

ROGUE WAVE

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As always, this one's for you, Kendall. "These three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love."

To Edna J Andrew: mother-in-law extraordinaire, the gifted artist whose work graced *Uncharted Territory's* cover, and a tireless admirer whose encouragement is like a beacon on the shore.

To Hilda and Ted Deines who know and demonstrate that the secret to living each day to the fullest is to expand the definition of *family*.

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CHAPTER 1



One wheel whined stridently as Noah Whipple pulled a faded-red Flyer along the uneven walkway. Any other day, the sound would have prompted a reminder to oil the bearings, but other concerns occupied Noah's thoughts. From opposite ends of the children's wagon, Dana and Cory solemnly blinked at each other across the bundle lodged between their legs.

Following a pace behind, Ella also seemed oblivious to the grating noise. She kept a firm grip on her two daughters' hands. Winnie and Alyce's feet brushed a double-time beat to their parents' footfalls. No dawdling today to collect the barky eucalyptus wraiths that littered the street like ladies' dun-hued scarves.

Turning off Osos Street, Noah's eyes automatically sought the familiar visage of his childhood home looming a block away. As a youngster, he had often fantasized the house as a kindly face with its terra cotta tile roof perched like a watchman's cap above two window-eyes with radiating brick brows. He'd imagined the trellised porch groaning beneath his mother's roses as a smile with white-painted French doors gleaming like incisors.

Today, the sight of his two sisters sitting on the porch swing banished all whimsical thoughts. The wagon wheel rasped when Noah jerked to a stop and spun to face his wife. His throat constricted, allowing only a crisp "Look," as he nodded toward the house.

She squinted in the mid-day sun. "*What* are they doing on the veranda at this hour, and in this heat?"

"I imagine they hope to prevent visitors from ringing the bell while Papa and Mama rest." He inhaled sharply in a long, faint whistle; his lips stayed puckered even after the sound ceased. He extended the wagon's handle to his

wife and pleaded, "Take the children back home. Please? Let me talk to Fayleen and R'Lou alone."

"No. I know what will happen if it's just the three of you. They'll refuse," Ella continued, as if asked, "because you won't have presented our case with any conviction, and then you'll cave at their least opposition. No, I need to be here. Just leave the wagon beneath the bushes and go about our business as we planned."

Noah could not sift through the past few days' emotional rubble to find a suitable rebuttal. Ella had first broached the volatile subject yesterday morning, shocking Noah with her demands and unnerving him with her persistence. Their voices had alternately whispered and hissed, stuttered and insisted as they debated and defended, pleaded and protested long into the night. Ella emerged the victor. And now, for the first time in Noah's recollection, the shaded porch seemed to frown, not smile at his approach.

Inside the gate, he lifted the year-old cousins out of the wagon and backed it beneath the bushes, acquiescing to Ella's instructions in yet another detail of this unsettling affair. Ella carried Dana, Noah held Cory. Together, they herded Winnie and Alyce toward the two silent women watching from the porch. As Noah mounted the steps, the day-old newspaper clipping in his pants' pocket crackled. He knew the column's content by heart, having provided the grim facts for the account:

SAN LUIS OBISPO, CALIFORNIA: FRIDAY, JULY 2, 1943

Yesterday, a northbound Southern Pacific freight train crossing Marsh Street at 7:15 am struck the automobile driven by Joshua Whipple, age 34, killing him instantly. His wife, Gertrude "Trudy" Whipple, age 28, died enroute to the hospital without regaining consciousness. Joshua was home on a short leave from the service before shipping out.

It is unknown if the Whipple vehicle stalled on the tracks, as suggested by the engineer who has worked for the railroad without incident for over twenty years, or if Joshua failed to hear the train's whistle. The investigation continues and witnesses are urged to come forward.

Joshua and Trudy are survived by their year-old son, Cory, who was not in the vehicle at the time of the accident. Also surviving are Trudy's father, Harvey Briggs of San Francisco; Joshua's parents, John and Letitia "Letty" Whipple; and Joshua's siblings: brother Noah (wife, Ella, and three daughters: Winifred, Alyce, and Dana), and sisters Fayleen and R'Lou, all of San Luis Obispo. Trudy was preceded in death by her mother, Florence Briggs, in 1941.

Before his induction into the service, Joshua was co-owner with his older brother of the respected third-generation local family business, Whip-

ple Mercantile on Monterey Street. Trudy, a former employee at the store, was a homemaker. Both were members of First Presbyterian Church where they were married in June 1940.

Services will be held at eleven o'clock on Monday, July 5, at First Presbyterian Church of San Luis Obispo on the corner of Morrow and Marsh Streets. Following burial in the family plot at San Luis Cemetery on Higuera Street, the Ladies' Guild will serve a light lunch in the church hall.

Also surviving...brother Noah. The more accurate wording was *barely surviving*. Knowing Joshua was gone clawed at Noah's insides like a caged beast. It had been hard enough to see Joshua go off to war—a war Noah's polio prevented him from entering—knowing that he could lose his brother on a far-off battlefield. But the angst of Joshua dying at the same railroad crossing the brothers had seen every day of their lives was almost too much to bear. At least there was honor in a patriotic death. These deaths lacked purpose and left the heart with unanswered questions.

Added to their grief, he and Ella had come to blows over an issue seeming to have no point of conciliation. Feeling like one of his sisters' students called up for reprimand, Noah shifted uneasily beneath their inscrutable assessment. Noah was more nervous in his sisters' presence than he cared to admit, fully aware of their prescient abilities to assess a situation. The current state of affairs was ripe with turmoil.

R'Lou broke the uneasy silence with the most obvious fact: "Mama and Papa are napping, you know."

"Y-y-yes," Noah stammered, and then repeated in a steadier voice. "Yes, we know, but Ella and I wish to speak to you alone."

The women's arched eyebrows queried, *If so, why are the children here?* as they turned to contemplate their nieces and nephew: Winnie with her tousled Whipple-brown hair; Alyce with her mother's lighter coloring and string-straight wispy blond strands; Dana whose baldness gave little clue to her future hair color, let alone her sex; and Cory whose sweaty brown locks hinted at his mother's auburn hues. The silence was broken by Cory's raucous wail. He stiffened and fought against the confines of Noah's arms as if protesting his aunts' stares.

"Such screeching!" R'Lou drew back as if stung.

"It's bone-chilling! What is wrong with him?" Fayleen demanded.

"His world, like ours, is turned upside-down." Noah made clucking noises and swayed in place, but failed to calm the child. "Hopefully, he'll quiet down soon. We have something urgent to discuss."

“I will wake the folks,” Fayleen said, beginning to rise, “if Cory has not already done so,” she added with an encompassing glower.

“No!” The word flew past Noah’s lips like a stone leaving a slingshot. “This concerns the four of us. It won’t take long.” His words reverberated as Cory beat his head against his uncle’s chest. Noah pivoted the boy to face his shoulder. When he spoke again, the nervous tenor of his voice ensured his sisters’ attention. “I will get right to the point.” He moistened his lips and waited while Ella seated herself in the wicker chair to Fayleen’s right.

Winnie and Alyce hovered near their mother as Ella placed Dana at her feet. She nodded toward the other chair near R’Lou. “Have a seat, Noah, or we’ll get kinks in our necks looking up at you.”

“And your point would be?” Fayleen prompted Noah sharply.

“It’s about Cory.” The boy’s demeanor was at distinct odds with the lazy afternoon’s random sounds that echoed off the golden hills and floated through the narrow valley like disjointed melodies. Instead, the porch occupants heard only the intensifying volume of Cory’s lungs at work.

Distraught over her argument with Noah and bone-weary from caring for the disconsolate boy in addition to three little girls, Ella viewed Cory with more detachment than the others. *Stand firm, Noah*, her eyes bugled to her husband. But, sensing his potential to waver, Ella sprang up, crossed the porch and snatched Cory from Noah’s lap. Her actions reflected less nurturing of her nephew than determination nothing would divert Noah from his mission. Returning to her chair, she situated Cory on the floor near Dana and met Noah’s eyes in an unwavering gaze. *Go ahead*, her curt nod communicated.

Noah’s right cheek twitched; he pulled at his shirt cuffs and shifted uneasily. Stretching his legs out, he stared at the dusty tips of his shoes and then pulled his legs back abruptly, placing his feet firmly on the floor. On this weekend of national celebration, his shoes—the elevated sole, the heavy brace—were taunting reminders of his country rejecting him. He needed to stay focused on the present situation.

Though the eldest child of his family, he found his sisters intimidating. Whenever they leveled their teachers’ stares at him, he forgot he held a place of authority in the family business and was as respected in his own rights in the community as were they. Noah wished he had two sisters who would unquestioningly do his bidding.

He darted a glance at his wife. She busied herself with the children, retying a hair bow and rubbing a smudged cheek, effectively shutting out Noah with each inconsequential task. It was an uncomfortable portent of life at home if

he failed in his assigned duties. *I do love you, Ella, but you make life more difficult than one expects of a helpmate.*

With trepidation rising like bile in his throat, Noah focused again on his sisters. Fayleen resembled a fence post set perfectly vertical in cement. Six years of teaching High School English and Literature had only strengthened her innate ability to subdue the recalcitrant into submission. Today, one needed only the briefest glance at her face to know how deeply she grieved, but Noah knew she sensed the strain between husband and wife, alert to each nuance and degree of dissention. Like a weathervane, the set of her jaw showed which way the wind blew beneath her French-plaited thick brown hair.

It saddened Noah to realize his wife's words and actions served only to substantiate his sisters' belief that he had married wrong. He regretted how Ella had failed to engage the twins as kindred spirits in the years of their marriage. Seeing Fayleen's piercing gaze, Noah knew she suspected Ella's pivotal role in the intent and timing of this visit.

It was no accident Noah's entourage arrived just after one o'clock. John and Letty Whipple napped every day between one and two o'clock; two days after their son's shocking death was no exception. Ever since Pete Harlow's police car had parked by the gate and his knock had brought mourning to the Whipple household, word had spread like morning fog across the valley. A steady stream of friends, neighbors, and employees and customers from the family business bore casseroles and condolences, pies and sympathy. But even these somber visits halted during the hour following lunch. Naptime was a well-known and revered hour in the Whipple house. Yes, their parents' predictable schedule dictated the visit's precise timing.

Noah leaned his head against the painted chair's high back and wished he were anywhere but here. *Wishing*—wishing so many things. *Wishing* Joshua had stayed home on Thursday. *Wishing* the train had arrived early or late at the crossing. *Wishing* Ella would listen to reason. *Wishing* could eat at a person; parts of him had already been chewed like rust on iron.

Movement drew his attention to R'Lou. She crossed and uncrossed her ankles, fidgeted with her shirt and fussed with her collar. She, too, sensed things were amiss, Noah realized. While older students either feared or respected Fayleen, fourth graders dearly loved R'Lou. She sneaked learning into a day like yeast invades a lump of dough. Children basked in her attention, each feeling secretly they were her favorite as she beamed and hugged and praised and prodded them into rising higher than anyone ever dreamed possible.

Noah banked on R’Lou coming around to a more charitable opinion of Ella’s latest foibles if he could intervene before Fayleen influenced her thinking. But today R’Lou was completely attuned to her twin. She twisted a tendril of curly brown hair around her index finger. This action loosened a hairpin which slithered past her shoulder and bounced off the swing’s wooden slats to the painted boards below. Absentmindedly, she bent to retrieve it and shifted closer to Fayleen as she rose up again.

Disheartened by all the subtle gesture implied, Noah cleared his throat; the sound startled everyone from their reveries. “Ella and I had agreed to keep Cory during Joshua and Trudy’s trip, but now...” he blinked back tears blurring his vision and continued in a strained voice, “their deaths change things considerably. Ella and I hope...” He gulped like a swimmer facing a cresting wave before blurting out, “I mean, we think you should take him.”

Fayleen squinted at Ella. *Oh, forevermore! This is so like you, to shrug off the simplest responsibility in the midst of a crisis!*

R’Lou’s lips formed a long thin O, and then collapsed into a tight line which slowly parted as if preparing to speak. But her fingertips halted any escaping words as she blinked and then lowered her hand, trailing it along her chin, her neck, to her locket. The locket held photographs of the four Whipple siblings forever frozen in time at ages two, eight, and eleven on the left side and, on the right side, twenty-one-year-old Fayleen on the twins’ college graduation night.

No one noticed when Dana pulled off her left shoe and sock and gleefully tossed them off the porch. So, she flung the other shoe beneath her mother’s chair and waved the corresponding sock, wiggling her bare toes. Cory grabbed his cousin’s second sock and stuck it in his mouth. Dana’s lower lip curled into a pout as she awaited parental intervention that never came.

R’Lou hedged, “We *have* hired extra help for Birdie for the week, what with everyone coming for the funeral, but it is expecting a lot to add Cory into all the confusion,” she noted Fayleen’s glower and added in a rush, “I mean, this is an especially hard time for Papa and Mama, and I don’t think—”

“Quit pussy-footing, R’Lou! It is a flat-out imposition,” Fayleen said bluntly. “This is hardly the time for us to be scouring the attic for baby furniture! And just who do you expect to care for him during the night, and monitor him throughout the day?”

Ever the peacekeeper, R’Lou attempted to soften Fayleen’s abruptness. “Perhaps one of Birdie’s helpers could sleep here if needed for a few days,” she caught Fayleen’s formidable stare and amended quickly, “...though if Cory

kept everyone awake, it would hardly be hospitable to our guests. It is simply not something we can do,” she ended apologetically.

Fayleen said brusquely, “One of Birdie’s helpers will stay with all the children at your house during the funeral. With everyone gathering here later, it is best not to have children underfoot.” She leaned back in the swing, as stiff and unbending as her decree, convinced her alternative closed the case.

Ella alternated between tight-lipped fury and slack-jawed disbelief as she listened to her sisters-in-law calmly undermine her careful plans. Twice she sputtered “...b-b-but...” in the midst of the twins’ discourse, though she never got beyond that one repeated syllable of protest.

Noah felt alternately hot and cold, dizzy and nauseous. “We, uh, I, uh,” he shot a pleading look at Ella, but met only her flinty stare, “...we didn’t mean for you to have Cory here for just a few days. What we’re—oh, how do I say this?” His chest rose and fell like a runner gasping for air. “We’re asking you to raise him.”

R’Lou clamped her lips against a squeak. Fayleen gripped the swing’s arm and turned toward Ella with an ominous squint.

Noah continued in a rush, “Joshua had not updated his will since Cory was born, so we can only assume what his and Trudy’s intentions would be. With Trudy being an only child and Harvey Briggs in poor health and still grieving his wife’s death, it falls to the Whipple side to take Cory, which essentially is the two of you.”

“Are you *daft*?” Fayleen spat out. She shook her head in disbelief, which became denial, and finally shifted to utter disgust.

R’Lou was more scandalized than incredulous. “We’re *single ladies*—hardly the logical choice to raise a boy! Why, strangers could assume one of us had engaged in illicit...I mean, as time goes by, people who do not know the full story of Joshua and Trudy could view Cory as an illegitimate...mercy! Think of what you’re asking!”

Ella said piously, “It is a matter of family doing what needs to be done for family.”

“Exactly,” R’Lou blurted out. “Surely you must see *you’re* the part of our family best suited to this...this...” Words failed her and she looked to Fayleen for help.

“To thrust Cory upon us in the midst of everything else is like teaching someone to swim by pitching him overboard!” Fayleen said.

“You seem to forget the agreement we all made long ago,” R’Lou said. “In exchange for our living here,” her sweeping gesture included the sun-dappled

lawn and impressive domicile behind them, “we care for our parents throughout their lifetime. It is not as if we shirk our family duties.”

“It seems suspect,” Fayleen added shrewdly, “that you chose to come at this time of day. Do you honestly think this discussion can sidestep Mama and Papa?” She noted Noah’s rising color and continued before Ella could spout a retort, “Cory needs to grow up with children, not grandparents who are more inclined to nap than play and aunts who have busy lives. He needs a man to guide him, Noah, and that is you. Papa is far too old and feeble. Besides, you have experience.”

“Experience isn’t the half of it. You have much more room than we do,” Ella countered petulantly.

“Ah, is *that* what this is about? Years ago, Ella, you and Noah were offered first chance to live here. R’Lou and I were prepared to secure housing elsewhere, but you wanted no part of with living with Mama and Papa.” Fayleen’s tone stifled students’ antics, but it only irritated her sister-in-law.

Ella brushed over Fayleen’s comments, persisting with her own protests, “Cory should have his own bedroom, which requires our girls to share a room. It is *hardly* as if you have no experience with children,” she sniffed, “for heaven’s sake, children are your life-work!”

“A weak argument,” Fayleen scoffed. She set the swing in motion with the thrust of one foot against the floor boards and R’Lou promptly assisted from her end. The soles of their shoes whispered against the floorboards. “We are *teachers*, not parents—*teachers* who devote extended time each summer to furthering our education. As usual, you fail to recognize how much time and effort our school-year responsibilities and summer courses require.”

“We don’t mind hosting family gatherings for holidays and such, but what you are asking of us is a daily undertaking and *that* in addition to our jobs and caring for our parents!” R’Lou said.

Ella snapped, “Granted, the folks have physical ailments, but given their ages, they are quite self-sufficient and likely will remain so for several years. It is *not* as if they require much assistance.” Her eyebrows formed half-moons rising above a disdainful sneer.

“You don’t know the state of Papa and Mama’s health.” Fayleen’s voice rose. “You see them under the best conditions and for short visits. They are not as healthy as they appear.”

Ella retorted, “Doctor Steele surely would have told Noah if they had deteriorated as you claim.”

Noah groaned inwardly and unconsciously clenched and unclenched his fists. Words flew like arrows from the women's bow-like lips—defensive words, stinging words, angry words, bitter words—until he wanted to grab the children and run to safety. *The children!* Winnie and Alyce, amazingly enough, seemed more interested in a trail of ants trudging along the porch rail than in the adults' dispute. Cory and Dana were entertained by Cory's shoestrings at the moment. *If only the women sought such peaceful, simple pleasures,* he thought.

On her home front, Ella was impenetrable, unshakable in the verbal battles between husband and wife. But here on the porch, she sparred with two forces Noah knew were far beyond her skills—a fact she refused to acknowledge despite losing lesser battles among the three sisters-in-law. Noah knew she would rather limp off the porch than admit defeat. He hesitated to leap into the fray, knowing anything he said would either irritate or alienate one of the combatants and so he bit his tongue and prayed *Please God!* unsure which side he hoped divine intervention would deem the winner.

When Noah refocused on the *mêlée*, Fayleen was saying, "Our days are already full. We leave home early each morning and work until late at night, what with grading papers, assisting with school activities, planning lessons, to say nothing of running the house and devoting time to our parents. As for our *experience*, we deal with *school-age* children!"

"Fayleen doesn't pack her students' lunches or wipe their noses," R'Lou said, "and my fourth graders don't need diapers changed or bottles heated in the middle of the night. How would we function during the day with such disruptions of our sleep?"

"We don't tuck our students into bed at night," Fayleen continued, "or remind them to brush their teeth, or nurse them through mumps, or buy their bicycles and winter coats—oh, is that it? Is it the *cost* of providing for another child that worries you? Rest assured, when Joshua's financial affairs are settled, we will not dispute money coming to you for Cory's care. But to expect *us* to raise him is irrational and totally inappropriate!" She brushed one hand across her hair, lingering to massage her temple where a headache threatened to erupt.

"We *could* take responsibility for all the children for a day or perhaps an overnight when they are old enough to be separated from you," R'Lou proposed impulsively. "Perhaps Winnie could spend an occasional afternoon with us to give you a break. We could have a tea party and let her play dress-up with

clothes from the playroom trunk.” She smiled at the three-year-old who showed none of the enthusiasm R’Lou thought the offer would generate.

“Stuffing Winnie with lemonade and cookies and then delivering her home all sugared up is hardly the solution to this situation! Even at her young age, Winnie is the closest thing to a helper I have most days, and you would take her away?” Ella demanded shrilly.

“Let’s not get distracted,” Noah pleaded. His resolve floundered like a lifeboat taking on water, but having found his oar, he rowed tenaciously against the surging current. “It is not the money; it is the burden; you need to share the *burden*. It is not financial hardship, but *responsibility*. We are responsible for our own children. You can’t deny we *all* help with the folks during your summer school sessions. We’ll continue to do so because we know your desires to work toward advanced degrees—”

Ella interrupted, “...though heaven knows what you hope to gain. No one in town will ever hope to match you...” Distinctly heard was her unspoken barb...*or want to marry you*. “We don’t mind helping with the folks occasionally, but it is inconsiderate of you to expect it of us each year when our children are so young,” she ended in a whiny tone.

Noah silenced her with a meaningful cough. “You could give Cory a quality of life we are unable to provide. We are stretched too thin to give him what he deserves.” He caught Ella’s pointed stare at him. *Time is running out*, she signaled. “What do you say—will you do it?” he ended abruptly.

Stillness hovered as if the town awaited the twins’ response to Noah’s life-changing question.

Ella surreptitiously glanced at Noah, somewhat encouraged by his jutting jaw. She feared it did not bode well for their marriage if R’Lou and Fayleen refused to agree to these plans. *They live in the lap of luxury in this big house. Ten bedrooms! What I wouldn’t give to have half that many. Living with Mama and Papa has its drawbacks, but they have hired help, Monday through Friday! What do I have? Three bedrooms and only ancient Bettina to help one morning a week.*

While emotions churned behind Ella’s impassive face, the twins floundered in their own inner tides. How they answered Noah’s challenge determined Cory’s destiny and the family’s future. Though they were hardly bosom-buddies with their sister-in-law, she *was* their brother’s wife, their parents’ daughter-in-law, and their nieces’ mother. The air crackled with uncertainty, tension, and grief.

Uncertainty, because Noah really did not know what R’Lou and Fayleen would say. He hoped for *yes*, but feared *no*. He did not relish life at home if his sisters flat-out refused to take Cory. They had valid points for saying no; he only hoped his reasons for asking seemed as compelling.

Tension, because either answer the twins gave affected so many people, especially Cory. Either *yes* or *no* had the potential to destroy trust or alienate loved ones with perceived injustices.

Grief, because this whole situation was necessitated solely by the recent and untimely death of the fourth sibling and his wife. Without that shattering event, this midsummer conversation would never have happened.

At that moment, Dana swung her sock and hit Cory in the face. Squeezing his eyes tight, he let loose a full-throated squall. Dana reared back in admiration of such a show. Ella stomped her foot and hissed, “Cory, hush!” Gulping, he looked up at her and stopped briefly, only to resume even louder.

Arrested by the commotion, the sisters’ attention shifted from their grim-faced elder brother and his determined wife to rest on Cory. Clad in the perfectly acceptable baby attire of a diaper and blousy cotton shirt, his erupting wails disallowed reasonable thought.

Typical of her more pensive temperament, R’Lou retreated mentally to envision a set of scales: on the ominously heavier side lurked *The Question*; on the lighter side, now swinging wildly out of control, lodged *The Remainder of Our Lives*. She sensed much more than Noah and Ella or their parents—or even her twin suspected she knew—about the ramifications of a *yes* answer. That knowledge lodged like a boulder flung up on the shore of her heart: unmovable and impossible to ignore.

“Well?” Noah asked above Cory’s cries. “We need your answer before Mama and Papa awaken because it is really *your* decision, not theirs. You are the ones who must assume responsibility. They will go along with whatever you say. The funeral is Monday and people will ask what’s to become of Cory; you can count on that. We have no room at our house...” His voice trailed off as he looked at Ella and lifted his eyebrows imperceptibly.

Ella shrugged in response to her husband’s unvoiced query, and then said cryptically, “I’m in the family way. Due in December.”

“So you see,” Noah was nearly pleading now, “we cannot take Cory. Winnie is three, and Alyce is two, and with Cory and Dana both one-year-olds, and another one expected, life would be frightfully difficult for Ella. You are the logical ones to raise our nephew. Lord knows, this big ol’ house can certainly accommodate him.”

“Joshua and Trudy wouldn’t have wanted Cory raised by strangers,” Ella said. Cory’s voice shot up an octave as he continued his angry solo.

Fayleen erupted from the swing. “The racket he produces is truly astounding!” She bent and picked up the little boy, holding him away to avoid his flailing arms and kicking legs.

Dropping back in the swing, Fayleen planted Cory firmly on her lap and—accompanied by a frantic “Shush!”—offered him her locket, the companion to R’Lou’s. He promptly put it in his mouth and stared at her through tear-laden eyelashes, hiccupping himself into some semblance of quiet while she regretted surrendering her necklace to a saliva bath.

R’Lou pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and handed it to her sister. While Fayleen wiped Cory’s face, R’Lou caressed his tousled curls. This dual act mirrored the twins’ lives—they were two halves of an apple, two sides of a coin.

“See?” Ella said, infusing one word with as much warmth as she could muster. “He likes you.”

“So do elephants, as long as we feed them peanuts, but we have no plans to invite an elephant to share our home,” Fayleen muttered.

“We know as much about raising a child as we do raising an elephant,” R’Lou said with a nervous smile that quickly faded. “You say Cory is our responsibility. Tell me: who will care for Cory during the school year? Birdie made her feelings on children perfectly clear, long ago. If Cory fusses like this every day, it will upset Mama and Papa. What if they fall while carrying him, or trip over his toys? What if they can’t keep up with him and he injures himself? What if worries over him bring on new ailments for them? We know your house is full, but we are not the better choice to raise Cory, even if he is our nephew.”

“You could get more help,” Noah suggested. “Floyd Benson’s daughter is ready to hire out.”

“I thought the point was for family to care for Cory. If Sophie Benson is in charge of him from morning to night, that’s hardly family,” Fayleen challenged, though her arguments were losing some of their starch. She could face a roomful of bored or disruptive students for hours on-end and persevere, but Joshua’s traumatic death and the anxiety now roosting on the porch like a flock of vultures nearly pushed her beyond her limits. “Mama and Papa simply are not up to living with a small child underfoot, and I doubt they’ll put up with the ruckus. As much as they love their grandchildren, children’s visits tire them terribly.”

“Surely they will enjoy having a grandson close at hand to spoil. In fact, it could help soften their grief over losing Joshua.” Noah envisioned his efforts plummeting like ducks shot out of the sky by hunters.

As usual, Ella took offense where none was intended. “Perhaps in the future we should take our children out to the backyard so as not to annoy you or the folks.”

“Oh, Ella! Must you always...oh, never mind. It would have been nice to be included in the discussion you obviously had prior to showing up here this afternoon. We deserve more than this hypocritical opportunity to agree to what you have already decided.” Ella squirmed beneath Fayleen’s accurate judgment.

“As for *our* future,” R’Lou added, “we are single *now*,”—only she heard Fayleen inhale sharply—“but for us to have Cory in our care essentially discourages men from taking serious interest in either of us. Not every man enjoys children. We should not be saddled with a child when it could dissuade potential suitors.”

Cory’s sporadic whimpers and gulps hovered. Noah asked with a modicum of kindness couching his blunt questions, “This is a moot issue, is it not? At this point, it seems highly unlikely either of you will marry, don’t you think?”

“We are twenty-eight years old,” Fayleen said, “but stranger things have happened. Remember Dottie Floughden? She turned thirty-four the week she married Emil.”

Ella ignored her. “A man of high caliber would appreciate the selflessness your raising Cory exemplifies.”

A pungent odor drifted across the porch, carried by a breeze. A suspicious warm spot on her lap alerted Fayleen to the unnerving realization she held the source of the problem. She sputtered, “*Oh*, this is unacceptable behavior!” She circled Cory’s plump waist and hefted him unceremoniously into the air. His red cheeks puffed out; he kicked his feet and cooed, happy at last. A steady brown rivulet escaped his diaper, accompanied by a wayward golden nugget bumping across the multiple creases in his chubby legs to land with an inaudible plop on Fayleen’s gray dotted-Swiss lap.

A bleat crossed Fayleen’s lips. She thrust Cory away, dangling him above the porch floor. He continued to grunt and flail his arms while the odor increased in direct proportion to Fayleen’s dismay. “Someone help! Apparently, his business is not completed,” she said crossly.

“Cousin Cory pooped on Aunt Fayleen’s dress!” Winnie’s awed voice filled the silence.

“Winnie! Polite people don’t use such words in public,” Ella corrected automatically. She stepped around Dana and reached for Cory. “For goodness’ sake, it’s just a little accident, Fayleen, and perfectly natural at his age! Go change clothes if you’re so bothered by a mishap. Noah, take Cory around to clean him by the backyard pump.” Uncle and nephew disappeared without protest while Fayleen hobbled off, holding her skirt like a bowl.

After a quick stop in the bathroom, Fayleen hurried to her bedroom. Allowing herself the weak comfort of a whimper, she undid the row of tiny buttons she had so painstakingly sewn in place just days ago. “It’s enough to make me cry! The first time I wear it, and now this...this mess!” She lowered the dress along her slender frame and stepped out of it. “I had *so* wanted it for the first day of school, and now every time I wear it, all I’ll think about is *messes!*”

R’Lou spoke from the doorway, “It can still be your first-day dress, Fayleen. Birdie is a whiz with stains. But don’t get yourself all distraught—we have bigger issues at stake.”

“Why aren’t you outside with Ella and those little girls who would *never* defecate on me?” Fayleen huffed. “With Noah busy at the pump, you’re wasting our perfect chance to set Ella straight about what she can and cannot expect of us. We are *not* placed on this earth to do her bidding, and we both know this whole idea originated with her. It’s enough to make me spit!”

R’Lou deflected Fayleen’s frustration with a mild answer. “Winnie and Alyce are enjoying the swing and Ella is nursing Dana.”

“See? Yet another reason Ella is the perfect choice to raise Cory—she could nurse him. Trudy said he has never taken the bottle willingly.” She slammed a drawer shut and flung open the closet door a bit more forcefully than required. “Oh, R’Lou, whatever will we do?” she wailed. “No matter how convincing our arguments, Noah and Ella’s points are well-taken—their hands are full, their house is small. It falls to us to raise Cory, but we are doing him no favors.”

“I seriously doubt Papa and Mama will agree to Noah and Ella’s idea,” R’Lou said absentmindedly as she picked up her sister’s soiled dress and rolled it into a ball to take to the laundry tub. “If anything, they may suggest Noah move here, we take either Joshua or Noah’s houses, and sell the other one. But Ella’s not likely to cater to that idea. No, the lucky winner has been drawn, and the ticket says our names.”

Clad in a navy-blue skirt and white blouse with navy piping, Fayleen linked arms with R’Lou and they returned to the veranda where Noah and Ella and their genteel family of lovely stair-step daughters and a cleaned, quieted nephew awaited them.

Like steel to a magnet, Fayleen's eye leaped to Cory. "How is it Cory has dry clothes?" she demanded, halting beside Noah's chair.

"We, uh, brought Cory's things," Noah admitted; shame shadowed his words. "The bundle Trudy packed for his stay at our house is in the wagon." He nodded toward the bush by the gate.

Fayleen's anger shot past her lips like a seasoned cowboy on a bucking bronco: "You have an overly exalted opinion of your ability to persuade, Ella. And *you*, Noah—" She snorted, leaving each person to determine the intent of her unspoken rebuke—no great stretch for anyone's imagination.

R'Lou grasped Fayleen's arm, partly to calm, partly to caution. Through the open window, they heard the grandfather clock chime twice. "We cannot decide something of this magnitude without considering all aspects. Surely you can allow us sufficient time for that."

"At least until after the funeral. One would *hope* you could manage that much longer, Ella," Fayleen added with thinly veiled sarcasm.

The twins remained standing; as far as they were concerned, the discussion had ended. Noah and Ella exchanged resigned glances and made quick work of gathering the four children and heading down the steps.

Watching Noah retrieve the wagon from beneath the bush and situate Dana and Cory in it, R'Lou fervently wished he had shown some backbone in dealing with his wife. *Whatever was he thinking to ask this of us?*

Fayleen, however, watched only Ella. Spine stiff, grip unyielding on the two girls' hands, the young mother exhibited all the tenderness of a cactus. *This woman is never willing to lose an argument. Stand firm, Noah, stand firm!* Fayleen begged in silence, unwittingly echoing Ella's earlier thoughts.

Like sentries, the twins watched their brother, sister-in-law, three nieces, and one lone nephew until they turned the corner. Even when there was nothing left to see, the sisters remained on the top step staring down the road, each lost in thoughts that defied words.