

Chapter One

I was still asleep when the phone rang. Eyes closed, I groaned and drew my legs closer to my chest. By the third ring, I realized Peter either couldn't hear it from the bathroom or had decided it was time for me to wake up. I cleared my throat.

"Hello."

"Amy Julia?"

I recognized Penny's voice. "Mmmhmm."

"Is Peter there?"

"Hold on." I shuffled into the bathroom. Peter stood in a towel in front of the mirror, preparing to shave. "It's your mother," I said. As I crawled back into bed, I noticed that the clock read 6:58. Only 5:58 in New Orleans, Central Time. Penny never called that early. I pulled the covers to my chin, but apprehension began to burn away the wispy remnants of sleep. *Something must be wrong.* I started to list possibilities—a *death in the family, maybe she lost her job, a problem with her house?* I circled back around to death, and with my eyes closed, envisioned Peter's relatives one by one until he walked back into the bedroom. I checked the clock again. 7:02.

"She has a tumor in her liver," he said. "She went to the doctor on Monday."

I looked Peter over, unable to get my brain to cooperate with this information. I noticed his hair, tousled and wet from the shower, his bare chest holding drops of water, the white towel wrapped tight around his hips. All I could think was that he looked young and handsome. I finally summoned the words to ask, "Is it cancer?"

"The doctors say they don't know, but she says it is. She's going to get a biopsy today."

“How was she?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” He looked at me for a moment, his forehead wrinkled. Razor in hand, he placed the phone on the receiver and walked back into the bathroom.

I was fully awake, but I stayed in bed imagining the worst. By the time Peter returned, I had envisioned hospitals, IVs, death, and a funeral.

“How are you?” I asked him. He looked more grown-up now, with a clean shave and his hair parted and combed.

“Fine, I guess,” he replied. “We don’t know anything yet. It might not be cancer. She might be fine.” He hung his towel on the back of the door, pulled on boxers, and chose a crisp white shirt from the closet.

“Yeah,” I said, watching closely as he buttoned the shirt, turned up the collar, and draped a tie around his neck.

He paused and looked at me. “Hey,” he said softly, “get out of bed. Get on with your day. There’s nothing we can do.”

“We can pray,” I said, with a hint of defiance.

“Okay.” He sat on the bed next to me. “What do you want to pray?”

“I don’t know,” I replied.

He took my hand. “The Lord’s Prayer?”

In unison, we recited the familiar words—“*Our Father, who art in heaven...*”—but it brought little comfort when we said *Amen*.

For the rest of the day, I felt detached from the world, as if a camera had been placed in my hand for me to film my own life. I could see everything as it happened; I

just wasn't able to feel any of it. Peter and I both worked for a small Christian nonprofit organization, and I went through the motions of the day—responding to e-mail, running a staff meeting, leading a discussion with a group of students—but what I wanted was to know what Penny was doing, how she felt, what she was thinking. As I tried to picture her day, I realized that she had called less than a week before Mardi Gras. It made for an ironic contrast—Penny in a series of doctors' visits while the city of New Orleans prepared for a party.

Before I met Peter, I hadn't known any of the nuances of Carnival. I had known the basics: "Mardi Gras," French for "Fat Tuesday," referred to the day before Ash Wednesday. What I hadn't realized was that Mardi Gras was the culmination of a season of revelry. The celebration started on Epiphany, twelve days after Christmas, and continued until Lenten penitence and fasting arrived. Penny's doctor had discovered this tumor just as Fat Tuesday drew near, as schools dismissed their students for a week's vacation and offices closed their doors.

I could envision New Orleans in the final stages of festivity, with crowds lining the sidewalks and medians, raising their hands and shouting a standard line—"Throw me something, Mister!"—in hopes of catching cheap plastic cups, fake gold doubloons, candy. In the French Quarter, the scene grew more raucous: women stood on balconies willing to bare their breasts in exchange for strands of plastic beads; bars and strip clubs stayed full and open all hours; the streets teemed with people dancing, laughing, and imbibing a steady flow of alcohol.

The excesses of Carnival had always both intrigued and offended my New England sensibilities, but that year the celebrations worried me more than anything else. I imagined Penny on the sidelines. I was afraid that she would be left alone, forgotten.

Penny had grown up in a world that revolved around Carnival, a world where girls became Queens. Not just debutantes, Queens. Thirty-five years earlier, Penny had been crowned Queen of Atlanteans and paired with a King three times her age. Her hand-painted invitation arrived as a scroll. It read: *Poseidon, puissant Monarch of the Atlanteans, sends greetings to Miss Penelope Ayers and issues this his Royal Edict. You are hereby commanded to appear as Royal Consort to His Majesty the King, on the night of Tuesday, February the twentieth, nineteen hundred and sixty eight, at the Municipal Auditorium. Fail not in this your bounden duty.*

I had discovered the scroll, rolled up inside a box on the floor of Penny's guest room closet, when Peter and I were in New Orleans the year before. It was nestled among a trove of Carnival memorabilia—photographs and newspaper clippings, a tiara and scepter, the white deerskin gloves Penny had worn that night in the spotlight. And during Thanksgiving dinner, with Peter on my left and Penny's Aunt Lillian on my right, I got the details. Penny had traveled with her mother to New York City to acquire a gown of white satin covered with silver. And then Aunt Lillian said what I could have guessed on my own—"Penny was more beautiful than any of the other Queens that year." I could tell from the photograph that the gown was exquisite, but it wasn't the clothing that made her beautiful. Penny greeted the camera with a wide smile, and her eyes danced. "And that's not all," said Aunt Lillian. "Penny was more gracious than any of the other Queens too.

She was the first one ever to extend her scepter to the balcony as well as the main floor of guests. It might sound trivial to you, but it was a big deal at the time.”

I didn’t understand the significance of that gesture. Still, that story about waving the scepter gave me a picture of Penny as a young woman, sparkling and welcoming and fun all at the same time. In recent years, that person seemed hidden, as if she had packed up her young self along with the gloves and the tiara.

Even before her diagnosis, Penny had mentioned she never knew what to do with herself during Carnival. She still loved the artifice of girls in white dresses and royal courts and memories of her own evening on stage. She loved the gossip that surrounded which man had been selected (and which overlooked) as king, which debutantes had lost weight, and which families had paid what amounts for parties leading up to the balls. But she hated it too—the patriarchy, the materialism, and the fact that she no longer fit the part.

So New Orleans geared up, with floats and balls and costumes, and Penny reported to the hospital. She lay upon a padded table in a loose cotton gown, received local anesthesia, and diverted her eyes from the long needle that penetrated her skin and pressed into the mass in her liver. She attended none of the festivities.

That night, many miles north in Richmond, Virginia, Peter and I drove home from dinner with friends. I stared at the ice glistening in the trees. I said, “She might die, you know.”

“I know,” Peter replied. “But we shouldn’t think about that now. We don’t even know if it’s cancer.”

I nodded, my shoulders tense. "I get really sad when I think about grandchildren," I said, expecting a rebuke.

"Me too," he said. The resolve had vanished from his voice.

Peter stretched out his hand and waited for me to grab hold.

Penny called the next afternoon. I hovered beside Peter so I could hear her end of the conversation. "The tumor is malignant," she said. "I have primary liver cancer." Her voice remained steady, but her words came out quickly, as if they were out of her control.

"Okay," Peter replied. He pressed his index finger along the curve of his eyebrow as he asked, "What happens next?"

"I'll go to a surgeon tomorrow to find out if they can operate," she said. "If they can't, it's not good."

"Do you want us to come down?"

"No, no," she responded. "That's too much trouble."

"Are you sure?" he asked again.

"It would be too much," she repeated. "And you couldn't get tickets the weekend before Mardi Gras."

"Do you want us to look into it?"

She waited a moment to reply. "That is just so sweet of you," she said, her voice shaking.

We landed in New Orleans twenty-four hours later. The tickets cost \$1,000 each. Most of our fellow passengers were destined for revelry. They dressed the part: cowboy

hats, turquoise-sequined tops, leopard-print pants. Beads of purple, green, and gold—Mardi Gras colors—dangled around their necks. By the time we approached New Orleans, the plane itself felt like a beer hall with strangers locking arms, swaying in their seats, raising their fists in the air, and singing “When the Saints Go Marching In.” Of course, no one knew the verses, so we listened to the chorus again and again: *Oh when the saints, go marching in, oh when the saints go marching in, how I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in.* I couldn’t help thinking about the words, and I realized that it was a song about going to heaven. Only in New Orleans, I thought, with its peculiar integration of sacred and secular, could a gospel number about judgment day double as the official theme song for a football team, and the unofficial anthem for the city itself.

Then, once we landed, I realized that the airport was named after Louis Armstrong, as if to signal that music and culture mattered more to the city than old mayors or governors. Even as we walked to the baggage claim, local color marked everything—beignets, canisters of creole seasonings, red beans, gumbo. Peter remarked, “Coming to New Orleans feels like stepping off a moving walkway onto solid ground.”

I knew exactly what he meant. The city moved slowly, and it always took me a few days to adjust. I filled my lungs with air, slowed my pace, and then I asked him, “Is New Orleans your solid ground?”

He turned his head, but then he looked past me as he considered my question. “I don’t think so,” he replied. “No,” he then said, with more determination in his voice. “You are my solid ground.”

I felt uneasy when we climbed into a taxi instead of looking for Penny to pick us up. Even the landscape felt foreign. Without the familiar jokes about the potholes and construction projects, the trash and abandoned buildings simply looked bleak. Peter kept up a light conversation with the driver, letting him think we were in town for Mardi Gras. I stayed silent, unable to pretend. I mumbled, “Thank you,” as we stepped onto the broken sidewalk in front of Penny’s house.

The weather was pleasant, warm enough to strip our sweaters and tie them around our waists. The air smelled moist. I could see people inside, and we entered to find the house filled with women waiting for Penny’s return from the doctor. They spilled from one room to the next, squeezing Peter’s hand, nodding with sympathy, offering food.

Moments after our arrival, Penny walked through the front door with her two older sisters, Nancy and Leelee. One of them announced, “They can operate!” and the house erupted. Some cried. Some jumped up and down. Others hugged. Peter and I stood back, not ready to enter the happy fray. He finally touched his mother on the shoulder.

“Hi, Mom,” he said gently. She looked up at him and stretched out her arms. Her short plump body pressed against his slender frame. He kissed the top of her head and rubbed his hand along her back.

Once the euphoria abated and the friends disbanded, the rest of us sat around the island in the kitchen. Nancy’s was a familiar presence, but it was the first time I had ever seen Leelee, short for Elizabeth, sitting down in Penny’s house. Though they lived within a mile of one another, they moved in different social circles and didn’t see each other often. Still, Leelee looked at ease in Penny’s kitchen, with her chin propped on her fist, tapping her fingernails on the countertop.

“When is the surgery?” Peter asked.

“Wednesday,” Nancy replied.

“I wanted him to do it Monday,” Penny said. “But he’s riding in Bacchus Sunday night, and I wouldn’t want him cutting my body open the next day.”

“Sorry,” I said, still learning the lingo of Carnival, “what’s Bacchus?”

Leelee laughed, but her eyes were kind as she replied. “It’s one of the krewes.”

I raised my eyebrows and she explained, “A krewe is a group of men who are more or less a social club. They put on a party and a parade during Carnival every year. Dr. Staunton—Bob—did us a favor just by giving Penny an appointment today. Bob’s an old friend.”

I still felt a little incredulous. *Why should a party postpone a surgery and make it difficult to get a doctor’s appointment?*

Leelee went on: “Being a member of any krewe takes up a lot of time. Bacchus parades Sunday, so the whole weekend is preparation and he’ll be too hung over Monday to operate.”

I nodded again. “And Tuesday?” I asked.

The three sisters and Peter shared a smile. “The whole city shuts down on Tuesday,” Leelee explained.

“So Wednesday it is,” Penny concluded.

The conversation left me somewhat bewildered, and yet I loved listening to Penny and her sisters talk. As native New Orleanians, they didn’t speak with a traditional Southern drawl. But their speech did hint at gentility, with subtle distinctions from my own clipped prose. They pronounced the days of the week with an “ee” at the end—

Sundee, Mondee, Wednesdee—a lilting cadence that made their words sound nostalgic, romantic.

“What else did they tell you?” Peter asked.

“It’s pretty foggy,” Penny replied, glancing to Nancy and Leelee.

“Did he tell you why?” I asked.

“Why what?”

“Why you have cancer? What caused it?”

“It was not caused by smoking,” Penny said. She looked at each of us in turn to see that we acknowledged her innocence.

Nancy added, “He said it’s very rare in the United States.”

Leelee continued, “He said there’s lots of liver cancer in the third world, in Asia and Africa and places like that.”

“Well,” Peter remarked, “if there was ever a third world city in the U.S., it’s New Orleans.”

“It’s not funny, Peter,” Penny said.

“I know, Mom.” He reached out and rested his hand on hers.

Throughout that evening, I stayed one step behind. I didn’t understand the city, the family, the cancer. And I wanted more information. I found out later that primary liver cancer comprised only one percent of all the cancer cases in the United States. Its clinical name was hepatocellular carcinoma. Most people who developed it already had cirrhosis of the liver or hepatitis. But the doctor wrote in Penny’s chart: “55-year old female. No history of chronic liver disease. No drug use, tattoos, transfusions, or

exposure to Hepatitis B or C.” They could provide no explanation, no cause. It just happened to an otherwise normal mom, sister, coworker, friend. It just happened.

“Penny,” I asked, “can you backtrack a minute? How did you figure this out?”

“Why did I go to the doctor?”

I nodded.

“Well,” she began, “I’ve been having digestive problems all month.” She surveyed her attentive audience and whispered, “Diarrhea.” She nodded knowingly and continued, “I thought it was from stress, so I went to see Dr. Goodyear. As soon as she started the examination, she knew. I had lost twenty pounds, which is one perk of this damn disease, and then she felt it.”

“Can you feel it now?” I asked.

“Yep,” she replied. “Here. Come with me.” The women followed into her bedroom. In the center of the wall stood Penny’s wrought-iron bed, specially designed by a local craftsman. It rose four feet off the floor, and was covered with a clean white comforter and piles of pillows. The bed faced an armoire of honey-colored wood that Penny inherited from her grandmother. She climbed onto the bed and lay on her back before pulling up her shirt. Penny guided my hand next to her heart, underneath her rib cage. “There’s the monster,” she said, as we took turns probing the hard, lumpy mass protruding from the center of her torso.

“The size of a grapefruit,” Nancy murmured.

I was last to leave the room, and I paused for a moment before walking out. I noticed a silver tray on Penny’s bedside table filled with an assortment of bottles: Imodium-AD, prescription cough syrup, and plastic containers holding her drugs for

depression. Behind the tray was a stack of cheap paperback novels—mysteries and thrillers mostly—and an open box of Cheese Nips. What at first had looked like excess suddenly struck me as absence, trappings of a daily unsuccessful struggle to feel good. Even though Penny had just finished telling us there was no particular cause for her cancer, I still wanted an explanation. And I wanted a solution. I wanted to close the open box and store it on a shelf in the kitchen, replace the paperbacks with good literature, and throw away the medicine in favor of exercise and Nicorette. I wanted to believe lifestyle changes would take back the words “primary liver cancer.”

But instead of clearing off Penny’s bedside table, I returned to the kitchen. By that point, Penny had trouble keeping her doctors straight. She had seen the internist, the oncologist, and the surgeon. Each one tried to explain her treatment options and chances for recovery. “What I do understand,” she said, “is that if they can’t get it out, I’m going to die.”

“You have to keep a positive attitude, Penelope,” Leelee said. “We are going to beat this thing.”

Penny nodded, but she avoided Leelee’s eyes.

“How long have you had it?” Peter asked.

“He couldn’t tell,” Penny said. “Maybe a few months, probably years. It takes a long time for liver cancer to make itself known.” She yawned, and then remarked, “I am supposed to get some sleep before they cut me open.”

Nancy and Leelee took their cues. Neither of them tried to contain their tears as they hugged Penny and said goodnight before Peter escorted them to the door.

The questions no one wanted to say out loud flashed through my head. *Could you have prevented it? Does it run in the family? Are you going to die?*

That night, we pretended we had all the information we wanted. We pretended death was impossible.

“Any other instructions?” Peter asked, once only the three of us remained.

“I’ve got to quit smoking,” Penny confessed. “Which sucks,” she added. “And I’m supposed to drink lots of fluids and take walks.”

Peter nodded. “We can help with that,” he said. He moved toward the sink to pour her a glass of water.

Penny looked up at him. “Thanks for coming,” she said.

“We’re so glad to be here, Mom,” he replied.

Then Penny stood, and Peter opened his arms. He rested his chin on top of his mother’s head and waited for her to move away. I walked over to them and squeezed Penny’s hand, thinking back to a few months earlier, when the three of us had assumed a similar posture. I remembered Penny’s words. “Help me, Lord,” she had prayed. “Please help me.”

Chapter Two

Penny had flown in to visit us on a crisp, clear day, at the time of year when the leaves crunched underfoot and the trees insisted upon drawing attention to themselves before winter set in. I had driven to the airport alone, with the sunroof open and the radio off, enjoying the solitude. I didn't make much of my drive at the time. I hadn't known it would herald the beginning of so many changes. The thing I could remember later was the leaves—the flashes of amber, the dappled yellow and green, the ones that looked like red roses.

And I could remember seeing Penny from a distance, standing at the curb, bags stacked neatly at her feet. I admired her profile—her strong jaw and high cheekbones, and I shook my head, thinking, *She's still beautiful. Overweight, middle-aged, lonely, and beautiful.* At the same time, she looked as though she were trying to hide herself beneath her baggy beige jumper, as though she weren't allowed to be lovely anymore. I pulled in front of her and hopped out of the car.

“Amy Julia!” she exclaimed, with a big grin.

“Hi, Penny.” I tried to match her enthusiasm. I kissed her on the cheek and she squeezed my shoulder. Even though I had known her for nearly ten years, it still felt as if we didn't know whether to embrace or shake hands.

“How was your flight?” I asked, extending my hand for her bag.

“Just fine,” she replied, and she tilted her chin up a little to gaze past me. Then, with her eyes closed, she said, “I love this time of year.”

My face softened, just from listening to her smooth, low voice, with its slight drawl. “Well,” I said, easing the trunk closed, “I’m glad you made it.”

The truth was, neither Peter nor I looked forward to Penny’s visits. It wasn’t because she was demanding, or because she complained. She was always very pleasant. It was simply that we had to slow down for her to enter our lives, and slowing down felt like sitting in a stopped car as a freight train rumbled past.

During that visit, our interactions were the same as usual, a little stilted, as if we were trying to ride a seesaw together but couldn’t find a rhythm, as if the fulcrum were in the wrong spot. By Sunday at lunch, we had run out of things to talk about. We took turns bemoaning the dreary weather, murmuring politely about the food. We finished the meal with long pauses as conversation repeatedly bumped and skidded to a halt.

But then Penny pushed her plate away and folded her napkin. “There’s something I want you to see,” she said, standing up. She returned with a black-and-white photograph.

She sat down again, and tears pooled in her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” Her face crumpled.

I broke the silence, sounding cheery and false: “It’s no problem. Cry all you want!”

Penny shook her head. With her eyes on the photograph, she said, “I’ve been crying about everything lately. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

Later, I would figure out that Penny expressed her emotions much more readily than me, that tears and laughter were everyday events for her, and that there was no need

to rush in with comfort, or pretend they weren't there. But I had grown up with a mother who shed tears only at the end of movies, never at the dining room table. So I said, "I'm sorry," and then, "do you need a Kleenex?"

"No," Penny said. "Thanks." She wiped her cheeks with her index fingers and picked up the photograph. "I want you to see this."

Peter took it from her outstretched hand.

"It's the only picture I have of me with Daddy," she said.

I didn't know much about Penny's father—just that she rarely saw him, even as a child living in the same city. And I had a vague memory of her saying that he drank too much. I walked behind them to peer over Peter's shoulder. The picture showed a man who I knew must be Edmund Ayers, surrounded by three little girls. He looked as skinny as a teenage boy racing to catch up with puberty, but he would have been in his late twenties when the picture was taken. A shadow covered his face. Nancy and Leelee smiled in the sunlight, and he clasped Penny's ankles as she sat atop his shoulders, delighted to be up so high. I saw a sweet scene of a young father with his three girls, but I wasn't sure what brought on Penny's tears, or what made it so significant that she had carried it from New Orleans for us to see.

Peter and I both studied the picture without speaking. Penny added, "Nancy had it and she never told me." She spoke matter-of-factly, but her voice held a hint of resentment, as if she thought Nancy had been intentionally hoarding the photograph.

"So how did you find it?" I asked.

“I saw it at her house one day,” Penny replied. “And I’d never seen us all together as a family before.” Her voice was filled with longing when she said, “Nancy had boxes and boxes of pictures.”

“He’s so handsome,” I murmured. All the other pictures I had seen were from later in his life, and in those he had always looked old, with a square face and a dour expression. But even as I examined the photograph, I was thinking more about Penny than about her father. I was thinking about her fragility—the helplessness when she talked about her family. Whether she meant to or not, she presented herself to us as a failure, a woman who hadn’t kept her marriage together, didn’t have enough money to live the life she wanted, couldn’t control her weight or her emotions. Later, I saw strength within that fragility, strength she didn’t even recognize in herself. Later, I heard other stories—that she took care of her father before he died, that he lived with her for months in the midst of his battle with cancer. Later, I could see her graciousness. But back then, as she handed over that photo, I simply saw her brokenness.

“When was this?” Peter asked, still staring at the picture.

“It must have been before the divorce,” Penny said. “So I was two, maybe three.”

I murmured, “What a nice picture.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Peter said, gently, and he handed it back to her.

Penny looked down, as if she were a little embarrassed, and I expected her to stay quiet for a few minutes. But then, as Peter and I began to clear the table, she said, “Peter, I need to ask you a question.”

He walked into the kitchen and set his plate carefully in the sink. Penny and I followed, bussing other dishes. Peter sprayed and stacked them all before turning to face his mother.

“Okay,” he said.

Penny squared her shoulders and made her face stern. “Does it make you uncomfortable when I get emotional?” she asked.

Peter dried his hands on a dishtowel, and then we all moved out of the center of the room, as if we were taking our places, waiting for a curtain to rise. Peter slid against the stove and crossed his arms over his chest. Penny leaned on a countertop. I propped myself up with the kitchen table, out of their line of sight. Peter finally replied, “No. I don’t think I’m uncomfortable when you get emotional. If I am, that’s my problem. But,” he deliberated, “I am frustrated because you’ve been sad for years and there’s nothing I can say or do to make you feel better.”

His face was smooth and his voice steady, and his reply had been as direct and honest as Penny’s question. And even though I was a little surprised by his calm response, his words made sense to me. Penny had started to see a therapist as soon as they moved back to New Orleans, after her divorce. Sixteen years later, Penny still met with Joe twice a week. And I knew Peter blamed him for her endless rounds of medication—one drug to combat depression, another to address the anxiety produced by the first, a third to medicate the sleepless nights caused by the second. As far as we could tell, none of it had made much of a difference.

Penny looked down at her hands. “I’m surprised you think it’s the same. I feel like I’m getting in touch with feelings about Daddy and Mother for the first time. I found

those old pictures and they opened up old wounds. Maybe,” she gulped, her face tightening, “maybe this time they can heal.” She tilted her head back.

“Mom, I know you’re hurting. But I can’t remember a time when you were happy. I can’t remember a time when you weren’t exploring your wounded inner child, and I don’t say that as a joke.” As Peter spoke, his tone softened. “I know there’s pain in your life. But that doesn’t have to define who you are forever. Mom, if you really want to know what I think...” He trailed off. Then he looked at her, his eyes crinkling a little, the way they did when he was concerned, and he said, “I think a lot of this comes back to God.”

I closed my eyes. A few years earlier, Peter had begun, in his words, “a relationship with God.” When Penny heard him talk about attending Bible studies and prayer groups, I think she was afraid he had really begun “a relationship with the religious right.” I didn’t blame her for being wary. At the time, I worked for a nonprofit Christian organization, and Peter had joined me there after an unfulfilling stint as an investment banker. He focused on the development side, while I worked directly with high school students, urging them to ask questions and argue, to figure out what they believed and why it mattered. It was easy for us to come off as seasoned veterans in God-talk, with Christian lingo spilling into conversation, as if talking about religion were as natural as talking about the weather.

Peter continued, saying, “Mom, I know that you don’t refer to God as ‘he’ because you want to use gender-inclusive language.”

Penny nodded, and I thought back to earlier that morning, when I had stood in church next to her. She had recited the liturgy with insistence, *Blessed be God's kingdom, now and forever.*

Peter said, "But I think you don't call God 'he' because you're afraid to let God be your father. And I think you need a father."

I agreed with Peter, but I generally stayed away from God as a topic of discussion with Penny. Over the years, she and Peter had gone head to head on any number of religious topics. So I worried that this conversation, which so far had seemed measured and sincere and good, would become just one more in a series of arguments about whose God was more loving. At the same time, the energy between the two of them was different than ever before, more like the heat of the sun than the sharp crackle of lightning. During previous disagreements, they had sounded like a mother and child, arguing. They spoke as two adults now, respectful and calm.

Penny said, "I know I need a father. I need God in my life."

We stood in silence until she spoke again. "But I'm scared I'll take it back."

"What do you mean?" Peter asked.

"I'm scared that if I ask God to be in my life, I'll take it back. That I won't stick to it."

Peter's voice was low but firm: "Mom, if you ask, then it's God's job to stick around."

I nodded from my perch across the room.

She looked at him warily. "When I was at boarding school, we went on a retreat and I prayed a prayer to 'receive Jesus into my heart,' or whatever it is they tell you to

do.” She paused. “Where has he been for all these years?” She spoke softly, without accusation.

I could understand why Penny asked. Her life hadn’t gone the way she wanted. There had been so much pain—her parents’ divorce, her husband’s alcoholism and then their divorce, her own struggles with depression and loneliness—and there had been so little redemption.

“When I look at your sons,” I said, tentatively adding myself to the conversation, “I see God’s hand in your life.” I was surprised to find myself on the verge of tears.

Penny nodded slowly. “Peter and Thomas are God’s grace to me.”

Her words lingered like the smell of fresh lilies, clean and strong.

Peter broke the silence. “Mom, remember the story of the prodigal son?”

She shrugged.

“Jesus tells a story about a father with two sons. One of them asks for his inheritance early. He goes off and spends the money. Then he’s starving, so he decides to come home.”

For a moment, I wondered if Penny thought he was preaching to her, but Peter didn’t sound authoritative or demanding. He was simply telling a story. And Penny’s posture was no longer rigid. Still, I couldn’t tell what she was thinking. She hugged her arms across her chest.

“He thinks his father will make him work off his debt, or maybe his father won’t welcome him back at all. But when the son was a long way off, the father ran to greet him.” Peter pressed his hands together and raised them to his lips. “Mom, when the son

returned, his father threw a party to celebrate. If you turn around, your Father is running towards you to welcome you home.”

I could hear the tap of rain on the roof.

Penny said, “I want God in my life.”

Peter nodded, his face soft.

And then Penny inhaled audibly. “Will you two pray with me?”

I looked up, startled. We hadn’t ever done this before. But we moved to the middle of the kitchen, as if it were perfectly natural, and we stood in a circle, shoulder to shoulder, heads bowed.

Peter and I both prayed. While our words were not insincere, I had the distinct impression that it was Penny who was talking to God. She said, “Help me, Lord. Please, help me.”

In retrospect, that prayer in the kitchen changed everything. I don’t mean that everything in Penny’s life, or my own, was immediately transformed, but with the prayer came a new level of intimacy. I wrote Penny a note on the heels of our time together: *Dear Penny, I know there are old and painful wounds in your life. I always want a Band-Aid to cover my pain, but Jesus wants thorough healing for my soul, and he does invasive surgery on my heart when it’s needed. I pray you’ll have the courage—the strength of heart—to let the healing begin. With love, Amy Julia.*

When I read the note out loud to Peter, he asked, “Don’t you think you’re being too optimistic?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not convinced anything has changed. It’s probably just another phase.”

“But maybe it isn’t,” I said.

We stared at each other.

He shrugged. “I suppose,” he said, and returned to his reading.

I looked over my note again, brooding. I wanted to protest that this time it would be different. I could sense it, that Penny’s desire for change was real, and I believed that real prayer would be answered. At the same time, he had a point. Penny did get excited about new endeavors, spiritual or otherwise. There had been the exercise regimens—kickboxing, rollerblading, a personal trainer. And Women’s Creativity retreats and meeting with a spiritual director and attending Wednesday night church suppers for a while. And then there was AA, Penny’s sanctuary for much of Peter’s youth. He once explained it to me—“Al-Atot, Al-Ateen, Al-Anon was our church.” With each new thing, even AA, Peter had watched the enthusiasm fizzle. So I understood his skepticism, even though I wished he could have more hope for her.

We didn’t talk often, but Penny remained on my mind throughout that fall. When we sat in church on Sunday mornings, I often thought back to her visit and said a prayer on her behalf. I didn’t know what exactly I was asking for—a new therapist, a husband, deeper faith? I certainly didn’t know that help would come, not only to Penny herself, but to the rest of us as well. At the time, all I knew was to offer up the plea and wait.

I waited all fall and into the winter. It was a time of preparation, a season of longing. The last leaves of autumn fluttered off the trees and the afternoons grew dark. In early December, Advent arrived, the beginning of the church’s calendar year. At the start

of the Sunday service, our minister quoted the prophet Isaiah: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

Chapter Three

The next time we saw Penny was a few days before Christmas. She picked us up at the airport in her white Toyota 4Runner. I watched a grin spread across her face when she spotted us, and I smiled in return as she swerved in front of another car to stop at our bags. Peter's brother Thomas, home from law school, sat in the passenger seat. Peter heaved our suitcase into the trunk as I climbed in back, leaning forward to kiss Penny and Thomas in greeting. As soon as I sat down, I noticed the hallmarks of Penny's car—the lingering scent of cigarette smoke, her window open even as the vents blew a steady stream of frigid air.

“Hi, Momma,” Peter said cheerfully, joining me in the back seat. “Hi, brother.” He squeezed Thomas' shoulder. “Hey, Mom,” he continued, “do you know your brake tags have expired?”

Penny took a swig of Diet Coke from an oversized plastic cup filled to the brim with small cubes of ice. “I would rather not know that my brake tags have expired,” she replied. “And Merry Christmas to you too.”

We passed strip malls, gas stations, bowling lanes, and a quintessential New Orleans establishment, the drive-through daiquiri bar. As the car bounced along, I remarked, “These roads are unbelievable.”

Thomas piped up, “You know, it's because the city was constructed on a swamp, eight feet below sea level.”

Then Peter asked, even though we all knew the answer, “How do you know that?”

“I wrote a report on it in eighth grade,” Thomas said with a grin. He continued with his favorite, and most frequently cited, piece of trivia about New Orleans: “And did

you know that the pumps installed underneath these roads are large enough for a fire truck to drive through?”

Penny was swaying in her seat to the radio, and at the next red light she turned up the volume. She held her fist to her lips as if she were grasping a microphone, closed her eyes, and mouthed along with Aretha Franklin. Thomas turned around in his seat and rolled his eyes, but soon enough both he and Peter had joined in, hands extended in front of them to mimic dance moves.

Penny pulled into a convenience store with the three of them still in full concert mode. She clicked off the radio.

“Peter,” she asked, “would you run inside and buy a bag of ice? I like the kind in small pieces.”

Peter unbuckled his seatbelt, ready to comply, but he paused after opening the door. “What happened to the icemaker at home?” he asked.

“It broke,” she said.

“When?”

“Oh, I don’t know. A while ago.”

“Don’t you want to get it fixed?”

She turned to look at him. “It’s easier to buy ice up here.”

Peter couldn’t resist. “There’re also these things called ice trays,” he said, “where you pour water into little containers and then stack them in the freezer and they produce this stuff called ice for free.”

“Thanks, smart ass,” she responded, with an exasperated smile, swatting at his hands as he held them out to indicate the size of conventional ice trays.

“Free advice, any time,” Peter replied. He trotted inside.

I giggled from the back seat.

Penny lit a cigarette, swaying her shoulders slightly, as if the music were still playing. Thomas grimaced and rolled down his window. “Hey, Mom,” he began. He sounded tired.

She looked at him before he had even finished his statement and said, “All right already.” She opened her door and walked to the curb.

The scene had changed so quickly. Just a few minutes earlier, the three of them had rocked the car, but now the mood was subdued, and a tense silence stretched between Thomas and Penny. Buying a bag of ice, smoking a cigarette—such insignificant things. At the same time, I saw them as emblems of the issues that had threatened the family for years. Peter always worried about Penny’s financial stability, Thomas about her physical health. Whenever I was with them, they seemed perched on an edge between humor and insult, love and anger. I wanted to pull them all into safe territory. But they preferred to risk the fall, and generally they landed without too much damage, brushed themselves off, and then returned to the edge again.

Once we turned into Penny’s driveway, Peter and Thomas hopped out of the car. It made me feel old to see them standing shoulder to shoulder, and to think that Thomas had graduated from college and was engaged to be married. When I had first visited New Orleans, almost ten years earlier, Thomas had been in middle school, long hair pulled into a ponytail, round-rimmed glasses, and a scrawny frame. Now he was as tall as his brother and equally handsome. His face was different from Peter’s and Penny’s. Thomas

didn't share their sharp cheekbones, so he looked more jovial, even mischievous, as if he were perpetually suppressing a smile.

Thomas' personality fit his face. He was optimistic, kind, helpful, almost to a fault. In college, he had become a volunteer firefighter, and he was always serving other people—helping a roommate unload a U-Haul, making breakfast for the house of guys he lived with, driving a friend to the airport. And Thomas could have rivaled Oprah in his interest in people. He would call our house to talk to Peter and end up asking questions about my life for half an hour before addressing the practical reason for his call.

As the two brothers approached the house, I enjoyed hearing their gentle banter as they joked and recited lines from favorite movies and old sit-coms. I followed them inside, allowing the screen door to snap closed behind me.

After unpacking, we found Penny in the kitchen. She stood at the counter, humming to herself as she made a pot of coffee. With her task finished, she turned to see the three of us perched on the bar stools along the island. We must have all looked at her expectantly, because when she saw our faces, she laughed. “Okay, boys. I'll put you to work,” she said. “Go get the Christmas tree from outside and we'll decorate together.”

At the end of the day, Penny insisted that we drive down St. Charles Avenue to admire, and scoff at, the lights and decorations adorning the hedges and doorways of the city's oldest and most ornate homes. Even though I'd visited half a dozen times, Penny narrated for me as we drove. “We call this one the wedding cake,” she said, pointing to a white house with trim so lavish it did resemble icing. “Tacky!” she cried out with glee when she saw the colored lights blinking wildly in front of another mansion.

It was fun to visit New Orleans. The city still seemed exotic to me, with a hint of the tropics in the palm trees and flowers that bloomed even in December, and daytime temperatures that often reached 70 degrees. I loved learning how to pronounce street names like Tchoupitoulas (“Just ignore the first T,” Peter said.) and Melpomene (“Pronounce every letter,” Penny instructed.). I loved that those same names were printed in blue and white tile on the sidewalk corners—interesting and lovely, even if they were a bit impractical. And I grinned when translating the local vocabulary that included French words like “*lagniappe*” (a little extra), and old-fashioned terms like “ice box” instead of refrigerator.

When we returned home that night, Penny said, “Amy Julia, could I take you out to lunch tomorrow?” She stood in the doorway of her bedroom, and she looked as if she might turn away before I could answer.

“I’d love that.”

“Good.” With a big grin she continued, “And then we’ll go shopping.” Penny blew a kiss, “Sweet dreams to you both.”

Penny took me to Dante’s Kitchen for lunch. Palm trees shaded the entrance, and inside, the walls were painted in vibrant colors—sunburst yellow, teal blue, fire engine red. I’m sure we talked about trivial matters before we ordered our food, but what I remembered later was Penny’s question to me. “Amy Julia,” she said, “what do you think Christianity is really all about?”

She asked deliberately, as if she had been waiting all morning for just the right moment. I put my fork down and held my hands in my lap. I didn't want to give a pat answer or talk about my beliefs as if I could hand them over in outline form.

"I used to think it was about forgiveness," I said. "And I still think forgiveness is important, but I think forgiveness is just a means to an end."

Penny looked eager, as if I were about to disclose the solution to a mystery. I was afraid I might disappoint her. I talked with people about God for a living, but that fall, I had begun to suspect that I was teaching answers to the wrong questions. Many of the students I worked with seemed to think about their faith mostly in terms of what would happen when they died, that is, who was "in" and who was "out" of heaven. I had started to think that living with God here and now mattered just as much as living with God after death.

I ran my fingers along the edge of the white tablecloth and looked up at her. "And the end, the point, I think, is a life lived with God." For the first time, I put into words what I had been mulling over for months. I stated my new thoughts as simply as I could: "I think Christianity is about God inviting us to live life with Him starting now and continuing on for eternity."

As the waiter began to clear our plates, Penny nodded.

"Life with God," she said. "That's what I want to figure out."

I would have loved for our whole visit to follow the pattern of my day with Penny—a shopping excursion, a good meal, a conversation about what matters in life. But Christmas Eve arrived, and that meant that it was time to get ready for church. I had

been to New Orleans once before for Christmas, so I knew what to expect. All of Uptown, it seemed, attended Trinity Church at four-thirty on Christmas Eve. Hundreds of people arrived early to reserve a spot in the pews and to listen as anthems soared to the rafters of the spacious nave. The setting sun glowed through the stained-glass windows, and lilies and poinsettias poured over the altar like a floral fountain. It was beautiful. But it was also intimidating. I showered and dressed with apprehension, knowing that my clothes would be simpler than those of most of the women in the congregation. Staring at myself in the mirror—round cheeks, fair skin, big eyes—I shook my head, chastising myself for caring about the clothes, then worrying again when my hair wouldn't curl the way I wanted.

With a sigh, I joined Peter and Thomas in the living room.

“You all look nice,” I said, envious of the ease with which they dressed for formal occasions.

Thomas murmured, “Thanks,” and then cocked his head and said, “You know, it was dressing up for church that got me so mad back in high school.”

“Really?” I asked, and I looked more closely at his outfit. Thomas still flirted with rebellion when donning his Sunday best. Instead of loafers, he wore brown boots, and a cartoon of Frosty the Snowman covered his tie.

“Yep,” he replied. “Peter and I were arguing because I said it seemed silly to put on a show for God. Peter said it was a sign of respect.”

“It *is* a sign of respect,” Peter remarked.

Thomas grinned. “I'm not arguing about it anymore.”

Peter shrugged as Penny emerged from her bedroom. She paused in front of the mirror. At first she grimaced, but then she blew her reflection a kiss.

“Ready?” she asked, and we filed outside.

Peter, ever the gentleman, opened the doors for his mother and me before taking his usual spot behind the steering wheel. I was still thinking about Thomas and Peter’s argument a few years back. I remembered Peter’s version of the events, but I had never heard Thomas or Penny speak about it. As we pulled onto Willow Street, I said to Thomas, “An argument about clothes made you go home?”

“Well, Peter and I fought about it all the way to church, and then when we got out of the car, he told me that I needed to cut the string on the back of my blazer, and I just couldn’t handle it.”

I hadn’t remembered the cause of the dispute. All I knew was that Thomas had taken the streetcar home as Penny and Peter headed into church.

“That was a fun night,” Penny chimed in.

“Always fun to be left alone in church on Christmas Eve,” Peter responded.

Again, Peter had told me that as he and Penny crossed the street, she’d berated him for being so hard on his brother. He responded by telling her that he was worried about Thomas because Thomas was selling drugs to his friends at boarding school. It took her until the Nicene Creed to act. *We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth...* Penny had leaned over to Peter and whispered, “Find a ride home.” She walked down the aisle and out the door. He glanced in her direction, but did not follow. *We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God...*

Penny confronted Thomas at home, watching a rerun of *Star Trek*. I never learned the details of their conversation, but I could imagine Penny stating bluntly that she knew he was selling drugs, then vacillating between sharp questions and empathetic listening. I envisioned Thomas sitting cross-legged, having already changed into flannel pajama bottoms, earnestly explaining the connection between shrooms and enlightenment.

As we drove, Thomas must have been replaying the scene in his mind too, because he said, “I guess it wasn’t just because of the clothes that I went home. I didn’t believe in God at the time, so church felt fake.” He propped his elbow against the door and leaned his head on his fist. When he spoke up again, unprompted, I suppressed a smile. He was so much more verbal than Peter. “I didn’t want to go back until I could believe it actually meant something.”

Even though I hadn’t been present for the dispute, I remembered with clarity Peter’s phone call six years earlier. His voice had sounded thin, lonely, as he told me what happened.

We neared the sanctuary for yet another Christmas Eve service, and Thomas spoke up a third time. “Hey, Peter.”

“Yes?” Peter asked.

“I don’t think I’ve ever told you that I forgive you.”

Peter craned his neck in search of a parking spot. “Forgive me for what?”

“For telling Mom about the drugs.”

“Oh,” Peter said, shifting into reverse. “Well, good. Thanks.”

I wished Peter had responded with more emotion, but Thomas looked content, tapping his fingers together as if he were listening to music.

We climbed out of the car, and Penny turned to Thomas. “That night, I thought I had lost you.”

Thomas smiled and hugged her. “But you didn’t,” he said.

“You done turned out all right, little brother,” Peter said. They walked across the street together, laughing at each other’s attempts to mimic cowboys. I remembered Penny’s words from the fall, “Peter and Thomas are God’s grace to me,” and it struck me as a small miracle that all four of us were headed into church, willingly, with sincere faith.

My thoughts were cut short as we entered the throngs of beautiful, smiling people. I glanced up at the building in front of me. It was tall, with trifol windows and pointed arches in the style of a Gothic cathedral. But instead of gray stone, its façade was salmon-colored stucco that resembled a seaside villa more than a place of worship. Inside, the space felt reverent—dark red carpet lined the floor, and another steep set of stairs led up to the sanctuary. We took our customary spot in the center row of pews, and each of us knelt to pray.

Soon, trumpets announced the processional: “O Come All Ye Faithful.” And all of us celebrated with the priest’s opening words: *Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.*

In recent years, it had become a tradition for Penny and her kids to eat Christmas Eve supper with her older sister and her family. We drove from church to Nancy’s house, still humming “Angels We Have Heard on High.” Nancy greeted us by saying, “Oh,

hello!” as if she were surprised, and delighted, to find us all on her doorstep. It was easy to see the family resemblance. Nancy’s features were softer than Penny’s, and the lines in her face deeper, but they shared high cheekbones and thick black hair. Nancy embraced us each in turn, and then wrapped her arms around Penny, closed her eyes, and sighed.

Nancy had moved out of the city into a single-story house with low ceilings and small rooms. The coffee tables and sideboards were clear of piles, so the space felt cozy, not cluttered.

“Feng shui,” Nancy had explained..

We all moved back to the kitchen, greeting Nancy’s daughters and helping ourselves to drinks. Nancy asked me, “How was the service?”

“Beautiful.”

As if she knew what I was thinking, Nancy said, “I haven’t been to church in ages.” She started to chop vegetables for a salad, but every time she spoke, she raised her head to look at me and put the knife down. “It’s a little too traditional for me, I think.”

I shrugged. “I like the tradition of it. It makes me feel connected to the past.” Honest words, but guarded. Nancy was an evangelist for a spiritual approach to life, and I suppose I was too. For me, that approach involved the structure and tradition of the church, of reading the Bible and praying, of private devotional time. For Nancy, spirituality took a different shape, and I was hesitant to enter into a discussion of the merits of tradition. So I didn’t wait for her response, but said instead, “What can I do to help with dinner?”

Nancy’s eyes returned to the task in front of her. “Yes,” she said, “dinner. You can take this tray over to the coffee table and enjoy yourself.”

After depositing the platter of cheese and crackers with Peter, Thomas, and two of Nancy's daughters, I stood in front of a bookcase that lined the wall next to the mantel. One shelf was devoted to spiritual themes, and I picked up a slim volume called *Walking a Sacred Path*. On its black cover was the design of a labyrinth. I knew from Penny that Nancy's attention, in recent years, had turned to labyrinths. Still standing, I skimmed the table of contents and the first few pages. Soon, Nancy stood by my side.

"Have you ever walked the labyrinth?" she asked.

I shook my head. "The closest I've come was a maze of hedges on a fourth grade field trip."

She corrected me earnestly, "But a labyrinth isn't a maze. There is only one path to walk. You can't get lost and there are no dead ends." I looked down at the design on the book cover and my eyes traced the circuitous path into the center and back out to the edges again. I could envision Nancy walking the labyrinth slowly, releasing her fears and sorrows, breathing in peace and safety.

She pulled another book off the shelf—this one filled with glossy color photos of European cathedrals—and opened it to a page on Chartres. With her index finger, she traced the outline of the labyrinth etched into its stone floor. "The point of the labyrinth is stillness and reflection, centering yourself." Nancy closed her eyes for a moment.

Part of me was curious about Nancy's fascination with labyrinths, with yoga and reiki, with eastern religions. But I refrained from more questions. It was as if I would violate my own rules if I expressed too much interest in any religious practice that stretched beyond the bounds of traditional Christianity. I placed the book back on the shelf with a smile. "Thanks for explaining it," I said.

Nancy summoned us all to the table, and her green eyes sparkled as she looked at her daughters, nephews, and sister. Before taking our seats, we formed a circle. Nancy began her prayer: “Dear Mother Earth...” Thomas and Peter suppressed giggles until we all squeezed hands and said, “Amen.”

Although our group filled all the chairs at Nancy’s dining room table, I did think about the family members who weren’t present. In my family, four generations gathered on Christmas Eve for a big meal after church. But in New Orleans, it was customary to socialize with friends that night. Penny and Nancy’s siblings, parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins would all be making the rounds from one cocktail party to the next. In contrast, Nancy had removed herself from Uptown society. And although Penny hadn’t moved to the suburbs like her older sister, she had given up alcohol, and she did forgo most stops on the social circuit. I never knew if the two of them felt pushed out, or if their absence was deliberate.

I did know that the family was fractured, like a raft that hit a boulder and began to break apart. I was under the impression that Penny and Nancy stuck together, talking daily and visiting often, but over dinner, I heard Nancy say quietly to Penny, “We’ve missed you on Friday nights.”

Penny kept her eyes on her food and shrugged. Nancy caught me watching. She explained, “There are four of us who’ve been getting together for a girls’ night out for years. We’ve missed Pen lately.”

“I’ve been busy,” Penny murmured.

“I just want you to know we miss you.”

“I needed some space,” Penny said.

Nancy nodded. Before their lapse in conversation grew into a pause that filled the whole table, she announced, "I have gifts!" The festive mood returned as we opened tokens of Nancy's generosity and eccentricity. I received a tin of ginger root candy, Peter a cheese grater.

As we paused before dessert, I stood to clear my plate, and it was almost a relief to leave the table for a few moments. I felt welcomed by all, but sitting among a group of native New Orleanians heightened my status as an in-law who didn't know the customs or the old stories. I rinsed dishes in the kitchen for a while, content to watch as Nancy and Penny retreated to two chairs in front of the fire, and to listen for laughter from all the cousins who stayed around the table. It was the type of evening I knew Peter loved, and I smiled to see him deep in conversation, using his hands to accentuate a point.

I sat down again as they began to recollect childhood Christmas Eves. We lingered past midnight, helping ourselves to pecan pie, drinking wine, until Penny finally stood in the doorway and said, "Boys, Amy Julia, time to head home."

On Christmas Day, Penny arose earlier than the rest of us, but she returned to bed with the paper and a cup of coffee. She worked the crossword puzzle until sleep approached again, and woke hours later to the sound of her sons in the kitchen.

By late morning, we all sat in the back room of the house, contemplating our presents in childlike anticipation. "I went a little nuts," Penny declared with a shy smile.

"What do you mean?" Thomas asked.

"Well, I kept finding more that I thought you might need," she said.

"Want," Peter responded. "Things you thought we might want."

“Whatever,” she said, shaking her head at Peter but grinning at the same time. “It’s Christmas! Open your gifts!”

We progressed through a pile of presents with murmurs of delight along the way. Penny instructed Peter and Thomas to open, simultaneously, photographs of their great-grandfather’s sailboat, the *Windjammer*. Her joy was palpable when both of them sat with the frames in their laps and studied the pictures. Each of them ran their fingers along the glass as if they might touch the wooden hull and feel the wind at their backs.

Peter handed his mother her gift at the end. “Here you go, Mom,” he said, with a hint of hesitation. “I hope you like it.”

Penny clapped at the distinctive robin’s-egg blue box with “Tiffany and Co.” written on top. She pulled the silky white ribbon. Inside the jewelry case lay a small silver cross, the four arms designed like teardrops. She held it in her palm, letting the chain dangle over the edge. “I love it,” she said. “Will you clasp it for me?”

So much went unsaid—that Peter had acted almost like a little boy behind the counter as he considered this gift, that he had been nervous about buying an overtly Christian present, but that he wanted it to be a reminder of a faith they held in common. His big fingers fumbled with the tiny clasp. The chain stretched tight around Penny’s neck.

“Is it too small?” Peter asked.

“I love it,” she said again. “I’ll get a larger chain.”

Penny and Peter both looked bashful all of a sudden, as if the gift tapped into intimacy unfamiliar to them both.

Three days after we returned to Richmond, we received a note that echoed my thoughts. Penny wrote, *Dear Amy Julia and Peter, I simply love the cross you gave me. It is perfect. I've been wanting a cross but all the ones I've seen are so hard looking. My cross is much softer. It brings to mind not only the hardness and brutality of Christ's death but also his love for us. I loved being with you all for Christmas. I think I could feel at home anywhere so long as I was near you. Be safe, rest up, and know that you are well loved from and in this part of the world. Love, the most blessed Mother and Mother-in-Law ever!*