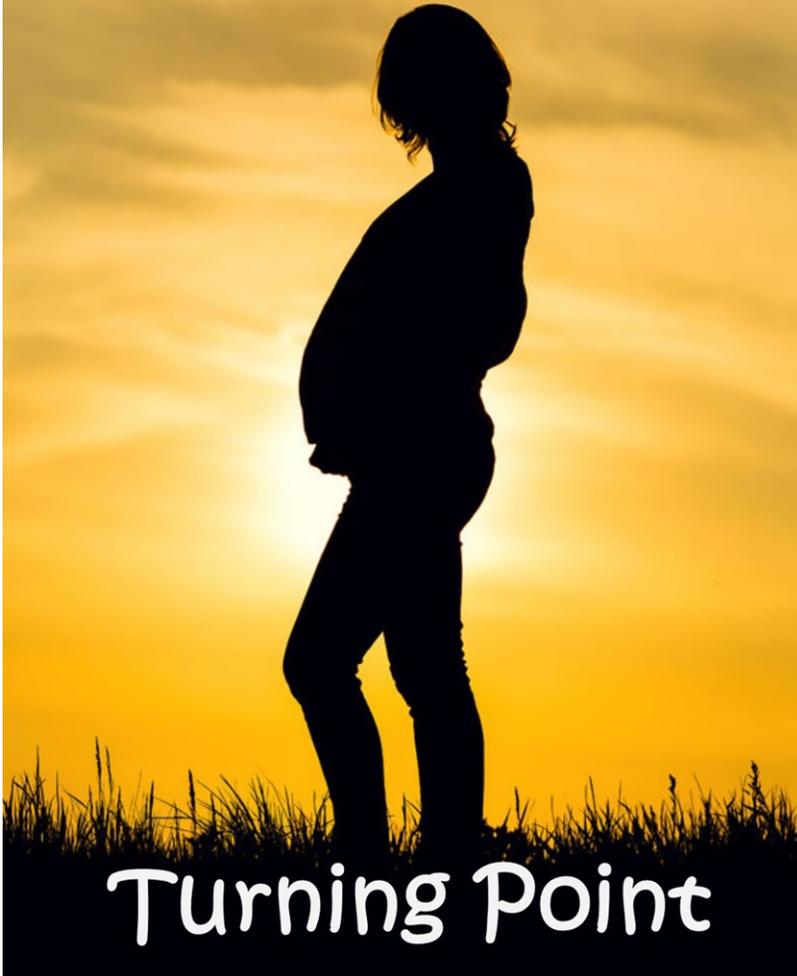


A short story by:

Belinda M Gordon



Turning Point

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www.belinda-gordon.com

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TURNING POINT

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Free at last! After two months of bedrest, my obstetrician had finally given the baby and me a clean bill of health. Although my friends had visited me often, they had busy lives to attend to. So I spent most of these past weeks with nothing to do but sit in my borrowed home, mourning what was lost and crying over the mess my life had become.

But not today. Today I was leaving this house for girly fun that I hadn't had for ages. My dark hair was long past due for a trim; it looked scraggly and ill kept even after I combed it. The ends fell all the way to my shoulders, far longer than my preferred pixie cut. My nails were a mess too, so I added a manicure to my mental agenda.

I turned to view my profile in the bathroom mirror, placing one hand beneath my breasts and the other below my burgeoning belly and pulling my blouse tight. I admired my baby bump with satisfaction before smoothing out the fabric and rechecking my makeup in the mirror. This blouse was the only true maternity top I owned. Until then I had grudgingly gotten by with wearing t-shirts that now barely stretched over my abdomen. I added clothes shopping to my growing list and smiled; things were looking up.

My stomach growled as I hurried downstairs to the kitchen of the old farmhouse. I scoured the cabinets but found nothing there to eat. I realized with surprise that I hadn't thought about groceries once since being on bedrest. When Tressa, my friend and boss, had asked me to housesit, plenty of food filled the pantry. But those supplies couldn't have lasted this long; my friends must have been restocking it for me. I shook my head with wonder at their kindness. Grabbing my keys, I headed toward my car with a bounce in my step. Breakfast in town sounded like a perfect way to start my outing.

I bought the one remaining blueberry muffin when I arrived at *The Apple Dumpling Café*. I ate it, heated and buttered, with a cup of herbal tea. Each morsel tasted more divine than the last.

"Holly Moyer, it's about time you show up," said Ida Krauss, the café's owner. Ida was famous for her baked goods; she was responsible for the delicious muffin. She came up beside me with a rag in her hand from wiping down the empty tables. "Why haven't I seen you for so long?"

"Not my fault. The doctor had me on bedrest," I said, popping the last bite of muffin into my mouth. "I thought you knew. You sent me muffins last week."

"Sent you? Sent where?"

"To Tressa's. I've been housesitting for her; she had to leave town unexpectedly."

"It wasn't me," she said, shaking her head. Then she beamed at me. "Stand up. Let me see that belly."

Ida spent a few minutes cooing over the baby and me, peppering me with questions: was it a girl or a boy? Had I picked out any names? What was my due date again? I waltzed out of the café a few minutes later in high spirits; talking about your baby is every expectant mother's favorite subject.

I started toward Main Street, lifting my chin to feel the heat of the August sun on my face. It felt good to be outside again. I was just stepping into the crosswalk when a truck turned the corner and barreled toward me. I jumped back onto the sidewalk, heart racing. A red Ford pickup with a familiar wide scrape along its rear fender zoomed down the street away from me. It was Fred's truck.

I scurried backward until my back pressed up against the building behind me. My body trembled, starting deep inside my core and radiating outwards. I wrapped arms around my abdomen, cradling my baby and trying to protect him from my panic.

My breathing had become quick and shallow; I forced myself to take deeper, slower breaths. It couldn't have been Fred driving the truck, I reassured myself. My savagely abusive husband was sitting in a jail cell. It would have been all over the news if he had gotten out. I repeated this to myself over and over again until my terror ebbed away.

Finally, I closed my eyes and took one last deep, healing breath before hurrying across the street and down the block to the *Hair Haven Salon*.

The salon bustled with activity. Customers occupied two of the four cutting stations. Someone was getting their hair washed in the back and several women were under the hood, waiting for their hair to dry or process. Rachel Singer, my friend and the owner of the salon, rushed to greet me at the door.

"Holly! You look fabulous," Rachel said as she hugged me. Rachel had long luxurious chestnut hair that won her many clients in the early days of her career. Today she had it pinned up out of her way.

"Ha! Hardly. I'm in need of some serious help," I retorted, running my fingers through my scraggly mane. She waved a hand at me, dismissing my words.

"You've got the pregnancy glow. That makes up for everything else."

I smiled as she led me to the back of the salon to wash my hair. It felt good to be in this comfortable, familiar place doing comfortable, familiar things. I sat in the chair she indicated, leaning back until my neck rested on the sink and closing my eyes as she sprayed my hair with warm water. She massaged my scalp as she shampooed, relaxing me until I could have fallen asleep.

After what seemed like too short a time, she wrapped a towel around my wet head and we headed to her station. She confirmed that I wanted my regular pixie cut and we fell into catching up with each other's news.

"So, you're still housesitting for Tressa. Will she be away much longer?" Rachel asked as she began clipping.

"I'm not sure." Talking about Tressa's trip was difficult. There were many things I had to keep secret: where she had gone, why she left so abruptly and even who and what she really was. I honestly didn't know when she would return.

"What about the store? Will it stay closed until she gets back?"

This was an interesting question. Tressa told me I should reopen if the doctor took me off bedrest. After months spent brooding hour after hour, reopening *Tressa's Treasures* would give me something else to occupy my thoughts, to get things moving in a positive direction.

"No, I'm going to reopen it for her."

Rachel ran her comb through my hair, pulling sections away from my head and testing the length of the layers. Satisfied with her work, she started on the sides. She caught my eye in the mirror.

"Linda is looking for a job. Maybe she can help you?" The receptionist at the front desk called her name and she patted my shoulder. "Give me a minute, I'll be right back," she said before scurrying away.

Without my friend's cheerful, friendly presence next to me, I sensed an odd atmosphere in the room. In the long mirror that ran the length of the four stations I could see everyone in the salon. They all seemed to focus on me. Heat rose in my cheeks as I flushed with embarrassment.

Several of the women behind me whispered amongst themselves while taking furtive glances at me. An elderly woman beside me leaned over and patted my hand when she saw me blush.

"Don't worry, sweetie, everyone knows it wasn't your fault."

"My fault?" I repeated stupidly. My mind moved like sludge and I stared at her blankly, not grasping her meaning.

"Fred and your sister. He killed her because she broke off their relationship, right?"

"No... No, there wasn't any affair."

"Then why did he... ?"

"Okay, Margaret. No need to repeat vicious rumors," Rachel said, cutting off the older woman as she hurried back to my side. Then she chattered cheerfully about the possibility of her daughter, Linda, working for me at the shop, as if she could erase the older woman's hurtful words. But my mind ruminated on them anyway.

My sister having an affair with Fred? The idea would be laughable if my heart hadn't been so broken. Eileen had despised my husband. She had tried to get me to leave him for years-since the first time he blackened my eye. If only I had listened to her sooner, perhaps she wouldn't be dead.

I couldn't go back and change that. The only small consolation I had now was my fervent promise to myself that I would never so much as lay eyes on him again. I hoped he would rot in jail.

"Are we doing your nails today, too?" Rachel's perky voice brought me back to the present.

"Some other time, thanks." The negative attention and nasty rumors had deflated my enthusiasm for the idea. I wanted to get out of the salon as quickly as possible.

Ten minutes later I walked toward my car with hunched shoulders. The women's tittering whispers, curious stares and nasty gossip sucked out all the joy I expected the visit to bring me. Instead, grief, hurt, and sadness weighed down each step.

Suddenly someone called my name. I looked up warily but smiled when a familiar face grinned back at me. Matt was sporting his usual round, wire-rimmed glasses and a big toothy smile that contrasted sharply against his dark brown skin.

"You better watch where you're going or you might run into something," Matt said, his tone light and teasing as he approached. "Nice to see you here. I guess this means you got good news yesterday?"

Besides being my best friend, Matt was the only other person who lived on Pine Ridge Estate. He knew the truth about our friend Tressa, that she was a Sidhe and currently in the Otherworld. And, like me, he could see through fae glamour. He had kept me company for many hours over my time of being locked up in the farmhouse.

"Yup, I'm off bedrest! The doctor said I can go back to normal activities."

He turned and walked in step with me as I continued toward my car. "So, first day out. What's the plan?"

"First stop was Rachel's salon," I said, fluffing the back of my hair. "And now I'm going clothes shopping."

"Wow, that sounds like a barrel of laughs," he said, teasing. I slapped his arm playfully.

"It is to me."

Just as my mood began to lift, the red pickup pulled up to the curb next to us. The driver jumped out, slamming the door shut behind him. Fred's brother Chuck stormed toward me.

"What's the matter with you? Where the hell have you been?" I flinched as he barked out each word. My heart pounded harder with each step he made in my direction. Matt stepped forward, and I gratefully slunk behind him. Matt was at least a foot taller than me; I felt hidden and protected in his shadow.

"What the hell are you doing? Can't you see you're scaring her?" Matt said. Chuck stood with his big beefy hands on hips, giving Matt the onceover.

"Who are you? The new boyfriend? She's married, you know. To my brother."

"I'm Holly's friend, which is more that I can say about you right now," Matt said, shaking his head. "Why don't you get back in your truck and leave the lady alone."

Chuck didn't move. He met Matt's eyes and attempted to stare him down. Matt stood his ground.

"Look, Holly," Chuck said, attempting to bite back the aggression in his voice. "Fred's been asking for you. He doesn't understand why you haven't come to visit him. You can't possibly believe what they're saying—that he's a murderer?"

Fred *was* guilty, and if Chuck didn't know that, he certainly knew enough to know that Fred was capable of murder. The indignation his words invoked compelled me to respond. But first I took a fistful of the back of Matt's t-shirt, using the physical connection to him as a security blanket to give me courage. I stepped out from Matt's protection to face Chuck.

"You can tell Fred that I will never visit him. If I have my way, I'll never have to see him again." I narrowed my eyes at him, my words coming out stronger than I could have hoped. He took a step away from the venom in my voice.

"Never?" His mind raced as he thought this through. "What about the trial? His attorney said that it's important for you to be there, showing your support."

"Chuck, I'm not going to do that."

Matt walked me to my car. He didn't explain, but I knew he wanted to make sure Chuck didn't come around again. He didn't say anything until we reached my car.

"Holly, can I ask you something about what you said back there?" I grimaced. The fact that he had asked permission implied I wouldn't like the question.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"You said you weren't going to the trial to support Fred, and I totally get that. But don't you have to go at some point to testify?" His voice was gentle, but my body tensed up as it did every time anyone mentioned the trial.

"I told them I wouldn't. They can't make me testify against him. He's my husband, and before you say anything else, know that they have plenty of evidence to convict him without my testimony."

"I'm sure the idea of facing Fred in court—to be so close to him again—is scary, but—"

"I'm not scared." My denial, though it came out abruptly and cut off his words, sounded hollow even to me. He knew I was lying. He stayed quiet as I got into my car and lowered my window. He leaned down to my level, folding his arms along the window ledge.

"Holly, I respect what you're saying, but think about it. Testifying, telling the world the truth about who Fred is, might be good for you. It could be empowering." When I didn't respond, he smiled at me weakly and stood. "I'm going home. If you need anything, just call me."

It wasn't until my stomach growled around dinnertime that I realized I hadn't gone to the grocery store. Too tired to drive back into town, I decided to rummage through the kitchen for a can of soup or a frozen meal to tide me over.

A large bowl filled with apples, oranges and bananas sat on the kitchen island. I creased my brow as I stared at the fruit. Had I been in such a hurry to get out of the house

that morning that I hadn't noticed it? I grabbed a banana, peeled it open and broke off the top half. I munched on it as I opened the refrigerator, remembering the leftovers of the Chinese food Matt had brought over two days ago.

The harsh light inside the refrigerator revealed food that had definitely not been there earlier: bread, eggs, fresh vegetables. A plate, covered in clear wrap, sat on the middle shelf. It held a serving of homemade meatloaf, mashed potatoes and veggies, just waiting to be popped into the microwave for reheating. Once I had the plate spinning in the microwave, I called Matt.

"Did you buy groceries for me today?"

"No... do you need me to run get something for you?" His puzzled tone made me feel silly for asking.

"No, that's okay. Someone left me a surprise is all." I heard a noise behind me, like the sound of someone sucking air in through their teeth to express their disapproval. "Hold on a second Matt," I said. Then I lowered my voice and whispered, "Someone's here."

"I'll be right over."

I saw movement in a dark corner of the kitchen and scanned the area around me for a weapon. I grabbed a heavy frying pan and called out, "Who's there? What do you want?"

"Who else would it be but Trudy, who's been taking care of you these long weeks? " A short woman stepped out of the shadows as Matt came barreling through the front door. He froze when he reached the kitchen.

We both stared at the woman, who wore a house dress like my grandmother used to wear and a handkerchief tied around her head to hold back her wiry hair. She wiped her hands in the big apron she wore over her clothes. Matt and I met eyes, silently acknowledging what we both recognized: she was a fae.

"You act as though you didn't know I was here, and after all the work I've been doing." She sucked air into her teeth again and I blushed. I had no idea she had been there.

"Did Tressa send you?" Matt asked.

"Nay, 'twas the princess Rosheen who said I must come and take care of the new mother." Her eyes narrowed as they shifted back and forth between the two of us. "I suppose I'll need to be fixing another plate, now that you have company."

The microwave dinged, and we all jumped before chuckling and smiling at each other, breaking the tension in the room.

Wards protected the estate from the dangerous Unseelie fae, still Matt peppered Trudy with questions. Once she had convinced him that our friends in the Otherworld had sent her, he declined the invitation for dinner and returned home.

After he left, Trudy scurried around the kitchen setting a place at the island, pouring me a glass of milk and pulling the hot plate out of the microwave.

"Trudy, if you've been here for so long, how is it I haven't seen you before?" I asked, feeling awkward now that we were alone together.

"I've been staying out of your way, haven't I?" she said, placing the plate on the placemat. "Assumed you prefer it that way." She looked pointedly from me to the food she had prepared, like a schoolteacher giving a silent command. Following the years of trained behavior, I automatically sat down.

"Well actually, if someone's living in my house I'd prefer to know they're around."

My cell phone rang. I sighed when my mother's picture came up on the caller ID. Experience told me that if I didn't take her call, she would keep calling until I did. I took a deep breath and answered.

"Hello mother, how are you?" I grimaced, expecting her usual response.

"Worried, that's how I am. I just don't understand why you can't move back with us until this whole mess is over." I didn't ask her to expand on what she meant by 'this whole mess,' although I'm sure her list of problems would be different than mine.

"We've been over this so many times already. I promised Tressa to housesit while she's away."

She went quiet, holding back her usual objections while I silently thanked Tressa for giving me a place to stay. I dreaded the idea of moving in with my parents.

"You need someone to take care of you."

"Oh, I'm well taken care of," I said glancing up at Trudy. She stood across the island from me, glaring at me with pursed lips and her arms crossed in front of her. She mouthed 'it's getting cold,' and I dutifully ate a forkful of mashed potatoes. I seized on this idea to end the call quickly. "As a matter of fact I'm in the middle of eating my dinner. Can we talk later?"

"Another letter arrived for you today." My stomach twisted into a knot. I put a protective hand over my belly. "Send it back. I don't want it."

"Shouldn't you at least read it?"

"No."

"Holly, he's your husband. Whatever happened between you, I'm sure he's sorry."

That was what the letter would say. How sorry he was. How it had been the booze, not him. How it would never happen again. I had believed him and forgiven him so many times, even after numerous blackened eyes, busted lips, and purple bruises. After all the physical pain and emotional trauma, I always believed he could go back to being the charming guy I married. That belief had died the day he hurt our baby.

I had hidden the abuse for years. My parents, while not quite saying they didn't believe me when I finally spoke up, refused to accept the truth. Eileen had always known. The evidence had been there all along to the astute observer.

"You and Dad need to understand. Maybe someday I'll manage to forgive him, but I never want to see him again."

"Honey, a marriage is forever."

"Not this marriage."

The next day, still restless with cabin fever, I went into work for a few hours. I'm the manager at *Tressa's Treasures*, a shop filled with Irish imports. With Tressa away and me on bedrest, it had stood closed for months. My conversation with Rachel had reminded me of my promise to reopen it if I could.

I expected to find the store a mess, dust covering the crystal and china and the carpet badly in need of vacuuming, but the place was spotless. Trudy must have been keeping the shop in order, too.

Time ran away from me as I opened a pile of mail, did a cursory check on inventory and planned the front window display for the upcoming Labor Day Weekend. After making a list of the things I needed to purchase for the window display, I sat back in my chair and smiled. It felt good to be productive again.

My stomach growled as I folded the list and slipped it into my purse. Then the baby kicked me in the ribs as if to say 'I'm hungry too.' I rubbed the spot and laughed.

"Okay, little one, I get the message. Let's get some lunch."

I glanced around for a familiar face when I entered the café. Ida's sandwiches were a favorite among the locals and I often bumped into friends at lunchtime. That day I had missed the lunch rush; the café was nearly empty. I settled into a table for two in the back corner. I ordered my regular turkey on wheat, but when my stomach growled again I impulsively added chips and a slice of shoofly pie.

Someone had left a newspaper folded on the table next to mine. I had avoided the news lately, not wanting to hear the details of my sister's death and the following investigation over and over again. Seeing the abandoned paper made me curious. Were they still reporting on the story?

I was just reaching for it when Ida approached me with my food.

"Don't bother with that," she said clunking the plates down in front of me. "That newspaper is nothing but a gossip rag."

I unfolded the paper to find a picture of Fred in prison garb next to a photo of him as the golden-haired football star during his college days.

"Holly, seriously. You don't want to read that stuff," Ida said, lowering her voice. I examined her worried expression. Ida loved gossip. She especially enjoyed spreading it. What could be in the news she didn't want me to see? I thanked her for her concern, but held tight to the paper until she left me alone to eat.

I munched on my potato chips and began to read. The previous day in the hair salon had prepared me for the worst of it, but I began to lose my appetite as I read the speculation about an affair. The paper mentioned the names of people who confirmed the tryst. They were strangers to me. I doubted they had ever met either one of them.

They quoted Fred's mother supporting him, proclaiming his innocence. I would expect nothing less—her love for her son blinded her to his flaws. But my mouth gaped open as I read my father's statement: that Fred was a good and faithful husband.

My father had adored Fred from the day I brought him home, star struck by the local boy headed for the big leagues. When a knee injury ended Fred's prospects of playing professionally, Dad wasn't deterred. He still recounted the details of the big plays Fred made in his glory days.

My father never had a nice thing to say about Eileen or me, but he loved his son-in-law. Although Dad never hit us, he ruled his home like a tyrant and my mother passively followed his lead. Perhaps he did think Fred was a great husband, I conceded.

My mind went back to the early days of our marriage, when Fred still looked like the golden boy in the photo. He had been so sweet; he treated me like a princess. We bought a little house, and I fixed it up while he worked. He gave me carte blanche to decorate our home and applauded each decision I made.

Once I finished, I had become restless being stuck at home every day. Fred preferred that I stay a housewife, but he tried to understand when I said I wanted to look for a job.

I telephoned him at work the day Tressa hired me.

"Fred, I did it. I got a job!"

"So soon?" he sighed, and I imagined him running his fingers through his short blonde hair. "I told you I would get you a job here at the hospital."

"And I told you, I don't want to work there. I want to work in retail—to use my degree—and this is the prettiest little shop. Please be happy for me."

"I'm happy, I'm happy." I smiled at the reticence in his voice. At the time I thought it was a sign he was trying to see things my way, to compromise.

"Thank you. I'll cook something special tonight to celebrate. I'll tell you all about it then."

Dinner had gotten cold as I waited for him for hours that night. By the time Fred tripped in through the door, reeking of booze and barely able to stand, I was furious.

"I guess I don't need to ask where you've been—drinking with the boys. Geez, Fred. You're not in college anymore. Couldn't you at least have called? We had plans."

"Stop ragging on me. I can do whatever I want." He pushed past me and staggered into the kitchen. "And right now I want another beer."

"Haven't you had enough?" My voice was terse with anger and I may even have shouted. But I never saw his reaction coming.

He punched me. Pain exploded through my eye and my cheek. Blood gushed from my nose as I stumbled back, too shocked to make any noise. My mouth hung open in a silent scream. Fred tripped past me, brushing a lamp and sending it crashing to the floor as he threw himself onto the living room sofa.

I took quick shallow breaths to hold myself together while I prayed for the pain to subside. When I could move, I grabbed a towel to catch the blood flowing from my nose and collapsed into the closest chair. I touched it gingerly and decided he hadn't broken it.

A silence fell over the house as I sat, tears running down my face, trying to digest the fact that my husband had just hit me. I made excuses for him. He was drunk. I shouldn't have shouted. I didn't let myself admit how shallow the excuses were.

The next day Fred was back to his sweet self. He was contrite, apologetic, and couldn't do enough for me. He said it would never happen again, and I believed him. Sweet loving Fred would never hurt me. Until the next time.

"Miss, are you ok?" A deep voice pulled me back to the present. A man stood next to me, holding onto a toddler's hand. The little boy stared at me while sucking on his thumb. I smiled at the child, blinking rapidly as I realized tears were about to spill over.

"I'm fine, thank you. It's just an allergy attack." I said, crumbling the newspaper and throwing it away. I carried my plate over to the counter. "Ida, could you wrap this up for me? I think I'll wait and eat it at home."

I went back to *Tressa's Treasures* more determined than ever to reopen it and get working again. Keeping busy, I assured myself, would be the best way to put the past behind me. I packed up the store laptop and the bills that had been in the mail and headed home.

I spent the rest of the afternoon catching up on neglected paperwork and answering emails. The store would reopen the following Monday. We had missed most of the summer—usually a busy time with so many families vacationing in the resorts around Findale—but we had another month until school started again. Might as well take advantage of the last part of the summer tourist season.

I closed the laptop and shuffled the papers into a pile, pleased to be working again, to be productive while I waited for my baby to arrive. I smiled and laid a hand on my stomach. The baby moved, as if knowing I was thinking about him.

The distinct aroma of chocolate chip cookies wafted in from the kitchen. I scrunched my nose, confused. A beat later I shook my head and chuckled as I remembered my stealth housekeeper. When I entered the kitchen, Trudy was leaning over in front of the oven, pulling out a sheet of hot and gooey cookies. She placed it on the stovetop next to a second tray.

"You had a visitor today," she said without preamble. She grabbed a spatula, lifting the cooled cookies and arranging them on a large dinner plate. "A bright looking young man with dark hair and spectacles."

"Anthony Hall." He was the district attorney prosecuting Fred's case. The small of my back began to ache. I leaned with my elbows on the kitchen island to relieve some pressure from it. "He came here? You spoke to him?"

"Why yes, he knocked on the door so persistently I thought it must be important. Sure and he said it was very important indeed." She sat the plate of cookies on the island in front of me before pulling another plate from the cupboard and loading it with the rest of the cookies. "He said to tell you he hopes you change your mind about testifying. He said you need only show up at the courthouse tomorrow morning."

I hid behind my hands as I rubbed my face. Why wouldn't everyone stop pestering me about this?

"Aren't you going to eat any of those?" Trudy stood holding the second plate of cookies. She raised her eyebrows and looked pointedly at the cookies in front of me. I grabbed one, and she set down the plate she held with a chiding humph.

She leaned against the counter, arms crossed over her chest as she watched for my reaction.

"Delicious," I said, grabbing another. Someone knocked at the door. Trudy started to move, but I shook my head to stop her. I pushed myself to stand up straight and, with one hand on my back and the other holding a cookie, I headed toward the door.

Maybe it would be Matt this time, and not Anthony Hall here to plead his case again. I thought of the picture of Fred in the newspaper. I didn't want to stand in a courtroom and relive the beatings he had inflicted on me. It was bad enough that they invaded my dreams. I had no doubt that seeing him again would only add strength to those nightmares. I didn't want to relate the facts that had convinced me that Fred had killed my sister. I didn't want to be reminded that it had been my fault she was dead.

I took a deep breath to brace myself and swung the front door open. Chuck stood there, hands on his hips, glaring at me with brown eyes so like Fred's that I couldn't speak.

"I came to tell you that you'd better be at the courthouse tomorrow," he said, his voice low and threatening. "You will sit behind Fred and play the dutiful wife."

I dropped my head and stared at the floor, though I had tried to fight the impulse. The heat in his expression crippled my resistance. I swallowed, gathered my strength and looked up. I still couldn't meet his eyes, but I kept my chin high and fixed my gaze just over his shoulder.

He had driven here in Fred's truck. A woman waited for him in the passenger seat: his girlfriend, Kristin. She stared back at me through dark tinted sunglasses. I recognized the empty expression she wore; I had seen it on my own face many times in the mirror. Her dark glasses and thick makeup hid the ugly truth: that Fred and his brother were cut from the same mold.

"Go away, Chuck," I said, slamming the door shut.

I nearly collided with Trudy when I turned around; she had crept up behind me with a rolling pin in her hand. I let out a surprised gasp when I saw her.

"The only way to deal with bullies is to stand up to them," she said in her stern schoolteacher-voice.

I had a restless night. Kristen's battered and bruised face swirled around in my dreams, mixing with images of my face looking the same. I pleaded and begged her to call the police. "Don't let him get away with it," I kept telling her, "or at least leave him so he can't do it again." It was an eerie echo of the pleas Eileen had made to me over and over again. I awoke with Eileen's voice ringing in my ears and a new resolve in my heart.

The buzz of the crowd reached me even before I turned the corner. Murder trials didn't happen often in Findale and the whole town had come to witness the event. A local television crew was filming a live report on the sidewalk in front of the courthouse.

I hesitated, my resolve weakening at the thought of pushing through the throng of people, knowing they would whisper and stare. Then I saw Matt hovering on the fringe of the crowd. I hurried toward him with a sigh of relief.

"You're here!" I said.

"I figured you might need some moral support if you decided to come."

He guided me up the courthouse stairs. The two of us working together made it easier to press through the crowd. Anthony Hall stood at the top of the stairs next to a column on the right side of the courthouse door. My parents stood with Chuck and others from Fred's family on the opposite side of the landing. I barely glanced at them before heading toward the prosecutor.

"Holly Marie, what do you think you're doing?" my father called out in shock and outrage. I turned and looked from him to my mother to each member of their group with a steady gaze until my eyes came to rest on Chuck.

"I'm doing what Eileen would have wanted me to do. I'm standing up for myself."

Matt sat with me outside the courtroom, waiting for the bailiff to call me. The longer we waited the more nervous I became. I would have been better prepared if I had met with the district attorney's office when they had asked me to. I had almost worked myself into a panic attack when the bailiff appeared at last.

I peered through the door into the packed courtroom, fearing I wouldn't be able to walk inside.

"I wish I could go up there with you," Matt said, and an odd sense of calm fell over me.

"Mattie, you've been a big help. But this is something I need to do myself."

I avoided the hundreds of eyes that followed me as I approached the witness stand, so it wasn't until I stood facing the crowd that I allowed myself to look over at Fred. He smirked at me, an expression I knew well. He thought I was the same person I had been a few months ago; that I was weak and he could still control me. He thought he had nothing to fear from me.

When the bailiff asked me to raise my right hand I took that opportunity to send Fred a message on my own. I held his eyes as I stood with a renewed strength and spoke the words, "I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God."