

HER MEMORY OF

*music*



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KATHERINE SCOTT JONES

  
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For women everywhere  
who cannot speak for themselves.  
You are seen.  
You are known.  
You are not alone.



The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.

—Exodus 14:14



# CHAPTER 1

*Langley-by-the-Sea, Washington, 2010*

The jangling of the distant bell beckoned as it always did, only today the sound carried a note of urgency. Ally let the screen door slap behind her, an exclamation point to mark the end of her shift, and hastened down the bistro's rough steps. An autumn wind whisking up from Saratoga Passage cooled her face. After six hours of hustling in and out of the steamy kitchen filling orders, she'd have enjoyed a few minutes to savor the breeze, but the bell's lingering echo told her she couldn't afford even a moment's respite.

She hurried on foot across the parking lot. *Shoot, shoot, shoot.* She'd been doing so well too, keeping a close eye on the clock, closing her stations well before quitting time. But her last customer sabotaged her efforts. She might have stood a chance had it been anyone but Margit Olsson. Margit loved to chat, and now Ally was late.

Her tote thumped against her hip as she broke into a jog. She turned off Front Street away from the bay, where sailboats were scattered like dice across the water. A few blocks later, she stepped aside to let two bicyclists pass through the narrow schoolyard gate before taking her turn. Once inside, boisterous kids surged past her like a river around a rock. Ally followed the gravel pathway around the brick building to the kindergarten classroom, passing the blue-and-yellow Big Toy, where two girls swung from the monkey bars.

Ally felt a lift of relief when she saw a woman in pink sweats and a baseball cap hurrying from the opposite direction toward the kindergarten wing. At least she wasn't the only mom running late. But a qualm tightened her stomach as she rounded the corner. Even from here, Ally could see that Jack was crying while his teacher, Mrs. Nichols, held his hand. Another little boy wearing a Seahawks windbreaker waited with them, but as soon as he caught sight of his mom in the pink sweats, he grinned and ran to join her.

As Ally drew near, Jack wiped his eyes with the back of a grimy hand. "Sorry I'm late, Bubba." She dropped to her knees and folded him in her arms, a throb in her chest feeling as if someone had bumped a bruise. "Were you worried?"

When he didn't respond, Mrs. Nichols touched his shoulder. "Know what, Jack? I never got around to erasing the whiteboard this afternoon. Would you do that for me?" Mrs. Nichols gave Ally a look over Jack's head.

Jack turned his face up to Ally, questioning with his eyes.

"I'll be right here," she promised. He headed back into the classroom, shoulders slumped beneath the straps of his

Spiderman backpack. Ally turned to Mrs. Nichols. "I'm so sorry, I got held up at work."

The teacher offered a thin smile. "Jack had a rough day today."

Ally frowned. "In what way?"

"He took a swipe at another little boy on the playground during afternoon recess."

"He—he hit someone?" The news caused an uneasy jump somewhere between Ally's heart and her stomach.

"Well, he tried to, and that's not like him. Forgive me for asking, but is everything all right at home? No significant changes?"

"I—no, none." What exactly was she suggesting? "Other than starting kindergarten, of course."

"No new boyfriend, or a grandparent dying...?"

"Nothing like that." Ally crossed her arms, ignoring the apprehension that tightened her insides. "Would you mind telling me exactly what happened? Did someone provoke him?"

"A first grader was teasing Jack at recess, but instead of telling a teacher, Jack tried to hit him. When the other boy swung back, a teacher stepped in."

So, he *was* provoked. "Why wasn't I called?"

"Since it was a first offense, we thought we could wait to tell you. We've spoken to both boys and trust the issue's resolved."

"What was the boy teasing Jack about?"

"Neither of them would say."

Jack emerged from the classroom. "All done, Mrs. Nichols."

"Good boy." Mrs. Nichols' smile etched grooves around her pale blue eyes. Then she crouched so she was eye-to-eye

with Jack. "What happened today on the playground isn't going to happen again, is it, Jack?"

He shook his head. Ally ached to pull her small son close, to press her lips into the soft, sweaty skin of his neck.

"Didn't think so." Mrs. Nichols straightened with a smile. "We'll see you tomorrow for a better day, all right?"

Ally thanked the teacher and reached for Jack's hand then led him from the school. Not until they'd turned onto Front Street, far away from Mrs. Nichols' keen eye, did she allow her pent-up anxiety to tumble free. Her son picking fights in kindergarten? Even if he had been provoked, how could this be? Part of her wanted to disbelieve Mrs. Nichols. But Jack's teacher, with her long cotton skirts and sensible clogs, struck Ally as eminently trustworthy. If she said it was true, it must be.

Ally glanced down at Jack, who kept his gaze fixed on his Spiderman sneakers. "Mrs. Nichols said you got into trouble today on the playground. Want to tell me about it?"

He shook his head.

"She said another boy was teasing you. Is that true?"

"I guess."

"What did he say?"

No answer.

"Jack, you know I won't tolerate fighting. I can't help you if you won't tell me what's going on. Can you at least tell me why you were crying when I got there?"

He shrugged and shook his head.

It wasn't like him not to talk to her. She watched him, searching for a clue to unlock the riddle. Even provoked, what would make him try to hit another little boy? She'd taught him

better than that. Was it pure instinct that made him lash out, the fault of the blood that ran through his veins?

*Stop it. Just because he tussled with another boy doesn't mean he'll turn out like—*

No. She couldn't go there. She wouldn't.

At the corner post office, as they waited for a stream of cars to pass before they could cross the street, Ally wished for the umpteenth time they'd lower the speed limit along this stretch of road. Once they reached the other side, she put herself between Jack and the curb.

"So, Bubba." Ally spoke in a new tone, determined to put this day's troubles behind them. "I was thinking about what to fix for dinner. I've pretty much settled on asparagus sandwiches. What do you think?"

"Asparagus?" He squinted up at her.

"No? Not even if I told you I had artichoke ice cream for dessert?"

"Eww."

"Well, then, liver soup? I know liver soup is one of your favorites."

A shudder coursed through his slight frame. "*Gross, Mom.*"

"I'm stumped then, because the only other thing I can think of is mac-n-cheese with hotdogs. But I thought for sure you'd prefer asparagus ice cream."

"You said asparagus sandwiches, Mom." Jack rolled his eyes. "Not ice cream. But I'll take mac-n-cheese and hot dogs."

Ally touched his soft, blond hair, so different from her own. "Good choice, little man."

Seashells crunched beneath their feet as they turned onto their lane, passing the stand of alder trees that shielded Penny

Watrous's property from the road. They walked by their landlady's clapboard house and empty carport on the left. A short path branching from the drive led to their cottage, a cedar-shingled converted boathouse nestled at the base of the sloping yard. Below the cottage, a rocky beach met the blue-gray waters of Saratoga Passage, which stretched to the snow-capped Cascades.

As Ally followed Jack, she eyed the half-acre of lawn, which seemed to have sprouted four inches in the last week, a final hurrah before the first frost. Ally sighed, adding "mow the lawn" to her list. If she didn't get it done this weekend, Penny would certainly have something to say about it.

She dug into her handbag for her keys, finding them buried beneath her soiled work apron. On the front porch, they dropped their sneakers into the shoe basket. Then Ally turned the key in the lock, and the door swung wide.

Salty air breezed across her face, a draft coming from inside the house. *From inside the house?*

"Jack, wait!" She grabbed his arm as he started over the threshold.

"Mom! Ow!"

She kept her grip as her eyes swept their small domain and settled on the space where their television used to be. The truth hit her like a punch to the gut. *We've been robbed.*

Her heart catapulted into her throat. Was the intruder still in the house? She waited, listening, but she heard only the rhythmic slosh of waves on the shore below and the rush of blood behind her ears. The living room windows were shut tight, but the draft told her another somewhere in the back was open.

Jack seemed rooted to the porch. “Don’t move,” she ordered.

Ally crept inside, her socked feet soundless on the hardwood floor. Careful to keep Jack in sight, she made a wide circle around the living room until she could peer around the divider into the kitchen. There she saw the source of the breeze. The glass in their back door had been smashed. Shards lay scattered across the yellow linoleum.

She raised a trembling hand, reminding Jack to stay put as she moved into the short hallway. In her bedroom, the only evidence of the intruder was a ring of dust made noticeable by her missing jewelry box. A glance into Jack’s room and the bath told her no one lurked there.

Breathing easier, she returned to the living room and scanned the area again for anything else out of place. As her gaze passed over the built-in bookcases, something flitted across her brain. She looked again, but the thought skittered from her grasp.

In the kitchen, she skirted the table with Jack’s box of peanut-butter crunch cereal still at his place and stepped closer to their shattered door. *Penny’s going to freak.*

“Mom?”

She jumped. “Ow!” White-hot pain ripped through her foot and raced to her spine. “Jack! I told you to stay put.”

“But I wanted to see—” His gaze traveled to her foot. “Mom, you’re bleeding.”

A crimson splotch spread across her white sock. As she yanked out a chair and sat down, a new, sickening thought occurred to her. *My viola.*

“Jack, quick, go make sure Lola’s still here.”

He didn't move, his alarmed gaze fastened on her foot.

"Jack!"

He scampered off. As soon as he was out of sight, Ally bent over the wound. The glass remained embedded in the ball of her foot. Blood dripped from the edge of her sock to the floor. She fought back a wave of nausea. What if she'd severed a tendon or something?

Then Jack was back, a dust bunny clinging to his hair, a black hourglass case clasped to his chest. "She was there," he panted. "Under the bed."

"Put her on the table. Watch out for the glass. Now Bubs, I need you to bring me my bag from the porch."

When he returned, he thrust it at her. She rooted through it for her cell phone, even emptied the contents onto the table. No phone. Where was it? Then it hit her. Brittany. She'd loaned it to her at work today and forgot to get it back.

"Jack, listen carefully." She tried to keep her voice steady as the puddle of blood spread. "I don't have my phone, so you're going to have to run to Miss Penny's. Go straight there, then back. Understand?"

"But Mom—"

"Now, Jack." Pain swelled, and her vision went gray around the edges. "Run!"