



Ritchie turned onto Washington Street and drove until we caught sight of a skinny copper-green cupola poking above treetops. Slowing the van, he braked in front of the county courthouse, a red-brick building with a huge portico and the cupola rising above it. My armpits broke out in a sweat. I felt as though I were being driven to a sentencing, not my wedding. My breathing grew fast and shallow, and I pressed a hand on my breastbone.

A horn behind us blared. Ritchie raised his hand, gave the driver the finger, then drove to the corner, and turned right. He found a parking lot in the block behind the courthouse and parked there. From this side, the building looked functional and less impressive.

Ritchie switched off the ignition and sat motionless. Wondering if he was as scared of marriage as I was, I decided to plead, *Let's go home*. Before I could, he said, "You wait here."

"What?" I turned toward him. He was staring at the building across the street and refusing to look at me. "Don't I have to come in too?"

Ritchie rubbed his chin. Usually, he was a good-looking guy with wavy mid-brown hair, dark liquid eyes, and a slightly pudgy face that tended toward an Elvis pout. That morning, however, his eyes were bloodshot from drinking too much beer the night before, and his lower face was covered with stubble. His features settled into a mulish expression that I'd seen him wear all our lives—ever since we were children playing together in his father's sun-dappled apple grove or wading in the creek at the back of my yard.

"I got to find out how much it costs, stuff like that." He shot me a sideways glance. "Maybe we should find a motel so we can clean up, come back tomorrow."

He was right that we didn't look like a bridal couple, both of us still wearing the clothes we'd run away in the day before. Instead of spending the night in a motel, he'd parked in a rest area and we slept

in the back of the van. That is, once he'd gotten around to letting me sleep. Knowing exactly what lay ahead of me if I agreed to the motel suggestion, I balked. "You promised we'd get married today."

Ritchie gripped and ungripped the steering wheel. "Sure. If everything goes OK." He took the keys, climbed down from the van, and started toward the courthouse. Halting, he turned back, opened the driver's door, and leaned inside. "Look, Katie—"

"What?" I snapped.

His face shuttered. "Forget it." Shoving his hands in his pockets, he slouched across the parking lot, looking for all the world like a guy who would spend his life sweeping floors. *You're making a mistake, a panicked voice within me screeched. I don't care if you slept with him, you don't deserve to be tied to him forever.*

My right hand gripped the passenger door handle, and I peered through the side windows to see if there was anywhere I could run to ask for help—but all the buildings within sight looked anonymous and unwelcoming.

Anyway, where would I go? Even if I got to a phone and reached my mother, I wasn't sure she'd take me back. She had forbidden my relationship with Ritchie over a year ago after she caught us necking and told me that, in God's eyes, I was as guilty as if I'd slept with him. Defying her low opinion of me, I had clung stubbornly to my virginity until we ran away, surrendering it then only because of the promise that I'd be Mrs. Richard Pelletier in the morning—and because Ritchie's rage at being asked to wait one more day was too menacing to defy. Now that the deed was done, according to the stringent doctrines of my mother and my church, my only chance to redeem myself was to marry the partner of my lust.

Checking my watch, I saw that it was a little after 1:00. Ritchie came out of the building and paused near one of the plain columns in front of the glass doors. He lit a cigarette and then trudged toward the van.

He didn't even glance at me as he pulled himself into the driver's seat and started the ignition. "We can't get married. You're too young."

"But you said that in Kentucky—"

"I know what I said. Paul was wrong."

The panicky feeling came back as I exclaimed, "What are we going to do?"

Ritchie gave me a backhanded slap that sent me crashing into the window. "Shut up! How do you expect me to think with you bitching in my ear?"

Pain radiated through my skull. I inched as far away from him as possible, shifted my jaw to make sure it wasn't broken, and willed myself not to cry.

Ritchie took a deep drag on his cigarette and tossed it out the window. He shifted into reverse. "I got to get something to eat."

The café was paneled in light pine and decorated with autographed photos of country music stars. A blackboard listed fifteen kinds of "ho-made" pie, and a jukebox played Tammy Wynette.

I stared at my plate, which held a slab of meat loaf, a mound of mashed potatoes, and a spoonful of overcooked peas. The sight roiled my stomach, so I put down my fork and sipped water.

Ritchie gestured to the waitress. "Give me another pork chop sandwich and a refill on the Coke. And a slice of that pecan pie."

"Sure thing." The waitress, a thin, brassy blonde in a salmon uniform, frowned at my untouched plate. "How 'bout you, hon? Everything OK?"

"Fine."

As the waitress walked away, Ritchie belched and stretched his legs under the table until they touched mine. He opened a matchbook and used the cover to pick at his teeth. "Wonder how long it'll take to drive to California."

I stared at him. Did he think if he ignored the problem I'd forget about it? If so, he had another think coming, as Grandma would say. "We should find a public library first."

"What the hell for?"

"To find out where we can get married."

Ritchie leaned across the table. After two days in that dark blue T-shirt, he stank. "There ain't no place."

"You don't know that. We have to check."

"I know." With an air of finality, he sat back and took out a cigarette.

Looking at his face, dark with unshaved whiskers, I felt a rush of hatred. "Yesterday you swore we could get married. Or was that a lie?"

"If you're calling me a liar, I'm going to have to learn you a lesson."

"Is hitting the only way you can win an argument?" I fell silent as the waitress brought Ritchie's food. Once she left us, I asked, "How'd you find this out anyway?"

After biting into the sandwich, Ritchie wiped his mouth with a crumpled paper napkin. "The courthouse lady went in back to look it up."

"You weren't gone long enough."

He narrowed his eyes. "I swear to God, you call me a liar once more, I'm going to belt you."

The threat froze me; we were hundreds of miles from home, and I had no place to run if he turned on me. "I'm sorry. I'm just upset. We have to get married."

"So maybe we'll get married when you're eighteen."

In spite of my fear, I pushed back. "That's a year from now. Can you wait that long?"

"Huh?" He paused with his sandwich poised in the air. "What's that mean?"

I crossed my arms over my chest. "No wedding, no sex."

"Come on, Katie. That's not fair. You already did it once."

"Only because you promised we'd get married today."

"Shit." Ritchie leaned forward. "Listen, you ain't got nothing to save anymore. You're just like the rest of us now, baby."

He reached for my hand. The moment I felt his touch, a terrible certainty gripped me. "You never intended to get married, did you? You lied to get me to do it."

His eyes flashed. Squeezing my hand till it hurt, he said, "I told you. The guy at the courthouse looked it up for me."

I jerked free. "You said it was a woman."

"No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did. Don't you even care enough to keep your story straight?"

"Shit." He rubbed his mouth. Then he pulled his pie in front of him and began to eat it.

My stomach churned, and my scalp tingled as if jolted with electricity. "How could you do this? You said you loved me."

Ritchie spoke with a full mouth. "You been making me wait all these years. That ain't much like love."

"Then it's true. You really said it to trick me."

He shrugged. "You got this hang-up about sex, so I thought you should get it over with."

Horrified, I pushed back my chair. "I'm going to the washroom."

As I entered the bathroom, the powerful scent of pine disinfectant sickened me. I vomited into the nearest toilet, then rinsed out my mouth, and stared in the mirror. Except for bruising on my cheek, there was no sign of what I had been through. No one could look at me and see that I was damned.

Taking a deep breath, I returned to the dining room. Ritchie's chair was empty, and the waitress was piling our dishes in a beige plastic bin. "Here's the check, hon." She held it out to me. "Pay up front."

I took it and glanced around. "Where's my boyfriend?"

"He left."

"No!"

As I hiked up my purse strap and ran toward the door, the waitress shouted, "Hey, girl. You better pay!"

I jerked to a stop, returned to the cash register, and fumbled with my wallet. The cashier was so slow I wanted to scream. By the time I ran outside, I was almost hyperventilating. What I saw stopped my breathing altogether. The van was gone. Next to the space it had occupied was my suitcase, standing on the curb like a hitchhiker.

PART ONE

*Daddy's
Girl*

JUNE 1965—
AUGUST 1979



"Daddy, guess what I found!"

Joe Thompson looked up from the concrete he was mixing in his dinged-up blue wheelbarrow and smiled across the back yard at his five-year-old daughter. "What?"

As Katie skipped toward him, her long black braid bounced against her back. "A feather." She stopped next to him and held it out for inspection. It was brown-black, probably from a robin.

"What're you going to do with it?"

"I don't know." Katie stared at her treasure with a face as solemn as a judge deciding on a sentence. As she pondered, she rubbed one dirty foot on top of the other. Then her face lit up. "I could find some more and make a fan."

"A fan? Of feathers?" Joe wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. Years ago, he'd gone to a state fair out west, where he saw Sally Rand perform her famous nude dance behind two huge, ever-shifting sweeps of ostrich plumes—not an image he wanted to associate with his little girl. "I don't think that will work."

"Yes, it will." She nodded for emphasis. "I saw it on TV. A lady went to a party in a long dress and carried a fan made out of white feathers."

"Oh." Joe cleared his throat, embarrassed by his assumption. "I see. But you'll need more than one."

"I know." Katie twirled the feather. "Can I go to the grove? Me and Ritchie most always find feathers there."

"No. You know you're not supposed to walk down the road by yourself. Look around our yard. I'll be done here in a few minutes, and then I'll help."

Joe and his wife owned a two-bedroom, ranch-style house in Moneka, a tiny hamlet of nine houses and a small grocery store ten miles east of Zebulun, Illinois, the county seat where they'd grown

up. They lived on Sunset Road just north of the Pelletier farm, which bordered the main highway. The grove Katie referred to was more than a quarter mile away.

Sighing at the unreasonableness of grown-ups, Katie wandered away. Joe stirred the concrete one last time and scooped it into each of the holes he'd dug to anchor the legs of Katie's swing set, bought for her birthday last week. When he was done, he cleaned the wheelbarrow and washed his hands. Then he looked around for his daughter. She was nowhere to be seen.

Joe walked to the back edge of their lot and glanced down at the stone-littered shallow creek flowing there. No Katie. Then he headed to the front yard, where he found her sitting on the concrete stoop, holding her chin in her hand. "I couldn't find any."

He sat next to her. "That's OK. You can keep this one until you collect enough."

Katie scowled and used her big toe to rub out an anthill in the crack of the sidewalk. Joe covered his mouth to hide the grin at what he called her "Marietta look"—she could be as stubborn as her mother. He thought a moment and said, "I know what else we could use it for. I could be Robin Hood; he wore a cap with a feather in it."

She threw him a suspicious look. "Who's he?"

"He lived a long time ago in a country ruled by a bad king who wanted to make himself and his friends rich and didn't care if poor people starved."

Katie's blue-grey eyes widened. "What happened?"

"Well, Robin Hood was a nobleman." She drew her dark brows together, so Joe explained, "That means he ruled a piece of land that was a part of the kingdom. He was supposed to fight for the king, and the farmers on his land were supposed to obey him."

"Oh." Katie watched him carefully. "Was Robin a bad man too?"

"No, he wanted everyone to have enough money and enough food. But the king didn't like that idea. So Robin Hood became an outlaw and hid in the forest with a group of friends." Joe stopped abruptly as he realized that Marietta wouldn't like his telling Katie a story where a thief was the hero. "Um, so, whenever anyone came by who had

robbed the poor, Robin Hood and his men took the stolen money to give back to the people it belonged to."

"Oh!" Katie breathed out the word in an ecstasy of satisfaction and extended her feather to him. "You can have this. Want me to get your hat?"

"No, I have to make a special one." Joe stood, walked the few steps to the garage door, pulled it up, and took a newspaper off the stack he stored against the inside wall. Extracting a single sheet, he folded it into a triangular hat with an upturned brim. "Imagine this is made out of green felt instead of paper." He poked in the feather so it stuck out at a jaunty angle over the back. Then he put the hat on and turned his head side to side. "What do you think?"

She squealed with laughter. "It's crooked!"

Joe squatted down. "Fix it."

As Katie adjusted his hat, she said, "Mommy says the sun makes your hair yellow."

"Blond," he said automatically. "Yeah, it gets lighter every summer."

Satisfied with the hat's position, she stepped back. "I want my hair to get yellow too."

"Katydid, the sun can't make black hair turn blond."

"Oh." Her lip quivered.

"Your hair is so pretty. Why do you want to change it?"

Her eyes glittered with unshed tears. "I don't know."

"Well, I like you the way you are." He pulled off the paper hat and handed it to her. "Why don't you put this on?"

Katie shook her head. "It's a boy's hat. Robin Hood is a boy."

Joe started to argue but then decided it would be safer to change the subject. "Let's go look at your swing." He reached for her hand.

As they walked to the back yard, he gazed down at her. Although Marietta pooh-poohed him, Joe was certain that Katie was going to be a beauty. She had inherited Marietta's white skin and black hair, and his own grey-blue eyes, straight nose, and high cheekbones. Her features were too stark to be considered pretty now, but she'd grow into them—and when she did, she would be a knockout.

For now, she was young enough to care more about toys than her