

## ONE

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The calendar never lies.

Kit Cooper stared at the hummingbird forever sipping from a pink and purple fuchsia blossom that topped the black-bound, numbered squares on the calendar. As it always did, her gaze slipped to the middle week of June.

The worst week of her life, the worst day, the fifteenth.

Two years ago today Amber died. Kit sucked in a deep breath and turned back to the silent kitchen. Surely she'd grieved enough, cried enough. Some said today should be a day for rejoicing. After all, that's what Amber was doing. At least that's what the Bible said people did in heaven, spent their time praising God and singing heavenly songs.

Kit blinked hard and rolled her eyes to stare at the ceiling, a trick she'd learned that helped ward off the tears. *I will not cry again. It's bad enough I woke up with a soaked pillow, thought I was past that.* Her gaze caught an errant cobweb, so she went to the closet to fetch a broom. Opening the pantry door, she saw that the bag filled with plastic grocery sacks had fallen down, so she reached to hang that back up and discovered that the hook had fallen out of the wall. Bending over to search for the hook, she bumped the broom and clawed her way up the handle.

Heavy air smothered her, air that held tears, shed and unshed, air so thick and black it clogged her throat, burned her eyes, and set her ears to ringing. She raked long fingers through shoulder-length hair, now pepper sprinkled with salt, pulling it back away from her face and fumbling in her jeans pocket for a rubber band that wasn't there.

“Dear God, not again. I cannot do this anymore.” She leaned against the wall, between the mop and the vacuum, her tears gushing forth like a newly broken fire hydrant. “I... I thought I was beyond this.” She hiccuped and coughed. “God, I’m so alone.”

She stepped out of the closet, snagged a dishtowel off the oven handle to mop her face, then pulled a tissue out of the box and blew her nose. While she so often felt the tears would never stop, at least she’d learned one thing.

They did. But they left her feeling ravaged and raw, as if she’d been mauled by a pit bull or a cougar. While she lived, so did the pain.

Missy, Amber’s basset hound, whined at Kit’s feet, then lifted her muzzle in a tenor howl, her sad brown eyes a reflection of Kit’s, sadder than any hound’s eyes should ever be.

Kit crossed long legs and sank down beside the dog, wrapping her arms around the warm neck and resting her wet cheek on the boney head. “Ah, Missy, do you still miss her, or have you forgotten how much she loved you?” Kit stroked the dog’s long, soft, black-and-tan ears.

Back when she was fighting the cancer and the pain was terrible enough to make her cry, Amber used to say that Missy’s ears were the perfect tear mop. Amber had not only a high pain threshold but a will strong enough to conquer most of life’s hard knocks. Except for cancer.

Amber hated crying.

“She wouldn’t want us sitting here, all maudlin and tear-soaked either, would she, girl?” Missy twisted and planted her two front paws in Kit’s lap. She stared into Kit’s eyes as if either seeking or giving reassurance, then whined, a tiny sound, more whimper, more comforting.

Kit pushed herself to her feet, returned to the pantry for a puppy treat, as Amber had called the dog biscuits, and arched one through the air toward Missy, whose tail now wagged, as she jumped and neatly caught it.

“Ah, dog, if only all of life could be cured by a rock-hard, bone-shaped cracker.”

The ringing of the doorbell made Kit wipe her eyes, give Missy one more pat, and, dog at her knee, make her sniffing way to the front door.

“Yes?”

The boy looking up at her wore his Mariners baseball cap with the bill to one side, sported freckles across nose and cheeks, and a grin made all the more charming by one missing front tooth.

“You got any kids to play with?” He stuck his hands in the front pockets of hand-me-down jeans, the hems frayed to strings.

“No, I’m sorry, my children are all grown.”

“Oh.” The sparkle in his blue eyes dimmed. He started to turn away, then stopped and looked over his shoulder.

“You got any grandkids?”

*Do I look that old?* Kit shook her head, wishing she had something to offer him. “I have a dog that needs someone to throw the ball.” She motioned toward Missy, whose tail had upped the wagging speed to tattoo.

“What’s his name?”

“Her name is Missy.”

“She’s kinda funny lookin’, ain’t she?”

“Not really, she’s a basset hound.”

He peered in the doorway. “Can she run? Shortest legs I ever seen.”

“Would your parents mind if you came in our backyard?”

“Nah, Dad’s at work.”

“Who’s taking care of you?” *Surely this boy isn’t a latchkey kid, not as young as he looks.*

He shrugged. “My sister. She’s bossy.” He reached a tentative hand to pat Missy and received a drooly kiss for his effort.

“She likes you.” *What’s the best way to handle this?*

The boy knelt and Missy made quick work of cleaning his face. He giggled, laid his cheek against her ear, both arms around the dog's neck.

"What's your name?"

"Thomas." Missy wriggled from nose to tail, her nails clicking on the tile of the entryway.

"Where do you live, Thomas?"

"Over there." He pointed to a house three doors down on the opposite side of the street.

She'd seen a U-Haul rental truck in the drive a few days earlier and meant to bake something and take it over but just hadn't gotten around to it yet. Like she hadn't gotten around to lots of things lately.

"How about if Missy and I walk you home and ask your sister if it is all right for you to play in our backyard."

"She won't care none."

"Just the same, I'll get Missy's leash." She reached inside the coat closet and lifted the blue nylon leash from the hook. Once she'd snapped it to Missy's collar, she closed the door behind her and smiled at Thomas. "How old are you?"

"Seven."

"Second grade?"

"When school starts. You think I could hold the leash?"

"Watch how I do it and then you may." She folded most of the leash in her right hand and, as Missy took her place at Kit's left knee, held the leash in her left hand at a heel position. "Missy knows to walk on the left side like this."

"Did you teach her that?"

"Ah, no, my daughter Amber did. Missy was her dog." Together they stepped off the porch and down the three wide wood steps to the brick walk, which led to the maple-lined street named after the trees.

“So how come Amber let Missy live with you?” He looked up, questions in his blue eyes.

*Oh, Lord, how do I answer all these questions? I don't do questions anymore.* “How do you like your new house?”

“Okay.” Thomas hung back a trifle as they started up the three concrete steps to his yard. Overgrown junipers formed a spiky green mat on either side of the steps. Missy’s nose twitched, and she turned her head to catch a whiff of whatever lived in the evergreens.

“Do you have a dog?”

Thomas shook his head, his chin drawing closer to his chest. All Kit could see was the button on the top of his blue hat. *Why doesn't he want to go home? What's going on her?* When she started toward the front door, he motioned her to take the concrete walk around to the back.

“You wait here, okay?” His eyes beseeched her to agree.

“Of course.” Kit sat on one of the green plastic lawn chairs, Missy plopping down at her feet.

Thomas crossed the silvered redwood deck and opened the sliding glass door.

Kit leaned back in the chair, letting the slanting sun bathe her face in golden warmth. Strange how comforting the sun felt, not like the gloom in her house that felt cold and...

Trying to prevent the intense introspection that always brought on tears, she opened her eyes to study the backyard. Like many of the others in Jefferson City, Washington, situated halfway between Tacoma and Mount Rainier, or “out in the boonies” as her son Ryan used to say, the permanently white-crowned mountain sat like a sentinel on the southeastern horizon. Towering Douglas fir trees flanked the peak, looking like deep green, near-to-black velvet from this distance.

June in Jefferson City held the sparkle of the finest diamond.

Except for the fifteenth.

*It's only another day* she reminded herself. *The same twenty-four hours as any other day. Even if you cry all day, which you're doing, it will still turn into the sixteenth at midnight and the worst will be over.*

“Please, God, let it be over.”

Missy raised her head from the ground and bumped against Kit's knee.

“Yes, I know, you'd rather walk than lie here. Let's give the kid a minute, and then perhaps he'll play ball with you.” At the word “ball,” the dog's ears rose and her tail brushed the grass. Her head swiveled to see the deck as a teenage girl followed Thomas outside. Straight hair, badly in need of a trim, swung from a center part, partially obscuring her thin face. She tucked one side behind her ear.

“Thomas said you live a couple of houses up on the other side of the street. If you don't mind him playing with your dog, he can go.”

Kit stood. “Is that all? Don't you even want to know my name?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess.” Fingers hooked the hair back again. “He better be home in an hour or so.”

“No, I don't.” Thomas stopped his forward motion toward the dog.

She glared down at him. “Yes, you do.” Each word came out clipped and hissed. “Or you can stay home.”

“Aw'right.”

“I'm Kit Cooper and I'll make sure he comes home on time. He'll be doing *me* a favor, besides Missy. If she doesn't get more exercise, she'll get fat.” *Why are you talking so much? You can see she's already tuned out, just as if she's turned on a radio to blast other sound to infinity.*

“Can I hold the leash?” Thomas looked up, his blue eyes pleading.

“Sure you can.” Kit handed him the loop and watched as he carefully mimicked what she had done, then turned and walked down back around the house. Missy waited until Kit said, “Heel,” then, tail in the air, picked up her broad feet and skipped in rhythm alongside

the boy. Kit shot another look to the deck and saw that the sister had disappeared inside. Kit shrugged and followed her new friend back out to the street.

“Now, you walk good, Missy, you hear?” Thomas ordered. “Don’t you go chasing no cats or nothing.”

Kit let them into the backyard, showed Thomas Missy’s box of toys, and went on in the house, only to stop and watch out the window. If she closed her eyes, she could pretend it was Ryan out there with Skip, the basset they’d had before Missy. Ryan throwing the ball, Ryan tumbling in the grass with a dog, him laughing, the dog barking in the bass tones of a hound. Amber coming around the corner to join the fun. Amber and Ryan playing keep-away from the short-legged dog that could still jump to catch the ball and then, ears flying, keep it away from them. The phone’s ringing broke into her reverie.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Speak of the angels, I was just thinking about you. I have a little boy playing out in the yard with Missy.”

“Where did you find him?”

“He showed up at my door asking if I had kids. His family moved into the Snyder place. So how are you?”

“Not good, how about you?” His voice clogged for part of a moment.

“Cried some earlier. Thomas’s coming by helped.”

“Mom, sometimes I miss her so much I...”

*Want to hit something? Scream? Curse? “I know.” Oh, how I know.* Ryan, two years younger than Amber, thought his big sister could do no wrong. She had been the person he loved most to tease in this world, one who gave as good as she got. Now Ryan was in college at Washington State University in Pullman, the last one to leave the nest. His sigh matched her own.

“What’s Dad doing?”

“I...ah, he hasn’t called yet today, still on that last consulting job.”

“When’s he comin’ home?”

*Oh, please stop asking questions I can’t answer* “Not sure.” *That’s right. Not sure, not even sure where he is.*

“So nobody’s with you?” His voice went up a couple of notes on the last word.

“No, I have Missy and now Thomas.”

“You know what I mean.”

She could hear music in the background. Ryan always needed music on when he studied. Amber liked everything quiet. That used to be one of their bones of contention.

“I thought Jennifer would come home, or Dad.”

*Me, too, but no such luck.*

“Jennifer didn’t dare ask for time off right after starting a new job like that.” Jennifer had graduated from college in mid-May and started her new accounting position the first of June. “So how is everything else?”

“Cool. Thanks for letting me stay on for summer school. You rattling around that big house?”

*If you only knew* Kit could feel tears burning at the back of her nose and eyes. “Yeah, well, maybe I’ll take in boarders.” She listened. “Hang on, someone’s at the door.” Laying the receiver down, she headed for the front door and found a young woman hiding behind an arrangement of mixed flowers in vivid pinks, reds, and whites with yellow mums in a milk glass bowl.

“Flowers for Kit Cooper.”

“Thank you.” Kit reached for the vase and inhaled the spicy aroma of carnations.

“Make sure you add water.”

“Thanks, I will.” She closed the door with her foot and crossed to set the arrangement on the coffee table. Taking the card from the pronged plastic holder, she headed back to the phone, opening the card as she went.

“Jennifer sent me flowers,” she told Ryan. “And in a milk glass bowl. You know how much I love milk glass.”

“Good old Jen. What kind?”

“Carnations, mums, and some others.” Kit read the card aloud. “Dear Mom and Dad, just to tell you how much I love you and how I wish I could make this day easier for you.” Kit’s voice broke halfway through, and she had to gulp to finish. “All my love, Jennifer.”

“That’s Jen. You think she likes Dallas?”

Kit finished wiping her eyes with a tissue. She’d learned to keep boxes of tissues handy at all times, including a pull-out packet in her pocket.

“Mom?”

“Yes, I’m all right, Ryan.”

“I should have come home.” That was her Ryan, the tender-hearted one.

“No, I’ll get through this. If I was too bad, I’d go out to Teza’s and have a cup of tea.” Her aunt Teza had bandaged many of her owies in life, many more than her own mother had. Teza had stood by when Kit’s mother died of cancer and then when Amber followed in her grandmother’s footsteps.

Aunt Teza could fix anything.

Except a daughter dying.

“I better get going, talk to you later.”

“Thank you, dear.” She sniffed again and sighed. “I love you, son. Take care of yourself.” Her nose was so plugged she had to breathe through her mouth. She knew he was crying too. Hanging up the

phone, she leaned her forehead against the refrigerator, trying to drive the memories out of her mind. Amber lying in the hospital, fighting to live, Amber weeping when all her hair fell out, Amber telling a joke and laughing so hard she would forget the punch line or at least not be able to get it out around the giggles.

*God, why? You didn't need her near as much as I do. And now ~~Amber~~ isn't here either. Bring him home this evening, please.*

The tears calmed enough that she could hear a small boy's laughter and the barking dog. She glanced at the clock. *About time to send him home so his sister wouldn't get angry with him.*

She checked the freezer. No Popsicles or ice-cream bars. She knew the cookie jar was empty. Were there no snacks here a small boy would enjoy?

She checked the pantry. *Same song second verse, a little bit louder and a little bit worse.* One of the old songs she'd taught the kids when they were little. She could hear them all singing on the car rides to anywhere over an hour.

She found a bag of chips on the shelf, poured some into a Baggie, and clamped the big bag closed again. Like a Greek bearing gifts, she wandered out to the backyard and called. "Thomas, time to go home."

"Aw, so soon?" He flopped back on the grass. Missy planted her ponderous paws on his chest and stared down into his face.

"Sorry. I have a treat for you. And one for Missy, too. You can give it to her." Kit sat down on the steps.

"Get off, dog." He pushed her off and Missy leaped back at him.

"Missy, puppy treats." At the familiar call, the dog charged across the grass, leaving a giggling boy behind to get on his feet and stagger after her, straightening his hat so the bill hung to the right. Grass greened the front of a T-shirt that had never met Tide and could use a

few stitches here and there. Kit thought about the sewing machine sitting at the ready in her sewing room. She could sew that up in a minute, but then what would Thomas's mother think? Nosy neighbor? Interfering old woman?

Missy reached up to rest her front paws on Kit's thigh and looked into her face, tail wagging expectantly.

Kit handed the snack to Thomas. "Here, you give her this."

"Hey, Missy." The puppy treat was gone with a gulp. "She didn't even chew it."

"I know. She never does with those small ones."

Thomas scuffed the toe of his tennis shoe on the stairs before looking at her from under lashes long enough to make every girl in the neighborhood envious. "Can I come back?"

"Of course you may, perhaps tomorrow." She handed him the bag of chips. "Thanks for giving Missy her exercise. She'll sleep well tonight."

He held the bag aloft. "Thanks for the chips."

She watched him trudge out the gate. "Watch out for cars on the street."

The look he threw over his shoulder told quite clearly what he thought of that advice.

*Yeah, well, once a mother, always a mother.*

The ringing phone brought her to her feet. "Come on, dog, dinner-time." She caught the phone just as the answering machine clicked in.

"Just a minute till that runs out." One of these days she would need to learn how to shut the stupid thing off, but like other technological beasts, it, too, would most likely best her. She'd ask Ryan to fix it when he came home. Or Mark.

"There now. Hello again."

"Kit?"

*Who else did you think it would be? And if you're calling, you aren't*

*on your way home. So much for God answering my prayers to day. Not that I plan on praying anymore anyway* That last bit had just slipped out.

“Yes.” A silence stretched.

“Uh, thought I’d better let you know that I’ll be moving on to another job.”

“Will you be coming home first?” There, she’d asked the question that should have been answered weeks ago. Or was it months now?

“Uh, no. Their time frame is too tight. Uh...”

Kit waited. Her mouth dried as the moments melted away. Where had the words gone? Why had they fled like phantoms flitting away in the dusk?

“Uh, I just wanted to touch base with you. I better get going.”

*Where are you, Mark, who are you? Why won’t you even talk to me?* “Take good care of yourself.” The trite phrase squeezed by the sandstone boulder lodged in her throat. She listened for the click and the pause that turned to buzzing on the line. The receiver clattered into the base, and she fled to the sink. Water. Like a Sahara sojourner, she needed a drink of water. Taking a glass out of the cupboard, she ran it full and drained it just as fast. She set it on the tile counter, precisely and with a nearly imperceptible sound. Her jaw felt as though it locked with the same chink. She stared at the faucet. *Water. The flowers. Where was he?* She strode to the coffee table and picked up the arrangement, cradling the milk glass bowl in both hands. *God, where is he? I can’t even call him, since he never gives me the number and his cell phone always transfers to voice mail. What is the matter with him?* She heard the sound of glass shattering against tile and saw flowers scatter across the counter and sink, one red carnation like blood on the floor. The water dripped off the cabinet and crept toward her living room carpet. Kit watched it, making no move to wipe it up.