

Chapter 1

The man in the picture grasped at some comfort buried deep in the monastery walls. The tips of his long fingers pressed into the gray sandstone blocks, as if greater force would bring greater peace, but Jack Wood knew better. When Jack had remembered Our Lady of the Valley, he had imagined that simply entering the chapel would provide relief, but in planning his escape, he made the mistake of bringing himself along.

He wished he could blame what had happened next on the unexpected click of the shutter, the woman stepping from the trees and asking his name for the local paper. The request appeared as routine to her as it did out of place to Jack. He could not remember what he had said, but he knew that with or without the photographer, the lanky man with the curly brown hair would become exactly what the caption in *The Rock Creek Herald* called him, a retreatant. He would turn and look at the door, unable even to turn the knob. He would fold his legs into the car and drive along snow-lined Wyoming roads to the nearby guesthouse where nothing waited for him except a bed.

Jack sat down at the guesthouse kitchen table and put one elbow on each side of the newspaper. “Good God,” he said to the haggard man in the photo, “no wonder Mike made you take a vacation.” He wanted to ease the lines of concern on the man’s face, wanted to put a hand on the hunched shoulder, look into the closed, brown eyes and say, “It will be all right.” Yet when he looked in the mirror, he avoided those round eyes, concentrated only on shaving, combing his hair, brushing his teeth because he knew, if he did meet that gaze, it would tell him he was definitely not all right.

“Why do you bother to stay alive?” he asked his photographic double. The man did not reply, yet Jack knew that every morning he got up, showered, ate whatever he found in the

cupboards—exactly as he'd been doing for the last two years. Jack thought he had kept up a good front, had appeared to be working, talking with people, making love to his wife, at least until she left. The photo disagreed. It showed a man who, no matter what else he had accomplished in his thirty-eight years, had failed at the only task that mattered. This man had Jack's unruly brown hair and long limbs, but instead of holding the world together, he hung onto life with his fingertips.

Strength had been Susan's complaint against him. "I appreciate your being strong, Jack," she had said almost a year ago, after he shattered the bowl full of Christmas chocolates. She had looked at the shards of glass, said that, then walked out the door three days before the first anniversary of Josh's death. She had called from her sister's house in San Jose to say she wasn't coming back, and Jack had spent Christmas alone. But she hadn't been at the hospital the year before; she didn't know that Josh's blood had spilled candy-wrapper red all over the white sheets.

The day of Josh's death was a day of telephone calls, the first one a surprise, the next ones seemingly inevitable. "Is Josh there?" Andrew's mom, Helen, had asked.

Her question made no sense to Jack. His son had left for his friend's house half an hour ago. He and Susan were enjoying an early afternoon glass of red wine, watching an astonishing, rare snow fall on San Francisco Bay, and divvying up Santa Claus responsibilities for the night.

"No, he's at your place," Jack replied.

"He never got here," she said.

Jack set down his wine glass. "What do you mean?" he asked, as if the words were a riddle that, when untangled, meant something different from what it said.

"He never showed up. At first we thought he was running late, but after half an hour we

figured we better call.”

The meaning of what she said continued to elude Jack. “You mean he’s not there?”

“No, he never got here.” Her speech had slowed as they talked.

Jack leaned on the kitchen counter. “OK, thanks.”

“Jack, is there anything we can do?”

“I’ll let you know.”

When he remembered to hang up the receiver, he was surprised to find Susan by his side. Her deep brown eyes held an emotion so intense he’d never seen it in ten years of marriage, not on their wedding day, not on the day Josh was born. She looked ferocious. “Josh isn’t at Andrew’s house,” he said.

“Call 911.” He stared at his wife, impressed with how quickly she understood what he said and thought of something to do.

“Describe the child. What was he last seen wearing?”

“Last seen?” Jack repeated. He felt Susan squeeze his arm and thought she, too, felt the finality of that phrase. The request reduced Josh to a list of physical details: age eight, brown hair, brown eyes, blue coat. The person on the other end of the line reconstructed a boy from the air Jack used to speak the words, but there was no room in this new boy for Josh’s love of chocolate milk. If they didn’t know about that, didn’t know that the boy they were looking for once drew a huge blue circle and said it was a magnified drop of water, could they find the right one?

“I’ll go look,” Jack said after he hung up the phone.

Susan nodded. “I’ll stay by the phone. Take a jacket. It’s snowing.” As if snow fell on Christmas Eve in San Francisco all the time. As if he were going to the corner to pick up a loaf

of bread. He ran his fingers through her soft, blond hair.

Jack walked the four blocks to Andrew's house slowly, looking between trash cans, around the sides of fences, and behind plastic reindeer, all the places an eight-year-old might wait to play a trick on him, though that was not his son's style. Josh had started walking to Andrew's house alone this year, and he had successfully completed the journey dozens of times.

Jack arrived at the baby blue Victorian walkup and rang the bell. He wished he could believe the cheerfulness of the lights strung along the eaves. When Helen answered the door, her face told him everything he needed to know, but he asked anyway, "Is Josh here yet?" The sound of his son's name comforted him. The name so clearly evoked the boy who wanted a turtle for Christmas that surely just saying it would summon him.

Helen pressed her lips together and shook her head. "Do you want to come in for a minute?"

"No, I'm going to keep looking."

"Ron's out looking, too."

Jack shrugged. If he couldn't find his son, what chance did this other man have, this man who didn't even know Josh wanted to be an architect like his dad when he grew up? Then Jack remembered what he was supposed to say. "Thanks."

He crossed the street and walked back toward his house in the same methodical way. He searched the alleyways for blocks in each direction and tried all the paths in the nearest park. At the far side of the park, he stood by a merry-go-round and realized he had been gone for hours. Snow no longer fell, and he wondered when it had stopped, could not recall the last time he felt flakes hit his face. How odd for something as precious as a once-in-twenty-year snowfall to matter so little.

He gave the merry-go-round a slow push, just the speed Josh liked it. Josh had tried for years to go faster but always got sick and had at last resigned himself to this gentler pace. Jack let the metal bars hit his hand as they went around. When his fingers grew numb, he shoved his hands in his pockets and went home.

He stood in front of his door, staring at the discolored spot in the middle of the wreath where the knocker had been before Josh watched *A Christmas Carol*. Josh had demanded its removal, convinced it would turn into the head of Jacob Marley at any moment. Jack wanted a knocker now so he could have the door opened for him, so he would not have to make the choice between knowing and not knowing for himself.

“They just called,” Susan said when he walked in. She was sitting on the couch, wrapped in a blanket. She looked cold and far away, as if she sat at the end of a long street that would only grow longer as Jack tried to approach.

“I can’t go, Jack. The information is on the counter. I can’t go.” He picked up the small sheet of paper and read the address. Then he crossed the room and knelt down in front of his wife.

He had never seen her eyes retreat from him the way they did now. When hurt she usually attacked. Now he was afraid to touch her, afraid she might bruise at the slightest contact. He wanted to reassure her but heard the absurdity of that phrase, “It’s all right,” a phrase he so often used to comfort Josh. He left it unsaid and gathered her into his long arms, lay an unmoving hand on her hair. He wished he could stay rather than go forward, but he gently arranged her back on the couch and drove to the hospital.

He did not allow himself feeling or thought, but the way the woman behind the desk looked at him left no room for misunderstanding. As he followed a nurse down the hall, he

walked more and more slowly. Though with his long legs he could have taken one step for every two of hers, the nurse had to stop and wait for him to catch up. Finally she turned into one in a row of identical rooms and stood outside a curtain.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Wood. Your son was dead when he got here. An anonymous 911 call. Cause of death is unknown, but it may have been a brain hemorrhage. He definitely had head trauma. We can do an autopsy if you want. He’s right in here. I’ll leave you alone now.”

Jack stood looking at the thin piece of cloth. Washed out pastel colors in a haphazard design gave the impression of a bunch of hospital gowns sewn together. Such a flimsy barrier. He stepped around the curtain, and the nurse’s words came back to him, “I’ll leave you alone now.” Alone. This body on the bed was no longer a person who could provide company. Jack forced himself to walk to the side of the bed where he could see Josh’s face.

He could pretend his son was still alive if he looked only at his face and ignored the red staining the sheets. Josh almost looked asleep, and Jack reached out to shake him, to wake him up. But bending closer, Jack saw the awful blankness of his son’s face—usually rosy cheeks without color, lips and eyelids too heavy to move, a body without breath. Was it this complete lack of movement that meant his son was dead? In the next instant, the details became inescapable: blood on the sheets; Josh still wearing his pea coat, now ripped on the side; the not quite natural pose of his arms and legs. Only his hair seemed the same. Jack put a hand on the brown curls his son had inherited from him. They were still wet with snow. He turned to the sink on the wall and retched.

He did not want to cry. Tears were inadequate, yet soon he could no longer see Josh’s face, felt drops of water hit his hand and knew they must also be falling on his son’s cheek, his eyes. Josh deserved more than tears. He deserved howling. He deserved to have the world stop

and take note of his passing, to have it not move again until he, Josh, said it was OK. Jack wanted to smear his son's blood on his face, let it dry into a crust and matt his hair. Instead he put his finger to the tears that had fallen on Josh's face and swallowed them. In the empty hospital room, he sank to his knees and reached out a feeble hand to touch his son's shoulder, his forehead, his chin.

Maybe if he had torn the curtain and punched holes in the wall he would now deserve more than survival, but he had failed Josh in death as he had in life. No, he had not been strong. Funny that Susan could find no other reason to leave him when there were so many.

Unable to sit alone with his memories any longer, Jack walked to the window and looked at the mountains across the meadow. Gray and quiet, the world seemed content to rest in this moment. Jack wished the stillness could penetrate the walls of the house and the waste of the last two years and settle where? His soul? He was not sure he had one, might have preferred not to, but surely in two years flesh would have mended while he still felt as if he'd drowned and been only partially resuscitated.

On the distant peaks, stone occasionally pushed its way through snow. Jack envied the mountains their solidity. He wanted to wrap his arms around one of them and press his face against it, beneath the snow, into the earth. With the touch of dirt on his cheek, he could sink down, become part of the soil, let his life disappear into these mountains that took no notice of individual tragedies, that were simply too large to care.

Without warning the screen door banged shut and a woman stood in the doorway holding a package under one arm. Aside from whoever delivered the newspaper, he had not seen another human being in a week. She wore a tan jean jacket with patches at the elbows, a hand-knit, light blue scarf, and a hunting hat with orange, yellow, and brown squares. She removed the hat and

shook out strawberry blond hair that fell to her shoulders. When she saw his coffee cup, her green eyes narrowed and she said, “God damn it, you’re not drinking my coffee are you? Is that the good stuff or the Folgers? And you might shovel the porch. I assumed no one was here.”

The kitchen came into sharp focus—crumbs on the wood table, dirty dishes in the sink, coffee grounds scattered across the orange countertop. Jack examined the dark brown liquid and tried to pull his thoughts back to when he brewed it. He couldn’t remember. And what was he wearing? He checked and found jeans and a brown sweater, both reasonably clean.

“Oh jeez, I forget how fragile some of you people are. I’m sorry.” She stomped her boots on the welcome mat then approached. “Tracey Warren,” she said, and stuck out her hand.

Jack was holding his coffee cup in his right hand, and it took him a moment to figure out he needed to switch it to his left. Her hand fit nicely into his, and she had a strong grip, which he returned.

“Jack Wood,” he said. Her skin felt rough and dry but pleasant.

“You have long fingers,” she said then flushed, let go, and rubbed her hand on her pants. “I mean, just drink the Folgers, okay? I can’t afford to feed all of you. You look like you need to be fed, though. Have you had breakfast?”

Jack indicated his coffee cup.

“OK, hold on, let me put these sheets away.” She disappeared into the living room and Jack stood watching the doorway until she returned to fill it. He was glad she came back, even though she now looked at him as if she’d like to open him up and see what needed fixing.

“There’s oatmeal and eggs. Which do you prefer?” she said.

“I’ve been eating the oatmeal,” he said.

She had turned to the cupboard but now looked back over her shoulder at him. “You’ve

what?"

"I've been having oatmeal for breakfast."

She faced him and leaned back on the counter, her fingers gripping the edge. "Jesus Christ, what do you think this is, some sort of full-service bed and breakfast? You have to bring your own food. Didn't you read the rules? They're posted all over the place. What else have you eaten?"

Jack sat down.

"Oh, don't pull this lily-boy routine on me. You have to be able to feed yourself."

He attempted a half grin. "I told you, I've been eating oatmeal."

"Why didn't you go into town and buy some groceries? How long have you been here?"

He struggled to come up with the exact accounting of days she seemed to want but failed.

"About a week."

"You've been eating Grace's oatmeal for a week?" He hadn't thought her voice could get any louder. She began to chew on the bottom, right corner of her lip.

"There's some other food in the freezer," he said.

"You ate her hot pockets, too? Look, it's a monastery. They don't have room service."

She looked as if she were holding onto the counter mainly to keep herself from leaping over the table at him.

"What kind of a nun are you?" he asked.

Tracey's lips parted slightly and she shook her head back and forth, the light catching first the blond, then the red in her hair. She smiled, and Jack felt the temperature in the room rise several degrees. Her lips were slightly redder than the terra cotta roof tiles in California. She walked over to the table, sat down opposite Jack, and leaned forward, never taking her eyes off

him.

“You really think I could be a nun? That beats anything I’m likely to hear for the next month, including Mrs. Pulanski telling me her dog has multiple personalities. Just for that, I’ll make sure Grace forgives you for the oatmeal. She really is a nun, so she’s good at that kind of thing.”

“Why are you here if you’re not a nun?” The question surprised Jack as much as it appeared to surprise Tracey. He’d intended to say something about never going near her coffee again.

“This isn’t your private little island retreat, you know. Other people use it.” She looked at him as if he were a rare animal or disease and she couldn’t decide whether he needed to be protected or eliminated. Shaking her head again, she continued. “I grew up just down the road. My folks still live there. I come and sit when I need some quiet. This summer I helped the sisters set up their sheep flock, so I was here quite a bit.”

She sat and looked out the window for a few moments then turned her green eyes back to him. He noticed a faint splay of freckles across her nose. “Now, you never told me what you wanted for breakfast.”

Jack hesitated. Many of his friends had cooked for him after Josh died, after Susan left; it seemed to be the only response they could think of, as though if the body were well fed, the spirit would recover. This woman, though, offered him food in much the same way she might fill a dog’s bowl—he would not be expected to do anything but eat. He realized he was staring at her and she returned his gaze. With her head cocked, she looked like a little kid about to get into mischief.

Tracey turned away first. She rose quickly and crossed to the cupboards. “Well?” she

said.

“Pancakes,” Jack said.

“That wasn’t on the menu.”

“But that’s what I want.”

Tracey was searching for pans in the cabinet. “What are you, eight?”

Jack twitched, dropped his eyes. “Never mind,” he said.

“Oh come on, don’t—” She turned, came back, and leaned over the table, her face only a foot away from his. He got the feeling she would have liked to check his teeth. “Good lord,” she said, “what happened to you? I’ve seen horses about to be shot who are in better shape than you are.”

Her voice was soft and no longer angry and Jack had the urge to tell her exactly what she asked. Instead he said, “I don’t know.”

“Now if you don’t want to tell me, that’s fine, but I hate being lied to when I’ve offered someone breakfast.” She rose, poured herself a cup of coffee from the pot he’d made, took a sip. “And stop drinking my coffee.”

He expected her to leave then, but when he looked up she was standing at the stove cooking oatmeal. She seemed like the opposite of a dream, too real to be set down in the middle of this world he inhabited. She came from the same place as the mountains, and though he could see them, he could not approach them. This distance hadn’t stopped her, though, and now a person as solid as those peaks stood only a few feet away cooking oatmeal.

When it was done, she spooned some into a bowl and sat across the table eating without saying a word. He watched the spoon rise and fall. She finished, washed and dried her dishes, fastened the snaps on her jacket, and walked past him to the door. He felt the air rush in, heard

the screen door creak.

“I can’t,” he said, raising his voice against the wind.

The room grew cold as she stood in the doorway. Finally, she stepped back into the house and let the door swing shut. Quiet returned. She stood with her hand still on the doorknob, and Jack did not look at her.

“Can’t what?” she said.

“I can’t go to town.”

“What has that got to do with me?”

“Strong” Susan had called him. How little she had seen. She never realized that only by putting a hand out for others had he steadied himself. If they had touched him, their fingertips would have come away dripping with his failure to keep Josh alive. Is that what Susan had wanted him to admit? Would she be pleased to see him reduced to this, begging a stranger to bring him food?

“Please,” he said, not looking up. He half expected Tracey to throw something at him.

She sighed. “All right, I come out this way anyway, so I’ll bring your food. But it’s going to cost you.” She pulled her gloves off and put them back on again. “There’s more oatmeal in the pot. And nice picture in the paper, by the way.”

The screen door banged shut, and the room was emptier than it had been before she came. “I appreciate your being strong, Jack, but I needed someone to cry with more than a shoulder to cry on,” Susan had said. Jack put his head down on the table and wished for the strength he never had.