

In the Name of Help

by
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Chapter One

Twenty-five years later, southern California...

Cathryn Margaret Silberg Kent was at one time an extraordinarily beautiful woman. She wasn't one of those women whose appearance comes together with smart clothes and clever make-up. Fortunately or unfortunately, nature had given Cathryn an absolutely natural and soft beauty, beauty that attracted the admiring attention of both men and women from the very beginning.

Cathryn had been an adorable child who never went through a clumsy or awkward stage and who seemed to be exempt from even an ordinary blemish on her adolescent skin. As she passed from one stage to the next, she became more beautiful.

Looking at herself in a mirror, Cathryn never saw it.

My eyes and nose are okay, she thought, critically turning her face one way and then the other. Always feeling uncomfortable with herself and somehow inadequate, she stared at her reflection, and she only saw a person that no one else ever saw and that person was not attractive. Cathryn saw only her flaws, the imperfections that were not evident to anyone else.

The framed pictures displayed in her father's spacious study documented her changes. On his huge mahogany desk there was a photograph of Cathryn when she was a pretty and happy baby sitting on her father's lap. The lips of her tiny mouth were almost heart-shaped and her big, violet eyes were liquid and sparkling with life, as she looked up into her father's adoring face.

Next to the mahogany-shuttered window, there was a close-up taken of a charming, smiling toddler, her shiny, wavy hair flowing behind her in the breeze as she stood on her tiptoes and reached up to help her mother hang clothes on a line.

Over the low bookcase that ran the length of one entire wall, amidst photographs of his wife and sons, there was a photograph of a lovely little girl with beautiful almond-shaped eyes and perfectly arched eyebrows. The picture was taken at the edge of a football field as Cathryn gazed up worshipfully at her favorite brother, Steve. Always the hero quarterback of the game, dressed in his dirt-smudged uniform, he knelt, his arm around his young sister.

Still another shot of Cathryn hung on the rich, tan grass cloth covered wall, showing wooden benches at a high school pep rally. She was on the right side of the picture, a strikingly attractive teenager with arms raised upward in exhilaration. Her smile was wide and dazzling, her long hair pulled back off her face into a thick, shining ponytail. Her already stunning figure was not at all obscured by the jeans and sweater she wore. Her radiance was so bright that the rest of the crowd within the perimeter of the picture seemed dim and a little hazy, though right there beside her.

There was another large photograph in a chrome frame on the wall opposite her father's desk. It was taken in Cathryn's last year of college and it captured an image of her as a remarkably beautiful young woman, who despite the gentle, sweet expression on her face, scintillated such an exotic sensuality, that even in a photograph, it was almost overpowering, like an expensive, heady perfume.

Cathryn even had pretty feet and above them her legs had been long and shapely from the time she was ten years old. Her slim hips curved into a slender waist. She had perfect breasts, firm and full, incredibly clear skin and a lovely face that was framed with shiny waves of golden, chestnut hair. Her almond-shaped warm eyes changed from sparkling bits of violet, to dark gray when she was angry, and her high cheekbones bore an ever-present natural blush. Her complexion was fair and clear, like fine china. Her lashes were dark, long and curved and even her hands were flawless, with long fingers and strong, tapered nails.

That was a long time ago. That was Cathryn before she got caught up in a web of insane circumstances that never should have happened. That was before Edward.

Clothes were easy for Cathryn. She could wear anything from clinging, strapless gowns, to T-shirts and cut-off jeans. There was clearly a strong familial resemblance between Cathryn and Linda, something about their smiles was very similar. But Linda's hair was much lighter, and her eyes and skin-coloring much darker than her cousin's. Linda was unquestionably attractive, but Cathryn . Cathryn was breathtakingly beautiful and everywhere the two of them went together, the attention from men was enormous and disconcerting.

"I feel like they don't even see my face," she complained to Linda. "Are they all so obsessed with boobs and asses that they don't know there's a person inside?"

"Some do," Linda said laughing, but with her own degree of discomfort showing in her eyes as she grew thoughtful. "Maybe we'll find one of them one day."

They both laughed, but Cathryn still felt the same vague nervousness in her stomach that she felt before. It had something to do with the men who stared at her breasts when she was walking down Michigan Avenue earlier that day, but this time it was taking a long time for it to go away.

She couldn't explain exactly what it was or where it came from, not to Linda, not even to herself. But, her thoughts drifted back to one morning in elementary school when her mother had helped her dress while she was still groggy with sleep. She wore a navy and peach plaid, wool skirt and a full slip, over which Anna had buttoned a soft, peach cardigan. Cathryn walked into the warm room where the children had their lockers and unconsciously unbuttoned the sweater, thinking distractedly that she had a blouse on underneath it. She didn't realize that she was in her slip and skirt, until she stood before the teacher's desk a moment later and Mrs. Kinsley kindly, quietly advised her of her mistake.

Cathryn rushed back to get her sweater and probably no one but the teacher ever noticed. But Cathryn never forgot the startled, sick feeling that had invaded the pit of her stomach when she realized that she was standing in front of a roomful of boys and girls, clad only in her underwear and skirt.

That self-conscious, sick feeling of having done something wrong, then drawing some kind of sexual interest, stayed stuck within her mind and sometimes something happened that would cause her to feel that disturbing feeling again.

Cathryn felt that same sickening, nauseated discomfort ooze into her gut when she thought about her Uncle Craig. Married to her father's sister Carol, Craig was a boisterous crude man, who always wanted to play with her and her brothers when they were younger, on his visits to their home with Aunt Carol.

Cathryn didn't like him, she felt uncomfortable with him. Craig was a pharmacist, but he always looked unkempt. He was rarely clean shaven and he often had dirt under his fingernails. When Cathryn got close to him, his clothes and skin smelled like stale tobacco.

One Saturday afternoon, Craig was wrestling with her brothers, Steve and Martin, when Cathryn walked into the family room looking for a doll. Craig reached out and grabbed her hand, pulled her down onto the floor with the boys and he began tickling her. He laughed loudly at her surprise and obvious discomfort, but he wouldn't let her go when she protested and struggled to get out of his reach. Steve and Martin, bored with this and eager to be outside, ran from the room leaving Cathryn still trying to get away from Craig's thoughtless game.

She tried to remember exactly what had happened, but the memory clouded over until she got that same nauseated, horribly embarrassed, wrongly sexual feeling. Then her recollection of the incident faded and became unreachable.

He must have touched me, she thought, appalled, years later, trying to look back at herself as a child of six years of age from a distance, as if that little girl were another person entirely.

Maybe he touched me, maybe he actually put his hand on my nonexistent chest or between my legs. Cathryn's stomach tightened, bile rising in her throat. *What a horrible creep he was*, she thought.

In the far recesses of her mind, there was also a troubling question about what that little girl had done to provoke that to happen. Whether she had done anything or not, Cathryn buried the question before it could even form itself into a complete thought. Totally unable to confront her own question, she could never come up with any answers to it.

Craig died when Cathryn was eleven and she remembered that although she knew she was supposed to feel badly about his death, something like relief changed places with the self-conscious, embarrassed sickening feeling deep in the pit of her stomach whenever she heard his name.

Cathryn, though truly physically beautiful, was also very troubled.

That same woman, now forty-two years old, was almost unrecognizable.

Cathryn sat shivering and hugging her body on the bare wood floor of her bedroom. An early photograph of her with Edward sat on the dresser just over her head, and in that picture she looked up at him, smiling happily. She wore a short-sleeved, pale yellow silk shirt and her face glowed radiantly with life and love and hope. Her delicate chin was lifted slightly, her lips moist and soft. The expression on her face was one of complete trust and devotion as she gazed up at him.

At the same moment, the photographer had caught Edward looking straight into the camera with an expression of impatience and irritation. Edward, a tall man, six foot four, stood almost a foot above the pretty woman next to him. His features, dark and strong, but lacking in emotion or warmth, caused him to appear formidable, even foreboding, rather than handsome or appealing. He held his chin up slightly in a firm and resolute manner, despite the glow of radiant beauty from the woman at his side. There was no hint of amusement or pleasure or love on his face.

Edward and Cathryn were a strange combination. Early on, people close to Cathryn tried to point this out to her in one stumbling attempt after another, but Cathryn stubbornly refused to listen to them. Even Linda and Nick concurred with her family at first. Her mother and father questioned her more when she began spending time with Edward than they ever had in her lifetime before.

Steve boldly demanded of his sister, "What can you possibly want with such a self-centered bastard?"

The tears that sprang to her eyes, rather than Cathryn's spitting anger, made Steve back up a bit, but Cathryn would not discuss it.

Edward is not cold, she told herself. Her heart beat faster as she thought of his hands, his strong, teasing fingers and his hot lips touching her body.

For a while, less severe criticism with seemingly endless questions went on and on. Cathryn simply would not have this and her eyes would grow dark and stormy.

"This is my life, not yours! I know what I want. I know what I'm doing," she declared harshly to her startled mother when Anna merely asked if she and Edward were going out again that weekend. "Why can't anyone just see how happy he makes me," she cried, her voice breaking into sobs. Her mother stood at the doorway to Cathryn's room, feeling puzzled and helpless, twisting a dish towel in her hands and pressing her lips together so that she wouldn't begin to cry as well.

Cathryn never spoke to me like this before, never, Anna lamented sorrowfully.

Joseph, Anna and Cathryn's friends retreated, thinking that something would change. *She'll get to know Edward better. She'll see him as he is*, her father thought.

After some time the feeble protests stopped entirely. Whatever the reasons, Cathryn was hopelessly committed to Edward, and she called it love.

Time passed and her attachment to Edward grew stronger instead of weakening. Cathryn's family and her closest friends resigned themselves to the fact that Cathryn had completely and adamantly made a choice and it was most certainly Edward. They admitted that Cathryn seemed happy. Though Edward was not by any stretch of the imagination, the effusive, warm and loving human being they envisioned for her, he did have something that had completely captivated their lovely Cathryn. Not one person who knew Cathryn and Edward could begin to guess exactly what that might be.

However, they did realize begrudgingly that Edward had somehow persuaded Cathryn to devote her life to him, along with anything else she might have to offer.

The room Cathryn sat in now was dreary and dim. The king-size bed was unmade, and dirty clothes and towels lay in piles on the floor by the windows. There was a thick layer of dust on the furniture . On the floor, the dust mixed with dog hair was so heavy that it was easy to see where someone had scuffed paths through it as they moved about the bedroom. Just a bit of gray light came in through the two bedroom windows between the slats of blinds that were closed almost all the way. Outside an overcast morning gave way to a steady sprinkle of rain. Thick, dismal dark clouds hung ominously over normally sun-drenched southern California.

It was almost impossible to tell that the lovely young woman in the photograph on the dresser was the same bedraggled woman who sat alone on the bare floor. She was barefoot, wearing only a pair of filthy tan sweatpants and a torn, faded pink T- shirt, that was stretched too tightly across her pudgy middle. She was a bloated thirty pounds heavier than she was in the picture and her lined skin had a grayish cast to it. Her eyes were dark gray without the slightest flicker of light in them. The blush was long gone from her cheeks.

Cathryn rocked mechanically back and forth as she sat on the floor in front of the dark wooden dresser, facing the doorway, waiting . She wasn't looking at anything in particular but her body was turned towards the hallway as if she expected something to appear there. She stopped rocking and leaned forward a little, staring into the space three or four feet in front of her where there was nothing. Dark, puffy spots blotched the skin under her eyes and extended to where her cheekbones were obscured with soft, grayish flesh. Her once lovely, shiny hair was unevenly cut. It lay close around her face in thick, matted tangles, looking as if it had gone unwashed for days.

At the same moment, just sixty miles away, Linda sat in front of her computer in the little office she worked from in her North County home. The room, next to her small kitchen, in spite of the grayness of the day, was open, airy and light, deeply in contrast to Linda's mood. She was unhappy. The expression on her face was serious, contemplative. She stared at the screen, her forehead creased with a frown. Linda felt troubled, but she wasn't certain what it was that was nagging at her so hard.

This isn't like me, she thought, annoyed with herself .

That was true. Linda was normally an unstoppable optimist. While those around her were busily listing their problems, Linda was usually seeking out solutions. She was unshakable in her belief that such a way always existed, only waiting to be discovered, no matter what the situation.

She began a little mental checklist, hoping that she could get some flicker of awareness about where the discomfort, the concern, the tightening of her stomach was coming from on this quiet, pleasant, if gray day, with nothing extraordinary looming on her horizon.

"The kids are doing fine. Mom's okay," she mumbled out loud to herself. "The bills are there, but getting better. I'll get them handled," she promised herself. "Work's good. I love what I'm doing, I love where I live."

Haven't met the man of my dreams yet, her thoughts continued, but at least I'm not involved with anyone who isn't, either, she declared silently.

Cathryn and Nick, a voice that wasn't quite a voice, but just the flutter of a thought, said in her head.

Linda felt a chill along her arms. She got up and made a pot of coffee.

Cathryn, Cathryn, Cathryn... she heard, no, felt.

I haven't talked to her in years... I'm losing it, Linda thought.

For two days now, she had had this crazy, uneasy, nervous feeling with absolutely nothing going on around her to warrant it.

Cathryn keeps popping into my head, she mused sipping the steaming hot coffee. *I feel like an alarm went off. I didn't hear it but I can feel it.*

Linda wore a faded red and blue flannel shirt tucked into worn jeans. She was barefoot, she didn't like to wear shoes in her house. Her hair, still a shiny, honey-blond, was even lighter than when she had lived in Chicago. Her skin was tan, a warm, bronze color even at this time of year. She often sat out on her deck off the living room, spreading her papers out on a table in front of her, working in the sunshine for hours at a time. She looked years younger than her age.

Pensively, Linda turned and looked out the sliding glass doors to her right. Though the other buildings of the condominium complex were visible beyond the trees, she saw only the rich green leaves of the macadamia nut trees that lined the oval park and walkways. Somehow, an aesthetically-minded landscape

architect had persuaded the developer to build his complex around this small, but lovely park, in spite of the objections that were raised. Less park area meant more units that could be squeezed into this very valuable land just three blocks from the Pacific ocean and the magnificent sunsets that adorned it.

Aesthetics over financial gain in southern California? Linda thought, smiling wryly. Through some miracle, the park had survived.

As she looked out into the peacefulness of the place, Linda thought, *You would have to be able to look out your windows and glass doors and see beautiful trees on one side and a piece of the ocean on the other to make up for living so close to so many other people.*

It was near enough to the ocean so that she could smell the moist, clean air when the sliding glass doors were open as they were now. She breathed deeply and relaxed a little. The complex was quiet and this helped her work.

I love it here more than anywhere else I've ever lived, she thought.

She took a sip of the coffee sitting beside her on the computer desk, then she sighed and rested her chin on her hands, her elbows on the desk in front of her. It was so long since she had heard anything from Cathryn, or Nick either, for that matter. Their lives had gone in completely different directions after college.

Back then we would never have believed that we would ever have become so separated, Linda thought sadly.

Not too long after Cathryn's move across the country and her marriage, Nick and Carrie were married. They moved into a huge, beautiful two story brick home in Winnetka, north of the city, where they were close to Carrie's parents' estate.

They might as well have lived in three different countries for all the times that Nick and Linda managed to see each other after Cathryn left the Midwest. Nick's lifestyle changed drastically and abruptly, both with the demands of the law firm and those of his new wife. Time to see Linda all but disappeared.

Then Linda finished college and made her own attempt at marriage. She met Dan Clinton at the gym where she went to work out in the early mornings.

Dan, a decent, hard-working young man, was a successful young architect, and he was attracted to Linda immediately. Steady and conservative himself, he was fascinated by her energy and enthusiasm. Linda liked him, too, as soon as they met, but it was fairly obvious that they were already going in different directions. Unfortunately, they were both so eager to have someone in their lives that they

refused to see the great disparity in their goals and purposes in life that would eventually rock their marriage.

Dan, so accepting of the status-quo, continuously argued with Linda when she disagreed with what she saw happening in the schools, in government and in the field of mental health. Dan kidded her and said that she was born late, beyond her time.

"You're a sixties radical," he told her. Though he teased, her strong views made him uneasy. Dan didn't want to make any waves. He was content at his office and in front of the television while Linda wanted with all her heart and soul to change any poor conditions that she saw around her. The popular quest for money and possessions as a way of life was ludicrous to her. She had never seen it make anyone around her happy, unless they had been happy to begin with. At the same time, business and accumulating wealth were Dan's entire focus and way of life.

Looking back, Linda thought, we made no sense at all. Ah, hindsight's a wonderful thing, she smiled grimly. It was my fault. I should've seen it coming.

Somewhere in her heart she always knew that she had picked Dan out as a likely choice, a suitable husband, when she thought it was time to get married. *More a fifties thing, than seventies, she grimaced. I was stuck in the appeal of "Father Knows Best."* She shook her head ruefully and took another sip of coffee.

She remembered sitting in Dan's favorite German restaurant the night, that he gave her an engagement ring. It was a beautiful but very cold night and snow had begun to fall outside the window. A huge fire blazed in the big stone fireplace just fifteen feet from their cozy booth. The smells of beer and ale, cooked meats and spices drifted through the huge dining room. The restaurant was known for its wonderfully seasoned heavy German dinners, and the huge Lazy Susans filled with mounds of cottage cheese, chopped liver, pickled beets and homemade apple sauce, that were promptly placed on each table as customers were seated.

Dan scooped up another forkful of wiener schnitzel and sauerkraut and put it in his mouth. Linda was pushing her vegetables around on her plate and staring at Dan's gentle face.

"What?" he asked her, tilting his head to the side and reaching across the table for her hand. "What're you thinking so hard about? Nice ring, hmm?" he smiled at her, admiring his gift on her finger. She remembered struggling with her own thoughts.

Do I tell him that I'm trying to figure out if I really love him, or if I just like him a lot? And, now, just an hour after we've decided to get married. What am I doing?

Do I say that my parents think he's wonderful and so do my friends, that I think he'll make someone a terrific husband, but I'm just not positive that that someone is me? Don't think so.

Instead, Linda smiled back at him, looked down at his hand holding hers, said nothing and the moment passed.

After that dinner, Linda looked out the window at the blanket of new snow that was covering everything in sight. The otherwise barren branches overhead were topped with it like cake frosting. Even the cars that had just arrived were tucked under a fluffy, thick layer of the white stuff. The new snow was beautifully untouched and it glistened in the bright moonlight. Enchanted with how it looked, and a little uncomfortable from the heavy meal, Linda had asked, spontaneously, "Dan, let's walk outside in the snow for a few minutes, okay?" Her face began to glow with enthusiasm now at the prospect of tramping through the fresh, soft, snowfall, like a carefree child.

"You're kidding. It must be ten degrees above zero out there," Dan dismissed the idea. He picked up his glass of ale and finished it off. "Let's go home," he said, reaching for her coat and helping her into it.

In the next few days, they were caught up in excitement and planning, the momentum that developed from their decision. Both families met and within a few weeks their wedding date was set. Linda convinced herself that she was doing the right thing. Dan was, after all, a very suitable person for her to marry.

Suitable? she thought ironically, as she remembered those times.

What has that got to do with anything? What was I doing in those days? Christ! She put the coffee down and walked out onto the deck and into the little bit of sunshine that was breaking through the heavy clouds overhead.

A woman was walking towards the pool along the pathway down below her. Something about her walk was so familiar. Cathryn? Her heart lurched within her chest. It couldn't be. Just then the woman scooped up a little kitten and turned back towards Linda. She was a complete stranger. Linda had never seen her before.

I am losing my mind, she thought. *Why do I keep thinking about her?*