

An Excerpt from
Tears on Stone
by Karen Wiesner & Chris Spindler

“Though I do not expect the terror... will ever altogether leave me, at most times it lies far in the back of my mind, a mere distant cloud, a memory and a faint distrust; but there are times when the little cloud spreads until it obscures the whole sky. Then I look about me at my fellow men. And I go in fear...”

~from *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, H.G. Wells

Prologue

HE WAS DRUNK again.

Dorothy hung up the phone, her heart thudding painfully in her chest as she considered for the first time in so many years that her husband always called before he came home. *Just like my father*, she thought.

Paul Hawks worked at the same factory her father, and his father, had all his life. The factory was the lifeblood of this small any-town, USA. The pay and benefits were lousy; the working conditions were bad. It was a dead-end job, but it was all they knew. They worked hard for little, then pissed it away every night on booze.

Dorothy immediately checked on the children, who slept fitfully just as they always had. She didn't have time to look at them in anguish. They had the faces of angels. They lived in hell. She had to protect them, no matter what was required of her.

Her eye fixed on the clock, she closed the door of their bedroom firmly behind her. Paul would be home in five minutes. As she swept into the kitchen, she sent an experienced gaze around the house. Everything was neat, in its place. Quickly she set the table, got an icy beer from the freezer where she'd put it twenty minutes ago, and put it next to his placemat. Then she took the hot plate of food from the oven and transferred his dinner to a cooler plate.

When Dorothy heard his car pull into the garage, her heart rose into her throat. She could hear it beating there as she prayed this was a dream she'd wake from soon. On automatic, she forced herself to enter the living room and glance at herself in the mirror. She'd put on a touch of makeup, not much.

As she raised her hand to smooth her dark hair, she saw her mother staring back at her.

"Go to your room. Quickly. Stay there no matter what you hear." Mama would send an experienced eye around the room to make sure everything was neat and in its place. She would set the table, put out a fresh beer. Then she would check herself in the mirror—not too much makeup. The little bit of blush on her cheeks would stand out sharply on her pale cheeks. The bruises there stood out just as sharply despite her attempts to cover them.

"But, Mama—" Dorothy would begin to protest, but Mama wouldn't give her the chance.

"Guthrie, take your sister to your room. Take care of her," Mama would say, her voice no more than a frantic whisper, and Guthrie would nod and whisk her away, locking the door behind them.

Dorothy now swallowed the fear in her throat, but it wouldn't go down as she touched the swollen side of her face she'd tried to cover with makeup. She was her mother. She was her mother in some sadistic play that she tried to set the scene for every night, and every night the script could change.

One thing would stay the same. Just one thing. She couldn't win. That never changed.

She was there when Paul walked in the door. Her forced smile was greeted by the face of an angry stranger. She'd married him when she was eighteen, back when he was a little older than she was, a little wild, and impossibly handsome. Now he was dark, grizzled. He was nothing of the man he'd been, the one she'd wanted him to be so badly. And she no longer adored him blindly.

She kissed him, living up to his ballsy expectation for her to be the loving wife when he walked through his door at night. He shoved her away like he always did. She forced herself to smile. *I hate you, Paul, with everything inside me.*

"Your dinner is ready, honey," she told him, anticipating the grumble and glare she got as he lurched into the kitchen reeking of smoke and booze.

He sat and ate. She sat with him, getting him a beer whenever he needed it and agreeing with anything he muttered.

The first time he did this ritual we just got back from Florida: our honeymoon. He got home from work and tripped over the suitcase I didn't have time to unpack because we both had to go to work. Our living room has become a boxing ring almost every night since then for five years. My mother did it for over fifteen. Oh my God, I don't think I can do this.

Everybody knew. Long ago, her co-workers must have realized she hadn't fallen down the stairs or tripped over anything. They all knew. *Just like everyone knew what Mama went through, what me and Guthrie went through. What Benji and Annabelle go through—because we're just women, worthless punching bags. My children hate their daddy as much as I hated mine.*

Tears filled Dorothy's eyes against her will. She'd never once wondered why her mother stayed. She'd never known any other way. Tonight, she looked across the table. She looked at those hands... the ones that had held her, touched her tenderly for a mere two weeks, and now only gave her pain. What she wouldn't do to be free of those hands, to free her children from this hell.

When Paul glanced at her, she lowered her eyes quickly, terrified he'd see her loathing of him there.

"Where're the kids?" he demanded.

Dorothy stopped breathing. He'd never hurt them. They were young enough that she could still protect them. But they would grow. Someday Benji would try to protect her the way Guthrie had tried to protect their mother... and then she wouldn't be able to keep Paul from hurting them anymore.

"It's after ten, Paul. They're asleep."

His dark eyes narrowed to slits. *Please God, help me distract him.*

"When the hell 'm I sposed to see 'em? I work all day; I come home, I wanna see my goddamn kids, too. That's not too much to ask."

He shoved himself away from the table, and Dorothy was on her feet in an instant. "Paul, please. Just don't wake them. Just look in on them, all right? But don't wake them."

His hand shot out, impacting her chest as he shoved her back. Dorothy lost her balance and fell against the floor lamp. It crashed to the floor next to her, and the light bulb popped before going dark.

She was on her feet a second later, after him before he could enter the children's room. Standing close by, she watched him flip on the overhead light. Dorothy's hatred of him for the insidious ways he had of bullying them grew as she waited for him to do something or nothing. The children stirred in the brightness, but didn't open their eyes. They knew better, Dorothy realized.

After a few minutes of looking at them, Paul swiped his hand down over the light switch again and left the room. Dorothy closed the door when he didn't make a move to do it.

He wouldn't let her get away with her attempt to prevent him from seeing his children. She knew that and told herself if it got too bad she could call Guthrie. But Guthrie would beat him to within an inch of his life, and when Dorothy came back, Paul would make her suffer for it.

No, she would take it tonight. She would take his fists. Then she would take his vile hands on her when he crawled into bed on top of her with her blood still on his knuckles.

Dorothy righted the floor lamp, holding the cold metal in her hands while the muscles in her stomach clenched painfully in premonition.

"Wanna keep me from my kids, do you?"

We got this lamp as a wedding present, she remembered. She'd thought the intricately etched metal lampshade had been so beautiful. So beautiful, befitting the beauty of their new union.

"Mama?"

Dorothy's ears heard the small cry as though from a dream, from the past. Tears stung her eyes again. She could almost feel the pressure of Guthrie's hand holding hers so tightly behind the door. She could almost hear her mother's screams, the sound of impact over and over again. Her father's voice—the devil's, she used to think—tormenting, luring, bellowing. The sound of his satisfaction.

Her mother's words came from Dorothy's mouth as she cried reassuringly to her own son, "Go back to sleep, honey," like everything was all right. Like anything would ever be all right. *Mama never tried to escape her hell, our hell. She never even tried. She took it like it was her cross to bear for being a woman.*

"What the hell've you been tellin' 'em, you bitch? You think you can turn my own kids against me?"

"I didn't tell them anything, Paul. I swear it."

She heard the desperation in her voice and hated it almost as much as she hated her need to run. He was closing in on her, circling before her, and her heart thudded painfully against her chest while she waited for him to make his move.

“You didn’t tell ’em anything, you swear,” he mocked, his lips twisted. “They’re awake now. Maybe I wanna see ’em. Maybe I wanna show ’em what happens when their mama tries to keep their own father from ’em.”

Dorothy’s instincts took over. Eyes narrowed, she shook her head at him. “No.” She would never let him hurt Benji and Annabelle. Never. It would be over her dead body. “No, Paul. If you want to hurt somebody, you hurt me... you fucking bully.”

His eyes widened. She’d never doubted his speed. She didn’t have time to run. He grabbed her by the hair and threw her across the room with every ounce of his strength. The impact of hitting the wall took her breath away, but she came to with the pain of his fingers in her hair again, dragging her up. She smelled the stale reek of beer and the pollution from the factory. *God, it hurts. It all hurts. Fresh and yet familiar.*

Dorothy closed her eyes and whimpered. *I want to die*, she thought when his fist slammed into her cheek and burst open her lip again where he’d hit her two nights ago over and over for wearing too much lipstick like a whore. A week before that, she hadn’t worn *enough* lipstick to please him.

I can’t win.

When he let her go, she ran, just like he wanted her to. Instead of trying to hide the way she usually did, though, she found her fingers clutching the cold, solid metal of the lamp again.

I can’t die. I can’t die because my kids need me. I need them. But you...

He was grinning as he came toward her, his fists clenched, bloody.

...without you we’re free. Without your bloody fists, we survive. And I can say the devil made me do it, you bastard.

Dorothy picked up the lamp in both hands, lifted it like a baseball bat, and swung it with a strength she hadn’t known she had in her.

The metal lampshade connected with his head, and he grunted in surprise. But she was already bringing it back and swinging again. And again.

She heard his body hit the floor, and she tilted the lamp and smashed the base down on his head once more. He wasn't moving. *His blood... tonight it's his blood. Tonight I'm free. Tonight I'm not just a woman. I'm a survivor.*

Carefully Dorothy set the lamp down again and walked to the phone. She dialed the operator and told her it was an emergency. Her husband was dead. Send the police.

Her children were crying, and that was real. She went to them, holding and kissing them as she told them the only two words her mind could grasp: "Never again."

Only moments later, her children crying in her arms, she opened the door to the police. Officer Stanley Wheeler. She knew his wife, Janice. Stanley had never been above "givin' the old lady what-for when she gets outta line."

"Where is he?"

Dorothy pointed to the living room where Paul lay face down in a growing pool of blood.

"What the hell happened here?" Stanley demanded.

Nothing mattered. She'd saved herself and her children, the way her mother had never been able to. They'd leave this town tomorrow. They'd leave hell behind them at last.

"He was beating me," she said simply. Stanley wasn't blind, yet he didn't seem to notice or care about her face, swollen and bloody, her back aching like it had been broken from where she'd hit the wall. He wouldn't care that clumps of her hair were clutched in Paul's fingers.

"*You* did this?"

Dorothy nodded.

Stanley's mouth twisted in anger when he stared at her. "Step away from them children, Dorothy Hawks."

"What?"

"You're under arrest for manslaughter."

As Annabelle and Benji burst into tears, Dorothy stared at Stanley, unable to comprehend this. He'd come to their house many times before and found her, beaten and bloody, by the hands of her own husband. He'd never arrested Paul. He'd told him to "take it easy next time."

Stanley grabbed her arm in a painful grip, turned her away, and slapped handcuffs around her wrists as tightly as he could get

them. Then he whispered, “You’ll never see your kids again, you murdering bitch. I’ll see to that personally.”

Dorothy only had time to twist her head around to see another officer dragging her children, screaming, away from her. “No, please... ” Dorothy whispered in disbelief. “No. No! I saved us.”

Chapter One

29 years later...

“HURRY,” PAM Garland said urgently as she and MaryEmma Gold passed each other on the porch.

MaryEmma nodded, picking up her pace.

“How much more is there?” Pam asked, and MaryEmma turned back to her.

“Not much. A couple more boxes like this. I was storing some things for Shell, so I thought those should go in first. These are my things.”

“I guess they’ll be grateful for that, won’t they.” Pam’s tone was brisk, too rushed to really ask the question or to dwell on the answer. She disappeared into the house.

MaryEmma glanced at her sister. Shelley Wilson was sitting on the curb outside MaryEmma’s house with her daughter Ariel. Shelley didn’t look at, let alone move to console, the four-year-old who wept softly. It went against every one of MaryEmma’s instincts not to console her niece herself, but there wasn’t time.

Quickly she went to the trunk of Pam’s white station wagon. She set the heavy box within. Some of the books and household items she’d thrown into it that morning fell off the top. She distributed them wherever they fit in the other boxes crammed into the trunk with Pam’s suitcases. Pam had arrived only ten minutes before after clearing out of her own apartment.

MaryEmma couldn’t resist giving Ariel’s tiara-crowned locks a gentle stroke as she passed by. Shelley didn’t respond to the squeeze she gave her shoulder.

Pam came out hefting another box, precariously piled with whatever had been nearby and necessary. “We can’t take it all. I

think another two boxes after this one,” she told MaryEmma. “Decide which ones you really want along.”

MaryEmma entered her house, now so empty and bare when just yesterday morning it had been a warm, cozy home she’d felt infinitely comfortable in. She’d enjoyed living alone. She’d put a lot into this house, though she’d only been renting it. She wished she had time to clean it thoroughly before leaving it. But it would rent again without trouble, MaryEmma told herself, especially because of the garden. She couldn’t resist looking out the back window to view the part of the house she’d most loved and spent the most time in. In a few weeks she would have been planting new flowers. Vegetables. She’d miss the garden; she’d miss this house.

The tightness in MaryEmma’s chest increased when Pam whirled into the house, the screen door slamming behind her. “Which one?” she demanded of the boxes in the middle of the living room floor.

Forcing herself away from the window, MaryEmma pawed through a box, pushing it aside when she saw it contained mostly her nature and relaxation cassettes.

From her fanny pack, Pam’s cell phone chirped, and MaryEmma saw the dread cross the older woman’s face.

“Finish packing the car,” Pam said in a low tone. “I’ll be out to change the license plate on the car in a minute, and then we’ll go.”

MaryEmma nodded, wondering if Pam would answer the phone or turn it off to ignore the incoming call. She watched Pam move into the kitchen. *She’s going to answer it*, MaryEmma realized in shock. *Why would she answer it?*

Pam knew what she was doing. She wouldn’t act foolishly—that was unthinkable. So everything would be all right.

After transferring some items into the box she was leaving behind, MaryEmma stood and lifted the box that was going. She winced as her forearms and biceps took the weight and sharp edges of the box.

In half a minute, she returned to the house for a last box. As she rearranged the items, she found herself straining to hear Pam in the kitchen.

“—cleaned it up. No. It had to be done. ...What was I supposed to do, tell me that? ...There’s nothing Del Jossey can do,

and he knows it. Miriam took care of it. ...Billie, why would this be any different than the other times?”

She was talking to Billie Salazar, MaryEmma realized, surprised by the impatience in Pam’s usually calm, gentle tone. Billie was an investigator and worked closely with Pam who was a counselor for the police department. They were also friends. Billie had come by the house often, before and after Pam had become her and Shelley’s guardian. Did Billie know they were leaving?

“Dorothy said that?” Pam said in a low, shocked tone that had MaryEmma straining even more to hear the conversation.

Pam had insisted that all of them leave without telling anyone... absolutely no one. Though Pam had answered her phone, MaryEmma got the feeling she hadn’t told Billie they were leaving during this conversation.

With her cheeks burning, MaryEmma hefted the last box, which landed heavily on her arms again. This time, she couldn’t help crying out in pain. At the sound, Pam emerged from the kitchen, her phone tucked back into her fanny pack. Her face was flushed, and MaryEmma knew the conversation with Billie had upset her greatly. Yet she only said, “Is everything all right, honey?”

MaryEmma nodded. She wanted to cover, but couldn’t lie or hold anything back from Pam. “Still... still sore,” she managed.

Pam came to her, putting an arm around her and stroking her cheek just the way MaryEmma’s mother used to when she was a little girl. “I know, love. We’re going to be okay though. We are. I promise we’re going to be right as rain soon. Then maybe we can... forget.”

MaryEmma nodded trustingly. Pam would take care of them. She’d always taken care of them, even when there was seemingly no way out.

“Here, let me take that.”

Knowing her too well, MaryEmma didn’t argue. She handed over the box to Pam. Pam was both tall and muscular. Even at age forty-nine, she lifted weights regularly. Her overactive love of sweets kept her figure plump instead of lean, but there was no denying that Pam Garland could carry the weight of the world on her shoulders if called upon to do so. MaryEmma had spent many futile hours wishing she was that strong. That fears and problems could bounce off her the way they appeared to bounce off Pam, instead of settling deep within to grow and fester.

“Lock up the house, and we’ll get out of here soon,” Pam said, and MaryEmma nodded.

She did one more walk through the house, making sure she wasn’t leaving something she couldn’t live without behind. She walked in the garden, saying a prayer on the ring she wore on a chain around her neck that the new occupants would love this place as much as she had.

When she locked up the house and put the spare keys in the potted plant dish by the front door, she saw that Shelley and Ariel were in the backseat already. Pam came to her feet with a screwdriver in her hand. MaryEmma joined her at the back of the car to see a South Dakota license plate in place with a new year sticker on it. Pam probably assumed no one would notice what state the sticker had been issued in.

The fear nearly jumped out of MaryEmma’s chest there and then, until Pam gave her a hug and reminded her everything would be fine soon.

It wasn’t until they crossed the state line that the tight ball of dread in MaryEmma’s chest finally became unknotted. Soon the four of them would have a new life, and then, just as Pam had said, maybe they could also forget.

Chapter Two

“THIS IS THE one,” MaryEmma said as they cruised slowly down the road at the outer edge of Falcon’s Bend.

From the driver’s seat, Pam leaned closer to the passenger’s window and pointed, asking, “The white one?”

MaryEmma nodded. “The realtor is here.” She’d seen the logo on the door of the car parked before the plain house that didn’t look much different than it had twenty-two years ago. It was a quaint two-story with a picket fence surrounding it and a front porch swing.

Helplessly, MaryEmma’s gaze stole to the house next door to it. Her entire body suffused with memories of happiness, of peace, of bittersweet pleasure and heartache. The house was even more beautiful than she remembered it. And just as the realtor had told her on the phone yesterday morning, someone else owned it. There wasn’t a name on the mailbox, though she looked for one—again, unable to help herself from doing it.

Pam parked the car in front of the smaller house, and MaryEmma got out, flinching at the soreness of her lower body, partially from the long drive. She opened the back door and helped Ariel out. The little girl leaned against her heavily. MaryEmma picked her up, holding the slight weight close when Ariel wrapped her thin arms around her neck. “It’s all right, princess. We’ve got a new castle, that’s all.”

“Miss my room,” Ariel said barely above a whisper.

“I know. But you’ll have a new room. You can pick whichever one you want. And then we’ll decorate it together. Would you like that?”

Ariel nodded against her without a word.

MaryEmma knew from the year she’d spent in Falcon’s Bend as a child that this house had four bedrooms—three upstairs and

one down. She'd memorized the place, and seeing it again filled her with anticipation. Soon she'd see her stone garden again, even if she couldn't go into it.

Pam took MaryEmma's arm as the realtor approached them with a friendly smile and an outstretched hand. "Welcome to Falcon's Bend. I am Sunny Curran, Home & Hearth Realty. I spoke to one of you all on the phone yesterday morning."

"That was me," MaryEmma said, taking her hand briefly.

"Something tells me you have been around these parts before. Where are you all from?" Sunny asked with a my-life-is-an-open-book; shouldn't-yours-be-too? ease that MaryEmma remembered about this place as a child.

MaryEmma glanced at Pam who smiled at her before turning to Sunny to say, "South Dakota."

MaryEmma held Ariel tighter when she felt her body react.

"Did you all drive out today?"

Pam's tone was just a notch less warm when she replied, "I think it was harder on our little Ariel than on us, wasn't it?"

"Hmm," MaryEmma murmured.

"Poor thing. She looks all done in," Sunny said sympathetically in a voice that seemed to imply she was bursting with questions and intent on asking all of them sooner or later.

"If you wouldn't mind, Sunny, we're very tired," Pam said firmly, remaining friendly. "We'd love to see the house, pay you, and get settled in a bit before dinner."

Sunny waved a hand, the picture of hospitality. "Oh surely. Let me give you the tour. The house is fully furnished, as I said on the phone last night. I have already contacted the power and water companies, and you are all set. You just need to call or go in tomorrow and fill out some paperwork. I have a list here of phone numbers and addresses for power and water, as well as to get your phone hooked up."

"You're just the model of efficiency, Sunny. We really appreciate this."

MaryEmma turned when Shelley got out of the car. Her usually gleaming blond hair was scraggly and greasy, her clothes hopelessly wrinkled. She didn't look at any of them as she followed them up the sidewalk to the front porch where Sunny unlocked the door, then handed Pam the keys.

Sunny gave them the full tour, chattering endlessly and asking questions that Pam either answered vaguely or glossed over with comments about the house. At long last, Sunny was persuaded by Pam to take the payment for the deposit and first months' rent and go on her merry way.

Pam and MaryEmma shared a look of relief, and Pam commented, "I hope they don't have a Welcome Wagon around here headed by someone like our dear Pollyanna Sunshine."

MaryEmma set Ariel down, offering a distracted excuse to do what she'd wanted to do since they entered town. She went out the backyard and did everything short of run to the gate. She hadn't seen a car parked in the driveway of the house next door, which wasn't a sure indication that no one was home. Nevertheless, she couldn't resist unhooking the gate and stepping through the space in the freestanding stone wall that surrounded the garden next door.

Her memories collided with bitter reality. A cry of horror escaped her at what she saw. The garden, the paths, even the pond and the stone walls were horribly overgrown with weeds and plant growth. And the centerpiece was utterly lost in the chaos. MaryEmma couldn't see the words—covered over by the profusion of weeds—carved into the slate base, but she knew the words and whispered them under her breath while holding the ring at the end of her necklace: "Tränen aus Stein." *Tears of stone. My stone garden is lost, and I can't bring it back.*

The new owners of the house had allowed the garden to go. They didn't love it, didn't care for it and tend to it—*the way I wanted to when I returned here.*

A hand on her back made MaryEmma jolt and swipe at the tears rolling down her face. Pam stood there, looking at her sadly.

She doesn't know about this house, the time Shelley and I lived here, this garden, my stone garden... Jordie. Pam only knows I love gardens. I love to bring life up out of the soil. And this garden is dying.

"You've got a lot to work with," Pam said softly, and MaryEmma nodded. There was plenty of space at the front of the house for flowers and shrubs, new trees. She turned to the backyard of the house they'd just rented. It had a lot of birdhouses, feeders, and a bath. There were large spaces for vegetables and flowers. Pam was right. She could make a nice garden there for them to enjoy.

“Let’s unload the trunk. There’s plenty of time to think about what to do with our new garden.”

MaryEmma smiled tightly, nodded, and looked back longingly at her stone garden.

Chapter Three

THE HOUSE NEXT door had been built by a German-Jew who'd been driven out of Germany by the Nazis. Joel Cohn had come to America in 1938 just eighteen years old and already embittered and devastated by his family's plight. He'd written in his journal, hidden in a window seat cabinet upstairs, that they'd been "driven out of the Garden of Eden." In a vow never to forget, Joel had taken some of the stones from his precious garden the night his family stole out of Germany under cover of night.

Shortly after coming to America, he'd married, built the house, and created the beautiful stone garden. At the heart of the garden was a stone sculpture he'd carved with his own two gifted hands: an angel with flaming stones blocking the way to Paradise, weeping tears of stone. Below the sculpture were five stone teardrops, carved from the very stones Joel had taken from his garden the fateful night that had changed his life forever.

Along with his journal detailing his life before and after leaving Germany, Joel had left a sterling silver ring. It, too, had been made by his own hands. Inscribed on the inside of the ring was "*Chaf*"—live your life.

When MaryEmma Gold was nine years old, her parents had rented the house, hoping to someday buy it. As though the two had been intended especially for her, MaryEmma had found the ring and the journal in her bedroom. The journal, Joel's words—powerful even though English was not his vernacular—had spoken to her, the new owner, asking her to look after his garden, to keep it alive for as long as she lived there. To love the garden.

At that time, the garden was little more than an overgrown shadow of what it had been when Joel took care of it and loved it, based on the photographs he'd included in his journal. Even at that age, MaryEmma could see the life pushing up through the ground,

seeking the sunshine. Patiently, lovingly, she'd brought the garden back and loved it with everything inside of her. She'd helped to make it beautiful and alive again.

Her father had died just after she'd turned ten, and her mother had taken her girls to live with Grandma Rose. MaryEmma had understood Joel's unwilling exit from "the Garden of Eden" firsthand. And, soon after leaving Falcon's Bend, she'd understood tears falling on stone and how a life could change forever in a single, fateful night.

Just two days ago, when Pam insisted they pick up and leave, MaryEmma's mind had instantly gone to her garden in Falcon's Bend. Pam had agreed readily to the suggestion.

At least I can see it, MaryEmma thought as she stared over the wall between her backyard and that of the stone garden. She wondered about the new owners, wondered why they preferred looking out at the tangle of weeds and the tall grass growing up and smothering the beauty.

You're not the same person anyway. That little girl who'd unburied a treasure in her backyard died here, the day she was taken away against her will.

"Auntie Emma," Ariel's small voice carried from the back porch.

MaryEmma set down the bucket of rocks she'd picked up from the grass in the backyard and went to her niece instantly.

"Oh, the princess looks so sad. What's wrong?"

Ariel wore her princess tiara, slippers, and pink feather boa with a white dress that was too small for her. The sleeves were halfway between her wrists and elbows. It was one of last year's dresses. They were all that she had.

Looking at her, MaryEmma remembered the clothes she'd had growing up—always too big or too small. Nothing ever fit properly because it had been given to them by shelters or churches. They'd taken what they could get, just as they'd accepted living in what had once been a nice house but had degenerated into a place where nothing worked or worked well. The little money they'd had had gone into booze.

"We have to get you some new clothes," MaryEmma said viscerally, well aware that the money she had would have to last for awhile. At least until she had a steady job.

“Velvet red?” Ariel asked, twisting a strand of her strawberry blond hair, then sticking it in her mouth where she would suck on it until someone told her not to.

MaryEmma smiled. “Maybe. We’ll see what we can find.”

“Mama sleeps a lot.”

Smile fading, MaryEmma sat down on the step and drew her niece close to her. Shelley had done nothing except sleep for the last two days. She barely ate anything. She didn’t take care of herself, let alone her daughter. Except for Pam’s stuff, MaryEmma had unpacked all the boxes where they should be. She’d cleaned the house from top to bottom. She’d also taken care of Ariel, which was no trouble at all.

“I know she does, princess.”

Ariel lowered her long, pale lashes. “Mama misses Daddy,” she said without taking her hair out of her mouth.

MaryEmma’s stomach sank at the words. *I don’t understand that, she thought with a viciousness that made her feel dizzy. I didn’t understand when Shell married him right out of high school, foregoing any semblance of a career, something for herself. I didn’t understand when she stayed for no reason at all... I don’t understand any of it.* “What about you?” she asked softly. “Do you miss your father, Ariel?”

Instead of speaking, Ariel shrugged without looking up.

“Your mother loves you, princess. It’s just... she’s having a hard time right now. We’ll give her some time and hope she gets better.” MaryEmma stroked the top of her niece’s head, kissing it lovingly.

“Tell me story, Auntie Emma.”

“What kind of story?” MaryEmma asked.

“Bout a princess. A new story.”

Smiling, MaryEmma laughed slightly. “Okay. A new story.” Taking a deep breath, she looked out at the garden beyond the wall. “Well, once upon a time, there was a princess named Princess Marigold who lived in a beautiful garden. She loved to wave her magic wand over the soil and make flowers pop up out of the ground, big and beautiful and full of colors.”

“Pur’p?” Ariel asked, a small smile dancing on her lips.

“Purple and blue and pink and red and yellow. Every color of the rainbow. The birds and butterflies loved to come to visit Princess Marigold’s garden. She was the happiest princess in the whole kingdom. But then one day, an evil dragon swept through

the land. He destroyed everything—all the flowers, all the birds and butterflies. He kidnapped the princess and wouldn't let her escape his dungeon. He hurt her badly and made her very, very sad."

"Why?"

"Because he was evil," MaryEmma told her with a raw throat. "All he knew how to do was hurt and destroy. He was a very bad man."

"But the prince rescued her?"

MaryEmma swallowed the lump in her throat. "Yes, the prince rescued her. He came on a big white horse. He rescued her, brought her back to her garden, and told her to live her life. He gave her back her magic wand so she could wave it over the soil and make the flowers come up again. The birds and butterflies came back. And he told her lots and lots of jokes and made her laugh so much she was happy again."

"What was his name?"

"Jor... Prince George."

Ariel smiled, hugging her. "I like Princess Marigold."

Tears stung MaryEmma's eyes as she hugged her niece back.

"What are we doing out here?" Pam's voice carried out from the window over the kitchen sink.

"Telling stories about princesses," MaryEmma said, standing and wondering if Pam had overheard them. But when she joined them on the porch, there was no disapproval on her kind, sweet face. "How did it go?"

Pam shrugged, turning to smooth back her hair when the wind caught the shoulder-length, dark blond strands. "I think I've found an office a few blocks right off the main street. I've started the paperwork, but we'll have to see."

MaryEmma didn't bother to ask or bring up the subject of Pam taking some time off to get settled in. Pam had been a workaholic all her life. She'd been too stir-crazy to do more than move her things into her downstairs bedroom and unpack quickly. Yesterday, she'd already been in town, scoping out office space with the curious-as-a-cat Sunny Curran.

Pam handed her the keys to her station wagon. "How long will you be gone?"

MaryEmma shrugged. "A few hours, at least. I have to put an application in at the flower shop, find a decent used car..."

“The DMV is open today. I asked Sunny. They have this weird revolving thing where it’s only open once a week on Thursdays. If you want to get your license here, you could do that today as well. Here’s the address.”

“Did you?” MaryEmma asked warily. “Did you get your license here?”

“Not yet. You go ahead. It’ll be all right.”

“You’re sure?”

Pam’s dark brown eyes met hers, offering strong reassurance that she would make sure everything was all right. “No one knows us here, MaryEmma. We’re safe. I promise you.”

MaryEmma nodded. “I’ll be back later then.” She bent to hug Ariel. “And we’ll go get some new clothes for you, princess. Sound good?”

Ariel nodded, looking lost as she watched her go into the house where she got her purse, then went out to Pam’s station wagon.

She was so nervous about applying for a Wisconsin license, she was sure they must have sensed it, yet the process went smoothly. In a little more than a half an hour, she walked out with the card.

The Falcon’s Bend Flower Shop and Greenhouse remained exactly where MaryEmma remembered it being and looked just the same. She couldn’t help smiling when she recalled going in with her mother when she was a little girl, picking out tiny potted daisies, pansies, chrysanthemums, and marigolds. She remembered designing the garden around these flowers in her mind, then in the soil around the stone tears’ centerpiece.

Unfortunately, she also remembered the cranky owner of the flower shop, Mr. Buckley Sosalla. Everyone called him “Buck,” as if a man with such a vicious glare should have a friendly nickname. The stubble on his chin was gray and looked as hard as nails, just as his black eyes did.

Though he certainly didn’t remember her, she remembered the sour expression on his hollow face the minute she stepped up to the counter and asked if he had any job openings.

“You wanna fill out an application?” he demanded, already ducking down under the counter to search one out.

MaryEmma had been hoping to avoid that part of the job process.

“I’ve worked at a flower shop and greenhouse taking care of the flowers and plants for over fifteen years—”

“Yeah? So maybe I wanna check your references.”

He slapped down the application before walking away. MaryEmma swallowed as she stared down at the application. *Previous Employment* she read silently. *List last three or those that pertain to the position you are applying for.* The only thing that kept her from walking out the door and leaving the probing application right where it was, was the fact that she had to have a job. And the only experience she had was that of a green thumb.

Taking a deep breath, MaryEmma filled out the top portion, which asked for her name and current address. Then she wrote down the specifics of her last and only job, including her boss as a reference, along with Pam.

“Um, I don’t have a phone yet. I just moved into town,” MaryEmma said when Buck returned to the counter. “I’ll be coming in tomorrow and next week for supplies for my own garden, so... I’ll check in with you then.”

“You gonna stick around here or you just passin’ through?” he asked, his face looking like an old dried apple. His tone seemed to imply she was some criminal he couldn’t trust simply because she was new to Falcon’s Bend.

“I’ll be staying.”

He nodded before dismissing her with his turned back.

MaryEmma’s hands were shaking when she got into Pam’s car. Pam had told her not to tell anyone they were leaving town, but MaryEmma hadn’t been able to do that, not even for Pam. She’d worked at the flower shop and greenhouse in Springvale far too long to just leave Mr. Harvey without telling him she was going. She’d begun dragging Shell with her to the shop after school and every summer even before Mr. Harvey gave her a real job with real pay. She’d come to love him for his gentleness, his wisdom, the magic way the soil and everything planted in it responded to him.

She’d done the only thing she could do—she’d gone to him, told him her sister wasn’t doing well after her husband’s death, and that Pam thought it best to get Shelley away from the area. The only lie she’d told Mr. Harvey was that she didn’t know where they’d end up. He’d told her he was sorry to lose her, that he thought of her as a daughter. He’d given her her last paycheck in cash since she’d already closed out all her bank accounts.

Buck would probably call her previous employer, and there was a good chance Buck would reveal that MaryEmma was now in Falcon's Bend, Wisconsin. What if Mr. Harvey told someone? Pam had been so insistent about them keeping their departure quiet. About laying low once they arrived here.

After finding a used car at a dealership, coincidentally the same make and color of Pam's white station wagon, MaryEmma paid with cash and said she'd pick it up later.

She wouldn't tell Pam what she'd had to do, she decided. Mr. Harvey wouldn't tell anyone. He knew they needed a fresh start. Everything would be all right.

Yet she worried.

Chapter Four

“YOU FERTILIZE MRS. Harrington’s lawn once more, boy, and I’ll be in the pooper scooper business instead of number crunching,” Jordan Shasta shouted to his golden retriever. He didn’t break the pace of his jog as he passed the Harrington’s pristine lawn. As he’d hoped, his dog lost interest in adding some decoration to the green grass and ran to catch up as soon as Jordan passed the property.

His morning ritual of a two mile jog was interrupted when upon turning down the next block he saw a car pull out of the driveway of the house next door to his. He’d seen very little of his new neighbors in the past few days since they’d moved in, but he’d heard around town that three women and a little girl had come from South Dakota.

The street he lived on had three houses all on the same side, an abandoned farm across the street that hadn’t been occupied in decades, and the infrequently used county road that continued on out of town after that. Jordan decided to stop at his father’s house, which was the first of the three on the block. He found his father, Ted, in the backyard, sitting in a lawn chair with his faithful old beagle Clooney at his feet. Whistling, he peeled potatoes. Jordan’s retriever immediately tried to interest Clooney in a romp.

“Where’s my favorite granddaughter?” his dad asked of Jordan’s daughter Nicole.

Jordan grinned, wiping the sweat from his face with the back of one hand. “Never mind your *only* granddaughter. Nic slept over at Ruthie Curran’s last night.”

After he sat on the back step, he asked, “You meet the new neighbors yet, Pop?”

Ted shook his head. His backyard was surrounded by a tall wood fence. All three houses on the block were at least sixty feet apart, more between his dad's land and the neighbors. "You?"

"Not yet. Sunny mentioned there were three women—two young, one in her forties, and a little girl about four years old. She wasn't sure if they were all related or what, but none of them are talkers. But then who is next to Sunny Curran?"

His dad laughed. Sunny's realty business was next door to Jordan's accounting practice building on Main Street, and their daughters were best friends. Sunny's husband, Dave, worked for the water department.

"I imagine we'll be seeing 'em sooner or later if they plan on staying."

"Yeah. I better get home and get showered. Nic'll be home soon. Talk to you later, Pop."

Ted went back to whistling while he peeled. Jordan hit the road again, the retriever pounding along beside him. As he passed by the house next to his, he saw a little girl sitting on the steps of the front porch, dressed to the nines in a princess costume. She huddled inside herself, not looking at anything except her own slippered feet. In one of the wide flower beds in the front yard kneeled a woman. A profusion of colorful flowers in plastic pots surrounded her. The woman was thin, obviously tall, and wore long sleeves and long pants despite the warmth of the morning. Her riot of reddish yellow curls had been strangled into a clip at the back of her neck. The small, round, wire rims she wore slipped down her nose, and she sat back once to push them up with a dirt-covered hand.

Marigold...

Jordan stopped at the edge of his own property, staring at the back of the woman in disbelief. It couldn't be. MaryEmma Gold had moved out of Falcon's Bend years ago when he was only eleven years old, right after her father died. Her family had rented the very house he now owned. Marigold, as he'd called her, had turned the horror of weeds in the backyard of the house into a beautiful garden those few weeks before summer—a summer for him that had been a nightmare of listening to his parents fight constantly. He'd had a single ray of light. Marigold had been his sunshine.

He'd never forgotten her, yet he hadn't thought about her in years. She'd been his closest friend during the worst part of his life. Friend... yet even now he remembered their first kiss. His first kiss. Sweet, simple, a little off-the-mark, but it'd gone straight to his heart.

Marigold, here again. Was he just imagining it could be her?

Because he couldn't stand out on the road gawking all day long and he certainly didn't want to meet her again dripping with sweat from head to toe, he went inside, showered, and dressed. Nicole would be home soon.

While he waited for his daughter, Jordan went out to the stone patio that surrounded the back corner of the house. It was the only part of the garden he'd used since he and his wife moved back to Falcon's Bend years ago. Kaitlyn couldn't bear to get her hands dirty, especially not outdoors where it was either too cold or too hot for her. Between his job, his family, and his social life, he'd never had the time to work on the garden like he'd always told himself he would.

Marigold would cry if she saw this. There was nothing she loved more than this garden. And it loved her back, Jordan thought sadly, feeling a twinge of guilt that he'd let it go, that he hadn't taken the torch—*Joel Cohn, that was it*—had passed down to the occupants of the house and garden he'd built with his own two hands, not to mention plenty of blood, sweat, and tears.

A car honked from the front, and Jordan went back through the breakfast nook patio doors and then out the front door. His eight-year-old daughter, the picture of her mother, flew to him, all smiles, laughter, and hugs. The dog welcomed her back home the way dogs do, making ample use of his slobbery tongue.

"Ruthie and I had such a good time, Daddy. She's got every game in the world on her computer."

"Sunny and Dave must have a bigger house than I thought if they've got a computer big enough to hold every game in the world," Jordan teased, and Nicole scolded him for it even as she hugged him back, saying softly, "I missed you, Daddy."

Sunny smiled and told Jordan that Nicole had been a dream guest and they'd have to do it again soon. Both Jordan and Nicole thanked her before she headed out, saying she had to show a house in twenty minutes.

"What do you say we greet our new neighbors properly, Nic?"

Nicole turned toward the house next door, her blue-violet eyes lighting up when she saw the little princess on the front steps. “They have a little girl! Maybe I can play with her.”

“Let’s drop by the bakery and get some cookies to bring over with us, Spunky. Can’t go empty-handed.”

“Let’s!” Nicole agreed. They put her suitcase inside, then went out to the SUV in the garage. “I’ve always wanted to have a friend next door. I wish Ruthie lived next door to us. Do you think this girl will like me?”

Jordan tousled his daughter’s black satin hair. “I don’t think she could resist.”

Chapter Five

“LET ME JUST wash my hands, and then I’ll get you a snack, princess,” MaryEmma said, trying not to touch anything as she went to the kitchen to get the dirt off her hands. Ariel followed her into the spacious room and sat down at the table.

MaryEmma grimaced when she saw the time. It was after ten and Shelley was still asleep. Every day she slept longer. Yesterday, MaryEmma had tried to talk to her sister, not even really knowing what to say. She couldn’t offer sympathy, let alone empathy. Not in this case. She also hadn’t wanted to make her feel bad for her neglect of Ariel.

A chime sounded through the house, and MaryEmma stopped short of turning on the faucet.

Doorbell. Who would visit?

Warily, MaryEmma decided to wait to wash her hands. It could be an excuse to discourage a long conversation if it happened to be Sunny Curran.

As she entered the hall, she saw two figures through the screen door. A tall man and a girl. MaryEmma swallowed the tension filling her throat and forced herself to go to the door and open it. The two visitors were smiling. MaryEmma couldn’t get herself to. Instead, she offered tightly, “May I help you?”

“It is you,” the man said, still smiling.

MaryEmma frowned in confusion.

“It’s been twenty-two years, so I guess it’s too much to ask for you to recognize me. I won’t hold it against you, Marigold.”

He was teasing, his tone light. One minute she had no idea who he was, let alone the girl with him, and what they might want; and the next, with one simple word—“Marigold”—she knew exactly who he was.

“Jordie?” she asked in hoarse shock. “Jordie Shasta?”

He'd changed. He'd changed radically—beyond recognition. He was a man, not a lean going-on-teenage boy who was just a little bit, not much, gawky. While she was tall for a woman at five foot nine and had been inches taller than him back then, now he towered over her. He wasn't the least bit ungainly. In the comfortable shorts and tank top he wore, she could see that his body was muscular everywhere.

The girl next to him giggled, glancing up at him to tease, “*Jordie?*”

When Jordie laughed, his frosty blue eyes crinkled; MaryEmma was transported back twenty-two years. She would never forget those eyes, the crinkles he'd had around them even as a young boy, and the brackets and dimples around his full, soft mouth.

She'd kissed him—once. She'd closed her eyes and zoomed in, all shaky courage because she'd known she'd regret it forever if she didn't. He hadn't pushed her away. Instead, he'd taken her face in his hands, re-centered and held for a lifetime of seconds before she fled without looking back.

Ariel's arms around her leg brought MaryEmma back to the present, and she tensed, dropping her gaze, especially when Ariel whispered, “Prince George.”

“What did she say?” Jordie asked, grinning adoringly down at Ariel.

MaryEmma shook her head.

“Well, this is my daughter Nicole, otherwise known as Sneetch-a-Peach,” Jordie introduced.

“Dad!” the girl shrieked, turning to look up at him. When she faced MaryEmma again, she rolled her eyes. “He makes up a new nickname for me every day, I swear.”

Daughter. Jordie has a daughter. Jordie has a wife.

MaryEmma couldn't get herself to function, not the way she should and must. She wanted to look at him so badly, but looking at Jordie the man, remembering Jordan the boy...

Never once did she consider he would still live in Falcon's Bend. How many times had he said to her he was “getting out of the old backwater” as soon as he graduated high school? Had he lived here all his life?

They'd come here to get lost. But she'd been found—by Jordie, the only person she'd ever cared about from this town.

Jordie, the one who'd told her endless silly jokes, making her laugh more in the year she was with him than she had in her whole life. Jordie, the boy who wasn't afraid to play with Barbie Dolls along with cars. Jordie, who shared her love of the garden, making up intriguing stories to explain everything—the abandoned farm across the street, antiques.

Nicole handed them a plate of chocolate chip cookies wrapped with plastic.

MaryEmma couldn't stop herself from meeting Jordie's sparkling eyes. "Don't worry. My mother did *not* make these. We got them from the bakery."

A smile pulled her lips up forcefully, though she lowered her gaze once more. His mother's chocolate chip cookies had simply been the worst cookies imaginable. A thought suddenly dawned on her. "*You* live next door. *You* own the garden."

"Your stone garden. Yeah. We're neighbors once more, as fate would have it. My father lives in the house on the other side of you."

The shuffle of bare feet on the wood floor drew MaryEmma's attention, and she turned her head to see her sister crossing the floor to the kitchen. She was wearing a bathrobe, her long hair tangled around her face.

Behind her, Pam came out of her room. Instead of walking past, she joined them, and MaryEmma introduced their new neighbors softly. She heard the coolness in Pam's voice as she greeted Jordan, but her friendliness returned with Nicole. It told MaryEmma that Pam had heard. If the window of her room was open, she would have overheard everything said on the porch.

"Can your daughter come out to play?" Nicole asked MaryEmma when Pam drew back into the kitchen, giving her a pointed look.

"Ariel isn't my daughter. She's my niece. She's... she's very shy. Thank you for the cookies."

Because she had to, MaryEmma closed the screen door, turned away, and led Ariel to the kitchen. Everything inside her rebelled against the rudeness she'd shown Jordie and his daughter. The fact that she had to do it didn't make her feel any better.

"You know this man," Pam said immediately while MaryEmma set the plate on the table and went to wash her hands. "That's why you wanted to come here."

“No!” MaryEmma said from her gut. “No. No, the garden. His garden. Shelley and I lived next door for a year just before Dad died.”

“Well, that explains it,” Pam said. “This was not a good idea, MaryEmma. We were supposed to disappear here.”

“I had no idea he’d still be here. He always said he’d move away.”

“Regardless, this has to stop. Maybe we should move into town. They have apartments...”

MaryEmma’s distress surprised her. She never fought Pam because Pam always knew what was best for all of them. But she couldn’t allow this. “It’ll be fine. You’ll see. We’ll keep to ourselves.”

Pam stood, leaning on the back of a chair, staring at her with strong uncertainty written in her very posture.

“He’s married. He has better things to do than bother with his neighbors.”

Slowly, Pam nodded. “I hope so. If not, we’ll have to move into town. I worry about my girls all alone out here, miles away from me when I’ll be at my office.”

Out here was still in town, the edge of it anyway, but MaryEmma didn’t protest.

“I’m going to my office,” Pam said, grabbing a cookie and dropping a kiss on Ariel’s head. “Good to see you’re out of bed, Shelley.”

Pam was gone before Shelley could muster a reply, but Shelley said nothing as she ate a cookie. MaryEmma got one for Ariel, then poured glasses of milk for all of them.

“We’re planting flowers out front today. You’re welcome to help us,” MaryEmma said warmly to her sister.

Shelley didn’t say anything, and MaryEmma knew she’d head upstairs, back to bed, soon.

Would Jordie be outside when she and Ariel went out to finish planting the front flower beds? Would his wife be out with him and his daughter?

She couldn’t imagine Jordie with a wife, but he made a wonderful father. In that one glance, she’d seen that Nicole adored him. How much had he changed?

“Auntie Emma, was he Prince George?”

MaryEmma flushed at being caught, yet she murmured, “No, princess.”

“But he called you Marigold. Princess Marigold.”

“Once upon a time,” MaryEmma whispered.

Princess Marigold, a gawky princess with too curly, frizzy, red-blond hair, buck teeth, four eyes. A princess who tripped more steps than she walked. A princess who had finally become coordinated when she met her prince.

End of Excerpt

Read Tears on Stone

Available at

www.swimmingkangaroo.com