

CHAPTER 1

*July 4, 1963*

Jean Krenshaw watched as her brother-in-law's Chevy Delray finally rolled into the driveway amid a swirling cloud of gritty summer dust that settled upon the rustling corn stalks in the surrounding fields. He was late.

Jean stood behind a row of folding tables overloaded with grilled meat and bowls of fruit salads, small legions of flies crawling and buzzing along the lips of the containers. She glanced down the long line of friends and neighbors waiting under the shade of a hundred-year-old oak tree to fill a plate. This year's Fourth of July picnic would be the biggest yet. Farmers from all over the area had come to see the Krenshaw Dairy's modern milking machine, the first in the county.

Jean waved a spatula covered in whipped cream for her husband's attention as he dumped a cup of water over an angry flame leaping off the grill.

"Jim!" she called.

Jim looked up and squinted at his wife through a rolling cloud of smoke.

"More hotdogs," she mouthed and lifted an empty plate, catching a scent of charred meat from across the yard. Jim nodded and brandished the barbecue poker at her with a playful grin. Jean's gaze lifted once more in search of the black car, now obscured by the numerous vehicles congesting the driveway and yard.

Reverend Iverson shuffled his way through the line, dropping several scoops of cole slaw onto his plate.

"I'm looking forward to seeing the new milker," he said. A small breeze lifted one edge of the dark hairpiece atop his head and he flattened it back down with a lightning quick reflex, nearly dumping the food from his plate.

"Oh, yes." Jean nodded and politely bit into a crunchy dill pickle while averting her eyes. "He and Jim are planning to do a demonstration."

She would have to tell Tommy about the reverend's latest hair mishap, something she knew he would get a kick out of since he regularly cracked toupee jokes during church services. *Of course he doesn't look his age. Toupees don't go gray...*

Jean craned her neck to look over the reverend's head, distracted by the Chevy now parked under a tree at the edge of the yard. The driver's door swung open and Tommy's tall frame emerged, outfitted in the usual denim jeans, white T-shirt, and faded blue Cubs baseball cap. He waved and flashed a particular smile at Jean—the sheepish version that usually bought him forgiveness for being late.

As she was about to wave him over, Tommy rushed to the passenger side of the car and held the door open. One tanned bare leg materialized followed by another connected to the petite frame of a woman with long glossy black hair. He tenderly guided the young woman by the elbow and laughed at something she was saying.

Jean shook her head. Another girl.

Tommy and the woman hooked index fingers, like two fishing lures tangled in a tackle box, as he led her into the crowd. Jean watched the smiles and handshakes of neighbors, the nods of welcome and more smiles. Patchy old farmers in overalls and seed corn hats jumped up from their sagging lawn chairs to greet the barefoot girl wearing a gauzy broom skirt and layers of beaded necklaces.

“Jean.” Jim nudged his wife in the side with a platter of shriveled, blackened wieners. “They’re a little overdone.”

“Who’s that?” Jean asked, gesturing to Tommy’s guest, though she usually didn’t pay too much attention to Tommy’s girls since they didn’t stay around very long.

Jim shielded his eyes with one hand. “Oh, that’s Liz.”

Before Jean could respond, Jim’s mother, Bonnie, dropped an empty glass pitcher onto the table.

“We’re out of iced tea,” she said wearily. With a tissue from her brassiere strap, she mopped rivulets of sweat from the deep crevices of wrinkled skin encasing her thick neck.

Jean put the pitcher upright and turned back to Jim. “You’ve met her?”

“Who are you talking about?” Bonnie asked.

“Liz.” Jim lifted his arm to point but Jean slapped his hand down.

“Oh, right, Tommy’s girlfriend,” Bonnie said.

Jean’s face blanched. “Girlfriend? You...”

“We had lunch in town a few weeks ago. Nice enough. She’s dark, though. Ethnic of some sort.”

“Ma, you can’t say that anymore,” Jim said.

“What?” Bonnie shrugged. She expectantly held the pitcher out to Jean. “Iced tea? Reverend Iverson is waiting for a glass.”

“Of course,” Jean said, and hurried to the house.

Inside, she filled the pitcher at her kitchen sink and dunked a bundle of tea bags, watching the party from the open window. She thought about what Bonnie had just said. *Girlfriend*. Tommy never called them his girlfriends. He was always careful to say, “This is my *friend*, Mary.” Or “I’d like you to meet my *date*, Kathy.” And he certainly never introduced them to his mother.

Jean lifted the café curtain with the tip of her finger and watched Tommy and the girl stroll around the yard, their heads tilted toward each as they talked. The word sunk in further. *Girlfriend*. There had only been one girl in ten years Tommy had pointedly called his girlfriend.

An image of that long, blonde hair fanned out across the back seat of her old Buick flashed through her mind. Jean shuddered and forced her attention back to the tea. She couldn’t think about that today.

When Jean returned to the food table, Bonnie had clearly grown impatient.

“Finally,” she said. She took the pitcher, thrust a slotted spoon dripping with cantaloupe juice into Jean’s hand, and marched back into the shade of the oak tree to join Reverend Iverson.

Jim delivered another plate of meat to the table. "He's coming over to introduce you to her," he whispered into Jean's ear as Tommy and the girl approached the table.

"You could've said something to me," Jean said, fidgeting with the collar of her blouse. She pushed her heavy glasses up the bridge of her sweaty nose with her middle finger and unintentionally flipped the bird, a nervous habit she could never break.

"We're running out of buns," she snapped.

Jim stopped chewing a bite of hamburger and stared at her. "Well, don't get cross with me about it."

"I knew we would need more buns and you didn't listen to me. And you should've put out more bales of straw. There's not enough places to sit. You never listen to me!" Her voice had raised more than she intended and she suddenly felt irritated by everything.

Jim looked away, a weary expression settling into the deep lines around his eyes and mouth. He started to take another bite of his burger but stopped, then threw it into the trash.

She wasn't really angry about the buns or the bales of hay. Like so many times before, she was never really angry with Jim for leaving the milk out on the counter, or forgetting his damp bath towels on the floor, or getting up from the table before she was finished eating. But as usual, she couldn't articulate what was truly bothering her, so the tantrums persisted and she hated it when she got this way.

"Hey, Queen Jean!" Tommy waved. "I've been looking for you everywhere." He drew the girl closer to his side. "Liz, I'd like you to meet my sister-in-law, Jean."

"Nice to finally meet you." Liz reached out for Jean's hand. "Tommy talks about you all the time."

Jean accepted Liz's tiny, soft hand and, standing face-to-face, was forced to look down at the impossibly petite girl.

"Welcome to our party," Jean said, and offered a closed-mouth smile, always conscious of a yellowed front tooth from some childhood antibiotic.

"Oh, yes, what fun!" Liz moved into Jean's long shadow to block to the sun, as if Jean were a tree. A breeze picked up her lustrous, thick hair, swirling it around her shoulders and face. A loose strand stuck her lip.

Jean instinctively flattened down her own short, windblown hair. Up close, she guessed the girl to be in her early twenties.

"Good to see you again, Jim," Liz said, extending her hand.

"Yes, we should," Jim said and pumped the girl's thin arm, rattling the line of metal bracelets up her slight wrist.

"Um, what?" she said with a confused, but warm laugh.

A blotchy flush crept up Jim's neck and he tapped the side of his head. "Sorry, my bad ears." He had long suffered from tinnitus after years of operating loud tractors, and the ringing in his ears was always worse in noisy crowds, making him socially clumsy and self-conscious. Jean's feelings of guilt for snapping at him returned.

The tablecloth flapped in the intermittent breeze and an oak leaf dropped from the towering tree above them, landing in Jean's bowl of potato salad. She quickly plucked it out before anyone noticed.

"Would you care for some of my salad, Liz?" Jean asked, already heaping several spoonfuls onto a plate.

"Um, sure," Liz said.

"Me too," Tommy said. "I'm starving'."

Jean grinned. He had always loved her potato salad. She added more food to his plate—coleslaw, corn on the cob, watermelon cubes, several deviled eggs, all his favorites, and fixed him a burger with ketchup and onion only.

"Liz," Jim said, "I can't remember where you said you're from."

Liz nibbled on the edge of a piece of watermelon. "I live in Madison. I'm a student at the university."

Jim bobbed his head up and down but Jean knew he hadn't heard a single word of Liz's answer. He removed his mesh seed corn cap and mopped a handkerchief over the thick, damp hair matted to his forehead. Jean caught his eye and gestured for him to wipe a bit of food out of the dark bristle of his overgrown mustache, another effort to make up for her earlier behavior.

"Liz, I didn't catch your last name," Jean said.

"Belardi."

Bingo. Italian.

"So, do you live with your family in Madison, then?" Jean asked.

Liz shook her head. "No, I live by myself. I was born in a little village in Matera, Italy but my parents passed away when I was a child. I was sent here to live with distant relatives."

"Lizzy, here, is putting herself through art school," Tommy said. "She does pottery and paintings and stuff." He beamed and pulled her against his hip.

"I'm working on my undergraduate degree in Art History," Liz said. "Though not getting much work done since I met this big distraction." She poked Tommy in the stomach with her finger. He lit a cigarette from the pack in his front t-shirt pocket and handed it to her. They passed it back and forth between each drag.

"You should hear her," Tommy said. "She talks Italian!"

Liz gently tapped the ash from the end of the cigarette. "It's all my aunt and uncle spoke at home."

"I think it's sexy as hell," Tommy said. "Even when she yells it at me."

Jean studied the couple and was struck by something unfamiliar in Tommy. He was *proud* of this girl.

"Where did you two meet?" she asked.

"Well, I'll tell ya," Tommy said. "I was up there in Madison for that dairy convention last May, when I stopped at this diner for lunch. I was sitting at the counter eating my tenderloin sandwich when this fine looking gal sat down next to me and told me to try their apple pie 'cause they got the best apple pie in town."

“And he said that he didn’t like apple pie,” Liz interjected. “And I said, ‘How can you not like apple pie and be American? I’m Italian and love apple pie.’”

“And then I said that I was more of a cannoli kind of man and she said that’s an Italian dessert and weren’t we a perfect match.” They broke into joint laughter.

“Oh, isn’t that something.” Jean bobbed her head and felt her eyes bulge with forced enthusiasm. “Isn’t that something, Jim?”

“Sure, sure,” Jim said.

She cocked her head at Tommy. “I didn’t know you liked cannoli.”

“Oh, they’re grand. I get ‘em from this little deal in downtown Madison every chance I get.”

“Except now I can make them for him,” Liz said.

“Absolutely!” Tommy planted a kiss on the side of her neck and Jean looked away, momentarily uncomfortable.

“Tom,” Jim said, checking his wristwatch. “It’s almost four o’clock.”

“Sure thing.” Tommy polished off the last bite of his burger and handed Liz his plate. “Sorry to run off on you, Baby, but—”

“Go,” Liz laughed. “I’ll be fine.”

“Jean, here, will bring you into the barn to watch,” Tommy said. He grabbed a brownie square before he fell in step behind Jim.

Liz hesitantly glanced down at her bare feet and wriggled her toes. “To the barn, I guess.”

Jean knitted her brow for a second, then cleared it and smiled. “How about we find you a pair of boots. We’ve got an extra pair in the barn.”

Liz blushed and exhaled a long breath of relief. “Thanks. I’ve never been on a dairy farm before. As you can probably tell.”

The women entered the stanchion barn through the milk house, an anteroom off the main building that housed the new one thousand gallon bulk tank.

“Wow,” Liz said, sliding her hand along the smooth stainless steel belly of the tank. “This thing is huge!”

“We just put it in a few weeks ago,” Jean said. “With the new milker we fill it once a day and a milk truck comes to empty it every night.”

Jean slipped into her own pair of gumboots and found an extra pair in a cabinet for Liz. Liz stepped into them and they comically swallowed her small feet and legs up to her knees.

“They’re men’s,” Jean said. “Sorry.”

“No, no.” Liz shook her head. “They’re fine. Really.”

Jean opened a second door from the milk house that led into the main barn and instantly met an overpowering wall of stink. Jean was used to the acrid mixture of ammonia and manure, but Liz gagged and pressed the back of her hand to her nose with an apology.

They followed the concrete center alley to where a group of neighborhood farmers had gathered around a few stalls at the far end. The stanchion barn was a massive arched-

ceiling building where a herd of sixty Holsteins were housed and milked, each tied to a stall—thirty on one side, thirty on the other. Two months prior, the brothers had installed the state-of-the-art Surge Bucket Milker system and pipeline to the new tank everyone was talking about. At the center of the group, Tommy was seated on the milking stool, explaining how the automated suction cups attached to each teat of the udder. Larry, Jean's eldest son, stood alongside his father at the back of the stall holding an iodine teat dip cup.

"See, each suction tube is pressurized," Tommy was saying. "And when the milk flow slows down, they drop off automatically so the cows don't get over-milked. Cuts our milking time to five or so minutes per cow." His speech was fast and enthusiastic, like a child with a new toy.

"When she's all finished up, we just slide the Bucket over to the next cow," Jim added. "It's so smooth, even Larry here can do it." He pulled his son up to the machine to demonstrate. Larry dipped the finished cow's teats in the iodine solution and slid the Bucket Milker down the rail to the next stall. His little muscles strained with some effort, but he managed. Tommy moved the stool to the next waiting cow, her udders already dripping milk, where Larry hooked her up and started the machine. It pumped and whished to life.

"See," Jim said. "Five minutes." The audience nodded and several men clapped.

Jean crossed her arms over her chest and gave Larry a thumbs-up when he sought her out in the crowd for her approval. The new system certainly was a marvel, she thought, no matter how many times she saw it work. She peeked at Liz from the corner of her eye. The girl startled whenever a nearby cow moved or swished her tail.

Jean leaned over and whispered to Liz. "Larry is our oldest son."

Liz nodded. "Oh, sure. He looks like Jim. How old is he?"

"He's nine."

"How many children do you have?"

"Three. There's Larry, Will is eight, and our youngest is James. He's six."

"Good grief! So close together!" Liz exhaled a light laugh and widened her eyes. "I can't even imagine." She waved a fly away from her face.

Tommy slipped through the crowd and joined them.

"What did you think?" he asked Liz. "Impressive, right?"

"It's swell," Liz said. She recoiled when a cow released a stream of urine in the stall next to them.

"Tommy, you'll never believe what happened earlier," Jean said, already smiling at the thought of telling him the latest Reverend Iverson hair flap. "I was dishing up food when—"

"What the hell are you wearing?" Tommy said, bending to examine the enormous boots on Liz's feet.

"You failed to mention that *shoes* would be required on a farm," Liz said.

"They still aren't." With that, he swooped her up and cradled her in his arms as she squealed and pulled down her skirt. The boots slid off her feet and landed next to Jean.

Several men turned around to look, their interest in the milking machine momentarily interrupted.

“See?” Tommy said. “No shoes required.” Liz laughed and tilted his baseball cap sideways.

“Jean, you’ll put those boots away for me, right?” Tommy called as he carried Liz out of the barn.

“Sure,” Jean said. She replaced the boots and followed.

Outside, Tommy was introducing Liz to Reverend Iverson. At the food table, Jean found her bowl of potato salad already empty. She cradled the crystal piece, her favorite because it had been a wedding gift from Tommy and she’d always loved the delicately etched rose pattern, in the crook of her arm and trudged across the yard. She stopped to pick up several discarded napkins. Jean took pride in their clean, tidy dairy operation—no junk piles or peeling paint on the buildings, with the exception of the old chicken coop behind her house; a rickety building with missing shingles and cracked windowpanes. It had evolved into a graveyard for broken tools and tractor parts, not to mention a haven for raccoons. Jean would just as soon burn it to the ground but Jim promised every spring to fix it up she could park her Buick inside and not have to dig out of the snow and ice in winter. Many winters had passed, though, and she still had to plug the headbolt heater of her car into the outlet on the side of the house to ensure it would start from November to March.

At her front porch, Jean lowered herself onto the stoop to cool off in the shade and rest her aching feet from slicing vegetables and frosting cakes all morning.

A commotion stirred within the crowd at the edge of the yard. People milled about and moved into a circle with whistles for attention, shushes and shouts for quiet. Tommy and Liz stepped into the center, as if awaiting a stage performance. Jean spotted Jim and Bonnie standing in the innermost ring of the circle, behind Tommy. He raised his hands over his head and the crowd instantly hushed but for a single fussing baby—Mary Meyers’ newborn girl, Jean easily recognized after trying to calm the child herself while volunteering in the nursery last Sunday.

“Now that I’ve got everyone’s attention,” Tommy said, “I have something important I wanted to say with all my family here by my side.”

Jean stood, her arms still loaded the bowl and trash, and moved closer to the outskirts of the crowd to better hear. No one moved to make room for her and she had to balance on her toes to see over their heads.

Tommy turned to Liz and gathered her hands into his own. “My old man, God rest his soul, used to tell me that when you know, you know.”

He slowly bent down to one knee. A few women gasped and covered their mouths.

Jean fought to keep her balance on her toes and the hard edges of the bowl dug into her ribs.

Tommy pulled a small ring from his front jeans pocket. “And right now, I just know. Elizabeth Belardi, will you marry me?”

Liz pressed her hands to her breasts, her eyes filling with tears. After a moment, she silently nodded.

“Is that a yes?” Tommy said.

She nodded again.

“She said yes!” Tommy shouted, and the crowd erupted into cheers.

Liz extended her visibly trembling left hand, tears streaming down her face, and Tommy stood to slip the ring onto her finger. When they finally kissed, he tipped her back into an elaborate dip as men tossed their hats into the air and cracked open cans of beer for a toast. The couple then embraced a jubilant Jim and Bonnie. No one seemed to notice Jean was missing from the family celebration.

Jean turned and walked away from the edge of the crowd, her legs heavy. She stumbled over the uneven terrain as she moved beyond the yard, dropping the dirty napkins from her hand one at a time. She followed a gravel lane behind the stanchion barn, past the silos and the hay barn, to a small slab of concrete used to hose down cattle behind the machine shed.

There, away from prying eyes, she hugged the crystal piece to her chest, feeling its heft and solid mass in her hands. Slowly, Jean raised the bowl over her head, as high as her arms would stretch, and hurled it against the concrete, shattering the crystal into a million sparkling shards. She dropped to her knees, shaking and breathless, momentarily shocked and remorseful at her impulsive action. She picked up a large fragment and turned it between her fingers.

After all this time, he was in love again.

With her family and neighbors still celebrating in her own front yard, Jean put the pointed tip of the crystal fragment to the tanned skin of her forearm, just below the elbow. She hadn't done this in many years, hadn't given in to the terrible, shameful urges in so long. But today, she'd lost the strength to resist and broke her own promise. She pressed down on the glass and dragged it several inches, parting the flesh like the open mouth of a flour sack. She closed her eyes and held her breath for the pain, and simultaneously, the relief.