

CHAPTER ONE

Home Again, Home Again, Jiggety-Gig

Hayley Gayle Swift, once-upon-a-time-country music diva, wiped away a tear as she sat sprawled on the soft, white leather sofa in her Nashville den. She scanned the letter in her hand once again.

Nothing much exciting going on around here (as usual). C.J.'s mom's Alzheimer's is about the same. Amanda stays busy with the twins (who are so darn cute!), Meg's working at a pawn shop, and I'll go back to teaching kindergarten when school starts. A bunch of us have been working on plans for our 35th high school reunion. Think you could come? We still don't have any place fancy around here, so it'll be in the school gym, or maybe the VFW building; at least the gym is air-conditioned now!

I hope everything's good with you. I still call Jerry at the radio station and request one of your songs at least once a week! We miss you, "Sister!" Take care of yourself.

Love, Sue



“Thirty-five years? Unbelievable,” Hayley sighed aloud to Bubba Troutt, the well-worn, fifty-something handyman/gardener/Father Confessor who was tightening the last bolt on a chronically leaky drainpipe under her kitchen sink. “It just doesn’t seem like it’s been that long.” She rested her head against the back of the sofa and stared for a few seconds at the cell phone that lay within arm’s reach. “Why haven’t I done a better job of staying in touch, Bubba?” She picked up the phone and gripped it as if feeling for a pulse. “I *loved* those girls. Maybe I could . . . nah, you can’t go home again. Isn’t that what they say?”

There was a grunt from under the sink.

“I’ve been in Nashville thirty-five years. *This* is home now, not South Carolina—even if nobody here remembers who I *am* anymore.” Hayley kicked a foot in frustration and sent a grey pillow sailing off the sofa. “Gaa! If I could just shake this writer’s block . . . come up with a new song . . . get back on top where I belong . . .” She snapped her fingers and sat up. “Hey, Bubba, that reminds me: Carrie Underwood never called me back. We were supposed to get together and work on a song this week.”

“Ungh,” came another grunt.

Hayley rose and ambled over to the large French doors that flanked the west side of the room. The sun streamed in, reflecting off her swimming pool—her *green* swimming pool—next to which a buxom platinum blonde, wearing a bikini at least two sizes too small, flipped through a *National Enquirer*.

“Bubba, why is my pool green? And who is that *Playboy* reject sitting in my chaise lounge?” Hayley stood with her arms folded across her favorite t-shirt—the turquoise one that always made her



think of the ocean she grew up next to, the one she always reached for when she was having a day like today.

“I told ya, the pump ain’t workin’. I also told ya if we had any really hot days, the water was gonna turn. Ow!” Bubba yelped as he emerged into a sitting position on the tile floor. “And that’s my new girlfriend, Suzette. I met her at church.”

Hayley snorted. “Musta changed the dress code; she doesn’t look like anybody *I’ve* ever seen in Sunday School.”

Bubba rolled his eyes as he stood up, then winced, bracing his back. “And your last trip to Sunday School was when—1990?”

“Hush up. I pay you to look after my house, not my soul.” The sulky brunette, graceful and shapely despite her baggy comfort clothes, turned and sank into an overstuffed chair. “So why isn’t the pump working?”

Bubba paused as he passed in front of the woman who was more buddy than boss, his bald head cocked in a patronizing tilt. “Because it’s gonna cost nine hundred dollars to replace it and you said, and I quote, ‘Screw *that!*’” He grinned as Hayley flinched.

“Fine. I’ll figure something out. Maybe I’ll fire *you*,” she threatened. “But the green has to go. Get it fixed. Throw some bleach in there, or something.”

There was a sudden tapping on one of the French doors. “*Bubbaaa*,” the chubby blonde whined through the glass. “You *said* you’d only be a few minutes!”

“I’m done, I’m done,” Bubba said as he opened the door and waved the girl inside. “Suzette, I want you to meet country music superstar—and my boss—the one and only Miss Hayley Swift.”

“*Swift?* Oh, my gosh! Are you, like, Taylor’s *mother?*” Su-



zette's transformation from bored to blissful was instantaneous and Hayley wasn't sure if she wanted to laugh or cry. Bubba cleared his throat and wrapped a reassuring arm around his boss.

"Honey, Miss Hayley has been one of the biggest names in country music for decades! You ever hear that great song, "*Sister Serenade*?"

Suzette shook her platinum spiked head as boredom once again engulfed her pouty face.

"Well, take my word for it; Miss Hayley here is a bigger star than ol' Taylor has ever *thought* about bein'!"

Hayley smiled in spite of herself. She kissed the hairy hand clutching her shoulder, then gave her handyman a bump with her hip. "Thanks for not using past tense on me, Tonto. Now you and"—the phrase "Bible School Barbie" flashed through her brain—"Suzette toddle along. Pool. Blue. ASAP," she reminded the receding bald head.

Good grief—Taylor Swift's mother?? she thought as she closed the door behind them, then fell into a favorite recliner. Curling into a ball, she imagined some smart-aleck Nashville deejay chortling, "What happens to has-been country queens? We shove 'em back into the closet!" *Ba-dump-BUM.*

As tears trickled down the clear, unlined face that looked a good ten years younger than its fifty-three years, Hayley let her eyes drift around the room. The walls were filled with trophies and mementos of her many achievements. *Newcomer Award, 1988 . . . Best Country Song, 1992 . . . Nashville Woman of the Year . . . 1996 . . . Songwriter of the Year, 1999 . . . Best Entertainer, 2002 . . .*

The fireplace mantle was cluttered with framed moments in time: Hayley at the Grand Ole Opry with Minnie Pearl; with Bush



Number One and Two at the White House; curtsying to the Queen in London; singing to troops in Iraq. So many songs, so many stages. When did it start to end? When did she start to find herself at home more than on the road, in front of a TV more often than in front of a camera, getting more attention from *Where Are They Now?* than *People*? Her gaze fell on a small, pink pillow half-hidden in a pile of bigger, brighter ones stacked on the sofa. Crying softly, she stumbled from the chair and snatched the little pillow to her breast—a handmade gift from her best friends back in Skerry on that euphoric May day when she'd boarded a bus bound for fame and fortune. She'd hauled that little pillow to all fifty states and most of Europe; more than once, it had cushioned her head as she faced fear, doubt, and fatigue on her way to the top.

But even as she had clung to that bedraggled memento like a cherished talisman—its cross-stitched reminder to “*Remember: there’s no place like home!*” bringing comfort time and again—she had let slide the friendships that spawned it. As her tears spilled on threads that were faded but still stitched tight, Hayley indulged in a bleak walk down Memory Lane. Images of her “gang”—brilliant Amanda, sassy Meg, lively C. J., and loyal Sue—tugged at her heart. She knew only the barest facts about their lives now, sent a perfunctory card now and then, *thought* about calling, but rarely did. Bless Sue, who had faithfully stayed in touch and kept her up to date on significant events. Her friend’s loyalty stabbed like a knife.

And what of Keith Parker? Handsome, faithful, focused, devoted Keith. Thirty-five years after the fact, Hayley still flinched when recalling the look on her boyfriend’s face at the bus station the day she departed. Commitment was the last thing on her mind at that point; fate had dealt her a golden opportunity in the form of a



bus ticket to Nashville, and she grabbed it like the brass ring it was. She'd loved Keith, but the timing was all wrong. She'd never meant to abandon him—he was the standard by which she compared every man who came after—but somehow, the time slipped away, she never made her way back home, and then it seemed too late to try. Now, with a career dying of malnutrition, her parents and her Aunt Beatrice long gone, no siblings, no husband, no children—not even a dog!—Hayley felt, for the first time, mocked instead of comforted by the pillow's clichéd admonition. Drained, she pulled an afghan around her legs as she tucked the pillow under her head and drew into a fetal position. “Oh, y'all,” she whispered raggedly, “I'm so sorry.”



The shrill trill of her cell phone jerked Hayley back to consciousness before she could make sense of anything. *Is that the security alarm? What time is it? Where's Bubba?* Slowly, her brain began to process the facts: it was late afternoon, and the phone was ringing, and ringing, and *ringing*. “Oh! Phone!” she exclaimed as the last synapse finally fell into place. She lunged out of the chair and toward the granite-topped bar that separated the den from the kitchen. “I'm here! I'm here!” she promised, hoping fervently it wasn't a vinyl siding salesman or cable TV deal-of-the-week that had wrenched her back into this pathetic day.

“Hayley Gayley! How's my girl?” Through the receiver came the irrepressible—and unmistakable—voice of Clarence “Tipsy” Mack, talent agent extraordinaire. Just this side of hustler for a two-bit record company when he happened upon Hayley at Skerry's 1987 Basket-Flower Festival, Tipsy was now one of Nashville's most respected names, and had enjoyed a golden reputation



for years. Promoters adored him because Tippy always delivered a hundred and fifty percent. Label execs loved him because he'd sent them one chart-topper after another for the past three and a half decades. Radio stations in every market carried his weekly one-minute commentary, "*Bullet Train*," and the execs of the hit TV show, "*New Country Superstar*," had offered him an insane amount of money to join their panel of judges for the upcoming fall season.

Holding the phone in place with her shoulder, Hayley returned to her nest in the chair. "I've been better," she admitted frankly.

"Well, cheer up. I've got good news. How'd ya like to take a little road trip?"

She sat up. "You got me a *gig*? Oh, Tippy! Where? When?"

Tippy chuckled. "The good ol' Bible Belt. All those little towns we used to love—Dickson, Oneonta, Fletcher, Westminster, Macclenny, even the Orange Blossom Opry!"

"Yee-haw, hold me back. When?"

"You kick off Labor Day weekend for an eight-week run."

Hayley took a moment to do the math. "Promo deadlines for those dates would have been months ago. What gives?"

There was a split-second pause, then a kinder, gentler Tippy spoke. "Well, Candy Cutler had to cancel; she's havin' some health issues."

Hayley felt a knot constrict in her stomach. "*Candy Cutler* is headlining a tour?" The copper-tressed adolescent coquette was being touted as Generation Z's LeAnn Rimes, but had only released one single and was just beginning to make her way onto radio playlists.

There was another pause. "She's not exactly headlining. She's . . . opening for Cal Taylor's "Retro Rodeo" tour."



For a full fifteen seconds, there was dead silence. Then Hayley managed to rasp out a pitiful wail. “I’m not the *headliner*?”

Tipsy was grateful he couldn’t see the look on his client’s face. He and Hayley had been together through good times and bad. It hurt him that her time in the spotlight had long ago ended and he hadn’t been able to pull her back into the game. The cold-hearted suits in today’s country music industry kept telling Tipsy he should dump the only losing member of his current roster, but Hayley was his first triumph and the reason for most of his success, and he remained loyal to a fault. He wouldn’t bail until she did. “Aw, honey, this is a great fit,” he soothed. “Cal’s fan demographics are the same as yours, and y’all enjoyed working together in the past. I thought it’d be fun for you.” He hesitated. “Singing old songs is better than singing *no* songs, sugar. Will you at least think about it?”

“Sure, Tipsy. Thanks, hon. I . . . uh, I gotta go.” Hayley clicked off the phone and let it slide down into the folds of the crumpled afghan. For a moment, she sat perfectly still as new tears began to flow. Then she poked around the afghan, found the phone and, with an anguished sob, hurled it across the room.



She was waiting when Tipsy walked into his Music Row office the next morning. “Am I in for good news or bad?” he asked as he grinned, dropped his briefcase in a chair, and engulfed his favorite singer in a hug.

Hayley sniffed. “Depends on whether you’re the windshield or the bug, I suppose.” She extracted herself from his arms and adjusted her hair and clothing. “How much does this gig pay?”

“Thirty thousand, fifteen shows. Expenses covered separately, and you’ll bunk on the tour bus, but get your own compartment.”



“Less than I used to make in a single night,” she observed wryly.

“Yeah, and once upon a time, women used to think I was a hunka-hunka burnin’ love,” Topsy commiserated with a shrug. “Look, it was gonna be *twenty* thousand, but I reminded them they’re dealing with the one and only Hayley Swift. I don’t think we can expect better. Life ain’t always grand, honey, but it goes on with or without us.” He sat tapping a pencil, gnawing on his lower lip.

“Wait a minute,” she demanded, her eyes narrowing. “You don’t chew your lip unless you’re holding back. What haven’t you told me?”

Topsy pushed back his swivel chair, stood, and swayed to the left, then to the right. His hair, backlit by a window that overlooked Music Row, surrounded his head like a grey halo. His dark suit, well-cut as it was, failed to hide the paunch most people would associate with beer—especially given his name. But Topsy was an absolute teetotaler. The swaying that earned him his moniker was the result of an inner ear condition he’d stopped trying to cure when he realized it had become his trademark. He swayed and gnawed his lip for several more seconds, then abruptly sat back down. “There’s no budget for rehearsals. You’ll have to pull it together on the road. And I can’t go with you; I got too much goin’ on here.” He paused and looked her straight in the eye. “And the tour starts with the Basket-Flower Festival.”

Hayley groaned and put her head in her hands. “Right back where I started from. This is pitiful.”

“There’s more,” he said quietly, and she lifted her head, the expression on her face somewhere between incredulity and disgust. “The Friday before the festival is your thirty-fifth high school re-



union. The mayor — some guy says he dated you in high school— called me yesterday to see if you'd be their guest of honor and sing at the dance.”

Hayley felt her legs go numb. “Dear merciful Lord in heaven.”

“Are you swearin’ or prayin’?”

“I’m not sure,” she admitted. “Keith Parker is mayor of Skerry?”

Tipsy frowned. “Naw, Parker ain’t the right name. Wiley? Wilding? Wilder? That’s it. Wilder!”

Hayley gave a hoot. “Darryl Ray Wilder is mayor of Skerry? That’s rich. But why on earth would they want *me* to be a guest of honor? I haven’t been back since the day I *left*.”

“Honey, you’re that little town’s biggest claim to fame—their *only* claim to fame, for that matter! They’re proud of you.”

“Maybe. They *oughta* think I’m the biggest snob on the planet. And, for the record,” she added, “I did not date Darryl Ray Wilder. I went on a hayride with him in the seventh grade.”

“Didja kiss him?” Tipsy asked with a lurid wiggle of his bushy eyebrows.

“No!”

“I’d bet he remembers it different. Boys do that, ya know. Anyway,” he continued, reaching to pat the hand Hayley had flung on his desk, “home towns are mighty forgiving. They’ll think you’ve been so busy with your glamorous, celebrity life you simply couldn’t get away, but you always wanted to. That’s what they wanna believe, that’s what they wanna hear, and that’s what we’re gonna tell ‘em. Illusion is everything, darlin’.” He smiled reassuringly.



“But my career is *over*, Tippy. I don’t want to go crawling back home as a *loser*!” Despite her resolve not to cry, Hayley felt puddles welling under her contacts.

Tippy’s smile vanished and he raised a finger to point in her face. “Listen here,” he said sternly. “Your career is not over till I *say* it is, and if you never sing another dang *note*, you’re not a loser! You had a heck of a ride before you were even dry behind the ears, little girl, and you still have more loyal fans out there than most in this business can ever *dream* of. You are *not* washed up, you’ve just . . .” he paused, struggling for the right image, “. . . been waitin’ for the right soap!”

The fierceness of his face, the ridiculous analogy, and the absurdity of it all hit Hayley hard and she suddenly burst out laughing, tears of mirth replacing those of self-pity. Regaining control, she grasped Tippy’s hand and covered it with her own. “Oh, Tippy, even if you’re lying through your teeth, I love you for your loyalty.”

Embarrassed now by his impassioned outburst, Tippy grunted. “Hey, I’m runnin’ a business here, missy. I don’t do charity.”

“Well, dig out some contracts and let me sign away what little dignity I have left. I have things to do if I’m going on the road,” Hayley challenged, then she smiled. The tour, humiliating as it was, would keep her sinking ship afloat a little longer.



“A tour? Hot diggety!” Bubba whooped when Hayley delivered the news. “I’m orderin’ that pool pump today! You’ll get to see all your old friends! Ain’t that great?”

“I don’t know,” Hayley sighed. “Once I left, I never went back, and I never *looked* back. I may have burned some bridges I didn’t mean to.”



Bubba gave a dismissive wave. “Come on, now, it’s a *gig*, ain’t it? I say we throw a party to celebrate!”

She gave him a long look. “And invite who—Suzette?”

Ignoring the sarcasm, Bubba rubbed his hands together in anticipation. “No! The press! And fans! We should have your fan club do a contest and let the winners come to the party! We’ll make it a send-off event, the night before the tour begins.”

Hayley looked at the employee who had long ago become family, her eyes narrowing. She mused for a moment then said, “You know, that’s not as hideous an idea as it sounds.”

“Thanks for *that*.”

“Let me run it past Topsy. If he likes the idea, you’re on!”

As Bubba left the room, Hayley turned and sauntered toward the master bedroom that adjoined her office, pausing in front of the full-length mirror that flanked her closet. “Fitness center,” she muttered aloud, casting a critical eye at the image facing her. “Fitness center, wax, body wrap, facial, pedicure, manicure, highlights.” She put her hands on her hips and pivoted left, then right. “You’re slip-pin’ a little, honey—sweats and tees are not your best look—but not bad, old girl, not bad. I think we can repackage the goods and give ‘em their money’s worth.” She leaned toward the mirror and affected a sexy pose. “So, tell me, Dr. Parker, how’ve you been?” she purred. Then, slowly, she backed away and blinked. “I’m sorry; do I know you?” she said dully, as she turned and walked away.



CHAPTER TWO

...But I Still Feel Eighteen!

“Ooh, didn’t we think we were gorgeous?” Sue Campbell sat with the 1987 edition of the *Cusabo Spirit* open in her lap, where a picture of five faces surrounded by abundant bangs and curls smiled up at her from the yearbook’s yellowed pages.

Amanda Brooks leaned down for a closer look. “*We were* gorgeous,” she confirmed. “Still are,” she added, giving Sue’s chair a firm bump with her denim-clad hip.

The sunny South Carolina kitchen was redolent with the tantalizing aroma of fresh-baked cinnamon rolls. Celia Jo Fleming, the kitchen’s attractive blonde owner, nodded agreement with Amanda’s assessment as she licked icing from her fingers. “That’s what my mama always said: ‘Skerry girls, best in the world!’” she quipped, as she whisked the plate of hot pastries off the counter and onto the oak table around which sat her three best friends.

“Why aren’t you a *cow*?” Meg Dorris groaned as she claimed



one of the huge, sugary treats. “I never come over here that you don’t have something fabulous baking in the oven! *How* do you stay so skinny?”

“Marital bliss,” C. J. deadpanned. “Pete complains constantly, but I tell him it’s the only way I can keep my girlish figure, so he just has to deal with it. Don’t you feel his pain?”

“Do *not* talk about ‘marital bliss’ when I haven’t had so much as a lukewarm kiss in five years!” scolded Sue. Widowed at thirty when her husband was killed in a boating accident, the plain but popular kindergarten teacher had dated only sporadically in the ensuing years, though her friends constantly sent eligible men her way.

Amanda hooted. “I keep telling you, Suzie—Bag Boy Barney over at the Piggly Wiggly is ripe for the picking. All you gotta do is let him know you’re interested!”

“But I’m *not*!” Sue protested, as Meg made a face and squealed, “Ewww!” Everyone laughed.

“If I hadn’t been kissed in five years, I’d go hunt up Matthew McConaughey,” mused Meg. “Might as well start with the best!”

“Oh, no,” countered C.J. “The *best* would be Ben Stiller.”

“Ew! And too short,” pronounced Amanda, as she reached for a cinnamon roll then folded her long, lithe body into the chair next to Sue. “Tom Selleck,” she sighed. “Now *there’s* a man you could kiss.”

“An *old* man,” Meg snorted, but Sue gave an enthusiastic thumbs-up.

“Definitely more interesting than Bag Boy Barney, bless his heart. I always thought Keith Parker looked a little like Tom Selleck—all that thick, dark hair, and those a-maa-zing shoulders.” She



drew out the last two words in a slow moan, and an audible sigh went up from all four women.

Meg harrumphed. “Wonder if poor *Keith* has had a kiss in the last five years? In the last *ten*, for that matter?” She narrowed her eyes as she took a sip of coffee. “I keep wondering if he’s gay. It’s weird someone that good-looking isn’t married.”

“He’s not gay. He just never got over Hayley,” Sue offered quietly.

“Well, she sure got over *him*,” Meg grumbled. “I still can’t believe she got on a bus to Nashville and never came back. The poor guy was devastated!”

C. J. shot Meg an odd look. “How do *you* know what he was? For that matter, how do you know he and Hayley never reconnected?”

Meg shrugged, her square jaw tensing defiantly. “We were all *friends* back then, C. J.; we talked. Keith came to see me a few times after Alice was born. And I still see him around town every now and then.”

Amanda moaned. “Me, too—and it’s always pure pleasure. He is *so* handsome.”

“And nice,” said Sue. “Keith Parker is a genuinely *nice* man. Skerry is very fortunate he chose to come back here and set up practice after medical school.”

“We are, indeed,” agreed C. J. “I figured he’d stay in Nashville to be close to Hayley and they’d get married and have lots of beautiful babies and live happily ever after.”

“Would that have been before or after she stole our song?” Meg sniffed.

Amanda sighed heavily and plunked down the mug of chai



tea she was holding. “Here we go again.” She fixed a level gaze on the voluptuous but aging blonde across from her. “*Hayley* wrote “Sister Serenade,” Meg. It was never ‘our’ song.”

“It was enough ours that we sang it at graduation, *and* we won the Basket-Flower Festival talent show with it!”

“Yes, and that was *our* moment in the spotlight. You can’t blame Hayley for catching a break, Meg. She had no way of knowing there was a talent scout in the audience that night.”

“She knew we were a quintet—a fact she conveniently forgot to mention!”

“No, she didn’t!” Sue protested. “I heard her tell that man we were a group. But he didn’t think the rest of us had that . . . whatever it is you have to have to be a star.” She smiled ruefully. “Not many people do.”

“We *might* have,” Meg retorted, “but nobody gave us a chance! And when Hayley Swift left town, she never even bothered to look back..”

“Oh, Meg,” soothed C. J. “The rest of us couldn’t have picked up and left like that. Amanda was headed for early admission at Mars Hill, Sue had a job, I was engaged, and you, well . . .”

Tears welled in Meg’s blue eyes and spilled down her cheeks. “It always comes back to that, doesn’t it? Thirty-five years and it still gets thrown in my face.”

Amanda lifted one brow. “People do tend to remember when someone shows up at senior prom in a maternity dress.”

“Bitch!”

“Trollop!”

“Girls!” C. J. scolded, as Meg and Amanda sat glowering.



“We’ve stuck together way too long to have this fight again. And as you, yourself, just pointed out, Meg, this really *is* ancient history! The point is, not only was Hayley far more talented than the rest of us, she needed a *break* more than the rest of us. We had college, and families, and futures to look forward to; Hayley had nothing but a sick aunt and a prehistoric Cadillac.”

“She had *us*, but she threw us away,” Meg returned. “You were her best friend, Sue. Are you still writing letters to her? Does she ever answer you back?”

Sue blushed at the memory of the letter she’d just mailed to Nashville. “She does, sometimes. Her life is different from ours, Meg. I doubt she gets to enjoy a daily routine like running to the post office or the drugstore, or grabbing a pizza after work with girlfriends. I’m not sure our life isn’t preferable to hers.”

Meg snorted. “Loyal to the end, every one of you a suck-up, just because Miss High-and- Mighty Country Diva made good. Well, *I* say she dumped us and doesn’t deserve to be fawned over and I can’t believe she’s coming back to rub it in after all these years.”

Sue stared at Meg. “What are you talking about? Hayley’s coming home?”

“She’s coming *home*?” Amanda echoed.

“Don’t you people read your mail? We got a flyer about the reunion, plus it was in today’s newspaper.”

C. J. jumped up from the table and dug down into a basket on the kitchen counter. “Oh, my gosh!” she exclaimed, scanning the front page of the latest *Skerry Herald*. “*Hayley Swift to Serenade Class of ’87*.”

Amanda grinned. “Good play on words, there, Keats,” she



said, referring to the paper's editor, Eddie Keats, a fellow member of their graduating class. "Guess we're not the only ones who remember 'Sister Serenade.'"

"Oh, I'd love to have her stay with me while she's here," murmured Sue. "Wonder if Eddie has a phone number for her?"

"It says she's going to play at the Basket-Flower Festival, too," said C. J. as she continued to scan the page. "What fun!" She looked up, her face beaming. "I'm thinking this calls for a party!"

"Um, isn't that what a reunion *is*?" Amanda inquired with a wry expression.

C. J. stuck out her tongue. "We need a bash for just us. It's *The Girls Next Door*' together again! Time to dig out the hair crimpers and Whitney Houston CDs!"

Amid the others' laughter, Meg abruptly pushed back her chair and rose to leave. "I can't believe you're welcoming her back with open arms like nothing ever happened."

"Hayley was a good friend, Meg. I've missed her. We *all* have—I thought," said C. J. "I don't bear her any grudges, and if you *do*, you're being unfair. Hayley got lucky, but we did, too—just in different ways."

Meg put her hands on her hips. "Don't talk to me about being lucky, Miss 'My-Husband's-Rich-as-Midas-and-I-Have-the-Perfect-Life.' Try raising a kid when you're eighteen, and the hot shot who knocked you up marries you just long enough to run up a pile of bills. Try keeping a decent job when you're raising a kid by yourself with nobody around to help. And try feeling good about yourself when that kid leaves home the day she turns eighteen. There is *nothing* lucky about my life, C. J.; my life *sucks!*"

The kitchen was silent but for Meg's ragged sniffs as she



plundered her purse in search of a tissue.

When C. J. finally spoke, her voice was controlled but passionate. “I’m sorry life didn’t turn out the way you wanted it to, Meg, but Ty Dorris didn’t get you pregnant all by himself. And in case you’ve been feeling too sorry for yourself to notice, the rest of us have our own problems. Amanda went through pure torture to have children, Sue lost Bill when they were barely back from their honeymoon, and my mother has Alzheimer’s. She doesn’t even remember there *was* a 1987, for Pete’s sake!” C. J.’s voice cracked and she fought to regain composure. “*Everybody’s* life sucks, at one time or another, but you can look for the blessings and go on, or you can wallow and drown. If looking for the blessings makes me Pollyanna, then so be it.”

“Once a cheerleader, always a cheerleader,” Sue interjected in a solemn stage whisper and the stony silence was broken as all four women began to giggle.

“Oh, C. J., I’m sorry.” Meg threw her arms around her friend. “I don’t mean to be hateful, and I guess I love Hayley as much as you do.” She straightened and wiped her eyes. “I’m just going through a really hard time right now. Every time I think maybe Alice and I can patch things up, something goes wrong. And, inevitably, that will be the day I run into Ty and his bimbo-of-the-month.”

“Let’s roll his house,” suggested Amanda.

“Amanda Brooks!” reprimanded Sue. “And you a Sunday School teacher!”

Amanda’s look of contrition was not convincing.

C. J. reached to smooth a wayward strand of Meg’s long, over-processed blonde hair. “Maybe Hayley coming home will be a fresh start for everyone. She’s bound to feel bad for not doing a better job of staying in touch; let’s just plan to focus on the positive.”



“Cue the violins,” trilled Amanda, and C. J. picked up a crumpled napkin and threw it at her.

“So, what are we wearing to the reunion?” Sue asked as she rose and started collecting dishes. “Anybody still have the halter dress C. J.’s mom made us for the talent show?”

“Got it,” confirmed C. J., “but don’t know that I can get *in* it!”

“Oh, please. I bet even your cheerleading outfit still fits!” Meg challenged.

“I kept my dress, too,” said Amanda, as Sue and Meg nodded agreement. “I can probably do a little altering for those of us who—for *whatever* reason,” she interjected, tossing a devious look at C. J., “—haven’t kept our girlish figures.”

“Mama had such fun making those dresses,” C. J. smiled. “I wish she could do the alterations for us.”

Sue brightened. “Do you think if we carried the dresses down to the nursing home, she’d remember making them?”

“What a great idea!” said Amanda. “What do you think, C. J.? Would that trigger any memories?”

C. J. turned off the water at the sink where she was rinsing cups and saucers. “It might,” she shrugged. “You never know what will get through to her, or how she’ll react.”

Sue crossed the kitchen to give her friend a sympathetic hug. “Poor Louise,” she sighed. “She didn’t deserve to end up like this.”

“Who does?” C. J. responded. “But the Alzheimer’s is harder on us than it is on Mama. She’s blissfully unaware. I guess that’s a blessing.”

“Pollyanna lives!” sang Amanda as she leapt triumphantly across the room. This time, C. J. heaved the wet dishcloth she was holding and hit her target square in the face.

