Chapter 1

The minute I saw my mother’s face, I knew something was terribly wrong. I heard only a minute or so of her conversation on the phone, but the only remark I remember was her last, “I can’t handle this right now—you don’t understand.” Usually politely warm and engaging, Mom was obviously agitated and in a hurry to end the conversation. After returning the receiver to its cradle, she rested her head on the phone apparently unaware that I had just walked into the kitchen.

“Mom, what’s wrong?”
“Where’s Kris?” she asked.
“Upstairs with Holly,” I answered.
“Go upstairs and make sure she’s okay,” she said so quietly I could hardly hear her. And then, in a robotic trance-like sort of way, she walked over to the kitchen table, dropped herself into the chair facing the window, and just stared outside.

I had seen Mom act this way a couple of times before—once, when Gran called to tell her that her stepfather had passed away in a terrible car accident. The second time was more recent—Mom was about five months pregnant with my little sister Kris.

Kris was Mom’s “delightful surprise.” Holly and I were ten and twelve respectively when Kris was born. No one expected there would ever be another addition to the family, but when Mom announced that a new baby was coming, Holly and I were elated, and Mom was just plain giddy. Dad was rather stoic about the whole thing and immediately made plans to convert the office upstairs into a nursery.

Since Mom was as old as she was, and therefore considered an “older” mother, her doctor recommended a series of medical tests to check for abnormalities more common among mothers her age and older. Dr. Allen strongly implored her to agree to the tests since an earlier sonogram revealed some disturbing possibilities in our baby.

I was in the kitchen that day, too, when Mom got the call from, I found out later, Dr. Allen’s office. I could tell from the way she grabbed the phone that she had been anxiously awaiting the call, and when I saw her shoulders drop, I knew the news wasn’t good. The color left her face, she had that stunned look, and in a hushed barely audible tone, she asked me to find Dad.

Dad was in the office/nursery making some changes in the closet.
“Daddy, Mom wants you,” I said. “She just got a phone call and now she’s upset.”

“Oh, God,” was all he said.

He rushed downstairs with me following close behind. I expected that my chances of being included in their conversation were practically non-existent, and I was right. As soon as Mom saw me on Dad’s heels, she placed her hands on my shoulders and directed me toward the kitchen door.

“Sandy, I have to talk with your dad privately, okay? Go upstairs and see what Holly is doing. Tell her dinner will be ready in about twenty minutes.”

Twenty minutes. I figured the news couldn’t be that bad if she needed only twenty minutes to hash it over with Dad. Furthermore, she wasn’t crying like she had when Gran told her that her stepfather had died. Still, I rushed back upstairs scaling the steps two at a time intent on returning to the kitchen exactly twenty minutes later.

First, though, and I knew this from experience, I had to at least warn Holly that something was amiss and that she should take her cues from me once we all congregated at the dinner table.

When I got to Holly’s room, I could see that she had strewn my collection of Barbie dolls and their accessories all over the floor. Before I could say anything, she defended her actions.

“You said I could play with them,” she said.

“I did, but never mind. Something’s going on downstairs. Mom’s upset about something. They’re talking about it right now. We’re supposed to go down to dinner in twenty minutes, so if things don’t seem quite right, keep your mouth shut until Mom starts talking, okay?”

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know yet. Just don’t say a thing unless Mom starts talking about it, okay?”

“Is it something about the baby?” she asked.

“Holly, I-don’t-know still means I don’t know. Now let’s wash our hands—Mom will ask—and get downstairs.”

We spent almost seven minutes washing our hands—I was watching the clock in the bathroom—before we both made our way to the middle landing of the stairway. I looked at Holly and she looked at me; it was understood between us (as it had countless times before) that a soundless entrance into the kitchen might afford us a few revealing moments of conversation between Mom and Dad. So we crept slowly and quietly down the remaining stairs and then down the short hallway to the kitchen.

We stood outside the kitchen door hoping to hear what they were saying, but there was nothing but dead silence—no dishes rattling as the table was being set, no running water filling the glasses, and no sound from the TV which was always on during dinner.

Holly whispered, “What should we do now?”

I rolled my eyes and said, “We’re going in. Now go.”

I delicately shoved Holly through the doorway. After scanning the kitchen, I could tell that dinner had been forgotten and, again, Mom was sitting in the same chair with a faraway look in her eyes. Dad was leaning against the island countertop, his arms spread out and his hands resting on its edge. He was looking downward, and no one was saying a word.

I could see that Holly was scared, and, really, so was I. After several minutes of tense silence, I just had to say something—anything to get Mom talking.

“Mom, should I set the table?”

“Not just yet. You and Holly, sit down. We have something….”

Dad finished her sentence when she couldn’t.

“…to tell you,” he said.
Holly asked, “Is it bad?”

“Um, maybe,” Dad replied. He took Holly’s hand and led her to the table where he sat her down next to Mom.

“You know your mom has had some tests to check on the baby,” he said. “Well, first, we want you to know that our baby is a girl.”

Holly’s pursed lips turned into a smile and she looked at me. But I knew something more was coming because neither Mom nor Dad looked happy. So when I didn’t smile back at Holly, she looked nervously at Mom.

I was searching Mom’s face, too. She wasn’t crying, but she looked as though she might start at any minute. And then she turned her face and stared out the window.

“Mom,” I said.

She didn’t answer and I could tell that Dad was getting nervous. He wasn’t usually good at tackling serious issues, but I guess he knew he was going to have to handle this one.

“We could have some challenging times after the baby comes,” he said, his voice unsteady. Challenging times? This didn’t sound like Dad.

“Daddy,” I said, “just say it.”

He looked over at Mom who looked at Holly and me. He gave himself a needed moment to compose himself, cleared his throat, and then spoke.

“There’s something wrong with the baby,” he said.

“Is she going to die?” Holly asked.

“She has a condition that she will have her whole life. And sometimes babies who are born with this condition also have heart problems,” he said.

“But is she going to die?” Holly repeated.

That’s when the tears began to flow. Holly started first, I followed, and Dad and Mom joined us. For a few minutes no one could utter a word, and then Mom surprised the rest of us by offering to make banana splits.

Are you kidding, I thought. We’re in the middle of a crisis here and you’re thinking of ice cream? But Mom was always pretty smart and I caught on after a couple of minutes. Sometimes ice cream has a way of calming the emotions, and she knew she had better do something before Holly had a meltdown.

“Holly,” she said, “you get the spoons. I’ll get the ice cream. Sandy, get the toppings from the refrigerator. Dad, you get to peel the bananas.”

As if it were a regular day and a regular time, we all got busy with our assigned tasks. Still, no one was talking. I was about to burst with anxiety, but Holly seemed to calm down and Dad never once complained about slicing the bananas when everyone knew he couldn’t stand touching peeled bananas.

After the banana splits were made and sitting in front of us all, Holly and I started digging in. I felt a little better, I’ll have to admit, and Holly seemed a little happier herself.

It was a little easier now to resume our conversation.

“Okay,” I said, “so she has a condition.”

“It’s called Down’s Syndrome,” Mom offered.

I was only twelve at the time, but I knew what Down’s Syndrome was.

“She’s going to be retarded?” I asked.

“These days,” Mom said, “the doctors are using the word ‘challenged.’”

Oh, so that’s where Dad got that word.
Within the following few months, Mom tried to prepare us for the “challenges” she and Dad expected to have with our new baby. Mom looked for books at the library, the bookstores, and even the resale shops. A friend from church helped her make contact with another family whose little boy had the same condition. And she had Holly busy getting our baby’s room ready and clothes organized. We were as ready as we could be.

After Kris was born, Mom and Dad finally got over the shock of having a “not so perfect” baby and Holly and I squabbled over our baby sister just like any two older sisters of “perfect” babies. Life just seemed to go on. I guess it’s true that God won’t give you more than you can handle.

So who was Mom talking to that day on the phone, and what was it that she just didn’t think she could handle?

Chapter 2

After a couple of days, I practically forgot about Mom’s mysterious phone call. She was acting as though she had forgotten it, too. She and Mrs. Harris had begun planning the eighth grade graduation ceremony and graduation party, and she was spending a lot of time at the mall searching for dresses for the three of us girls. Mrs. Harris was doing the same for her daughter, Jen.

Jen and I had been best friends since preschool mainly because our moms were best friends for just as long. My mom enrolled me in preschool shortly after Mrs. Harris enrolled Jen, so the lives of the four of us were solidly intertwined since then.

About two weeks into the graduation planning, Jen took me up to her room and told me to sit on her bed because she had something to tell me. She tossed that blond mane of hers the way she always did when she thought what she was about to say was earth-shattering, or at the very least, important. I couldn’t take her seriously usually unless she made me pinky-swear, and this day, she did exactly that.

“You can’t tell a soul,” she warned me. “I will be in big trouble if you tell.”
“The only people I talk to are you and Holly—who am I going to tell?” I asked.
“You can’t even tell Holly.”

Well, I had to agree to that because Holly’s brain sometimes had a hard time catching up with her tongue, and I didn’t want to be responsible for a pinky-swear betrayal.

“Okay,” I complained as we briefly hooked our pinky fingers. “Just tell me!”

Jen backed down a little. I could tell she was scared, like the time she told me her parents were getting a divorce. Even my mom didn’t know until after Jen had told me.

“Maybe I shouldn’t….” she said haltingly.
“Is it about your mom?” I asked eagerly.
She didn’t answer right away, but when she did, I almost fell off of the bed.
“It’s about your mom,” she said quietly.
“Oh, my gosh,” I responded. “Mom and Dad are getting a divorce?”

Jen clicked her tongue and rolled her eyes.

“You parents aren’t getting a divorce, as far as I know, but this sure could cause one.”

“Are you going to tell me, or what?” I was exploding with anxiety.
“You pinky-swear,” she reminded me.
“Okay!”
She paused dramatically and swung that hair again.
“You have a sister,” she said slowly.
So what else is new, I wondered.
“I have two sisters,” I replied.
“You have three sisters,” she said in a very controlled sort of way.
I couldn’t process what she was saying right away. But I remembered the time Mom and Dad had told Holly and me that our new baby sister was on her way.
“Mom is going to have a baby?” I fell back on the pillows and put my hands over my ears as if that would do any good!
Jen grabbed my arms, pulled my hands away from my ears, and said, “No.”
That was all she said at first. I was so confused I couldn’t have anticipated in a hundred years what was coming next. I couldn’t even think of what I should ask. Jen was looking into my eyes and the silence between us was absolutely brutal.
“You have a sister,” she said again. “She’s seventeen and her name is Sarah.”
I guess my next comment was kind of silly, but it’s the first thing that came out of my mouth.
“But I’m the oldest,” I said as I sat upright.
“Not really,” she answered.
I swallowed hard and tried to organize the thoughts that were racing through my head, and I could come to only one conclusion.
“I don’t know where you heard all this, Jen, but it’s not true,” I told her smugly.
“I heard it from your mom. She was telling my mom all about it. Believe me, my mom was just as surprised as you are.”
I swallowed again. I could hardly take a deep breath. If what Jen was saying was true, and anything secret told by way of pinky-swearing had to be true, then there was only one explanation to be had—Sarah was born before Mom and Dad were married.
Of course.
And then the questions began flooding my mind.
“Was she married to someone before Dad?”
“I don’t think so,” Jen answered.
“Well, then that means….”
I could feel the energy leaving my body. If I hadn’t already been sitting down, I might have fainted. Unmarried women are having babies all the time, I thought, but that’s not quite what was bothering me. How could my mom have kept something like that a secret? And didn’t I have the right to know? After all, I was fourteen years old. How does your mom carry a secret for fourteen years? And then I thought about Dad.
“Does my dad know? Did she say anything about that?”
“Your dad knows.”
“Well, why haven’t they told Holly and me?”
“She’s waiting for the right time which could be pretty soon.”
I perked up a little when she said that.
“What do you mean?” I asked.
“Sarah has contacted your mom. She wants to see your mom.”
I slowly rose from the bed not totally trusting that my legs could hold me. I told Jen that I had to go home, and again she reminded me that I had pinky-sworn and that she would be in big
trouble if “our” secret got out. I assured her of my loyalty and I rushed downstairs and then out
the front door.

I walked and walked purposely taking the long way home so I would have time to think. I
almost started crying a couple of times, but I didn’t exactly know why. I wanted to talk to
someone, but I knew I couldn’t for Mom’s sake. I was in turmoil. Here my world was no longer
the same. Aside from my graduating from the eighth grade and then heading to one of the
biggest high schools in the state, I suddenly have an older sister I didn’t know existed, I’m
tackling with the fact that my parents are keeping a huge secret from me, and I can’t tell Holly a
thing.

Chapter 3

The following day, Mom took the three of us girls to look at dresses she had seen at the mall.
She kept asking me if I felt well, and I kept telling her I was just fine.

“You’ve been so quiet all day,” she said.
“I’ve just got a lot on my mind,” I answered.
We were walking in the mall by then, and I wanted to change the subject.
“What stores did you see the dresses in?” I asked.
“They’re all in the same store,” she said. “This way.”
I scooped up Kris into my arms because Mom had forgotten the stroller. By the time we
reached Valigura’s, my arms hurt and I was in no mood to look at dresses.

“What is the matter with you?” Mom asked.
“Nothing,” I said, but I wanted to blurt out everything. Who is Sarah? Why didn’t you tell
me about her? Am I going to meet her? What does Dad think about all of this?
But I didn’t. Instead, I quietly followed Mom to a rack of identical blue dresses, all in
different sizes.

“Here it is,” she said proudly. “What do you think?”
Holly and I looked at each other.
“Mom, is this dress for me, Sandy, or Kris?” Holly asked.
“All three of you,” she answered.
For a minute, I forgot all about Sarah.
“Mom, are you kidding?” I complained. “This looks like a baby dress especially if Kris is
wearing it.”
Holly had the same sentiments.
“I’m not wearing a baby dress,” she said. “Why can’t we wear different dresses?”
“Because Gran wants a picture of all three of you in the same dress, and I thought we could
use these dresses for the picture and the graduation party. Good idea?”
Holly’s brow was furrowed which wasn’t a good sign.
“That’s a horrible idea, Mom,” she said. “Why do I have to go to the graduation party
anyway? I’m not the one graduating.”
“We’ve been through all of this, Holly. Dad and I are chaperoning, so we all have to go.”
“I can stay home with Kris. I’m old enough to babysit.”
“I can’t do that,” Mom replied. “What if something happens? I’m not sure you would know
what to do. I can’t leave Kris with anyone just yet. You know that.”
She did know. And so did I. Kris could have problems with her heart, and then what? Calling 911 might not be enough.

So Holly started thumbing through the dresses.
“I guess they’re not so bad,” she offered. “Right, Sandy?”
Mom looked relieved.
“Sandy, why don’t you and Holly find your sizes, and I’ll find one for Kris.”
I had to admit that the dresses were kind of pretty especially on Holly whose hair was long and blond. Blue wasn’t exactly my color, but I loved the way the dress looked on Kris because it made the blue in her eyes really stand out. I’d already seen Jen’s sleeveless dress so I asked Mom if she could remove my sleeves and maybe Holly’s.
She agreed, and we left the store to find a restaurant in the food court.
Thankfully, Mom quit asking me how I was feeling.

Chapter 4

I thought of Sarah often within the next couple of weeks, but I kept my promise not to mention a word to anyone, not even Holly. Everyone was preoccupied with the graduation plans. All of the eighth grade teachers were stressing final exams, past-due library books, and the dreaded cleaning-out of the lockers. I had plenty to think about. As if I needed anything else.

And then she called.
I was home alone. Mom had taken Kris to see her cardiologist for the umpteenth time, and Holly had gone with them. I was trying to motivate myself to study for my last exam in the morning when the phone rang.
“Is Mrs. Robeson there?” the female voice asked.
“She’s not available right now,” I answered. “Would you like to leave a message?”
She paused briefly and then said, “No, I don’t think so. Do you know when she will be in?”
I knew Mom had a 4:30 appointment and would probably be home by six, but I didn’t want to give the caller too much information.
“I’m not sure, but I can ask her to call you.”
“Well, okay,” she said. “My name is Sarah, and my number is—”
“Your name is Sarah?” I interrupted.
“Sarah Hall,” she said. “Are you writing this down?”
“No,” I stammered. “I mean, yes, I can if you want me to.”
That’s when I dropped the receiver.
“Wait a minute,” I yelled as I retrieved the phone. “I’m sorry. I dropped the phone. I’m so sorry.”
“Are you Mrs. Robeson’s daughter?” the woman asked.
I wanted to ask if she was Mrs. Robeson’s daughter.
“Yes,” I answered.
“Oh, really? I wondered,” she said as her voice trailed off. I only had a second to think about it, and I was certain that I could regret it later, but I just had to ask.
“Are you my sister?”
It seemed as though the silence that followed went on forever. I could hardly breathe just waiting for her to answer.

“You know about me?”

“No, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I asked.” Oh, my gosh, I thought. What have I done? Mom will be furious. Jen will never speak to me again. Holly will wonder….

“It’s okay,” she said.

“No, you don’t understand. Mom doesn’t know that I know. If she found out—“

“She won’t find out, not from me anyway. Please. Please calm down, okay?”

I didn’t know if I could calm down. In a way, I was relieved, but the reality was that I wasn’t supposed to know the secret, and here I was speaking to the secret. How in the world was Mom going to react to this?

“Can we just pretend this didn’t happen?” I asked her.

“If that’s what you want,” she replied.

But it wasn’t what I wanted, not really. I knew what it was to have a sister. Holly had been my best friend from the day she was born. I adored our precious little Kris who spoke volumes about love, affection, and acceptance without speaking a word. I just couldn’t turn my back on Sarah.

“I didn’t really mean that. I’m sorry. I don’t want to get in trouble. My dad is going to be home soon and I….”

“I understand,” she said. “Could we talk again?”

“I don’t know. My mom is usually here.”

“Do you have a cell phone?”

“I’m hoping Mom will get me one next year.”

“What about an e-mail address? Do you have one?”

“Yes, but what if—“

“Will you write to me? Do you have a pen? Write this down, okay?”

So I wrote her e-mail address on a sheet of paper and stuffed it into my pocket. When Mom came home, I asked her if I could have a cell phone.

Chapter 5

After dinner that night, I remembered that I had Sarah’s e-mail address in my pocket. Holly agreed to do the dishes (even though it was my turn) so I could go upstairs and study. But studying wasn’t what I intended to do.

I sat down in front of my computer and pondered whether or not I should e-mail Sarah. The ball was in my court, so to speak, since I had her e-mail address but she didn’t have mine. I convinced myself that this was no different from corresponding with Jen or some of the other girls from school. But in this case, I wouldn’t ask too much and I wouldn’t offer too much either.

I made my first e-mail very short; it dawned on me that I had not given her my name, so I made a point of including that. I told her I had two sisters, three counting her. And that’s all I said.

It wasn’t reasonable to expect her to answer right away, but when she didn’t, I checked her e-mail address a second time to make sure I had entered it in correctly. I must have checked my inbox six or seven times before I finally went to bed; she didn’t answer.
The next day I couldn’t wait to talk with Jen. She met me as usual at my house so we could walk to school together, our last day in the eighth grade. Luckily, Mom had agreed to drop Holly off on her way to the grocery store. I was still feeling apprehensive about excluding Holly from the “secret,” but I was glad that I could talk with Jen privately.

“I e-mailed her,” I said.

“Who?” Jen asked.

“Sarah. I e-mailed Sarah.”


“She called yesterday while Mom was at the doctor’s office with Kris.”

“Does your mom know about this?”

“No, and don’t forget we pinky-swear. You can’t tell anyone.”

She agreed and then asked if I was planning to meet Sarah in person. And seriously, I had not thought that far ahead.

“I’m not even sure I should be e-mailing her. But, yes, I would like to meet her—someday.”

“Then why don’t you?” Jen suggested.

“How would I do that? I’d have to tell her where I live. She can’t come to my house.”

I could almost see the wheels turning in her head.

“You could meet her at the mall. Next week. Your mom and my mom know we’re going to be spending a lot of time at the mall this summer anyway.”

I wasn’t sure this was a good idea. Even though Sarah was technically my sister, was it really okay to meet someone I didn’t really know? Besides, she might live hundreds of miles away. If so, I could not possibly travel to see her.

My curiosity was stronger than my sense, so I agreed to the plan. I told Jen I would wait though until after Sarah and I had been communicating for a couple of weeks before I would ask her about meeting me.

That afternoon, Jen and I returned home anxious to get to my computer. The computer lab at school had been closed the last week of school, so I couldn’t use a computer there. While all the other kids were jubilant about this being our last day of school, all I could think about was getting home so I could check my e-mail.

She wrote me back! She was a lot more forthcoming than I had been in my email. She told me she had one brother, also adopted. Her dad was a lawyer, and her mom was an animal activist who was especially interested in protecting exotic animals like cougars and monkeys. For some reason, I hadn’t given much thought to her “other” family—she had another mother, another father, and a brother who didn’t look anything like her.

I started thinking about Holly. This situation had already gotten too far without my having confided in her. I felt bad about that, but I also realized that I might need an ally down the road.

“Jen, I think I should tell Holly.”

“Yeah, you’re not going to be able to keep it from her for very much longer anyway.”

“I’ll tell her after the graduation party tomorrow night.”

Chapter 6

The eighth grade graduation from my school was scheduled on Saturday morning at the high school auditorium where all the district graduations were taking place. Unfortunately, my
school’s graduation was first on the schedule which meant that we had to be at the auditorium and in our places by 7:30 a.m.

Any Saturday morning was chaotic at our house, especially if any one of us had to be any place special at an early hour. But this day was especially trying. Mom had moved Holly out of her room and into my room so Gran could spend the night in her room. I didn’t mind really, but we had to share my bed with Kris, we argued over counter space in the bathroom, and then Mom, who was “running late,” asked me to fix Kris’s hair.

While the three of us girls stood in my bathroom, Kris on the lid of the commode, I saw our reflections in the large mirror over the sink. There we were, three blue peas in a pod. I could see Holly was horrified by our collective image.

“I can’t believe that Mom is making us wear these dresses!” she said.

“It’s okay,” I answered. “We only have to wear them just this one day, and then hopefully, we’ll outgrow them by the time Gran reminds Mom that we never had the picture made.”

I grabbed a brush and started on Kris’s thin blond hair. I collected as many stray strands as I could and bound them with a tiny rubber band. She handed me one of her matching blue ribbons, so I tucked it securely under the rubber band and then tied it into a bow.

“There you go, precious,” I said.

At almost two years of age, and developmentally slow, Kris couldn’t talk yet. But she made her desires known usually by gesturing or showing us what she wanted. She didn’t have any trouble “telling” Mom that she wanted the sleeves on her dress removed just like mine and Holly’s. She wanted her dress to look exactly like ours, so when she tried to put one of her blue ribbons in my hair, I knew exactly what she wanted. I grabbed a larger rubber band and fixed my light brown hair into a matching ponytail. Kris smiled broadly and clapped her short little hands. She looked at Holly, but Holly wasn’t enthused.

“I’m not wearing my hair in a ponytail! Forget it! Not happening!” she said as she stomped out of the bathroom.

I hoisted Kris onto my hip and followed Holly into the bedroom.

“If you do this one thing,” I told her, “I’ll make it worth your while. We don’t even have to have ponytails—we can do something else.”

She must have missed the part about wearing our hair a different way.

“You’re going to make it worth my while?” she asked.

I surveyed the bedroom to see if there was anything with which I could bribe her. But it was getting late, and I knew I’d have to hurry. I had, in times past, regretted promising to give her something of mine in exchange for whatever I wanted her to do for me. And then I remembered Sarah.

“If you do this,” I said, “I’ll have a surprise for you after the graduation party tonight.”

At twelve years of age, Holly wasn’t as easy to bribe as she used to be. But I was very confident that I could persuade her to wear the ribbon if I told her I had an important secret to share with her. And I was right.

Holly, Kris, and I left my room in our matching blue dresses, matching hairstyles, and matching blue ribbons, but only Kris and I were smiling.

Mom was delighted with our appearance, and Dad was amazed since he knew how Holly felt about the dresses.

“How did you manage the matching hair?” he whispered in my ear.

I thought of telling him that I would tell him later, but I knew I couldn’t.
The graduation ceremony lasted only a little more than an hour, luckily, because Holly was getting hungry and I wanted to get home to check my e-mail. Mom was worried about our getting our dresses dirty so it was easy to convince her that we should hurry home. After that, Gran agreed and reminded us all that we still had to have our pictures taken in the dresses. Holly groaned, and Dad gave his don’t-say-a-thing look at the both of us.

Gran made pancakes and sausage while the three of us girls went upstairs to change. Holly hadn’t forgotten my promise, so when we closed my bedroom door, she started right in.

“Why can’t you tell me now?” she asked. “I don’t think I can wait until after the party tonight.”

“Holly, a deal is a deal,” I tried to persuade her. “I’ll tell you after.”

“Why?” she said.

“Because this is the biggest secret ever and I don’t know how you will take it. I can’t risk your wigging out before the party. Mom will have a fit.”

She leaned forward and pulled Kris to her chest.

“How is Kris? Is something wrong with Kris?”

“No, but it’s pretty big. In a good way. I think,” I answered.

Well, that’s all it took. Holly badgered me firmly for the next ten minutes, and she wouldn’t stop looking at me the entire time we were eating Gran’s pancakes. I was almost relieved when Mom asked me to take Kris upstairs, get her washed up, and then try “really hard” to get her to take a nap.

I tucked Kris in my bed, but she wanted me to lie down next to her, so I closed the blinds and climbed right in. She put her soft little hand on my face and then drifted off in a way I could only imagine angels might fall asleep. I smoothed her hair away from her forehead, said a prayer that God would protect her and keep her healthy, and then kissed the top of her head as gently as I could.

That’s when Holly came in. I gave her the be-quiet sign so she closed the door without making a sound. I motioned her to sit on the end of the bed.

“Mom wants Kris to sleep,” I whispered. “We can’t talk about the secret just now.”

“Pl-e-e-a-s-e,” she sang.

My left arm was tucked under Kris’s shoulders and I was afraid to move it. I wasn’t sure that she was sleeping soundly yet, and I didn’t want to take any chances. Once awake, she probably wouldn’t go back to sleep the rest of the day, and we would have one cranky baby on our hands at the graduation party.

I looked at Holly’s pitiful face once more and concluded that the rest of the day including the graduation party could be undeniably miserable for me unless I relented.

So I did.

“You have to pinky-swear that you won’t tell anyone,” I warned her.

She moved in closer to Kris and me so that we could hook our pinky fingers.

“I pinky-swear,” she said.

“Holly, this is the biggest secret I’ve ever told anyone. It’s the biggest secret that anyone has ever told me. I’m not supposed to know it, and neither are you. No matter what happens, we can’t tell anyone, especially Mom.”

“Okay,” she responded.
“And you can’t get excited or anything,” I cautioned her. “And if you wake up Kris, I’ll be mad.”

“Okay,” she insisted.

“Jen told me—”

“This is Jen’s secret?” she interrupted.

“No, it’s our secret. It’s really Mom’s secret because it happened to her before she and Dad got married. She just didn’t tell anyone. And then one day, she told Mrs. Harris and Jen was listening, and then Jen told me.”

I could tell Holly was getting frustrated.

“What is the secret?” she asked.

“Well,” I started slowly, “you know how….”

And then I stopped. I wasn’t sure I was doing the right thing. I had no doubts of my own right to know that I had another sister out there. But it was, after all, Mom’s secret—did I have the right to share it? Sarah is Holly’s sister, too. She is Kris’s sister. Mom’s first daughter.

We’re a family, right? We shouldn’t be hiding anything, right?

So I just said it.

“Holly,” I said, “Mom had another child before us. Before she married Dad. Her name is Sarah, and she’s seventeen.”

Holly’s jaw dropped. It took a few seconds before she started speaking.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Jen said she heard Mom tell Mrs. Harris.”

I could see that Holly was thinking hard.

“Maybe that’s what that phone call was about,” she said.

I immediately thought of Mom’s call that day in the kitchen when she said she just couldn’t “handle this right now.”

“You know about the call?” I asked.

“I was there,” she replied.

“Wait,” I said realizing she wasn’t talking about the same phone call I had overheard.

“What phone call are you talking about?”

“Well,” she began, “someone called Mom a couple of months ago. I think she was talking to a lady. She was talking about something that happened a long time ago, that her life had taken a different direction. Mom told her she wasn’t ready for something—I don’t know what.”

“Oh, gosh,” I said. “I wonder if that was Sarah.”

That’s when I told her about the day I talked with Sarah on the phone and that I had an e-mail message from her in my inbox.

“If that was Sarah, and if Mom isn’t ready to see her, then would she want you to be e-mailing her?” Holly asked.

She carefully left the bed and sat down at my desk. In a few seconds, she was looking at Sarah’s message.

And then she asked me the same thing Jen did earlier.

“Are you going to meet her in person?”

Chapter 8
After Kris woke up, I took her downstairs because Mom wanted her to eat something before she dressed again for the party. Afterwards, I hurried back upstairs to answer Sarah’s e-mail though I wasn’t sure what I wanted to say.

I had a lot of questions though. I was wondering how much she knew about the situation that led Mom to give her up for adoption. I wanted to know if she was happy, what it was like to be adopted, and what it was like to know that there was another family out there. I wondered how she found Mom. I remembered that I didn’t know where she lived or even if it was possible for us to physically meet. So I wanted to at least ask her that.

I turned on my computer just as Holly walked into my bedroom.

“Are you checking your e-mail?” she asked.

“I haven’t answered Sarah’s e-mail yet,” I told her.

“What are you going to say?”

“I just want to ask her some questions.”

“Like what?” she asked.

I told her about the list of things I wanted to know, but I was worried about sounding nosey. I didn’t want to intrude on her privacy, and yet my curiosity wouldn’t quit. I still had one more question—I wondered out loud why Mom gave her away.

“Sarah probably doesn’t know why,” Holly answered.

“And what about Gran? She must have known about this.”

“Let’s go ask her,” Holly suggested.

“Holly!” I screamed.

“I’m just kidding. Don’t have a cow.”

I opened my inbox and searched for Sarah’s message. When I found it, I hit the reply icon and started typing.

I thought I should start with safe questions so I asked her how old her little brother was. And then I pressed the enter key.

“Why didn’t you write something more?” Holly wanted to know.

“I don’t want to ask too much at first. Anyway, we have to get ready for the party.”

I started to leave my chair when Sarah’s reply popped up.

“She’s on her computer right this very minute,” I said.

“See what she said!” Holly screamed.

I opened her reply and saw that she had written, “Hi! He’s thirteen.”

“What are you going to write now?” Holly asked.

I felt a little panicky. I wanted to keep writing, but I wanted some time to choose my words carefully. I wasn’t really sure where the conversation should go—I was totally stumped.

“Think of something!” I yelled to Holly.

“Just, just,” she stammered, “ask her what grade she’s in, where she goes to school. Does she even live in this state?”

“That’s a good question,” I said as I began typing.

“What state do you live in?” I wrote.

Holly and I sat motionless waiting for her answer.

“Same state,” she answered.

“Oh, my gosh,” Holly said. “Ask her what city.”

“What city?” I wrote.

“Sunset Valley,” was her reply. Holly and I gasped at the same time.
“That’s where Gran lives,” I whispered.
“Should we tell her that?” Holly asked.
“Ask her if she knows where we live.”
“She has to,” I said. “I mean, she found Mom, right?”
But I wanted to know for sure, so I typed as fast as I could.
“Yes,” she wrote. “You live in Hanover.”
“How did you find us?”
“Believe it or not, I found you on the Internet.”
“How did you know who to look for?”
“I saw your mom’s name on a document that I found in the attic.”
“I wonder how long ago she found it,” I said to Holly.
“Ask her,” Holly prodded.
Before I could think of how to phrase my question, another e-mail came from Sarah.
“I didn’t know until then that I was adopted.”
“How long ago was that?” I wrote.
“Last year. It was hard. Greg didn’t know he was adopted either. Mom and Dad hadn’t told us. We’re okay with it.”
Well, that answered one of my questions.
Just then, we heard Mom calling us from downstairs; we figured she was ready for us to get ourselves and Kris dressed. She could be on her way up here, I thought. Apparently Holly thought the same thing because she rushed out of my room and quickly returned with Kris.
“I’ll get Kris dressed!” she said. “You keep on e-mailing Sarah. Let me know what she says.”
I knew I didn’t have much time left. Holly had delayed Mom’s appearance, I was sure, but as soon as Mom had the kitchen cleaned up, I knew she would be upstairs checking on our progress.
“I have to go,” I wrote Sarah. “We have to go to the graduation party tonight, and we have to get ready.”
“Okay,” she answered. “Please write again, okay?”
I told her I would. I closed my e-mail and started changing my clothes. All the while, I was thinking about Sarah and how anxious I was to talk to Jen about our e-mail exchange.
And then I thought of other questions I wanted to ask Sarah. Do you drive, do you have a car, and have you ever driven to Hanover?

Chapter 9

The graduation party was to start at 6:30, but Mom and Dad, as chaperones, were expected to arrive at the school gym no later than 5:30. This was fine with me since I knew Jen and her mom would be checking in at about the same time.
As soon as we entered the gym, I spotted Jen helping her mom at the long refreshment tables situated near the kitchen at the back of the room. I wanted to talk with her right away, but Mrs. Waters, our principal, caught sight of the three of us girls in our blue peas-in-a-pod dresses and she scurried right over.
“Aw, the girls look adorable, Mrs. Robeson,” she told my mom. “Where in the world did you find these matching dresses?”

“Valigura’s,” she replied. “I’ll probably never again get them to wear matching dresses,” she said as she glanced Holly’s way.

“Hold on,” Mrs. Waters said. “I have my camera.”

After a brief picture-taking session, Mrs. Waters moved on, and Holly looked as though she was going to vomit at any minute.

“Oh, well, that’s just great,” she complained. “It’s not bad enough that I have to wear this dress. Now people are taking pictures.”

“Only one person took pictures,” I reminded Holly. “We’ll be the only ones here in matching dresses—this is going to get us some unwelcome attention, sure, but just suck it up, okay? We do look kind of cute.”

“No, Kris looks cute. We look ridiculous,” she whined as she followed me across the floor.

Jen finally saw us coming and met us halfway.

“Jen, I told Holly about Sarah.”

She turned to Holly and asked, “What did you think when you heard, Holly?”

“I was shocked. I don’t know why Mom isn’t telling us. Sandy and I want to know what happened.”

Jen turned to look at me and said, “You made her pinky-swear, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did,” I answered. “But wait until you hear what happened this afternoon.”

Jen’s eyes widened and I could tell she was worried that our secret was out, besides Holly knowing.

“Don’t worry,” I assured her. “Nothing bad happened. Sarah and I were e-mailing each other before we got here.”

Her eyes widened again. She slung her hair halfway around her head and looked around to make sure no one was within hearing distance.

“Why don’t we talk about this in the bathroom,” she said hurriedly.

When we got to the girls’ bathroom, we found it empty. Jen checked the shower pods “just to make sure” and then she pulled Holly and me into the large handicap stall.

“Well?” she asked anxiously.

“She found out last year she was adopted,” Holly offered. “She didn’t know until then. Isn’t that sad?”

“And,” I added, “she found Mom’s name on a document in their attic. That’s how she found us.”


“And guess what else,” Holly said.

“She lives in Sunset Valley,” I added.

Jen’s wheels were turning again, I could tell.

“Doesn’t your grandmother live in Sunset Valley?” she asked.

“Yep,” Holly and I said in unison.

“And it’s only about forty-five minutes from here,” I said.

Jen’s eyes were practically popping out of her head when she said, “Oh, my gosh!”

“I know what you’re thinking, Jen,” I told her. “But I’m just not sure it’s a good idea. What if Mom finds out?”

“Why would she?” Jen reasoned. “You could meet Sarah at the mall. Does she have a driver’s license?”
“I didn’t ask her. I didn’t think about that until after I closed my e-mail.”
“Ask her to meet us tomorrow,” Jen suggested.
“Us?” Holly asked.
“Well, I want to meet her, too,” Jen insisted.

Already bound by serious pinky-swearings, we all agreed to keep yet another secret—our plans to meet Sarah at the mall.

Chapter 10

As soon as we got home, Mom asked me to get Kris ready for bed, so I hurriedly changed her clothes and tucked her into her favorite spot, my bed. I was anxious to check my e-mail, but Kris insisted on a few minutes of cuddle time. It was just as well since I hadn’t made up my mind what I wanted to say next to Sarah—I needed some thinking time.

By the time I had my clothes changed, Kris was on the brink of sleep, so I carefully moved the covers so I could slide in beside her. She sighed heavily as though relieved that I was there. Then she drifted off with her hand on my face and her forehead tucked under my chin. My baby sister, such a sweet angel. Sarah will love her, I thought to myself.

As it turned out, I didn’t have another minute to think about what I should write to Sarah because Holly came bounding into my room.

“I thought you were going to e-mail Sarah,” she said.
“I have to wait until Kris is totally asleep,” I answered.
“She looks asleep to me.”

I didn’t want to move just yet, so I told Holly to turn on my computer and look for my e-mail. She checked my inbox right away but there was nothing new from Sarah.

“So do you want to ask her about meeting us at the mall?” she asked as she started typing.
“I guess so,” I answered though I still wasn’t quite sure. “Just ask her if she wants to meet us sometime at the mall. There’s no point in asking her to meet us tomorrow—she might not even check her e-mail again until tomorrow night.”

“No need to worry about that,” she said. “She just answered me.”
I got up so quickly I was sure I had awakened Kris. I rushed to my desk and read her response.

“Oh, great,” I lamented. “She wants to meet us.”
“You don’t seem very happy about it,” Holly said.
“Move over, okay? Let me write.”

I sat down at my desk preparing to write, but my emotions were so conflicted, I wasn’t sure what I should say. We were taking a real serious chance here. I was sure Mom would be furious about our plans, and yet I didn’t want to ignore the possibility of meeting Sarah in person. We now knew she wanted to meet us, too. I couldn’t tell her we shouldn’t—I just didn’t want to. So I asked her if she had a car.

“Yes, I do,” she wrote. “Where do you want to meet? And when?”

I had to pause for a minute because I still wasn’t sure I was doing the right thing. Before I could answer, she wrote again.

“What about your mom?” she asked.
I was relieved that she was as worried about Mom’s reaction as I was. And then my apprehension overwhelmed me again. Maybe we should wait, I thought. Again, another e-mail popped up before I could answer.

“We can wait, if you want to,” she wrote.
“Sandy,” Holly whimpered. “Are we going to chicken out, too?”
“Just a minute, Holly.”
“Sarah,” I wrote, “Holly and I need to talk this over. Wait a few minutes and I’ll write again.”

I turned to Holly.
“What if Mom finds out?” I asked her.
“I’m not going to tell her. Jen won’t either. We pinky-swear, remember?”
“But what about Sarah? Once she meets us, she might want to contact Mom again.”
“Sarah never has to tell her she’s already met us. It sounds like Mom doesn’t want to talk to her anyway, Sandy. I want to meet her!” she said emphatically.

I turned back to my computer and started typing.
“We haven’t said anything to Mom. We don’t know how she would feel about us meeting you behind her back.”

“I haven’t told my mom either. I think she would freak out,” she wrote. “I don’t think she would understand how I feel. I know that my birth mother is not ready for this, and I do respect that. I don’t want to be a problem for anyone. But these past few months have been very hard for me. Adoption seems to be a perfect solution for everyone but the adoptee.”

I looked at Holly and she looked at me. She pulled the keyboard in front of her and began to write.
“Can you meet us tomorrow at the mall in Hanover?” she wrote.
“Yes!” she replied. “What time?”

Chapter 11

The next morning I woke up to find Kris putting hair bows, barrettes, and clips in my hair. She had been thorough. Obviously, she had been watching Holly who was in my bathroom brushing her hair. For a second, I was wondering what Holly was doing up so early.

And then I remembered. Today would be the day that we would meet our other sister.
“I have to call Jen, Holly,” I yelled out.

Holly stepped into the doorway between my room and bathroom and continued brushing her hair.
“Okay,” I replied. “Kris, let’s go find Mommy.”

I scooped Kris into my arms, carried her downstairs, and then took her to the kitchen where Mom was already preparing breakfast. Dad was sitting at the kitchen table reading the newspaper. Everything looked so normal, just a regular day, I thought.

Mom took Kris out of my arms and sat her down at the table.

“Has Kris been fixing your hair again?” she asked. “Quick, Dad, get the camera.”

Without raising his eyes from the paper, Dad replied, “She’ll never speak to me again if I do.”
“Thank you, Daddy,” I said. “Mom, Holly and I want to go to the mall today.”
“Oh, honey, I’ve got so much to do today. What about Monday?”
“We can go by ourselves,” I suggested. I tried to sound as casual as possible. “We can walk—it might be fun. Jen will probably want to go with us.”
“It’s so hot out already, and it’s getting hotter by the minute.”
I was glad when Dad contributed his opinion.
“Let them go,” he said. “Good exercise.”
I watched Mom place a bowl of dry cereal in front of Kris, but the little sweetheart pushed it away. I could have sworn I heard her say “pancakes” without the “p,” but I wasn’t sure until Dad mentioned the same thing. She had never been verbal up to now though it was expected that she would be a late talker. Mom was ecstatic.
“I think I heard it, too!” she said excitedly. “She said ‘pancakes.’”
Dad looked up from his paper and said, “She doesn’t say ‘mom’ or ‘dad,’ and her first real word is ‘pancakes.’ Weird.”
They were still talking about it when I left the kitchen to go upstairs. I was anxious to call Jen so I rushed up to my room where Holly was still brushing her hair.
“If you don’t quit that,” I told her, “your hair is going to fall out.”
She clicked her tongue and sighed heavily just like Mom does when she gets exasperated with us.
“Did you call Jen yet?” she asked.
“I didn’t want to call her from the kitchen. Mom and Dad are in there having breakfast.”
Within a few minutes, I had Jen on my bedroom phone. I told her that I had written to Sarah and our plans were set to meet together in the food court at around noon.
“I’ll bring my camera,” was all she said and she hung up the phone.
By the time Jen arrived at our house, Holly and I were ready to go. Mom and Dad were still in the kitchen so we decided to leave the house by way of the front door. When Mom heard the door, she yelled out that she wanted us home by four.
“Okay,” I responded, and I slammed the door shut.
I couldn’t wait to get away from the house. My heart was racing and my knees felt weak.
Again, doubts were creeping into my thoughts. I still wasn’t comfortable keeping secrets from Mom, and this secret was huge. Jen could tell I was having second thoughts.
“It’ll be okay,” she assured me. “Sarah’s probably on her way already.”
“I know,” I said. “I wouldn’t back out now. I’m just worried about Mom.”
“Don’t worry. We’re going to have a great time today. Everything’s going to be okay.”
I wanted to believe her.

Chapter 12

We reached the mall almost thirty minutes early. Jen wanted to stop by a restroom to check her hair so we dashed into the nearest one we could find and stayed there for about fifteen minutes checking and rechecking. Satisfied that we looked presentable, Jen reminded Holly and me that it was nearly time for us to meet Sarah.
“She might already be in the food court,” she said.
I looked at Holly and she returned a momentary glance. I was sure I looked as petrified as she did.
“Okay, let’s do this,” I said as we all quietly and slowly left the restroom.

The mall was a little crowded so we had to weave our way closer to the food court. I was glad that we didn’t see anyone we knew and I was hoping for the same once we got to our destination.

As expected, the food court was crowded, too. Almost every chair was occupied and it was difficult at first to determine which patrons might be solitary visitors.

The three of us surveyed the entire space. Holly asked me if I could see anyone I thought might be Sarah.

I was just about to say no when I saw a girl standing alone near a pillar in the center of the court.

“That must be her,” I said as I gestured her way. “She looks like she’s alone and she’s watching the crowd. Maybe she’s trying to figure out which ones are us.”

“Let’s go over and ask her,” Holly suggested.

I took a deep breath, repositioned my purse strap on my shoulder, and made the first move. Holly and Jen were right behind me.

The girl didn’t seem to notice us at first, but when we were within ten feet of her space, she looked our way and a tiny smile formed on her face.

We had found Sarah. It was one of those moments I knew I would never forget. There she was, standing right before us obviously anxious, maybe a little apprehensive, to meet us.

The look in her eyes was almost unsettling. Suddenly I worried that we might fail to meet her expectations. I tried to dismiss the unsure thoughts that were again invading my mind. I was on the verge of a wonderful adventure here, and yet I wanted to turn around and run. She’s just another girl, I tried to convince myself. We could have met her under any other circumstance. And then she spoke.

“I’m Sarah,” she said softly.

I wasn’t sure what to do. How does one introduce herself to her sister after years of not knowing she even existed? Should I hug her, should I shake her hand, or should our meeting be as casual as any other?

I could see she was as uncomfortable as I was. But Holly saved us both—she immediately grabbed Sarah’s hand and shook it wildly.

“We’re so glad to meet you,” she said breathlessly. “I’m Holly. This is Sandy, my sister, your sister.” She laughed nervously and then introduced Jen.

“I guess I’m the reason this is all happening,” Jen said. “You will keep it a secret, right, Sarah? If this gets out, I’m in big trouble.”

“Believe me, I don’t want anyone to know either. My mother would have a fit,” Sarah answered.

“Let’s find a place to sit down,” I said.

Most of the chairs were still occupied and we couldn’t find an entirely empty table, so we walked the mall until we saw a sitting area close to one of the escalators. We each took a seat allowing Sarah to sit in the middle. Holly began talking right away telling Sarah how pretty she was. All I could do was stare.

She was, in fact, very pretty. She had blond hair, not exactly like Mom’s or Holly’s, maybe a hue somewhere between the two of theirs. She had dark brown eyes like Mom’s and if she was taller than my 5’4”, I figured it was just by an inch or so. I noticed right away that she dressed well.

“I like your shirt,” I said.
“Mom got it for me for my birthday,” she answered.
“It’s really nice,” Holly added.

The conversation stalled, and I was burning with all sorts of questions. I decided to just go for it.
“Do you know anything about your adoption?”
She didn’t seem surprised by my first question, but Jen’s eyes nearly popped out her head, and I could see Holly squirm in her chair.
“Sandy, maybe she doesn’t want to talk about that,” Holly said.
“I don’t mind at all,” Sarah told us. “I’m just happy to be able to talk to someone about it. I don’t really know that much. Mom told me that my adoption was private and closed.”
“What does that mean?” I asked.
“Well,” Sarah began, “my adoption was handled by a doctor instead of an agency, and it was closed. That means that the birth mother and my family had no further contact once the adoption was final. Sometimes birth moms keep in touch, but that didn’t happen with my adoption.”
“So my mom hasn’t seen you since you were born, not even a picture?” I asked.
“That’s right.”
“We were wondering why she gave you away,” Holly said.
Sarah slowly shook her head and said, “Mom didn’t know. She told me she assumed my birth mom couldn’t take care of me. But I’d like to ask her myself someday. I know she was twenty when I was born. I could understand if she had been fifteen, or maybe even seventeen but she was….”

Jen was sitting quietly the whole time, but then she jumped right in with a question of her own.
“What made you decide to look for your birth mom?”
“When I was in the fifth grade, my best friend was an adoptee. She always said she was luckier than the rest of us because her mom got to pick her out, like a tomato in a fruit basket. She was special, she would always say. But I felt sorry for her. First, because her “real” mother gave her away, and then later because she never seemed to be very connected to her mom. They didn’t even look alike. Well, she moved away, but we kept in touch and when I found out about my adoption, I called her. She’s been looking for her birth mom for two years now. She feels the same way I do—I just want to know who my mother is. I just want to know my history.”
“But you have a mother—” I said.
“And I’ve always loved her. I have certain feelings for her—mother-daughter feelings, same as my friends. And then I find out there’s another mother out there. What am I supposed to feel then? I was so confused. I could have felt for her what I was feeling for my adoptive mom. It’s strange to say this, but the bond I’m feeling for my birth mother is coming from the bond I have with my adoptive mom.” She sighed heavily. “I wish I could explain this better.”

As far as I was concerned, she was explaining things just fine.
“Since Mom hasn’t agreed to see you, what’s next?” I asked.
She sighed again. I thought I saw tears in her eyes.
“I don’t know,” she said. “I guess I could try calling her again. I just want to see her, touch her. I’m not mad, really. It’s just so frustrating that this has happened to me and I didn’t have any say in it. If I could just see her….”

“But that could be really hard on our mom,” I said. “Your birth mom, our mom, has kept you a secret for such a long time. It might be hard for her to invite you back into her life when her closest friends, not to mention family, don’t even know about you.”
“Maybe one day….” she said.

After a few awkward moments of silence, our conversation gravitated toward lighter subjects—high school, clothes, boys, siblings, just life in general. Before we knew it, our time was up and the three of us remembered that Mom wanted us home by four. We forgot all about taking some pictures.

Chapter 13

Within the next couple of weeks, Sarah and I kept in touch via e-mail, and a few times I called her on her cell phone from Jen’s house. But she didn’t mention Mom much and she only hinted that she would like to meet with Holly and me again. I couldn’t have guessed in a million years what her next objective was.

I was thinking she would want to meet us again at the mall, but trekking to the mall five blocks away from home in the hottest week of June didn’t appeal to me at all. In fact, I was satisfied with our e-mail conversations and occasional phone calls from Jen’s house.

It was during one of these calls that Sarah told me of her new plan. I was sitting on a bar stool in Jen’s kitchen when Sarah told me what she wanted to do. I yelled, “What?” and nearly fell off the stool. Thankfully, no one was home but Jen and me.

“You can’t do that!” I told her. “Mom hasn’t told me about you yet. How in the world am I going to pull that off?”

Jen was sitting right beside me and I could see she was absolutely bewildered.

“What? What is she saying?” she asked.

After protesting vehemently for several minutes, I concluded my conversation with Sarah and hung up the phone.

Jen was just as curious as ever.

“What’s the matter?” she asked. “I’m dying to know!”

“She wants to come to our house!” I cried.

“And meet your mom?”

“Kind of. Not as her daughter, but as my friend.”

There went that hair again. She slung it around to the back of her head and said, “I think that’s a wonderful idea, absolutely genius.”

“It will never work. I know I can’t do this. What if Mom recognizes her?”

“She said your mom doesn’t even have a picture of her. Just because they’re related doesn’t mean she’s going to instantly know who she is,” she reasoned.

A whirlwind of emotions were exploding in my head. I knew how much Sarah wanted to meet Mom, but I still wasn’t sure how Mom would feel about my making that decision for her. I’d always been so honest with Mom—I just didn’t think I could deceive her this way. And yet there was a side of me who knew that Sarah was Mom’s child just as much as I was—there is no denying lineage no matter whose house Sarah grew up in. Would I want someone to do the same for me? I would want just a glimpse, just a moment to connect with a fractured past.

But show up at my house? No way. We had to think of another way, something not so contrived, planned. I had an idea.

“What if we meet at the mall?” I asked Jen. “We could ask Mom to take us, and we could ‘accidentally’ meet Sarah there.”

“Might work,” she responded.
“But then what would we do? Just sit around and talk? What if it gets awkward? What if Sarah decides this is her only chance to open up to Mom?”

“On second thought,” Jen said, “this might not work.”

A knot was welling up in my stomach. I couldn’t just tell her no. And yet I had to think about possible outcomes and their effect on Jen and me. The tremendous pressure Sarah was exerting on me, Jen, and my entire family seemed unfair. It was at this point that a tiny resentment was building within me. My emotions were so jumbled by now that I couldn’t think straight. But I did know one thing—this situation with Sarah was moving too fast.

“We’re not going to do this,” I said.

“What? I thought you—“

“I want her to see Mom. It’s only fair. But we can’t take any chances. I’ll tell Sarah we’ll get Mom to the mall so she can see her, only see her, not talk to her.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ll get Mom to take us to the mall. We’ll have lunch at the food court. If Sarah wants to see what Mom looks like, she can see her from a distance.”

“That might not be good enough—for her, I mean,” Jen said.

“It has to be good enough, for right now.”

“Well, why don’t you call her and tell her?”

“Maybe I’ll e-mail her.”

“Sounds good.”

I walked home slowly from Jen’s house already formulating in my mind what I wanted to say in my e-mail to Sarah. I would tell her that I wasn’t sure I was doing the right thing in planning and executing a meeting between her and Mom. I would explain that Mom’s meeting her had to be Mom’s decision as much as it was Sarah’s. By the time I got home, I was satisfied with the wording I would use, so lest I should forget, I rushed up to my bedroom and immediately started to write.

Just as I was clicking on the send button, Holly came into my room.

“E-mailing Sarah?” she asked.

I turned from my computer and told Holly to sit down.

“Holly, she wants to come here to the house. I told her no.”

Holly was nodding in agreement.

“She can’t come here,” she said. “Mom would know everything then.”

“I told her if she wants to see what Mom looks like, we’ll come to the mall and she can see her from a distance.”

“When are you going to do this?” Holly asked.

“I guess the next time Mom wants to go to the mall.”

Just then Dad popped in and told us dinner was ready.

Chapter 14

I figured I’d have a response from Sarah by the time dinner was over, and I was right. Sarah agreed to the plan and seemed to understand the reservations I was having. I told her in a return e-mail that I would let her know of a date and time though I couldn’t promise it would be very soon. She seemed satisfied.

I was laboring over details of our plan when the phone rang. It was Jen.
“What ‘cha doin’?” she asked.
“Just e-mailing Sarah,” I told her. “She’s okay with just seeing Mom from a distance.”
“That’s great because my mom wants me to go to the mall with her tomorrow. Maybe you and your mom can meet us there.”

I hadn’t thought of it until that second but it would be a very good idea for someone else to be with Mom if Sarah was to see her at the mall. That way, Sarah might not be as inclined to approach her or initiate a conversation with her.

“Jen, you are so good,” I responded. “I’ll check with Mom. But first I’ve got to check with Sarah to see if she can make it.”

“Okay, well, let me know. We’ll probably go early—it’s supposed to be really hot tomorrow.”

After returning the receiver to its cradle, I logged on to my computer and navigated directly to my inbox. Nothing new was showing so I wrote to Sarah asking her if it was possible to meet me at the mall the next day if I could persuade Mom to take me.

I waited several minutes for a reply and when none came, I left my room to search for Mom. Even if Sarah couldn’t meet with me the following day, I thought it would be fun to at least meet Jen there.

Mom was in the kitchen with Kris trying to coax her into eating a few green beans since she hadn’t eaten well at dinner earlier. But Kris wasn’t having any of it and batted at Mom’s hand every time Mom attempted to feed her.

“You want me to try?” I asked her.
“You may as well. I’m not getting anywhere.”

Kris was more receptive to me than she was to Mom, so I was able to get a few beans into her, but after a few more tries, she had had enough.
“I think that’s all she wants,” I said.
“Okay. Just throw the rest away, will you, honey? I’ll try something else later.”

I threw the remaining beans into the garbage disposal while Mom was cleaning Kris’s hands and face. I decided to casually mention the mall trip.

“Mom, Jen and Mrs. Harris are going to the mall tomorrow. You wanna go?”
“I can’t think of anything I need. But, sure. Maybe I can get a Happy Meal into Kris.”

On the one hand, I was relieved to know that our plan was progressing so well, but those apprehensive feelings were again dominating my thoughts. I wondered if I could trust Sarah to abide. I had to remind myself that Mrs. Harris would be there. Maybe everything will be okay, I thought.

Mom asked me to get Kris dressed in her pajamas, so I carried her upstairs. After dressing her, I held her on my lap while I wrote to Sarah. I didn’t have to wait long before I got a reply.

“Yes, I can come to the mall tomorrow!” she wrote. “What time?”

“We’ll be there at around ten,” I told her. “We’ll probably eat somewhere in the food court at around 11:30. Just look for Holly and me. Jen and her mom are coming, too. By the way, Mom’s hair is blond.”

I clicked the send button and immediately felt waves of guilt overtaking my whole body. I was resolved at this point to never allow anyone to coerce me into doing anything I didn’t really want to do. It wasn’t my fault that Mom gave Sarah away.

After several minutes of battling my emotions, I took Kris to my bed, tucked her in, and kissed her little cheek all the while dreading tomorrow’s trip to the mall.
Chapter 15

The next day Holly and I got up early and got Kris and ourselves dressed so quickly that Mom was almost surprised to see us at the breakfast table.

“Well,” she said. “I guess you two really want to go to the mall.”

“Yeah,” Holly answered. “Summer’s been pretty boring so far.”

I glared at Holly and she shrugged her shoulders. Mom acted as though she didn’t notice.

“Okay, girls,” she said, “I’ve got to get Kris to eat something so we’re all having her favorite cereal. We’ll get something at the mall for lunch.”

Holly agreed and ate heartily while I could hardly touch a bite. My anxiety level was escalating—this day could transform our summer into one we would never forget. For the first time, I wanted to cave and just tell Mom everything. But then Dad came into the kitchen.

“Are you guys ready to go?” he asked.

“In just a minute,” Mom replied. “Kris is actually eating some of this cereal.”

“Okay, I’ll wait for you then.”

Holly’s eyebrows drifted upward and her chin dropped a couple of inches.

“You’re going with us, Dad?” she asked.

I couldn’t remember the last time Dad went with us to the mall. He hated the mall and shopping and spending any amount of money. Even worse, he hated waiting on any one of us girls while we tried on clothes. But this time, he actually looked happy about going.

“I need to get away from work for awhile,” he added.

Mom looked pleased. “We’ll have a family day.”

“But, Mom, we’re meeting Mrs. Harris and Jen there,” I complained.

“They’re almost family, Sandy,” Mom answered. “Honestly, what’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, then,” she said, “get the stroller and put it in the car, will you, please?”

I motioned for Holly to follow me. We found the stroller just outside the back door, and we wheeled it to Dad’s car. I glanced back toward the house to make sure no one was within hearing distance.

“I wish we could call this off, Holly.”

She didn’t look as worried as I felt. “As long as Sarah doesn’t try to actually talk to Mom, everything’s going to be okay. You’ll see.”

I was hoping she was right—I even felt a little more confident by the time we reached the mall. Within minutes of stepping into the mall, I spotted Sarah sitting on one of the benches in the center corridor. She pretended not to notice us as we passed her. All of a sudden, I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. Here Mom and Sarah were within feet of one another and it was all my doing. I decided that I had a better chance of controlling the situation if I could get to Sarah before she approached us.

“Mom, can we take Kris to the toy store?” I asked.

“I guess so. Make sure she stays in the stroller.”

Dad stepped closer to me. “Watch her close. Here. Take my cell in case you need us.”

I slipped Dad’s phone into my purse. I motioned to Holly to follow, and we headed in the direction of the toy store. We passed Sarah a second time—I could tell she was looking back at Mom. I was relieved when she started following Holly and me.

We were a few yards from the toy store when I spotted Jen and Mrs. Harris. Oh, boy, I thought. What now? Will Sarah keep her distance until after we pass Jen’s mom?
Holly and I quickened our pace and finally reached the two of them.

“Hi, Jen,” I yelled out. “Hi, Mrs. Harris.”

“Hello there, girls.” Mrs. Harris leaned over to Kris and gave her a delicate kiss on her forehead. “Hey, Kris, how’s my little girl?”

Mrs. Harris adored Kris so I figured I’d better cut this exchange short. Just as I was planning my strategy, Jen’s mom tucked her hands under Kris’s arms and tried to remove her from the stroller.

“Mrs. Harris, Mom’s waiting for you—that way,” I pointed.

“Oh, well, I’d better go then.” She released her grip on Kris. “Jen, you want to hang out with the girls then? Sandy, I’m surprised your mom let you have Kris.”

“Dad gave me his phone just in case.”

“Okay, we’ll see you later. Jen, let’s meet at the food court at 11:15 or so.”

“Okay, Mom,” Jen agreed.

Finally! Mrs. Harris left us to look for Mom. I could see Sarah watching her as she passed by. When Sarah looked our way, I motioned for her to let her know we were going into the toy store.

As far as I could tell, the hard part was over. Sarah had seen Mom so my promise to her was complete. The two had not actually made contact which was my second essential objective. And best of all, Mom still didn’t know a thing. I sighed deeply and wheeled Kris into the toy store. Holly and Jen were right behind us.

“Whew, that was close,” I said.

“But it worked out,” Holly said.

“What should we do now?” Jen wanted to know.

Just then we saw Sarah enter the store. She saw us immediately, so I motioned her over. I could see that she was as happy as I was that our plan had turned out so well. The first thing she did when she reached us was throw her arms around me and hug me so tightly, I could hardly breathe.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you, Sandy,” she said. “Your mom is beautiful. I can’t believe this is happening.”

Me neither, I thought. But now, I wanted it to be over, for her to leave right away. Obviously, however, this wasn’t her plan.

“Is this Kris?” she asked. “She’s so cute. Would it be okay for me to hold her?”

“I don’t know, Sarah,” I said nervously. “Mom and Dad could be coming this way at any minute.”

“Please, Sandy,” she said.

“Well, if you hurry…”

Sarah lifted Kris and settled her on her hip. My baby sister was definitely obliging—she loved attention and was happy to be held at any time by just about anyone. She nuzzled her face into Sarah’s shoulder and the molded image of my two sisters began dancing in circles right there in the middle aisle of the toy store.

Jen started searching for her camera. “Kodak moment,” she announced.

The four of us sisters huddled together for our first picture together. If Mom only knew….

And then the unthinkable happened. Holly saw him first.

“Oh, God,” she said under her breath. “Sandy, Dad’s looking into the toy store.”
I hardly had a chance to respond when I saw Dad casually walking through the double doors at the front of the store. I was so stunned I could hardly breathe. And I certainly didn’t have another minute to devise a plan.

Within seconds, he was standing in front of us. “Find anything you like?”
Holly was more collected than I was and spoke first.
“Oh, Dad, we don’t play with toys anymore.”
Jen, the life saver, added, “Yeah, we’re just here so Kris can look at the toys.”
I couldn’t feel my legs from my knees down. I still couldn’t breathe, but now I couldn’t talk either. How in the world should I introduce him to Sarah, or should I even do that? My mind was spinning.
I finally managed to get my first words out, but I felt they were strangling me as I spoke.
“Where’s Mom?”
“She’s with Jen’s mother at Valigura’s,” he answered. He then turned to Sarah. “And who’s this?”
I nearly died right then and there. If I could have managed fainting, I would have. Again, Holly saved me.
“This is Sarah, Dad,” she answered.
“Good to meet you, Sarah,” he said. “You must be a student at the high school.”
“I’ll be a senior this coming year.”
“Hanover High?”
“No,” she replied. “Sunset Valley. I always come over here to Hanover to shop at the mall.”
“Oh, sounds good. Well, it’s good to meet you.”
I could have sworn that I detected a puzzled look on his face that lasted just a little too long. He looked away, paused briefly, and then offered to take Kris out of Sarah’s arms.
“I’ll take her if you girls want to walk the mall,” he offered.
I searched his face for clues as to what he might be thinking. Would he ask me later where Sarah and we girls had met? Or would our encounter be totally forgotten once we got home?

We stayed at the mall for another hour or so talking with Sarah. Jen took a few more pictures. Finally Mom called and told us to meet her at the food court. While there, Mom noticed that Kris’s nose was running, so we cut our lunch with Jen and Mrs. Harris short and we left to find our car. Thankfully, Sarah had made good on her promise to stay out of sight.

As soon as we reached the house, Mom bolted from the car and rushed upstairs to find a thermometer because she was certain Kris had a fever.

Dad told Holly and me to wait with him while he pulled the car into the garage. As soon as the car was parked and turned off, Dad started right in. He didn’t even turn around to look at us before he started asking questions.
“Who’s this Sarah, and how long have you known her?”
Holly and I looked at each other. I figured I should be the one to confess if the conversation got that far, so I answered his question.
“She lives in Sunset Valley, Dad. We haven’t known her for very long.” Safe answer, I figured.
I didn’t want to lie to him, but at this point, I wanted to avoid offering him too much information. Frankly, though, his next question had me trapped.
“How is it that you know her?”
When he turned around after asking that question, I knew we were in trouble. Holly knew, too, so in true Holly fashion, she blurted out the truth.
“She’s our sister, Dad,”

Dad looked as though the wind had been knocked out of him, and all of a sudden, I felt sick to my stomach. I didn’t want to explain how we knew about her, and he didn’t ask. In fact, the conversation died right there. Dad got out of the car and walked into the house without saying another word. Holly and I followed knowing full well that this conversation wasn’t really finished.

I went straight to my room, and Holly went to hers. By the time I got to my bed, I was in tears. I couldn’t exactly read Dad’s reaction in the car. Certainly he was shocked that we knew Mom’s secret, but was that all? Did he feel as though we had deceived him and Mom by making contact with Sarah without their knowledge? Was he angry with us? What was he going to tell Mom? I wondered if we should have told him the whole story. I just didn’t know what to think. That night, I was certain that I could classify this day as the worst time of my life.

But I was wrong.

Chapter 16

The next morning I woke up at around 5:30 and was immediately aware that someone was already fixing breakfast. Odd, I thought. We’ve never been early risers, but I figured Kris had had a bad night and Mom was just trying to get her to eat.

I was surprised then when I saw only Dad and Gran in the kitchen. What’s Gran doing here, I wondered.

“Where’s Mom?” I asked them both.

Gran was tending to the bacon I had smelled from all the way upstairs and Dad was setting the table.

“At the hospital,” he answered. “By two this morning, Kris’s fever was pretty high. Almost 103. Her cardiologist wanted us to take her in.”

I wasn’t really concerned at that point because Kris was no stranger to the medical community. She was seeing a cardiologist and general practitioner frequently. She had had more medical appointments within the previous six months than the rest of the family combined. Even though she had a myriad of physical problems, none of them compared to the severity of her heart condition. This was a dark cloud that never went away, but it had never been bad enough to necessitate a trip to the emergency room.

“How come you’re not with Mom?” I asked. “Kris will be scared, Daddy.”

“As soon as I talk with you and Holly, I’m going to the hospital.”

“Is it bad? Is something wrong, bad wrong, with Kris?”

Dad placed the last fork with great deliberation to the side of the plate at the head of the table.

“Sandy, let’s wait for Holly.”

“No!” I yelled. “Tell me now. What’s wrong with her?”

Gran turned off the range and slid the pan of bacon to a cool burner. By the time Dad was at my side, she was, too.

“Sandy,” she said, “Kris is really sick. The fever could cause problems for her heart. We’re just going to have to wait and see.”
I knew she said something more, but I can’t remember what it was. Perhaps I stopped listening—I’m not sure. Wild images were dancing in my head. All I could think of was Kris in the hospital, terrified and without me.

“I want to go, Dad,” I begged.

“Maybe if her fever breaks. Until then, you and Holly will have to stay here with Gran.”

“No, Daddy.”

“It could get complicated,” he insisted.

“I won’t be in the way. I promise.”

I could see tears welling in Gran’s eyes.

“She should go,” she said.

I looked at Dad’s face for an affirmative sign, but it took awhile to see one.

“Go get dressed, and don’t wake Holly,” he finally said.

I dashed out of the kitchen and up the stairs. The clothes I wore the previous day were still draped over the computer where I had left them. I hurriedly put them on and was back in the kitchen in less than three minutes.

Dad was leaving instructions with Gran so I grabbed his keys and left to start the car. It wasn’t long before he slid in the driver’s seat and we were on our way.

The drive to the hospital was a short silent blur. We didn’t have much time to talk and I’m sure Dad didn’t feel like carrying on a conversation any more than I did. As soon as he pulled into the parking space at the hospital, he turned off the car and touched my hand.

“Don’t say anything to your mom about Sarah,” he said. He looked me squarely in the face and added, “She doesn’t need that right now.”

I nodded my head slightly knowing that there would be no opportunity for discussion. We both left the car and hurried to the hospital’s front door. Upon entering, we saw an information desk where a smiling receptionist greeted us.

“Are you looking for a patient?” she asked.

“Kris Robeson,” he answered.

She scanned her computer screen and finally found Kris’s name.

“She’s on the second floor. Room 212.”

Dad grabbed my arm without saying another thing to the receptionist and we both headed for the elevators.

“If she’s in a regular room, that means she’s not that sick, right, Daddy?” I asked as we entered the elevator.

Dad stopped the doors before they could close completely and he pulled me out of the elevator and into the hallway.

“We have to talk, Sandy.”

He guided me toward a waiting area and told me to sit down. Beads of sweat were forming on his brow and I noticed a mild shaking in his hands. I knew I wasn’t going to like what he was about to tell me.

“What, Dad?”

“You know Kris isn’t healthy,” he began.

The catch in his voice made me think he was on the verge of crying. I wasn’t too far away from tears myself.

“I know about her heart, Daddy. She has Down’s Syndrome. I know about all of that,” I told him.
His following silence and the heartbroken look on his face were as telling as any words could have been. Extreme panic overtook me. I bolted to the elevator doors and pounded furiously on the up button. When the doors didn’t open, I tried to open them myself. I could feel Dad’s hands on my shoulders, but I brushed them off. He was trying to soothe me but I couldn’t hear anything he was saying. He tried to hold me a second time, but I tore away from him and started running. Within a few minutes, I was in the stairwell—he was following close behind. By the time I reached the landing on the second floor, he caught up with me and pinned me against the wall.

“Sandy,” he whispered, “please calm down.”

Suddenly my energy was gone and I slipped down to my knees. He joined me on the floor and took me into his arms. It was the first time I had ever seen my father cry.

“Sandy,” he said, “this is hard, I know.”

“The doctors can’t help her?”

“She’s very sick. We don’t know for sure what’s going to happen.”

“Mom—what about Mom?”

“We’ll talk later, okay? Right now, they both need us."

I brushed the tears off my face and took my dad’s hand.

“Let’s go,” I said.

Within a few minutes, we were standing outside of Kris’s room. Dad patted my face with his handkerchief and then blotted his own eyes.

“Ready?”

I nodded my head and opened the door.

Right away, I could see Mom sitting in a lounge chair with Kris in her lap. Mom motioned for us to come closer.

“It’s okay to touch her,” she said. “Be careful of the IV line and that little thing on her finger.”

Dad kissed Kris’s forehead and I wrapped her tiny fingers around my thumb. She opened her beautiful blue eyes and for a brief time she looked at me, smiled, and then closed her eyes. I moved the oxygen mask from her face and kissed her tiny lips. When I swept the hair from her forehead, she opened her eyes a second time and extended her hands toward me.

“Can I hold her, Mom?”

“I’m going to put her in her bed. Then I want you to lay down with her.”

“Is it okay to do that?” I wondered out loud.

“She’s used to sleeping with you,” she answered. “I’ll lay down next to her on her other side.”

After Mom had Kris and me situated in the bed, she gently crawled in on the other side of Kris. Like so many times before, Kris buried her little head in my shoulder, draped her arm over my neck, and drifted off to sleep.

It felt good to cuddle with her and pretend for a few minutes that as long as I was holding her, nothing bad could happen. And then I prayed furtively, begging God to change his mind if his intention was to take her away.

Vacillating between hopefulness and despair, I just wanted to take her home. My eyes were tearing and my heart was breaking.

I thought Mom had fallen asleep until she handed me a tissue.

“She’s gone,” she said. “Dry your tears, honey.”

“Mom, what’s going to happen?”
“Only God knows for sure,” she answered.
“Daddy told me—”
“Kris is very sick, Sandy. The doctors want us to be prepared in case something bad happens.”
“Could she die?”
Mom propped herself up in the bed and grabbed another tissue.
“It could happen, Sandy.”
My mother’s words stunned me. I looked down at our peaceful little baby not daring to imagine our lives without her. I clutched Kris’s body and drew her closer to my own. I stroked her hair, kissed her lips, and whispered whatever I could think of into her ears. There I stayed for the better part of each day intent on staying close, comforting her in every possible way I could, and praying that God would return her to us.

On the eleventh day of her stay in the hospital, our little baby, defeated by an unrelenting fever and an unhealthy heart, left us to join God in Heaven, forever free of the trials of this life. No longer the victim of poor health, unending medical involvement, and certainly a bleak future, our baby was finally whole in Heaven.

Chapter 17

During the following two days, Holly and I were the forgotten two as Mom and Dad made arrangements for Kris’s funeral, received countless visitors, and managed what seemed to be an endless array of food that friends and neighbors brought to the house. Mom’s demeanor was baffling to Holly and me since we knew she was capable of tears, but we weren’t seeing any. In fact, she seemed to ignore the reality that our baby was gone and instead focused on constantly “cleaning up” in preparation for the next slew of visitors. Dad’s behavior was just as perplexing. He mowed the lawn the day after Kris died.

Looking back, it’s now a little easier to understand the “adult” way of handling a tragedy of this magnitude—perhaps their busyness was their way of coping, their way of taking one step after the other, their way of holding on to a shred of sanity when their grief threatened to take that away.

As for me, I confess I had no way to cope and I wasn’t interested in finding one. All I wanted was another minute with Kris—I wanted her back. Our connection with each other was now broken, and I wondered how she would do without me. How would she find her way to Heaven without my help? If only I could take her myself to make sure she gets there safely, I thought numerous times.

Such is the rationale of a fourteen-year-old girl consumed with grief and beleaguered by the incapacity to truly accept the finality of a life so young and so precious as that of our baby. I dreaded the funeral—viewing the body would erase my fantasy that all of this wasn’t really happening.

I was already awake that morning when I heard Mom trying to arouse Holly. Except for their exchange, the house seemed quiet. After a few minutes, I could tell Holly was getting dressed so I decided to do the same. While I was laboring over what I should wear, Holly appeared in my bedroom doorway wearing her blue graduation dress.

“How does this look okay?” she asked.
“You hate that dress.”
“Kris is wearing hers.”

Holly started to cry, and as much as I wanted to squelch my own urge to do the same, I couldn’t stop myself. Before we knew it, Mom was in my room holding the both of us and trying to soothe us the best she could.

“I know, I know,” she said.

“Why did God do that, Mom?” Holly asked. “Why did he take her? She was so little—she didn’t deserve this.”

“Holly, Kris was very sick. From the very first day. She was born that way. There just wasn’t much anyone could do for her.”

I slipped out her grasp and dropped to the bed. “You knew? You knew she was going to die?”

Mom brushed a tear from my face. “No one knew for sure, but the doctors told me that, considering the severity of her problems, we probably shouldn’t expect—"

“Why didn’t you tell us?” I screamed.

“I wanted Kris’s life to have as much normalcy as possible. And I guess I was holding out for a miracle. I didn’t want to say anything to anyone until we knew something for sure. Of course the doctors wouldn’t commit one way or another. I just didn’t want you to be living with the same sadness I was living with.”

“We could have lived with it together.”

“We loved her together, Sandy. That’s what was important. Because of you two, Kris was the happiest little sister ever. I couldn’t have asked for more. Now, the two of you get dressed. We should be leaving in about an hour. I’ll make some eggs. It’s going to be a long day.”

“Mom,” I called as she turned to leave.

“Yes, honey.”

“Will every day be this bad?”

She paused in the doorway and seemed to brace herself on its frame.

“For awhile, yes,” she answered. “As time goes by, it will be a little easier. You’ll never forget, but that’s not a bad thing because eventually we’ll recall the happy times more often. And we’ll remember how happy she made us and how happy we made her. That’s what will stay with us forever. It will get better. Understand, honey?”

I didn’t really because the wounds were still fresh and I couldn’t see a day that would ever be different than the one we were living in at the moment. But I had to consider that she probably knew what she was talking about. After all, she had experienced the loss before. Only the child didn’t die and she was living only forty-five minutes away from our house.

Chapter 18

I can’t remember much about the car ride to the church except that no one was doing much talking. Somehow it seemed odd, as I watched the traffic around us, that life seemed to be carrying on as usual for everyone but us. A carful of children obviously on their way to a swimming pool or the water park in Sunset Valley passed us twice. Their world is the same today as it was yesterday, I thought, and ours had tragically and abruptly changed forever. Shouldn’t they know? Are we grieving alone? Don’t they realize that our baby has just died? Why does everyone else look so normal today?
As soon as we pulled into the driveway at the church, we saw Gran standing on the front steps motioning us to park in the space next to the one occupied by her car.

Like Mom and Dad, Gran looked drawn and spent. She reached Mom’s side of the car before Dad had come to a full stop and she opened the door before Mom had a chance to open it herself. I’ll never forget the look on Gran’s face. I knew she had to be heartbroken over losing Kris because certainly she loved her almost as much as we did. But I saw something else in her eyes, undoubtedly a deep sadness compounded by the extreme grief her daughter was experiencing. Even though each of us was experiencing this tragedy in his or her own way, it was apparent to me that this tragedy was a bonding experience shared in some significant way by the entire family.

Gran’s actions led me to think of Sarah. What was Gran’s part in that loss? Did anyone grieve? Do they talk about her? They have no sweet memories, I thought. Does Mom regret what she did? Do they wonder about Sarah?

Gran helped Mom out of the car and onto her feet. They embraced tightly; Gran was trying to soothe her daughter the way Mom had soothed Holly and me earlier in my bedroom. Dad rounded the front of the car and wrapped his arms around the both of them. Mom finally had a release and was sobbing uncontrollably, and Dad was having a hard time hiding his tears. Gran broke away when she noticed that Holly was in tears also.

“There, there,” she said softly as she held Holly close. She plucked a hanky from her purse and dabbed Holly’s eyes. “It’s okay to cry. Let’s go in before everyone gets here.”

If it hadn’t been for Gran’s suggestion, I don’t know how long we would have stayed in the parking lot crying. It seemed as though I couldn’t force myself to go into the building, and I’m sure the rest of the family felt the same way. This was it—our final good-bye, our baby gone forever, our lives to go on without her. I couldn’t imagine conceding to this horrific thought. How in the world does someone let go?

The viewing area was dimly lit. I noticed beautiful expensive furnishings situated throughout the room. It was an effort to keep myself balanced on such thick carpet. Holly grabbed my hand and we followed Mom, Dad, and Gran to Kris’s casket.

There she was. Beautiful and doll-like. Her face perfectly flawless, her lashes resting on her cheeks, her little hands caressing a single rose. And the beautiful blue dress she loved so much.

“Kris,” I whispered, “we’re wearing our blue dresses, too….”

I could feel Mom slide her arm around my shoulder.

“She would be so happy to know you’re all wearing your dresses.” She pointed to a picture on a small easel resting on the casket. “Mrs. Waters had it made from the pictures she took at the graduation party. Do you remember?”

I nodded my head but I couldn’t say anything. We simply looked at our baby until a man wearing a black suit approached us and informed us that the viewing for the public would begin within the next few minutes. He told us we had the option of remaining at the side of the casket, or retiring to the church parlor to await the service.

I was glad to get away. I knew that dealing with the mourners would simply be a replay of the last two days at the house when it seemed that everyone we knew, and some we didn’t, came by with food, flowers, and condolences. Another lengthy reminder, I was certain, that this nightmare was indeed very real.

Mom led the way, closely flanked by Dad and Gran. Holly and I were following a short distance behind when I noticed that Mrs. Harris and Jen were entering the church from a side
door close to the parlor. Before Holly and I caught up with Mom and Dad, Mrs. Harris was at Mom’s side leading her into the parlor.

I was so glad to see Jen. Somehow she seemed to be the only stable constant in my life at that moment. I was looking forward to just being at her house, getting back to school, maybe even pretending that nothing had changed at my own house. At the moment, I was just grateful to see my best friend.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I told her.

“Me, too,” she said. “How’s your mom?”

“Not too good,” I answered. “I think we’re all having a hard time. We still can’t believe this is happening.”

“I have to tell you something.”

She pulled me away from the parlor doorway and led Holly and me to an alcove just down the hall.

“What about?” I asked.

“Sarah has been calling me. I told her about Kris. I hope that’s okay.”

“Sure,” I answered.

“Well, you haven’t e-mailed her and she’s hoping you haven’t forgotten about her, and—“

“What does she expect?” I said too loudly. “Kris has been sick and now she’s gone. Does Sarah really think I’m going to be e-mailing people right now? How could she be so selfish?”

“Wait a minute, Sandy,” Jen said. “Remember Kris was her sister and how happy she was to meet Kris and Holly and you. Now she thinks that maybe she won’t have a chance to meet your mom.”

“Well, maybe she’s right,” I said contentiously. “Mom doesn’t want to meet her. She knows that. All we can think of right now is Kris.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have told you she’s been calling me,” she said as she looked downward.

“Jen, I’m sorry,” I told her. “I’m glad you told me. But she’s going to have to wait. Tell her that, okay? Mom is the important one right now.”

My feelings of anxiety regarding Sarah suddenly resurfaced. If she knew Kris had died, she undoubtedly also knew when the funeral would be held. What if she shows up here, I wondered. What if she takes this opportunity to speak to me, or worse, Mom? What would Dad do now that he knows what Sarah looks like? A tornado was spinning in my head. I was glad that Mom had elected to leave before the mourners started filing in to visit Kris’s casket, but I was anxious to know if Sarah was in the church.

I didn’t have to wait long.

Chapter 19

The same man in the black suit called for us at the parlor announcing that the guests were all seated. We were expected to be the last to enter the sanctuary where we would take our places on the front row. Mom invited Mrs. Harris and Jen to sit with us; I asked both Jen and Holly to scan the sanctuary for Sarah.

There were so many people in the pews, I didn’t think I would be able to see her even if I tried. But I didn’t have to look far. She was directly behind Mom but two rows back. I felt panicky and frankly a little irritated. She had to have known that I would be anxious about her being there. I tried to convince myself that surely she would do the right thing and keep her
distance. But I knew that as soon as the service was over, we would all be invited to meet in the Fellowship Hall where a meal prepared by other church members would be waiting for us. I wondered if she would join us or do the sensible thing and leave.

As soon as the service began, I lost my focus on Sarah. The pastor reminded us of the blessing that Kris had been to everyone whose lives she had touched in the short time that God had lent her to us. I tried to concentrate on what he was saying, but my mind kept drifting to other places. I couldn’t to this day remember what else he said. My thoughts were scattered and my emotions were taking charge. Eventually, I realized that the service was ending when the pastor invited everyone to meet in the Fellowship Hall. I was afraid someone would ask me to stand and I wouldn’t be able to.

My anxiety escalated when I realized that the man in the black suit and his associates were directing the mourners to leave their pews, walk down to the front where Kris rested, and then past Mom and Dad and the rest of the family. Some of the mourners paused at Mom or Dad’s side and extended a hand or briefly embraced one of them or both. Oh, my gosh, I thought. What will Sarah do when it’s her turn to view Kris for the last time and then walk past Mom and Dad?

It seemed to take forever for the rows of people to file past us. When the people on Sarah’s row were invited to stand, I glanced at Jen and Holly.

“Here she comes,” I told Jen.
“I’m keeping my fingers crossed,” she whispered.
“Oh, boy,” Holly added.

Sarah approached the casket and paused for several seconds before turning away and walking toward Mom and Dad. I thought my heart was going to jump out of my throat when she reached for Mom’s hand. Dad looked my way, widened his eyes, and then turned to face Sarah. I heard him say, “Thank you for coming,” as he extended his hand. She had no choice but to release her grip on Mom and accept his handshake. I could see that he was leading her away from Mom’s space.

I had one of those I-think-I’m-going-to-throw-up moments, but it didn’t last long and a wave of relief passed over me. Within a few seconds, Sarah was out the door and I was able to breathe again.

After the last of the congregants were out of sight, the man in the black suit leaned over toward Mom and Dad and whispered something I couldn’t hear. He assisted Mom off the pew and led her to Kris’s casket. Dad and Gran followed. When Holly and I hesitated, Gran reached out to the two of us and encouraged us to stand to either side of Mom and Dad. She stepped back. It was our last moment together, the four of us gazing at our little angel, so still and quiet. There are times when a memory remains forever etched in the mind—I knew that this was one of those moments.

I’m not sure how long we lingered but Mom was the first to return to the front pew. She sat down for a few minutes while the rest of our family, including Gran, paid their last respects and then started filing out of the sanctuary.

After a few minutes, she said, “I guess we should go.”
Dad put his hands on hers. “We can stay as long as you want.”
“No, let’s go. Everyone will be waiting for us.”

I’m not sure what was going through her mind at that time, but I knew what was going through mine. I wanted this nightmare to end. I was past fantasizing that this tragedy had never
happened. I simply wanted to jump ahead a few months where, I was told, the passing of time would soften the wrenching heartache I was feeling at that moment.

When we reached the Fellowship Hall, almost everyone was already seated and eating. There was a low hum of conversation along with the usual clinking of silverware against dishes. A group of men in the serving line were chuckling as if one of them had said something funny. Such a normal looking scene, life going on as usual, a casual lunch among a group of people we just happened to know. These were the same people who gathered with us for the Wednesday evening meal every week prior to Wednesday evening services. But someone was missing. Our baby was on her way to the cemetery where a private burial service would be held only for her family.

By the time Mom had reached the serving line, I felt as though an explosion was bursting within me. I simply could not stand another minute of this reality. I tugged on Gran’s sleeve and told her I was leaving to use the bathroom.

“Don’t be too long, honey,” she said. She tucked her fingertips under my chin and asked, “Are you okay?”

I nodded my head slightly but I wasn’t sure I had convinced her. I could feel the tears coming at any minute, so I broke away from her and bolted for the door.

It was hot outside. The sun was shining and I could hear children playing and laughing in a yard close by. I took a deep breath and leaned against the brick wall just outside the door. I thought I was alone but then I sensed someone approaching me.

“Sandy,” she called out. “I have to talk to you.”

I turned toward the voice. “Sarah,” I said, “you shouldn’t have come here.”

“Jen told me what happened to Kris. I was—I’m so sorry. I couldn’t stay away.”

“You have to leave before Mom finds out,” I insisted.

“If it hadn’t been for you, Sandy, I would never have met Kris. I had fifteen minutes of her life in my arms that day in that toy store and—“

“You have to go,” I interrupted.

“I fell in love with her. I think she would have liked me, but I’ll never know….“

Well, there was no point in imploring her to leave because, in the first place, she wasn’t listening to a word I was saying, and even if she had, I could tell that the pull that was keeping her there was stronger than anything I could do. The desperation on her face and in her words had me feeling sympathetic but I had to remember that Mom was only steps away.

“Sarah, listen. My dad knows about you. We told him after he met you at the toy store. I’ll talk to him, and we’ll see what we can do. Mom is so fragile right now. You must know that.”

She nodded her head as she dried her tears with her sleeve. “I do,” she said.

“Only the family is going to the cemetery, okay? You can’t come. Please tell me you won’t.”

“I won’t,” she said quietly. “I’m sorry, Sandy. I didn’t mean to cause any trouble. My mom is waiting for me in the car. We’ll go right now.”

“Your mom is here?” I screamed.

“I told her everything. Don’t worry—she won’t get involved, I promise. She’s a good person. Will you call me, e-mail me?”

“I can’t tell you when, but I’ll try.”

She hugged me tightly, but quickly, and then ran to a car that pulled up just feet away from us. After I looked around to make sure no one was watching, I scurried back into the building. I can’t wait until this day is over, I thought.
Chapter 20

The next week or so, our family of now four stayed in the house, somewhat protected by the cocoon we had woven around ourselves. Gran kept visitors to a minimum; Dad, Mom, and we girls stayed upstairs almost solidly that entire time. We talked, cried, shared our grief, and wondered how in the world life would ever get back to normal. Gran said it would, but I didn’t believe her.

“You have to go on,” she said. “Cherish your memories, but live your lives.”

And she was determined that we should. Exactly two weeks after Kris’s funeral, she suggested a trip to the water park in Sunset Valley. Holly and I were willing, but we weren’t sure Mom and Dad were up to it.

We were wrong. Mom thought it was a good idea, and Dad said he was ready to get out of the house.

The park was incredibly crowded. I didn’t want to see anyone we knew. It would have been harder to pretend that we were doing what everyone else was doing, escaping the heat. Instead, we were getting away from the misery we were all feeling, if only for a few hours. It felt good. No one there knew. We could pretend to be as happy and carefree as anyone else there.

At about midmorning, Mom and Gran stopped by one of the restrooms in the park leaving Holly, Dad, and me at one of the picnic tables in the restaurant section. Holly was hungry so Dad said he would check out the fast foods. Shortly after he left, Holly moved from the other side of the table and sat down next to me.

“Well, what are we going to do?” she asked.

I didn’t have to ask her what she meant because I already knew. Sarah was on my mind as well, but I honestly had no idea what direction we should take. I was still unsure of Dad’s stand on this issue so I wasn’t convinced we could count on him to help us. I certainly couldn’t look at the situation from his perspective though I figured it would be very hard for a man to embrace the idea that his wife, before they married, had a past that involved a child that wasn’t his.

Still, we needed some adult advice from someone close to the situation. Absolutely not Gran; Dad would have to do.

“This problem isn’t going to go away on its own,” I told her. “The next chance we get, we should talk to Dad.”

“Here he comes,” she said. “Oh, good, he has food.”

Holly took the fountain drinks out of Dad’s arms and placed them on the table. I removed the sandwiches from the bag and handed one to each of them. Holly took a sip of her drink, looked at me intently, and then just came out with it.

“Dad,” she said, “what are we going to do about Sarah?”

I nearly fell off the bench I was sitting on and Dad dropped his sandwich.

“I didn’t mean right this minute, Holly,” I complained. “Maybe today is not the right time.”

“Why not? It’s just a matter of time before she contacts you again.”

Dad looked over to me. “When’s the last time, Sandy?”

“The day of the funeral. She came to the service and then I saw her outside of the church near the parking lot. I told her not to go to the cemetery. And she hasn’t e-mailed me since. But I know she will. She wants to see Mom really bad.”

Dad was silent for a few seconds before he asked another question.
“How long have you known about her?”
“How long have you known about her?”
“Since right before graduation.”
“Well, then, not very long.”

I was hoping he wouldn’t ask how I happened to know about her. Thankfully, Holly redirected the conversation.

“Dad, are you going to talk to Mom? Are you going to tell her we know? Because if we’re the reason she’s keeping Sarah a secret, there really isn’t a reason anymore, right?”
“I suspect that’s true,” he answered. “But I want you to understand that a situation like this is usually very complicated. And considering what your mom’s been through, I’m not sure she could handle all of this right now.”

Dad promised he would talk with her when the time seemed right, but he didn’t tell us exactly what he planned to tell her. Still, I was satisfied and almost relieved to know that the next step of any plan would be his.

“So, Dad, what should I tell Sarah?” I asked.
“Tell her to be patient.”

Chapter 21

We left the park at about nine, tired and bedraggled in a good sort of way. We dropped Gran off at her house, stopped at a McDonald’s in Hanover, and then drove home. Dad and Mom were talking about how good it was to get away for a while and Holly wanted to know when we could go back. It was our first really “normal” day since Kris had left us, and I knew it was a good start to Gran’s admonition that we should “go on” and “live our lives.”

When we got home, Holly and I went upstairs to get ready for bed. While she was showering in my bathroom, I checked my e-mail. Still nothing from Sarah. I sat there for a minute contemplating whether or not I should contact her before I got a go-ahead from Dad. But then I didn’t want to give her hope in case there wasn’t any. So I decided to shut down my computer and call Jen instead.

“Has she called you?” was my first question.
“Only once. She felt bad about showing up at the funeral.”
“Did she say anything about Mom?”
“She told me she got to touch her. I told her we saw her shake your mom’s hand.”
“She didn’t say anything about wanting to see her again?”
“She said she was happy about seeing her. Just touching her was a big deal to her. But she knows she has to be patient because of Kris and everything.”
“That’s just what Dad said,” I told her.
“You talked with your dad?”
“Today. He’s going to figure a way to talk to Mom, but he doesn’t know when—when he thinks it’s a good time.”

She thought that sounded like a good idea.

By the time I ended my conversation with Jen, Holly had dressed and was already in my bed.

“What’s it okay if I sleep in here again?” she asked.
“Of course,” I answered.
She had slept every night in my bed since Kris died, and, frankly, I was just as grateful for the company as she was.
“I’m going to take a shower,” I said. “You want the light off?”
She didn’t, so I left to take a shower and by the time I had finished, Holly was asleep. I
turned out the light and was finally lulled to sleep by the overhead fan.
I’m not sure what time it was when I woke up, but I knew it was either very late or very
early. I could hear Holly’s rhythmic breathing and then a sigh from someone sitting at my desk.
“Mom?”
“Yes, it’s me,” she answered.
“What are you doing?” I asked.
The small light on my computer lent enough light so that I could see her collecting her hair in
a temporary ponytail and then allowing it to cascade upon her shoulders.
“I just wanted to check on you two, that’s all.”
“How come? Is something wrong?”
It was then that I realized Holly had awakened and was listening.
“She comes in every night,” she explained.
Well, I wasn’t sure what to respond to that because I knew the wrong words could send us all
into another teary episode. I didn’t want to undo what we had accomplished at the water park,
but I suddenly felt like talking.
“You want to get in bed with us, Mom?” I asked.
“Might be kind of crowded, but, yes, that sounds nice.”
She made her way to my side of the bed and both Holly and I slid over to give her room. She
sighed slightly and took my hand.
“So tell me about Sarah,” she said.
I almost quit breathing and Holly popped out of bed like a jack-in-the-box and rushed to turn
a lamp on.
“Oh, Mom,” she said, “she’s really pretty. And she’s so nice. And did Dad tell you
everything?”
“Well,” she answered, “he said he’s leaving some of that up to you.”
“Mom,” I said, “do you know you actually met her at Kris’s funeral?”
“I was kind of in a fog that day. I don’t remember. But your dad told me.”
Holly climbed back into bed with Mom and me and continued the conversation.
“She really wants to meet you and talk about what happened to her—and you.”
Mom drew the covers off her legs and sat up. She crossed her legs Indian style and began to
wring her hands. I could see that she was mulling things over in her mind possibly trying to
decide where to start. She cleared her throat while we sat anxiously waiting for answers.
“Well,” she began, “I was twenty, in college, with really no direction in my life. Then I met
another student. He was a year younger than I was. And he was really nice until I told him I was
going to have a baby.”
“He was mad?” I asked.
“No, just scared. He made a mad dash, with the help of his mother, right out of my life. He
relinquished his parental rights, never saw the baby, and never saw me again, for that matter.
“My stepfather wasn’t too happy about the baby either. Along with my doctor, he arranged
for me to stay in a maternity home where I was constantly badgered to give up my baby for
adoption. The people at the maternity home told me that the only way I could ‘fix’ this problem
and ‘make it right’ was to be generous and make a gift of my baby to a couple not capable of
having one of their own. I felt bad about being unmarried and pregnant and I didn’t know what
to do.”
“What about Gran? What did she think about your baby?” Holly asked.

“Gran was heartbroken, but she was feeling as much pressure as I was. My stepfather was a strong-willed person. She didn’t have many choices either. And of course the people at the maternity home were very persistent. I didn’t know until later that their maternity home was supported by adoptive parents—they were very motivated to take my baby from me. They told me everyone would be happier if the baby had a two-parent home, that it was selfish of me to raise her myself and alone. They went so far as to tell me my baby was being born just so that this couple could have a child.”

“Did you believe that?” I asked.

“No, not really, but I didn’t have anywhere to turn. My mom couldn’t help me because of her husband, and I thought I couldn’t take care of Sarah on my own. I realized too late that I had other options.”

“Like what?” Holly asked.

“I should have kept her, gotten a job, and borrowed some money. But I didn’t know that then. It wasn’t as though I was a young teenager. I could have made it work—lots of single moms do.”

“So then what happened next?” Holly asked.

“Sarah was born on a cool fall morning. Gran was there. I stayed in the hospital for two days and signed the adoption papers a week later at the doctor’s office. The doctor told me that I was doing the right thing and that signing the papers would give me ‘closure’ after a difficult time in my life.”

Holly’s brow wrinkled. “What’s closure?”

“Holly, there’s no such thing. I never forgot about her. I cried for weeks. No one at home mentioned her. Why, it was almost as if she had never been born. Eventually, life went on but I never forgot her.”

It was at this point that I wondered about Gran and Dad.

“What about Gran? Did she know that your baby was going to be living in Sunset Valley? Did she worry about running into her adoptive parents? Did you know Dad then?”

“No, she and I didn’t know where the adoptive parents lived. I suspect that they were people that the doctor already knew, but I don’t know that for sure. No, I didn’t know your dad then. We met shortly thereafter, got married, had you two, and later, Kris. And then one day, out of the blue, Sarah calls me on the phone. I was shocked. I didn’t know what to do.”

“But, Mom,” I said, “do you know what you’re going to do now? Everyone knows about her now.”

“Sandy, I need some time. I’m feeling a little raw right now. I think about Kris constantly.”

Mom leaned over and kissed each of us before straightening her legs and sliding out of the bed.

“I guess I’d better get back to my own bed before your dad comes looking for me.” She offered a weak smile and headed for the bedroom door. “We’ll talk some more in the morning, okay?”

“Mom, what should we tell Sarah?” I asked.

“We’ll talk about that in the morning.”

“You are going to see her, right, Mom?” Holly asked.

She nodded her head ever so slightly as if not truly certain, and she left the room.
Afterwards, Holly and I talked for another hour or so. I felt as though a huge burden had been lifted from our shoulders. I didn’t have to devise another plan; the next step depended on Mom and Dad.

Chapter 22

The next morning, Holly and I went down to the kitchen where Dad was already starting breakfast. He handed me a frying pan and told me to start the bacon.

“Use the whole package,” he said. “I’m hungry, and we might be here for a long while.”

I took the pan from him, set it on the range, and grabbed the package of bacon sitting on the counter. Holly and I exchanged glances; she questioned me with her eyes. All I could do was shrug my shoulders.

We waited for a couple of minutes for Dad to explain his last comment, and when he didn’t, God bless Holly, she just asked.

“What do you mean by that, Dad?”

“Well, girls, we’re going to have to decide what to do about this Sarah thing.”

Sarah thing?

“And,” he continued, “we’re going to be talking about that as soon as your mom comes down.”

“What do you mean by that, Dad?” I asked as I laid pieces of bacon into the frying pan.

“I’m more worried about the two of you.”

In unison, Holly and I said, “Why?”

Dad motioned for us to join him at the table. We all sat down. I felt as though we were waiting for the ceiling to cave in.

“Look,” he began. “Sarah is probably going to want to be a part of your mom’s life. That means she’s going to be a part of the lives of the rest of us. In a way, that means you’re going to have another sister.”

I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. We had just lost Kris. I felt as though we were almost trading one for the other. Holly, on the other hand, was fine with it.

“Dad, she’s really nice,” she said. “I think she likes us, too. What could go wrong?”

“Holly, it would be like having a stepsister. And sometimes that can be difficult.”

“But she’s not a stepsister, Dad.” She turned to me. “She’s a real half sister, right, Sandy?”

“She would be our half sister, but really more like a stepdaughter to Dad,” I answered.

We both looked at Dad and he immediately assuaged our fears.

“Don’t worry about me. I can handle this,” he tried to convince us. “It will be an adjustment for everyone, even Sarah. And her family. Don’t forget about them.”

Just then, Mom appeared at the kitchen door.

“I thought you were going to wait for me,” she told Dad.

“Just wanted to get a head start,” he replied.

Mom joined us at the table, and after a few empty moments, Holly started in.

“What’s going to happen now, Mom?” she asked. “Do you want to see Sarah? Because if you do, it’s okay with Sandy and me.”

“Well, I heard your dad mention her family. We have to be careful—we’re not sure how they feel about all of this,” she said as she swept her bangs from her forehead.

“But, Mom,” I said, “her mom knows. She even drove her to the funeral.”
“I know, but her father and brother—we just have to be careful, Sandy. We don’t even know for sure how threatening this might be to her mother. Some adoptive moms are very much opposed to close relationships with birth parents.”

“So,” Dad added, “probably the best thing to do is to contact Sarah’s mom.”

We all exchanged glances. The only one with a hopeful look on her face was Holly. Dad cleared his throat and Mom’s brow furrowed the way it does every time she tells us her middle name is “Worry.” I guess she could see the same look on my face.

“Sandy, what?” she asked.

“Shouldn’t we talk this over with Sarah first?” I suggested. “Maybe she’s the one who should be talking to her mom.”

Mom nodded her head. She sighed heavily and rested her chin in the palms of her hands.

“Okay,” she said. “Do you have her number, her e-mail address? Tell her we’re ready.”

Holly squealed and my heart started racing.

“You mean you are ready, right, Mom?” I asked.

“We all have to be ready,” she replied. “Let me know when she wants to talk. I’ll finish the bacon.”

Holly wanted to know how in the world any of us could eat at a time like this as Dad was ushering the two of us out of the kitchen. He told us he was so hungry that there might not be anything left by the time we got back.

But we didn’t care. The barriers had fallen away, at least the ones we had expected from our own family. Now all we had to do was present our plan to Sarah and allow her time to approach her parents.

When Holly and I got to my bedroom, we both sat on my bed. I needed a minute or two to collect the tumultuous thoughts in my head as well as decide whether I was going to call her or e-mail her. I ultimately decided to e-mail her but I’m not sure exactly why. Holly didn’t care either way—she just wanted me to get started.

“So,” she said. “What are we going to say in the e-mail?”

“Well,” I answered, “just what Mom said. Let’s start working.”

I took the chair at my computer desk and Holly sat next to me on a stool. After a few seconds we were looking at my inbox. Holly gasped ever so slightly when Sarah’s most recent e-mail popped up.

“Look at the time on that e-mail,” she said. “Seventeen minutes ago. She could still be on. Hurry. Open it.”

Sarah’s e-mail didn’t say much, just that she was sorry she upset me by coming to Kris’s funeral, and that she knew she might have to wait for a long time before our mom was ready to talk to her.

“Boy,” I said. “Isn’t she going to be surprised when we tell her what Mom said?”

“We’d better hurry before she logs off.”

I started typing right away. I simply told her that Mom wanted to see her, but that we all felt she should first talk with her family. I clicked the send button, and Holly and I waited silently for a reply.

As we had hoped, she answered almost instantly.

“Yes,” she wrote. “I’ll talk to my mom and dad. Would you ask your mom if I can call her?”

“Okay,” I responded. “I’ll ask her right now. Hold on a minute.”
Holly was at the door and to the stairwell before I was, but I was able to catch up. We both burst into the kitchen where Mom and Dad were again sitting. Both of us were panting so hard we could hardly speak. Dad finally told us to sit down, calm down, and start over.

“Sandy,” he said, “I’m guessing you reached Sarah.”

“Yes,” I said excitedly. “She wants to talk to Mom on the phone.”

“When?” he asked.

Holly and I looked at each other and then back to Dad.

“Well,” I answered, “I guess right now.”

Holly could hardly contain herself. “Can she call?”

Mom covered her face with both hands for just a second before dropping them both on the table.

“Okay.”

Holly and I raced upstairs, gave Sarah Mom’s answer, and returned to the kitchen to wait for the call. After a few tense moments at the table, Dad decided he was still hungry so he got up and started the eggs. Mom got up and stood by the phone on the wall while Holly and I made small talk about who should set the table.

When the phone rang, Dad dropped the egg carton in the sink and Holly pulled the silverware drawer out so far, she spilled every fork we had onto the kitchen floor. Mom and I started laughing so hard we couldn’t stop. Holly started crying and Dad started yelling.

“The phone is ringing!” he shouted. “Pick up before it goes to the machine!”

We all managed to compose ourselves as Mom answered the phone.

“Hello.”

I don’t know what Sarah said but it was enough to make Mom cry. And of course that set Holly off, and I followed shortly thereafter. Dad was the only one who was still hungry so he made himself busy turning the now-burning bacon. Within a few minutes, Mom ended the conversation with a short, “Call when you know” and hung up the phone.

Dad handed her a paper towel and asked her what Sarah had said.

“She’s going to talk with her parents,” she said as she patted her eyes with the paper towel.

“We’ll just have to wait to see what happens.”

Chapter 23

We stayed home all day waiting for Sarah to call us, but nothing happened. The same was true the following day and the day after that. As the days droned on, we surmised that Sarah had either decided not to talk with her parents or was received in a negative way once she had. In any case, the situation didn’t appear to be too promising. I kept telling myself we had done everything we could on our end and that at least our curiosity had been satisfied should we never see her again.

But I couldn’t stop thinking about her and what she said that day at the mall. First, she had had to consider a second rejection from her birth mother, and now she had to deal with the possibility that her parents, particularly her mom, would forbid her from having contact with us. After all, her adoptive mom didn’t tell her about the adoption until forced to, and obviously there had been no intention that a relationship between the two families should ever exist.

Still, I remembered that her mom drove her to Kris’s funeral. Maybe this was a concession considering the gravity of the situation—at the time, we had no way of knowing for sure. Mom,
though, cautioned us not to be too hopeful. She reminded us that Sarah was still only seventeen
and still bound by the decisions her parents were making for her.

Before long, life returned to normal inasmuch as it could. Jen and I started our ninth grade
year at the high school, and Holly was on her own in the seventh grade at the middle school.
Mom started a support group for grieving parents and Dad was putting in twice as much time at
the office downtown as he was at home. If Mom and Dad were thinking very much about Sarah,
they didn’t say so. Our family conversations focused mostly on memories of Kris—how much
we missed her and how sad it was that we had had so little time with her.

Of course that always led me to think about how short life can be. While we cherished every
minute with Kris, we also made the most of each one of those minutes. We loved her, we
cuddled with her—she was the center of our world. I doubt there was ever a time that she didn’t
feel our intense love for her. Even though we weren’t promised many years with her, we knew
that every minute we did have was ours spent together, shared in a way that surely saved us from
regret later.

How regretful could we be if a future with Sarah was to be denied us—if we failed to take
advantage of the here and now?

I stressed over that thought so often I finally decided to act. I knew that Hanover High and
Sunset Valley High were to square off against each other in an early season football game. I e-
mailed Sarah to ask her if she planned to go to the game. I told her I hoped to see her there.

I was surprised when she answered my e-mail within minutes.

“I’m not supposed to be e-mailing you,” she wrote. “My mom is mad about everything.”

“We figured she told you not to talk to us,” I wrote back. “But are you coming to Hanover
for the game?”

“I’m on the drill team,” she answered. “I have to go to the game. Can you meet me
somewhere during the first quarter?”

“Yes,” I promised. “Meet me at the girls’ restroom. Jen and I will wait for you. Holly will
probably come, too.”

From then and up until the game, I contemplated many times talking with Mom and Dad
about my plan, but every time I did, I decided against it. For one thing, I didn’t want anyone to
discourage me, or worse, tell me I couldn’t see Sarah. Secondly, I was hoping this meeting
would lead to another one, with all of us, and I didn’t want to give anyone—I mean Sarah’s mom
—a head start on squelching my plan.

I knew then what I know now—that it was wrong to defy Sarah’s mom, but given the same
circumstances and the same opportunity, I would do it again. My convictions had never been
stronger than they were at that time. I was completely convinced I was doing the right thing. I
told myself repeatedly I had a God-given right to know my sister and that that right was hers as
well.

I was so sure of my decision, none of the apprehension, feelings of guilt, or any other
negative emotion had a hold on me the way they had during my earlier communication with
Sarah. By the time Mom dropped us off at the gate leading to the football field, my resolve had
me at peace.

After waving Mom off, we three girls paid for our tickets and headed for the fence that
surrounded the playing field. We could see that the drill team from Sarah’s school was already
positioned on the sidelines waiting for their team to emerge from the field house. I nervously
panned the entire girls’ team looking for Sarah, but Holly found her first.

“Seventh one from the front,” she said.
“I see her!” I shouted.

“Let’s wave and see if she waves back,” Holly suggested.

Jen pointed out that Sarah was holding her poms at her waist and was probably in formation as all the other girls had the same stance.

“She might get in trouble if she waves back,” she said.

I didn’t care if she waved or not. I just wanted her to know we were on the field, and as stated earlier, we would be meeting her in the girls’ restroom.

We watched the opening performance of the cheerleaders, and when we thought the performance was coming to a close, the three of us started walking toward the girls’ restroom at the far end of the concession stand.

Once there, I was so nervous my stomach started to ache and my hands were sweating. Jen patted me on the back in that “knowing” kind of way and told me to sit down for a minute on the wooden bench just inside the door.

“It’ll be okay,” she said. “Take a deep breath.”

“A deep breath?”

“My mom always tells me to take a deep breath when I get really anxious. And then we start a conversation on how that never works, and before you know it, I’m less anxious.”

Just then, Sarah walked into the restroom. Holly rushed up to her, threw her arms around her neck, and twirled her around so violently I was sure they would both end up on the floor.

By the time their Hallmark moment ended, they were both crying. All of the anxiety that I had been feeling melted and completely drained from my body. I grabbed the both of them in a group hug, and before long, the only one with dry eyes was Jen.

“Okay, you guys,” she said, “stop before you get me started.”

Jen’s comment caused an eruption of laughter that eventually calmed all of us. But not for long. Holly asked Sarah about the status of her plans to talk with her mom about seeing our mom.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen. My mom isn’t taking this very well. She doesn’t want me to see you or your mom. I think she’s afraid I’ll want to move in with you or something weird like that. She doesn’t understand, and I really can’t talk with her right now.”

“You mean never see us?” I asked. “You’re almost eighteen. After that, you can do what you want, right?”

“Technically, yes, but I don’t want to hurt my mom,” she said as she brushed tears from her cheeks. “But I want to meet my birth mother. I mean really meet her. But now that my mom knows where you live, she will never want me to come here again. She was nervous about my coming for the game tonight.”

“But she took you to Kris’s funeral,” I said.

“Only because I told her I was going to go no matter what. I think there might have been just a glimmer of compassion in her that day, but she’s had time to think this over. I think she’s definitely going to try to keep us apart.”

My heart sank into my stomach. What now, I thought. Possible solutions to the problem were swirling in my head, but none seemed to promise a good outcome. But something happened the next day that changed everything.

Chapter 24
The following day, Holly and I were sitting on my bed sorting old clothes Mom wanted to give to Goodwill. Because it was almost lunchtime, Holly decided she was hungry and wanted to check to see if Mom had started lunch yet.

“She’ll be right back,” she said.

“Okay,” I told her. “If Mom doesn’t have lunch started, bring me back a PB&J.”

“Okay,” she said. “I might bring back one for me, too.”

Considering her comment, I didn’t expect her back any time real soon, so I was slightly surprised when she returned after only a couple of minutes.

“Where is my sandwich?” I asked as I swept all the clothes off the bed.

“Guess what,” she said in a very theatrical sort of way.

“The dog ate my sandwich?”

“We don’t have a dog.” she replied. “But we do have a sister and maybe her father walking up to our front door at this very minute!”

“What? Who said?”

Holly swallowed hard before continuing.

“I saw them through the landing window. They were getting out of their car!”

With that, I bounced across the bed, followed Holly out the door, and made it to the front door just as the doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it, Mom,” I yelled out.

“Okay,” she answered from someplace else in the house.

I paused a minute, looked at Holly, and then slowly opened the door.

“Hi, Sarah,” I said as I tried not to sway too much.

“Sandy,” she said, “I want to see my birth mother.”

“Oh, Sarah,” I said as I tried not to sway too much.

“Okay by me,” I said only because I couldn’t think of anything else.

“This is my dad, Richard Hall,” she said. “Daddy, this is my sister, Sandy. And my other sister, Holly.”

Mr. Hall extended his hand and shook mine and then Holly’s. For a few seconds, we stood there in numbed silence. I didn’t know what to say, and, for once, neither did Holly.

Finally, Mr. Hall broke the silence.

“You think we could come in?” he asked.

Just then Dad showed up.

“Whoa,” I heard him say under his breath.

Mr. Hall extended his hand again, this time to Dad and then introduced himself as Sarah’s father.

In turn, Dad took a deep breath and introduced himself. “And this is Sarah.”

Nodding yes, Mr. Hall looked a little embarrassed. “I hope we haven’t come at a bad time.”

“We didn’t know you were coming.” Dad looked back nervously—I knew he was wondering if Mom was on her way.

“We didn’t know we were coming until about fifteen minutes ago,” Mr. Hall said. “Sarah and I have been driving around all morning talking about this situation and before we knew it, we found ourselves in Hanover and headed toward your house.”

“Come in,” Dad finally said. “Sandy and Holly will show you to the den. I’ll find my wife.”

Holly and I each grabbed one of Sarah’s hands and pulled her into the den where we all three sat on the couch. Mr. Hall sat on the love seat. No one said a word.

I’m not sure what Dad told Mom, but she must have been pretty shocked because when she came into the den, her face was almost colorless. She looked so pale, I thought she was going to
faint. Actually, it looked as though Dad might have been holding her up a little. They stood like statues on the other side of the coffee table.

Well, there we all were, no one saying anything, no one knowing really what to do. Mom’s nose was turning a little pink which was a sure sign she was on the cusp of tears. Finally, I nudged Sarah and she slowly got up, walked around the coffee table, and stood squarely in front of Mom.

“My name is Sarah,” she finally said through tears. “I am your daughter.”

Talk about Hallmark moments—this was it. Mom and Sarah embraced so tightly I thought we’d be hearing broken bones at any minute. The tears were coming in a flood, even from Dad. Mr. Hall tried to hold his in, but there was no use. The moment had consumed us all. I grabbed Holly’s hand and we both joined Mom and Sarah.

After a few minutes, Dad offered everyone paper towels and fresh coffee. He took a cue from Mom and invited Mr. Hall into the kitchen. Holly and I reluctantly followed.

I sure would have liked to have been a fly on the den wall that day because Mom and Sarah talked in there alone for almost an hour. I still don’t know exactly what was said but I know Sarah got some of the answers she was hoping to hear and Mom was finally able to revisit a hard time in her life and somehow reclaim the very best part of it, her firstborn daughter.

It’s been almost five years since that very eventful summer when we found Sarah and lost Kris. We marvel at God’s timing and how he blessed our lives at a time when we were hurting beyond description. I can’t say we’ve totally healed from our loss, but each day gets a little easier. Mom was right when she said there’s no such thing as closure—I can’t imagine a day when I will cease to long for my little baby sister.

The situation with Sarah got a little easier, too. Her mom finally acquiesced to Sarah’s desire to develop a relationship with Mom. Before long, our two families were spending lots of time together. Dad hit it off with Richard, and Mrs. Hall had Mom working with her at a veterinarian’s office two days a week. We all even went on vacation together at some gosh-awful place in Louisiana and had a wonderful time.

As for Sarah, Holly, and me, it wasn’t quite what Dad had warned us it might be. After I got over the feeling that we had traded one sister for another, the bond among the three of us grew stronger and stronger. Sarah was the doting big sister any girl would ever want. And, for Sarah, Holly and I somehow bridged what was initially an awkward gap between her and Mom.

There are always “what if’s” to every major life story. There might even be a few regrets—I know Mom has some. But for a young woman named Sarah Hall, her biggest dream came true, and we were a part of it. I can’t truly know what it’s like to be an adopted child, but I saw firsthand the significant healing that took place in Sarah’s heart since reuniting with my mom, her birth mother. Her story was unsettling, but at least she knows where her life and her story began and with whom. How she builds on that story will be up to her. And of course we’ll be building also—right beside her.

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