

CHAPTER ONE



Portland, Oregon

Ellen stared at the certified envelope the FEDEX man handed her. Her hand trembled as she signed her name.

“Thank you.” She closed the door and sank into the nearest chair.

What is this about? Something to do with my children? She was afraid to open the cardboard envelope. *Another let down?*

She'd been searching for Meg and Maddie for ten years. It was as if they had vanished from the face of the earth, along with her ex-husband.

Her fingers refused to cooperate as she tried to grab the strip to open the stiff, cardboard envelope. With difficulty, she pulled the contents out. The first thing she saw was a letter addressed to her with the name of a lawyer in Chicago at the top. *Is that where my children are?* But then she read the letter.

A great aunt, who wanted to remain anonymous, had left her a house in Chicago. *I don't know of any great aunt. This just doesn't make sense.* The lawyer's formal letter said that if she had any questions, to call him. The letter also stated for her to follow the instructions very carefully. *I don't care about any house in Chicago. I want to find my children.*

Ellen put the envelope on the desk. *Another let down.* She fought the tears filling her eyes. *I'll read the rest of this later.*

After a nap, Ellen fixed herself a salad, showered and dressed for work. Waitressing at Trader Vic's in the Pearl District, was a hectic place to work, but she made great tips. Her out-going personality made her a favorite waitress.

Because the restaurant was not far from her apartment, she often walked. Ellen was thankful a bus was available to get her to work when it was raining. A heat wave had Portland in its' grip, so today she opted for the bus.

"Hi, Tom, how's it going?" Ellen smiled at her favorite bus driver.

"Not, too bad. You look mighty pretty."

"Thanks." Ellen grabbed the pole as Tom pulled away from the bus stop.

"One of these days I'm going to come and eat at that fancy place you work at."

"Let me know and I'll reserve a table for you." She dropped into the nearest seat. Ellen wished she could pay for a dinner for Tom, but she barely made ends meet herself, even with the great tips.

She watched the stores, businesses, and bistros pass. She didn't have to indicate her stop, Tom knew where she liked to be let off.

"There you go Ellen. Have a great night." Tom gave her a big grin.

"You have a good shift, too, Tom." Ellen exited the bus and made her way down a side street. Ellen entered through the back door of the restaurant. They didn't open for another hour. Coming early always gave her time to see that her tables were perfectly set—glassware, silverware, napkins, salt and pepper, candle—all placed just so.

"Hey, Ellen. Ready for the night?" Art, one of the bartenders lined up glasses he would need. "We have a big party of ten, hotshot lawyers coming in at seven. The boss gave their table to you." He gave her a knowing wink.

THE TRAIN TO CHICAGO

“Why me?” Ellen groaned.

“Because, you’re the best looking and you make them happy. And if they’re happy, they eat and drink a lot and come back. That’s why.” Art went back to preparing for all the different drinks he would be required to mix.

Ellen clocked in and looked at the schedule to see which tables were hers for the evening. She enjoyed her job because she was a people person. But she preferred tables for two, four and even six. When there was a small group, there was more time to get to know them. They often returned asking for her. She was not looking forward to a table of ten lawyers. *Oh, well, I’ll do my best. Maybe it won’t be too crazy.*

It turned out to be an exhausting night, but nothing she couldn’t handle. Ellen always prayed her way through serving each table. Listening to snatches of conversations, she would pick up on someone who needed a prayer that she could shoot up to God. When her back was to the table of lawyers, she heard one of them being addressed as Derek. She wanted to turn around to see which one responded, but she needed to keep focus on serving the table.

“There you go. Can I get you anything else?” Ellen gave the table of four a big smile.

“Yes, I think I’m going to need another napkin. This looks wonderful but messy.” The rather large man laughed.

“I’ll be right back with some more napkins.” Ellen glanced at the table of lawyers on her way to the supply station. *Wasn’t Derek the name of Heather’s friend? I think she said he was a lawyer.*



Ellen left the restaurant weary and took the bus home. She let herself into the apartment and sat in the chair closest to the door, not bothering to turn on the lights. She savored the peace and silence of the dark room.

The name Derek slipped into her consciousness, and with it Heather's sweet face. Ellen had met Heather when the woman was in crisis. It had been one of those divine encounters that often happened to Ellen. God would impress upon her to introduce herself to someone while she stood in a line or passed a table. Heather sat at the last available table in one of Ellen's favorite delis. Ellen could tell she was lonely and very unaccustomed to her surroundings. After their first meeting, there were several encounters that encouraged Heather to return to her family. Ellen knew God often used her own past to help others.

Ellen prayed for Heather and then switched on the light. Her eyes fell on the desk and the envelope from the lawyer. She'd forgotten about it in the busyness of the evening.

No, not tonight. I can hardly keep my eyes open much less read some legal mumble jumble. The morning will be soon enough.



The alarm on Derek's phone jarred him awake. Derek sat up and tried to focus. "Man, it's a good thing I walked home, driving could have been disastrous . . . got to cut down on the alcohol." He pulled himself up and stretched.

A tepid shower and several cups of black coffee finally woke him up. Dressed for the courtroom, he walked briskly to the office. Usually he enjoyed his morning walks to work, but this morning he was disturbed by the dream he'd had last night. *Probably the excellent food, conversation and martinis.* At least that's what he kept telling himself. He just wanted the dreams gone—the dreams of the woman he never could have. It was his fault. The first time, he was the one who'd left her for another, a girl whose name now he could not even remember. And the second time he'd known that she did not belong to him, and to press the issue would have destroyed lives. *If only I could stop dreaming of Heather.*

THE TRAIN TO CHICAGO

“Good morning, Mr. Wycoff.” The young receptionist greeted him with a shy smile.

“Good morning. Any earth-shattering news I should be aware of?”

“No, nothing.” She turned to answer the ringing phone.

Derek opened his office door and greeted his secretary. “Good morning, Shirley. Everything ready for this morning? I need to go over my briefs.”

“Everything’s ready. It’s all on your desk. Rough night?”

Shirley never missed a thing, legally or personally. He was fortunate to have her as his private secretary, but sometimes he wished she didn’t know him quite so well.

“Too late of a night for what’s on my plate today.” Derek smiled at her. “Thanks, Shirley, you make my rough days easier.”

“You’re welcome. Let me know if you need anything else.”

Derek’s office looked out onto the street. The office was a dream, everything he’d envisioned for himself as a successful lawyer. The mahogany desk, the leather chairs, and side tables complemented the dusky blue walls. Derek had searched for just the right pieces of art from local artists. Contrasting with the walls, the stark whiteness of ocean waves beating upon the rocks, wasn’t missed when entering his office.

The latest single-serving coffee maker’s light signaled it’s ready. A small glass pitcher held fresh cream. A basket held something that smelled wonderful. Shirley really spoiled him. He plunked in a pod and pushed the button. Folding back the napkin draped over the basket, he grinned at the sight of the lemon, poppy seed muffins. Coffee and muffin in hand he walked to his desk.

Derek slipped into his chair and stared at the information for the court appointment this morning. But that was all he did. *I really don’t want to do this anymore. Empty—my life is empty, empty, empty.* He put his head in his hands. The coffee and muffin grew cold.