

CHAPTER ONE

SEPTEMBER 1964

THE HANDS OF THE LARGE BLACK CLOCK TICKED menacingly slow as I doodled at my desk, trying to ignore the background drone of Sister Marie Josetta. There seemed to be no actual evidence of feet as she floated among the colorful reading chairs—though sometimes I was treated to a black-tipped toe shyly peeking out from underneath the hem of her gown. Secretly, I yearned to have the strict nun trip over the chairs just once, her habit skirts flying up to reveal the all-mysterious Nun Panties. But my Sinful Thoughts were thwarted as Sister Josetta skillfully wove her way around each small chair using only the Eyes In The Back Of Her Head.

There could be no doubt about it: The Order of the Sisters of St. Joseph were in command at St. Mary's Elementary School in Lansing, Michigan. Our school was part of a Gothic cathedral dating back more than one hundred years, its sanctuary filled with the smoky aroma of incense and the salty smells of the cracked leather pews. Heavy, red velvet drapes roped off the imposing altar, where glistening gold goblets reigned with silver candlesticks on tablecloths of the purest white linen. The scars of time had left interesting facial shapes on the rough-hewn rocks that huddled behind the altar with smug authority. One of them bore an uncanny resemblance to Father Fedewa, who seemed unaware of this chiseled twin hovering over his shoulder as if to correct the elderly priest's pronunciation of the Latin phrases. Of course, any error on Father Fedewa's part would have been easily overlooked, since the of *this* foreign language was a Mystery Unto Itself.

All too often, the congregation had to take cover from several bats that swooped down from the swirling mist of the belfry. This eerie performance could always be counted on to terrify the younger children, who were well versed in the tale of The First Grade Student Who Had a Bat Get Tangled in Her Hair. It was said that The Bat was still embedded in the once-beautiful platinum locks of this unfortunate child, where it would forever nest with its young.

Occasionally, threads of golden sunlight would stream through the cracks of the stained-glass windows, dancing across the pews like iridescent fairies. Their whispered promises of flight seemed the only relief to the cave-like existence within this fortress of gloom.

Connected to the cathedral by a musty corridor was its Gothic equivalent: St. Mary's Elementary. Here, the nuns could be found pacing through dark, narrow hallways, casting long shadows as they went about their early-morning prayer. Accompanied by the clicking of rosaries and the fresh smell of starch, the nuns quietly inspected our wrinkled uniforms with a sigh of deliverance from our imperfect souls.

The taunting hands of the Big Black Clock were continuing their merciless crawl as Sister Josetta, with a heroic effort to "let some air into this muggy room," successfully pried open the heavy wooden window. The heavenly vapor of freshly raked foliage and distant burning leaves lingered briefly, before whisking hurriedly from the stifling classroom—as if to torture my imprisoned spirit with its tantalizing aroma. I was beginning to suspect that the upcoming Reading Hour might be the only shred of stimulation to another dreary afternoon at St. Mary's Elementary.

My mother, a College Professor, had taught me to read before I reached Kindergarten. Nevertheless, in an unusual stretch of humility, I had been keeping my dormant talents Under Wraps—until yesterday. It was right after lunch, when all of the second graders were being sorted into biased little groups of Reading Levels that I had decided to reveal my true intelligence. Standing tall beside my desk, and after just the right pause, I had blown right through Dick and Jane—successfully stunning my entire audience. Later, it was determined that I had broken all the records by reading at a staggering speed of “Eighth Grade Level.” Since I had been struggling all year with my Basic Math problems, this little preview of my real brilliance had resulted in a satisfying new wrinkle on the already furrowed brow of Sister Joesetta. Clearly, the perplexed nun had pegged me as having a Learning Disability, and probably couldn’t wait to ban me to the Little Red Trailers that were tucked discreetly outside St. Mary’s school building. Even so, I was now enjoying my popular new Title as “Chairman” for the prestigious Snowflake Reading Group. My brother Joe, close enough in age to share the same grade, had not even been jealous that day, as he made way for me around the circle of miniature blue chairs.

I went on to study the bangs of Sister Joesetta which protruded from her veil in a perfect little sausage curl, and decided this time, my sister was Telling The Truth. “All nuns are really bald,” Jean had recently confided in a rare moment of generosity for her superior Third Grade Knowledge. Then, lowering her voice to a discreet hush, she had also exposed the “well known fact” that “Nun Bangs could be purchased separately at the Woolworth’s Five and Dime.” We had even gone on to discuss their odd apparel: It seemed to me that God’s imagination was much too colorful to have signed off on the

simple black-and-white garments that the nuns sported with an air of fashionable authority. Besides, I had later told my sister, the gowns were clearly a knock-off of the highly original Penguin family. These were called Habits, not gowns, Jean had corrected me, because the nuns were forced to wear the same one every day.

As I returned to drawing the whiskers of a smiling cat, the mysterious box on the wall—which contained our principal’s voice—suddenly came alive. “Annie Peters,” the P.A. system crackled, “please come to the Sister Superior’s office at once.”

There had not been a classroom disturbance of this kind since November 22nd of last year, when on my birthday Sister Superior had made the unexpected announcement that we would be all be given a day off from school. At the time, I thought this could only mean that America would be *joining* me in my birthday celebration.

But later that afternoon, instead of the usual gala in which I would finally get to play The Starring Role, everyone remained glued to the Hi Fi television that my mother had just won as a Door Prize. Apparently, somebody named President Kennedy had been assassinated by a mysterious man who was still making his Big Getaway. And even though Mr. Cronkite appeared every fifteen minutes with more Late Breaking News, there was not even one announcement to the people of America that Annie Peters had reached the age of six.

For days afterwards, I was plagued with the same black-and-white images of a casket draped with an American flag, which was it seemed, *never* going to make it into the ground. On top of that, someone who happened to be at the Scene Of The Crime, had caught the whole thing on a fuzzy Home Videotape, and we were all forced to watch the gruesome shooting over and over again – just so we would never forget. During this

tragedy, tiny rivers of blood stained the very fashionable suit of our elegant First Lady, who reminded me of the lovely *Snow White*, as she remained poised and serene through it all. The most disturbing outcome of the whole ordeal however, was that after almost a whole year, I was still having trouble shaking a secret crush that I had somehow acquired for little John-John. I might even have considered marrying the captivating young fellow – if he were closer to my age.

“Annie...*please* come back to Earth!” I shielded my eyes from the harsh glare of the fluorescent light and found myself looking straight into the flared nostrils of Sister Josetta. One wayward hair curled defiantly from her thin upper lip, while sparks of icy-blue flashed from crinkled eyes. Clearly, this little interruption had not been part of the day’s agenda.

Taking a quick mental inventory of any possible trouble I might have caused, I risked a quick sideward glance at my brother. But his half-hearted shrug made it clear that he couldn’t be bothered with *my* problems. This time, I was On My Own.

Finally, I decided that even a lecture would beat this increasingly dreary scene. Mustering all the dignity of a Prisoner Of War humbly accepting his fate, I secretly reveled in the curious eyes that remained glued to me as I clattered noisily out of the classroom. After all, it was my Classmate Duty to make the most of this unexpected interruption.

Sister Josetta’s shrill reminder, “And Young Ladies know how to march *quietly!*” was cut off just as an extra nudge of my saddle oxford shoe caused the heavy classroom door to slam shut.

After doing a quick cartwheel in the middle of the empty hallway and taking a peek in the restroom mirror just for fun, I arrived at Sister Superior's office to find my mother perched anxiously at the towering oak desk.

Because of her kindly voice and disposition, the Sister Superior was one of my favorite nuns at St. Mary's. Since our family was considered quite large, the nuns tended to greet each of us into the new school year with the predestined label of "One Of The Peters Children." Even though judging others was supposed to be a Venial Sin, it was clear that the behavior of the previous sibling could make or break your entire year. Sister Superior, however, seemed to regard each one of us as an individual instead of just another member of the clan.

Quickly clearing her desk, she made a place for me by pulling up an extra little chair. If it weren't for the troubled look in the nun's warm brown eyes, I would have thought we three ladies were simply getting together for a tea party.

My mother was wearing an elegant linen suit from her Glamour Days, which looked quite out of place in Sister Superior's barren office. One lone strand of brown hair spilled out from under the veil of an old ivory pillbox hat that Jean and I had often fought over during Dress Up Time. Her stiff posture reminded me for a moment of the lovely statue that hovered elegantly over the first floor landing. Saint Theresa wore a gown of delicate blue folds and an expression so pure, that I made it a daily habit to salute her with a quick Sign Of The Cross, just for gracing our school with her extraordinary beauty.

Just like Saint Theresa, my mother seemed aware of my presence, but did not reach out and give me the usual Bear Hug. Instead, long white gloves that were hiding her pretty, tapered fingertips tapped nervously on the scarred desk.

Sister Superior and I both listened very carefully as my mother tearfully related the reason for her Surprise Visit: There was to be a Kidnapping involving me and my other four siblings, and it was to take place that very afternoon on the playground of St. Mary's Elementary. The Kidnapper, it seemed, had a special interest in taking me; a flattering thought that seemed far more appealing than spending the next hour with *Dick and Jane*. I immediately tried to imagine what the captor looked like, but could only visualize my loving daddy whisking us away to a deserted island, just like Robinson Crusoe...

While I was mentally constructing the makeshift fort—complete with American flag—that my family would tirelessly build under a crystal-blue sky, my concentration was shattered by Sister Superior firmly calling me to attention. With quiet assurance, she explained to both of us that there had never been, and probably never would be, a Kidnapping at St. Mary's Elementary School.

My mother, remembering her usual impeccable manners, grew silent for a moment as she considered the principal's suggestion. I caught my breath with a glimmer of hope that in a last minute Miracle, she was going to come to her senses after all. But after flashing a gracious smile, my mother continued with even more vivid details of the upcoming abduction.

Sister Superior was just settling into the worn creases of her burgundy leather chair with an air of feigned interest in this lively story, when I suddenly recalled the Box with the Plain Brown Wrapper....

Mr. Mailman had rung the doorbell with packages for both my mother and me that day. I was the proud new owner of an Ant Farm that my father had ordered from the back of my favorite comic book. Just like the advertisement had warned, it had taken exactly six long weeks for my package to appear. This fact could be proven by the pencil marks that were carefully concealed under the lid of my school desk. I had also spent every afternoon, through both snow and shine, perched on our front-yard picket fence to find out if my Very Important Package had arrived. I knew this Act Of Grace would surely speed things along.

And then, just when I was beginning to wonder if I was *ever* going to have the opportunity to “Amaze All My Friends,” as the advertisement promised, the Ant Farm finally arrived. Mr. Mailman seemed relieved as he gently laid the package in my arms, pointing out that it was specifically addressed to Ms. Annie Peters. This meant, Mr. Mailman patiently explained, that no one else in my family—including my brother, Joe—was allowed to open it. That was The Law.

My mother was not having as much fun with her new toy. After rushing The Mailman out the front door with a look of alarm, she had thrown the box out into the backyard and fled into the kitchen. Later, she took me aside and calmly explained that *her* Very Important Package contained a dangerous bomb. Worse, the package had been sent by a Very Bad Person who wanted to hurt our family.

When my father came home from work that day, much earlier than usual, he reminded my mother that the package only contained Christmas cookie cutters that she had recently ordered by mail. Though he laughed this off in his usual lighthearted way, we all had

begun to notice the worry that seemed to deepen the lines in his forehead with each new Episode.

For a while now, my mother's bedtime had been scheduled even earlier than my own. We children had been warned not to disturb her, since She Was Not Feeling Well. Even more irritating were the private Slumber Parties that were being held in her honor on the Fifth Floor of St. Lawrence Hospital. I was beginning to suspect, with a twinge of envy, that her new early bedtime was probably due to a lack of sleep from all the fun.

In an effort to learn more about my increasingly mysterious household, I had begun taking late-night escapades downstairs with a perfect alibi—the mandatory glass of milk—should I be questioned by those who held a higher rank. This was also the ideal opportunity to slide down the long ivory banister in blissful solitude, free from the taunts of more adventurous siblings who were always too willing to push me from behind.

At the end of my late night flight, I could always count on finding my father resting in his favorite fake-leather Lazy Boy, gazing thoughtfully out the window. If I timed my slide perfectly, I could make it from the end of the banister into his lap in one fell swoop, turning his worried expression into a tender smile as he made way for me to snuggle in closer.

With my fingertips, I loved to trace the faded picture of the mystical rose that was tautly displayed on the muscle of my father's strong left arm. According to my brother, the flower had suddenly appeared while my father was in the Navy, and in love with a woman who bore the same name. Even now, a majestic ribbon floated under the rose, which had once flaunted the name of the perpetual young nymph who would forever be attached to my father's past. Upon marrying my mother, it seemed there had been a

feeble attempt to remove the time-weary rose, but the faded letters could still be observed in the light of a clear dawn perhaps as a subtle memory of a more liberating love...

Taking the opportunity for a little one-on-one chat, I would try to gather information from my father by twisting the corners of his mouth back up into the opposite position of a smile. “Daddy,” I would tease, “when are you going to turn that frown upside down?”

Hoisting me up on his shoulder, my father would respond by running back up the staircase and tossing me into bed like a sack of potatoes. This little game could always be counted to make me laugh out loud, while my father smothered his own amusement for the sake of sleeping children.

The sounds of his fading footsteps, mingled with the soothing tones of Johnny Carson, provided a certain sense of comfort; but they didn't quite make up for the special Goodnight Kisses that I had come to cherish from my mother—kisses that were getting harder and harder to come by.

Now, as my mother struggled to reorient herself in the Principal's Office, I presented my sweetest smile to welcome her back. Instead, her startled eyes darted over my shoulder, as if wistfully bidding farewell to The Demon that was furiously trying to make its escape. Feeling my first pangs of jealousy, I turned to confront The One who held my mother in his thrall—and was disappointed to find a space as empty as my mother's melancholy stare.

After one last feeble attempt to warn Sister Superior of the mysterious villain who was making his way to the playground at that very moment, my mother finally gave up.

Hating to see her look so defeated, I gave my mother an extra hug. “Don’t worry,” I consoled her. “No one would ever be so lucky as to be kidnapped on a Monday.”

My mother’s eyes, which usually held all the quiet colors of a sea-green ocean, appeared to flicker around the room with unusual sparkles of light. And upon closer range, I could see that her makeup had been hurriedly applied (unlike the perfectly drawn lips and cheeks of Saint Theresa, which happened to be the exact shade of my favorite Carnation Pink crayon). No, I had been mistaken. There was no resemblance between my mother’s frantic expression and the calm, clear gaze of Saint Theresa at all.

A few minutes later, I was heading toward the Snowflake reading chairs with a sinking feeling in my heart that went beyond the despair of facing a long afternoon. I was slowly losing my mother to the Other World, a place that my family could never be a part of. The whisperings of these People In The Other World were gradually winning the race to invade her mind. They were surely coming to get her, and it would be up to my mother to find her own way home.