Little Ships, by Sandra Scofield

A Novel Excerpt

**1**

The Beckers—Nick, Karin, and their adolescent daughters, Tilde and Juni—had been living in their two-bedroom apartment half an hour south of Portland, Oregon, for four months, since Nick got a job installing new computer software in the pharmacies of a chain of drugstores all over Oregon. He enjoyed the challenge and the break from being cooped up in a pharmacy kiosk counting pills and advising customers. The new job meant he did a lot of driving and once or twice a week stayed over out of town. He had rented their apartment in a two-story complex right off the I-5 freeway, promising they would get a house as soon as the job settled down, but he hadn’t mentioned moving again. He and Karin talked about putting the girls in public school so they could join some sports teams, but he drove away in their only car every day, and the middle school was across the freeway and another two miles after that, so the girls didn’t go. At their age, they should have been in seventh and eighth grades, but their mother said they were good readers and what else mattered? They had both taken the required state tests for fifth graders two years earlier (to keep the state off their backs), and though Juni was behind in math, the state did no more than send a form letter urging attention to the deficient skills. The girls had a big carton of homeschooling books and workbooks and a laptop computer that had been sent to them from the state education offices in September, when they were living in Salem, and there were certified teachers who could have helped the girls online, but the internet had been cut off because Karin didn’t pay the bill. She had lost interest in school stuff, so the girls dipped into the box when they wanted to. Juni read the language arts books—anthologies, novels—and any parts of the science texts that were about animals. Tilde read a lot too and worked through the mathematics books—hers and Juni’s; her mother said she was like a caterpillar chewing through parsley. Sometimes the girls drilled one another on spelling science vocabulary, easy words like *muscle* and *environment* and *savanna* and *terrestrial.* The state materials included fabric-bound journals for both girls. Juni wrote poems in hers, and lists of places she wanted to go in the world, and designs of clothes she would buy if she could, and sometimes cats with large paws. Tilde copied her favorite (hardest) mathematics exercises into her journal, and drew sketches of trees, plants, and fish. Neither girl ever wrote about what was going on or not going on in their lives, any more than they spoke about such things. Each had memories they didn’t talk about. And dreams. They had no friends, but they had each other and the open promise of the future.

If there was a library, they hadn’t found it, but they knew where all the fast food places were on their side of the freeway, and there was a discount mall where they spent hours looking at things like tennis shoes, camping equipment, stuffed animals, and baseball caps. Once in a while they shoplifted something cheap and useless, but they seemed to be invisible and it wasn’t a thrill. Whatever they took they threw in the trash or behind a bush on their way home. There was a pocket park nearby with two swings and a shabby backboard with a basketball hoop. Homeless people had tents and sheets of plastic to sleep under at the edge of the park, and they hung out during the day; sometimes the girls stood at the edge and said hi if someone noticed them, then ran away. Sometimes the girls waited for their mother to nap and then they sneaked out and ran across the freeway overpass like vagrant dogs. There was a cluster of nicer stores over there. If no cops were around, they begged, and they always got a few dollars and coins. Once a lady with gray hair cut short as a man’s gave Tilde a five-dollar bill and offered them a ride. They gave her wide-eyed looks and Juni said, “We’re not allowed!”

Nick stopped at grocery stores on the way home and brought in milk, sacks of cereals, soups, sandwich meat, bread, margarine, and candy bars—the sort of things you bought to go stay for a weekend in a cabin in the woods. Karin never left the apartment. She played solitaire, watched TV, looked at magazines, colored intricate designs on pages she tore from the girls’ journals, and slept a lot. She had been thin, but now she was fat in the middle, while Nick was skinny like a stick. The girls washed clothes in the basement’s coin-operated machines. When Nick got home at night, he ate a sandwich and sometimes played cards or Scrabble with the girls, and then he went in his room and smoked.

If he hadn’t lost his job at the big-box store in Salem, they would still be in a house, and might be going to school.

Sometimes the girls wandered along the freeway and talked about what would happen if they hitchhiked—north or south, it didn’t matter. They didn’t have any real sense of where they were or what was beyond them. Their grandmothers were four hours away, and they knew if they called them, one or both would come get them, but you can’t leave your parents like that, just when they are having a hard time. It was understood: the family was a unit. You are my ruby ring, Karin told Tilde; you are my opal brooch, she told Juni. You are my heart, Nick said. You are my girls. Juni and Tilde believed them.

One night Nick called from Bend to say he was late and they shouldn’t wait up for him. A little later he called and said he was going to get a room at a motel. He was too tired to drive.

Karin said, “Oh well, we can watch TV.” She liked QVC. The girls scrambled the last four eggs and watched them congeal in the skillet, then cut them into wedges like pie.

Karin lay on the couch with her swollen leg stretched out, bundled in a blanket because she was chilled. She had a ring on one toe, and she couldn’t get it off. She turned on the TV and sent Tilde to get her credit cards from the shoebox under their bed. Tilde brought back bracelets too. The girls sat on the floor, leaning against the couch. They held their hands up so the bracelets wouldn’t fall off.

It was time for jewelry. Karin decided to buy matching necklaces for the three of them. She shuffled a deck of cards for a while, then picked one, held it up as if it had an answer, then called in her order. Her hair was wet around her face and her skin was bruised under her eyes, purple like the swollen toe.

“Are you sick?” the girls asked. “Are you okay, Mommy?”

Karin said she was tired and limped off to bed. Her bracelets jangled. The girls watched TV until they were too sleepy to undress, and they crawled into bed together.

Early in the morning, Karin woke them with her howling. They ran in and begged her to stop. “What’s wrong? What’s wrong?” they cried. Karin was tossing around on the bed. After a while she got quiet, and the girls couldn’t wake her. Their daddy came home soon after and called 911, and off he went with their mother in an ambulance.

The girls watched from the window as they pulled away.

They were hungry. There was cereal but no milk. They found a can of pineapple and one of lima beans. They watched TV. They spread their mother’s credit cards out on the kitchen table and drew their own. Tilde’s had fish on hers; Juni’s had birds. They slept through the long afternoon. When it was dark they put on pajamas and went to their room.

Juni said, “Let’s play store.”

They took out all the boxes from the ends of their closet and from under the bed. Many boxes were still wrapped in shipping paper and tape, and they had to get a paring knife. They opened all of them, and set the boxes around the room, nested in their lids. They lined the walls and the closet doors, three deep. They put on all the jewels they could wear: two on every finger, up their arms to the elbows, heavy around their necks. There were tiaras for both of them. They got lamps from other rooms to make theirs bright.

When Nick got home, he came into their room carrying the credit cards from the table. He looked around the room like he had never been there before, then plopped the cards down on their bed. It was low and his skinny knees stuck up. Tilde pulled the shoeboxes full of bills from under the bed and dumped them beside him. He rustled the envelopes with one hand, swish swish, and threw the cards on top. He put his hands out on the bed and wadded the sheet. He was crying without making any sound. In a little while he told them he had brought a pizza. Then he went out again.

The sisters lay down on the floor. They spread their limbs like snow angels. The lamplight shone on their glittering arms.

**When Nick hadn’t** come back from the hospital in the morning, the girls looked around the house until they had a few dollars, then walked to a McDonald’s and split a pancake breakfast and a cup of orange juice. Tilde put a sausage between her teeth and bent toward her sister; Juni bit off half.

Tilde said, “Remember Mormor’s pannkakor?” and Juni said, “If we wait a little while, we could have a hamburger.” But they were out of money. They filled their juice cup with Coke. They sat away from the service counter, looking out at the traffic, sometimes knocking each other’s legs under the table, never changing expression even if it hurt. They didn’t talk, but they called out words: *aphrodisiac! sentimental! anthropomorphic! indubitable!*

The counter clerks watched them, but they weren’t causing trouble.

They rushed back to the apartment to pee. The door was ajar and the apartment reeked of marijuana. They looked in their parents’ bedroom. Nick was asleep on his bed. He was on his back in his boxer shorts and undershirt, his arms straight at his side, his legs open in a long upside-down V, his mouth slack. They stood there a few minutes listening to him snore, and then Nick’s cell phone rang. They found it on the floor by his bed.

Juni answered. It was a woman who wanted to speak to Mr. Becker.

“Daddy is so asleep I don’t think I can wake him,” Juni said. She put the phone on speaker. “He was at the hospital all night.”

“Sweetheart, I know, I’m so sorry, I have to talk to him, so I will know what we’re supposed to do here.”

Tilde flapped her hands: Who? Who?

“I can tell him to call you if you tell me who you are.”

“It would be better if you could wake him up. We can’t start anything until your father comes down. How old are you, honey?”

“Thirteen.”

“Oh dear.” There was a silence Juni couldn’t fill.

“Do you have a pencil and paper? I’ll wait while you find something.”

Juni laid the phone down. Tilde picked it up and looked at caller ID. It said Gateway Abbey.

“Daddy,” Tilde said, leaning over him. His breath was hot and horrible. “There’s a woman on the phone for you.”

Nick grunted and rolled away on his side. The back of his shirt was wet.

“He’ll call you in a little while,” Tilde told the woman. “He can see your number on his phone.” She hung up.

“Who was it?” Tilde asked.

“I think it was about Mom. A nurse, maybe.”

“If we wake him up, we can find out,” Tilde said.

“Whether she’s dead.”

“He’s been smoking,” Tilde said.

“No use trying,” Juni said.

They didn’t say: if they didn’t ask, she might still be alive.

Juni got a volleyball from the closet and they went downstairs and practiced serves against the door of one of the garages, standing far back at the driveway entrance. Thump. Thump. The door next to them rose as a gray snub-nosed car approached. A woman drove into the space, got out, and walked toward them. They could see bulging plastic bags in the back seat.

Juni held the ball, twirling it on her fingers. The woman scowled.

“It may not be my business, but I am going to ask anyway. Why aren’t the two of you in school? I see you around here, where’s your mother?”

Tilde said, “She homeschools us. We have exercise time.”

Juni sent the ball flying hard against the garage door right in back of where the woman was standing, and she jumped. The woman said, “I have a mind to call the police, young ladies.”

The girls watched the woman get her bags, close the garage, and go into her apartment at the top of the near stairs, and then they went up to their own. They turned on the TV, but they hated daytime programs—all the talking, the drama. They sat on the couch staring at the TV, because they didn’t know what else to do. They kept the sound off. There were five women sitting along a table, talking and gesticulating madly. It didn’t seem possible that anyone was listening. You couldn’t tell if the women were arguing or having a good time.

When the girls were little, they used to pretend to be characters in *Days of Our Lives,* but now that would feel stupid. They had a few library books from Salem, months overdue, but they had read them numerous times. Their mother’s old magazines—gossip, knitting, cooking—were scattered around the apartment.

The woman from Gateway Abbey called again an hour later. Tilde answered and said, “You hold on and I’ll make him talk to you.”

She shook Nick’s shoulder and she kicked the bed and then she told the woman, “He says he’ll call you as soon as he has a shower.”

Then she called their grandmother Eleanor, Nick’s mother. Phone numbers were written an inch high with marker ink on the wall by the hallway door. Eleanor was at work—she was an attendance counselor at the high school in Lupine—and the number of the school was annotated: *Emrgncy only.* There was nothing to do but give her the number of the woman who didn’t know what to do with their mother, because Nick was not going to get up any time soon.

**2**

Eleanor had never liked Helve, but she thought it was surely the hardest thing she had done, telling Helve her daughter was dead.

The call from her granddaughter Tilde had come at work just after lunch. Eleanor had been on the attendance hot line, talking to a chronic truant who was in danger of failing, and maybe worse, bringing official attention to his home situation. “Everyone wants to help you, Jason,” she was telling him. “We can work with you.” She heard the plaintiveness in her voice and straightened her spine. “You can still make your nine-thirty class,” she told him, her voice shifted from sympathy to sternness. “Get in gear.”

Then the office secretary rushed to her. She had a phone in her hand and was wide-eyed. “Your granddaughter,” she said. “I think she’s crying.”

Eleanor went home and made a cup of tea. She sat on the sofa to drink it and to think of what would happen now, two girls without a mother. She called her daughter, Alison, a teacher, to let her know what was happening. Alison said she would call Walter, but Eleanor said, “There’s no use just yet.” Then she gathered a few things and washed her face and headed for Frost Valley.

When she went up the long drive to the Sunderson property, Eleanor could see the tiller at the edge of the house and the ground beyond the house where Helve would plant her kitchen garden. Light shimmered on the pine trees further up the hill. It was a nice day, cool and sunny, a break from the spring drizzle they had had the past week. Helve, dressed in old clothes, came down the steps, holding her hand up to shade her eyes; and when she saw who it was—Eleanor’s face flushed and evading—Helve stopped and reached out for a wall that wasn’t there, seeking her balance. When Eleanor told her Karin was dead, Helve smacked Eleanor’s face with her open hand. Then she shut her eyes and put her hands on top of her head and keened and said, “Forgive me.” Eleanor’s cheek burned and her stomach roiled. She took Helve’s arm and they went indoors.

They drank cool water in Helve’s spotless kitchen and talked about what to do. Both of them were crying, wiping their faces with their fingers, snuffling and shaking their heads. Helve, of course, had the better reason to cry, but Eleanor felt engulfed with dread. Nick would be worthless. He and Karin had been like conjoined twins. Helve would arrange things with the funeral home so that Karin’s body would be brought back to the valley immediately. Helve didn’t want a funeral; she said her pastor would attend them graveside, just the family. She was a courteous woman but not sociable. They were Lutherans; Karin had been baptized. Helve believed in eternal blessedness and she would take comfort in thinking of being reunited, a family again, with Henry and Karin. She believed God would not let her suffer grief forever. She was not worried about Nick, but the girls, oh, the girls would need her.

Eleanor was wondering how much stuff she would have to bring back to her house from Nick’s apartment and how they would get rid of the rest of it. There wasn’t any doubt in her mind that he would be in a shambles without Karin, unable to cope; that he would come home.

But Nick had always worked. He had always held a job.

“You don’t think he will want to cremate her, do you?” Helve asked.

“Oh my, no. None of our family has done that.”

“I want to see her. I want to bury her beside her father and the baby at our plot. Do you think Nick will agree?”

Eleanor thought, Nick will be out of his mind, but all she said was, “He knows how close you were, Helve. He knows what Karin would want.” She told Helve that she had talked with a woman at the funeral home. Evidently Nick had okayed them to receive Karin’s body, but he hadn’t followed up. They said they would have to send the body back to the hospital morgue after twenty-four hours. The woman said they had very limited refrigeration, but Eleanor didn’t mention that to Helve.

She called the funeral director and made an appointment for six that evening; she would stay with the girls while Nick and Helve went to make the arrangements. Eleanor would take the girls somewhere to eat and would rent rooms at a nearby motel for her and Helve for the night. They agreed that they would try to get everyone to bed by ten, and they wouldn’t rush in the morning. Working out details helped both of them calm down.

Helve said, “I wouldn’t think that Nick can afford the expenses. Not after being out of work.”

Eleanor started to say she would help, but Helve was looking somewhere past her, still talking.

“There’s no point in him taking on debt, I’ve got the money. The casket won’t be fancy, we Lutherans don’t do that.” She looked at Eleanor, wide-eyed, as if inspired. “I don’t want her to be embalmed.”

The plot was Sunderson property. Helve said, “There’s room for Nick too. With Karin and the baby.” It was infuriating to hear her already planning Nick’s burial, but nobody stricken with grief is rational, and Eleanor, who dealt with teenagers and their teachers and parents all day, usually had a lot of patience.

She listened while Helve went on talking. Simple casket. Viewing just for the family. Eleanor thought about saying she would pay for the casket herself on Nick’s behalf, but she didn’t want to start some kind of struggle with Helve. And Nick wouldn’t be insulted if Helve assumed the costs. He probably wouldn’t think twice once the matter was mentioned.

While Helve talked to her pastor, Eleanor made sandwiches for them and brewed coffee and put it in a thermos. They could pull over before Roseburg and eat a bite. Helve changed into clean slacks and a light wool sweater the color of mustard. She pulled her hair into a tight braid and wound and pinned it at the base of her skull. “Ready,” she said, and followed Eleanor out the door, locking it behind her.

They went in Helve’s Subaru sedan, and Eleanor drove. Eleanor would drive back to Lupine with Nick, in his car, and Helve would bring the girls to Frost. She said she would like to have them with her for a few days. Nick could stay too, she said, but both women knew he wouldn’t.

Once they were in the car, they stopped talking. Helve sat most of the way with her eyes closed. Every once in a while, she gasped. In Roseburg they got gas. Neither of them was hungry.

**Karin had been ill** late last summer and into the fall—it was March now—and Helve had thought she would lose her then. Karin had been bitten by a bat, going out to the trash in the dark, and then she had stumbled and hit her head on the edge of the porch and been concussed. She had had rabies shots and then a series of seizures that the doctors said had nothing to do with the bat (which wasn’t found, so no one knew if the shots were necessary), and a few weeks later, she had a cough that turned out to be pneumonia. That was when Helve went and stayed at the house in Salem for two weeks, sleeping on a rented rollaway bed, until Nick told her it was all right for her to go home. He had taken time off from work and he could handle things. He delayed his return to work, and after several calls of sympathy from his supervisor and one of warning from a senior manager, he was fired. In retrospect, it was foolish for Helve not to have stayed on, but none of them had been comfortable with the arrangement, not even the girls.

As they traveled, Helve remembered Karin’s pallor and the wracking cough and the vacant look in her eyes; and she remembered how, when Karin took the narcotic syrup prescribed for the cough at night, she slept without moving, even when Helve washed her face and spoke to her. She wondered if the infection that killed Karin had been in her body all this time, lying in wait, or if it was something new and unfair, like an errant arrow through a window. It was terrible that it had been such a quick dying, that there had been no time for goodbyes, but Henry—Helve’s husband and Karin’s father—had had a long dying, and there had been no comfort to him or to her in her being beside him while he suffered.

Helve didn’t think about Nick, whom she had never learned to love, because he had his own mother and besides, he was alive. She could not imagine how he would care for his daughters alone; suddenly she realized that she and Eleanor would have to find a way to set aside their mutual jealousy and resentment for the sake of the girls. Karin and the girls had always spent Christmas with Helve, and weeks in the summer, and she was sure that Eleanor minded, because they spent much less time with her; but Helve would have little standing now. Nick would need his mother, and where he went, of course the girls would go too.

She wondered if something had bitten Karin. If there had been much pain.

She pressed her head against the window and groaned. Eleanor touched her arm lightly. When they reached the apartment, everyone was asleep. The door was unlocked, there were dirty dishes and pizza cartons on the counter, clothes in heaps, the television was on, the blinds were up. There was a fetid, ashy smell. Nick was in bed and the girls lay on the couch in pajamas and sweatshirts, feet to feet, their legs tangled. Helve fell to her knees a yard inside the door, and Eleanor went down beside her and put her arms around her, and they wept. The girls woke and came and stood and watched them, neither curious nor upset, only witnessing the end of life as they knew it.

**3**

Helve sat on the couch and the girls tumbled down beside her and bent their heads onto her thighs. She laid her hands softly on their crowns. They whispered, “Mormor, Mormor.”

Eleanor opened the door to Nick’s bedroom and felt breathless with fury. It was a small room with one window, now shut. Clothes, magazines, ashtrays, and cups and glasses were strewn about on the floor. He lay asleep on his back in his boxers and a faded green T-shirt. He hadn’t shaved in days. He smelled of sweat and the closed room. She couldn’t think that he was her boy, who had always made straight A’s; who had been so kind and gentle to everyone; who as a teenager read about topics from brain science to deep-water marine life to biographies of spies; who loved to play cards and chess, to water-ski; was a ranked high school golfer; who had excelled in pharmacy school and could have been a doctor; who had been deeply loved by his family, by his friends, by a beautiful, athletic, lively young woman he didn’t have the sense to marry. And somewhere, sometime, after he started working and married, he became this sad slug of a man. Oh, what would he do without Karin, without her emptiness to fill his own? They had been happy! And then, in a wave of pity for her grieving son, Eleanor knew Helve would find a way to blame him for Karin’s death, and she resented her for it.

She put her hand to her mouth and shut her eyes. God help us all, she prayed. Nothing makes sense, we are so weak, all of us. Make us strong, for these children. Let me live as long as I must to see them grown. Maker, Healer, Father, hold me up.

She thought of Catholics and their obsession with Jesus’s mother. That was what she needed: a holy mother. A Mother God. Mother, guide me. Like a pinch appeared the memory of her foster mother, who had once whispered to her—she had been Catholic—that a priest could never understand who Mary was; that only a mother would admit that Mary was the true source of a woman’s strength. “And you,” she had said to motherless Eleanor, “must remember she will look after you if you ask.”

She went to the bathroom and rinsed a frayed washcloth in warm water and wrung it out. She looked in the mirror and washed her face. She was fifty-nine years old, barely gray, barely wrinkled; she had planned to work a long while yet, and maybe travel—a cruise or two on little ships. A river through France; the islands of Greece. Blue water, the pleasure of other people’s company. Ruins and gardens and monuments to the past. A slow pace, to take it all in. Now she would have two girls to raise, and she had to think about Nick; there was no possibility that he would do more than scrape through his days like a prisoner at hard labor. He would work, though; it would save him—the tedium, the responsibility. And she would have him close, there was that.

She knew she had to call Walter, her husband and Nick’s father. He hadn’t slept in their house for almost a month. She thought of his absence as a tantrum gone sour, but she wondered if he intended to come back. She didn’t know what she would say to him, how she would step over their disaffection to say, “Nick’s wife is dead.”

Thank God it wasn’t Nicky?

She rinsed the rag and took it in to Nick. She wanted to sit down and take him in her arms. She wanted to shake him.

She stood at the side of the bed. “Wipe your face and get dressed, Nick. You have to talk to the girls.”

He rubbed his eyes and sat up slightly. “Huh?”

“You have to tell Juni and Tilde that their mother is dead.”

“They know, Mom. Jesus.”

“They think they know. They suppose. Things happened away from them while they were sleeping. They are children. They need their parent to tell them: Your mother is dead, but I’m here and we will make it. Do you hear me?” She thrust the washrag at him.

“I’ll be there in a minute.”

Eleanor found a pitcher and a few cloudy ice cubes left in a tray, and ran water and set glasses on the counter. She wondered if anyone had had anything to drink all day. Next they would all fall over from dehydration.

Nick came out of his room in jeans and a worn denim shirt and perched on the coffee table in front of the couch, buttoning the shirt. His daughters raised their heads from their grandmother’s lap. Helve’s skirt was damp where their tears had leaked.

Nick said, “Your mother was asleep when the ambulance came, you remember that. She never woke up again. It was all something strange, a kind of bug in her blood. It was bad luck, like lightning.” He paused and swallowed; his Adam’s apple bobbed. The girls were bent over slightly, rapt, their eyes wide, their expressions blank. Their arms hung down past their knees. They had drawn on their knee tops with ballpoint pens: little flowers and hearts and their mother’s name.

Nick said, “The doctors and nurses tried really hard to make the infection stop but they couldn’t and she never woke up. I said that. She—” He began sobbing. “I don’t think she hurt, maybe a little bit of time before she went to sleep here.” His girls were sobbing too. “I love her so much.”

“Nick,” Eleanor said.

“Your mother died yesterday.” Nick pulled up the hem of his shirt and wiped his nose. He spoke weakly, coldly, and closed his eyes. “Your mother is dead.”

The girls rose up and threw their arms around his neck and shoulders.

Eleanor poured water into glasses. She gave each girl a glass.

She took over. “We have to get through the next few days. Your dad and Grandmother Helve will go see about the casket and the transportation, while we get your things together here. You will go with your grandmother to Frost Valley in the morning; your dad and I will go to Lupine later in the day; Saturday morning you will go to a funeral home in Wellen to see your mother, and from there the funeral home will take her to the grave site where Papa Henry is buried, and we will all go there to say goodbye.”

Eleanor gave water to Nick, who drank it greedily, and to Helve, who thanked her.

Tilde said, “You can have my bed. One of you.”

“And mine,” Juni said. “We like the couch.”

“Oh no, dear, we’ll go to a motel,” Helve said.

Juni said, “I don’t want to stay here, then. I don’t want to.”

Helve said, “Just tonight, to be with your father.”

“I don’t want to,” Juni said, and Tilde said, “I don’t want to, either.”

Nick said, “You don’t have to stay.” He looked at his mother. “It’s okay, Mom.”

Helve said, “We have adjoining rooms at a motel just up the road. Eleanor and I. You’ll stay with us, then. We’ll be together.” She had known generations of dying and burying, and not one time had it been like this. She had had history, ritual, memory; these girls were like cats at a gate. Their father was weak.

“What about Daddy?” Tilde said.

Helve said, “I think he wants to be here one more night.” She looked at him and knew she was cold, but her daughter was gone and she wondered what he might have done to protect her.

“You must find something for your mother to wear,” she said in a moment. “Something you remember her wearing.” She glanced at Nick, who didn’t notice.

The girls went into their parents’ bedroom and came back with a pair of flannel pajamas. They were midnight-blue with yellow stars and crescent moons scattered on them. They appeared to be almost new, though they were crumpled. “They were her birthday present,” Tilde said. “Juni and I picked them out at Target.” Karin had turned thirty-six on December 29. Helve took the pajamas and held them against her chest. She folded them tightly and gave them back to Tilde. “Put them by the door, angel, by my purse.”

No one wanted to go out to eat. Eleanor remembered the sandwiches in the car and went to get them for the girls. Nick and Helve left for the funeral home.

Eleanor had brought two empty suitcases. She gave one to each girl and said, “Don’t take anything you don’t think you’ll wear. Don’t take anything old or too small or too little-girlish. Take some pajamas and underwear and a few things you like. We won’t save the old things, unless there’s something special to you; put that in. We will shop for new clothes for school. What will you wear to the burial? It’s not a funeral in a church, just us at the plot. You don’t have to dress up. But you might not want to wear it again, the dress you choose.”

It struck her that both girls had grown three inches since she had last seen them.

The girls looked sick and dazed. Eleanor helped them sort their things. They didn’t have anything nice, but it didn’t matter. They didn’t have much of anything at all, and they didn’t seem attached to any of it. They laid out jeans and T-shirts and tattered tennis shoes. There wasn’t a single dress or blouse. They stuffed clothes into one of the suitcases and they filled the other with their mother’s jewelry boxes. Then Eleanor took them to a Dairy Queen, where they ate fries and chocolate sundaes.

At the motel they discussed who would sleep where. The girls wanted to sleep together. They stripped to their panties and T-shirts and got in the second bed in Helve’s room. They hadn’t washed, and Eleanor hoped Helve wouldn’t say anything about it.

While Helve was in the bathroom, Eleanor sat on the bed and tried to talk to them.

“It must feel like a storm blowing around you.”

“She screamed,” Juni said. Both girls had a blank, patient look. They were obviously exhausted. Eleanor took Juni’s hand.

“Please don’t worry about what’s going to happen. Your daddy will be with you. You’ll be with us—with Grandmother Helve or in our house. You’ll have Papa Walt and your Aunt Alison and your cousin, Fiona. We all love you. You’ll get in school and catch up. Everything takes time. You’ll make friends. Don’t worry about anything, let your daddy work it all out for you. He’s very sad, but he is your daddy.”

She gave the girls hugs and then she quietly asked Tilde why she had called her and not Helve.

“I didn’t want Mormor to know,” Tilde said.

Next door again, Eleanor thought about what Tilde had said. Helve’s Karin had been alive two hours longer because of the child’s tact. It was touching. And it clarified Eleanor’s status in the girls’ life. She would have a lot of catching up to do.

She called Walter. She was propped against a pillow so fat it fought her effort to lean back. She kicked the heavy embossed bedspread off the end of the bed, huffing at its recalcitrance, and stretched out on top of a velour blanket.

“I’m in Portland. I have bad news,” she said softly, and Walter said, “Oh no, not Nick.”

“No. Karin died yesterday. Helve and I are here.”

“Was it an accident?”

“It was a sudden illness. Like a lightning strike.”

“What should I do?”

“Helve is taking the girls to Frost tomorrow morning. I’m going to help Nick clear out the apartment. I’ll bring them home. They can’t stay here, Walt.”

“I suppose not, with all his traveling.”

“I don’t think there will be a funeral, just the burial in Frost. Helve will make the arrangements. We’ll call you.”

“That’s it? I wait for an invitation? I should be there.” His voice was sharp.

“There is no there right now. I’m in a motel. We’re not leaving you out of anything. We’ll be home tomorrow evening. We’ll know more then.”

Walter hung up.

Eleanor slept little. She woke up over and over, afraid for Nick alone in his apartment.

Tilde dreamed of ships and stars and balls in the sky all at once. Juni dreamed of babies’ fists and falling, and floating, glowing crowns. Both girls slept easily through the night and woke up startled in the morning.

In the morning they ate waffles and peanut butter at the motel buffet. Eleanor made a mental note that they seemed to like them.

**In his apartment,** Nick smoked and lay on the couch for hours, listening to Bob Dylan and Gillian Welch. He thought about the time he and Karin went to Brookings and stayed in a damp cabin for two nights. The second night, there was a brief but fierce squall in from the ocean and the wind blew their door open. Karin jumped out of bed and ran outside long enough to get soaked, laughing and calling for Nick, who didn’t go out. Back indoors, she took off her pajamas and Nick dried her slowly and they talked about having children. She must have been pregnant then; they would know she was, in a month or so. She wanted girls; Nick didn’t care whether they had girls or boys. “Besides, it’s out of our control,” he said, and she said, “Isn’t everything?”

She said she wanted her children to play naked in the backyard in the hot days of summer, as she had when she was small. Then she laughed and said, “Imagine if it wasn’t a storm after all. Imagine that people were crying out and there was a great commotion. A UFO had landed on the beach and people were gathering to see, but not going close. And then our door flew open and this thing, this stem of light, spoke and it said, ‘We have chosen you to come with us.’

“Oooh!” she said. “Would you go? Would we take such a leap, to a life utterly unknown to us?” And of course he said he would.

He woke when his mother came in, and for the moment before she spoke, he held his breath, thinking that he had forgotten something important; then he thought of his daughters, and got up.