

## Someone to Blame

### Chapter 1

Irene once heard that if you fell off a cliff in your dream, you would always wake before smacking the ground.

If only real life were that merciful.

She pulled her damp cheek away from the warm glass of the truck window and gazed at the Trinity River meandering hundreds of feet below, gloomy green water snaking through a precipitous canyon. Narrow curves hugged the steep sides of cliff with only a short retaining wall of stacked rocks separating them from disaster—many of the stones chipped, some ominously missing from the ledge.

Irene imagined the fear a driver would feel straining to discern the gray road on a foggy night. Stunned as the stone wall came up too fast, too close, jerking the steering wheel, hearing the chilling screech of tires spinning out on loose gravel. And she could almost taste the desperate panic contained in the freefall, the driver trapped in the confines of the car as the vehicle plunged to the rocks and icy water below.

*Freefalling.*

Maybe that word came closest to defining this indefinable sensation of pain. No other words quite fit, and Irene desperately needed one that would. For months she had tested adjectives, placing them alongside the events that punctured their lives, yearning for a match.

*Raw. Horrific. Suffocating. Tragic. Debilitating.*

Impotent, feeble words.

After you fell for a while, you'd reach a constant speed—terminal velocity. Irene remembered reading that a skydiver in freefall leveled out at two hundred miles per hour. Had the person who invented that term realized the implied double meaning? How a fall at that great a speed could only be terminal?

Haunting images flooded her mind. Desperate people leaping from skyscraper windows in a futile attempt to escape a fire. A plane exploding at high altitude, spilling people out of their seats thousands of feet above the polar ice caps.

Yet, those tragic victims suffered only a merciful few seconds of horror before death.

When you lose a child, you tumble in freefall continually, without acquittal. The ground rushes up at you, your mind frantic and disbelieving. Impending doom pulls you toward impact at dizzying speeds.

But you never hit bottom.

Never a reprieve from panic. Never startling awake before the moment of contact. Never breathing that sigh of relief as the wisp of nightmare dissolves and you learn you are safe, tangled in bedcovers, your husband sleeping undisturbed at your side.

You are always falling.

Irene wrenched her eyes from the river and turned to Matt. He had barely spoken all day, but she was growing accustomed to his long stretches of silence. She watched him shift his

weight and hunker down over the steering wheel, eyeing the rental trailer in the side-view mirror as it dragged behind them like an albatross.

They had sold most of their furniture with the house, shed it all, along with as many memories as possible. Crammed all the tangible remnants of their past into that twelve-foot box dragging behind them. How was it so easy to fit the pieces of their lives into such a small container?

The strain etched in Matt's face was telltale: his red, tired eyes; the pallor across his features; a grimace that annihilated any former trace of joy. Even the way he gripped the wheel evidenced the weeks of sleepless nights that eroded his concentration.

Exhaustion—plain and simple.

Irene knew she looked just as haggard. She adjusted the small vanity mirror attached to the sun visor so she could see into the backseat. Behind her, Casey's eyes were closed. Indecipherable strains of music filtered out of her daughter's headphones. Irene wished she could smother her own inner monologue that easily.

They had left the Motel 6 in Redding at dawn with the air already sweltering and shimmering across the highway. Matt had made one trip north the week before to relocate his work trailer and other equipment. Irene knew he had disposed of most of his tools, given them away or thrown them out. An inconceivable act. But then, nearly every choice they made these days seemed incongruous.

"Where are we now?" she asked.

"Almost to Willow Creek." He glanced at her, his eyes vacant. "Do you need to stop?"

Irene shook her head.

Casey leaned forward, raw impatience in her voice. "How much longer?"

“About an hour,” Matt said.

“You hungry?” Irene turned and touched Casey’s shoulder, felt a barely perceptible flinch. “We could get a bite.”

Casey flopped back against her seat. “Let’s just get there.”

“There” meant the coastal town of Breakers—their new home. Most people would visit a place before making such a big decision, but theirs had been an act of hasty desperation. Irene had accepted the first job offered; she’d had no energy to think beyond that. She left all the moving details to Matt.

As they rounded another treacherous curve, her eyes caught a makeshift cross half buried in the weeds alongside the road, faded plastic flowers stapled to the wood. The sight snagged her heart, like hide on barbed wire.

There she was again. Falling.

In the town they’d left behind, a poorly banked curve two miles below their home was called the “Trap.” Driving down the mountain grade into Running Springs was trying enough—all tight hairpin curves, compounded by three seasons of fog, ice, and sleet. No wonder the fatalities racked up. On more than one occasion, Matt had ushered Jesse and Daniel out in front of the station wagon with a flashlight while he inched the car behind them, locking sight on their waving hands, which looked like disembodied limbs. The road would materialize like an apparition, a foot at a time, out of nowhere. Eventually, there’d be a break in the fog and the boys would stomp the cold from their feet and tumble back into the car, blowing on their hands, wishing for hot chocolate.

The Trap had claimed countless victims over the years, accidents caused by mats of slick maple leaves rotting along the edges of the asphalt and the eerie way the fog gathered and pooled

along that stretch of two-lane road. Yet in all those years, Irene never imagined her own family would be added to the grim statistics.

When had it all started to fall apart? That tragic day Daniel got his driver's license? Or earlier—the first time he was summoned to the principal's office in third grade? Or perhaps it traced even further back, to the day she'd met Matt and seen a man so carefully in control of his life.

Irene squeezed her eyes shut. Why hadn't warning bells gone off in her head that night? Why hadn't God stepped in and prevented the accident? Friends at church meant to be consoling, but their platitudes only stoked her anger. The "nonanswers."

We don't know why.

Why God allows some to live and some to die.

Why we can pray for him to protect our children and yet he lets things like this happen. Maybe for a greater glory and purpose.

So the town would now install warning lights and guard rails, and future lives would be spared—Jesse's life not lost in vain, et cetera, et cetera.

Irene clenched her teeth. She'd been over and over this for more than a year now—a tireless barrage of questions that yielded no answers.

She glanced at Matt and saw his blank expression, the stone wall he erected alongside his own raging river chasm. Who was she fooling? Did she think she could salvage a family out of the ashes of disaster? She knew she had to try—for Casey. At least she kept telling herself that, willing herself to believe it.

When they arrived at Breakers, Matt slowed the truck and eased up to a stop sign. Casey leaned forward and smoothed her cropped black hair.

“Are we here? Is this it?”

Matt nodded.

Irene looked at the small shopping center across the street and lowered the window. A strong breeze of salt air rushed in, cool and startling. Seagulls winged on the updraft above her, and she even heard the sea. Across the street a clapboard-sided market, post office, police station, and a few mismatched shops lined a parking lot. Casey leaned forward to peek out the windshield, then retreated to her seat with a disapproving sigh.

They drove the last five miles in silence, passing one rundown motel after another, dark wooden structures backed up against pockets of giant redwood trees. The road sank and tipped at the mercy of eroding cliffs, cliffs slowly dissolving at the insouciance of an unforgiving sea, while below them a turbulent metal-gray ocean slammed against the rocky shoreline, spray erupting high into the air.

Irene felt a kinship with the restless shifting of elements.

The rental house sat at the end of a dirt lane, close to the state park. Irene got out and eyed the small weathered cottage with its rotting plank siding and peeling brown paint. She had little doubt that, in no time, Matt would have it spruced up, with plumbing and lights working to his satisfaction. Matt would never have picked a house in perfect condition. She knew he needed something to fix ... since there was so much he couldn't fix in his own life.

Casey got out of the truck and stopped beside her mother, evaluating her new home. “You gotta be kidding,” she mumbled, then trudged through the front door.

Matt busied himself detaching the trailer and setting chocks behind the tires. Irene closed her eyes and let the crisp wind whip her hair. Off in the distance waves pounded the shore, a low thrumming, like an advancing army.

She hesitated at the sagging threshold of the front door. Maybe this would be a good move. She would start teaching at Breakers Elementary. Casey would begin eighth grade with a whole new set of classmates—students who wouldn't stare at her with pity or back away, afraid her bad luck was contagious. Matt would pour his frustrated energy into repairing the cottage. They could begin a new life, one unmarred by pain and disaster. Allow some semblance of normalcy to seep back into their lives.

At least that was what Irene had hoped for, had prayed for.

She turned, about to say something to Jesse.

Her dead son.

At the edge of a crumbling cliff, Irene felt her feet give way. As the ground rushed up to meet her, she clutched the word in her fist.

*Freefalling.*