

WHEN SHE WOKE, SHE WAS RED. Not flushed, not sunburned, but the solid, declarative red of a stop sign.

She saw her hands first. She held them in front of her eyes, squinting up at them. For a few seconds, shadowed by her eyelashes and backlit by the hard white light emanating from the ceiling, they appeared black. Then her eyes adjusted, and the illusion faded. She examined the backs, the palms. They floated above her, as starkly alien as starfish. She'd known what to expect—she'd seen Reds many times before, of course, on the street and on the vid—but still, she wasn't prepared for the sight of her own changed flesh. For the twenty-six years she'd been alive, her hands had been a honey-toned pink, deepening to golden brown in the summertime. Now, they were the color of newly shed blood.

She felt panic rising, felt her throat constrict and her limbs begin to quiver. She shut her eyes and forced herself to lie still, slowing her breathing and focusing on the steady rise and fall of her belly. A short, sleeveless shift was all that covered her, but she wasn't cold. The temperature in the room was precisely calibrated to keep her comfortable. Punishment was meted out in other ways: in increments of solitude, monotony and, harshest of all, self-reflection, both figurative and literal. She hadn't yet seen the mirrors, but she could feel them shimmering at the edges of her awareness, waiting to show her what she'd become. She could sense the cameras behind the mirrors too, recording her every eyeblink and muscle twitch, and the watchers behind the cameras, the guards, doctors and technicians employed by the state and the millions watching

at home, feet propped up on the coffee table, a beer or a soda in one hand, eyes fixed on the vidscreen. She told herself she would give them nothing: no proofs or exceptions for their case studies, no reactions to arouse their scorn or pity. She would sit up, open her eyes, see what was there to be seen and then wait calmly for them to release her. Thirty days was not such a long time.

She took a deep breath and sat up. Mirrors lined all four walls. They reflected back a white floor and ceiling, white sleeping platform and pallet, transparent shower unit, white sink and toilet. And in the midst of all that pristine white, a lurid red blotch that was herself, Hannah Payne. She saw a red face—hers. Red arms and legs—hers. Even the shift she wore was red, though of a less intense shade than her skin.

She wanted to curl into a ball and hide, wanted to scream and beat her fists against the glass until it shattered. But before she could act on any of these impulses, her stomach cramped and she felt a swell of nausea. She rushed to the toilet. She threw up until there was nothing left but bile and leaned weakly on the seat with her arm cushioning her sweaty face. After a few seconds the toilet flushed itself.

Time passed. A tone sounded three times, and a panel on the opposite wall opened, revealing a recess containing a tray of food. Hannah didn't move from her position on the floor; she was too ill to eat. The panel closed, and the tone sounded again, twice this time. There was a brief delay, then the room went dark. It was the most welcome darkness she had ever known. She crawled to the platform and lay down on the pallet. Eventually, she slept.

She dreamed she was at Mustang Island with Becca and their parents. Becca was nine, Hannah seven. They were building a sand castle. Becca shaped the castle while Hannah dug the moat. Her fingers furrowed the sand, moving round and round the rising

structure in the center. The deeper she dug, the wetter and denser the sand and the harder it was for her fingers to penetrate it. “That’s deep enough,” Becca said, but Hannah ignored her sister and kept digging. There was something down there, something she urgently needed to find. Her motions grew frantic. The sand was very wet now and very dark, and her fingers were raw. The moat started to fill with water from below, welling up over her hands to her wrists. She smelled something fetid and realized it wasn’t water but blood, dark and viscous with age. She tried to jerk her hands out of the moat, but they were caught on something—no, something was holding them, pulling them down. Her arms disappeared up to the elbows. She screamed for her parents, but the beach was empty apart from herself and Becca. Her face hit the sand castle, collapsing it. “Help me,” she begged her sister, but Becca didn’t move. She watched impassively as Hannah was pulled under. “Kiss the baby for me,” Becca said. “Tell it—” Hannah couldn’t hear the rest. Her ears were full of blood.

She started awake, heart tripping. The room was still dark, and her body was cold and wet. *It’s just sweat*, she told herself. *Not blood, sweat*. As it dried she began to shiver, and she felt the air around her grow warmer to compensate. She was about to nod off again when the tone sounded twice. The lights came on, blindingly bright. Her second day as a Red had begun.

SHE TRIED TO GO BACK TO sleep, but the white light burned through her closed lids, through her eyeballs and into her brain. Even with an arm flung over her eyes, she could still see it, like a harsh alien sun blazing inside her skull. This was by design, she knew. The lights inhibited sleep in all but a small percentage of inmates. Of these, something like ninety percent committed suicide within a month of their release. The message of the numbers was unambiguous: if you were depressed enough to sleep despite the lights, you were as good as dead. Hannah couldn't sleep. She didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed.

She shifted onto her side. She couldn't feel the microcomputers embedded in the pallet, but she knew they were there, monitoring her temperature, pulse rate, blood pressure, respiratory rate, white blood cell count, serotonin levels. Private information—but there was no privacy in a Chrome ward.

She needed to use the toilet but held it for as long as possible, mindful of the cameras. While “acts of personal hygiene” were censored from public broadcast, she knew the guards and editors still saw them. Finally, when she could wait no longer, she got up and peed. The urine came out yellow. There was some comfort in that.

At the sink she found a cup and toothbrush. She opened her mouth to clean her teeth and was startled by the sight of her tongue. It was a livid reddish purple, the color of a raspberry popsicle. Only her eyes were unchanged, still a deep black, surrounded by white. The virus no longer mutated the pigment of the eyes as it had in the early days of melachroming. There'd been too many cases of blindness, and that, the courts had decided, constituted cruel and unusual

punishment. Hannah had seen vids of those early Chromes, with their flat neon gazes and disturbingly blank faces. At least she still had her eyes to remind her of who she was: Hannah Elizabeth Payne. Daughter of John and Samantha. Sister of Rebecca. Killer of a child, unnamed. Hannah wondered whether that child would have inherited its father's melancholy brown eyes and sensitive mouth, his high wide brow and translucent skin.

Her own skin felt clammy, and her body smelled sour. She went to the shower unit. A sign on the door read: WATER NONPOTABLE. DO NOT DRINK. Just beneath it was a hook for her shift. She started to take it off but then remembered the watchers and stepped inside still wearing it. She closed the door, and the water came on, blessedly hot. There was a dispenser of soap and she used it, scrubbing her skin hard with her hands. She waited until the walls of the shower steamed up and then lifted up her shift and quickly soaped and rinsed herself underneath. As always, the feel of hair under her arms surprised her, though she should have been used to it by now. She hadn't been allowed a razor since her arrest. At first, when the hair there and on her legs had begun to grow out, going from stubbly to silky, it had horrified her. Now, the thought of such feminine vanity made her laugh, an ugly sound, loud in the enclosed space of the stall. She was a Red. Her femininity was irrelevant.

She remembered the first time she'd seen a female Chrome, when she was in kindergarten. Then as now, they were comparatively rare, and the vast majority were Yellows serving short sentences for misdemeanors. The woman Hannah had seen was a Blue—an even more uncommon sight, though she was too young then to know it. Child molesters tended not to survive long once they were released. Some committed suicide, but most simply disappeared. Their bodies turned up in dumpsters and rivers, stabbed

or shot or strangled. That day, Hannah and her father had been crossing the street, and the woman, swathed in a long, hooded coat and gloves despite the sticky autumn heat, had been crossing in the opposite direction. As she approached, Hannah's father jerked Hannah toward him, and the sudden motion caused the woman to lift her lowered head. Her face was a startling cobalt blue, but it was her eyes that riveted Hannah. They were like shards of basalt, jagged with rage. Hannah shrank away from her, and the woman smiled, baring white teeth planted in ghastly purple gums.

Hannah hadn't quite finished rinsing herself when the water brake activated. The dryjets came on, and warm air whooshed over her. When they cut off, she stepped out of the shower, feeling a little better for being clean.

The tone sounded three times and the food panel opened. Hannah ignored it. But it seemed she wouldn't be allowed to skip another meal, because after a short delay a different tone sounded, this one a needle-sharp, intolerable shriek. She walked quickly to the opening in the wall and removed the tray. The sound stopped.

There were two nutribars, one a speckled brown, the other bright green, as well as a cup of water and a large beige pill. It looked like a vitamin, but she couldn't be sure. She ate the bars, leaving the pill, and returned the tray to the opening. But as she turned away, the shrieking started again. She picked up the pill and swallowed it. The sound stopped and the panel slid shut.

*Now what?* Hannah thought. She looked despairingly around the featureless cell, wishing for something, anything to distract her from the sight of herself. In the infirmary, just before they'd injected her with the virus, the warden had offered her a Bible, but his pompous, self-righteous manner and disdainful tone had kept her from taking it. That, and her own pride, which had prompted her to say, "I don't want anything from you."

He smirked. “You won’t be so high and mighty after a week or two alone in that cell. You’ll change your mind, just like they all do.”

“You’re wrong,” she said, thinking, *I’m not like the others.*

“When you do,” the warden went on, as if Hannah hadn’t spoken, “just ask, and I’ll see to it you get one.”

“I told you, I won’t be asking.”

He eyed her speculatively. “I give you six days. Seven, tops. Don’t forget to say please.”

Now, Hannah kicked herself for not having accepted that Bible. Not because she would find any comfort in its pages—God had clearly abandoned her, and she couldn’t blame Him—but because it would have given her something to contemplate besides the red ruin she’d made of her life. She leaned back against the wall and slid down it until her buttocks touched the floor. She hugged her knees and rested her head on top of them, but then saw the pitiful, little-match-girl picture she made in the mirror and straightened up, crossing her legs and folding her hands in her lap. There was no way to tell when she was on. Although the feed from each cell was continuous and the broadcasts were live, they didn’t show every inmate all the time, but rather, shuffled among them at the discretion of the editors and producers. Hannah knew she was just one of thousands they had to choose from in the central time zone alone, but from the few times she’d watched the show she also knew that women, especially the attractive ones, tended to get more airtime than men, and Reds and other felons more than Yellows. And if you were one of the really entertaining ones—if you spoke in tongues or had conversations with imaginary people, if you screamed for mercy or had fits or scraped your skin raw trying to get the color off (which was allowed only to a point, and then the punishment tone would sound)—you could be bumped up to the national show. She vowed to present as calm and uninteresting

a picture as possible, if only for her family's sake. They could be watching her at this moment. *He* could be watching.

He hadn't come to the trial, but he'd appeared via vidlink at her sentencing hearing. A holo of his famous face had floated in front of her, larger than life, urging her to cooperate with the prosecutors. "Hannah, as your former pastor, I implore you to comply with the law and speak the name of the man who performed the abortion and any others who played a part."

Hannah couldn't bring herself to look at him. Instead, she watched the attorneys and court officials, spectators and jurors as they listened to him, leaning forward in their seats to catch his every word. She watched her father, who sat hunched in his Sunday suit and hadn't met her eyes since the bailiff had led her into the courtroom. Of course, her mother and sister weren't with him.

"Don't be swayed by mistaken loyalty or pity for your accomplices," the reverend went on. "What can your silence do for them, except encourage them to commit further crimes against the unborn?" His voice, low and rich and roughened by emotion, rolled through the room, commanding the absolute attention of everyone present. "By the grace of God," he said, on a rising note, "you've been granted an open shame, so that you may one day have an open triumph over the wickedness within you. Would you deny your fellow sinners the same bitter but cleansing cup you now drink from? Would you deny it to the father of this child, who lacked the courage to come forward? No, Hannah, better to name them now and take from them the intolerable burden of hiding their guilt for the rest of their lives!"

The judge, jury, and spectators turned to Hannah expectantly. It seemed impossible that she could resist the power of that impassioned appeal. It came, after all, from none other than the Reverend Aidan Dale, former pastor of the twenty-thousand-member



Plano Church of the Ignited Word, founder of the Way, Truth & Life Worldwide Ministry and now, at the unheard-of age of thirty-seven, newly appointed secretary of faith under President Morales. How could Hannah not speak the names? How could anyone?

“No,” she said. “I won’t.”

The spectators let out a collective sigh. Reverend Dale placed his hand on his chest and lowered his head, as though in silent prayer.

“Miss Payne,” said the judge, “has your counsel made you aware that by refusing to testify as to the identities of the abortionist and the child’s father, you’re adding six years to your sentence?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“Will the prisoner please rise.”

Hannah felt her attorney’s hand on her elbow, helping her to stand. Her legs wobbled and her mouth was dry with dread, but she kept her face expressionless.

“Hannah Elizabeth Payne,” began the judge.

“Before you sentence her,” interrupted Reverend Dale, “may I address the court once more?”

“Go ahead, Reverend.”

“I was this woman’s pastor. Her soul was in my charge.” She looked at him then, meeting his gaze. The pain in his eyes tore at her heart. “That she’s sitting before this court today isn’t just her fault, but mine as well, for failing to guide her toward righteousness. I’ve known Hannah Payne for two years. I’ve seen her devotion to her family, her kindness to those less fortunate, her true faith in God. Though her crime is grave, I believe that through His grace she can be redeemed, and I’ll do everything in my power to help her, if you’ll show her leniency.”

Among the jury, heads nodded and eyes misted. Even the judge’s

stern countenance softened a bit. Hannah began to have hope. But then he shook his head sharply, as if he were dispelling an enchantment, and said, "I'm sorry, Reverend. The law is absolute in these cases."

The judge turned back to her. "Hannah Elizabeth Payne, having been found guilty of the crime of murder in the second degree, I hereby sentence you to undergo melachroming by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, to spend thirty days in the Chrome ward of the Crawford State Prison and to remain a Red for a period of sixteen years."

When he banged the gavel she swayed on her feet but didn't fall. Nor did she look at Aidan Dale as the guards led her away.

THE SHOWER BECAME HANNAH'S one pleasure and a crucial intermission during the long, bleak hours between lunch and dinner. She'd learned that lesson on day two, when she'd showered first thing in the morning. The afternoon had crawled by while the silence beat against her eardrums and her thoughts careened between the past and the present. When, desperate for distraction, she tried to take a second shower, nothing came out of the nozzle. She cursed her keepers then, a savage "Damn you!" that would have shocked her younger, more innocent self, the Hannah of just two years ago whose life had revolved around the twin nuclei of her family and the church; who'd lived with her parents, worked as a seamstress for a local bridal salon, gone to services on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights and Bible study classes twice a week, volunteered at the thrift shop and campaigned for Trinity Party candidates. That Hannah had been a good girl and a good Christian, obedient to her parents' wishes—in almost everything.

Her one secret vice was her dresses: dresses with keyhole necklines and mother-of-pearl buttons, sheer overlays and pencil skirts, made from sumptuous velvets and jewel-toned silks and voiles shot through with gold thread. She designed them herself and sewed them late at night, hiding them under the virginal white mounds of silk, lace and tulle that filled her workroom over the garage. When she finished one, she would double-check to make sure her parents and Becca were asleep and then creep back up to the workroom, lock the door and try it on, doing slow, dreamy pirouettes in front of the mirror. Though she knew it was vain and sinful,

she couldn't help taking pleasure in the feel of the fabric and the way the colors warmed her skin. What a contrast to the dull clothing she had to wear outside that room, the demure dresses that her faith dictated, high-necked and calf-length, pastel or tastefully flowered. She wore these things dutifully, understanding their necessity in a world full of temptation, but she hated putting them on in the morning, and no amount of praying on the subject could make her feel differently.

Hannah was well aware of her own rebellious nature. Her parents had scolded her for it all her life while urging her to emulate her sister. Becca was a sunny, obedient child who swam through adolescence and into womanhood with an ease Hannah envied. Becca never struggled to follow God's plan or had any doubts about what it was, never yearned for something indefinably *more*. Hannah tried to be like her sister, but the more she suppressed her true nature, the stronger it burst forth when her resolve weakened, as it inevitably did. During her teens she was always getting into trouble over one thing or another: trying on lip gloss, doing forbidden searches on her port, reading books her parents considered corrupting. Most often though, it was for voicing the questions that cropped up so insistently in her mind: "Why is it immodest for girls not to wear shirts but not for boys?" "Why does God let innocent people suffer?" "If Jesus turned water into wine, why is it wrong for people to drink it?" These questions exasperated her parents, especially her mother, who would make her sit in silence for hours and reflect on her presumption. Good girls, Hannah came to understand, did not ask why. They did not even wonder it in their most private thoughts.

The dresses had saved her, at least temporarily. She'd always had a gift for needlework, and the walls of the Payne house were covered with her samplers, progressing from the simple cross-stitch

of her early efforts—JESUS LOVES ME, HONOR THY FATHER AND MOTHER, GIVE SATAN AN INCH AND HE'LL BE A RULER—to elaborately embroidered verses illustrated with lambs, doves and crosses. She'd sewn clothes for her and Becca's dolls, embroidered flowers on her mother's aprons and JWPs on her father's handkerchiefs, using them as peace offerings when she fell from grace. But none of it had been enough to fill her or to silence the questions within her.

And then, when she was eighteen, she happened on the bolt of violet silk buried in the sale bin at the fabric store. From the moment she saw it she wanted to possess it. It shimmered with a deep, mysterious beauty that seemed to call out to her. She ran her fingers across it caressingly and, when her mother's back was turned, leaned down and rubbed its softness against her cheek. Becca hissed, warning her that their mother was coming, and Hannah dropped the fabric, but the voluptuous feel of it lingered on her skin. That night, a violet shape began to form in her mind, indistinct at first, growing sharper the more she imagined it: an evening gown with long sleeves and a high neckline, but with a low, scooped back—a dress with a secret side. From there it was just a short journey to imagining herself wearing it, not on a Paris runway or at a ball in the arms of a handsome prince, but alone, in a plain room with gleaming wood floors and one standing mirror where she could admire it without guilt, seeking to please no one but herself.

She waited a full week before riding her bike back to the shop, telling herself that if the fabric was gone, it was God's will, and she would obey. But not only was the bolt still there, it had been marked down another thirty percent. *So be it*, she thought, without a trace of irony. She was still eight years away from irony.

For six of them, the secret dresses had been enough. She'd made

one or at most two a year, spending months on the designs before choosing the fabric and beginning the work. Creating them satisfied something within her that nothing else ever had, assuaging her restlessness and making it easier for her to fill her expected role. Her parents praised her for her newfound obedience and God for having shown her the way to it. Hannah, for her part, felt just as grateful to Him. God *had* shown her the way. With that bolt of violet silk, He'd given her a channel for her passions, one that harmed no one and would sustain her for years to come.

And so it had. Until she'd met Aidan Dale.

Now, sitting against the wall of her cell, waiting for the dinner tone to sound, Hannah thought back to their first meeting on that terrible Fourth of July two years ago. Her father managed a sporting goods store, and he'd had to work that day. He'd been coming home on the train when the suicide bomber blew up himself and seventeen other people. Her father had been at the far end of the car and was badly injured. He had a fractured skull, a perforated eardrum and multiple lacerations from the screws the terrorist had packed around the bomb, but the most worrisome injuries were to his eyes. The doctors said there was a fifty-fifty chance he wouldn't regain his sight.

The day after his surgery, Hannah had returned from the hospital cafeteria with a tray of drinks and sandwiches to find Aidan Dale kneeling with her mother and Becca beside her father's bed, beseeching God to heal his wounds. Hannah had heard him speak countless times before, but sitting in the sixtieth row listening to him on the loudspeakers was poor preparation for the effect of hearing him in person. His voice was so sonorous and compelling, imbued with such faith and passion that it seemed an instrument created for the sole purpose of reaching Him. It traveled through

her like hot liquid, warming her and calming her fear. Surely God would not, could not ignore the pleas of that voice.

She set the food down and went to the bed. She'd never been this close to Reverend Dale before, and he looked younger than she'd expected. A curling lock of light brown hair fell onto his brow and nearly into his eye, and she found her fingers itching to smooth it back. Disconcerted—where had that come from?—she knelt across from him. When he looked up and saw her, his prayer faltered briefly, and then he closed his eyes and continued. Hannah bent her head, letting her hair fall forward to hide her confusion.

After he finished, he stood and came around to her side of the bed. For an anxious moment, all she could do was stare at his knees.

“You must be Hannah,” he said.

She got to her feet, made herself look at him. Nodded. The compassion in his eyes made her own blur with tears. She mumbled a “Thank you” and looked down at her father, swathed in bandages and riddled by needles and tubes. The shape his body made beneath the sheet seemed too small to be his. All that was visible of him were the top of his head and one forearm, and as she reached down to stroke the patch of exposed skin, it occurred to her that she could be touching a perfect stranger and never even know it. A tear rolled down her cheek and fell onto his arm, and then she felt Reverend Dale's hand come down on her shoulder, a warm and reassuring weight. She had to fight the urge to lean into it, into him.

“I know you're frightened for him, Hannah,” he said, and she thought how lovely her name sounded, shaped by his mouth: a poem of two syllables. “But he's not alone. His Father is within him, and Jesus is by his side.”

*As you are by mine.* She was keenly aware of the mere inches that separated them. She could smell his scent, cedar and apples and a faint, sharp trace of raw onion, and feel the heat emanating from his body against her back. She closed her eyes, seized by an unknown sensation, a swoop of want and need and belonging. Was this what people meant, when they spoke of desire?

Her father moaned in his sleep, wrenching her back to reality. How could she be thinking such thoughts while he lay wounded and suffering before her? How could she be thinking them at all?

For Aidan Dale was a married man. He and his wife, Alyssa, had wed in their early twenties, and by all accounts and appearances their union was a happy one. His unfailing tenderness toward her and the rapt, adoring expression she wore when he preached were the cause of much sighing among the female members of the congregation—including Becca, who'd vowed at eighteen never to marry unless she were as deeply in love as the Dales. And yet, they were childless. No one knew why, but it was a subject of constant speculation and prayer at Ignited Word. All agreed there could be no two people better suited to parenthood, or more worthy of its joys, than Aidan and Alyssa Dale. That God had chosen to deny them this greatest of blessings was a mystery and a vivid illustration of His inexplicable will. If the Dales were saddened by it—and how could they not be? and why had they never adopted?—they bore it well, channeling their energies into the church. Still, it didn't go unnoticed that children, particularly those in need, were the special focus of Reverend Dale's ministry. He'd founded shelters and schools in every major city in Texas and funded countless others across the country. He was a regular visitor to the refugee camps in Africa, Indonesia and South America and had worked with the governments of many war-ravaged countries to enable adoption of orphans by American families.



The WTL Ministry brought in millions, but the Dales didn't live in a gated mansion or have an army of servants and bodyguards. Most of what came into the ministry went out again to those in need. Aidan Dale was known and admired the world over as a true man of God, and Hannah had always felt proud to be a member of his congregation. But what she was feeling at this moment—what his nearness and the simple touch of his hand were kindling in her—went far beyond pride and admiration. Sinfully far. *Forgive me, Lord*, she prayed.

Reverend Dale's hand lifted, leaving a cool, empty space on her shoulder, and he went back to stand before her mother. "Is there anything you need, Samantha? Any help at home?"

"No, thank you, Reverend. Between family and friends from church, we have more helping hands and casseroles than we know what to do with."

Gently, he said, "And you're all right for money?"

Hannah saw her mother's face color a little. "Yes, Reverend. We'll be fine."

"Please, call me Aidan." When she hesitated, he said, "I insist." Finally she gave a reluctant nod. Reverend Dale smiled, satisfied that he'd prevailed, and Hannah smiled too, knowing that her mother would sooner take up pot smoking or become a lingerie model than address a pastor, and especially this pastor, by his first name.

*Aidan*. Hannah tasted it in her mind and thought, *But I could*.

He gave them his private contact information and made them promise to call at any hour if they needed anything at all. When he extended his hand to Hannah's mother, she took it in both of hers, then bent and lay her forehead against it for a few seconds. "God bless you for coming, Reverend. It will mean the world to John to know you were here."

"Well, I—I'm just glad I was in town," he said, reclaiming his

hand awkwardly. “I was supposed to be in Mexico this week, but my trip got postponed at the last minute.”

“The Lord must love our father a great deal, to have kept you here,” Becca said. Like their mother’s—and, Hannah supposed, her own—her face was soft with reverence.

Aidan ducked his head like a teenaged boy being praised for how much he’d grown, and Hannah realized, with some astonishment, that he was not only genuinely embarrassed by their adulation but that he also felt himself to be unworthy of it. The swooping sensation came again, stronger this time. How many men in his position would be so humble?

“Yes,” Hannah agreed. “He must.”

Aidan’s port chimed, and he glanced at it with evident relief. “I’d better get back,” he said. “Alyssa and I will pray for John, and for all of you.”

*Alyssa and I.* The words clanged in Hannah’s head, reminding her that Aidan Dale was another woman’s husband, a woman who had a name, Alyssa, and who worried about him the way Hannah’s own mother worried about her father. By wanting him, Hannah wronged Aidan’s wife as surely as if she lay with him. Shaken and ashamed, she shook his hand, thanked him and said goodbye. That night when she got home, she prayed for a long time, asking God’s forgiveness for breaking His commandment and imploring Him to lead her away from temptation.

Instead, He sent Aidan Dale back to the hospital the following day, and the one after that and nearly every day for the next week. Hannah’s mother and sister were in raptures over his continued attention to their family. Such an important man, with such a large flock to tend to, and yet here he was, praying with them daily! Hannah’s own feelings were a tangle of elation and despair. She knew that God was testing her and that she was failing the test, but

how could she not, when it was so cruelly rigged? Aidan (whom she was careful to call Reverend Dale, despite his protestations) brought them light and hope. He made Becca smile and took some of the fear from their mother's eyes. And once their father was off the painkillers and clearheaded enough to remember what had happened to him, Aidan spoke quietly with him, once for almost two hours, lending him the strength to beat back the terror, rage and helplessness Hannah saw in his face when he thought she wasn't looking.

The morning the bandages were to come off, Aidan arrived early and waited with them for the surgeon. He said a prayer, but Hannah was too anxious to follow it. She stood by the bed and stroked her father's hand, knowing how desperately afraid he must feel at this moment. He'd always prided himself on being the kind of man who could be counted on, a man to whom others looked for advice and support. Dependence would wither his spirit, and the thought of that, of her father being diminished or broken, was almost as unbearable as the thought of losing him.

The surgeon arrived at last, and they all clustered around the bed while he cut off the bandages. The three women stood on one side, the doctor on the other, Aidan at the foot. Hannah's father opened his eyes. They seemed unfocused at first, and then they settled on her mother.

"You look beautiful," he said finally, "but you've gotten awfully skinny." They all erupted then, laughing through the tears as they kissed and hugged him.

"Thank God," Aidan said. The huskiness in his voice made Hannah glance up at him. His expression was grave, and he was looking not at her father but at her.

Then his eyes dropped, and he smiled and said, "Congratulations, John," leaving Hannah to wonder whether she'd imagined the thing she'd seen in them, the swoop of want and need and belonging.