

PROLOGUE

May 18, 1980

Maggie spotted him near the artichokes, out of the corner of her eye. Was it him? He was ten feet away, down the same aisle. She dumped the grapefruit back in the bin and turned away, towards the hanging baskets, and began to examine the difference between the English walnuts in the top basket and the black walnuts in the lower one.

This man's hair was completely white. But it had been more than eleven years since she'd seen him. She'd been back in California for almost a year. The man carried himself with the same military grace with which she remembered him from the Oceanside boatyard.

She knew his name. But what was it?

She wondered how he had recognized her in those days. Because she was with Scott? Or, after they separated, because she always went to the boat where Scott was living? Or by her chartreuse VW van, or her bell-bottomed jeans, distinguished by the scarlet and gold astrological signs she'd embroidered over the thighs for her and Scott? Or because her long chestnut hair, kept down usually with a rainbow headband, was curlier than most? If so he surely wouldn't recognize her now. Her hair was cropped. She was eight months pregnant.

Now he was a foot nearer, by the plums. Her knees were giving way. What was he doing in Monterey? Only the locals shopped at this fruit and vegetable stand. He was four hundred miles north of his home.

A boy of about ten appeared next to him. The man turned towards him, and she could see his profile. The same leathery, suntanned skin, the straight nose, the trim chin now sagging slightly.

She had always liked him. Though she would never have admitted it then, the fact he was way over thirty and a retired Naval officer had given her a sense of security. He hadn't seemed to notice their freaky hair. Once he'd called her "the pretty-faced girl." He was always there early in the morning. He used to wave to them, and sometimes stopped to talk. He'd told them a few stories about World War II. He had taken great care of his boat.

She touched the baskets, steadying herself. She could almost hear his easy voice. The black walnuts were blacker than the English. She picked one up. They were also more bitter.

He had informed Scott's parents that Scott hung himself. They, in turn, had called her in Michigan. Laying the black phone on its hook, telling her sister Carole, she'd wondered why it was he who had told them. How had he known? What did he have to do with it?

"Grandpop, will you buy us some peaches, too?"

Maggie moved her head just enough to see them walk to the cashier. A woman and a little girl, younger than the boy, joined them. They were leaving. She would not have to reveal herself now, she would not have to speak to him. She turned a little further towards them. But could she?

A pain seared her heart. No. She could not.

He pocketed his change. The little girl tugged on his arm and pointed to the peaches. The man's gaze followed, and for a split second, Maggie saw him full-face.

Hank. That was his name.

CHAPTER ONE

May 19, 1980

The hills of Corral de Tierra lay like old velvet, worn over the ridges, brushed deep brown one way and golden the other. The dark clotted shapes of manzanita and bay bushes abounded upon them and the winter's rains had left a haze of green. Spanish moss hung from the scrub oak trees, and the air in the afternoons was dry and cool. Fiery poppies and mustardweed rose up among the wild oats.

The house was on top of one of these hills, in the Pastures of Heaven, east of Monterey, between the Salinas and Carmel Valleys. On a clear day you could see all the way to the Pacific Ocean as far north as Santa Cruz. But this morning there was fog.

Maggie and Jed lay cupped together in the bedroom of this house. There was a rhythm like the hills in the rumpling of the blankets that covered them and in their bodies beneath the blankets. Maggie was nearing the full of her term of pregnancy. She could lie only on her side to be comfortable, and she was lying that way now. Jed lay on his side too, the length of his chest along her back, his arm over her belly.

She opened her eyes, then closed them again. She had to go to the bathroom. She pressed her back ever so slightly closer to his chest. This natural heat from their bodies, it was the best warmth. Jed's skin was so sweet. The net of tiny curls on his stomach and chest nuzzled her cozily.

But she couldn't lie turned to him the other way any more. She missed that, her breasts and belly snug to his back, her hips and thighs bending around his round buttocks. She liked to put her arm around his chest, lying that way, floating her hand atop his cushioning hair.

She had been dreaming. She remembered now. She moved among the crowds in the seaport town, a hang glider surrounding her like a parachute. She was bountiful with fruits and nuts and vegetables. She sold them, she gave them away. There was a child, her child. The child was indistinguishable by sex, by any special characteristics. It was normal, nothing deformed, nothing missing, it was intelligent, could speak, she inspected it for all these things.

She'd stepped one, two, three, and sprung off from the ground, lifting into a current of air that took her up. She was rising over cliffs and high dunes, she and her bountiful hang glider, on a powerful current. Winds rushed past, she became afraid, it was sweeping her out over nothing but ocean.

She opened her eyes again. Dim grey light. Stillness. The hands on the clock said a little before five. An hour shy of rising. It won't be this quiet for us much longer, she thought, and after that, not for a long time again.

Last spring she was performing with the dance company in New York. How astonishing that what wasn't, became what was. Her stomach growing over the months to this globe. Last spring she hadn't even met Jed, who lay beside her sleeping so comfortably. Who was he? He was a stranger, really. What did they have to do with one another?

How equally astonishing that what was became what wasn't. Scott popped into her mind and she dismissed his image swiftly. But then she thought, what of Jed? He was a man. Would he leave her?

She drew away from him and felt a cool space along her back. Scott and I were married, I'm not married to Jed, she thought. But I am pregnant. So we are bound.

She got up. She moved carefully so Jed would not rouse. At the bedroom door she remembered with a jolt: Hank.

Hank had been there at the end, and she hadn't.

She was not going to think about Hank or Scott. She had the baby to think about, and Jed.

In the bathroom, she rested her hand on the top of her belly, which seemed to be all there was of her. "Hello in there," she said.

On the way back to bed she heard scratching on the screen doors of the bedroom. She drew the chintz drapes aside and peered through the glass. There had been this kind of dense fog the first day she had awakened in this house. She slid the screen and the glass door back just a crack. Kootchimoo rubbed in past her bare legs. Her fur was damp.

Maggie shivered. She couldn't even see the garden. Usually when it was like this, she felt secure within the house and protected against the outside world. But this morning she felt the thick moisture threatening to enter the room. She pulled the door shut.

"Where've you been this time?"

She turned quickly. "The Himalayas." Kootchimoo was already at Jed's armpit, purring.

"What'd you see there?" His voice was thick with sleep.

"Parasols, made of paper."

"Did you bring any for me?"

"I couldn't. A great mist melted them away."

"Ohh," he said, sleepily. "You brought me a tiger though." He stroked Kootchimoo.

"Yes," she said.

"Come back to sleep."

She squatted, cupping her hands beneath her belly until she sat on the edge of the bed. She drew her legs up and pressed her hands down by one side, straining against the weight of her belly so as not to flop when she lay down, but she did, anyway. She had been getting into bed this way for the last month.

"You okay?" He put a finger through a curl on the back of her neck.

"No." She snuggled back against him.

"What's the matter?"

"I long to pee in one full steady stream."

He kissed her earlobe. "You'll be able to do that in a couple of months."

The cat stood above her. She was white with black patches like abstract butterflies. Maggie lifted the covers and Kootchimoo disappeared inside. She did that occasionally when she'd been out a long time in the night or when there was a storm. Maggie hoped she would stay awhile underneath. There was nothing more delicious than lying between her soft fur on one side and Jed's vibrant skin on the other. This purring bundle, this draping warmth. This nest.