

## **Tristan's Gap, Chapter One**

## Chapter One

Well-trained Golden retriever versus scrappy miniature dachshund. That was the difference between my two daughters, and it was never more obvious than when we were talking about their father.

That August night as I drove Tristan to work with both of them in the car, it would have sounded to anybody else like we were discussing Tristan's hair. But when we got right down to it, everything always came back to Nick.

"Did you ask Daddy if I could cut it?" Tristan said.

"I did," I said.

"He said no, right?"

"He said he'd think about it."

"That means no," Max said from the back seat. "You're done, Tristan."

I glanced in the rearview mirror at my ten-year-old's dark paintbrush-like tails, sticking out from her head while the rest of her hair straggled down to her shoulders. We hadn't even begun to discuss *that* 'do.'

"I really wish I could cut it," Tristan said. "All I ever do is put it up in a ponytail anyway."

The tendril of wistfulness in her voice was as close to arguing as Tristan ever came.

I pulled up to the STOP sign at the corner of Ocean View and Bethany Street and looked at her. Brush handle in her mouth, she secured a thick, deep-brown bundle of hair with one hand and snapped what we Soltani girls called "a pony holder" into place with the other. She executed the whole thing the way she did every task: neatly, and with graceful resignation. I had to agree I'd seen her do it for at least ten of her sixteen years.

She pulled the tail tight and let it splash against her cheek as she leaned over to return the brush to its precise place in her purse.

"I'd miss your ponytail," I said. "It's you." I grinned into the rearview. "Now, Max, honey, we need to talk about yours."

Max pointed to the intersection where we were still idling. "Mom, there's, like, nobody coming."

"I knew that," I said.

She cocked one eyebrow, a trick she'd learned recently.

"I *did* know," I said.

Tristan wound her arms around her lithe, long legs as she perched her feet on the edge of the seat.

"He said he'd think about it, baby girl," I said. "And that doesn't *always* mean no. He had to think about it before he let you get a job, and that turned out to be a yes."

"There's a *way* big difference between working on the boardwalk and getting a haircut," Max said.

There was nobody like a ten-year-old to reduce everything to its lowest possible denominator. Must be something about the recent introduction to fractions in her fourth-grade past.

“Daddy’s afraid you might regret it if you cut it,” I said to Tristan. “They like it long for dance, right?”

“Yeah,” Max said, “you gotta do that tight bun thing that makes your eyes go all slanty.” I didn’t have to look at her to know she was demonstrating.

The pizza places and hoagie shops on Garfield Parkway, which led to the boardwalk, were revving up for supertime, but I was lucky enough to snag a parking space.

“We’ll talk to Daddy about it when he gets home tonight,” I said. “We’ll have plenty of time since you’re only working a couple of hours to fill in for somebody.” I brushed my fingers against her cheek. “Maybe we’ll soften him up with some ice cream.”

“Chocolate chip cookie dough,” Max said. “Aunt Pete’s gonna want pistachio, but that stuff is foul.”

I expected Tristan’s answering “butter pecan,” or at least a nose wrinkle at Max. But Tristan gazed through the windshield as if she were gathering up Bethany Beach details, the snippets of sunburned faces and beach toys in shop windows. Her dark-chocolate eyes hinted at tears.

I felt myself melt. “I didn’t know it was that important to you, honey,” I said. “Okay—we’ll definitely talk to Daddy.”

“That’s gonna mean whipped cream, sprinkles, the works,” Max said.

“It’s okay,” Tristan said. “We can just forget about it.”

“You sure?”

She nodded and swept up her purse.

“Daddy’ll be here to pick you up at nine,” I said. “My meeting will be over way before then, so maybe Max and I will buy some ice cream anyway—in case you change your mind.” Tristan paused, fingers on the door handle, and said, “I don’t think I will.”

She climbed out, and I leaned across the seat before she could close the door. “I love you, baby girl,” I said.

As I watched her thread her way through the crowd, green purse with its blue “T” swaying from her shoulder, her grace erased the image of lanky adolescence I swore I’d seen in her just yesterday. It was one of those mom-moments when I realized there was nothing left of my baby except my view of her. It left me momentarily sad.

Max hoisted herself over the seat and buckled into Tristan’s. Her sleeveless pink hoodie shouted, ANGEL IN DISGUISE in bright green letters across her chest. No bra was in my ten-year-old’s immediate future. She was still an unselfconscious girl-child.

But there were moments, like now, when she was thoroughly Nick, sizing up the situation like a little computer. High speed, of course. Like his, her small, dark eyes crinkled from beneath puffy lids, and her mouth went straight across, curving up at the corners. Only there was no predicting what was going to come out Max’s mouth.

“I don’t get it,” she said.

“What don’t you get?”

“Why Dad even cares about how we wear our hair.” She gave the familiar husky grunt. “Why should we take beauty tips from him when he hardly even *has* any hair? It’s like this short.”

I felt the corners of my mouth already twitching a warning. It was a sure sign that Max was about to take me some place I could never resist going.

I put the Blazer in gear and backed out. "It's not really about the hair."

"What's it about?"

"It's about Daddy not wanting Tristan to make a decision she's going to regret."

"It s just hair. It'll grow back."

"Okay," I said. "How 'bout we get you a buzz cut, then?"

"Seriously?"

"Right." I tugged at one of her rakish tails. "There isn't enough ice cream in the world that would make that okay."

"Men are just weird."

I couldn't hold back the deep laugh Nick always said sounded devious. I never planned it. It sneaked up on me like an imp. The laugh never seemed to surprise Max, though. It was as if she waited for it, licking her little chops.

"Why do you think men are weird?" I said.

"Because they're not like us."

"You noticed, did you?"

"Not like they get beards and we don't—"

"Hopefully."

"I mean, du-uh."

"Hel-lo-o."

"It's like—" I could feel her eyes sparking at me. "Give me a topic."

"Um—T.V."

"Okay. Boys are all...hog the remote control. And girls..."

"Oh, okay. Give me a second."

Max started in on the *Jeopardy* theme.

"I have it. Girls all read *People* magazine."

Max cocked the practiced eyebrow.

"It's true," I said. "Boys get their information by flipping the channels, and girls go straight to the source."

"What-*ev*-er. Okay, boys go in the kitchen and blow their nose on a paper towel during a sad movie."

"And girls are use up a whole box of Kleenex."

"Boys point out all the things that are, like, fake in an action movie."

"I've got a great one for this one: girls watch romantic movies and wish life was really like that."

"I don't," Max said.

My imp within couldn't pass up the chance.

"There's not some lil' cute fifth-grade-boy you have a crush on?" I said.

“Well, now that you mention it,” she said. “I’m totally crushing on Justin Dalberg. I’m just waiting for him to ask me out.”

I jerked us to a stop inside the church parking lot. “Tell me you’re kidding. You are, aren’t you?”

A chuckle rumbled from Max’s throat. “Got you, Mom.”

“You are bad.” I tugged her face into my chest by both ponytails. Max was one of the few people my imp appeared for. The imp in *her* drew it out.

Max scanned the lot with narrowed eyes while I parked. “There’s Mrs. Godfried’s car. I hope she didn’t bring the Quantum Quartet.”

“The *what?*”

“Her kids. They’re like all scientific.”

“Do you even know what ‘quantum’ means?” I said.

Max shook her head, setting the tails in motion. “It’s something nerdy that nobody understands except the kids that are so smart they’re weird.”

Rebecca’s sons—Noah, Isaiah, Daniel, and Matthias—*were* the youngest nerds I’d ever known. Bless their hearts, they even wore little bow ties to church.

“They’re just a little bit—proper,” I said, reigning in my imp. “That’s okay.”

“They’re just a little bit—”

“So—have a good time playing with the kids.” I hopped down out of the Blazer, wishing as I did every time in the four months I’d had it that Nick had either gotten me a step stool or let me have the little Volkswagen Beetle I wanted. My mother’s old nickname for me—“Squatty Body”—was apt.

“It’s gonna be all boys. Again. Justin sits there and plays with his Gameboy like, the entire time. The Quantums—”

“We went there already,” I said. I hugged her shoulders as we made our way to the door of the fellowship hall. “When’s Ashley coming home from her vacation?”

“Not for *forever*. I don’t see why Dad won’t let me stay home with Aunt Pete. It’s not like she’s gonna try to burn the house down again.”

“She didn’t ‘try to burn the house down.’”

“Dad said she did.”

“He was just a little bit cranky that day.”

Max dragged herself off to the kids’ play area.

Even she knew when to leave a subject alone.

“Aunt Pete tried to burn the house down, Serena?”

I turned to see Lissa Dalberg behind me, flushed face obviously amused. Everything about my best friend bounced, except her twelve-year-old son, Justin, of Gameboy fame, who appeared to be as excited about “playing with the kids” as Max was. As Lissa nudged him off in that direction, he looked like he’d rather be shot..

“You heard that, huh?” I said.

Lissa looped her arm through mine, skin clammy in the August heat. Even with the ocean breeze, the temperature was a muggy ninety degrees.

“So *did* Nick’s aunt try to burn the house down?”

“That’s the way Nicky tells it,” I said. “She was cooking bacon and a little grease fire started. It wasn’t her fault. She was distracted because she found her false teeth in the freezer.”

“Oh, now that clears it up.”

“Is this that Mentoring For Moms thing?”

I looked back to see a woman approaching us, and I felt my eyes bulge a little. I’d never seen anybody quite like her in our church parking lot...

Looking directly at me with blue eyes made startling by her leathery skin, she shook back her bangs, which were colored an impossible shade of blonde. She folded her tattooed arms against her black tank top—although between the bracelets and the collection of gold neck chains she might as well have been wearing long sleeves and a turtleneck.

“So is this the group?” she said. Her voice was a cigarette alto I could have filed my nails on.

Lissa recovered first. It was one of those things they must learn in pastors’ wives school.

“This is it,” she said to the woman. ] “And this is our leader, Serena Soltani.” Lissa put out a manicured hand. “And you are?”

“Name’s Hazel.” The woman pumped Lissa’s arm, but her too-blue eyes were fixed on me. “So you’re Mighty Mom?”

I choked.

“Serena’s a wonderful mother. Her Tristan and Max are—”

“You have two boys?” Hazel said.

“Two girls.”

“Talk about a little gender confusion.”

“This is only our second meeting, and already Serena has helped us all so much—”

“That’s what I need—help,” Hazel said. Her voice was reminding me more and more of gravel in a clothes dryer. “So how does this work? Do you preach or just say stuff out of the Bible? I’ll warn you, I don’t know jack about the Bible.”

She didn’t look as if she had any desire to learn. But there was something earnest in those blue eyes. I couldn’t look away from her.

“Actually, it’s more of a discussion format,” Lissa said. She opened the door and wafted an arm through for Hazel. “We each have a chance to talk about our challenges, and then Serena addresses them, sometimes from her own experience. Her children are the poster kids for—”

“Good,” Hazel said, and elbowed past us. “That’s what I need. My kids are out of control. I need help before I kill them.”

The look on Rebecca Godfried’s face when Hazel crossed the room was priceless.. Whenever Rebecca got even a whiff of anything smacking of the “un-Christian,” she drew her mouth into a raisin. With multi-pierced ears and the biker-chick attire, Hazel must have seemed to Rebecca to be a little more than a whiff.

Lissa carried two bags of snacks into the kitchen. As the leader, I had to stay. Besides, I had never known Rebecca Godfried to be speechless before. My imp really wanted to see what happened next.

As the rest of the moms trickled in, they all did double-takes of Hazel. A couple of them slipped to the kitchen, obviously in pursuit of the lowdown on the new woman.. Lissa had never had so much help putting store-bought cookies on a plate.

Christine Michaels, the advertising executive whose only child was just six months old, looked baffled as she glanced from me to Hazel to the customary notepad where she wrote things down. I realized I didn't have a clue what I was going to say. My entire lesson plan walked out when Hazel walked in.

I shouldn't have worried. As soon as Lissa herded everyone back in with refreshments, Hazel leaned forward and said, "If it's time to talk, I'll start."

"Sure," I said.

Hazel tossed her lanky hair back from her shoulders and said, "My mother gave birth to me in the front seat of an eighteen-wheeler. She was hitchhiking, and some trucker picked her up. Imagine *that* scene." Her voice dipped deeper into its gravel pit. "I mean, what kind of model for motherhood did I have?"

It went downhill from there. I couldn't even look at anyone. All I could do was put my hand in front of my mouth to smother the kind of guilty giggles you get at a funeral.

Group control wasn't one of my gifts. Most of the soccer moms looked on as if they were in shock, but I couldn't make a move to stop her, not even when she got to the part where her mother named her for the tattoo on the trucker's arm. From there she led us through the series of cars, campers, and house trailers she'd grown up in. The entire tale was punctuated with a pair of glasses she took out of her bag but never put on. She was well into a rendition of her adolescent years before I realized the earpieces were exact replicas of Barbie doll legs. I kind of envied her panache.

"I never lived in anything without wheels until I married my first husband," Hazel said. "We did the granola thing. Lived in a log cabin. Stopped shaving. Both of us. We were supposed to become 'one with the earth.'" She pointed with Barbie's high-heeled foot. "I should have stuck with the wheels."

Lissa darted a series of *do something* looks at me. But I merely looked on with increasing fascination while Hazel enchanted my group with an autobiography that grew more outrageous by the word.

"I had my oldest in that dump," Hazel said. "Twenty hours of labor. I was really starting to hate that kid—"

Rebecca gasped out loud.

"And that midwife. About the tenth time she told me this was my finest hour, I told her to—"

"Well!" I said. "I think a lot of us can relate to getting off to a rocky start with our children, can't we?" (See? She's trying to be charitable)

I nodded my head like a dashboard dog. Nobody nodded back. Evidently nobody related.

Christine sat with her pen poised over the notepad, one exquisite eyebrow arched in a frozen state of I-wasn't-expecting-*this*.

"I never knew a seven-pound kid could poop so much," Hazel went on. "The third time I took a load of nasty diapers down to the stream to beat them on a rock, I knew I was outta there."

. “You left the baby?” Rebecca said. Hazel laughed in a drawn-out wheeze that made me want to giggle right along with her.

“I’m not a *complete* loser,” Hazel said. “I left Nature Boy and took the kid with me, but I didn’t know what to do with her. I still don’t—and I’ve had two more since.”

She was only up to her first baby, which meant we probably hadn’t heard even half her life story yet.. She looked to be least forty. Of course, considering the sun damage, maybe thirty-five. That would mean she was four years younger than me, and had somehow lived four times longer. I had to admit, I was strangely hooked.

“So, Mighty Mom,” she said to me. “Can you fix me?”

“Um,” I said. “I don’t know that ‘fix’ is the word I’d use.”

“Is there hope for me and my kids? That’s what I’m asking you.”

“Well,” I said too cheerfully, “you’re here, aren’t you?”

“There’s always hope in the Lord,” Rebecca said.

Hazel put on the Barbie glasses and leveled her eyes at Rebecca. An outward-moving spray of lines radiated from them, the way a child draws a sun with a crayon. “Can the Lord make my kids do what I tell them?”

“He can help *you* make them do it,” Rebecca said. She sat up straighter. A mini-sermon was imminent.

“That’s true,” I said. “God’s our guide.”

I’d been in church groups with Rebecca for six years. It was always a good idea to make her think she was right, lest she add the slicing, sideways look to the pursed lips. She was always the first one on the scene with a casserole when a family had a crisis, and she knew her Bible better than anybody in the congregation except Pastor Gary. I did feel guilty every time I got an impishmental picture of her being baptized in vinegar.

Hazel took off the glasses and leaned toward me, bracelets clinking up and down her arms. “Okay—so—I want to be amazing at motherhood—no matter what it takes—before my kids turn out to be shoplifters or topless dancers.”

“I want that, too.” Christine clicked her pen. “Aren’t there bullet points you can give us?”

“Well,” I said, “like, in this group I’m basically showing you what our Father says about parenting—in Scripture?”

I knew I wasn’t even speaking as coherently as Max would have but Christine appeared to be writing it all down. Hazel looked at me as if I was trying to sell her a time-share.

Lissa nudged me and tapped her watch. Hazel had eaten up more than an hour and a half.

“We’re out of time, unfortunately,” I said. “For next Thursday, why don’t we continue our study of what kind of parent God is?” I rubbed my palms together, now oozing sweat from my lifelines. “We’ll pick up with Luke.”

“We were supposed to discuss chapters five through ten this time,” Rebecca said. She sliced Hazel a look. “But we never got around to it.”

“Like I said, that’s where we’ll pick up next time then,” I said. And then I added the obligatory, “Unless you have some verses you want to share, Rebecca.”

“I might,” she said. “We’re totally skipping the Old Testament, and there are things in there I’ve used with my boys—”

I wimped out completely. “We’ll save some time for that.”

As everyone lunged for their purses, Lissa gave me a one-armed squeeze. “I should *be* the little bundle of love you are,” she whispered to me. “You handled that so well.”

The cell phone chirping in my purse interrupted my inner debate over whether Lissa was talking about Hazel or Rebecca. The display showed Nick’s cell number, so I moved toward the room’s accordion partition.

“Thank you, honey,” I said, hand cupped around the phone.

“For what?”

“For saving me from the most awkward moment on the planet.”

I could almost hear him grinning his straight-across grin. “You owe me, then, and I’m ready to collect.”

“What flavor do you want—chocolate chip or Rocky Road?”

“Fudge Ripple—and I need you to pick Tristan up.”

His voice tightened. It wasn’t the first time that summer he’d reminded me that *I* was the one who had talked *him* into letting her get a job on the boardwalk, and that he still didn’t think it was a good idea. That was just Nicky.

“I don’t want her walking home by herself,” Nick said.

“Honey, she knows to wait for one of us.”

“Aunt Pete says Max is with you.”

“You called home, then.”

“I just have to check on my girls. How soon can you pick up Tristan?”

“I’m on my way,” I said. “Our meeting just broke up.”

“How did it go?”

I felt the irresistible gurgling in my throat. “Interesting,” I said. “Too bad it’s all confidential or I’d get you to explain it to me.”

“I’ll get it out of you. Okay—Tristan gets off in ten minutes—”

“I’m gone,” I said.

I closed the phone with my chin.

“Orders from hubby?”

I turned to Hazel, who was the only one left at that point. She made no attempt to cover up the fact that she’d been unashamedly listening. “That’s one of the five hundred reasons why I’m not married anymore,” she said. “Three husbands was enough for me to figure out there isn’t a man alive who doesn’t want to run your life.”

“Nick’s just a little bit protective,” I said.

“Is that what I need to be so my kids will be perfect like Jo and Hermione, or whatever their names are?”

I finally let go of the laughter I’d been holding back. A slow smile broke the grip of Hazel’s hard mouth, showing a nicotine-stained fence of capped teeth.

“I wasn’t expecting that to come out of you,” she said. “You sit there looking like a virgin petunia, and then out comes this deep...laugh thing. It sounds like it should be coming out of some 1940’s movie diva. Marlena Dietrich or somebody.”

“I know it sounds sort of devilish, which isn’t the best—”

“Is that why you’re always putting your hand in front of your mouth? So nobody will know what you’re really thinking?”

I did *not* want s Hazel discovering the impish Serena inside. I headed for the door, Nick’s voice in my ear, Hazel on my heels.

“So maybe you *aren’t* perfect,” she said. “That’s good to know. I’m trying to decide if this is the right place for me.” She glanced ruefully at the sign over the door I was locking behind us that read: *GOD IS GOOD ALL THE TIME. ALL THE TIME, GOD IS GOOD.* “I don’t exactly ‘fit’ into the church scene.”

Just before she stepped out of the halo of light from the porch lamp, I saw her purse her lips and narrow her eyes into hyphens. She was a dead ringer for Rebecca. My laugh put even Marlena Dietrich to shame.

“I think you and I might get along after all,” she said.

I was trying to edge toward the parking lot where Max was waiting next to the Blazer, doing the combination tap-jazz-hip-hop routine she was constantly in the midst of. But Hazel stopped me with a jab of the Barbie glasses.

“When I first saw you in this little package you present, “I thought, ‘Uh-oh. Super Mom.’ You’ve got the little wispy hair cut. I bet you’re still a natural brunette.... I hate women like you. The cute little body in the boutique capris—”

“Cute little body?” I said. “My mother always told me I was built like a fire plug.”

Hazel smacked her own hefty hips. “Get over it. Anyway, I see all that, plus the churchy smile, and I’m thinking, *What can this chick teach me? She probably says excuse me when she belches in an empty room.*” She peered at me. “You do belch, don’t you?”

“Sure,” I said, although I hoped she wasn’t going to ask for a demonstration. I didn’t do well under pressure.

Hazel flipped a few bleached strands off her shoulder with one of Barbie’s calves. “But I was watching you while I was talking, and you weren’t judging me. I can smell that kind of thing.” She made another Rebecca face. “There was some of that going on with the rest of them.” [

I didn’t bother to deny it.

“Anyway, Sarah—Savannah—what is it?”

“Serena,” I said.

“Yeah, look, the Bible’s not my deal, but I *am* going to study *you*. I want to dog you until I see how you do this master mother thing.”

I glanced at my watch. It was later than I’d thought, and Tristan would be about to punch out. I hurried toward Max., and Hazel followed. She wasn’t kidding about dogging my trail.

Beeping the Blazer’s lock I called out, “Get in Max. We have to pick up Tristan.”

“Oh, yeah. Three blocks is *way* too far for her to walk by herself.”

“I really have to get going,” I said to Hazel.

I half-expected her to hop into her car and “dog” me all the way to Boardwalk Fries. But she only gave a final Barbie poke and said, “You really are a good mom. I can tell that.”

“Who was *that*?” Max said when we were both in the car.

“That was a lady that wants some help with her kids,” I said.

“She was scary-looking.” Max patted my arm. “I guess they can’t all be Super-Mom like you, huh?”

I laughed at her. But I couldn’t help thinking that, next to Hazel, I *could* be Super-Mom.