ONE

When Ellen Loverage needed to be alone, she went to Miss Merkle's house. On such days she came directly home from school, grabbed a few dog biscuits from her dresser drawer, and headed out her back door. Edging behind an ancient row of white roses and raising the thick, tangled stems of Boston ivy, she pushed back a rotting board in Father's old fence and squeezed through. After pacifying Rolex with a few pats on the head and a biscuit, she retrieved a key from its usual spot under the potted hosta, quickly unlocked the door, and stepped into peace and solitude.

In Miss Merkle's library she slid a book from its ornate slipcover, adjusted the stereo to a whisper, nestled into her usual spot on the plush Persian carpet, and leaned back against the brocaded settee. Perfect. Absorbing hours of reading lay ahead. Good music. No chores. No phone to answer. No homework.

When the clock chimed a quarter to five she replaced the book, pushed the OFF button on the stereo, smoothed the car-

pet where she'd been sitting, and left. Another biscuit and a few more pats on the head to assure Rolex that all was well, and Ellen slipped back through the fence. Miss Merkle would get home around 5:15, Father at 5:30.

NO ONE ELSE KNEW about Ellen's sanctuary. The previous summer, while relaxing in the backyard hammock, sipping lemonade and reading, she had heard Rolex's gleeful half-yip, half-bark. Through a knothole in Father's fence she watched Miss Merkle toss sticks and balls for her dog to fetch, now and then substituting a leather bone for him to chew on. After freshening Rolex's water bowl, she climbed her porch steps to go inside. Finding her door locked, she tilted a large terra cotta pot, picked up a key, and unlocked the door.

Everybody has a hiding place for an emergency key. The Loverages' was under the decorative rocks next to the entryway. Ellen felt a little uncomfortable with her unsought knowledge, but it was no big deal. She no more thought of entering her neighbor's house than of trying out for the cross-country team.

And she never would have entered Miss Merkle's house if she hadn't needed to get away from Father and his things. The aroma of his coffee in the morning and the redolence of his leather recliner greeted her when she came home from school. His stodgy music played at breakfast and dinner, and each day ended with his ten o'clock news. Mom's touch still lingered throughout most of the rooms, but in the living room, where Ellen liked to read, the pictures and plaques, the furniture, the clocks, and the carpet were all his. Nothing in the house had her own touch, except for her bedroom, which was on the dark side of the house, and the laundry room, which Father hadn't entered for years. Even the kitchen was his, because he dictated what he wanted for breakfast and dinner, and she had to keep it cleaned according to his specifications.

The event that pushed her through the back fence and into

Miss Merkle's house happened near the end of her sophomore year. She had hurried home from school to finish the last chapters of *The Power and the Glory* before Father got home from work. He wasn't sure she should be reading the book, but it was on Miss Merkle's recommended reading list. Ellen opened a cold can of Pepsi and settled into Father's forbidden recliner. He wouldn't be home for two hours. It was the most comfortable chair in the house, and she often read there when he wasn't around. After all, if he let her sit on his lap when she was little, why couldn't she use his empty chair now?

About four o'clock, she heard his car pull into the driveway. He was home early. She hurried upstairs to her bedroom, but as soon as she got there she knew she was in trouble—on the end table next to his recliner sat her Pepsi, sweating and coasterless. It was too late to rescue it; he was in the house. She looked at her watch: 4:03. Within two minutes he'd call her name. She went into the bathroom to wait.

"Ellie!"

4:06. A minute slow. "Be right there, Father." She let him stew a little longer.

"Ellie, come down here!"

"Just a sec, Father." She peered into the mirror and saw the same boring pie-face draped with straight, mud-puddle brown hair. Thick, rimless glasses, supported on a petite upturned nose, reflected back at her. Her older sister, Linda, had used up all the Loverage family good looks. She flushed the toilet, ran the faucet awhile, and lingered another minute before sauntering downstairs—4:12. Father stood at the bottom of the stairs with his hands on his hips.

"You were in my chair."

A wonderful father-daughter greeting. He could at least start with a simple hello.

"I was reading, Father." She reminded herself to stay cool.

"Haven't I provided enough places in this house for you to read?"

Ellen purposely stopped in the middle of the staircase,

knowing it made him uncomfortable to look up at her. "Yes, but your chair's so comfortable. I didn't think you'd care."

"Why would you think I'd changed my mind since the last time you sat there?" He maintained the same pose at the bottom of the stairs.

Father was a pair of triangles, his head with its broad forehead and pointed chin perched on a broad-shouldered, hipless, athletic body.

"I never sit there while you're home. I don't think it should make any difference if you aren't here." He wouldn't buy it. A rule was a rule.

"Ellie, you know the rule about my recliner. Don't sit in it! What part of that don't you understand?" He waited, as though he expected an answer. "And the Pepsi?"

"That was a mistake, Father. I'm sorry. I should have used a coaster."

"Ellie, one act of disobedience always leads to another. Big sins grow from little ones."

She could get his sermons in church; he didn't need to preach at her.

"If you hadn't sat in the chair, you wouldn't have left the can there. It could ruin the end table."

She stared at the ring of water surrounding the can. "Sorry. I'll wipe it up."

"No, I'll take care of it. It's best if you stay away from my things." He shifted his feet and narrowed his eyes as though he were aiming a rifle. "There's one more thing. Do you know what it is?"

"Yep."

"You mean yes?"

"Yes, Father."

"Well, what is it?" he demanded.

"You think I ran upstairs when I heard you coming."

"Disobedience is bad enough, carelessness with the Pepsi might be overlooked, but running upstairs hoping I wouldn't notice is deception."

"It might have worked if it hadn't been for the stupid Pepsi." Why did she say things like that? Now she'd uncapped his geyser. He'd raise his voice slightly, but his language would remain exemplary, always under control.

"That's enough, Ellie. You're adding insolence to everything else. You're grounded again, for a week. Come straight home after school. No activities in the evenings or on the weekend. We'll talk about it seven days from now and go over the rules again."

"Thanks, Father." She couldn't conceal the sarcasm in her reply.

"Make that two weeks. I don't know what I'm going to do with you. I didn't have this trouble with your brothers and sister." He turned abruptly, picked up his briefcase, and strode to the front door. "I'll be home at the regular time. I expect dinner at six."

She was still on the stairs as he hurried into his study, then out the front door. He had probably come home just to grab something he'd forgotten, and now was late for a 4:15 meeting. It would be her fault, of course. She tried to resettle herself in his recliner, but she couldn't get comfortable with the Pepsi can still signing its white-ringed signature into the varnish. Well, let it sign. He'd accepted responsibility for it and hadn't followed through.

Back in her room, she stretched out on her bed and imagined the peace she might find in Miss Merkle's house.

IT WAS SOON AFTER the Pepsi incident that Ellen began going into her neighbor's house. It was too easy. If Rolex was in the backyard, Miss Merkle wasn't home yet. Besides, the kitchen light was on when she was there. Ellen always checked. Surprises could spell disaster.

Rolex was never a problem. She'd made friends with all of Miss Merkle's watchdogs, Rolex and his predecessors, Bulova and Hamilton. All three were Rottweilers, marked copper-red

and black, standing three feet high, their barks resounding like cannons. When they were puppies she'd talked to them and fed them biscuits through the fence. When Rolex was a puppy, she'd loosened one of the boards so she could pet him. Miss Merkle's backyard was safe from all intruders except her.

The first day Ellen went into the house she was as tense as a set mousetrap. As she had expected, the key lay under the hosta pot. It slid into the lock and turned effortlessly. She replaced it, in case she had to leave in a hurry, wiped her feet on the mat, and tentatively stepped inside. She thought that any second Miss Merkle might walk in. Maybe she was already there. Every squeak, every noise, was a butler announcing her presence.

From the moment she stepped through the door she knew she was in Elysium. Mom's country style decor was all right, but this was elegance. Not of luxury, but refinement and taste. The kitchen was lined with dark wood cabinets. In its center stood an island, its top a cutting board composed of black, brown, red, and tan hardwoods inlaid in a geometric pattern. Stainless steel pots, pans, and utensils were suspended over the island and from pegs above the stove. The floor was tiled, and a garden window overlooked the backyard.

On that first day Ellen had turned and left quickly, frightened and guilty. She had no business being in that house. Everybody—Father, her sibs, Miss Merkle, her classmates, the people at Father's church—would be scandalized if they knew. It was too risky. She swore she'd never go in there again. It was best to leave with the knowledge that Miss Merkle's house was wonderful. She didn't need to see any more of it.

ELLEN DIDN'T RETURN to Miss Merkle's house until after Labor Day. Every time she thought about what she'd done, she was chagrined. She, Ellen Loverage, the pastor's daughter, trespassing. Unthinkable! How could she have been so stupid?

The second time she entered the house was after another

fight with Father. This time it was about music. His range of what was acceptable was as narrow as a tightrope. Old church music, a little classical, some golden oldies, that was all. Anything else was sinful or, if not sinful, unedifying. Father loved the word *edify*.

She was lying on her bed reading and listening to a CD by Angels of Light, a contemporary Christian group, purposely keeping the volume low so it wouldn't bother him. After a while Father knocked and, before she could reply, opened her door. His upper lip had a slight curl and his nose was wrinkled, as if he were sniffing burnt cabbage.

"What's that noise?"

"What noise?" She turned back to her book.

"That so-called music."

"That's my CD player."

"All I hear is Babel. What's it supposed to be playing?"

"It's a song called 'Breath of Heaven.' Mostly verses from the Psalms."

"I can't understand a word."

"It's an unknown tongue called English, Father. Would you like me to interpret?"

"It's loud and repetitious."

"You mean like the 'Hallelujah Chorus'?" She still didn't look at him, but out of the corner of her eye saw him take a deep breath.

"Ellie, this is just noise. If the message is covered up, there's no message."

"You mean like when Mrs. Ritchie sings at church? She warbles so much she sounds like a howler monkey."

"Ellie, that's not fair. Adele Ritchie has a trained voice. Everyone understands what she's singing."

"The kids don't. We get a lot more out of Angels of Light."

"Where'd you get that CD, anyway? It's not yours, is it?"

"I got it for a dollar at the Salvation Army thrift store."

"I don't want it in my house."

"Why? I like it." She tried to sound innocent, wounded. "It's just words from the Bible. You can't object to that."

"Ellie, if you mix pure, sweet honey with pesticides and puree it in a blender, you still can't drink it. You can't keep feeding your mind this stuff. You should listen to something that will edify your soul."

After Father left, Ellen looked over the rest of the CDs in her rack. She chose the one he'd just given to her for Christmas. *To Ellie,* he'd written on the cover, *To edify your soul and light your way. With love, Father.* She'd listened to it once.

She put it in the boom box and adjusted the volume, not high enough to bother anyone in the hallway. Then she laid the boom box on the floor, speaker side down, and placed her thick dictionary on top of it. Father's study was in the room below. The floor and ceiling acted as a giant sounding board to vibrate his pictures crooked and ripple his coffee.

That ought to edify his soul. She locked her door, settled back on her bed with her book, and waited.

A few minutes later he was back upstairs, rapping on her door.

"Yes?" she answered sweetly.

"Ellie, can you turn it down a little? I'm trying to work on my sermon."

"Sure, Father." She lowered the volume just enough to be noticed. "How's that?"

"A little more." It was not a suggestion, but a command.

She cut off another thin slice of volume. "That okay?"

"I'll try it."

"Let me know if there's a problem." She moved the boom box to the center of the room, piled a couple of schoolbooks on it, and went back to reading.

Five minutes later he rapped again. "Ellie, do you think you could turn it down a little bit more? I still can't concentrate."

She pushed the OFF button.

"I didn't want you to turn it off. That's good music."

"Don't worry about it. I wasn't listening anyway. I can

study better without it." She leaned back against the pillow, gave a long, satisfied stretch, and continued reading *The Sound and the Fury.*

After a while, she went to her desk and unpinned her calendar from the wall. She'd promised herself she'd leave home when she turned eighteen. That would be June 13, 1997. Today was January 21; a year and five months to go. She calculated the days—510. At five hundred and the other hundreds she'd celebrate by treating herself to a double sundae smothered under chocolate syrup, chopped almonds, and mini-marshmallows. She highlighted the days on her calendar and went back to reading.

AFTER THE CD INCIDENT, Ellie started going to Miss Merkle's house regularly. She knew she was breaking the law. If she were caught, she'd be in big trouble and Father would be mortified. But she wasn't doing anything morally wrong—she promised herself never to take so much as a cashew or mint from the crystal candy bowl on the coffee table. She was simply taking advantage of peace and quiet that would otherwise go unused.

When she went into the house she was extremely careful. Mondays and Thursdays were best because Miss Merkle had regularly scheduled meetings at school on those days. Still, she checked on Rolex and the kitchen light. During the winter months she walked carefully on the stones around the edge of the lawn so as not to leave footprints.

It was the contrasts between her house and Miss Merkle's that fascinated Ellen. Persian carpets and throw rugs over polished hardwood floors instead of wall-to-wall carpets. Tile in place of linoleum in the kitchen and bathrooms. Walls decorated with stylish wallpaper instead of off-white paint with stenciled geese parading around the top of the wall.

Mom had collected carvings and figurines of cows; Miss Merkle's Hummel figurines were locked in a large china

cabinet behind thick, beveled glass. Crystal and cut-glass figurines were everywhere. Floor and table lamps lighted the Loverage house; Miss Merkle had a few of these plus chandeliers and wall lamps mounted on sconces. Their religious and Rockwell prints looked tawdry compared to her original florals and pastorals. Their Melmac and stoneware paled in comparison to Miss Merkle's navy blue and gold filigreed bone china.

Miss Merkle's house greeted her with the scent of lavender. Melodic chimes announced the time. Sofas, chairs, tables, magazine racks, serving ware—expensive but not gaudy, tasteful but never flamboyant.

The room Ellen always went to was the study-library. Shelves of hardcover books covered two walls. Most of these were in their own slipcases, as though meant to last hundreds of years. There were no paperbacks, no throwaways. Everything Miss Merkle recommended in class was there, and much more, from Homer to Hugo to Hemingway. It was better than the city library, because everything Ellen put her hands on she wanted to read. The room was a blissful haven with all the literary delights she could desire.

A second reason Ellen spent her time in the study-library was that it was next to the garage. Because Miss Merkle always opened the garage door electronically from about a block away, there was more than enough time for Ellen to slip out the back door and through the fence. She was always careful. No one suspected. It was easier each time.

TWO

Clayton Loverage sat in his office at Springdale Church, rocking back in his black leather chair and scanning his schedule for the day. His polished mahogany desk sank into a royal blue carpet and was lighted by two small chandeliers. Except for a telephone, pictures of his wife and four children, and an open Bible, his desk was clear.

The office was spacious enough for a meeting of thirty people. On one wall oak shelving displayed bound books and mementos presented to him by missionaries; behind his desk a large olive-wood cross reminded everyone of the focus of the church. Two framed pictures, Jesus on the road to Emmaus and Jesus healing a leper, set off another wall. In the back of the office a door led to a bathroom, complete with shower. Clayton considered his office comfortable, but not ostentatious. If one served the God of the Universe, he explained, it was right to invest in quality. Because the Bible tells us to be good workmen, we should buy the products of the best craftsmen.

Clayton was thirty-seven when he'd arrived in Springdale; now he was fifty-nine. After finishing seminary, he'd studied two years in Germany, earning a doctorate from the University of Darmstadt. This was followed by associate pastorates at medium-sized churches in Texas and Missouri, before he took on the challenge of the Springdale position.

When he first considered the church it was dying, only a year or two from complete collapse. The average Sunday attendance and the average age of the parishioners were almost the same, about sixty-five. Only a handful of children attended Sunday school, dragged there by parents or grandparents, and teenagers were overlooked. The deteriorating sanctuary, the church sign obscured by overgrown shrubs, and the weed-infested parking lot spoke of a church in its death throes. While everything cried for resuscitation, Clayton saw two things in its favor: it was in the middle of a prosperous section of town, and it was located on eight acres of land.

Although the church was a rehabilitation project, Springdale was an ideal place to raise a family. The school system rated among the best in the state, and unemployment was low. Drawn by a major rail line and an interstate highway, companies waited in line to fill the new business and industrial park. Slums were nonexistent, and the crime rate was far below the state average. A community college was to be built within five to ten years. After carefully considering the advantages and disadvantages of accepting the pastorate of a declining church in a small town, he presented the opportunity to Joyce. Years in urban areas had left her longing for a small-town atmosphere. After weighing the pros and cons and praying about it together, they accepted the challenge of Springdale Church.

Now his church was the largest in the county. The new sanctuary, filled twice every Sunday morning, seated four hundred. The high school group numbered almost two hundred, the junior-highers about 150. He led a team of five pastors, and six people worked in the office. As one of the most suc-

cessful small churches in the country, Springdale Church was once featured in *Today's Christian* magazine.

As for his children, Clay, Jr. pastored a medium-sized church in Fort Worth, and Dan worked with start-up computer companies in Silicon Valley. Recent stock splits had made him wealthy. Linda, after graduating from Wheaton College, taught high school math in Aurora. All three were still in the faith, happily married, and living productive, satisfying lives. Added to that were the grandchildren Clay, Jr. and Linda had given him.

And then there was Ellie, born five years after their arrival in Springdale when he and Joyce were forty-two. Always her own master—or was it mistress?—she was the most headstrong child he'd ever known, defying all the theories of child-raising that humankind had ever devised.

EACH WEEKDAY CLAYTON woke at 6:30, showered, shaved, dressed, and straightened his room in time to be at breakfast at 7:00. After eating, scanning the newspaper, and giving Ellie last-minute instructions for the day, he drove to the church to spend the next hour in his study reading the Bible and praying. That hour had become a willing obligation, usually a pleasure, rarely a duty. Sometimes emergencies came up, but to skip because he wanted to sleep in or because he wasn't in the mood was forbidden. God honored faithfulness, even when one's mind was distracted and one's heart was troubled. Those first sixty minutes, immersed in the Word of God and bathed in prayer, were essential.

His staff began trickling in at half past eight, and the next half hour he invested in the minutiae of office details. The usual questions about announcements for the bulletin, meeting times and places, and office responsibilities had to be answered. More importantly, he used those minutes before nine o'clock to bond with his staff, to exchange anecdotes and feelings, and to learn each other's likes and dislikes, joys and sorrows.

Just before nine o'clock he retreated to his office and scanned his schedule again. Tuesday, April 9, 1996.

9:00 Joe Nunes, Central Paving/parking lot expansion
9:30 Plan Sunday's worship service with Nate and Wilson
11:00 Sermon preparation
1:30 Visitation at Good Samaritan
3:00 Jack Brandt/JubiLatte Coffeehouse
4:30 Springdale High to discuss Ellie

He looked forward to most of it. The first two involved people he could work with, and sermon preparation was his joy and passion. He'd eat his lunch while he studied and wrote. Hospital visitation was usually a pleasure, although often disquieting. After that, however, his day went downhill. A meeting with Jack Brandt often resembled a forced march through the Sahara, and he had no idea why the high school counselor wanted to talk about Ellie.

THE FIRST PERSON he ran into at Good Samaritan was Adele Ritchie, a member of his church. She was wiry, six feet tall, and had kinky pumpkin-orange hair that made him suspect she was Little Orphan Annie's mother. He was convinced she dyed it until he had recently noticed strands of softening gray. Clashing with her hair, stoplight-red lipstick outlined a small, slightly puckered mouth. True green eyes perched a little too close together above a thin, slightly hooked nose. He could not easily overlook Adele, nor did he want to.

Several weeks after arriving at the church, Adele let it be known that she had a trained operatic voice and was available for solos. Trained at Juilliard, she had then spent fifteen years in New York. When she was almost forty and realized her musical career was going nowhere, she dropped everything to study nursing at Fordham.

Clayton had talked Wilson, the music director, into letting her sing. She nearly shattered the stained-glass windows; the

preschoolers plugged their ears with their fingers while the older kids snickered. Her voice may have been suitable for opera, but its volume and vibrato, and her exaggerated gestures didn't suit a church in Springdale, Illinois. He asked to meet with her in his office.

"Adele, about your solo last Sunday . . ." he began with trepidation.

"Yes! You liked it!" Her eyes were bright, and her puckery little mouth was stretched into its broadest smile.

"Well, I liked it well enough"—he had to be careful not to lie or offend her—"except that our sanctuary is rather small. . . ."

"Too loud?"

"Well, yes, a little. And the Latin . . ."

"I had a feeling it was too formal."

"And the congregation's not used to gestures. . . ."

"My, I got everything wrong, didn't I?" She put her face in her hands.

"No, no. Your motivation was perfect, Adele. You sang from your heart to the Lord; that's what counts. Maybe you'd like to talk with Wilson. Together you could figure out what's perfect for both your voice and our church."

Adele had responded graciously, saying she was very flexible and was anxious to be guided to a more appropriate singing style. Now she sang with a subdued operatic flair. The children still giggled, but at least some of the congregation appreciated her efforts.

Clayton considered Adele a prime example of God's grace. In her New York years she had made token appearances in operas and musicals while cruising through two husbands and numerous lovers. Contacts with Catholics and Episcopalians at a Brooklyn hospital turned her heart toward God, and she ended up working in a hospital and attending a Presbyterian church in Havre de Grace, Maryland. It was there she married Eric Ritchie, and a few years later they moved into the old Schroeder estate west of Springdale.

Adele was one of Good Samaritan's three head nurses. She was competent and authoritarian—some would say bossy—and ran such a tight ship that the hospital staff simultaneously revered and despised her.

"You're late," she announced to Clayton. "You should have been here four minutes ago."

"There was a major earthquake and a landslide on First Street," he quipped, "and I had to fight my way through a flock of killer sparrows. Next Tuesday I'll be here at 1:56 to make up for it."

Anyone listening to their acrimonious comments would think they were enemies, but in truth Adele was one of his treasures, a hard-nosed, worldly-wise parishioner whose faith and commitment could never be doubted. She had become his friendly inquisitor, lagging behind at the end of services to make humorous, critical, or insightful comments. Just before Christmas she'd caught him off guard with another one of her offbeat questions. "If the male parentage of a child can be traced through DNA analysis, and Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, what would the Holy Spirit's DNA analysis look like?" She hadn't waited for an answer, but hurried off, leaving him with a ridiculous question that rattled around in his head the rest of the week.

"It's best to avoid unexpected catastrophes, but I sympathize," she said to him now. "There's been a devastating flood in the B hallway. If you're going to see Wally, you'll have to go all the way around. You think you can manage that? Or should I call for a guide and a wheelchair?"

"I'm tough, Adele. Even if I have to swim down B, I'm going to see Wally," he said, hurrying off.

"I didn't like the third song last Sunday," she called after him.

"I know you didn't."

"How'd you know? Did it show on my face?"

"No, you hid it very well. I didn't care for the music either, so I knew you wouldn't."

"Why do we sing those things then?" she asked.

"Because a lot of the younger people like them. I try to keep it under control."

"My friend George Frederick Handel is weeping."

"For the music perhaps, but we can all sing the words to the glory of God."

WALLY FITCH, Clayton's long-time fishing partner and confidant, probably wouldn't hang on another week. He'd been a clerk at Western Sporting Goods when Clayton first moved to Springdale, and was soon taking him fishing out at Braxton Reservoir, where he kept a small rowboat. He attended St. Thomas Episcopal when the weather wouldn't allow him to fish. Over the past twenty years they'd fished together hundreds of times, usually at Braxton, sometimes at other lakes and reservoirs in the area. The old man empathized with Clayton's worst frustrations and deepest emotions. Now he lay in Good Samaritan with thyroid cancer, so weak he struggled to speak. Wally made being a pastor a pleasure. As always, through his pain, he asked about the church, Ellie, and the rest of the children. As Clayton spoke softly, Wally's blinks became longer and longer until he drifted off in a sedated sleep. Clayton stayed by his bed, wending his way through memories of fishing trips and conversations that contained more wealth than Fort Knox.

After a while, Wally rolled over to face him and said, "Clayton, I have all day and night to lie here and think and daydream and pray. One of the things I've thought about is leaving you my boat and shed out at Braxton. It's okay with my kids. They don't know a minnow from a marlin and don't care."

"Wally, you don't have to—"

"Oh hush, let a dying old man do what he wants." His smile was weak and beautiful.

Near the end of their time together, Clayton opened his

Bible to read the Twenty-third Psalm. After the first few words, Wally held up his hand and stopped him. Then, in a crepe-paper voice, he quoted the rest of the Psalm word for word and, as he finished, dropped off to sleep. Clayton said a silent prayer over him, maybe the last one he'd ever pray with his old friend.

Bella Belinsky, on the other hand, was her usual complaining self. Her second language was Gripe. In some ways she had a right, Clayton thought, for her life had been a caravan of misfortunes. She'd endured three marriages, and her last husband had suffered five years with lung cancer. Last year her teenage grandson, whom she was raising alone, was killed in a spinout on Bull Creek Road. She owned an array of ailments, real and imagined, that kept Springdale doctors employed, guessing, and intimidated. For the twenty-two years he'd known her she'd been a grumbler, and now that was intensified by real illness.

As Clayton sat by her bed she blathered on about the nurses, doctors, her family who never came to see her, her HMO, Medicare—nobody was doing anything right, no one cared. When he told her that he cared, she shooed him off like a fly and said that he didn't count because he was getting paid to care. When he said that Jesus cared, she asked why, if Jesus cared so much, He hadn't protected her grandson, and why He wouldn't cure her diver-tickle-itis.

As he left the hospital, he wondered what he would be like if he were a sick old man. Would he be able to handle pain? At fifty-nine he'd probably lived three-quarters of his life, and in only eleven years he'd be in his seventies! Joyce had been gone two and a half years. She'd been in a lot of pain those last six months, but had never complained. What an angel. *God, thank You for that woman.* He hoped he'd be like her and Wally when he was sick. God preserve him from dragging everyone down as that Belinsky woman did.

Clayton arrived at JubiLatte Coffeehouse at 2:55 to find Brandt waiting for him. Eleven years earlier he'd been delighted

when Jack and Shirley Brandt showed up at his church. Within six months they had both assumed leadership roles. Jack taught a Sunday-morning Bible study that quickly grew from twenty to fifty attendees, and Shirley, who was trained in marriage and family ministries, set up a Christian counseling center. They led a Thursday-evening Bible study in their home and were active in outreach to visitors. Except for one unfortunate incident in which five-year-old Ellie had grabbed and nearly unscrewed Shirley's nose, he had gotten along well with them during those first months. They were a little opinionated at times, but some opposition was healthy. What more could a pastor desire from parishioners?

Eight months after the Brandts moved to Springdale, however, Clayton was given an ominous glimpse of the future when he lunched with Walt Logan, their former pastor from Fort Collins. Logan avoided specific accusations, but his warnings were unmistakable. Although Walt never doubted the Brandts' faith or the sincerity of their deeds in the church and community, he had found that everything was an issue for them—from obscure doctrinal points to the color of the carpet in the foyer. They had their say on every issue and believed that their opinion, simply because it was *their* opinion, was right. They thrived on power struggles and relentlessly lobbied people behind the scenes.

At the time, Clayton had defended the Brandts. He wasn't looking for people to parrot his viewpoints; lively discussions were healthy. He could handle any personality problems that might appear. Logan warned him again, saying that he had never been so relieved as when Jack Brandt announced his new position with the police department in Springdale. A plague of locusts had ended and healing of the land could begin.

Within a few years, Jack was elected to the church's ruling board, and Clayton felt the plague of which Logan had spoken. Most people were delighted, because Jack was indeed a solid Christian who had the time and dedication to provide leadership for many years. And it was true, the man was all

that. Like Walt Logan, Clayton seldom doubted Jack's faith or sincerity; but as the parishioner carried out his thorough, efficient work, he seemed to sow discord instead of harmony.

Brandt's irregular hours with the police department freed him to meet people any time of day. With breakfasts, lunches, cups of coffee, ball games, and hunting and fishing trips, Jack garnered support for his side of every issue. Furthermore, Shirley, with her involvement in counseling, Bible studies, exercise classes, and growth groups, was equally effective among the women.

Intentionally or not, their highly regarded visitation ministry served as a subtle tactic to sway people to their points of view. And, as Walt Logan had warned, no issue, major or minor, escaped their interest and influence. It was impossible to stay ahead of them, because they seemed to be tireless and omnipresent. Jack especially irritated Clayton. His persuasion appeared gentle on the surface, but often implied that if you disagreed with him, you might be opposing the will of God.

After ten years he considered Jack Brandt both an enigma and a paragon of Christian living. No person at Springdale Church, or at the other two churches he'd served, was as dedicated. Besides being on the church board and teaching, he had a visitation ministry to the sick and dying that would shame most pastors or priests. He always wrote notes and letters of condolence in times of tragedy or loss. The Brandts not only tithed to the church but gave generously to many Christian organizations. And somehow Jack squeezed in time to work with Boy Scouts, Little League, and camping programs for underprivileged youth. Clayton once heard a city council member say, "When I consider what it means to be a Christian, I think of Jack Brandt. Now there's a man who practices what he believes."

It was hard to criticize such a man, and, indeed, Clayton had never done so publicly, but shared his frustrations only with Wally and Joyce. He realized that he himself might be jealous and resentful. In a very real sense, without the burdens

of administrative duties and sermon preparation, Brandt was outpastoring him. But the man believed so firmly in his own rightness that he left no room for anyone to differ with him. His incessant lobbying and the sheer volume of his arguments left no breathing space, and Clayton was suffocating. There hadn't been one day since Brandt had become firmly entrenched at the church that Clayton wasn't fighting wildfires on four or five fronts that seemed to have been ignited and fanned by the man. Despite biblical commands to forgive and avoid being judgmental, he occasionally envisaged Brandt as a hundred-eyed Argus bent on destroying him. God forgive him, but he couldn't escape such thoughts.

The time at JubiLatte exceeded Clayton's worst fears. After fifteen minutes of friendly chitchat, Brandt hinted at his agenda.

"Pastor, how long have you been in Springdale?" It was clearly a rhetorical question.

"Since spring of '73. Twenty-three years. Why do you ask, Jack?"

"That's a long time. You're comfortable here, aren't you?"

"Yes, Joyce loved it here. I'm very thankful for our town and our congregation."

"You're an exception, you know. Most pastorates last less than six years."

"Yes, I know. But there are no rules for how long a minister should remain with a church. Two years, twenty years. I believe God has different plans for every congregation."

"Sometimes new blood and renewed enthusiasm are helpful. Don't you think so?"

"We must balance enthusiasm with maturity and experience."

"That's true, as long as that maturity has kept up with the times. Even a mature Jonathan Edwards wouldn't stand a chance in late twentieth-century ministry."

"I pray that we meet the needs of our congregation, Jack. Do you think we are failing to keep up with the times?"

"I think you've done a wonderful job in Springdale, Pastor, but there's always room for improvement."

"No person or system is perfect. We have a broad range of needs in our church. It's difficult to meet them all."

"We should always review our priorities."

"I try to do that, Jack. Thank you."

"And I will try to help you."

Clayton stared at the wonderful-terrible man sitting across from him. Brandt wasn't making small talk; he was subtly outlining an agenda. If he thought enough about something to mention it, it was already part of his action plan. And that meant there was already some movement afoot to remove him from the pastorate. Brandt was surely soliciting support from key people, one-on-one. How did one counteract such tactics?

They parted with smiles painted on their faces and blessings flowing off their tongues, both knowing that the first salvo of a major battle had been fired.

With Brandt's time bomb ticking away, Clayton found it difficult to shift his focus and worry to Ellie. He envisaged Jack having coffee with someone at that moment, arguing that an almost-sixty-year-old man wasn't qualified to lead a family-oriented congregation. He was suddenly tired and not up to a life-or-death struggle with Brandt.

A meeting about Ellie was the last thing he needed. It was always the same thing: a teacher had tried to get her to do something, and Rock-of-Gibraltar Ellie had refused.

None of the other kids had given him any trouble. Clay, Jr., Dan, and Linda had done what was expected with no arguments. Ellie, on the other hand, was born shaking her head no. She had been a colicky baby who bawled and fussed from the minute she opened her eyes. Every night he and Joyce took turns holding and patting her, pacing the floor, sitting in his recliner or Joyce's rocking chair. Usually it did little good, and they'd end up letting her cry herself to sleep. After a year and a half the colic finally disappeared but left a residue of stubbornness and independence. It was as though his little girl was

born claiming veto power over decisions that involved her, and when she cast her vote, no power on earth could change her mind.

As he waited at the school for the teachers, he recalled the recliner episode of several months ago. Although he had said he would take care of the Pepsi can, he suspected she'd noticed he forgot when he left in a hurry. Now a white water ring marked the spot where condensation had damaged the varnish. He'd refinish the end table someday. On the other hand, the water ring might serve to remind her of her disobedience. Then again, maybe not. Ellie was Ellie.

THE MEETING WAS NOT as bad as Clayton expected, just a routine concern from the teachers that Ellie wasn't living up to her potential. She was getting her usual A in English, but in all her other classes she hovered around C minus. At that rate she would pass and graduate next year, but her teachers were frustrated, convinced she could do much better. Mrs. Moreno, her counselor, warned that a GPA of 2.2 wouldn't get her into much more than a community college.

Mr. Wicker, her math teacher, had the most to say. "Dr. Loverage, your daughter is one of the most focused pupils I've had in twenty-five years. She can do anything she sets her mind to. . . . Let me show you some of her recent tests. I don't grade on a curve. Taught math long enough to know what to expect from my students. A score of 90–100 gets an A, 80–89 a B, 70–79 a C, and so on."

He placed a test paper on the table so that all three could view it and pulled a yellow pencil from behind his ear. "Look at this. Twenty problems, each worth five points. Ellen finishes the first fourteen and quits. She does nothing on the last six. Sits there, fiddles with her pencil, doodles, daydreams. She gets all fourteen right and earns a seventy, a low C.

"Now look at this one." He laid a second test paper on the table. "Ten questions, worth ten points each, but I add a

difficult extra-credit problem at the end worth another ten. Ellen finishes the last six, the harder ones, and then works the extra-credit problem. I'm watching her. With about fifteen minutes left she just quits and stares out the window. She gets her usual seventy."

"That's Ellie," Clayton said. "I hope you don't think you've failed her, because I don't blame the teachers or the school system for what's going on."

"Do you have any idea why she does it?" the teacher asked.

"I think she delights in not meeting others' expectations," said Clayton. "She gets C's because everyone expects her to get A's. She needs to prove something by ignoring everyone's wishes and feelings and catering to her own. I've watched her do that since she was two years old."

When he found out that Ellie wasn't in trouble, his mind wandered, drifting back to his talk with Brandt. He half-listened while Mrs. Moreno suggested heart-to-heart talks, psychologists, extra jobs, groundings, and incentives. But she didn't understand: Ellie couldn't be bought, convinced, reprogrammed, or coerced. He'd have more success rearranging the Great Lakes.

Clayton left the conference feeling agitated but relieved. Ellie wasn't in big trouble, just the usual. In a perverse way he was pleased that she could deliberately get the grades she wanted. He wondered if she could get exactly ninety-fives if she set her mind to it.