

Chapter 1

“The children are dead.”

The raspy voice on the phone laughed harshly. And then the line cut out.

Short little gasps escaped her clenched throat as she stared blankly at the phone receiver then slammed it down as the words penetrated her frightened mind. Terrified, she ran up the steps to the second floor and threw open the door to the children’s room. The beam of light from the hallway speared into the pink room and illuminated the two girls who lay in their beds. But instead of the horror she anticipated, she saw they slept soundly, the thin white sheets moving gently up and down with their breathing.

Even though the girls were safe, fear pumped like poison through her, causing her heart to rattle in her chest in time with the old dryer in the basement.

Ignoring the beat of the ancient machine, she went back to the living room. Who would make such a vile prank call—twice? Steadying her breathing, she picked up the receiver and called the operator, asking him to trace the last phone call. She hung up the phone.

Sweat coated her palms, so she wiped them on her fresh new blue jeans. Her entire focus was on the phone, daring it to ring a third time, desperately hoping it wouldn’t. Finally, the rattle of the old dryer turning on and off, on and off in the basement broke her concentration.

With the portable in her hand, she jogged down the basement steps, her fingers outstretched to the door handle when the phone rang again. Dizzily, she stopped in her tracks at the bottom of the dim cement landing. Taking a deep breath, the babysitter answered the phone.

It was the operator. He said the calls had originated from a second line in the house, a line the owners had installed last year in the basement.

“Emma!”

The scolding voice startled screams from the group of girls sitting in a half circle around the storyteller, who herself jumped almost a foot.

With a sheepish grin, Emma tossed her thick braid of golden hair over her shoulder as she twisted around on the rough bench to face her accuser.

“We’re just having a little a story-time, Jen.”

Jenny, her co-leader, didn’t notice Emma’s placating smile or the wink Emma threw over her shoulder at the girls gathered around her, causing them to smother their giggles with the palms of their hands. What she did notice was how difficult it was to restrain the smile threatening to lift her otherwise severe frown.

“That story is far too scary for eleven-year-old girls! What will Mother Superior think when these children wake screaming from nightmares tonight?” Jenny huffed as she tugged her navy-blue mantle back into place.

Mother Superior was a woman not to be defied. Even though she presided over a little orphanage in the U.S. desert, she always hinted that she carried quite a bit of weight with the Church. When they were girls, the warning was enough for both Emma and Jenny to walk a straight line, thinking the religious figure meant she had a direct channel to God himself and punishment would be severe. But as they got older they understood from girls with parents that this was simply another form of the “you’re-gonna-get-it-when-your-father-hears-about-this” trick. Now, they simply loved and respected the woman enough to do whatever they could to please her.

But in so far as the girls they watched now, they knew the real danger of discovery from their religious mother-figure lay not in the disturbed sleep of these children but in these girls repeating the ghoulish tale to others with terrified joy that only young girls can experience, loving to scare themselves.

Besides, both Emma and Sister Jenny knew many of these orphaned girls had experienced true terrors, realities far scarier than a silly urban legend. The unofficial goal of the sisters and volunteers, like Emma, at St. Agnes School and Orphanage for Girls was to give these children a normal childhood. And what was more normal than girls spreading outrageous fiction in whispered giggles?

But Sister Jenny felt the responsibility to at least pretend she objected—to show her young charges what was proper. Tucking the flap of

the golf shirt into her khaki hiking shorts, Jenny looked up and saw the expectant looks on the young girls' faces, not to mention her childhood friend, and gave up, eagerly joining Emma and the giggling girls. She, too, loved this story.

Emma scooted over on the fallen log to make room for her friend then turned back to the seven kids, waiting with apt attention for Emma to finish the wonderfully terrifying tale.

What these girls didn't know was that for the past two years, since Emma had returned from her ten years traveling then teaching English abroad she and Jenny had been having this mock-disagreement in front of a different group of girls each month—Sister Jenny believing she knew what was best and proper for the weekend excursion of children, and Emma knowing what they really liked. Why wouldn't she—she used to be one of them.

"Emma, what happens next?" The girls, including Jenny, pleaded with Emma to continue. Emma couldn't help but laugh as she saw the eagerness on her friend's face.

Unable to deny her friend and the wide eyes of the girls, Emma continued with the story.

"Her heart beat as erratically as the old washing machine, clunking against the cement floor. Unable to help herself, she slowly opened the door to the basement.

There, sitting on the dryer, was a psycho killer, cordless phone in one hand, butcher's knife in the other..."

As one, a gasp erupted from the group of girls, leaning forward with eyes like saucers.

"No way."

"Omigosh!"

"Holy crap! Sorry Sister."

The last comment wrung a half smile from Emma as she caught the stern expression her friend directed at the girl.

In terrified breaths, the girls immediately rehashed the urban legend with gruesome detail, each account or 'what if' more dramatic than the last.

They had a dozen questions about the story, all of them directed at Emma.

"Jen, you know this story better than I do." Emma nudged the nun in the ribs with her elbow, a grin plastered to her face, making the woman with the blue headgear smile ruefully at the group of girls. "Besides, you embellish much better than I."

Jenny laughed and began fielding questions from the girls. Emma stood and stretched her nimble five-foot-four frame, walking casually

around the group of girls as their eager stares shifted to Jenny, giving the co-leader the stage. Listening with a half-smile tugging her lips, Emma slowly eased out of the clearing and toward the sheer red cliff-face of the Arizona canyon they were camped in. She didn't need to tell her co-leader where she was going—Jenny knew that Emma's ritual at the end of each weekend camping trip with the girls was to search out a good rock wall to climb. After the first time Jenny watched Emma expertly climb a jagged cliff with terror clogging her throat, they had an unspoken agreement that at the end of each trip Jenny would take over the girls so Emma could go climb as she ached to - if only the nervous nun didn't have to watch.

Emma had been eyeing the cliff face all weekend—the sharp crevasses and steep overhang. The sheer height of the rock stood stubbornly against the afternoon sunlight as she walked toward it, the mountain defiant against yet another element struggling to humble it. Emma itched to run her callused fingers over its coarse face like a lover's caress, finding handholds in an otherwise impenetrable fortress.

Body tense with excitement, Emma jogged the last few hundred feet over the rocky terrain, her athletic body honed from her morning runs and yoga practices. She was driven to set harsh goals for herself, to push herself both physically and mentally. But nothing compared to the moment when she faced that rock wall—heart stilling, focus sharpening, concentration unbreakable as she evaluated, mapped her moves, and finally took that first step.

This cliff was no different for Emma in how she approached it, in the way it made her feel: small but determined. Yet, it in itself was unique—the blush hues of the rock, amplified by the soft orange glow of the descending sun, the way the land rose to support it, the alien forms of the saguaro spearing up from the land with barrel and teddy-bear cacti spilled at its feet.

But all of it parted for the rock.

Emma slowed her jog when she reached its base. She flipped her heavy braid over her shoulder in an offhand gesture then slowly assessed her opponent. The rock appeared smooth, the task impossible. But she could see just above her a small divot in the rock—a handhold. Then, about four feet to the left, another, until she saw the entire route up the rock face displayed like a map.

A small smile of satisfaction curved her lips. She'd always considered this moment to be the most difficult—the moment when she tried to outsmart the mountain. It gave her a small sense of victory to mentally beat it. Now it was just a physical obstacle. A two-hundred-foot obstacle, Emma grinned warily, but just like any other obstacle—something to be overcome.

With her eye trained on the first handhold, Emma reached down, grabbed a handful of sand and absently brushed it between her palms. Then she nodded slightly at the mountain as if she'd accepted its challenge.

And then the battle began. She wasn't sure what it was that drove her to do this, to push against the laws of nature and gravity, but the desire was too compelling. Maybe it was a form of escape—from the constant press of her students back at the local college or from Ray Baker who had asked her out again, even in the face of her fourth firm but gentle refusal. Or, maybe it was to forget a past filled with an endless line of foster homes then, after she had graduated from her Masters in Computer Sciences, years of wandering the world alone.

Isolation and loneliness were feelings Emma knew well. Even when she took the job at the local college to teach computers and came back to the first town she remembered, the one near the orphanage, she still felt somehow insulated from those around her, as though over the years she had added enough padding around her for protection that she only experienced light friendships and casual acquaintances. She felt she had so much to give those around her, so much bursting inside her to share, but when the moment came to connect with another, her words came out too softly and shyly for anyone to really notice her.

In the end, the isolation was what Emma preferred. It was why she bought the little one-story home on the outskirts of Phoenix, why she hadn't had a serious relationship with a man in the past two years. It was why she sought this rock.

Emma curled her fingers into the next dip on the cliff face, now a good sixty feet from the hard-packed desert floor below. She could feel the structure of the sandstone outcropping that held her right foot begin to crumble, so she quickly flexed her arms and jumped up to the next position, always keeping three points of contact with the rock. From below, a passer-by would be forgiven if they looked up and thought she was just a shadow darting up the cliff.

Emma could smell the air change as she steadily climbed to around one hundred and ninety feet. To her, it was sweeter, purer than the heavier air below. She could see the ridge of the cliff wall not double her length away. Emma decided on the sharp edge of a small shelf above her for her final handhold. Shifting her light weight to stretch up and to the right, Emma caught its edge, loosened her left hand from its last grip and scanned the edge above.

It was that moment of suspension that saved her.

Emma heard the ominous death rattle of the snake before she registered that the ledge where she had placed her right hand was warm and smooth to the touch. With the last of the strength in her tired legs, Emma

lunged for the cliff's edge above. A split second later, the posed rattlesnake struck the rock where her hand just was.

Hoping desperately she hadn't misjudged the distance, Emma reached in mid-air for the sharp edge of the crest. Her raw fingers grasped then held the stone as her body reacted to the onward movement, swinging wildly in free air. Her legs tangled beneath her as she swung helplessly. Instinctually, she looked down. Below her on the warm ledge, the coil of disgruntled snakes slithered, readjusting in the afternoon sunlight, and Emma counted at least ten diamond-shaped heads sticking their tongues out at her. Her focus widened, causing her to look beyond the rocky shelf, and saw that beneath the snakes there was nothing but a very long way down.

Don't look down! She screamed the warning in her mind, desperately attempting to gain control over the vertigo that clamped onto her at the stunning depths over which she dangled. Unbidden, a man's voice sounded in her mind. *Hold on, McCormick. You're not gonna get anywhere with that fear racing through you.*

Emma didn't know to whom the voice belonged or why it calmed her but the words slowed her erratic heartbeat and sharpened her mind.

Breathe, she ordered. Struggling to find her balance, Emma closed her eyes. In her mind, she pictured the rocky outcropping of the cliff's crest and then saw herself standing at its peak. The visualization steadied her. She knew what she had to do.

Emma opened her eyes and squinted up against the dirt falling down into her face. She focused on the edge and slowly began to feel the rock for a hold with her bleeding knees. The moment stretched as Emma felt her grip on the cliff's edge begin to weaken. Finally, she found what she was searching for—a small crack in the stone, enough to wedge her toe in.

With a quick prayer offered up to the God the nuns had tried to convince her was real, Emma eased her body to the right then swung back to the left, catching the crevasse with her left foot. Using the momentum, she pushed up with arms and legs, hoisting herself up waist level in a fluid motion.

Emma tumbled face-first into the dirt at the cliff's crest then rolled from the edge, sucking great gasps of air into her lungs as the shock and adrenaline warred within her. *Stupid, stupid, stupid,* she chastised herself as the fear slowly began to ease and was replaced by annoyance. She never should have rushed that last move. She knew better than to let the excitement take over. But in the end all she could see was the final stretch so she didn't afford it the same contemplation she had allowed every other move. Emma's thoughts tumbled over themselves in self-flagellation. Finally, as her recriminations crested then eased, the soft colors of the sky

reflecting on the billowing clouds rolling in from the north calmed her, making her focus on her breathing and cherish the moment to be alive.

Thirty minutes later the sounds of early evening settled on Emma. She stretched full out on her back, easing blood into her exhausted muscles. Like every other mistake in her life, she had learned a valuable lesson from it and she acknowledged that. Taking a deep breath, Emma pushed off the ground and stood at the edge of the precipice. The view was stunning: the sharp shadows cast by the canyon walls cut through the diffuse light from the setting sun; the green-black of the cacti standing sentinel in an ancient waterway now dry with sand; the sagebrush clustered around rock outcroppings, hiding a jackrabbit Emma saw dart into its branches for protection. To Emma's mind, the treacherous climb was well worth the view. She smiled as the peace of the moment filled her, then turned around and took the steep trail down the back of the mountain toward the group waiting below to go home.

*Hamgyong Sanmaek Mountains,
North Korea*

The massive black iron beast lumbered north, curving through North Korea's darkened mountainous forests like a snake. A relic from the Cold War, the Red Army train had been enlisted fifteen years ago by the People as a cargo vehicle to transport goods, supplies and people through the small country.

And for the leaders of North Korea, the importance they placed on those items followed that same order. This was reflected by how the train was organized. The goods such as electronics, manufactured wares and luxury items were housed in the most secure of the cars, usually in the middle of the train, cradled on either side by the less important cars.

Next came the supplies cars, flanking the goods. This is where one would find bags of rice and grains from China and Russia, and bundled boxes of canned foods traded from the West. Although North Korea was a communist nation, there were many western societies that traded freely with the country that had only one real product for export—weapons.

Trailing along the train's end were the least important cars—those that carried people. The wealth goods and supplies would bring to the red Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea was far more important to the rulers than the people whose shoulders they built their nation.

The cargo transported by this train was no different than any other. The final cars were stacked with North Koreans as they traveled north from

the nation's seaside city of Pukch'ong, through the small Communist country's hinterland to Changbai, on its shared border with China.

The people inside the plodding train knew their place but the fact that they were at the bottom-most rung bothered them little. Their cares centred around much smaller things than the political makeup of the country. For the young mother gently rocking her infant to sleep, she thought of her husband stationed in Changbai who would be waiting to greet her at the train depot. For the older man fingering the bag of money hidden under the breast flap of his jacket, he dreamed of the joy his only son would receive with the wedding gift he would buy him. For the child tucked between his grandmother and the darkened window, his cares focused on huge ancient monsters that may lurk in the shadows of the forest and was both terrified and excited.

There was another on that rambling train who knew his place, and that was definitively not in the passenger car. He sat on a crate containing briefcases of hand-held radios that would eventually make its way to market in Europe, crossing China's inner Mongolia then northern province of Sinkiang and finally into Kazakhstan. It would then cross Russia's southwest peninsula then into Eastern Europe. He knew the route well, having done it now five times over the past three months.

He sat in the goods car with his legs swinging lightly with the train's movement and, like the others, thought of small cares, too. He remembered his young wife holding their first son, the joy on her face, the love in her eyes. They had been alone so he allowed her to come up to him and hand him their child, sharing that joy with him. He had felt a moment of pure hope then, thinking of the future he would provide for his son, full of possibilities. He was a fairly wealthy man, good at his trade and knew soon he would be able to afford a second wife to increase his prestige. But he knew he would never love another son as much as this one purely because it was his first. He remembered looking up at his wife and thinking much the same about her with her shy eyes and long dark hair.

But that memory was from years ago and much had happened since. That night all those years ago had been a night of beginnings and endings for him. He saw the rightness of that now, even though fear still gripped him as he remembered the screaming sound of the American bombs dropping on his home in Iraq.

It was a night of endings because that was the night he watched his young wife and beloved son die under a crushing wall of stone and smoke, his town destroyed by the impersonal missiles launched by leaders half a world away. But it was also a night of beginnings because that was the moment he became another person like so many others in his part of the world—understanding that the giant beast of the west needed to be killed.

That was the night he embraced terrorism as a way to avenge the death of not only his family but also his hope in the future.

Even though over the years he had distinguished himself as a fearless leader, making him a lieutenant in the Jihad, he had sat in this god-forsaken train car five times, sitting on top of a crate carrying a few radios but mostly plutonium in the form of suitcase bombs, ushering them into a realm that has known only hatred for too many years. This was to be the last trip. After this all their goals would soon be realized and a godless nation of murderers would finally understand what it feels like to lose the one thing that is most precious: hope.