

A monochromatic red-toned photograph of the Chicago skyline at night, with the city lights reflecting on the water in the foreground. The image has a distressed, torn-paper texture.

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#1 NEW YORK
TIMES
BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF
**EVERY BREATH
YOU TAKE**

Paradise

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Story*

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Paradise

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Dedication

Anyone who is closely involved with me when I'm working on a novel could tell you that it requires certain things to maintain any sort of relationship—including incredible patience, extraordinary tolerance, and the ability to believe I'm actually working when I'm staring off into space.

This novel is dedicated to my family and friends who possess those traits in abundance and who have enriched my life beyond measure:

To my son, Clayton, and my daughter, Whitney, whose pride in me has been a tremendous source of pleasure. And relief.

And to those very special people who offered their friendship and then had to bear more than their fair share of the burden of that friendship—especially Phyllis and Richard Ashley, Debbie and Craig Kiefer, Kathy and Lloyd Stansberry, and Cathy and Paul Waldner. I couldn't ask for a better "cheering section" than all of you.

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Chapter 1

December 1973

With her scrapbook opened beside her on her canopied bed, Meredith Bancroft carefully cut out the picture from the *Chicago Tribune*. The caption read, *Children of Chicago socialites, dressed as elves, participate in charity Christmas pageant at Oakland Memorial Hospital*, then it listed their names. Beneath the caption was a large picture of the "elves"—five boys and five girls, including Meredith—who were handing out presents to the kids in the children's ward. Standing off to the left, supervising the proceedings, was a handsome young man of eighteen, who the caption referred to as "Parker Reynolds III, son of Mr. and Mrs. Parker Reynolds of Kenilworth."

Impartially, Meredith compared herself to the other girls in the elf costumes, wondering how they could manage to look leggy and curvy while she looked . . . "Dumpy!" she pronounced with a pained grimace. "I look like a troll, not an elf!"

It did not seem at all fair that the other girls who were fourteen, just a few small weeks older than she was, should look so wonderful while she looked like a flat-chested troll with braces. Her gaze shifted to her picture and she regretted again the streak of vanity that had caused her to take off her glasses for the photograph; without them she had a tendency to squint—just like she was doing in that awful picture. "Contact lenses would definitely help," she concluded. Her gaze switched to Parker's picture, and a dreamy smile drifted across her face as she clasped the newspaper clipping to what would have been her breasts if she *had* breasts, which she didn't. Not yet. At this rate, not ever.

The door to her bedroom opened and Meredith hastily yanked the picture from her chest as the stout, sixty-year-old housekeeper came in to take her dinner tray away. "You didn't eat your dessert," Mrs. Ellis chided.

"I'm fat, Mrs. Ellis," Meredith said. To prove it, she scrambled off the antique bed and marched over to the mirror above her dressing table. "Look at me," she said, pointing an accusing finger at her reflection. "I have no waistline!"

"You have some baby fat there, that's all."

"I don't have hips either. I look like a walking two-by-four. No wonder I have no friends—"

Mrs. Ellis, who'd worked for the Bancrofts for less than a year, looked amazed. "You have no friends? Why not?"

Desperately in need of someone to confide in, Meredith said, "I've only pretended that everything is fine at school. The truth is, it's terrible. I'm a . . . a complete misfit. I've always been a misfit."

"Well, I never! There must be something wrong with the children in your school. . . ."

"It isn't them, it's *me*, but I'm going to change," Meredith announced. "I've gone on a diet, and I want to do something with my hair. It's awful."

"It's *not* awful!" Mrs. Ellis argued, looking at Meredith's shoulder-length pale blond hair and then her turquoise eyes. "You have striking eyes and very nice hair. Nice and thick and—"

"Colorless."

"Blond."

Meredith stared stubbornly at the mirror, her mind magnifying the flaws that existed. "I'm almost five feet seven inches tall. It's a lucky thing I finally stopped growing before I became a giant! But I'm not hopeless, I realized that on Saturday."

Mrs. Ellis's brows drew together in confusion. "What happened on Saturday to change your mind about yourself?"

"Nothing earth-shattering," Meredith said. *Something*

earth-shattering, she thought. *Parker smiled at me at the Christmas pageant. He brought me a Coke without being asked. He told me to be sure and save a dance for him Saturday at the Eppingham party.* Seventy-five years before, Parker's family had founded the large Chicago bank where Bancroft & Company's funds were deposited, and the friendship between the Bancrofts and Reynoldses had endured for generations. "Everything is going to change now, not just the way I look," Meredith continued happily as she turned away from the mirror. "I'm going to have a friend too! There's a new girl at school, and *she* doesn't know that no one else likes me. She's smart, like I am, and she called me tonight to ask me a homework question. She *called* me, and we talked about all sorts of things."

"I did notice you never brought friends home from school," Mrs. Ellis said, wringing her hands in nervous dismay, "but I thought it was because you lived so far away."

"No, it isn't that," Meredith said, flopping down onto the bed and staring self-consciously at her serviceable slippers that looked just like small replicas of the ones her father wore. Despite their wealth, Meredith's father had the liveliest respect for money; all of her clothing was of excellent quality and was purchased only when necessary, always with a stern eye toward durability. "I don't fit in, you see."

"When I was a girl," Mrs. Ellis said with a sudden look of comprehension, "we were always a little leery of children who got good grades."

"It's not just that," Meredith said wryly. "It's something besides the way I look and the grades I get that makes me a misfit. It's—all this," she said, and made a sweeping gesture that encompassed the large, rather austere room with its antique furniture, a room whose character resembled all the other forty-five rooms in the Bancroft estate. "Everyone thinks I'm completely weird because Father insists that Fenwick drive me to school."

"What's wrong with that, may I ask?"

"The other children walk or ride the school bus."

"So?"

"So they do *not* arrive in a chauffeur-driven Rolls!" Almost wistfully, Meredith added, "Their fathers are plumbers and accountants. One of them works for us at the store."

Unable to argue with the logic of that, and unwilling to admit it was true, Mrs. Ellis said, "But this new girl in school—she doesn't find it odd that Fenwick drives you?"

"No," Meredith said with a guilty chuckle that made her eyes glow with sudden liveliness behind her glasses, "because she thinks Fenwick *is* my father! I told her my father works for some rich people who own a big store."

"You didn't!"

"Yes, I did, and I—I'm not sorry. I should have spread that around school years ago, only I didn't want to lie."

"But now you don't mind lying?" Mrs. Ellis said with a censorious look.

"It *isn't* a lie, not entirely," Meredith said in an imploring voice. "Father explained it to me a long time ago. You see, Bancroft & Company is a corporation, and a corporation is actually owned by the stockholders. So you see, as president of Bancroft & Company, Father is—technically—employed by the stockholders. Do you understand?"

"Probably not," she said flatly. "Who owns the stock?"

Meredith sent her a guilty look. "We do, mostly."

Mrs. Ellis found the whole notion of the operation of Bancroft & Company, a famous downtown Chicago department store, absolutely baffling, but Meredith frequently displayed an uncanny understanding of the business. Although, Mrs. Ellis thought with helpless ire at Meredith's father, it wasn't so uncanny—not when the man had no interest in his daughter *except* when he was lecturing her about that store. In fact, Mrs. Ellis thought Philip Bancroft was probably to blame for his daughter's inability to fit in with the other girls her age. He treated his daughter like an adult, and he insisted that

she speak and act like one at all times. On the rare occasions when he entertained friends, Meredith even acted as his hostess. As a result, Meredith was very much at ease with adults and obviously at a complete loss with her peers.

"You're right about one thing though," Meredith said. "I can't go on tricking Lisa Pontini about Fenwick being my father. I just thought that if she had a chance to know me first, it might not matter when I tell her Fenwick is actually our chauffeur. The only reason she hasn't found out already is that she doesn't know anyone else in our class, and she always has to go straight home after school. She has seven brothers and sisters, and she has to help out at home."

Mrs. Ellis reached out and awkwardly patted Meredith's arm, trying to think of something encouraging to say. "Things always look brighter in the morning," she announced, resorting, as she often did, to one of the cozy clichés she herself found so comforting. She picked up the dinner tray, then paused in the doorway, struck with another inspiring platitude. "And remember this," she instructed Meredith in the rising tones of one who is about to impart a very satisfying thought, "every *dog* has its *day*!"

Meredith didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Thank you, Mrs. Ellis," she said, "that is *very* encouraging." In mortified silence she watched the door close behind the housekeeper, then she slowly picked up the scrapbook. When the *Tribune* clipping had been safely taped to the page, she stared at it for a long moment, then reached out and lightly touched Parker's smiling mouth. The thought of actually dancing with him made her shiver with a mixture of terror and anticipation. This was Thursday, and the Eppingham dance was the day after tomorrow. It seemed like years to wait.

Sighing, she flipped backward through the pages of the big scrapbook. At the front were some very old clippings, yellowed now with age, the pictures faded. The scrapbook had originally belonged to her mother, Caroline,

and it contained the only tangible proof in the house that Caroline Edwards Bancroft had ever existed. Everything else connected with her had been removed at Philip Bancroft's instructions.

Caroline Edwards had been an actress—not an especially good one, according to her reviews—but an unquestionably glamorous one. Meredith studied the faded pictures, but she didn't read what the columnists had written because she knew every word by heart. She knew that Cary Grant had escorted her mother to the Academy Awards in 1955, and that David Niven had said she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, and that David Selznick had wanted her in one of his pictures. She knew that her mother had roles in three Broadway musicals and that the critics had panned her acting but praised her shapely legs. The gossip columnists had hinted at serious romances between Caroline and nearly all her leading men. There were clippings of her, draped in furs, attending a party in Rome; wrapped in a strapless black evening gown, playing roulette in Monte Carlo. In one photograph she was clad in a skimpy bikini on the beach in Monaco, in another, skiing in Gstaad with a Swiss Olympic Gold Medalist. It was obvious to Meredith that wherever she went, Caroline had been surrounded by handsome men.

The last clipping her mother had saved was dated six months after the one in Gstaad. She was wearing a magnificent white wedding gown—laughing and running down the cathedral steps on Philip Bancroft's arm beneath a shower of rice. The society columnists had outdone themselves with extravagant descriptions of the wedding. The reception at the Palmer House Hotel had been closed to the press, but the columnists faithfully reported all the famous guests who were present, from the Vanderbilts and Whitneys, to a Supreme Court justice and four U.S. senators.

The marriage lasted two years—long enough for Caroline to get pregnant, have her baby, have a sleazy affair with a horse trainer, and then go running off to Europe

with a phony Italian prince who'd been a guest in this very house. Beyond that, Meredith knew little, except that her mother had never bothered to send her so much as a note or a birthday card. Meredith's father, who placed great emphasis on dignity and old-fashioned values, said her mother was a self-centered slut without the slightest conception of marital fidelity or maternal responsibility. When Meredith was a year old, he had filed for divorce and for custody of Meredith, fully prepared to exert all the Bancroft family's considerable political and social influence to assure that he won his suit. In the end he hadn't needed to resort to that. According to what he'd told Meredith, her mother hadn't bothered to wait around for the court hearing, let alone try to oppose him.

Once he was granted custody of Meredith, her father had set out to ensure that she would never follow her mother's example. Instead, he was determined that Meredith would take her place in a long line of dignified Bancroft women who'd led exemplary lives dedicated to charitable good works that befitted their station, and to which not a single breath of scandal had ever been attached.

When it came time for her to start school, Philip had discovered to his annoyance that standards of conduct were relaxing, even among his own social class. Many of his acquaintances were taking a more liberal view of child behavior and sending their children to "progressive" schools like Bently and Ridgeview. When he inspected these schools, he heard phrases like "unstructured classes" and "self-expression." Progressive education sounded undisciplined to him; it foretold lower standards of education and deportment. After rejecting both those schools, he took Meredith with him to see St. Stephen's—a private Catholic school run by the Benedictine nuns, the same school his aunt and his mother had attended.

Her father had approved of all he saw the day they visited St. Stephen's: Thirty-four first-grade girls in

demure gray-and-blue-plaid jumpers, and ten boys in white shirts and blue ties, had come instantly and respectfully to their feet when the nun had shown him the classroom. Forty-four young voices had chorused, "*Good morning, Sister.*" Furthermore, St. Stephen's still taught academics in the good old-fashioned way—unlike Bently, where he'd seen some children finger-painting while the other students, who *chose* to learn, worked on math. As an added benefit, Meredith would receive strict moral training here as well.

Her father was not oblivious to the fact that the neighborhood surrounding St. Stephen's had deteriorated, but he was obsessed with the idea that Meredith be raised in the same manner as the other upstanding, upright Bancroft women who had attended St. Stephen's for three generations. He solved the matter of the neighborhood by having the family chauffeur drive Meredith to and from school.

The one thing he didn't realize was that the girls and boys who attended St. Stephen's were not the virtuous little beings they'd seemed to be that day. They were ordinary kids from lower-middle-class families and even some poor families; they played together and walked to school together, and they shared a common suspicion of anyone from an entirely different and far more prosperous background.

Meredith hadn't known about that when she arrived at St. Stephen's to start first grade. Clad in her neat gray-and-blue-plaid uniform jumper and carrying her new lunch pail, she'd quaked with the nervous excitement of any six-year-old confronting a class filled with strangers, but she'd felt little actual fear. After spending her whole life in relative loneliness, with only her father and the servants as companions, she was happily anticipating the prospect of finally having friends her own age.

The first day at school went well enough, but it took a sudden turn for the worse when classes were dismissed and the students poured out the school doors into the playground and parking lot. Fenwick had been waiting in

the playground, standing beside the Rolls in his black chauffeur's uniform. The older children had stopped and stared—and then identified her as being rich, ergo “different.”

That alone was enough to make them wary and distant, but by the end of the week, they'd also discovered other things about “the rich girl” that set her apart: For one thing, Meredith Bancroft spoke more like an adult than a child; in addition, she didn't know how to play any of the games they played at recess, and when she did play them, her unfamiliarity made her seem clumsy. Worst of all, within days, she was teacher's pet because she was smart.

Within a month, Meredith had been judged by all her peers and branded as an outsider, an alien being from another world, to be ostracized by all. Perhaps if she'd been pretty enough to inspire admiration, it would have helped in time, but she wasn't. When she was nine she arrived at school wearing glasses. At twelve she had braces; at thirteen, she was the tallest girl in her class.

A week ago, years after Meredith had despaired of ever having a real friend, everything had changed. Lisa Pontini had enrolled in the eighth grade at St. Stephen's. An inch taller than Meredith, Lisa moved like a model and answered complicated algebra questions like a bored scholar. At noon that same day, Meredith had been sitting on a low stone wall on the perimeter of the school grounds, eating her lunch, exactly as she did every day, with a book open in her lap. Originally, she'd started bringing a book to read because it dulled the feeling of being isolated and conspicuous. By fifth grade she'd become an avid reader.

She'd been about to turn a page when a pair of scuffed oxfords entered her line of vision, and there was Lisa Pontini, looking curiously at her. With Lisa's vivid coloring and mass of auburn hair, she was Meredith's complete opposite; moreover, there was an indefinable air of daring confidence about Lisa that gave her what *Seventeen* magazine called panache. Instead of wearing

her gray school sweater with its school emblem demurely over her shoulders as Meredith did, Lisa had tied the sleeves in a loose knot over her breasts.

"God, what a dump!" Lisa announced, sitting down beside Meredith and looking around at the school grounds. "I've never seen so many short boys in my life. They must put something in the drinking fountains here that stunts their growth! What's your average?"

Grades at St. Stephen's were expressed in percentiles carried out to a precise decimal point. "It's 97.8," Meredith said, a little dazed by Lisa's rapid remarks and unexpected sociability.

"Mine's 98.1," Lisa countered, and Meredith noticed that Lisa's ears were pierced. Earrings and lipstick were forbidden on the school grounds. While Meredith was noting all that, Lisa was looking her over too. With a puzzled smile, she demanded bluntly, "Are you a loner by choice or are you some sort of outcast?"

"I never thought about it," Meredith lied.

"How long do you have to wear those braces?"

"Another year," Meredith said, deciding she didn't like Lisa Pontini at all. She closed her book and stood up, glad the bell was about to ring.

That afternoon, as was the custom on the last Friday of every month, the students lined up in church to confess their sins to St. Stephen's priests. Feeling, as always, like a disgraceful sinner, Meredith knelt in the confessional, and told her misdemeanors to Father Vickers, including such sins as disliking Sister Mary Lawrence and spending too much time thinking about her appearance. Finished, she held the door open for the next person, then she knelt in a pew and said her assigned prayers of penance.

Since students were allowed to leave for the day after that, Meredith went outside to wait for Fenwick. A few minutes later, Lisa walked down the church steps, putting on her jacket. Still flinching from Lisa's comments about her being a loner and having to wear braces, Meredith watched warily as the other girl looked around and then sauntered over to her.

"Would you believe," Lisa announced, "Vickers told me to say a whole rosary tonight for penance for a little necking? I'd hate to think what penance he hands out for French kissing!" she added with an impudent grin, sitting down on the ledge beside Meredith.

Meredith hadn't known that one's nationality determined the way a person kissed, but she assumed from Lisa's remark that however the French did it, the priests definitely didn't want St. Stephen's students doing it. Trying to look worldly, she said, "For kissing that way, Father Vickers makes you clean the church."

Lisa giggled, studying Meredith with curiosity. "Does your boyfriend wear braces too?"

Meredith thought of Parker and shook her head.

"That's good," Lisa said with an infectious grin. "I always wondered how two people with braces could possibly kiss and not get stuck together. My boyfriend's name is Mario Campano. He's tall, dark, and handsome. What's your boyfriend's name? What's he like?"

Meredith glanced at the street, hoping Fenwick wouldn't remember that school got out early today. Although she was uneasy with the topic of conversation, Lisa Pontini fascinated her, and Meredith sensed that for some reason the other girl truly wanted to be friends. "He's eighteen and he looks," Meredith said honestly, "like Robert Redford. His name is Parker."

"What's his first name?"

"That is his first name. His last name is Reynolds."

"Parker Reynolds," Lisa repeated, wrinkling her nose. "Sounds like a society snob. Is he good at it?"

"At what?"

"Kissing, of course."

"Oh. Well—yes. Absolutely fantastic."

Lisa sent her a mocking look. "He's never kissed you. Your face turns pink when you lie."

Meredith stood up abruptly. "Now, look," she began angrily. "I didn't ask you to come over here, and I—"

"Hey, don't get into a sweat over it. Kissing isn't all that wonderful. I mean, the first time Mario kissed me, it was the most embarrassing moment of my entire life."

Meredith's anger evaporated now that Lisa was about to confess something about herself, and she sat back down. "It was embarrassing because he kissed you?"

"No, it was embarrassing because I leaned against the front door when he did it, and my shoulder hit the doorbell. My father pulled the door open, and I went crashing backwards into his arms with Mario still holding onto me for dear life. It took *ages* to untangle all three of us on the floor."

Meredith's shriek of laughter was abruptly terminated by the sight of the Rolls turning the corner. "There's my—my ride," she hedged, sobering.

Lisa glanced sideways and gaped. "Jesus, is that a Rolls?"

Nodding uncomfortably, Meredith said with a shrug as she picked up her books, "I live a long way from here, and my father doesn't want me to take the bus."

"Your dad's a chauffeur, huh?" Lisa said, walking with Meredith toward the car. "It must be great to be able to ride around in a car like that, pretending you're rich." Without waiting for Meredith to answer, she said, "My dad's a pipe fitter. His union's on strike right now, so we moved here where the rent's even cheaper. You know how that goes."

Meredith had no idea "how that goes" from any personal experience, but she knew from her father's angry tirades what effect unions and strikes had on business owners like the Bancrofts. Even so, she nodded in sympathetic reaction to Lisa's grim sigh. "It must be tough," she said, and then impulsively added, "Do you want a ride home?"

"Do I! No, wait—can I do it next week? I've got seven brothers and sisters, and my ma will have twenty chores for me to do. I'd rather hang around here a little while, and then get home at the normal time."

That had been a week ago, and the tentative friendship that began that day had blossomed and grown, nourished by more exchanged confidences and laughing admissions. Now, as Meredith sat gazing at Parker's picture in the scrapbook and thinking about the dance Saturday