

CHAPTER TWO

Gayle pulled her car into the driveway Thursday night after work. It was still daylight, although the days were getting shorter. As she stepped out, the heady smell of evening and autumn caught her. She took a moment to relish it. Gold, red and brown leaves littered lawns. Swollen crusty red blossoms crowned a variety of broadleaf geraniums in the yard next door. Someone was burning dry leaves across the street. The smoke, obscuring everything behind it, hung like a dense fog. Mystically, ghostly images floated upward to dissipate in the waning sunlight. Gayle leaned on her car, resting her arms on the top. How she loved this time of year.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're home!" Gayle turned to see Ellen hurrying toward her waving a piece a paper. "I want to show you this!"

"Come inside," Gayle said and led the way to her apartment.

Ellen followed Gayle inside. "I don't know what to think of this." She slumped into the love seat just inside the door, "I don't know what I should do!"

"Let me see." Gayle sat beside her friend. Ellen moved quickly, pulling the dark, flowered lounging robe she wore away from touching Gayle's pastel yellow uniform as though she was ashamed of it. Gayle gave her a questioning look but said nothing as she took the paper Ellen held out to her.

"What would make a thirteen-year-old write something s-s-so morbid and so negative?" Ellen asked, tears threatening.

Gayle read the few lines aloud. "Last night I had a dream that I could fly like Peter Pan. High in the sky, over the clouds, free in the wind. Then I woke up. I didn't want to wake up because then I knew it was only a dream. I wish I could die. Then I could fly. Fly like Peter Pan and go anywhere."

"See what I mean!" Ellen jumped up and snatched the paper from Gayle. "Why would a child want to commit suicide?"

THURSDAY'S SECRET

"Oh, Ellen. I don't think that's what this says. Sandra isn't thinking of committing suicide. She's just connecting her fantasies and dreams with the things she knows. She knows Peter Pan is fantasy, but angels in heaven can fly. How do you get to heaven? You have to die. To her, fantasy and heaven are one and the same."

Ellen sat down again, this time ignoring the closeness of her gaudy coloured apparel to Gayle's sunny outfit. "Do you think so?"

Gayle patted Ellen's hand. "I don't think you have anything to be concerned about. I'm sure Sandra is thinking more about flying than dying. Don't worry. Your girls seem quite okay."

"Oh, it's probably me. I'm the one not adjusting." Ellen's head drooped, her shoulders slumped.

"You haven't been on your own for very long," Gayle told her. "Changes take time." A feeling of *déjà vu* swept over Gayle and she remembered a similar conversation several years ago when she had been the one in need of reassurance. "Come on Ellen," she said standing, "let me walk you home. I'll take a minute to talk to Sandra, and to Jami. But I'm sure they're fine."

Gayle spent longer at Ellen's than she had anticipated. Her conversation with the girls turned out to be quite enjoyable. Sandra showed Gayle the pictures she had drawn of Peter Pan. Jami, who was fifteen, joined in and showed Gayle her unicorn collection. All three talked about how neat it was to dream. The girls were happy, both talking about their school friends and activities. Several times Gayle looked up at Ellen, who now was also smiling, the worry lines not so evident on her face.

"I guess I overreacted," she told Gayle when she walked her to the door a little while later. "I can't help but think they're struggling like I am."

Gayle faced Ellen once she had stepped outside. "I believe they knew there were problems in your marriage, yet both of them sound as though they're happy to be free of the stress."

"I am, too, most of the time," Ellen told her. "In fact I know we're better off. It's just... I—I get so lonely."

Gayle felt a lump rise in her own throat. "I know. I don't think that ever goes away."

Ellen looked at Gayle. "You mean you still get lonely?"

Gayle smiled slightly, touching Ellen on the arm. "At times. But when I feel that way I stay longer at the nursing home to give some extra care to my patients. Or, I read church magazines, especially conference talks, and listen to some good music. Most times I get down on my knees to talk to Heavenly Father. I want you to know I've shed my share of tears."

Ellen looked a little surprised but only responded pitifully with, "But I don't have senior citizens to work with."

"But," Gayle motioned toward the open door behind her, her voice firm but kind, "you do have two lovely daughters. You're lucky," she said.

Ellen grimaced sheepishly. "I'm sorry. I know I'm lucky. I guess I'm just feeling sorry for myself today."

"That's okay. Sometimes feeling sorry for yourself is therapeutic as long as it's temporary." Gayle patted Ellen's arm and stepped away.

"I hope so." Ellen waved as Gayle headed down the sidewalk. Gayle took one last glance backward, then with a farewell smile turned toward home.

The sun had dropped behind the distant hills giving the sky a grey drabness. The air was still and quiet, the mood solemn. The conversation with Ellen had evoked strong memories and Gayle couldn't stop the feelings of melancholy which overcame her. As soon as she was inside her apartment, she let the tears slide down her cheek. "None of this, Gayle Anderson," she said aloud as she wiped the tears away. "There's too much to be done for the opening social next week. You just don't have time to feel sorry for yourself."

Gayle hurried through a supper of yesterday's leftovers and then picked up her single adult books. It took painstaking discipline to keep her mind on the assignments and handouts she'd need for