

CHAPTER ONE

“Damn it, Theadora! Will you stop kicking the seat? I swear, you’ll cause an accident!”

Theadora found her mother’s face in the rearview mirror, then looked over to her brother riding next to her.

“How can my feet cause an accident when you’re driving?” she asked.

“You know what a nervous driver I am! I jump a foot every time you shift your legs. Now, please!”

Theadora gave her brother an evil look, then purposely recrossed her legs, making sure to give the driver’s seat just one more accidental thunk.

“Sorry,” she said as she watched her mother hump, then stiffen.

“I mean it, young lady!”

“She did that on purpose, Mom,” Howie, the brother, said righteously.

“I know she did. She just wants to do everything she can to make this trip miserable for all of us!”

“I do?”

“Yes, you do!”

“Oh,” theadora mumbled into her reflection in the window. “well, that explains everything.”

Theadora Ann Ramsey was fourteen years old, cocky, angry and proud. She’d spent the majority of those fourteen years proving she could outrun, outsmart, outthrow, outdare, and far and away outdistance any boy ... anywhere, any way, any day. She

despised her mother, barely tolerated her brother and hadn't a true friend in the world. If it was Tuesday, she wished for last Sunday, If it was light, she longed for dark It it ws Oregon, she prayed for Siberia. If it was peace, she jockeyed for war.

To make matters worse, she was harnessed with bands on her buck teeth and was freckled mercilessly, and her head was topped with an unruly thatch of dark brown hair, bobbed to the earlobes, then pageboyed. Added to all this awkward horror were two severely scarred, skin-grafted but perfectly functional hands. Ah, but there was nothing wrong with Theadora, preached her mother, that some serious time at the makeup bar in the corner drugstore couldn't amend. That, perhaps a decent haircut, eventually some red hair rinse and oh, of course, gloves. No lady should ever be without gloves, Theadora especially.

Theadora, or Teddy as she preferred to be called, had been warned weekly by the brother that she's require the unearthly talent of fifty fair godmothers, working three shifts, just to elevate her to the status of ugly duckling. Not that Teddy cared. Gloves, henna rinse, makeup and fairy godmothers were for budding Cinderellas who required nothing more in life than monocled Prince Charmings to arrange things in their pampered, safe castle lives. She'd never bought the fair tale, written, no doubt, by a man anyway. Jack the Giant Killer was more to her liking., Her had dragons much larger to slay.

But her brother, Howard, had all the answers regarding his sister. Being six minutes older, he had the answers before the questions were even asked. Teddy was a drip, it was as simple as that. Not the carbon copy of their lovely, feminine, dainty mother that all daughters were supposed to aspire toward. A changeling, perhaps -- yes, of course! Switched at birth! Either that or maybe Teddy was a little, well, mannish. What worried Howard about this theory was, if his twin had gotten a ration of his male hormones, then maybe he'd received some of he female hormones in the exchange. But chin hair was sprouting right on schedule, his voice was finally starting to drop an octave and very little could hold his attention more than a nearby set of fully developed breasts. Still, there had to be a reason Teddy was so strange. They couldn't possible be related, except for the fact that Howard was a Y Chromosomed duplicate - identically

tall, lanky, also harnessed with bands on his buck teeth, freckles mercilessly and similarly cursed with unruly dark brown hair, now butched all around for the summer.,

Howard, therefore, had spent the majority of his fourteen years avoiding, ignoring and denying the existence of his twin sister. This arrangement suited Teddy just fine. She didn't have many more need for Howard than he had for her. That was the way it had always been .. right up to their fifteen summer.

Of all the places teddy could have been that June of 44, the last place she would have chosen to be (including a foxhole in Normandy) was the backseat of a hot, smelly old Plymouth, limping down Oregon's Highway 30, battling car sickness, sparring with her brother, damning her mother. She took her gaze from the cow-dotted pasturelands and forced it on her mother's reflection in the rearview mirror. Always the vision of loveliness, her permed red hair frizzed out fetchingly from her hunter green scarf and waves playfully with the warm air sweeping through the windows. Her cheeks were flushed - or was it too much rouge? Each cheek was dotted with a perfect, deep dimple - each dimple was filled to overflowing with the secrets of countless flirtations. Oh, how men loved the dimples, Her face was dutifully dusted with powder, her large, blue eyes framed by bluish liner. Her mother's lips, no matter where she was, when or how she was, were always full and brightly painted.

Teddy watched her mother as she gripped the steering wheel with panicked determination, nose first, always alert to the potential vehicular devastation and accompanying front-page headline, "Mother-Daughter-Son Killed in Fiery Crash!" She smacked her wad of gum nervously, and she never once allowed her back to relax against the seat. It was a wonder the four-for-one obituary hadn't already been written.

Teddy returned to the journal on her lap and tried to concentrate on her last entry:

JE118 - June 9 - I hate this car! I hate the smell! What's worse? Cigarette smoke or Mom's cheap perfume? I hate this whole damn thing! Why can't she just leave me out of this? Holiday Beach. Where's that? What's wrong with Tacoma? Okay, plenty, but the whole crummy summer! Christ! Why me? Just when things were starting to go right!

Her mother slammed on the brakes as she did each time a curve, no matter how unthreatening, appears in the road ahead. Howard slid into his sister, and she shoved him away to protect the privacy of her journal.

“Hey, take it easy!” he grumbled.

“Now what’re you two fighting about, huh? Dee Dee Ramsey screeched from the driver’s seat. “I swear to God, you’re both acting like babies and I can’t stand it any longer!”

Howard poked his sister and said, “Well, one of us IS a baby!”

Teddy seized his finger and gave it a wrenching twist. He cried out in pain and retreated to his corner of the backseat.

“I mean it, you two! I’m going to get into a crash or a nervous breakdown!” Mrs. Ramsey hollered, gripping the wheel fiercely and not daring to look back at her children.

Teddy settled back to her journal writing but was soon feeling backseat nausea rising inside her. She looked outside the window to take her mind off her mother’s driving, the agonizing curves, her brother’s glaring, their impending destination and the burger and fries playing rugby in her stomach.,

They were somewhere between Longview, Washington, and Astoria, Oregon. All she knew for sure was the Columbia River was on their right and the Pacific Ocean was somewhere straight ahead. And beyond that, promised her other, by sundown,, Holiday Beach. Grandma Rose. Oh God.

She closed her eyes as the Plymouth negotiated a series of hairpin turns, each one able to roll a righter curl than the last.,

She felt her stomach tighten as they took another corner. Don’t brake, she silently warned her mother. Whoever gave you a license oughta be shot! She furiously rolled down her window, leaned her head out and took a long, deep breath. She forced her eyelids to stay open against the wind until her eyes began to sting - tears rushed to soothe, but were quickly blinked away. She pulled her head back inside and warned, “Mom, I’m getting -”

“Light me a cig, will you, hon?” her mother asked, throwing a pack of Camels and a lighter back to Howard.

“No, he won’t light you a cig!” Teddy retorted, seizing the camels and shoving the cigarettes back. “mom, we gotta stop. I’m gonna puke!”

“Gotta Gonna! Puke! Some talk!” her mother snapped.

“I mean it! Mom! Pull over!”

“Oh, all right. Hang on. I can’t just stop here in the middle of traffic!”

Teddy looked behind them. Not a car was to be seen. “Hurry!”

“All right, Theadora. Deep breaths, damn it, deep breaths!”

“This wouldn’t happen if you’d let me drive,” Teddy snapped, in and out of deep gulps/

“Don’t be silly. You’re only fourteen. You can’t drive,” her mother shot back.

“You oughta check your odometer once in a while, Mom,” howie offered, giving his sister a threatening glance to spill more.

“Shut up!” Teddy offered right back. “I mean it, Mom. The least you can do is let me ride in the front seat!”

Her mother dared a quick glance at her daughter in the mirror and answered, “You know Perkie can’t ride in the backseat!”

“Oh great, Mom. It’s okay if I get sick bu oh no, not your precious little Jerkie! Mom, I’m warning you! My moth’s starting to water!” Teddy threatened, her hand on the door latch. As the car began to slow down, Teddy looked over the front seat at the Pekingese, perched arrogantly on a stack of fluffy pillow elevating it so it could see out the windows. The dog returned her look, growled up at her and followed it with a hairy-lipped, hih hih hih” pant that Teddy knew was Pekingese for “Go ahead and puke!”

“Better hurry up, Mom!” Howie piped up. “Is she pukes, I’ll puke.”

The car slowed to a cautious crawl, and after an obedient hand signal to absolutely no one, Dee Dee Ramsey pulled the car to a stop. Teddy was out and pacing, hands on hips, behind the hand brake was set. She leaned over and emptied while her brother walked in the opposite direction, found a bush and peed.

Teddy was sitting on a large rock, taking deep, long breaths, when Howie approached her.

“I told you, if you’d stop eating, you’d stop puking,” he said.

Teddy looked back at their mother, who was lighting a cigarette and walking Perkie.

“Look at her,” Teddy said, watching their mother as she walked her dog. “out here in the head, middle of nowhere, dressed for an audition on Major Bowes!”

“You know why, don't you?” Howard asked, looking down the highway at an approaching truck.

“Because you never know when Mr. Right will come along,” Teddy replied, droning the words she'd so often heard from her mother.

The truck passed the, and the driver, upon seeing Mrs. Ramsey bending over to converse with Perkie, honked appreciatively. Howie watched the truck whoosh by, then said to his sister, “It's because she wants Grandma Rose to think she's doing all right for herself.”

Teddy gave her brother a disgusted look. “You're so wrong you're pathetic! If that's what she wants Grandma Rose to think, then why the hell's Mom palming us off for the whole summer? She's probably going to hit the old lady up for a loan.”

“She's too proud, Teddy., You're way off base!”

Teddy faced her brother and said solemnly, “Yeah? Well, I'll tell you something else, Howie-Cowie, She doesn't want us around Tacoma this summer because she's out to get a man and she doesn't want us to see how she does it.”

Howie grabbed his sister's arm and said, “That's not fair, Teddy!@ Mom's doing the best she can with what...”

“...with what she's got!” Teddy finished for him.

“Shut up before she hears you!” He looked back at his sister and added, “You're dead wrong about Mom. You always have been.”

After the family was sufficiently aired, relieved and watered, they climbed back into the Plymouth, and returned to their separate corners. Mrs. Ramsey handed out lemon drops, added another layer of lipstick, signaled and pulled back on out Highway 30. Once the lemon drop disappeared, Teddy surrendered to drowsiness. Before dropping off, she offered a brief prayer to St. Christopher, who she'd heard occasionally watched out for old Plymouths being propelled by wheel-gripping, overdressed drivers. Teddy

waited for Howie to nod off to sleep before closing her eyes, her journal tucked safely under her.