

THE BAD DAUGHTER

Joy Fielding is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *She's Not There*, *Someone is Watching*, *See Jane Run* and other acclaimed novels. She divides her time between Toronto and Palm Beach, Florida.

www.JoyFielding.com

Twitter: @JoyFielding

Instagram: @fieldingjoy

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The Stranger Next Door

Take What's Mine

Tell Me No Secrets

When I Looked Away

THE BAD DAUGHTER

JOY FIELDING

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*For my two wonderful daughters,
Shannon and Annie*



1

The tingling started in the pit of her stomach, a vague gnawing that quickly traveled to her chest, then spread upward and outward until it reached her neck. Invisible fingers wrapped around her throat and pressed down hard on her windpipe, cutting off her supply of oxygen, rendering her dizzy and light-headed. *I'm having a heart attack*, Robin thought. *I can't breathe. I'm going to die.*

The middle-aged woman sitting across from her didn't seem to notice. She was too engrossed in her own troubles. Something about an overbearing mother-in-law, a difficult daughter, and a less-than-supportive husband.

Okay, get a grip. Concentrate. The woman—*what the hell was her name?*—wasn't paying her a hundred and seventy-five dollars an hour to receive a blank stare back in response. At the very least, she expected Robin to be paying attention. You didn't go to a therapist to watch *her* have a nervous breakdown.

You are not having a nervous breakdown, Robin admonished herself, recognizing the familiar symptoms. *This isn't a heart attack. It is a panic attack, plain and simple. You've had them before. God knows you should be used to them by now.*



But it's been more than five years, she thought with her next breath. The panic attacks she used to experience on an almost daily basis were part of her past. Except the past is always with you. Isn't that what they say?

Robin didn't have to wonder what had brought on the sudden attack. She knew exactly what—*who*—was responsible. *Melanie*, she thought, picturing her sister, older by three years, and thinking, not for the first time, that if you removed the L from her sister's name, it spelled "Meanie."

A message from Melanie had been waiting on her voice mail when she'd returned to her office after lunch. Robin had listened to the message, debating whether to return the call or simply pretend she'd never received it. In the midst of her deliberations, her client had arrived. *You'll just have to wait*, she'd informed her sister silently, grabbing her notepad and entering the room she reserved for counseling clients.

"Are you all right?" the woman asked her now, leaning forward in her upholstered blue chair and eyeing Robin suspiciously. "You look kind of funny."

"Could you excuse me for just a minute?" Robin was out of her seat before the woman could answer. She returned to the smaller room off her main office and shut the door. "Okay," she whispered, leaning against her desk with the palms of both hands, careful not to look at the phone. "Breathe. Just breathe."

Okay, you've identified what's happening. You know what caused it. All you have to do now is relax and concentrate on your breathing. You have a client in the next room waiting for you. You





don't have time for this crap. Pull yourself together. What was it her mother used to say? *This too shall pass.*

Except not everything passed. And if it did, it often circled back to bite you in the ass. "Okay, take deep breaths," she counseled herself again. "Now another one." Three more and her breathing had almost returned to normal. "Okay," she said. "Okay."

Except it wasn't okay, and she knew it. Melanie was calling for a reason, and whatever that reason was, it wasn't good. The sisters had barely exchanged two words since their mother died, and none at all since Robin had left Red Bluff for good after their father's hasty remarriage. Nothing in almost six years. Not a congratulatory note after Robin graduated from Berkeley with a master's degree in psychology, no best wishes when she'd opened her own practice the following year, not even a casual "good luck" when she and Blake had announced their engagement.

And so, two years ago, with Blake's encouragement and support, Robin had ceased all attempts at communication with her sister. Wasn't she always advising clients to stop banging their heads against the wall when faced with an immovable object and insurmountable odds? Wasn't it time she followed her own sage counsel?

Of course, it was always easier to give advice than it was to take it.

And now, out of the blue, her sister was calling and leaving cryptic messages on her voice mail. Like a cancer you thought had been excised, only to have it come roaring back, more virulent than ever.





“Call me” was the enigmatic message Melanie had left, not bothering to state her name, taking for granted that Robin would recognize her voice even after all this time.

Which, of course, she had. Melanie’s voice was a hard one to get out of your head, no matter how many years had passed.

What fresh hell is this? Robin wondered, taking several more deep breaths and refusing to speculate. Experience had taught her that her imagination couldn’t compete with her reality. Not by a long shot.

She debated calling Blake, then decided against it. He was busy and wouldn’t appreciate being interrupted. “You’re the therapist,” he would tell her, his eyes wandering to a space behind her head, as if someone more interesting had just walked into view.

Pushing thoughts of Blake and Melanie out of her mind, Robin tucked her chin-length curly blond hair behind her ears and returned to the other room, forcing her lips into a reassuring smile. “Sorry about that,” she told the woman waiting, who was a first-time client and whose name Robin was still unable to recall. Emma or Emily. Something like that.

“Everything okay?” the woman asked.

“Everything’s fine. I just felt a bit queasy for a second there.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed. “You’re not pregnant, are you? I’d hate to start this process only to see you quit to have a baby.”

“No. I’m not pregnant.” *You have to have sex to get pregnant*, Robin thought. And she and Blake hadn’t made love in over a month. “I’m fine,” she said, trying desperately to recall the woman’s name. “Please, go on. You were saying . . .”





What the hell had the woman been saying?

“Yes, well, I was saying that my husband is absolutely useless as far as his mother is concerned. It’s like he’s ten years old again and he’s afraid to open his mouth. She says the most hurtful things to me, and he acts like he doesn’t hear any of it. Then when I point it out, he says I’m exaggerating, and I shouldn’t let her get to me. But my daughter has picked up on it, of course. And now she’s being just as rude. You should hear the way she talks to me.”

You think you have problems? Robin thought. You think your family is difficult?

“I don’t know why my mother-in-law hates me so much.”

She doesn’t need a reason. If she’s anything like my sister, she despises you on principle. Because you exist.

It was true. Melanie had hated her baby sister from the first moment she’d laid eyes on her. She’d been instantly jealous of their mother’s suddenly divided attention. She would pinch Robin while she lay sleeping in her crib, not stopping until the infant was covered in tiny bruises; she’d hacked off Robin’s beautiful curls with scissors when she was two; when Robin was seven, Melanie had pushed her into a wall during a supposedly friendly game of tag, breaking her nose. She was constantly criticizing Robin’s choice of clothes, her choice of interests, her choice of friends. “The girl’s a stupid slut,” Melanie had sneered about Robin’s best friend, Tara.

Oh, wait—she was right about that.

“I’ve done everything to make peace with that woman. I’ve taken her shopping. I’ve taken her for lunch. I invite her to have dinner at our house at least three times a week.”





“Why?” Robin asked.

“Why?” the woman repeated.

“If she’s so unpleasant, why bother?”

“Because my husband thinks it’s the right thing to do.”

“Then let *him* take her shopping and out to lunch. She’s *his* mother.”

“It’s not that simple,” the woman demurred.

“It’s exactly that simple,” Robin countered. “She’s rude and disrespectful. You’re under no obligation to put up with that. Stop taking her shopping and to lunch. Stop inviting her over for dinner. If she asks you why, tell her.”

“What will I say to my husband?”

“That you’re tired of being disrespected and you’re not going to put up with it anymore.”

“I don’t think I can do that.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“Well, it’s complicated.”

“Not really.”

You want complicated? I’ll give you complicated: My parents were married for thirty-four years, during which time my father cheated on my mother with every skank who caught his roving eye, including my best friend, Tara, whom he married five short months after my mother died. And just to make matters truly interesting, at the time, Tara was engaged to my brother, Alec. How’s that for complicated?

Oh, wait—there’s more.

Tara has a daughter, the product of a failed first marriage when she was barely out of her teens. Cassidy would be twelve now, I guess.





Cute kid. My father adores her, has shown her more love than he ever gave any of his own kids. Speaking of which, did I mention that I haven't talked to my sister in almost six years?

"Some people are toxic," Robin said out loud. "It's best to have as little to do with them as possible."

"Even when they're family?"

"Especially when they're family."

"Wow," the woman said. "I thought therapists were supposed to ask questions and let you figure things out for yourself."

Were they? God, that could take years. "Just thought I'd save us both some time."

"You're tough," the woman said.

Robin almost laughed. "Tough" was probably the last word she would have used to describe herself. Melanie was the tough one. Or maybe "angry" was the right word. For as long as Robin could remember, Melanie had been angry. At the world in general. At Robin in particular. Although to be fair, it hadn't always been easy for Melanie. Hell, it had *never* been easy for her.

Double hell, Robin thought. *Who wants to be fair?*

"Are you sure you're all right?" the woman asked. "Your face . . ."

"What's the matter with my face?" *Am I having a stroke? Is it Bell's palsy? What's the matter with my face?*

"Nothing. It just got all scrunched up for a second there."

"Scrunched up?" Robin realized she was shouting.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you—"

"Would you excuse me for another minute?" Robin propelled herself from her chair with such force that it almost tipped over.





“I’ll be right back.” She opened the outer door to her office and bolted into the gray-carpeted hallway, running down the narrow corridor until she reached the washroom. Pushing the door open, she darted toward the sink to check her image in the mirror. An attractive thirty-three-year-old woman with deep blue eyes, pleasantly full lips, and a vaguely heart-shaped face stared back at her. There were no unsavory warts or blemishes, no noticeable scars or abnormalities. Everything was where it was supposed to be, if a little off-kilter because of her slightly crooked nose. But there was nothing that could be described as “scrunched up.” Her hair could use a touch-up and a trim, she realized, but other than that, she looked decent enough, even professional, in her rose-colored blouse and straight gray skirt. She could stand to put on a few pounds, she thought, hearing Melanie’s voice in her ear reminding her that despite her achievements and “*fancy degree*,” she was still “*flat as a pancake*” and “*skinny like a stick*.”

She felt the stirrings of another panic attack and took a series of preventive deep breaths. When that didn’t work, she splashed a handful of cold water on her face. “Okay, calm down,” she told herself. “Calm down. Everything is fine. Except your face *is* all scrunched up.” She examined her reflection once more, noting her pursed lips and pinched cheeks and making a concerted effort to relax her features. “You can’t let Melanie get to you.” She took another series of deep breaths—in through the nose, out through the mouth, inhale the good energy, exhale the bad. “There’s a woman patiently awaiting





your wise counsel,” she reminded herself. “Now, get back there and give it to her.” *Whatever the hell her name is.*

But when Robin returned to her office, the woman was gone. “Hello?” Robin called, opening the door to her inner office and discovering that room empty as well. “Adeline?” She returned to the exterior hallway and found it likewise deserted. *Great. Fine time to remember her name.*

Obviously, Adeline had fled. Scared off by Robin’s “tough” facade and “scrunched-up” face. Not that Robin blamed her. The session had been a disaster. What gave her the right to think she could counsel others when she herself was such a complete and utter fuckup?

Robin plopped down into the blue chair that Adeline had abandoned and looked around the thoughtfully arranged space. The walls were a pale but sunny yellow, meant to encourage optimism. A poster of colorful flowers hung on the wall opposite the door, meant to suggest growth and personal development. A photograph of autumn leaves was situated beside the door to her inner sanctum, a subtle reminder that change was both good and inevitable. Her personal favorite—a collage depicting a curly-haired woman with glasses and a worried smile amidst a flurry of happy faces and abstract raindrops, the capitalized words WHY DO I GET SO EMOTIONAL? floating above her head—occupied the place of honor behind the chair she usually sat in. It was intended to be humorous and put clients at ease. She’d found it at a neighborhood garage sale soon after she and Blake had moved in together. Now he





was increasingly “working late.” How long before he brought up the idea of moving out?

“Why do I get so emotional indeed?” she asked the woman in the collage.

The woman smiled her worried smile and said nothing.

The phone in Robin’s inner office rang.

“Shit,” she said, listening as it rang two more times before voice mail picked up. Was it Melanie, phoning to berate her for not returning her previous call promptly enough? Robin pushed herself slowly to her feet. *What the hell, might as well get this over with.*

The first thing she saw when she entered the adjoining room was the telephone’s blinking red light. She sank into the comfortable burgundy leather chair behind her small oak desk, a desk that had been Blake’s when he first began practicing law; he’d passed it on to her when he graduated to a bigger firm with a bigger office, one that required a more imposing desk.

Was that why they’d never followed through on their plans to marry? Was she not sufficiently imposing for a man of his growing stature?

Or maybe it was the pretty new assistant he’d hired, or the attractive young lawyer in the next office. Perhaps the woman he’d smiled at while waiting in line at Starbucks had been the source of second thoughts on his part.

How long could she continue to ignore the all-too-familiar signs?

She picked up the receiver, listened as a recorded voice informed her that she had one new message and one saved message. “To listen to your message, press one-one.”



Robin did as directed.

“Hi, this is Adeline Sullivan,” the voice said. “I’m calling to apologize for running out on you like that. I just didn’t think we were a good fit, and to quote a therapist I know, ‘I thought I’d save us both some time’ and just leave. I hope you aren’t angry. You can bill me for the session. You *did* give me some things to think about.” She left the address where Robin could send the invoice. Robin promptly erased the message. *Would that everything else was so easy to erase.* She closed her eyes, her fingers hovering over the phone’s keypad.

“Go on,” she urged herself. “You can do this.” She pressed the button to listen to her sister’s message again.

“First saved message,” the recorded voice announced, followed by her sister’s abrupt command.

“Call me.”

Robin didn’t have to look up Melanie’s phone number. She knew it by heart. It was chiseled into her brain. She punched in the digits before she could change her mind.

The phone was answered almost immediately. “Took you long enough,” her sister said without preamble.

“What’s wrong?” Robin asked.

“You better sit down,” Melanie said.

2

The next morning, Robin woke up in a strange bed in an unfamiliar room, the conversation with her sister playing on an endless loop in her head.

"It's Dad," Melanie had said, her voice flat and unemotional.

"Is he dead?"

"He's in the hospital."

"Did he have a heart attack?"

"No."

"A car accident?"

"No."

"Someone shot him?"

"Bingo."

Robin pressed the Pause button in her brain, temporarily freezing the conversation that had been haunting her all night. The exaggerated frown she imagined on her sister's face froze as well, a frown that had always kept her from being the beauty their mother had predicted she would become.

Robin climbed out of the too-hard queen-size bed and shuffled toward the bathroom. *Why do all motel rooms look alike?*



she wondered. *Is there some union rule that dictates they all be uninteresting rectangles in shades of beige and brown?* Not that she was an expert in motel decor, having stayed in only a few over the years. She'd gone from her parents' crowded house in Red Bluff to a dorm room at Berkeley, back to her parents' house to work and earn money to continue her education, on to a small shared apartment off campus, then back and forth between Berkeley and Red Bluff to help care for her mother, then on to a cramped studio apartment in Los Angeles, and finally to the spacious two-bedroom unit she shared with Blake.

Blake, she thought, silently turning the name over on her tongue as she stepped into the tub. *What must he be thinking?* She turned on the faucet for the shower, then had to brace herself against the wall as a torrent of ice-cold water shot from the showerhead.

Blake would be furious with her.

She hadn't called him since yesterday afternoon. Even then, she hadn't spoken to him directly, but just left a message with his pretty new assistant to the effect that she had to go to Red Bluff to deal with a family emergency and she'd call him later. Then she'd canceled the week's remaining appointments, gone home to pack a small suitcase, and taken a cab to the airport, where she'd boarded the first available flight to Sacramento, arriving at almost six o'clock in the evening. The bus to Red Bluff didn't leave till the next morning, but the thought of renting a car and making the drive herself had proved too daunting, and in truth, she was in no hurry to get there. Instead she'd found a motel





close to the bus terminal and checked in. She'd eschewed dinner, instead wolfing down a Three Musketeers bar she got from the vending machine down the hall.

She also resisted turning on the TV, hoping to avoid reports of the shooting. She could handle only so much information, process only so much. She really didn't want to know every awful detail yet.

She thought about calling Blake again, but then remembered he'd said something about a dinner meeting with clients, so why bother? He was busy. He was always busy. Too busy to phone, obviously. Too busy to spare a few seconds to inquire as to what sort of family emergency would necessitate her taking off like that, to return to a place she'd sworn never to go back to. Would it have been so hard for him to interrupt one of his seemingly endless meetings to call her, to feign at least a modicum of interest?

So maybe he wouldn't be furious that she hadn't tried contacting him again. Maybe he'd be relieved. Maybe she'd finally handed him the ammunition he'd been waiting for to end their relationship once and for all.

Not that he could do anything to help the situation, she reminded herself. His specialty was corporate law, not criminal law. And it wasn't as if he even knew her father. Or her sister. Or any member of her screwed-up family, except her brother, Alec, who lived in San Francisco, so they'd actually met only twice. She'd left a message for Alec, but he hadn't called her back either. So screw both of them, she'd decided, turning off her cell phone and climbing into bed at barely eight o'clock.



She shouldn't have turned off her cell phone, she thought now. What if Blake or Alec *had* called? What if Melanie had been trying to reach her?

"It's Dad," she heard her sister say. She fast-forwarded her memory of the conversation as the shower gradually lost its icy sting and settled into a tepid spray. Someone had shot their father.

"Who?"

"We don't know."

"When?"

"Last night."

"Is he all right?"

"Of course he's not all right. He was shot. In the head. He's in a coma."

"Oh, God."

"They operated, but it's not looking good."

Robin fumbled with the wrapping on the tiny bar of soap lying in the soap dish, tossing the paper to the bottom of the tub and watching it stick to the top of the drain like a plug, causing the water to begin rising, puddling around her ankles. The soap produced almost no lather, no matter how hard she scrubbed. "Great," she muttered as it slipped from her hands and disappeared beneath the rising water. "Just great." She positioned herself directly under the shower's spray, feeling her wet hair flatten against her scalp, then wind around her head like a layer of Saran Wrap.

"He was shot. In the head. He's in a coma."

She turned off the shower and stepped onto the too-small ivory-colored bath mat, wrapping herself in one of the two thin terry-cloth towels provided, then returned to the bedroom. She glanced at the clock on the nightstand. Just after seven A.M., which meant she had three hours to kill before her bus left. Add to that the two-plus hours it would take to travel the hundred and twenty-five miles of boring highway to the middle of nowhere known as Red Bluff. Which meant at least five hours for the conversation with her sister to ricochet around in her head like a pinball.

"I don't understand. How did this happen? Where's Tara?"

"Still in surgery."

"In surgery? What are you saying? She was shot, too?"

"And Cassidy."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Someone shot Cassidy?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe it. What kind of monster shoots a twelve-year-old girl?"

Robin opened her suitcase and removed some fresh underwear, a blue-and-white-striped jersey, and a pair of jeans. She dressed quickly, debating again whether to turn on the television in case the local station was carrying news of the shooting. *"Prominent Red Bluff developer Greg Davis, his wife, and stepdaughter are clinging to life in the hospital after being shot,"* she imagined a perky yet paradoxically somber-faced reporter announcing.

Once again, Melanie's voice interrupted her musings. "It's *looking like some sort of home invasion*," she was saying, her voice growing faster and less steady with each word. "Apparently *sometime after midnight last night, someone entered their house and . . . and . . .*"

"Okay. Okay. Slow down. Take deep breaths."

"Please don't tell me what to do. You aren't here. You haven't been here."

Well, *that didn't take long*, Robin had thought, every muscle in her body constricting. It was the same refrain she'd been hearing ever since their mother's death. "*Just tell me what happened.*"

"I told you. It looks like a home invasion."

"What does that mean exactly? Do the police know who did it? Do they have any leads, any suspects?"

"Not that they've told me."

"Have you spoken to Alec?"

"I called him. He hasn't returned any of my messages."

"I'll try to reach him."

"Are you coming home or not?"

"I don't know. I'll have to make arrangements, find out what flights, what buses . . . It could take time."

"Fine. Whatever. Your choice."

Robin sank back onto the bed, lowering her head into her hands and staring at the worn beige-and-brown carpet at her feet. No matter how many times she went over the conversation with her sister, she couldn't wrap her head around it. It was like



a disturbing dream that bolted from your memory the second you tried to make sense of it.

She sat motionless until she felt her stomach start to rumble. She hadn't had a proper meal since yesterday's soup-and-sandwich lunch. Probably she should grab a bite of breakfast before the bus left. Who knew when she'd have the opportunity to eat once she got to Red Bluff? She pushed her bare feet into her sneakers, grabbed her purse, activated her cell phone, and headed for the door, vaguely recalling there was a diner across the street.

The phone rang as her fingers were reaching for the doorknob.

"Blake?" she asked, lifting it to her ear without checking the caller ID.

"Alec," her brother answered. "What's going on?"

"Have you spoken to Melanie?"

"Thought I'd call you first. What's up?"

"Brace yourself."

"Fully braced."

Robin took a deep breath. "Dad's been shot."

There was a brief pause, followed by a nervous laugh. "Is this a joke?"

"It's no joke. He's alive, but probably not for long."

"Did Tara do it?"

"No." She suppressed a smile. That had been her first thought as well. "She was shot, too."

"Tara was shot?"

"And Cassidy."





"Tara's been shot?" Alec repeated. "How is she?"

"I don't know. She was in surgery when I spoke to Melanie."

"I don't understand. What happened?"

"Melanie says it appears to be some sort of home invasion."

"Wow." A second of silence. Robin pictured her brother, younger than her by three years, lifting his hand to his face to massage his jaw, something he always did when he was upset. "Guess it serves them right for building the biggest fucking house in town."

"I'm on my way there now. You should probably come, too."

"No, not a good idea."

Robin was trying to come up with something she could use to lure her brother back to Red Bluff when she realized he was no longer on the line. She returned the phone to her purse, deciding to call him back when she had more information and he'd had more time to think.

She opened the door to her motel room and stepped into the adjacent parking lot. A blanket of heat immediately wrapped itself around her shoulders. Mid-April, not even eight A.M. and already the thermometer was edging past eighty. It would be even hotter in Red Bluff, where the temperature averaged more than ninety degrees a hundred days a year. Just the thought of it made her heart rate quicken.

"Okay, stay calm," she whispered to herself as she crossed the street to the fifties-style diner. "A diner is not a suitable place for a panic attack." But waves of anxiety were already sweeping over her as she stumbled through the restaurant's heavy glass door.





She sidled into a booth by the window, her hand knocking against the small jukebox at the side of the Formica tabletop, and she cried out.

“You okay?” the waitress asked, approaching with a pot of hot coffee.

“I will be,” Robin managed to say, trying to find a spot on the lumpy red vinyl seat that she wouldn’t stick to. “Once I get some of that.”

The waitress poured her a cup. “You need a menu?”

“No. Just the coffee.” Robin reached for the cup, returning her hands to her lap when she realized they were shaking. She glanced toward the counter running along one wall, three of the five stools in front of it occupied by men with heavy-looking tool belts around their waists. A list of the diner’s specialties was written in black paint on the long mirror behind the counter. *Sundaes. Blueberry Pancakes. Waffles. Western Omelets.* “Do you have any bagels?”

“Sesame seed, poppy seed, cinnamon-raisin,” the waitress rattled off.

Oh, God. “Sesame seed.”

“Toasted?”

Shit. “Yes, please.”

“Buttered?”

Help. “Okay.”

“You sure you’re all right?”

Robin looked up at the woman, who was around fifty and at least that many pounds overweight. She had a sweet bow-shaped



mouth and a twinkle in her kind brown eyes. *Just smile and tell her you're fine.* "My father's been shot," Robin said instead, the words tumbling out of her mouth before she could stop them.

"That's horrible. I'm so sorry."

"And his wife, Tara. She was shot, too," she continued, hearing her voice rise with each sentence. "She used to be my best friend, and my brother's fiancée. Until she married my father." A strangled chuckle escaped her mouth. *You're hysterical,* she told herself. *Stop talking. Stop talking now.* "And her daughter, Cassidy. She was shot, too. She's only twelve."

The waitress looked stunned. She slid into the seat on the opposite side of the booth, depositing the pot of coffee on the table and reaching across to take one of Robin's shaking hands in her own. "That's so awful, honey. Did it happen here? I haven't heard anything . . ."

"No. It happened in Red Bluff. I'm on my way there now. As soon as the bus comes." She glanced toward the terminal. "I live in L.A. There are no flights to Red Bluff anymore because nobody in their right mind wants to go there. There's a municipal airport, but it hasn't been used in years. That's why I have to take the bus."

"Are you alone?"

"My sister's meeting me at the bus stop."

"Well, that's good," the waitress said.

"Not really," Robin said with a smile. "She hates me." *Why am I smiling? Stop smiling!*

"I'm sure she doesn't . . ."



“Oh, yes, she absolutely does. She thinks I’ve had it so easy all my life. That I’ve had all the breaks. That I got to go away to college while she had to stay in Red Bluff and look after our mother when she was dying. Which isn’t exactly the truth, because even though I had a partial scholarship, I paid for the rest all by myself. My father said a master’s degree in psychology was a waste of time and money and he wasn’t going to contribute to it, which is why it took me so long to finish my degree.” *Okay, that’s enough. She’s not interested. You can stop now.*

Except she couldn’t stop the words that were already pouring out of her.

“That plus the fact that I was traveling back and forth all the time to see my mother,” Robin continued without pause, her words picking up speed, like a runaway train. “My sister conveniently leaves that out, along with the fact that she had to stay in Red Bluff anyway because of her son. She has a son, Landon. He’s eighteen now. He was named for this actor. He’s dead now. The actor, not Landon. Landon’s autistic. I’m sure she blames me for that, too.” Robin’s smile stretched toward her ears. She began laughing, then crying, then laughing and crying at the same time until she was gasping for air. “Oh, God. I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe.”

The waitress was instantly on her feet. “I’ll call an ambulance.”

Robin reached out and grabbed the woman’s apron. “No, it’s okay. It’s just a panic attack. I’ll be fine. Honestly. I don’t need an ambulance.”

“I have some Valium in my purse. Would you like a couple?”





“Dear God, yes.”

A minute later, the waitress was back, two small pills in the palm of her hand.

“I think I love you,” Robin said.

At ten o'clock Robin boarded the Greyhound bus for Red Bluff. Any residual feelings of embarrassment she'd had about her mini breakdown at breakfast—*I'm a therapist, for God's sake. I just spilled my guts to a waitress in a diner*—had long since disappeared into the pleasant buzz from the Valium, and she slept for most of the more than two-hour journey north along Highway 5. “Everything's going to be okay,” she whispered into the palm of her hand as the bus drew closer to Red Bluff, located at the base of the snow-covered Cascades, about halfway between Sacramento and the Oregon border, on the banks of the Sacramento River, the largest river in California.

“Everything's going to be okay,” she repeated as the bus made its way down tree-lined Main Street in what was generously referred to as Historic Downtown Red Bluff. If memory served, there were about one hundred and fifty businesses located in the downtown core, all just blocks from the river. Most of the residents lived in the surrounding suburbs—fully a fifth of them below the poverty line—and her father had played a major part in developing its 7.7 square miles.

Your father is invincible, Robin told herself. He isn't about to let a little bullet to the brain slow him down. And Tara's no shrinking violet. At the very least, she's a survivor. Hell, the word was





coined for her. And little Cassidy will be fine. She's twelve. She'll bounce back in no time. You'll see—all three of them will pull through. You'll visit them in the hospital, they'll laugh in your face, and you'll get the hell out of Dodge.

Robin was feeling almost peaceful as the bus passed the State Theatre and the gold-hatted clock tower—both regularly referred to in local guidebooks as “historic”—before pulling to a stop at the far end of the street.

Then she saw Melanie waiting by the side of the road.

Robin stepped off the bus, the colorful Victorian architecture of Main Street blurring behind her as she took her small suitcase from the bus driver's outstretched hand, then walked toward her sister.

Melanie wasted no time on pleasantries. “Tara's dead,” she said.

