

Chapter One

Jessica stirred the remains of her twenty-ounce Slurpee with the straw, sipped, and gazed out into the pasture. Her eyes lost focus and her mind drifted to the farm and to today's visitor.

"Jessica, did you hear what I said?"

Jessica jumped. "What? Oh, you're ready to go." She swung her legs over the split-rail fence and slid to the ground. Balancing her cup against a fence post, she dusted off the seat of her sundress and watched Alison do the same to her jeans. She took a last look at the big chestnut quarter horse, the paint, and the black mare who had been their midmorning companions, then turned and followed Alison, who was kicking her way through unmowed grass that bordered the two-lane highway, drifting toward the turn-off a hundred yards ahead.

"That's a pretty dress," Alison said without looking over her shoulder.

Jessica smiled, stroked the cotton print ornamented with yellow and peach lilies and lime foliage that was her summer treat, and said, "Thanks. I like your shirt, too. It's cute."

"Did you get all dressed up just to go and get a MoonPie?"

Jessica glanced sharply at her friend's back. "It's just such a lovely day," she said and looked down, brow furrowed.

"Are you meeting a boy?"

Alison's voice rang with gentle humor, but Jessica blushed and kept her head low, hoping her friend wouldn't notice. Jessica was sure she was the only rising sophomore in Wilkeston who never dated, even among the congregants of the Church of the Epistles, but although Jessica shared with her parents the church's strict moral and religious beliefs, she still had the hormones of a fifteen-year-old girl. And although she and Alison shared everything, Jessica had kept private her feelings for Colby Kidd, who was not only two years older than her and, to Jessica, a man but was also the preacher's son. He was coming to the farm today to help her father, and Jessica planned to bump into him.

"You *are* meeting someone! Who is it?" Alison had stopped and turned to stare, but

Jessica lowered her shoulders and shoved past. She heard Alison scurry to catch up as she persisted with her questions. "Come on, tell me: who are you seeing?"

"No one. Besides, who would I want to see?"

"I don't know. Jeff Parker?"

"Alison!"

Alison laughed. "Yeah, I guess that was months ago." Alison knew all about Jessica's crush on Jeff and had even tried to goad her into acting on it, but she also knew that nothing had happened and that Jessica had moved on. Alison lapsed into silence, though Jessica knew her mind was spinning for an answer.

"I wonder..."

Alison had been Jessica's best friend since kindergarten, and they had always attended the same church and shared a homeroom at school, but Jessica sometimes wondered what the popular girl still saw in her. Perhaps she gave Alison a place away from teenage cliques, somewhere safe to talk about tampons and periods, crushes and dates, and Alison's increasingly intimate sexual experiences. It didn't matter, though: Jessica was grateful for a friendship without which the classroom would be a lonely place and the long summer vacation boring.

"I know," Alison announced with a tone of confident discovery, "you're seeing Colby Kidd."

Jessica scowled, said, "Of course I'm not," and pressed her head lower as she accelerated toward the unmarked road on which Alison would turn off.

"You are, too. I've seen the way you look at him. Where are you meeting?"

Jessica reached the corner. Sullen, though not sure why, she turned to face Alison. "We're not. He's just coming over to help out on the farm."

"Wow." Alison paused, and Jessica felt herself being studied. "You know he hangs out with Robbie and them? He's..." Alison let the silence hang, then shook her head and said, "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"I'm not doing anything, all right?"

Alison's eyes were sympathetic, but Jessica didn't want to talk about it. She had an insane crush on a stud two years older than her who she barely even knew, and she didn't want Alison making her feel stupid. She glared back defiantly.

Alison eventually shrugged. "Just be careful, okay? And call me if you want to talk." With a toss of her head, her long curls bouncing, she swung her hips, turned, and walked up the hill toward her house on the main street of the small mountain town of Wilkeston, North Carolina. With a twinge of regret, Jessica watched her BFF drift up the middle of the road, a run-down trailer park fronted by beaten-up pickups on her left, a furniture outlet on her right. Perhaps she should have sought Alison's advice on how to handle Colby; maybe she should call her back? But when Alison passed into the shadow of a large oak tree, Jessica sighed and turned to cross the highway. She glanced both ways and saw nothing but a scooter fading into the distance, probably Danny Collins making a run to the state line. Danny had lost his license years ago for drunk driving but toiled around town on his 50cc bike and once a week crossed into Georgia to

buy a case of beer and a stack of lottery tickets. Jessica meandered toward the farm, dreaming of Colby's green eyes.

On Sundays, Jessica usually managed to get her parents to arrive early for church and steered them into a pew toward the front and on the other side of the aisle from Colby, from where she could admire Colby's strong jaw and broad shoulders in profile. She caught glimpses of him at school, too, though they were generally fleeting: usually he was with his friends and she was with Alison, so the best she could do was steal sly peeks. Occasionally, she got closer, leaning casually on a locker and manufacturing a hallway encounter, or exchanging quick humor in the lunch line, but he probably had no idea that she liked him. How could he? She was younger and a prude, and he could have any girl he wanted.

Jessica's home was a small farm less than half a mile from the pasture where she and Alison had met for the day. The house, barn, and surrounding trees and shrubs obscured the farmyard from the road, so she couldn't tell whether Colby's car was there, but she craned her neck as she walked up the long driveway, her heart beating faster and finally leaping when she saw a big blue Buick. It was Pastor Kidd's car, and for an insane moment, Jessica wondered if Colby had borrowed it for the day to take her for a drive. She dismissed the thought, but a thrill lingered in her belly. She swallowed and resolved that today, she would talk to Colby, even if she had to wander out into the fields to find him.

But first she had to feed the kittens.

Four weeks ago, Maisie, one of last year's litter of barn cats, had birthed six kittens. She had been far too young, and the birth had been premature: one kitten had been stillborn, and a second had died soon thereafter. Even now, Maisie was not feeding well, so twice a day, Jessica took a bottle of warm milk to the barn to feed the survivors. They were making good progress, though her favorite, Ella, was still weak.

Jessica turned to the left, past her dream of being taken for a ride, and entered the old, stone house to fetch the milk. The kitchen's austerity, stark cleanness, and lack of ornamentation spoke of Ma and were enough reality to shatter Jessica's daydreams. A relationship with Colby could never happen, for Ma expected Jessica to live the same life of sacrifice that she had made her own, eventually marrying a man to whom she would offer unquestioning obedience; although Jessica did not know when she would be granted permission to find that man, she knew it was not yet. Not only had Ma and Dad never talked to her of the birds and bees, they never even held hands, and when it came down to it, Jessica was too embarrassed to even bring the topic of boys into the house. Succumbing to earthy desires would bitterly disappoint parents from whose example she had learned that pleasures of the flesh were for lesser people. She turned on the faucet, picked up a bottle, and fumed, wanting to rebel and have a boyfriend, but knowing she lacked the courage to do so.

A bottle of warm milk in hand, Jessica stepped into the yard and looked around hopefully but saw no sign of Colby. Her chin fell, and she crossed to the old barn, a faded wood construction with missing panels and a gaping hole in one side from a runaway tractor accident—Jessica had not been allowed near the machine since. But the barn was structurally

sound and the tin roof was only ten years old, so the hayloft where the kittens lived was warm and dry. Jessica entered the barn and climbed the ladder. When her head poked above the line of the hayloft, her heart stopped. Maisie was licking Ella, who lay motionless beside her.

No!

Jessica scrambled up the last steps and stumbled to the kitten. Maisie didn't object to her offspring being picked up, but Ella didn't stir as Jessica lifted her. Jessica laid the corpse aside and picked up the mother to console her, but Maisie was uninterested, her eyes dull like the lifeless buttons on the face of a stuffed toy. Jessica put her down, and the cat returned to her offspring, licked her all over, and then wandered dreadingly into the back of the hayloft.

These were only barn cats to Ma and Dad, but to Jessica, they were more—more even than pets. They were her friends, and the hayloft, with its familiar smells of oil, animals, and hay, was a sanctuary she shared with them, a place she came to rest and dream. When she was a toddler, Dad had made her a cedar chest in which she used to hide, giggling when he found her among her clothes, and when she had turned ten, he had brought it up to the hayloft, where it still resided and held her treasures: a ticket stub from the first time Dad had taken her to the movies; Cassandra, her childhood princess doll; magazine photos of Leonardo DiCaprio, Justin Timberlake, and other MTV and Hollywood stars she wasn't allowed to watch; and a collection of her favorite romance and fantasy novels. The chest was also where she stored her diary, and the hayloft where she came to write. Ella's death was a desecration of her sacred space.

Quiet conversation approached the barn, and Jessica straightened; that would be Dad, who would make the pain go away, just like he always did. She knew that she was the jewel of his life, and he had told her a hundred times how, for the first twenty years of his marriage with Ma, he had desperately wanted children and had felt as blessed as Abraham when, at thirty-six, Ma had, like Sarah, borne him the child that he had no longer thought possible. Jessica felt blessed, too, for she loved her father more than anyone or anything in the world. His happiness was the most important thing in her life.

But he must be busy on farm business right now. She cocked her head to listen.

"Okay, Colby," her father said, his voice becoming clearer as he approached the barn, "you fetch the pick and axe from in there and get started. I've got to go down to Cook Hardware for some odds and ends, and then I need to spend half an hour in my shop fixing the chain. I'll meet you at the stumps with the tractor in an hour or so."

"Yes, sir."

Jessica flushed, brushed the straw and cat hair off her lap, then shook out her long black hair and pulled it back over her shoulders. She grabbed the nearest of Maisie's frolicking kittens and raised him to her lap, looked down briefly as Spike reached for and grasped the nipple of the bottle, then tickled his neck and shifted slightly so she could see down into the barn.

She had watched Colby from afar for long enough that she could close her eyes and still see his swaggering stride, the sleeves of his shirt rolled halfway up his forearms and his jeans hugging his hips and running down his long legs to break on the cowboy boots he favored. But today she kept her eyes open and saw him stop in the barn doorway, his arms loose at his side

and his shoulders swinging with his head as he peered around the tractor and agricultural equipment, looking for tools. She gazed at him from the hayloft, her chest thumping and her breath arrhythmic. But this was more than nervousness: something very uncomfortable was happening. She was drawn to Colby, yet she was too embarrassed to do anything. What if he didn't like her? She thought he was interested, but what if she was wrong? What if she made a fool of herself? And what would Ma and Dad think?

Colby's eyes latched onto something in the corner, and he started to move. If Jessica didn't act now, it would be too late.

"Hi, Colby," she called.

What had she done? Guilt accompanied embarrassment, and she waited as Colby's head moved quickly from side to side, confused and searching for the voice.

He's so cute!

He saw her and called out, "Hi, Jessica."

"I'm feeding the kittens."

You idiot! What a stupid thing to say.

"I'm helping your father dig up a couple of tree stumps. I have to get some tools to loosen up the roots first."

"I could use a hand. The kittens are hungry, and Maisie's not feeding. And Ella's dead."

"Ella?"

Jessica nodded. "She's one of the kittens."

After a brief silence, Colby shrugged his shoulders. "I guess there's no rush. Is Ella up there?"

"Yeah, she's right here."

Boys!

She had a litter of kittens to feed, tiny little balls of fluff, and all Colby cared about was the one that had died. But he was strolling across strips of sunlight to the short ladder. Butterflies fluttered in Jessica's stomach as she dusted the wooden floor beside her with the palm of her hand.

Just then, panic hit her.

Colby would want to explore the hayloft and would surely look in her cedar chest, where he would see Cassandra and read Alison's diaries. She would look so immature, sitting in her secret place and feeding the kittens. What was she thinking? And what could she possibly talk about to a boy two years older than her?

Colby's head appeared at the top of the ladder, and he looked around. "Where's Ella?"

Jessica nodded to the side. "I put her over there."

Colby stepped onto the hayloft, took a few steps, and crouched down. Jessica tried to swallow the guilt she felt from looking at the strong shoulders and back that pressed against Colby's shirt.

"Cool." He stood up and, with a smile, crossed the hayloft, lowered his back against the bales of hay beside Jessica, and stretched his legs out straight, almost touching her. When Spike

released the bottle, Jessica set him down, and he wobbled back to the hay. Colby was so close that Jessica could hear his breath. Her mind swirled, and she felt giddy. She wanted him to smile at her and say sweet things, wanted him to look at her and touch her, but mostly there was just wild confusion. She scooped her hand under a kitten that rubbed against her leg and lifted him to her lap, where he kneaded her waist and rubbed his head against her belly.

“Bubbles is hungry,” she said.

“Bubbles?”

“Yeah.” Jessica smiled. “He’s kind of round, and he bounces a lot.” She lifted the small gray-and-white bundle and held him out. “Why don’t you feed him?”

Colby held out his open hands, a confused expression on his face.

“Let me show you,” she said and slid across the inches that separated them. Her bare shoulder pressed against the muscles under Colby’s shirt. Surely he could feel her heart pounding, the heat radiating from a face fit to burst with excitement? When their legs touched, Jessica thought she would explode.

Jeff Parker, her freshman-year crush, had been in her grade and so had been easier to talk to, easier to touch. One time last year, she had leaned on him and pressed against his back as she had reached around for a book on the desk in front of him, and she felt embarrassed whenever she remembered letting him hug her from behind for a reason she could no longer recall, allowing his hand to rest on her butt for a few seconds. It had been thrilling, but it had been in the classroom and safe, and very different from what she was doing with Colby. Today, her touch was an invitation, that much she knew, but an invitation to do what, she wasn’t sure. With her heart in her throat, she put her hand around Bubbles.

“You do it like this,” she said. Surely Colby could hear her voice quaking.

She laid Bubbles on his back on Colby’s hand and held out the bottle. The kitten grabbed the nipple and sucked.

“Here, you take it,” she said, and with her chest pounding, guided the older boy’s hand to the bottle.

Jessica remembered a fantasy that she had never told her father and that Alison would have forgotten. It was a fantasy she had outgrown but that in some strange way still hung on in the corners of her imagination, surviving the havoc that puberty had wreaked on her emotions. She had dreamed of a prince riding up to the farm on a white stallion and sweeping her off her feet—Pastor Kidd, leader of the Church of the Epistles in Wilkeston, was king of her community. Could his son be her prince?

She slid her hand down the bottle to rest on Colby’s hand and didn’t resist as his leg pressed back against hers. She studied his face, whose flatness offered simplicity and whose breadth spoke of openness and honesty. The red hair and freckles gave it an air of novelty and perhaps a touch of humor, but above all, the face was just Colby, and when he was around, she tingled all over and fumbled and dropped things. Her crush on him was six months old, and she still didn’t really know why she liked him. Now that she thought about it, there were plenty of muscle-bound boys: the school fielded a whole football team of them, and many of them were

taller. If it was “cute” or “handsome” that she was after, she should have been drawn to Philip Darcy or Josh Delegance, and yet no one made her feel the way Colby did. Was this what being in love felt like?

“How old is he?”

“Four weeks.”

Colby watched the kitten suck for some time, then looked up at Jessica and said, “He’s cute. How many have you got?”

“Three.” Jessica gazed helplessly at Colby, paralyzed by fear and wonder. Even her monosyllabic answers made her voice shake. She tried to summon the courage to speak a full sentence, tried to compose one, but Colby spoke first.

“You’ve been crying.”

His hand moved toward Jessica’s cheek, and she flinched. She wanted him to touch her and yet was unbearably nervous. She forced herself to sit still in the thrill of anticipation. Tender and light, the back of a finger wiped away a tear and then stroked her cheek again, although no tear remained.

“I’m sorry. I’ve probably been really insensitive about Ella, haven’t I?”

Swallowing hard, Jessica fought to keep her voice steady as she replied, “No, you haven’t.”

“Are you sure? ’Cause if I have been, you know...”

Jessica didn’t know, but it didn’t matter. “No, you’re fine. I’m just glad you’re here.”

Jessica knew she was out of control and speaking gibberish, but she couldn’t tear her eyes away from Colby’s. No one had ever looked at her like this before: it was a look of want, of need.

“You know, you’ve got a real pretty nose. I don’t know where you get it from. Your mom has that long ridge,” he said, and they both laughed. “But yours is real cute.”

He put the bottle and the kitten aside, and Bubbles scurried away. Colby’s touch on Jessica’s nose was tender, not at all what she had expected, and the little things he said were funny. He moved his finger up to her forehead and ran it back down her small, upturned nose. Jessica was suddenly conscious that her hand still rested on Colby’s and that it felt fat and heavy, her leg awkward against his. Colby raised his finger and tapped the tip of her nose ever so gently, and then tapped again. They both smiled, and their eyes met again.

“I could gaze into your eyes all day long.”

“Dad has hazel eyes, too.” Jessica felt herself floating, the barn and her body strangely unreal. She was in the presence of her prince, and they were as one. Her hand was no longer numb, her leg no longer inadequate; instead, they were irrelevant, as the whole universe was reduced to Colby’s gaze. His finger slipped from Jessica’s nose to her lip. She laid her head back on the hay.

“You have beautiful hair.” He ran his fingers through the dark mane that was Jessica’s pride and joy, pulling it forward so it cascaded over her shoulders, blowing a soft breeze onto her ears. With a familiar smooth slipping sensation, her hair slid back off her cheeks and shoulders.

She smiled.

Colby turned his shoulders, tilted his head, and eased his mouth toward Jessica's. Sitting on the loose hay, the sultry humidity of late summer clinging to her clothes, the smell of the farm filling her nostrils, Jessica realized that her moment of magic had arrived. Colby tipped her head back. Jessica closed her eyes, and their lips met, opening up a blissful blackness into which Jessica melted. She had not known such beauty or pleasure was possible and wanted it to last forever. The world disappeared, and she disappeared with it, into the unknowing cloud of the kiss. Her fairytale ending had arrived; her prince had come.

The hand on her knee slid up her thigh and under the hem of her skirt.

This was not the way it was supposed to happen. The mystery of the kiss shriveled, and Jessica dropped her hand firmly onto Colby's fingers as she pulled away from his mouth. Colby lifted himself from her and raised his head. Jessica expected to see the softness of his last gaze, but it was gone, replaced by an intensity that scared her. She started to sit up, but Colby placed his hand gently on her shoulder, arresting her movement without pressing. The softness returned to his eyes.

"It's okay, I'm not going to hurt you," he said, removing his hand. "I just want to make you happy." He brushed her hair from her face and stroked her cheek, then ran the backs of his fingers up her arms, straightened the hem of her skirt, and, with just the tips of his fingers, touched her thighs.

It was wrong, and yet she tingled.

"Colby," she said as she looked down at her crumpled dress, "I've never done anything like this before."

"It's okay to be nervous; I am too. I really like you, Jessica. You're cute and pretty and funny."

Jessica just sat, letting Colby stroke her arm. On the rare occasions her father had spoken of boys, he had warned her of their ways and told her that they only wanted one thing. But was this so wrong? After all, Colby had backed off when she had asked, and Alison had gone much further than this, anyway. Besides, the kiss had been wonderful. Jessica relaxed and laid back against the hay, allowed her head to fall back and her arms to drop to the ground.

"I'd like to kiss you again, Jessica; can I do that?"

She gazed up at Colby and nodded; that is exactly what she wanted. He rolled forward, and she closed her eyes, wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and let her mouth melt into his. Her arms tightened and held him close while she ran her hands up and down his back. She let him slide her down to lie on the floor of the hayloft, her right leg entwining with his left. She had not realized it was possible to join with another human being in such an intimate way.

Colby's hands explored, wandering to places that had never been touched by a boy before, but when they returned to Jessica's hemline, she resisted, pulling herself back from paradise, and pressed on his chest. She opened her eyes as Colby let her push him up to a kneeling position.

Then he reached down and undid his belt and zipper.

Jessica's hands rose to her mouth, and she gasped, paralyzed. When she was able to move again, she averted her gaze: she had never seen a man naked, not even in the movies her mother disapproved of her watching. "Colby, what are you doing? Stop it." She dropped her hands to the ground and started to push herself away, but Colby put his index finger on her lips.

"Shhhh."

His whisper was just enough to make Jessica think twice. She glanced at his freckled face before closing her eyes tightly and tucking her head once more into her curled-up arms. The Colby of her dreams who had promised a home far away where kittens did not die, where princes and princesses lived happily ever after, was fading.

"It's okay, Jessica."

She had only wanted to let him kiss her, and yet they had lain together on the ground. She had held him close and rubbed against him with that strange, rocking motion, and it had been wonderful, but she did not understand what was happening. Even Alison's intimate accounts of what boys did when she let them take off her bra and what had happened when Jake had put his hand down her panties had not prepared Jessica for this. She was terrified and wanted to stop, but she had led Colby this far. The prudishness of her upbringing met in terrible ambivalence with the need to sacrifice herself. It was because of her that they were lying on the floor, because of her that Colby wanted to continue.

"It'll be all right, Jessica."

Jessica was afraid and neither moved nor spoke.

"Let's just take it one step at a time, and you tell me when to stop, okay?"

The tips of Colby's fingers stroked her raised calves. She shivered and lowered her feet to the floor beside him, knees raised. His fingers ran past her knee and stroked her thighs, up to, but not crossing, the hemline. She laid her head back on the ground and tried to relax. Colby's hands rested on Jessica's hips, then circled her belly, his thumbs caressing her.

"I'm going to lie down with you, okay?"

She sensed Colby's weight shift and felt him sit down beside her. When his hand touched her cheek, he whispered, "You're so beautiful." The hand stroked her hair, and he cooed, "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

Jessica shuddered. Dad had been there for every difficult moment in her life, but he couldn't help now, and she had spurned Alison's advice. What was she supposed to do?

"You're crying again." The hand brushed her cheek once more, and she let her arms fall away, though her fists stayed clenched. Her eyes remained closed as Colby lowered his body to the ground beside her, laid a leg across hers. He stroked her cheek again, ran his fingers through her hair.

Jessica was terrified, yet unable to move.

Colby kissed the tears that trickled out of the corners of her eyes, and Jessica choked out the words, "Colby, don't." Then he kissed her cheeks, and, on the verge of sobbing, she begged, "Colby, please."

"It's okay, baby, just one step at a time."

When his lips touched hers, Jessica started to mumble in protest, but he pressed, and she relented. How could she not? She let his lips open hers and she even put her arms around his shoulders. She was losing the will over her body. Colby rotated in increments until he was lying on her once more.

Finally, Jessica's resolve hardened, and she decided she couldn't let go this go any further. She released her arms, relaxed her lips, and waited for him to stop.

But he didn't.

Colby's head slid beside hers, his hot breath now on her shoulder. He pressed his thighs hard against the inside of her legs, and Jessica started to struggle, slid her hands between their bodies, and pushed up on his shoulders, but Colby used his weight and balance to hold her to the ground. With one hand, he reached down and lifted her skirt. She felt his hand on her belly, his warmth below that, and she squirmed and tried to roll him off, but he was too strong. His hand slid off her belly and onto her hips.

He ripped off her underpants.

Eyes wide in terror, Jessica fought. She tossed her hips furiously and beat at Colby with her hands while her feet flailed and kicked, but she couldn't break free. Colby held her hips to the ground and her legs apart. Jessica wanted to scream, but what did she have to scream about? Had she not brought this on herself? If her parents found her like this, they would be horrified.

Nonetheless, Jessica's instincts took over, and she filled her lungs.

Colby placed a hand over her mouth and smothered her cry. She tossed her head and tried to bite his hand, tried to pull it away from her face with her own hand, but before she could do so, it was too late to scream. The sharp, unfamiliar, and almost unbearable pain seemed to last an eternity, though she knew it was only a few moments. Colby's weight lifted, and Jessica slid out from under him to shuffle the short distance into the corner, where she yanked her dress down over her tucked-up legs so violently that she felt the seams give. She wrapped her arms around her knees to hold them tightly against her chest and then curled up to die, her lips quivering, loose hair clinging to her clothes, her tousled hair, her skin. She glanced up and saw Colby fumbling with his trousers but looking at her, his eyes wide and his face white. When their eyes met, he staggered backward as if she had hit him.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled. "Jessica, I'm so sorry."

She didn't respond. He finished dressing himself, and after a moment, extended a shaking hand and stepped toward Jessica, but Jessica curled up more tightly and pulled away. Colby stared at her, his shoulders wilting and his mouth hanging open, before letting his arms fall, limp, to his sides. After an awful silence, he took two steps back, then turned and lunged for the stepladder.

Jessica heard a thump as Colby slid down the last few steps and fell to the floor, then a clatter and a muttered curse, presumably him dropping the implements he had come in to seek in the first place. A crash and another outcry sounded like him stumbling into the tractor, and then with fast footsteps, he was gone.

What did Jessica's prince think of her now? She had fought him at the last, but not until it

was too late. She had allowed—invited—him to violate her and yet in the end had rejected him, and Colby's hasty departure told her that this prince would not be carrying her off into the sunset. Jessica no longer wanted him to do so anyway. Having flaunted herself and tempted the pastor's son to lie with her, she was guilty, like Eve, of original sin, and, like Eve, she would have to face the consequences of her disobedience.

Spike, Bubbles, and Blizzard nuzzled up to Jessica. Were they still hungry, or did they sense that something was wrong? They mewed and rubbed their noses on her legs, but rather than offering consolation, they only reinforced the emptiness of loss.