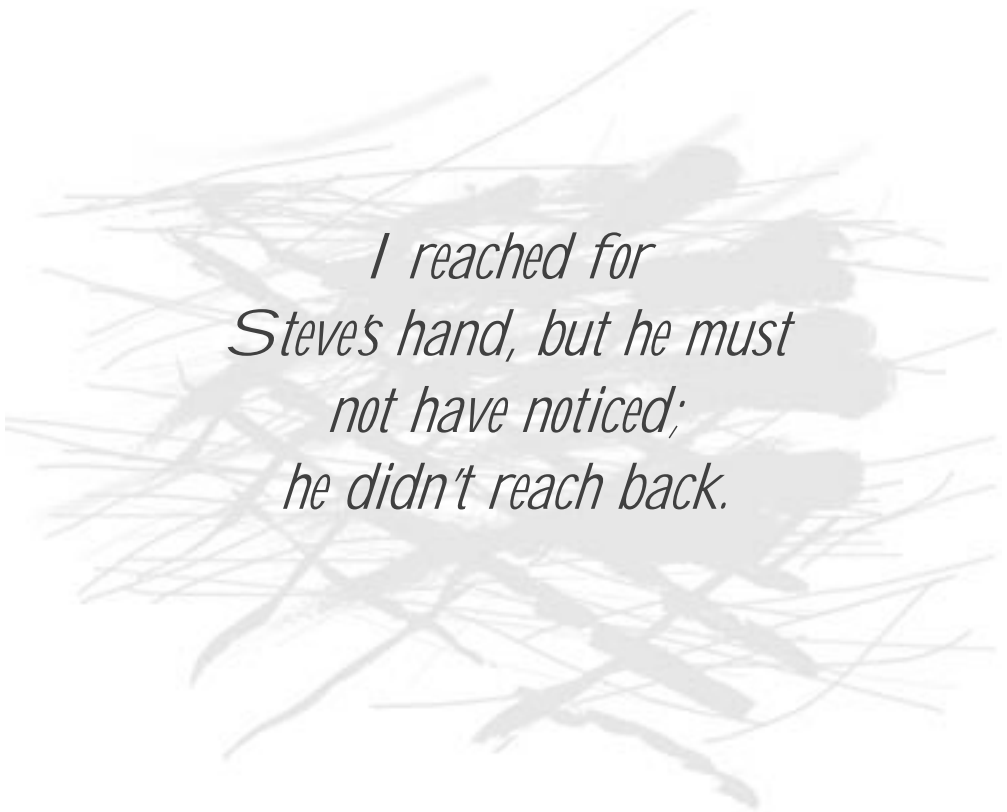


CHAPTER ONE



**STATIC  
IN THE  
STORM**



*I reached for  
Steve's hand, but he must  
not have noticed;  
he didn't reach back.*

*The havoc you wreaked in my life was not the first storm I endured. Another struck two years prior to my even being aware of your existence. It started in the sterility of a doctor's office. I remember listening to my own heartbeat in the silence of that examining room.*

**W**hat's wrong, Maryann?" My whispered words screamed.

I searched my doctor's face, desperate for the reassurance of the familiar crinkles around her soft blue eyes. She murmured some word of comfort, in vain.

A streak of lightning sliced the sky.

"You can't find the heartbeat, can you?" I asked quietly. She was my friend more often than she was my doctor, and I would not accept anything less than the full truth.

Maryann looked up at me, and then a smile caught the edge of her lips. "This baby is definitely your child, Heather. I'm sure he's dodging the Doppler just to frustrate me."

Her teasing didn't entirely relax me, but I accepted her attempt and tried to smile. "When have I ever frustrated you? I have been the calming source in your life, the sunshine after the rain, the wind beneath your wings—"

"Right." She snorted. "Okay. Maybe *frustrate* is the wrong word for it. Perhaps *torment* would work better."

"Word choice, eh? I knew you would bring it around to Scrabble sooner or later." This was my soul sister. "The only reason I let you win was so Byron wouldn't have to go home ashamed that his esteemed wife was beat by—"

"Let me win? You need a psychiatrist, girl, not an obstetrician." Maryann's sandy brown hair maintained a tousled look, whether in the office or at the beach, and her intimidating brilliance was disguised by playful kindness. "Now hush. I want to hear your son."

"It's a girl, Maryann."

"It's a boy. Shh." She raised a finger to her lips and held the silence. Her eyebrows were furrowed. The thunder growled. "So, why didn't Steve come with you today?"

"Come on, Maryann. You know him."

"Yeah, but he hasn't even heard the heartbeat yet."

"I know. But he doesn't take time off work for things like this."

"Did you ask him to come?"

"Well, no. But I know he wouldn't want to."

"Heather," she touched her fingers to her forehead, "you have to do your part. Listen, Steve may be emotionally inaccessible at times—I'll give you that—but that doesn't let you off the hook. You could have at least asked him to come."

"But then he'd come out of obligation and I'd feel guilty."

"Nah. He wouldn't complain."

"Okay. He probably wouldn't say a word, but he'd be ticked off inside. I'm sure he would be."

“You can’t jump to conclusions, Heather. It doesn’t help.”

“Well, what am I supposed to do? I don’t know what he’s thinking. Either he has no feelings whatsoever or he just doesn’t want to tell them to me. Yesterday he felt the baby move for the first time, and I don’t even know if he thought that was exciting or not.”

“You felt the baby move?”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot to tell you. Lately I’ve been feeling her flutter all the time, way more than I did with the boys at five months.”

“Hmm. I’m surprised. That’s early.” She rested cool, gloved fingers gently on my belly for a moment. “But, Heather, I’ll bet Steve was just as excited as you were. You can’t let his poker face fool you.”

“Right. If only this *were* a card game. I’d let him win every hand if only we could have some interaction while we played.” I waved my hand. “Anyway, I was pretty excited.” I put my hand on my belly, too. “Oh, Maryann, I think it must have been her little elbow poking up against me. And she didn’t pull away until I moved again.”

“No doubt a little boy wanting his daddy.” Her words smiled, but Maryann’s face looked serious as she spread more gel on my belly and started moving the monitor over it. She turned the volume up and we listened to the swishy noises inside me. After a few minutes she clicked it off and looked at me, but her eyes looked right through me as her thoughts roved. “This Doppler must not be working.”

I felt a sprinkle of fear fall over me again. “You still can’t find the heartbeat? What are you going to do?”

“Well, I’m going to get a newer one from the other room. This one’s older than you are.” She winked.

I laughed. But when she left, I lay back, gently massaged the protrusion that represented my baby, and waited for the

fluttering to begin. She had measured up exactly right and had moved just yesterday. Nothing could be wrong.

I watched the nimbus clouds pile on top of each other. Occasionally an escaped raindrop splattered against the window, but the sky was not yet ready to release its fury. I've always believed that we each choose our own path, but as I stared out the window in that quiet examining room, I realized for the first time that we don't get to choose the obstacles we face on the journey.

*Oh, God, don't let this be my obstacle. Let me learn about life another way.*

**M**aryann was silent for nearly five minutes as she moved the cool plastic plate back and forth over my belly, pushing gently and then more firmly, listening to the creaks and groans, rumbles and churnings.

"Wait. I heard it," I said after an especially loud whoosh.

"No. That did sound somewhat like a baby's heartbeat, but it's actually the blood flow through your arteries. Listen." We heard some more whooshing sounds. "It's much slower than the baby's heartbeat." She waited a moment longer and then turned off the monitor. I watched her long, smooth fingers fold the tool neatly into the drawer and then float upward to slide through the soft curls over her eyes. She glanced at the clock and then put the lid on the gel and straightened the instruments beside it. Finally, she looked at me, pulling the white jacket tight around her athletic shoulders as she crossed her arms in front of her. "Well, Heather, we're going to have to get you to the hospital for an ultrasound."

The storm broke and propelled its wrath against me. I knew the truth without being told.

I have heard the question from little kids and from old ladies: Why does God let bad things happen to good people?

I've known a mother who left her fourteen-month-old son home alone in his crib for sixteen hours; she laughed when the child was taken away from her. Steve and I had chosen names for our baby before she was the size of a pea; before she was as big as a banana, I had blankets and diapers and pajamas folded neatly in the room that would be her home. Our first two children had been conceived accidentally, at times inconvenient for us; we loved them no less for it. This child had been prayed for and anticipated, our reward for a job well done.

The illusion of control shattered before my eyes.

"Don't give up, Heather. We might be able to pick up the heartbeat at the hospital." I nodded heavily and prepared to leave while Maryann personally made arrangements. Just before I left the office, she grabbed my arm and pulled me into a spontaneous hug. She almost squeezed the tears out of me.

Moments after stepping outside, I felt my hair pressed slick against my scalp, but I did not pop open my umbrella or run through the rain. And I sat quietly before I turned on the car. It's hard to believe that God knows our prayers when we do not even know what to say. My wipers slapped the rain that dumped on my windshield, and I thought about the baby pushing up against me the day before. No wonder she hadn't moved away when I touched her. She couldn't.

**I** called Steve when I got home. "What are we going to do?" I lamented quietly.

Over the thick static threatening our connection, I heard Steve's answer. "We'll go ... hospital like ... said and find out if every ... alright."

I wanted *connection*.

"Oh, Steve, what's going to happen?" The dim yellow glow encircling the porch light was nearly swallowed up by the sheet of rain streaking into it. "What are we going to do?"

Steve didn't hear my question.

"I'll ... home in ten minutes and we'll ... the boys to ... parents' house. Then we'll meet ... with Maryann...." The connection was broken.

I set down the phone and stared at my reflection in the window. The paleness of my round face was hidden in the dark glass, but I could see the effects of the rain on my long, straight hair. Dark eyes looked sadly back at me and full lips twisted downward. I leaned my forehead against the cold window. *Does rain hurt when it smacks against a window? Does it want to mingle with the brown hair that is pressed into the glass?* The rain and I, like my husband and I, nearly touched each other.

When Steve came home, he threw an odd expression toward the red spot on my forehead—and I felt foolish for my meandering thoughts.

An hour later I lay on a doctor's table again, intently watching the screen, asking the technician many questions about what I saw as he wiggled the camera over my belly. He pointed the heart out to me when I asked: a little black blip on the screen, perfectly still. He must have known I understood my baby's status, but I didn't cry. Steve stood silently by my side while I joked about having to pee.

The curse of gregarious people is that our extroversion sometimes shows up at inappropriate times. I remember respecting Steve's taciturn nature, maybe for the first time since our wedding, when our neighbor showed up at our door a few years ago, her bag stuffed with clothes and her left eye badly swollen. "Can I stay with you a few days?" she asked. I, embarrassingly, responded with delighted enthusiasm to the opportunity for enjoyable company rather than, like Steve, extending hospitality and then sitting back quietly, ready to listen to words that would express her apparent suffering.

In this situation, as I stared at the screen that proved my

baby had died, I used humor as a shield. Laughter might keep away sorrow.

The technician told us to wait while he took the pictures to the doctor. We waited, and my own black blip of a heart could stand no more. Resistance crumbled. I had struggled against the sweeping sorrow—and felt as if I were pushing my way through the wind that shook the world outside—but now I wept. Our precious baby had died.

**W**hen Maryann entered the little room only minutes later, looking very disturbed, she knew she was saved the work of breaking the news to us. Instead she sat down and waited until I had finished sobbing.

“Maryann,” I croaked, “do you know if it was a girl or a boy?”

Maryann shook her head. “I don’t think we got a clear view of that from the ultrasound”—I nodded with acceptance—“but we’ll find out in a little while.”

A blast of truth hit me. The storm wasn’t over yet.

**I** craned my neck back to see him, but Steve looked straight ahead as he pushed me in a wheelchair down the hallway. Oddly, I felt surprised by his perfect features that I had come to know so well: soft brown hair falling neatly into place; thick eyelashes extending over deep brown eyes; muscular arms complementing his slim body; tall legs moving confidently forward.

The storm did not seem to touch him.

Would resistance eventually crumble for him, or did he have nothing to resist?

We passed a few moms groaning in the pains of labor, the nursery housing several newborns, and the nurses’ station where one woman grinned at me as we descended to the far end of the obstetrics hall.

I stopped looking around. Instead, I ventured back to the moments (was it only a few hours ago?) that I had pressed my head against the glass, comparing my marriage to raindrops on a window—and no longer felt foolish. Rather, I envisioned myself punching the glass, shattering it, so the rain, so Steve's love, could drench me.

I envisioned but did nothing more.

Maryann came in and sat down with us again. She didn't seem in a hurry to start the procedure, and I was thankful for that. Things were happening much too quickly already.

"I'm going to give you medication to induce labor," Maryann told me. "We will wait for full dilation to occur and for your water to break, and then you will deliver this baby as if everything were normal." She looked at me sympathetically before she continued. "I need to warn you that this will be painful and long. You are physically unprepared for this. Your body thinks it still has a few months to go."

I nodded. For once my body and mind were in agreement.

"I'm sorry, Heather and Steve. This is really tough."

I reached for Steve's hand, but he must not have noticed; he didn't reach back.

Maryann was right. Bare minutes after taking the medication, I felt my first labor pain. I gasped in surprise as I was plunged into an all-night, agonizing ordeal.

When it came time to push, I didn't bother to call for help. Steve sent for a nurse when he saw what was happening. "Try to wait until Maryann gets here, Heather," he begged. But I pushed. *What difference does it make? The baby's dead anyway.*

Maryann came in time to help deliver the placenta and to care for me. The silent infant was set aside.

Exhausted, I closed my eyes and wished for sleep. Maybe now it would all be over. I didn't care about the gender of the baby, about whether or not Steve loved me, about what

Maryann was doing. I had no desire to pray—neither to cry out in anger nor to breathe in God’s peace. I just wanted to sleep.

**A** nurse touched me on the shoulder. I turned, and in her arms was the baby, so tiny, dressed in a blue gown and a white woolen hat far too big for him. “It’s a boy. Would you like to hold him?”

*A boy?* He seemed alien to me, and I could hardly acknowledge that this baby before me was my own child. I shook my head.

But Steve reached out for him. “A boy,” he crooned as he pulled back the hat to better see the little head. I watched a half-smile creep over Steve’s face, and I couldn’t help peeping at our child. He was precious. So delicate and so small. The nurse encouraged us to undress him, to examine him thoroughly, to embrace our little one with the pride only new parents can have. We did, and the nurse left us alone.

I did not feel sad during those brief moments with our son. I had emerged into the calm of the storm. I marveled at how perfectly he was formed, how each of his tiny toes was wrinkled just right, how soft his cheeks felt, how round his belly was. His death did not diminish his beauty.

“You did a great job again, Heather,” Steve told me. I soaked up his favor like parched ground soaking in a late summer rain.

“It was worth it.” My words surprised me. I looked at the little fingers resting on mine. “An hour ago I wouldn’t have said that, but now—well, he is absolutely amazing.”

“Yes. Casey is amazing.”

We smiled at each other. The rain poured down, and I stood with head back and mouth open to take in as much as I could.

“Steve, would you ever have believed that our hearts could be so full and so empty at the same time?” A beautiful paradox. Steve turned his head to look out the window. I put my hand on his arm. “The emotion is almost too much, isn’t it?”

Steve didn't say anything for a moment. Finally, still looking out the window as if preparing to face the storm we were reentering, he shook his head. "I'm confused."

I murmured agreement.

"No, it's different," he said. I couldn't read the look in his eyes when he turned to me. "I don't feel anything at all. I mean, I'm amazed that this child is so perfectly developed, but I don't feel strong love or sadness. I wish I could agree with you that the emotion is too much, but it's not."

I let go of Steve and lifted Casey to my shoulder, patting his back as if listening for a burp. "You must be numb still, from the shock."

"No, it's not that."

We shifted uneasily in the silence.

I made another attempt. "Well, you hadn't even felt the baby move until yesterday. It makes sense that you're not feeling the loss like I am."

He looked out the window again, staring right through the drizzle. "No, it's not that, either." Steve slumped into the stiff hospital chair. "I never feel things strongly. Sometimes I wonder if I'm even able to love at all." He almost whispered the words.

I softly pressed my cheek against Casey's cold body.

Raindrops don't hurt when they smack against a window; they don't even notice the brown hair pressed into the glass. No, I had felt the extent of Steve's pain in his brief smile moments ago.

**W**hen the nurse stole into the room a while later, I kissed Casey's cheek and reluctantly handed him over to her. Then I turned my head to sleep. I could not consider my husband's emptiness just yet.

I slept as Steve signed the papers that released our child to the funeral home for cremation and as he made the appropriate

phone calls to family and friends. I barely woke when nurses checked my vitals. I slept through visitations from our pastor and friends. I groaned when I had to eat; I cried when I had to urinate; and I bawled when my milk came in.

I laid in bed begging God to transform me into a stoic so I would not have to feel the pain of loss, to help me gain comfort from people's words that little Casey was cuddled safely in his arms, or to convict me that this—like “all things ... for those who love him”—would turn out for good.

But grief overcame me. The repercussions of my loss were strewn before me like broken branches on a windswept street.

Steve wheeled me out of the hospital the next day. My arms were full of flowers, cards, and candy, but I held only emptiness.