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Mary Jane Combs crossed her spacious condominium to stand at the living room windows. Thirty floors below, she watched snow blanket New York's Central Park. Despite the room's warmth, she tugged her mother's shawl tight around her shoulders and crossed her arms protectively.

She wasn't working today. She never did on this the anniversary of her mother's death. Over the years the day had become a time for solitude, a momentary respite from her hectic life given over to remembering and reflecting.

The falling snow triggered childhood memories and Mary Jane smiled recalling past winters. In Eastern Kentucky where she grew up the weather turned frigid after Christmas. January meant frost on the inside of the windows, extra quilts on the beds, and the *Warm Morning* heat stove in the living room set to high. January also brought snow, deep snow that filled the hollows and drifted over the back porch steps.

As she got ready for bed she'd watch it pile up on the sill outside her bedroom window secretly hoping they would close the schools so she and her two brothers could go sledding.

They'd come into the house wet, cold, and rosy-cheeked, hang their gloves and knit hats on a rack in front of the stove to dry, and hurry to their rooms to change. When they returned Momma always had mugs of hot cocoa waiting on the kitchen table.

"Take baby sips, boys," Momma would warn. "You too, Mary Jane; otherwise you'll scorch your tongues."

We, of course, never listened, she thought, softly chuckling.

Sometimes, when the snow was just right, Momma would send them outside with big spoons and bowls. They'd scrape aside the crusty top layer so they didn't get soot from the chimney and fill the bowls for Momma to turn into snow ice cream. She swept her tongue around her mouth remembering how soothing it felt on her sore tongue.

Those were happy times for Mary Jane, her two brothers, and Momma and Daddy. Life seemed simple then and the future looked as perfect as perfect could be. She sighed.

Everything changed the year I turned 15 and Momma took sick.

Salty tears blurred her view. She lowered her head, sniffed, and dug in her pocket for a tissue.

Folks back home said she looked just like her Momma, that they could be twins. It was true. More and more when she looked in the mirror it was Momma she saw. Those same people thought she relied upon those good looks to earn her living. In a way maybe she did, but it takes more than good bones, a nice figure and a new name to make it to the top as a model.

On melancholy days such as this she reminded herself that Momma was not so much taken from her, as she was given to her...even if only for a short while. A few days before she passed over, Mary Jane sat at her Momma's bedside and made certain promises. Promises she'd done her level best to keep.

The thought that she might have fallen short, that she somehow let her down, never ceased to haunt her.

BOOK ONE

KENTUCKY WOMAN

~ 2 ~

Bly, Kentucky 1980—

The wind howled the night before her mother's funeral. It grabbed the gnarled oak beside the house, shaking its bare branches and sending dead twigs clattering across their tin roof. She'd woken several times to the sound of branches scraping her bedroom wall.

As a little girl, Mary Jane called them *Witch's Fingers*. On stormy nights when witches tried to claw their way into her bedroom, she'd scream, "Momma!"

Her mother would be there in an instant, the stairway light glowing behind her like the Madonna's halo. She'd slide into the bed with her, kiss away her fears, and rock her back to sleep.

Her father called from the bottom of the stairway. "Mary Jane, the boys are nearly ready. What about you?"

Sleet pinged against her bedroom window like buckshot off a steel drum. She sat the newspaper aside. "All but my dress."

The worn linoleum felt cold and brittle under her feet. She tightened the blue chenille bathrobe she'd pulled on over her slip and jammed her toes into the matted fleece of her slippers. Mary Jane had slept in this attic bedroom shoehorned into the eaves of their modest, story-and-a-half clapboard house all her life. Its knee walls and sloping ceiling always seemed warm and protective.

On this day they felt cold and foreboding.

She went to her desk and returned with a pair of scissors. At fifteen, she was tall, 5' 11", and automatically stooped to avoid banging her head on the ceiling. The mattress quivered beside her. She felt a nudge and glanced down. Marmalade, her orange tabby, stared up at her from the patchwork quilt. When she didn't immediately pet him, he marched forward and butted her again.

"Good old Marmuls." Scooping him into her arms, she pressed him to her cheek and listened to the comforting rumble of his little motor. "You always know when I need a pick-me-up."

She reached for her newspaper, making practice snips in the air with the scissors. Then, frowning in concentration, she made the first tentative cut. Seconds later her mother's obituary separated from the page and drifted into her lap like an autumn leaf falling from its tree. Mary Jane opened her white Bible, tucked in the small rectangle of newsprint, and watched it disappear as the pages fanned shut.

From now on my life will be divided into two parts, she thought. Before Momma died and after Momma died.

* * *

The family returned from the cemetery to find well-wishers overflowing their small farmhouse. Ladies from the church set up a makeshift buffet in the kitchen and people milled around plate-in-hand. The women claimed the living room, relegating the men and their tobacco to the front porch.

Mary Jane glanced around the room. Taking Estil's hand, she whispered, "All these people are making me nervous. Can we go for a walk?"

He helped her on with her coat and together they threaded their way between the men clustered on the porch. She noticed her father turn aside and quickly looked away before he spoke.

A gust of wind shook the apple trees as they walked through the garden, showering them with ice. She shivered and folded her collar up.

Estil put his arm around her. "Let's go inside the barn. It'll get you out of the wind."

She hesitated, checking the porch. "Maybe we shouldn't. Daddy might not like it."

"Don't be silly. He's too busy talking to pay us any attention."

He opened the door of the attached shed and led Mary Jane inside. Muted sunlight streamed in through dusty windows with cobwebs in the corners. The distinctive smell of burley tobacco lingered where they'd graded their tobacco crop a month earlier. Discarded bits of dry leaves and stems crunched underfoot.

Mary Jane and Estil clung to each other in the privacy of the grading room. She wept into the scratchy wool of his overcoat, soaking it with her tears. He lifted her chin and kissed her. She pressed against him, savoring the strength of his embrace. She let Estil hold her a long time before reluctantly pushing away.

"I don't know how I'm going to make it without Momma." She stared into his eyes. "Now I understand that old spiritual *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child*."

She watched Estil's expression momentarily darken and touched his cheek. "I shouldn't have said that. I didn't mean it to be hurtful."

He wrapped her in his arms and kissed the top of her head. "In different ways, we're both motherless children now," he said, rocking her.

"Do you ever miss your Mom?"

"Not often. I learned a long time ago to avoid expectations. She does her thing; I do mine."

She tried to read Estil's eyes, wondering how much of what he said was true and how much was macho posturing.

"It would be alright to miss her just a little now and then."

"And it's just as alright *not* to miss her. We're talking about a woman who moved to California with her boyfriend and left her 16-month-old son behind."

He stepped away, rolling his shoulders as he nervously paced. "Look. I know you mean well, MJ, but this is nothing like you and your Mom." He raised two fingers, one tightly entwined around the other. "You two were this close."

"Yes, but—"

"Your mother left because she had to. Mine ran off to be someone else's whore."

Mary Jane lapsed into shocked silence.

Estil frowned at the rough oak post beside him.

She watched his right hand tighten into a fist. "No!" she whispered, moving to stop him.

His fingers relaxed a second before she reached him.

She kissed him long and hard to heal the hurt she'd caused. They were flushed and breathless when they separated.

He glanced around the dusty room. "You know, I'm not deaf, dumb and blind. I understand how people in this county feel about my father. But say what you want, Pop was there for me when she wasn't. Some days I can just about convince myself he cares about me."

~ 3 ~

Mary Jane and Estil stood facing each other beside his pickup, holding hands as they said good-bye.

He reached for her.

Out of the corner of her eye she noticed the curtain in the living room window jerk aside. Feeling her father's watchful eye, she rested a hand on the front of Estil's shoulder, keeping him at arm's length.

"Call me tonight?" she asked.

"Always do."

She gave him a chaste kiss.

Mary Jane rested her elbow on the gatepost and smiled as she watched his pickup disappear from view. The smile slipped from her face when she turned.

Her father waited on the porch, white shirtsleeves folded back over his muscular forearms, his breath forming puffs of smoke in the January air.

"Where have you been?" he asked as her foot touched the bottom step.

"Walking... talking."

"Didn't I see you coming out of the barn?"

Mary Jane nodded. "Uh huh, I got cold. We went inside to get out of the wind."

"It was plenty warm in the house."

"We wanted to be alone."

"You don't need to be alone with the likes of Estil Estep. It doesn't look good."

Her father stood between her and the door. Those few feet felt like miles.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

She tossed her hair back and stepped around him to go inside. "I hope I don't."

After hanging up her coat, Mary Jane gathered the plates and napkins abandoned on living room tables. She carried them into the kitchen and stacked them on the drainboard.

Stephanie Brown, her best friend, followed with cups clinking in her hands.

"Where's the golden boy off to?"

"Estil wanted to throw his rock."

"He wanted to what?"

Mary Jane put on an apron and squirted detergent into the sink's hot water. She swished her hand, making bubbles and enjoying its familiar lemony scent.

"He went home to throw his rock,"

"OK, hold it right there." Stephanie rested a hand on her hip. "I thought I knew every bit of sexual slang, but you gotta explain that one."

Mary Jane's cheeks flushed. "What a dirty mind you have. Estil has this football-shaped rock, that's all."

“And he throws it?”

“He thinks it’ll strengthen his passing arm. He says it’s like those heavy bats baseball players swing.” Mary Jane smiled. “He spent a whole afternoon poking around the quarry until he found just the right one. He throws it back and forth across his front yard almost every night.”

Stephanie pulled the faucet to her side of the sink. “So, are you two lovebirds making any, you know, plans?”

In a part of the state where many girls married right out of high school and more than a few dropped out to get married, it was not an inappropriate question.

Mary Jane passed her a sudsy plate. “Sometimes we talk about going to the University of Kentucky together, if that’s what you mean.”

“No. I meant plans like engagement rings, wedding bells, and the pitter-patter of little feet.”

“What would make you say that?”

“Gosh, I don’t know. You and Estil have been an item ever since you started sharing peanut butter sandwiches at Vacation Bible School. He’s really cute, captain of the football team, and his family owns most of Blackstone County. If he isn’t a catch, who is?”

“You know there are things more important than good looks and money.”

“I’m not sure I do. Tell me.”

Mary Jane’s eyes sparkled. “Like having someone nice who cares about me and loves me the way Daddy loved Momma. Someone I could love right back and have kids with and make a family.” She nodded and reached for another plate. “See. It’s not all that complicated.”

“And you’ve never thought what it might be like making kids with Estil?”

“We’re still in high school.”

“You’ve absolutely, never, ever thought about it?”

Mary Jane skimmed off some foam and tossed it in Stephanie’s direction. “What if I have? Is that so terrible?”

“Of course not, you deserve him. You’re the prettiest girl in school.”

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

“Stow the modesty. I’ve seen the way people...boys, look at you.”

“They do that to all the girls.”

“Let’s switch. I’ll be the long-legged, blue-eyed blond and you’re short with mousy-brown hair. See how things feel from this side.”

Mary Jane’s Aunt Louise leaned around the corner. “Yoo Hoo, it’s me. Do you girls need any help?”

“You could clean up leftovers, Aunt Weezie,” Mary Jane said. “There’s plenty of room in the fridge.”

Weezie began spooning leftovers into storage containers and passed the empty bowls over to the sink. She looked from one girl to the other. “It sure quieted down in here since I came in. Did I interrupt your secrets?”

“We’d pretty much exhausted the subject.”

“Oh, really?”

Stephanie cupped her hand around her mouth and whispered, “We were talking about boyfriends. Specifically, the golden boy, Estil Estep.”

“What else do teenage girls talk about?” She pulled out a chair and turned it to face the sink. “Don’t stop on my account. I don’t hear many juicy tidbits at my age.” She fluttered her hands at them. “Go on...go on. What about him?”

“I told her I’m surprised she’s not making plans. If it were me, I’d do more than wear his class ring. At the very least, I’d spend my study halls practicing writing Stephanie Estep in my theme book.”

Weezie’s brow knotted. “Like your father, I have reservations about the Estep family. Randall Estep’s messy divorces and public affairs have been, to say the least, scandalous.”

Mary Jane whipped around ready to declare the son innocent of his father’s sins.

Weezie’s raised hand, stopped her. “Still, Estil seems like a nice young man. He sent flowers to the funeral home. We’ll give him some points there. He’s good looking and, of course, he’s got those muscles. Seems I recall some young girls *do* like muscles.”

Mary Jane stared down at the dishes.

“But his father hardly qualifies as the ideal role model, though far be it from me to judge. The bottom line, girls, is that matrimony is a sacred union.” She tapped her knee for emphasis. “It must be approached cautiously and only after prayerful consideration.”

“Will you two stop it? I’m not ready to marry anyone.”

Stephanie rolled her eyes. “Miss Aw Shucks here also claims not to be the prettiest girl in school. Can you believe it?”

“Steph, enough already.”

“I’m sure there are many attractive young women at your school,” Weezie said, “but there’s a difference between polite modesty and plain foolishness. The Bible says pride is sinful, however, it also enjoins us not to hide our light under a bushel.”

“See.” Stephanie licked her finger and marked a point in the air. “I win.”

Weezie glanced at the kitchen clock. Felix the Cat’s round, bobbing eyes snapped back and forth in time with his twitching tail, ticking away the seconds. “Look at that time. Stephanie, would you be a dear and carry these casserole dishes out to my car?”

She waited until Stephanie left the room then slipped an arm around Mary Jane’s shoulder. A retired librarian, Weezie contributed to her niece and nephews’ education by providing them with daily watchwords.

“Our watchword for tomorrow will be *Pertinacious*: to hold on firmly, to be persistent. You know,” Weezie continued, “it’s not my job to tell you you’re beautiful, nor yours to tell yourself you’re not. Christian humility doesn’t require a lovely woman to pretend she’s ugly. Rather, she must acknowledge that every person is equally beautiful in God’s eyes. You inherited your mother’s good looks. It’s a gift.”

Rechecking the doorway, she stared Mary Jane in the eye. “And like anything the Lord gives it can be a blessing...or a curse.”

Mary Jane shivered when icy fingers tiptoed up her spine.

~ 4 ~

Temperatures dropped all afternoon as a winter storm swept through the Appalachians. Snow fell, bringing its peculiar hush. Mary Jane put away the supper dishes, went upstairs and changed for bed. The evening’s stillness seeped into her room as she retreated into a novel.

John Combs tapped on the stairway door leading up to his daughter’s bedroom.

Opening it a crack, he asked, "MJ, are you still awake?"

She closed her book over a finger. "Present and accounted for."

"Can I come up and talk?"

"Sure."

She put the book aside as her father ascended the steep stairway. He sat a small paper sack on her desk without comment then spun the straight-backed wooden chair around and straddled the seat. Folding his big hands across the chair's back, her father leaned forward and rested his chin on them.

Mary Jane sat on the bed in her nightgown with the quilt bunched around her waist. Marmalade, lay sprawled across her lap.

After quietly studying his daughter for several moments, her father sighed and murmured, "Sad, sad day."

She nodded.

He continued staring.

Mary Jane wiggled her legs, dislodging the cat, and lifted the covers chest high. "What is it, Daddy?"

"In this light you bear an amazing resemblance to your mother." His voice sounded weary, defeated. By the time his words reached her, they seemed worn-out from the journey. "She was your age when we met. I can't look at you without seeing her."

She swallowed hard and, in a tiny voice, said, "You've told me that before,"

"Yes, I suppose I have."

Her father's eyes drifted around the small room cataloging minute details as if the answer he sought lay hidden in the knotted strings of a tennis shoe, the lines of discolored paint on the ceiling where the roof leaked three winters ago, or blond hairs tangled in the bristles of her hairbrush.

"We tried for a dozen years before she got pregnant. We'd almost given up. Then one day, there you were. And now you're all I have to remember her by."

It seemed a struggle for him to maintain a consistent train of thought. She wondered if he'd forgotten what he came for, or was he simply reflecting the emptiness hanging over their household?

"I'm sorry for the episode on the porch. I've had a lot on my mind these last few weeks."

"I know you were never thrilled about me dating Estil, but don't blame him. He didn't kill Momma; cancer did."

"A father's entitled to worry." He opened his hands like a preacher at Sunday service. "Honey, you're young. Estil's your first real boyfriend. These feelings can be overwhelming; I don't want to see you hurt."

"A minute ago you said Momma was my age when you two began dating."

He straightened in the chair. "But I wasn't Estil Estep. I respected your mother."

"He respects me. What is it you think we do?"

Her father's strong hands clenched the back of the chair. "If for one instant I even suspected he tried to do anything, he and I would have a man-to-man talk he'd never forget."

"We've been good. I swear it. Estil's my friend. I need him right now."

"Even though she was sick, your mother convinced me to allow you to keep company with him. I don't think she'd want me to forbid you to see him now."

He rubbed his sandpapery palms together.

“Honey, you don’t know the Esteps like I do. All my life, I’ve watched them cheat the folks in Blackstone County. First it was Estil’s grandfather, now it’s his father. Someday it will be him. The Esteps think they own everything they touch, land...livestock...coal. Women aren’t any different. Sooner or later, Estil’s going to try to claim what he thinks is rightfully his.”

He stopped when he saw her wiping her eyes on the bed sheet. He ran his fingers through his hair and shook his head. “I didn’t come here to argue about Estil. I don’t know how we ended up doing it.”

She sniffed. “Why did you come?”

“I know life feels confused right now, but I wanted you to know I’ll take care of you and your brothers. I’ll always be here for you, no matter what.”

A sense of foreboding quivered through her. Although her father came offering reassurance, the conviction in his voice frightened her. Her mother’s death had driven home the futility of counting on the future. She no longer believed there was such a thing as certainty this side of eternity.

“Hear me?” he asked, when she didn’t immediately respond.

“Yes, I hear you.” Her soft voice was barely audible in the quiet room.

“One other thing.” He touched the lunch sack, rustling its stiff brown paper. “Your mother left this for you. She wanted you to have it after she passed.” He looked around nervously. “Well, I guess that’s all I came to say.”

Her father unfolded himself from the chair, returned it to the kneehole of her desk and headed for the stairs.

“Daddy?”

He paused on the first step, glancing back over his shoulder.

“Thanks. I love you.”

“I love you, too. Goodnight, Baby.”

Mary Jane listened to her father descend the stairs, heard the familiar squeak as he put his foot on the next to last step and the metallic click of the latch sliding into its mortise when the door closed.

She was on her way to retrieve the sack when the phone rang. It was Estil.

“MJ?”

“Hi.”

“Are you alone?”

Mary Jane giggled. “No. Actually, I’ve got another fella here in bed with me.”

“His name better be Marmalade, or I’m gonna be pissed.”

More giggles. “Wel-l-l, I really can’t say.”

“Do you ever wish I were there in bed with you?”

“I’m not going to answer that.”

“You sound upset. Everything okay?”

“We’d better not stay on too long. I turned the ringer off downstairs like always, but Daddy may have heard my phone.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Just typical fatherly concern for his little girl. He wasn’t pleased that we went off to the barn today.”

“Oh, for cryin’ out loud. Did you let him check the back of your coat for bits of

straw?"

"That was very rude, Estil. It's been a stressful day and we're all on edge."

"At least your father's interested, which is more than I can say about mine."

"Your dad wouldn't like hearing you say that."

"He's not even here. He left for Frankfort right after the funeral. There's some kind of coal convention at the State Capitol. He's probably busy greasing palms."

"Aren't you being a little hard on him?"

"It's not like I blame Pop, or anything. He didn't choose to be an Estep anymore than I did."

"Don't forget, Estep Mining Company is your family's business."

"And I want no part of it."

"You make it sound like you're being held captive."

"I am. Nobody asked if coal mining was what I wanted. I'm supposed to want it and, if I don't, pretend I do. That's the difference between us, MJ. Your world's wide open; you have options, choices. My future was decided before I was born. But fortunately fate dealt me a wild card. Football's like my *Get Outta Jail Free* card."

Marmalade adjusted positions on her bed, meowing several times as he made a nest in the covers.

"Hey. I heard your boyfriend meow." Estil chuckled. "Now I can sleep tonight."

"I'd better hang up. I have something to do before I turn off the light."

"Okay. Love you."

She pulled the receiver close. "Love you, too."

~ 5 ~

Mary Jane cradled the phone and returned to bed carrying the sack her father left. Feeling like a small child on Christmas morning, she removed the package and turned it in her hands.

Momma wrapped this herself, she thought. The thin red ribbon with its cluster of long curlicues proved it. She hugged the package and closed her eyes, remembering.

* * *

"Make it curly, Momma."

With the exuberance only five-year-olds have, she spooled off yards of ribbon, offering them to her mother by the handful. Mary Jane hopped from one foot to the other, bubbling-over with excitement as she watched her mother wrap packages.

"Make it curly, Momma" she demanded. "Make it curly."

"Keep your pants on," her mother said, giving the package a final once over.

Then, opening the scissors, her mother trapped a piece of ribbon between her thumb and the blade. She zipped it along, curling the ribbon into tight spirals as Mary Jane squealed with delight.

* * *

Beneath the ribbon and wrapping paper lay a department store box. Inside she found a single envelope with her name written across it in expansive script. She slowly lifted it out of the box and turned it in her hand.

Mary Jane shifted in the bed. Sliding closer to the light, she ran a fingernail under

the flap. The stiff paper crinkled as she removed the letter from its envelope. Unfolding it, she began to read.

My dear, dear Mary Jane—

You are my beautiful daughter whom I cherish more than life itself. Flesh of my flesh, you are the embodiment of the love your father and I shared. You lived within me for nine months and you'll stay in my heart forever.

I suppose, deep down all mothers are pretty much the same. I've watched you mature in wisdom and grace with boundless pride. Ever since you were a little girl, I've dreamed of seeing you grown-up with babies of your own.

But it wasn't to be. The specialists in Lexington tell me there's nothing more they can do. So, rather than remain far from my family, I've come home to die.

Even though I believe with all my heart that greater things await us on the other side, I'm not ready to go. But I've come to accept that it's His will, not mine, which must be done. You see, we're all part of an eternal plan far beyond our understanding. You, your brothers, your father...everyone, always was and always will be in God's hands. That is my comfort as I prepare to leave you.

On the way back from Lexington I decided to write this letter. And, though very tired, I insisted your father stop at Cumberland Falls. We honeymooned there...even managed to see a moonbow one night. As a new bride I considered it quite an omen, especially since there are only a half-dozen places in the world where it can be seen.

I just heard Weezie's "Yoo Hoo" at the door. Time to put this aside.

We ended up talking several hours. I find myself doing it a lot these days. Time is short and I must say all that is in my heart while I still have the chance.

Thanksgiving's come and gone and Christmas is hard upon us. Not a very merry one this year, I'm afraid. Sorry. Though the doctors tell me it can't happen, I'm determined to last into January. I don't want to cloud all future Christmases with memories of my death.

Must focus, my thoughts are flying in as many directions as a flock of frightened geese. I'm very tired, making it doubly difficult. But I promised myself I'd finish this letter before I rest, and I will.

A wonderfully strange thing has happened, Mary Jane. I've begun having moments of clarity...visions. I won't waste time on explanations; the process isn't important. Though I will confess I've discussed this with the visiting nurse. She insists it's a side effect of the pain medication.

I can't accept that. I won't accept that.

It's been like flipping pages in a photo album. I see you doing things, going places, meeting people. The images aren't always easy to interpret as they flash by, but I've done my best. And, oh the things I've seen.

Perhaps it's Weezie having just left, but I want to end this letter with a watchword. This is my watchword, not for just a day or a week, but for the rest of your life. *Trust*: an assured reliance on the character, strength or truth of someone or something. Trust God, Mary Jane. Trust your values, trust those who love you and, most important of all, trust yourself.

You're destined for wonderful things, my darling daughter. I felt it the moment they placed you in my arms. You were only a few seconds old and complaining mightily about

being thrust into this cold, cruel world. Suddenly our eyes met. You calmed. We looked at each other and I felt it. I really did. And now I've seen it.

Don't roll your eyes this is your mother talking. I see that little smirk of yours. I'm serious; I was there.

Remain true to yourself and what you know to be right. Remember the promises you made at my bedside. Get up each morning, look in the mirror, and tell yourself you're special...because you are.

They say a bride should wear something old and something new, something borrowed and something blue. I'm giving you something old to wear on your wedding day. Your great grandmother wore this necklace on her wedding day. My mother wore it on hers, and I wore it on mine. I'm giving it to you now so you can wear it on yours.

Hugs and kisses and love forever,

Momma

Mary Jane opened the small package of folded tissue. A gold necklace with a delicate filigreed cross tumbled into her palm.

~ 6 ~

John Combs returned to work at Estep Mining Company's Blossom Gulch Mine No. 3 the morning after his wife's funeral.

Mary Jane rose early, threw on a robe and padded down to the kitchen to fix his breakfast. Despite her resolve to fill the gap left by her mother's death, she knew even this simple task could intimidate her if she let it.

You can do this, she told herself. Hadn't she watched Momma often enough to know the routine?

Walking by memory, she crossed the dark living room and clicked on the kitchen light. Circles of frost clung to the inside of the cold windowpanes. She filled the coffeemaker and turned it on. While it hissed and belched she put bacon in a skillet and started it frying. She opened a can of shortening and scooped a heaping spoonful into a second black iron skillet.

As the bacon sizzled, Mary Jane paused to review the steps in her memory before mixing self-rising flour and buttermilk in a bowl. She poured off some melted shortening, incorporated it into her mix, and spooned the dough into the warm skillet. When the bread rose and baked on one side, she carefully ran a spatula around the rim of the skillet freeing it. She lifted it onto the spatula, and with a deft flip of her wrist, turned it exactly as her mother had.

Mary Jane looked at the bread's golden surface and grinned. Cocking her elbow, she flicked the spatula in the air making a definitive, "Yes!"

She removed the bacon and cracked two eggs into the drippings. Moments later a pair of perfect over-easy eggs slid onto her father's plate. She turned out the panbread, cut it into pie-shaped wedges and put butter, jam and cream on the table.

Hearing footsteps, she glanced up from pouring coffee and gave her father a proud smile. "Mornin', Daddy. Breakfast's ready."

John Combs paused in the doorway. The welcoming smell of coffee, bacon and fresh bread filled the tiny kitchen. His eyes moved from his smiling daughter to the table. He kissed her on the forehead and pulled out a chair.

“You shouldn’t have gone to all this trouble. I coulda made a bowl of cereal.”

“If that’s all you needed, Momma wouldn’t have fixed you eggs and meat every morning. How many times did she say, ‘If you work hard, you gotta eat?’?”

She waited beside the table trying not to fidget.

He took a bite and chewed for a moment. “Umm!” He nodded and smiled as he washed it down with a sip of coffee. “Tastes every bit as good as what your Momma made.”

By the time he finished she had his lunchbox packed and waiting.

* * *

It was dark when John Combs returned from the mine. Mary Jane heard the crunch of tires on the gravel drive and pushed aside the curtain. What she saw shocked her. His eyes had the sunken, empty look of a concentration camp survivor. He shuffled to the porch bent with fatigue.

She heard the clump of his work boots on the steps and opened the door to greet him.

Her father unlaced the steel-toed boots and pulled them off without a word. He came through the back door and dropped them beside a cardboard box of kindling.

Mary Jane felt both pride and anger watching him limp through the kitchen like a beaten fighter. Pride for the sacrifices he made to provide for them, and anger at what the mine did to him. Each evening he returned a little less himself than he’d been that morning. Estep Mining Company wasn’t just grinding up coal; they were grinding down the men who mined it.

While he sifted through the evening paper, Mary Jane tied on an apron and began setting the supper table. She heated a casserole left from the day before. An apple cobbler from the refrigerator became dessert. She made a fresh pot of coffee and put out bread and butter.

The short rest improved her father’s appearance, but did nothing for his mood. He frowned at his plate while the children held hands and said Grace.

“Did you have a bad day at work?” Mary Jane asked.

“You’d do well not to worry over things that don’t concern you,” he said, buttering his bread with angry slaps of his knife

Halfway through the meal, her father slammed his fist on the table. All three children jumped. Brent’s fork slipped from his fingers, clattering onto his plate. Brian’s mouth dropped. Mary Jane bolted upright and folded her hands in her lap.

“A man was almost killed today.”

“What happened?” they asked in unison.

“A section of belt ripped apart without warning. The last 40 feet of it whipsawed out like a bullwhip.” He studied their stunned faces. “Ever have someone snap you with a towel in gym class?”

They all had.

He spread his hands apart. “Imagine that tiny piece of terrycloth is an industrial belt this wide.”

“What about the man?”

“He must’ve had an angel beside him. The end of the belt slammed into his mantrip tearing the seat to pieces. If he hadn’t leaped out of the car, it would’ve been him along

with it.”

Her father dropped his head into his hands. “I could tell something wasn’t right, but I couldn’t get to the shutoff in time. I’ve told Estep over and over that belt needed to be replaced.” He curled his big hands into fists. “He keeps telling me to patch it. I’ve patched it so damn many times there’s no belt left. It’s nothing but a bunch of patches chasing each other around the sprockets.”

“Did they replace the belt today?” Brent asked.

His father glared at him across the table. “What do you think?”

* * *

Mary Jane smiled when the phone rang. “Hi.”

“Missed you at school today,” Estil said.

“Maybe in another day or so.”

“How are you doing?”

“I was doing pretty well until Daddy got home from work. He was upset about an accident at the mine.”

“I heard about it. A belt snapped down in No. 3. That’s all Pop talked about. He was really ticked-off.”

“Oh yeah, what’d he say?”

“They had to shut down to fix the belt. The down time cost him a bunch of lost production and the belt destroyed the seats on one of those little machines they use to come and go. It’ll cost over five hundred bucks to repair it.”

“What about the man in the car?”

“No big deal; he wasn’t hurt. Pop said it’s a good thing. Otherwise, they would’ve had to shut down for a safety inspection. And that’s the last thing he wants.”

“I can imagine.”

After they hung up, she replayed their conversation, measuring them against her father’s comments at the supper table. For reasons she didn’t fully understand, she jumped out of bed, went to her desk and took out the diary Stephanie gave her for Christmas. With everything else going on she’d never got around to using it.

Something prodded her to record everything that happened down in Blossom Gulch No. 3. It was easy enough, the pages were dated. Mary Jane flipped it open and recorded what her father said at supper. She also noted Estil’s comments.

Her brow wrinkled as she snapped the clasp and dropped the diary back into the drawer. She frowned at her reflection in the mirror.

Why am I doing this?