

A Sleep of Years

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Dedication

For RWR, who found out too early what angel song sounds like.

Book One

Chapter One

“You’re what?” Waylan asked. He sat beside me, nervously tracing the flowers on my maroon bedspread.

“I’m pregnant,” I whispered, avoiding his eyes and focusing instead on the large, pink blossom under his hand.

Waylan abruptly rose and paced past the *Titanic* poster then stopped at my desk and paced the other way. “It’s a mistake, Jen,” he finally managed. His shoulders slumped, and his head tilted forward. “Damn. It’s got to be a mistake.”

I smoothed the bedspread, erasing the wrinkles where he’d been. “No, it’s not.”

Waylan raked his fingers through his hair. “It could’ve been a bad test. Or you could’ve....” His voice died as I stared into blue eyes that looked like storms had danced across them.

I folded my hands in my lap. “Or I could’ve messed it up. Done something wrong,” I finished. “Is that what you think?”

“Jen, just wait a minute—” Waylan’s arms hung limply. His large white tee-shirt had come untucked from his jeans.

“No, you wait a minute.” I walked to the dresser. Digging under my panties, I found them--three hard, plastic squares with faint red plus signs.

I slipped them into his outstretched palm. “I did it three times. Three damned plus signs.” Tears burned my throat as I tried to bury them. “And I prayed...harder each time.” I gulped air. “I thought maybe if I said the right thing God would listen, but He didn’t.”

Waylan dumped the squares on the bed and reached for me. “Take it easy, Jen. Breathe.”

I slipped into his embrace and closed my eyes, wishing everything would vanish. “How am I going to tell my parents?”

Waylan rubbed his hands down my back softly, reassuringly. “I don’t know.”

“They’re going to kill me. My dad is going to be humiliated.” My whole body trembled as though it were twenty degrees in the room.

“What if we didn’t tell them?”

“What?” I tried to remember what I knew about having a baby. It was late September, and I’d missed two periods. Would I show at three or four months?

“Maybe we won’t have to,” Waylan repeated, louder.

I shook my head. “But that’s crazy. They’ll figure it out. They’ll see.” My voice quivered, thinning.

Waylan slowly released me. “Jesus, Jen.” He frowned, hard worry lines etched into his face. Stale afternoon

sunlight slipped through the window. "I'm a junior, and you're only a sophomore. We can't have a baby, not now." He paced the room like a caged tiger.

"But we are having a baby," I argued in a shrill voice. "I'm carrying your child, Waylan." I slumped onto the bed, cradling my head in both hands. "My dad's going to kill me." My whole body began trembling as though I cried without tears. "I'm supposed to be the responsible child."

He turned toward the window. Sunlight haloed his tall, lanky shoulders. His hands settled on his hips, and he threaded his fingers through his jean belt loops. The monogrammed bracelet I'd given him last Christmas glittered. "Don't panic."

"I can't help it," I whispered, imaging my flat stomach bulging. I closed my eyes, cringing. I didn't want to be fat. I didn't want this baby. Why hadn't God given it to a couple who had been trying to have a baby for years? Wasn't that what miracles were for?

"Come here," he said and gathered me into his arms. "I know you're scared. I am, too. We've got to think about this, okay? We'll figure something out."

"Okay." I drew in a shuddering breath and leaned into him. Waylan brushed a finger through my hair, lifted a few long strands over my shoulder, and kissed my forehead. "That's my girl."

The sound of the front door rattling open and closed warned us my mother had arrived home from work. Taking an uneasy breath, I snatched the pregnancy tests from the bed where Waylan had laid them and shoved them back into my drawer.

"Jen?" My mother came toward my room.

I leaned in front of the dresser as though conveniently placing my body there would mask our terrible secret. "Yeah, Mom?"

She opened the door, looking first at Waylan and then at me. Her fingers gripped the doorknob tightly, and I could tell she didn't like the door being closed.

"Waylan was just helping with homework."

"Why don't you work at the kitchen table? At least you can still find it." She pointed at my cluttered desk. "It would be hard to get any work done there."

She turned and smiled at my boyfriend. "Hello, Waylan." Against her bright yellow blazer, a gold cello pin glittered. It had been years since she had played her cello, but I remembered her music from when I was small. I used to hear it before I drifted to sleep.

Her perfume filled the air, and I closed my eyes, savoring the way it seemed to melt the years. She'd always worn Channel No. 5, and in that scent, I floundered, wishing I could go back to being a child and crawl into her lap.

"Hi, Mrs. Landry." Waylan replied quietly as he pretended to spot a scrap of paper on the floor that he picked up and threw away.

Mom quickly turned to me. "Where is your sister?"

My fingers tapped the dresser. "Track practice." I felt like I was five again, sitting at the piano bench and posturing myself appropriately.

She turned to Waylan. "Are you staying for dinner? We're having meatloaf."

Waylan's gaze lifted just long enough to say, "No," before falling again as he tagged on, "thank you, ma'am." He peered at his watch. "I guess I'd better go home. I've got a calculus test tomorrow."

Mom disappeared through the doorway as I called out, "I'll be out in a few minutes to help."

"Okay." She gave me a meaningful look that suggested I leave the door open.

Once she'd gone, I exhaled slowly and felt my shoulders slump. I jerked my hands from the dresser. Tears blurred my vision. I hadn't done anything wrong right then. I hadn't lied, and I hadn't been a disrespectful daughter. I hadn't done anything wrong.

Except gotten pregnant.

My mother had always tried to talk about everything, but this wasn't something I could share, not now and possibly not ever.

"Jen, it's going to be okay," Waylan said, staring at my trembling hands. He took them and pulled me to him. "We'll get through this—one way or another."

I laid my head on his chest and listened to the drumming of his heart. "I'm really scared."

He rested his chin on the top of my head. "That makes two of us. But we're in this together."

* * *

"Thank you, Lord, for the chance to share this dinner with the three most wonderful women in the world," my father said. "God bless this food." His head was bowed, and he closed his eyes tightly, so unaware that I studied him when I should have been talking to God. "And keep us safe in Your loving embrace. In Jesus' name, Amen."

I whispered that final word without conviction. I didn't want to be kept in God's embrace. I just wanted to know why this had to happen—and how I could stop it.

"Here," my father said, handing me the mashed potatoes. I looked at their smooth whiteness and cringed at the thought of eating them. My stomach lurched as I smelled the meatloaf, and yet I knew if I excused myself everyone would suspect something. My father always came home expecting us to eat as a family.

"Thank you." I accepted the bowl and hefted a small spoonful onto my plate. From my peripheral vision, I saw my three other family members. Meagan, my older sister, leaned forward to pick up the plate of meatloaf when the locket her boyfriend had given her dangled outward and struck a musical resonance against her water glass.

She grabbed the locket and tucked it into her shirt before pushing her long, brown hair from her face and grabbing the plate. She chose a slice of the meatloaf and set it on her dish before handing the plate to my father. My gaze followed the plate, staring at these people who had known me my whole life. Suddenly they were acquaintances, like teachers. I was not their daughter. Meagan wasn't my sister.

My father noticed my weighted stare and switched his focus to my face. "Something wrong?"

"Nope." Instead of meeting his gaze, I focused on the new inch of baldness which had overtaken his hairline this year. Pretty soon, he'd have no hair. Sooner than that, he'd have no daughter; he'd hate me for this.

I hated me for this.

"Jennifer? You okay?" He set the plate down and frowned. "You look pale."

"I'm all right," I insisted, selecting a bread slice I didn't intend to eat. I busied myself buttering it. *Just act normal*, I thought, trying to disguise my trembling hands with the knife stroking the bread. *Act normal, and they*

won't realize anything is wrong.

Yet.

"You were at track practice really late, weren't you?" my mother asked, shifting the conversation to Meagan. I still felt my father's watchful gaze lingering. He selected his slice of meatloaf without forcing his attention from my face.

He reached across the table and touched my hand, stroking my index finger. "Are you sick, Jen Jen?" He hadn't called me that in years. At that moment, I felt the weight of his love, and an unbearable pressure of breath filled me.

Daddy, I thought, I'm sorry. Sweet Jesus, I'm sorry. Please don't hate me. Please tell me you won't hate me. I hate me enough for both of us.

I stifled the sobs filling my body.

"Yeah," Meagan answered. "I was late coming home, but I had to get ready for the first meet."

I blinked once, twice, three times, and still my father's face blurred until all lines and shadows had vanished into flesh, and despite the pain, for that instant I was relieved I couldn't read his expression.

"I thought you were only an alternate for the team," Mom said in a voice that sounded far away. "You should have been home earlier."

"I was just an alternate," Meagan replied. "But not anymore. This was my lucky day. Lissa Renard dropped out."

Despite my blurry vision, I took the plate of meatloaf my mother offered and hefted a piece onto my place.

"Why did Lissa drop out? Wasn't she one of the best runners?" Mom lifted her glass and took a sip of water.

"Yeah," Meagan agreed, taking a bite of meatloaf. As I listened, I cut mine up into small pieces, wondering how I would manage to swallow any of it. I reached for the salt shaker. "But," Meagan continued, "you can't run track if you're pregnant."

My arm jerked backward, knocking my water glass over. I shuddered and pushed my chair from the table, wondering if I could make it to the bathroom before I got sick.

"Jen?" My father called as I raced down the hall and locked myself inside. I hunched over the toilet and let the spasms claim my body. My father pounded on the door. "Jen, are you okay?"

Oh, God, Daddy. I'm sorry.

The pounding ceased as the contents of my stomach spewed from my mouth, the acid biting my throat. Sweat filmed my face.

"Jen Jen?" my father's patient voice. "Are you all right?"

"Stomach flu," I said weakly. "I've got a stomach flu." His hard soles tapped the floor as he walked away, leaving me alone, facing my reflection. A small dab of the vomit sat in the corner of my mouth, and I huddled over the sink, turned on the water. Cupping my hands, I filled them with water and rinsed out my mouth, trying to get rid of that horrible bitter taste. It remained.

I stood and let the water keep running as tears seeped down my face. Mascara darkened the streaks. In the corner of my eye I saw my blue toothbrush in the holder. Toothpaste lay close by and beside it a brush. Then I saw

a small triangular hair trimming tool. Just where its teeth began I saw the silver razor blade buried in the tool.

I turned my arms over and flashed the insides toward the fluorescent lights. The flesh seemed paler than elsewhere. Thin blue lines ran under the skin, pumping blood through my body. I brushed my fingers across the soft, smooth flesh, probing.

We could still fix this. Waylan's words echoed in my head, and I thought, *No, but I could fix this. Permanently.* I picked up the tool and pried it open.

"Jennifer, are you all right?" my father said in a more demanding tone.

The blade finally slid free, and it sliced across my index finger, nicking me as it fell to the floor.

"Damn," I said. The tears thickened so I couldn't see my finger, only the red drops that bubbled to the surface. Tears splashed my hand, mingling with the blood, thinning to a lighter pink.

"I'm okay, Daddy." My voice sounded frighteningly normal as I ignored the cut and bent to retrieve the blade, knowing I was a coward. I wasn't afraid to kill the baby, just afraid to die.

I pressed the blade back into its housing and leaned against the wall. My legs slowly gave under me, and I slid down the wall, feeling my shirt tag scratch my neck. My head filled with the sound of running water. Tears shuddered through me and I wrapped my arms around my body, trying to still them both. I was a coward, and cowards couldn't do what needed to be done.

I cradled my head in my hands and wept as the memories came—my father throwing me through the air so I could try to catch stars, walking beside me right after we'd bought a popsicle from the ice cream truck, kissing my cheek right before I slipped out the door to go to my freshman prom. "I love you, Jen Jen," he'd said.

But was love ever constant? Did it stay intact even when it shouldn't, when we didn't deserve it? Failing my father seemed so much worse than failing myself.

I forced myself to stand. Bending over the sink, I dipped my hands into the cold water and splashed my face, ignoring the drops splattering my clothes. My reflection caught my attention, and I looked at the long face surrounded by dark strands matting the skin.

I didn't recognize myself anymore.

Dark brown eyes blinked once, twice. My lips trembled, and my entire face was as white as flour. How could a few careless nights change so much? How could they leave me with something I could never wash away?

"Jenny?" Meagan called.

"I'll be out in a sec." I grabbed a maroon towel and blotted my face before refolding the towel and opening the door.

"Are you all right?" Her fingers reached for my face and pushed back a long strand of hair stuck to my cheek.

"Fine," I mumbled, placing a hand over my stomach. "I've just got a stomach virus."

"Stay away from me," Meagan said in a mock serious tone as she took a step backward. "I don't want it. My first meet is just a week away."

No, I thought, you don't want this. I started to walk around her when she called my name again, and I forced myself to turn and half-smile. "Yeah?"

"Isn't it great that I'll be competing with the track team? I never thought I'd get to." A warm smile lit up her

face, and her blue eyes seemed enormous. "I can't believe I finally made it." Her words tumbled together as though she couldn't speak quickly enough. "So what if I got there on a fluke. Lissa should have known. I've worked hard. I deserve to run."

"Yeah," I responded. My fingers absently rubbed my stomach. "Congratulations. You deserve it."

Still, all I could think about was Lissa. No doubt the school would be buzzing with her name. *Who was the father?* they'd wonder. *The poor cheerleader couldn't keep her legs closed,* they'd think. Scarlet heat flushed my cheeks, and bile filled my mouth, making me want to vomit again.

I'd be next. "Jennifer Landry is so easy," they'd whisper behind cupped hands as I walked down the hall. How does Waylan know that the baby is his? It could be anybody's. She's like a bitch in heat." It didn't matter that Waylan had been the only one. The rumors always became more sensational.

"You'll have to come to the meets," Meagan bubbled. Before I realized what was happening, she hugged me. "God, I'm so happy, Jenny. We're so lucky. This is finally my chance."

I clenched my eyes shut. "You'll be great, Meg." My voice thinned, threatening to break.

My sister slowly withdrew and peered at me. "You're so pale. Are you sure you're okay?"

I nodded woodenly. "Yeah. I just feel sick. I'm going to bed early."

"You'll feel better in the morning." Meagan stepped into the bathroom and closed the door. As it locked, I hurried to my room, changed into a sleep shirt, and crawled under the covers, waiting for sleep.

As the grandfather clock down the hall chimed eleven, I stared at the textured white ceiling. Tiny flecks of silver glittered amid the paint and sparkled in the moon-stained night. I heard the tell-tale jiggle of my doorknob, and I rolled to my side so I could see the doorway. My hair slipped across my face, helping to conceal my wakeful state.

My father softly crossed the room and knelt. "Jen Jen?" he whispered. His hand, the same one that had pushed me on swings and tickled me until I giggled, pulled the hair from my face and laid it down my back. His fingers gently traveled my spine, reminding me of when he used to tuck me in and draw letters on my back. "You awake?"

My body answered with stillness. "I hope you feel better tomorrow." He leaned forward, brushed his lips across my forehead, and stood. "I'll miss you." For what seemed like an eternity, he lingered, watching me sleep. Through narrowed eyes, I saw the faintest smile cross his face. Then he headed through the doorway and disappeared.

"Daddy," I whispered. My fingers clutched the sheets, wadding them into uneven bunches. I pulled my knees to my chest and curled into a tight ball. "I'm sorry, Daddy." I touched my forehead where he'd kissed me, my fingertips caressing the skin as though I could absorb his touch and the rest of me might feel safely loved. As the darkness closed in around me, watching me cry myself to sleep, I trembled.

