

CHAPTER 1



When it began, sometime before noon, the feeling was an uneasy, undefined apprehension that something was not quite right—a disturbing, vague sense of foreboding which, she kept telling herself, meant absolutely nothing. Now, by three o'clock in the afternoon, the feeling had evolved from something-isn't-quite-right to something-is-definitely-wrong.

Not the children. Cissy, her three-year-old, was napping peacefully upstairs. Billy, the seven-year-old, had returned from school fifteen minutes ago with all of his various appendages attached and in working order. And Barbara, gifted, twelve, and impossible, had been home all day with a miserable cold and an equally miserable pre-pubescent disposition.

Warren, her beloved husband? Hardly. He was returning today, after nearly half a year in Denver, where he had been the lead defense attorney in a federal anti-trust case against one of the firm's major corporate clients. It had been difficult during the months when he was home only on weekends and holidays. But the trial was over, and he had won. No, not Warren.

Suddenly, and for no reason at all, she began to wonder if perhaps something were wrong with her parents. They weren't getting any younger, and this feeling had to come from somewhere. From Oregon? She hurried into the kitchen and dialed her mother. At precisely three-fifteen.

“What’s wrong?” Her mother’s voice was anxious. “Something’s wrong. You never call in the daytime. And I can tell it in your voice. I’ve always been able to tell. Since you were little.”

“In my voice? All I said was, ‘Hello, Mother.’”

“I can tell, Susan. Is it the children? Warren?”

Susan groaned. “Nothing’s *wrong*. The children are fine, except Barbara has a nasty cold. And Warren’s just come home. The Denver case is finally over. They won. So you see? Everything’s just dandy. Really.”

Why had she called her mother? The world’s premiere worrier. The alarmist of all time. “I just felt like chatting at the moment, that’s all.”

“You’re not pregnant, are you?”

“I am not pregnant. I promise, Mother, it’s nothing. I’ll call you later. About eight. Or maybe over the weekend. Give Daddy a hug.”

What was the matter with her, for pity sake? Why was her skin crawling, her nerve ends poking out through her skin, her mid-section so queasy?

She went up to her bathroom, ran hot water into the tub, turned on the Jacuzzi, and tossed her clothes on top of the wicker hamper. Barbara followed her mother upstairs, watched her for a moment, then threw herself on her parents’ bed, the current Gifted Reader’s assignment, *Ivanhoe*, in one hand, a box of tissue in the other. “Whatcha gonna do, Mom?” she called.

“I’m going to race Billy’s tropical fish across the tub.”

“Aw, come on. You’re gonna take a bath. *God*, Mother!”

“Barbara! I’m warning you. Don’t be profane!”

Settling into warm, sweet-smelling effervescence, she felt the tension leaving through her fingertips. Susan moved her body so that one of the big jets in back hit her critical relaxing spot, then tried to maneuver both thighs in front of side jets, having read somewhere that hot water turbulence helped break down cellulite. She was perfectly positioned when the telephone on her bedside table rang.

"Blast! Barbara, get that, please," she called. And, after another two rings, "Barbara! For heaven's sake, get the phone!" Her daughter groped in the general direction of the telephone, eyes never leaving the classic Scott romance.

"Jeeze, what a book. They should make a movie." Barbara finally rolled over and picked up the telephone. "Clay residence," she said politely.

"Let me speak to your mother," her father said.

"Fine, thank you, and how are you?"

"Don't be sarcastic, Barbara. Give me your mother."

"She's in the tub. Hold on, Daddy, here she comes."

Wrapped in a white terry bath sheet, Susan took the telephone. "They did," she said to Barbara. "With Elizabeth Taylor and Joan Fontaine."

"What about Elizabeth Taylor?" Warren asked. "She's long gone."

"I was talking to Barbara. I think in the end she..."

"Don't tell me the ending!" Barbara screamed.

"What's going on?" Warren wondered.

"Nothing, Darling." She hesitated, then, "I don't know why you didn't let me meet you at the airport."

"Too complicated with the kids and all. Anyway, I'd like for us to have dinner at the Wayfarer. Can you get a sitter? For seven? I can be finished here by about six-thirty."

"Wonderful! I'm sure I can get Betsy. If not, I'll try her sister. She's home from college."

"Not Betsy," Barbara complained. "She scratches a lot. She's got allergies."

There was silence on the line for a moment before Warren asked, "Can you meet me at the restaurant?"

"Of course, but I can drive in to get you. No need to take a cab."

"Actually, someone here is going that way, so I'll just hitch a ride. Meet you there. Seven," he repeated.

See, she told herself as she slipped back into the tub, see where this foolish anxiety gets you? Nervous all day, a day

which should have been lovely because of Warren's return, ruined for no reason. What a stupid waste of angst!

"Who were the men?" Barbara asked, poking her head around the door.

"What men?"

"With Elizabeth Taylor and what's-her-name."

Susan thought a moment. "Robert Taylor. He was gorgeous. They don't make them like him anymore—except maybe George Clooney. And, I think, George Saunders was in the film. Yes, Taylor and Saunders. Actors you wouldn't know, of course."

"They shoulda had Brad Pitt," Barbara announced and disappeared.

When it was time to dress for dinner, Susan chose a clingy dress in pale blue, a present from Warren for her last birthday. The thirty-sixth. What fun they had that evening; what fun they almost always had together. Almost, because lately, with the strain of the Washington-Denver commute, Warren frequently seemed tired and preoccupied on the weekends. Tonight, however, would be like the old days, she told her reflection in the mirror. Her dark, shoulder-length hair was loose and full, the way Warren liked it. "Nice tan for early in the summer," she observed. Susan liked herself in tan, regardless of her mother's assurance that she would be dead before forty, a tragic victim of sunshine and melanoma.

Warren was waiting for her in the bar. She always experienced a bit of a buzz when she saw him like that, looking deliciously handsome in his tall, firm frame, a slight smile playing at his nice mouth, and a steady, admiring gaze watching her approach. This time, the buzz was anticipatory; it came before she looked at his face, and disappeared as her eyes moved up his body to his somber expression. The worry, drowned in the Jacuzzi, was at once resuscitated and back in her veins. Something *was* wrong.

They had a drink at the bar and then went to their table, making small talk. I'll bet, she suddenly thought, the firm

wants to move us to Denver. That must be it! Poor Warren—he loves being in Washington. We'd both hate to move, but I doubt if he's in a position to refuse.

There was nothing to do but wait for him to tell her about it in his own time. He chose dessert as the time.

"Susan, I love you. You know that don't you?"

She reached across the table and took his hand. "Of course I do. And whatever's wrong, we'll handle it together. I love you, too, you know."

He cleared his throat. "I repeat, Susan, that I love you. The problem is that I am *in* love with someone else."

She quit breathing.

"I'm sorry," he added. "So very sorry."

Susan Clay said nothing. She sat there, frozen, totally numb and disbelieving; then, after studying his face, believing, and gradually experiencing pain—real, physical pain—in her chest. Finally, she asked him, "How serious is it?"

"Very. I honestly think the only answer is divorce." Without looking at her, he continued hurriedly, words tumbling over each other.

"Look, I know what a shock this has to be for you, but try to believe that I don't want to hurt you. It makes me physically ill to do this. But I have to, Susan, because there's just no other way." He cleared his throat again, then rushed on.

"Try, just try, to look at the positive side. You're a beautiful, talented woman who will do all right. And you've got wonderful friends, Myrna especially, who can help you though this, and terrific parents who love you. Who knows? Maybe now you'll write a best seller. Do the book you've always wanted to do. You used to say you'd love to be alone on a desert island and just write."

She shook her head. "No! I didn't mean it! Not literally!" Her voice was a hoarse whisper. "Warren, this is crazy! You're my *life*—you, and the children."

A thousand thoughts raced through her mind, neon-lit, flashing for attention. How did they move from his affair, his suggestion of divorce, to her wanting to be on a desert island? As if he were doing this for her! Was all of this her fault? No matter, whatever the cause, whatever the reason, it simply could not happen. She would not let it happen.

“Look Warren,” her voice desperate now, “a lot of men go through something like this. Give yourself time. And me—what did I do wrong? What didn’t I do? God, I thought we had a perfect relationship! We don’t fight, we have good sex, we have fun. And oh, my God, we have three children.” She was trying to hang on, struggling to keep control. “Please, Warren, *please*. Just give it some time.” She was begging, pleading, and unashamed.

Embarrassed, hurting, Warren said softly, “Susan, *Dear* Susan, I know it’s tough. It’s killing me, too...”

“That’s because it’s all wrong! I can’t believe you’re saying these things! Not you. Not us.” Be careful, she was telling herself. She wanted to be furious, to yell at him, to strike out, but she did not. She was terrified of losing him, of having their lives changed by a silly affair. Wives can forgive, can’t they? And maybe forget after awhile? Didn’t this happen to a lot of married couples?

“But it’s not wrong,” Warren insisted. “I’ve already thought about everything you’re thinking right now, like giving it more time. I honestly,” and he looked away, “*honestly* have never felt like this before. Nothing’s ever been so right as this feeling.”

“Right? *Right?*”

“Listen, I know what this is doing to you, but I wouldn’t be saying this tonight if I thought there was the slightest chance for our marriage, given what’s happened. It breaks my heart, when I think of you and the kids, but...”

“Then put a stop to it, for God’s sake!” she snapped. “You can’t just think of yourself!” Her hands, clenched into fists,

flew open and the control she had held so tightly was gone. "Who is she? How old is she? What does she do, the bitch?"

"Stop it, Susan! It's not her fault."

"I'll give you that one. It's your fault. Now, answer my questions! I have a right to know."

There was a lengthy, painful silence. Neither of them moved. At last, Warren said, slowly and distinctly, "Her name is Madison Willard, she's twenty-three, and she's been working on the Senate Finance Committee."

"Twenty-three! You've got to be kidding! This is too typical, Warren, can't you see that? Too typical! This happens to men all the time! Don't tell me, let me guess—she's blond and has big tits. Right?"

His face was a dark red. "You're being coarse. I see no point in continuing this line of conversation."

Their waiter arrived and was greeted by menacing glares from both sides of the table. Without asking, he filled their coffee cups and moved away.

"Look," Warren suggested, "let's try to calm down and be as reasonable and kind as possible under the circumstances. There are things we have to talk about."

"You announce your intention to destroy my life and mess up our kids' lives, and you want me to be gracious? Come on!" For two or three minutes, a lifetime at least, they sat across from each other, eyes downcast, saying nothing. Finally, Susan asked, "May I have answers to a few more relevant questions?"

"I guess."

"I assume this is a bona fide affair. That is, that you are sleeping with this child?"

"Watch it! I won't discuss *anything* if you continue this way!"

"All right. I'm sorry. Let me rephrase my question. Are you sleeping with this woman?"

His eyes dropped. "Yes, of course I am."

"How long has it been going on?"

"About six months, I guess."

"Six months!"

Susan fumbled in her bag for a handkerchief, and, of course, couldn't find one. There was a lipsticked tissue, and she grabbed it, all the better for shredding.

"Where" her voice croaked, and she repeated, "where ...does she live?"

"In Denver, for the moment. But she's moving back here."

"Denver! So that's why you didn't want me to come and visit while you were there!"

"Not exactly." He hesitated. "Look, Susan, I'm not certain all of this is productive—I mean, digging into the details. Can't we just leave it at my wanting a divorce because I want to be with someone else?"

"No, we cannot," she raged. "I've got to know these things, or I'll go crazy trying to find out."

"All right," he sighed. "I met her here, on the Hill. Neither of us was out looking for anything. It just happened."

"It always does, doesn't it? God, what a line."

He leaned forward, red-faced again. "You wanna hear or don't you? If you do...."

"All right! Do you think this is easy?"

"I know it isn't," he conceded. "Okay, I met her on the Hill. We kept, you know, running into each other, and before we knew it, we were involved. I...."

"You hauled her off to Denver with you! I wondered why you took that case, with all those months of preparation, with so much time away from home." She glared, eyes drilling into his. "Your work's always been here, even though the firm's headquartered in Denver."

He didn't respond.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Lawyer," she hissed, "you took the case so you could go to Denver and get away from home while you decided what you wanted, right? You could sleep with Miss Big Tits all week in Denver, and come home on the weekend and sleep with the little woman, then compare

performances. My, oh my! Just like the Redskins' training camp—who's going to win the tight-end slot and who's going on waivers, right? Of course I'm right."

Warren Clay was clearly shocked. His lovely wife speaking so coarsely? But he said nothing in response as Susan pushed back her chair and stood up.

"I would suppose the pal with whom you hitched a ride tonight will be picking you up as well. I also suppose you aren't coming home tonight. Am I correct?"

There was no answer, and she left.