

Enid

June 1983

I rub my hand over my mother's words. My throat clenches, and I hiccup, forcing back a sob. A tear lands on the lined page of the diary with a splat. The word "willow" starts to bleed with the moisture. I read through the entry once more.

*April 10th, 1977*

*Dear Diary,*

*I put the silverware in the breadbox today. I don't know why. I went to pull a loaf of bread out of the red, tin box to make a sandwich, and instead I pulled out a fork. I haven't found the bread yet.*

*Yesterday, I couldn't recall my phone number, when asked to give it over the phone to the clinic scheduler. Nothing appeared in my mind when I tried to imagine it. I could pull no number out of my magical memory hat. I had to read the number off the label under the receiver cradle. After about an hour, the number suddenly came to me, like I'd been hit with it. Did my memory go on vacation for an hour?*

*I have been noticing these strange things recently. It frightens me. It's as if someone else has done these things. I don't remember moving the bread at all. I try, but only a black hole appears in my mind when I do. That emptiness slowly sucks at me, like a vacuum. One day I fear there may be nothing left to remember.*

*Maybe I'm going crazy, but I swore I'd never go there again. I see the edge of the pond and feel the dangling willow branches tangle in my hair as if it were yesterday. The water pulls at me like Velcro, clinging, drawing me in. Why can I remember that from so many years ago and not where I put the bread today? I know one thing: They will not put me in an asylum for the mentally deranged. Not again.*

I lift my eyes from the diary and look out the window in the sitting room. The willow tree still stands watching over the pond despite having battled several storms and suffering lost limbs. I whiled away many a summer day under its canopy of hanging branches. Mom didn't like me playing by the willow, and she hated the pond. She was always after Uncle Hal to drain it. I never knew why.

The ink smudges as I swipe at the damp spot on the page of Mom's diary, and I try to comprehend the words. *Crazy... asylum?* What could she possibly mean?

I swallow the lump in my throat and try not to be overburdened by guilt.

This was Mom's first full week in the Dunn County Nursing Health Care Center, a glorified name for a nursing home. I hate that I had to admit her, but she'll be safe. They won't treat her like a crazy person. Will they? No, dementia is different. Well, Alzheimer's the doctor called it. The staff are professionals and can care for her better.

I groan and swipe at my eyes. I can tell myself any number of things to justify my mother being tucked away like an old rag doll, but at the bottom of the justification lies the fact that I am the one who brought her there.

I sigh and close the diary, placing it back by her wingback recliner. We can't have a repeat of this last winter. The neighbor had caught her bewildered and walking down the road in the middle of January with no coat on. She could have died.

"Enie! Where are you?"

"In here!" I shout at my husband, Clive.

I hear his footsteps and in seconds he rounds the corner of

the old farmhouse kitchen and stands in the large opening to the sitting room. I sit up straighter in Mom's gold, velvet, upholstered recliner. Too bad there wasn't room for her chair at the nursing home.

“Thought I’d stop by and see if you need some help.”

His solid, brown eyes hold sympathy. He leans against the wood trim accenting the doorway. His slouchy shirt and Levi’s give him a relaxed appearance. A smile warms his face. He knows how hard it’s been for me, moving Mom. I smile the best I can in return, studying his familiar, unconventionally handsome face.

Clive’s eyes are evenly spaced under contained brows of the same shade, but his face is rather full. I suppose some would call him pudgy, but I like that he’s not skin and bones. He’s stocky and thick. Reliable.

“No. Just collecting a few trinkets to add to Mom’s room to make it feel homey.”

I hide the journal in the cleft of the chair cushion. I don’t want to talk to Clive about what I’ve found. Not yet anyway. I shouldn’t even be reading her private diaries, but I can’t help it. I would have found and read them one day, after she passed. Why is now so different? She’s as good as gone. Her memories have flown away, and isn’t that all that we are — memories?

“All right then.” He steps closer and leans down, kissing me on the cheek. The stubble shading his jawline scratches me. “Hey.” His eyes sparkle at me. He hovers inches from my face. “How ’bout we hit the A&W tonight in Menomonie. We could take our food to the park and eat. Just you and me.”

He kisses the tip of my nose.

I push my brown, owl-like glasses farther up my nose and gently push him back so I can stand. “Weren’t the kids supposed to come over tonight?”

“Na, Kelly called the shop and canceled. Said the twins are sick.”

“Sick? Well, why didn’t he call me?”

I wonder what has my thirteen-year-old twin grandchildren, Penny and Pamela, under the weather.

Clive stands up straight and digs in the pocket of his jeans. “Well, you were here, Enid. The phone’s been shut off. Remember?”

I sigh. “Oh, right.”

He dangles a set of keys at me. “Take the truck. I’ll grab your car and do an oil change today before I come home. Then we’ll go grab some food.”

I take the keys. “It’s a date.”

Clive kisses me again and starts to head out. “Keys in the Buick?”

“Yep.”

“See ya later.”

He whistles as he leaves. I hear the screen door slam and soon the car starts. The Skylark has a whine, which has been getting noticeably louder the last few days. Whatever it is, Clive will fix it. It’s his job. He worked at his dad’s garage before he set up his own, shortly after we married in 1945. He didn’t fight in the war due to the hearing loss in his right ear.

I watch out the window as he leaves. I can hardly believe we are in our sixth decade. It seems like yesterday we were kids, but now we have grandkids. Where does the time go?

I head back to Mom’s chair and dig out the diary. I replace it next to the stack of others in her rolltop desk. I’ll save them for another time. I’ve read all I can handle at the moment. I grab the tote of newspaper-wrapped knickknacks and head out, locking the door behind me.

An idea settles in my brain as I hop in Clive’s black ’67 Dodge with red and white pinstripes along the side. The engine rattles in a good way as it comes to life. On Monday I’m going to head to the library and look up

where there would have been a sanitarium or mental hospital around here. I don't remember one, and I certainly don't remember Mom being in one, so it had to be before I was born or when I was too young to remember. Places like that must keep records.

I expect my heart to lighten with a goal in mind, but the ache in my chest is as heavy and cloudy as the dust trail from the gravel driveway that I'm kicking up behind the Dodge. I cough and roll up the windows and turn onto county highway E to head into town.