

## Chapter One

It all started the last time she came to visit, in the fall of 2002. Penny flew in 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 drove 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 didn't know it would herald the beginning of so many changes. The only thing I can remember now is the leaves—the flashes of amber, the dappled yellow and green, the ones that looked like red roses.

And I can remember my approach to the airport. I saw Penny from a distance, standing at the curb, bags stacked neatly at her feet. She hadn't noticed me yet, so I had a moment to admire her profile—her strong jaw and high cheekbones. I couldn't help shaking 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 replied, trying to match her enthusiasm. I kissed her on the cheek and she squeezed my shoulder. It felt a little awkward, as if we didn't know whether to embrace or shake hands. And I was nervous—afraid I would say the wrong thing, or somehow fail to welcome her properly.

“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 at the blue sky. With her eyes closed, she said, “I love this time of year.” She inhaled deeply through her nose.

I felt my face soften a little, just from listening to her smooth, low voice, with its slight trace of a drawl. “Well,” I said, easing the trunk closed, “I’m glad you made it.”

Once we reached the highway, Penny cracked her window open and the breeze ruffled her short dark hair. She reminded me of a patient child, sitting still and staring straight ahead, her manicured hands folded neatly in her lap. After a moment of silence, she said, “You know, the thing I miss most about living up north is autumn.”

I didn’t think of our home in Richmond, Virginia, as “up north,” but I replied, “I don’t think I could ever move farther south. I’d miss the seasons too much.”

“Winter I can do without,” Penny said. “But fall—“ she paused and her voice sounded almost sultry as she continued, “God, I forgot how much I love the colors and that delicious fall air.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but I couldn’t think of anything to say. Despite our best efforts, the little bits of conversation so far had felt stilted, as if Penny and I were trying to ride a seesaw together but couldn’t find a rhythm, as if the fulcrum were in the wrong spot. So I pretended to concentrate on the road, and I started to wonder what Penny thought of me. I came up with two possibilities. There was the cute, sweet version of me—the one that deferred to Peter in decisions about where to go to dinner or what movie to rent, the one that blushed easily, the one that dressed in pastel colors and loved cats. Or there was the smart, assertive version of me—the one who had skipped kindergarten, the one who led a team of five staff members and two dozen volunteers, the

one who wasn't sure she ever wanted to have children. With Penny, I tried to play the cute, sweet part. I think I was afraid she wouldn't like me, wouldn't approve, if she knew the rest.

I know now that Penny was more generous than I gave her credit for, and if I had been more willing to show her all of myself, we probably would have become friends sooner. As it was, I felt insecure, sure I couldn't measure up. I had heard too many stories from her past, stories of glamour and sophistication, stories that sounded nothing like my quiet and predictable rule-keeping life. Penny had grown up in a world where girls became Queens. Not just debutantes, Queens. During Carnival, the season that culminates on Mardi Gras Day, Penny was 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 that invitation, 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 went on, "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."

Lillian was right. I didn't really understand the significance of that gesture. Not until I was living in New Orleans with Penny did I even begin to comprehend the way the city revolved around Carnival. Still, that story about waving the scepter gave me a picture of Penny as a young woman, a picture of someone sparkling and welcoming and fun all at the same time. That person seemed hidden now, as if she had packed up her young self along with the gloves and the tiara.

Penny's beauty was quieter these days, more subtle. I stole another glance at her, sitting in the passenger seat next to me. Her hair held specks of gray, and the lines of time had begun to mark her temples. It made me wonder if she would grow old alone, and I finally broke the silence to ask her, "Do you ever think about moving out of New Orleans?"

She sighed and fingered the chain of her necklace. "Yes and no," she said. "Anytime I see you all I want to be closer."

And although I couldn't imagine living near Penny, I didn't mean to underscore the distance when I asked, "Has Peter told you that we're talking about moving north?"

"No," she replied, sharply.

“We’re just starting to think about it,” I said, realizing I had forgotten how little Peter confided in his mother. “I’ll probably apply to Seminary,” I went on, trying to keep my tone light, “and he wants to find a job teaching in a boarding school.”

Peter and I had actually been talking for months about a potential move, and I already felt a prick of nostalgia at the thought of leaving Richmond. I loved the hole-in-the-wall restaurants and the Byrd Theater, with its \$2.00 movie tickets and live organist at the beginning of Saturday night’s show. I loved our friends—from our elderly neighbors who helped tend the flowers in our backyard, to the other young couples we knew from church, to Peter’s college roommates who lived a mile away. But I didn’t tell Penny any of that.

“So you’d end up in New England?” she asked, and her voice still sounded tight.

“Probably,” I answered. Then I backpedaled, with a statement that wasn’t entirely true, “It’s all tentative now.”

When Penny didn’t reply, I glanced over. She had turned her face toward the window so I couldn’t tell for sure, but I thought she pulled her hand to her cheek to wipe away a tear.

As Penny fell silent again, I felt a little exasperated. We already lived a plane ride away from her, what difference would it make if we moved? If I had been bold enough to ask about her tears, maybe she would have told me then what she mentioned months later, that she had been thinking about moving to Virginia, for the chance to be near her sons. But instead of asking for an explanation, I fiddled with the radio.

The mood lightened when Penny turned her head towards me. “I just love the Dixie Chicks,” she said, and she began to hum along.

We exited the highway and turned left onto Wilmington Avenue. Small houses lined each side of the street and a grassy median ran through the middle. Our house resembled an English cottage, with ivy crawling along the brick and covering most of the façade. I liked that it was old—built in the 1930’s—and that it was ours, even though I often caught myself thinking it couldn’t be real. Who were these people, these kids, playing at grown-up with a mortgage and two cars and bills to pay? I happily reminded myself that it was us, still working out the kinks of early married life and home ownership, still trying to remember to mow the lawn and trim the hedges. With Penny seated next to me, I had a sense of my life working out exactly the way I wanted it to, exactly the way I had planned. It was easy for me to judge her, to think that if only she had tried harder, things would have worked out for her too.

Peter approached us as I parked the car. His black hair was wet, which meant he must have had time to shower after coaching soccer that afternoon, and he wore casual clothes—khakis, a polo shirt, a belt with our prep school’s insignia.

He opened the door for his mother and offered his arm. “Hi, Momma,” he said, leaning forward to embrace her.

She kissed him on the cheek with a loud smooch and grinned. “Hello, Pierre.”

“Hi beautiful,” he said to me, directing his attention over the top of the car, as Penny moved towards her bags in the trunk.

I returned his gaze with a blank face. He had forgotten about the soccer game until the day before, leaving me to retrieve Penny from the airport on my own.

When I didn’t reply, he raised his eyebrows and widened his eyes, in what I knew was an expression of contrition.

It never took much for him to appease me. I shook my head, smiling now, and any leftover resentment slid from my consciousness like snow off a slate roof. “How was the game?” I asked.

He grinned. “We won.”

“Good job,” Penny remarked, unaware that as she was rummaging through her luggage, her son had reconciled with his wife.

I stood on tiptoe to kiss Peter in greeting. He squeezed my hand and winked.

“I got that, Mom,” he said, as she started to lift her bag. He slung it over his shoulder and wrapped his other arm around her to escort her inside.

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 in order for her to enter our lives, and slowing down felt like sitting in a stopped car as a long freight train rumbled past. I wish we had spent time with her differently—exploring the city, going to museums, finding fun restaurants. Instead, I made sure to line up projects. That way, any lack of conversation could be filled with activity, and at the end of the weekend I would feel as though I had accomplished something. So the next day, we started by wrapping presents for all the weddings Peter and I had missed in the previous year. Once the packages were addressed and piled at one end of the table, Penny asked, “What’s next?”

“There is one other thing,” I said. I wiggled my wedding band off my finger and pushed it back on again, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

“Yes?” she prompted.

“We could address our Christmas cards,” I said, “if everyone’s willing.”

“Y’all are so organized,” Penny murmured, and I couldn’t tell if it was a note of respect or a hint of disdain that I heard in her voice.

“I take no credit,” Peter said with a shrug. “Amy Julia’s fully responsible.”

My face felt hot. “It will be crazy in December,” I explained. “Besides, I love your handwriting.”

That night, Peter stretched out on the floor of our den to affix stamps while Penny and I sat cross-legged on the green pullout sofa, addressing envelopes. Penny perched her reading glasses—“cheaters,” she called them—upon her nose, but she let the small purple frames dangle whenever she looked up to make a comment. After a few minutes of small talk, Penny said to Peter, “Amy Julia tells me you’re thinking of teaching in a boarding school next year?”

Without turning around to look at her, he murmured, “Mmmhmm...”

“So you’d probably move?” she asked.

“Probably,” Peter said, sounding vague.

I hadn’t told him that I thought Penny had cried when I brought up moving on the way home from the airport. I wished I could catch his eye, somehow prod him to say more. When he didn’t offer any further comment, I said, “I think Peter would be a really good teacher. And he could coach soccer and tennis.”

“Actually, Mom,” Peter said, twisting his torso to look at her, “I could use your help with my résumé.”

“Sure,” she replied. “I can do that.” Penny knew how to improve a résumé. She worked in the Tulane Law School Office of Career Placement. Still, I heard resignation in

her voice, and I could only guess that she wanted to be more than a career consultant to her son. Abruptly, she stacked her envelopes on the table next to her and said, “I think I’ll go have a cigarette before bed.”

Peter and I didn’t say anything as Penny grabbed her purse and walked out of the room. But as soon as I heard the back door latch behind her, I asked in a hushed tone, “Why didn’t you say more?”

He looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“You just seem so unwilling to talk to your mom,” I said. “Sometimes you’re so indifferent.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know why. Habit, I guess.” He pushed himself up from the floor. When I didn’t move, he gestured toward the sofa. “Let’s make the bed.”

We piled the pillows in the corner in silence, but then Peter said, using his nickname for me, “Age, I think it’s hard for you to understand. There were so many years with Mom crying all the time, and there was never enough money, and without a father around…” He trailed off. “I think it’s hard for you to understand,” he repeated.

I didn’t reply as I tugged at a pillowcase. I filled in what I thought he meant: *Hard for you—with parents who are married and never fight and never cry and never worry about money—hard for you to understand.*

“I had to distance myself,” he said, with a slight edge to his voice.

I nodded, but I didn’t look him in the eye. He walked out of the room. Then I just stood there, hugging a pillow, trying to work through their family dynamic as if it were a puzzle I could solve by rearranging the pieces in my head. I wanted to understand Peter’s reticence with his mother. The only thing that came to mind was a story he had told me

years earlier, back in boarding school. We had been dating for a few months, and it was Peter's seventeenth birthday. I took him out to dinner, and towards the end of the meal, I asked him about his best and worst birthdays ever. I can't recall his best, but I can still see the quick flash of hurt in his eyes and hear his abrupt, clipped laugh as he said, "The worst? That was freshman year. I waited all day for someone to remember it was my birthday." He looked past me. "No gift, no card, not even a phone call. It was eleven that night when I called Mom." He laughed again, "And the funny thing was, she didn't even know why I was calling. Even then, I had to tell her what day it was."

That story stuck with me, not because of what it said about Penny as a mother. She was a great mom in lots of ways—managing the boys' school and soccer and girlfriends and fistfights by herself for so many years. She had simply forgotten his birthday. I remembered the story because of what it said about Peter. I think for him, that birthday was the end. I think he decided not to need his mother anymore. So although he saw her a few times each year—every other Christmas, a few weeks in the summer, perhaps Spring Break—the boy Penny raised grew into a young man, and once he left home, he did so without much guidance from her.

Now that Peter was an adult, Penny knew her son was well-liked, good-looking, intelligent—a "man's man" who could throw a football with ease, share hunting stories, trade stock tips. But she couldn't relate much to any of those traits. If anything, she recoiled from them. I wanted her to see, I wanted Peter to show her, that there was so much more to him than an interest in sports and business. He had inherited a spark from her that she rarely saw. And I wanted Penny to know that part of her son—the part that faithfully wrote letters to me every day in college, the part that enjoyed art museums, the

part that grabbed my elbow on the street so I would stop and smell a flower. I loved that Peter wanted to paint every room in our house a different color, and that he gladly conversed with old ladies in home decorating stores to find the proper shade of coral for the dining room walls. I loved that even though he always said he didn't understand poetry, he would sporadically pick up our high school edition of Norton's Anthology and page through. I loved that he made faces in the mirror and pulled me into his arms when he felt like dancing and that the joy of victory at the end of any major sporting event, from the Olympics to the World Series, brought tears to his eyes. But I hated the fact that with his mother, he kept the tender, spontaneous, boyish elements of himself hidden.

I heard footsteps in the hallway, and I shook myself out of my reverie as Penny walked into the room. Peter was close behind her. "Hey, Mom," he said, and she turned around. "It's nice to have you here."

She wrinkled her nose and smiled at the same time, as if she knew he was offering an apology of sorts. "It's nice to be here," she replied, and he bent down to kiss her goodnight.

I moved toward the doorway and asked, "Penny, do you have everything you need?"

"Everything," she said, nodding her head once at me and once at Peter.

I kissed her on the cheek. "Help yourself to anything in the kitchen if you wake up before us." I felt Peter's hands on my shoulders. "See you tomorrow," I said.

Penny smiled in return. "Goodnight."

Once Peter and I lay under the covers, I asked, my voice low in case Penny could hear us, “Was it a good day?”

“It was a good day,” he replied. “She’s a good woman.” I lay my head against his chest, breathing in the smell of toothpaste and soap. He murmured, “Sometimes I’m such a jerk.”

“But sometimes you’re not,” I offered.

Peter sighed. “I just wish I could give her something to make her happy.” He ran his fingers along my hip.

“She would be the first one to tell you that it’s not your job to make her happy,” I replied.

“Yeah,” he said.

I propped myself up on my elbow to study his face. I was struck more than ever before by how much he resembled Penny. He stood a head taller, but he still looked like a young male version of her—brown eyes with specks of green, the same well-defined jaw, olive-hued skin. “You look just like her,” I said. I brushed my finger against his cheekbone.

Peter smiled a little, but he didn’t speak as he shifted onto his side and drew me near. He turned out the light, and I closed my eyes to receive his kiss.

## Chapter Two

I woke up the next morning a little worried about the day ahead. Church would take up a few hours, but we had nothing planned for the afternoon and evening. When I expressed my concern to Peter, his dimples showed. “Naptime!” he exclaimed, and I sighed. I didn’t think it was funny. I didn’t want everything to feel so forced, so uneasy, when we were around Penny. I wanted natural conversation about things that mattered, but I didn’t want to make another comment that brought tears. And I didn’t want to witness another exchange that left her on the porch, alone, smoking a cigarette.

So when we sat down for brunch after church, I looked for a cheerful topic. Penny’s younger son was engaged, with the wedding set for the end of May. I asked her, “What do you think about Thomas and Sarah getting married?”

I had expected an exuberant response, but Penny simply stared at the wall behind me. “You four have just done it so differently,” she said, quietly, as if she were talking to herself. She poked at her eggs with her fork, her forehead creased.

“What do you mean?” I replied, even though I had a sense of how she would answer. Peter and I had married as soon as we graduated from college, and Thomas and Sarah would be one year out of school when they exchanged their vows. Penny had stayed single throughout her twenties.

Without intending to, Penny affirmed my thoughts. “When I was your age,” she said, looking up, “I wasn’t thinking about marriage.” She explained, “I was in New York,” as if that said all we needed to know.

“How did Hans ask you to marry him?” I asked, curious. But as soon as I said it, I wondered if I had asked the wrong question. I glanced at Peter. He looked as if he were suppressing a smile. “What?” I asked him, before Penny could reply.

“Nothing,” Peter said, grinning outright now. “I just don’t understand why I never think to ask these questions. That’s all.” He took another bite.

I said, “Sorry, Penny,” and then repeated, “How did Hans ask you to marry him?”

She wrinkled her forehead and replied vaguely, “I’m not sure. I told him I was pregnant and he said something like, ‘Then we’ll have to get married even sooner.’” She fixed her eyes on her plate as she talked. “I remember thinking, who is this guy and why does he want to marry me?” Her laugh sounded hollow.

Years earlier, I had heard the details from Peter. Penny met Hans at a party. A few weeks later, she told him she was pregnant. They wed to great fanfare in New Orleans, just as her belly began to look round. As I reminded myself of the story, I felt the distance between Penny’s life experience and my own. An unplanned pregnancy and hurried marriage sounded dramatic and clandestine, as unknown and risky to me as race car driving or working for the CIA.

“Did you love him?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m not sure I knew what that was.”

“Do you wish you hadn’t married him?” I persisted.

For the first time that morning, a true smile flashed across her face, and all of a sudden her eyes looked young. She shook her head. “I wouldn’t have my boys if I hadn’t married him.”

The simple honesty of her words settled in. I decided not to probe any further into Penny's past, and I wished Peter would introduce a new subject. Instead, 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.

Finally, Penny pushed her plate away and folded her napkin. "There's something I want you to see," she said, standing up from the table. 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 looked as if it had crumpled. She began to cry.

Her tears were unexpected, and they startled me a little, but I didn't feel annoyed, or guilty, as I had the day before. I just felt the beginning of an ache inside my chest, thinking of Peter's words, "I wish I could give her something to make her happy."

*He should touch her hand*, I thought, but Peter didn't budge. I broke the silence, sounding cheery and false, "It's no problem. Cry all you want!"

Penny shook her head, and she didn't look at me. With her eyes on the photograph, she said, "I've been crying about everything lately. I don't know what's wrong with me," she repeated.

Later, I would figure it out—that Penny expressed her emotions much more readily than I, that tears and laughter were everyday events for her, and that there was no need for me to rush in with comfort, or pretend they weren't there. But I had grown up with a mother who only shed tears 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, firmly. “Thanks.” She wiped the tears away 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 stood up and 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. Penny’s older sisters, Nancy and Leelee, smiled in the sunlight, and he clasped both hands around Penny’s ankles as she sat atop his shoulders, looking delighted to be up so high. I saw a sweet scene of a young father with his three girls, but I wasn’t sure why this photograph 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.” Her tears had disappeared as quickly as they had come, like a rainstorm in the middle of a sunny day. Now 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. I had never met Penny’s father in person, even though he had been alive for the first three years that Peter and I were dating. 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 tears, the tone of 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. Now, I see so much strength within that fragility, strength I don’t think she even recognized in herself. Now, I remember 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. Now, I can see her graciousness. But back then, as she handed over that photo and cried again, 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 suspected that we could press her to say more, and yet I simply 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 still and quiet for a few minutes to collect her thoughts. But then, as Peter and I began to clear the table, she said, in a decisive tone, “Peter, I need to ask you a question.”

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

“Okay,” he said.

Penny looked resolute, with her shoulders squared and her face stern. She seemed to be gathering the courage to say whatever would come next. “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, as if she hoped to catch the tears before they left her eyes.

“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, Penny’s tears spilled over. 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 for a minute, as if he were debating whether to speak the words inside his head. 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 gulped, feeling my shoulders tighten. Another thing that had changed in Peter after he moved away from home was that he 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.” Peter and I shared similar views, but I generally stayed away from God as a topic of discussion with Penny. Over the years, though, she and Peter had gone head to head on any number of religious topics. So I was nervous 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.

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. I had felt a mixture of respect and discomfort as she 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 closed my eyes, as if I were afraid to see Penny’s response. 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. Any other time I had heard them disagree, they had sounded like a mother and child, arguing. They spoke as two adults now, respectful and calm.

Penny said softly, “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. He grasped the stove behind him.

“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 forehead wrinkled, as if what she had said didn’t make sense. His voice was quiet but firm when he responded, “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 the question. Her life hadn’t gone the way she wanted. There had been so much pain—her parent’s divorce, her husband’s alcoholism and then their divorce, her own struggles with depression and loneliness—and there had been so little redemption. But she did have Thomas and Peter. They both were happy, and they both had a sense of strength and purpose to them, when they could have been filled with anger or despair. “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 simple statement 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, as if to protect herself from harm.

“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. He said, “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.”

The tears fell as Penny said, “I want God in my life.”

I could hear the tap of rain on the roof. Peter nodded, his face soft.

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

I looked up, startled. I hadn’t expected her to suggest a group prayer. But even though we hadn’t ever done this before, 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. Our words were not insincere, but I had the distinct impression that while we were saying prayers, Penny was talking to God. I remember her prayer distinctly, because in the months to follow it would haunt me. It was a simple plea. She said, “Help me, Lord. Please, help me.”

### Chapter Three

On the evening after Penny flew home, Peter and I basked in the cozy silence of our living room. He paged through the leftover Sunday New York Times. I sat on the other end of the sofa, my feet extended until they touched his thigh. I couldn't stop thinking about our time with Penny. It had been different from any other visit, as if a connection had been established that went beyond obligation, as if all our pretenses had been stripped away for just one moment.

My relationship with Penny had always been cordial, but we had never been particularly close. Through the years, we had offered one another indirect and unsolicited advice. Once, back when I was in college, Peter told his mother I was struggling with an eating disorder. During my next visit to New Orleans, she gave me a bright blue pamphlet with "Overeaters Anonymous" written on the front in bold white letters. "In case you're interested," she said, as she held out her hand. I murmured, "Thank you," the color rushing to my cheeks, and I threw away the pamphlet as soon as I got home. For her birthday, I had given Penny books with spiritual themes, one by Henri Nouwen, another by Kathleen Norris. Later I found them, spines unbroken, on the shelves in her back room. And then there was the summer when Penny sent me five of her favorite paperback novels. I only read one of them, and I wondered the whole time if Penny was trying to send me a message through the sassy feminist at its center. In the end, I think we both interpreted those gifts as what they were, gestures of affection and concern. But we never talked about them face-to-face.

After Penny's visit, I wanted to keep talking. I wanted to know if that prayer in the kitchen had changed anything. And yet I felt shy about bringing it up again. There

were risks—I didn't want to come off as manipulative or narrow-minded. I didn't want her to think we were trying to "fix" her, even though that may have been the case. And I didn't want to overanalyze what could have been a simple prayer that didn't need any further discussion. Besides all that, ringing in my memory was a conversation from the year before, when Penny had said to me, "I have a hard time talking with you and Peter about religion."

Her statement seemed to come out of the blue, as we were driving to the mall together. I said, "Oh," feeling a little embarrassed, and a little defensive, "I'm sorry."

"It's not that," she had replied. "I just feel like you have the vocabulary and that I don't know the right words to talk about it."

I hadn't wanted Penny to see that her comment flustered me, so I said, in as calm a voice as I could muster, "Well, we've been talking about God for a real long time. Maybe it's like speaking a foreign language. No one would hold it against you if you started taking Spanish right now and didn't learn it all by next month."

"Yeah," she had said, and she drew her finger towards her mouth to bite her cuticle before turning up the music on the radio. That visit, we didn't mention God again.

In retrospect, I shouldn't have blamed Penny for being wary of talking with me about religion. Not only had my words implied that I was a seasoned veteran in God-talk, but my life probably looked intimidatingly religious too. 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 my position was more hands-on. I worked directly with high school students, urging them to ask questions and argue, to figure out what they believed and why it mattered. I liked my job, but that

fall, I had begun to suspect that I was teaching answers to the wrong questions. Many students 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.

It’s funny, because Penny had told me that when it came to religion, she didn’t feel like she had the right words. Looking back on it, neither did I.

After a few moments of contemplation, circling through memories of all the years I had known Penny, I finally abandoned my concerns that she would think of me as a religious fanatic, and I decided to write her a note. I kept it short: *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.*

I read the note out loud to Peter.

He draped the paper over his knees to listen, nodded, and picked up the Week in Review as I finished. From behind the crinkled newsprint, he asked, “Don’t you think you’re being too optimistic?”

I pushed my toes into his legs, wanting his full attention, and replied, “What do you mean?”

He lowered the paper and said, sounding a little tired, “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. 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.

I decided to take another tack. “Speaking of your Mom,” I said, “I think we should spend Christmas in New Orleans.”

“Mmm,” he murmured, actively resisting this second attempt to draw his attention from world events.

“What do you think?” I persisted.

“I think you’re getting worked up over something that may not amount to anything. I’ve seen Mom get excited about God before.”

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. But all I said was, “The least we can do is support her, don’t you think?”

“I guess,” he said, sounding unconvinced.

“So,” I pushed on, fingering the note to Penny as I spoke, “Christmas in New Orleans?”

He finally put down the paper and turned toward me with a bemused expression on his face. “That’s fine,” he replied.

I leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. “I’ll buy the tickets,” I said.

For the rest of the fall, it didn’t feel as if anything had changed between us and Penny. I sometimes wondered if Peter was right and her prayer in the kitchen had been just one more phase. I felt too awkward to ask her about it. I did call to confirm that she would welcome our presence at Christmas, but she didn’t mention my note when we spoke. After that, about once a week I would ask Peter, “Have you talked to your mother lately?” and he would make the call. He always told her that I said hi.

Even so, Penny remained on my mind. When we sat in church on Sunday mornings, I often thought back to her visit and said a prayer on her behalf. I used her own words, “Help her, Lord. Please, help.” 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.”

We flew to New Orleans a few days before Christmas. Once we had landed, I realized for the first time that the airport was named after Louis Armstrong, as if to signal the fact that music and culture mattered more to the city than old mayors or governors. And even as we walked from the plane to the baggage claim, local color marked everything I saw—the food for sale included French donuts called beignets, canisters of creole seasonings, red beans, gumbo. Peter must have been thinking about the distinctiveness of his hometown too, because as we walked underneath a sign advertising brunch at Commander’s Palace, he 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 to the lugubrious lifestyle. I filled my lungs with air and slowed my pace after his comment, 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.” He had his laptop slung over one shoulder and he was pulling a suitcase, but he still reached out and grabbed my hand.

Penny picked us up 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. 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 driving with Penny—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, changing the way he addressed her and lowering his voice, “do you know your break 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.”

I wondered if Penny remembered the last time she and Peter had talked about break tags. I would never forget it, that night during my first ever visit to New Orleans, when Peter had been pulled over while driving Penny’s car. He had received a ticket because the brake tags were expired, and when he passed it along to Penny, she refused to pay. I can remember her accusations, that he must have been drinking or speeding, that he must have done something wrong to deserve the ticket. And I can remember his furious replies, and the shouts between them escalating as I wished I could melt into the carpet and disappear. But neither one of them seemed to be thinking about that night as we drove away from the airport, so I pushed the memory from my mind. We passed strip malls, gas stations, bowling lanes, and a quintessential New Orleans establishment, the drive-through daiquiri bar. The car bounced along the ramshackle streets, and 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, “And did you know that the

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

Peter and I both laughed when we heard his familiar refrain. 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, making an immediate transition to practical matters, “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 responded, staring straight ahead.

“When?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said vaguely, “a while ago.”

“Don’t you want to get it fixed?” he persisted.

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

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, with a mixture of amusement and nervousness. I loved the rapport between the two of them, but I also thought Peter was too hard on Penny. It was hard to believe he really cared about the money she spent on a bag of ice.

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 to finish smoking.

The scene had changed so quickly. Just a few minutes earlier, the three of them had rocked the car with their exuberant performance, but now the mood was subdued, and a tense silence stretched between Thomas and Penny. Buying a bag of ice, smoking a cigarette—they were 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. When I had first visited

New Orleans, almost ten years earlier, Thomas had been in middle school, with 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. The two brothers approached the house, and 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.

Peter knew I liked to unpack immediately, so he deposited our suitcase on the twin bed in Penny's guest room. Thomas, standing in the doorway, said, "I cannot believe you both can fit into that bed."

Peter, distracted by the task at hand, didn't reply. Thomas must have been expecting a witty comment, for the animation drained from his face when Peter remained silent.

I intervened. "It is kind of funny that we don't mind. Habit, I guess."

Thomas leaned against the doorframe as we settled into the room. We placed our clothing on hangers and in drawers. Peter retrieved a glass from the kitchen to hold our toothbrushes. I carried my cosmetic case into the bathroom, and I placed the most current issue of Time magazine next to the sink.

When I came back, Thomas crinkled his nose behind his glasses. He asked, "Do you bring reading material wherever you go?"

I shrugged in response, not sure what to say. Reading had always been my badge of honor, but I felt a little self-conscious about my bookishness too. My mother said I

taught myself to read on my own, and I had gobbled up books like candy ever since. I can remember clutching *Little House on the Prairie* to my chest when I walked into my first grade classroom and feigning illness to stay home and read *Gone with the Wind* when I was nine. It followed as a matter of course that I would write for our high school newspaper and become an English major in college and, now, carry reading material with me at all times.

Peter spoke up. “She’s ridiculous about reading,” he said.

I busied myself by zipping up the suitcase and sliding it underneath the bed.

Peter continued, with a mixture of pride and amusement in his voice, “She reads everywhere—standing in line at the grocery store, blow-drying her hair, brushing her teeth, before bed. Am I missing anything?” he asked.

I looked up, more composed now. “It’s just the most efficient way to use my time,” I said to Thomas. “And I like to read.”

“I like to read too,” he replied, “but you’ve taken it to a whole other level.”

“That’s my wife,” Peter said. He walked around the bed and hugged me from behind. “A whole other level.”

“Let’s go see your mom,” I said, interlacing my fingers with Peter’s as I extracted his hand from my waist.

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 us perched on the bar stools along the island. We must have all looked at her expectantly, as if she had an assignment to give us, 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.”

The boys loped out the side door. I took a deep breath, starting to feel relaxed, grateful for the time together. I looked over at Penny, intending to share a smile, but I caught her with a pained expression on her face, her hand pressed against her stomach. She said, apologetically, “I’ve been having some tummy issues lately.”

I didn’t understand. “What’s going on?” I asked.

“Working too hard, I guess,” she replied. “It stresses me out.”

“You do look like you’ve lost some weight,” I said earnestly.

“I make it a policy never to step on a scale,” she remarked. “But if this keeps up...” She grimaced and hurried out of the room.

For a short moment, I wondered if something might be wrong. I didn’t think of Penny as being under so much stress that it would cause stomach problems. But I didn’t dwell on it. I moved to get myself a Diet Coke, and I stopped to look at the array of photos and quotations hanging on the refrigerator in front of me. Most of them had been there for years. I recognized the list of “feeling words” that Penny instructed the boys to use whenever they were upset: “I feel (angry, hurt, sad) when you...” and I smiled at a pair of old photographs of Peter and Thomas. They were school pictures, taken in kindergarten and third grade. I had always loved the way those photographs captured their differences. First there was Thomas—his head cocked to one side, hair sticking up, a zany grin upon his face. The same year, Peter’s picture shows him poised and smiling. Peter told me he had slipped into the bathroom before photo-time to comb his hair back with water and part it neatly, in imitation of his father.

As I scanned the door, I noticed one new addition to Penny's refrigerator collage: a yellow index card with the words to a song called "This is to Mother You." When Penny returned from the bathroom, she found me staring at the lyrics. I kept rereading the chorus, "*All the pain that you have known/ All the violence in your soul/ All the wrong things you have done/ I will take from you when I come... I'm here to mother you...*"

"What a lovely song," I said.

She stood silently next to me for a moment. Her voice was gentle when she replied, "I need God to be my mother too."

It was the first mention of God between us since the fall, and I wanted to ask her what she meant. But before I could say more, Peter poked his head into the kitchen. "Mom, can you come instruct us?" he asked.

The front room, the most formal, was ready for decoration. Penny had a white sheet and a metal stand in place, and large tubs of ornaments already open on the floor. We worked together for the next hour—making sure the tree stood relatively straight, stringing the white lights and clipping the ornaments among its branches, pretending to argue over who placed the star on top. We celebrated our efforts by defrosting a container of grilliades—a New Orleans specialty of veal smothered in gravy and poured over creamy grits—and then by indulging ourselves in a pan of Penny's homemade fudge.

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. And then, "Tacky!" she cried out

with glee when she saw the brightly-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). 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, would you like to go shopping with me in the morning?” She stood in the doorway of her bedroom, and she looked as if she might turn away before I could answer.

“I’d love to,” I replied.

“Good,” she said. Her tone of voice and her posture shifted with my positive response. With a big grin she continued, “And then I’ll take you out to lunch.”

“Sounds great,” I said.

Penny blew a kiss, “Sweet dreams to you both.”

In the morning, our first stop was a frame shop. I stepped out of the car and noticed the street name—Prytania—printed in blue and white tile at my feet. It struck me as delightful that the street signs were interesting, and lovely, in and of themselves, even if they were a bit impractical. Penny and I ducked inside, and she placed two photographs on the counter and said to me, “I was thinking about giving these to the boys.” I saw two

black-and-white pictures of a schooner, sails full. “It’s the Windjammer,” she explained. “My grandfather’s boat.”

“They’d love them,” I murmured, as the shopkeeper approached.

He told Penny there was a two-week wait. Christmas was in three days. I watched, amazed, as she somehow charmed him into finishing the job by Christmas Eve. As we walked out of the shop, I was still trying to figure out how she had convinced him to put her order towards the front of the line. “Do you get things framed often?” I asked.

“Nope,” she said. “Hardly ever.” She seemed very proud of herself.

Our next stop was Uptown Square. There was nothing distinctive about the stores there, but we did pass by the place where Peter and I had registered for our wedding. I remembered standing amongst the fine china and crystal and silver, awed and insecure and excited. Penny had helped us select placemats and decorative wastebaskets, and the other unessential items that can make a home beautiful. My favorite discovery was a tissue box holder with dainty flowers and butterflies all around. I hadn’t even known that tissue box holders existed before that day.

Penny led me into the paper shop around the corner. She had suggested it after I told her I wanted to buy Peter a journal. I found one with handmade paper stitched together within a soft leather binding. It cost \$100. “It’s perfect,” I said, but my mind was racing. “I wasn’t planning to spend so much…” I trailed off.

“Amy Julia,” Penny said. “You only live once.” She winked and danced her way over to look at stationary samples. I bought the journal.

Our final stop was Dante’s Kitchen for lunch. Palm trees shaded the entrance to the restaurant, and inside, the walls were painted in vibrant colors—sunburst yellow, teal

blue, fire engine red. We must have 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?"

Her question took me off guard. She asked it so 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, thinking through my response. 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 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."