



Sometimes it takes weathering the storm to find the perfect shelter

DEBORAH
PIERSON DILL

PERFECT
SHELTER

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Prologue

*Blithe Settlement, Texas
Spring 2004*

"Please, God!"

Elaine stopped pounding and straining against the storm cellar door and held her breath, listening for some sign of help. A mockingbird chirped and sang happily, as if nothing had happened. A dog barked somewhere in the distance. Aside from that nothing. No sound. What if no one ever came?

Don't be stupid. She shook her head to dislodge the unnerving prospect. *Of course someone will come.* Too late! Fear clamped like a vise around her heart. She raised a hand to clutch at her tightening chest. If only there was a little light down here, it wouldn't be so bad. Up until now she'd done all right. But each minute that passed, each futile shove against the obstructed door, made it harder to contain the panic rising from the pit of her stomach trying to claw its way out.

She had to get out of here! But she could barely breathe, let alone move whatever had landed on top of the door. What if it was her truck or one of Mr. Chandler's Longhorns? She pushed again, measuring

the result this time. No. It wasn't that solid. But it wasn't moving either. She bent forward and braced her hands on her knees, gasping desperately to fill constricted lungs.

Don't scream. She took a deep breath. *It won't help.* She let it out. *No one will hear.* She stood up straight again, her head throbbing in time with the rhythm of her pounding pulse. The Chandlers, her nearest neighbors, lived a mile down the road. They had been a great source of help and comfort to her since Richard's death. The tightness in her chest bore down again, nearly driving her to her knees. But she'd run for the storm cellar without thinking to grab her phone. She had no way to contact them or anyone. She'd have to figure a way out of this alone. She closed her eyes and breathed.

"Please, God."

This time the words sounded calmer, less desperate, ready to negotiate as if God didn't know exactly how hopeless she was.

The sound of rustling debris nearly stopped her heart.

Her eyes snapped open, then she froze. *Surely not.* Surely she had not locked herself down here with something alive. She held her breath. Maybe she'd just imagined it. But the sound came again. Something moved. Or had it slithered? She spun around, slammed her open palms against the door and pushed with an adrenaline fed strength she didn't possess under ordinary circumstances. The obstruction outside shifted. Whatever had her trapped down here scraped and slid against the door. She shoved again and it lifted slightly, a couple of inches.

"Yes!"

She took a deep, determined breath, then wiped away tears she hadn't, until just now, realized had fallen. She braced herself, and shoved again. The sound of splintering wood on the outside was like music to her ears. She kept pushing, and her captor kept giving way. Daylight! *Thank you, God!*

She could only raise the door a foot or so. But that was all the space she needed. She pushed and pulled and squirmed her way back above ground. When she finally emerged into the gray afternoon light she sank to her knees, trembling and gasping for breath. *Thank you, God!*

For a long moment she knelt there, filling her lungs with fresh, cool air. Her pulse slowed, and the tightness in her chest relaxed. She swallowed repeatedly, trying to ease the soreness in her parched throat.

Water. That's what she needed. After a long cool drink she'd assess the damage. She pushed herself up off the rain soaked grass and turned for the house, but stopped short at the sight before her. The tightness in her chest returned and stole her breath as effectively as a punch to the gut. A pile of battered lumber and spewing broken plumbing lay where her beautiful home had stood not more than twenty minutes ago. Nothing remained intact except a border of immaculate, untouched flower beds filled with pink snapdragons.

Tears surged. She sniffed and tried to blink them away. Then she tried to rub them away. She turned back to the storm cellar. There *had* been a tornado. She *had* been down in the shelter. The tree that had been uprooted and tossed on top of the doors still lay there blocking the entrance. The lacerations and abrasions all

over her arms, face and back from pushing her way out were real, stinging, and bleeding. She turned around again. The house was still gone.

God, what now? It was all she could do to keep from falling back to her knees and shouting the question straight to heaven. *First Richard's death, now this?*

Had it really only been four weeks? She squeezed her eyes shut against the coming memory.

"Elaine, there's been an accident." Justin Barnett had broken the news.

An accident... The word echoed in her mind.

In her mind's eye Elaine pushed the screen door open and stepped onto her front porch, sheltered from the full force of the thunderstorm but still feeling the spray of it on her face.

"It's Richard," Justin continued, tears filling his eyes. "Elaine, he's..."

"What's going on?" Panic flared hot and bright. Elaine turned to the sheriff, Ed Lacey, who stood beside Justin. "What's happened?"

"Elaine, the creek is just running so high and fast. The current must have knocked his feet out from under him."

"Where is he?" Elaine dashed back into the house and grabbed a raincoat off the rack by the door, then pulled it on as she pushed her way back out the door.

"At the hospital, but Elaine—"

She nodded. "OK. What's wrong? How is he?"

Justin stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. "Elaine, he's gone."

She felt something like a punch in the stomach. It took the wind right out of her. "He...he's...what?"

"He drowned."

Elaine remembered feeling her knees buckle and Justin catching her before she hit the porch, but could recall nothing else about that day except the sight of Richard's body, cold and lifeless on the hospital gurney.

Now the home they'd shared was gone, too.

God, what will You take next? What do I have left?
Aunt Laura?

Aunt Laura! She should get to town, to check on her great aunt. She should check on her neighbors. Together they'd come up with a plan. Somebody had to have a plan. She turned and ran for the driveway, but stopped dead after a few strides. Her truck...She scanned the rubble and the pasture beyond, but it was nowhere in sight. And that could only mean that, wherever it had landed, it probably wasn't fit to drive.

Something hung from a limb of a mangled mesquite tree across the field. She squinted hard, trying to bring it into focus through her tear-blurred vision. Her purse? Elaine rushed for it, stirring a small flock of screeching guineas from their refuge in a patch of tall buffalo grass.

A spark of anger flashed inside her. "How is it," she muttered to the sky, wiping her running nose on the cuff of her sleeve, "that those stupid birds survived, but my home—*my life!*—is gone? Haven't I tried to please You? Haven't I done everything I was supposed to do?"

The spark set fire to something inside and it drove her. She clambered up into the tree to find her purse still zipped and, except for hanging from a tree limb, perfectly normal. Not a scratch on it. She dropped back to the ground and pulled open the zipper. Everything was there; cash, credit cards, lip gloss, keys.

"Thank You *so* much for sparing my keys!" With a furious shout she drew her arm back and threw the keys as hard as she could toward the rubble.

The sound of a siren drifted intermittently through the silence, growing steadier and louder as the gray clouds began to break up and give way to clear blue patches of sky. A cool breeze picked up, as if what had preceded it had been the gentlest of showers. It would be a perfect spring day—at least what was left of it would be. The irony brought a fresh sting of tears.

She *should* be thankful for her life. Elaine cast another glance at the scattered debris. If she hadn't been caught outside...If she'd gone to the house instead of that musty old cellar...She'd be dead.

But no. She wouldn't thank God for sparing her life. Why should she? What good was her life after everything He'd taken from her? What kind of pawn was she in His perfect *plan*? And what kind of plan was it that stripped her of everything truly important and left her with nothing but a useless set of keys? She was finished with trying to please God. She turned from the scene, slung her purse over her shoulder, and started walking.

A sheriff's department patrol car rolled slowly down the debris strewn road toward her as she climbed over a tree that had dropped like a twig, blocking its progress. Almost before the car had come to a stop, the driver's door flew open. Justin Barnett jumped out and ran toward her.

She gritted her teeth and suppressed a groan. This was the last thing she needed. Sweet, solicitous Justin, telling her that everything would be OK was the absolute *last* thing in the world she needed at this moment.

"Elaine, are you OK? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine." Justin surveyed her from head to toe, then he reached out to her, as if to offer support. "You're bleeding. Elaine...your house..."

She shrugged away from his touch and fought hard to resist the impulse to physically push him away. "It's gone." Her voice trembled with rage, but she was so tired of pretending to be OK she made no effort to mask it.

Justin glanced from the remains of her home and back to her again, the stunned look on his face expressing plainly that he had never before witnessed this level of destruction either.

Elaine followed his gaze back to the rubble. "Can you give me a ride into town?"



"Elaine, the bus is here."

Elaine started and tore her gaze away from the television set behind the convenience store counter. How long had she been here, staring at the Weather Channel? She glanced at her watch. Almost two hours.

"Elaine, darlin'? Did you hear me?"

She nodded, stood, and stretched. "Yes. Thank you, Mrs. Simon. I'm ready."

When she turned for the door, she almost ran right into Justin.

"I was hoping I'd make it before the bus got here."

For a second the breath caught in her chest and she couldn't tear her gaze from his. His eyes always looked so startlingly blue, but they seemed particularly intense just now. Maybe it was the way they contrasted

with his dark hair and lashes. Or maybe it was something about the tan of his uniform. Maybe it was the now cloudless blue sky visible through the clear glass door behind him. Maybe she could get lost in those eyes and forget everything that had happened up until this moment. He loved her. That was something she still had.

"Where are you gonna go?" The sound of his voice drew her unwillingly back to reality.

Elaine shrugged, looking down to fidget with the ticket in her hand. "The bus is going to Dallas."

He swallowed. "What's in Dallas?"

"Guess I'll find out when I get there." She tried to smile. "I have a few friends..."

"You have friends here." Justin's voice sounded hoarse. "Stay."

She shook her head and pinched the bridge of her nose to stem the coming flow of tears. "I don't want to stay here." She forced the words past her constricted throat. "I don't want to live here anymore. I never wanted to come back here, anyway..." She let her voice trail off with another shake of her head. "I'm gonna find another place." She took a deep breath and made up her mind for good, steeling herself against the look of desolation on Justin's face. "Maybe in Dallas, maybe somewhere else entirely. But not here. I just can't stay here anymore."

"Elaine..." He took a few steps toward her. "I know you've had a bad time these last few weeks..." He stopped and shook his head as if he knew the words were totally insufficient. "Since Richard..." His voice broke and he drew in a deep shuddering breath, dropping his gaze to his boots. "You've got friends here, too. There are people who love you here. What

about your aunt and everybody at church. They'll take care of you." He met her gaze again. "I'll take care of you. God will take care of you."

"You think?" Even when he dropped his gaze to the floor, she didn't regret the bitter sentiment. But she did regret directing it at him. She laid an apologetic hand on his arm, then started to move past him, but he took hold of her hand and turned her to face him.

"Elaine, don't go." Before she could pull herself free, he drew her close and wrapped his arms around her. "Please don't go," he whispered against her hair.

She stiffened and raised her hands to his chest to push him away, but as he held her tightly all the fight drained out of her. Her eyelids drifted closed and she breathed deeply, finally leaning into him, letting him hold her. Her arms slid around him and she laid her head against his shoulder, feeling comfort for the first time since Richard's death.

Oh, Justin. She nearly sighed his name. Maybe she could stay. Maybe she should. Justin *would* take care of her, even if she never loved him the way she'd loved Richard...

Richard. No. She shook her head and pushed away from him.

Justin might take care of her, but she had her doubts as to whether God would. And she would not stay here, the place to which He had so clearly called her and Richard, and subject herself to more heartache at the hands of a God whom she had spent her life trying to please.

"I won't stay here." She took a big step back, shaking her head. Then she turned and walked quickly away from him. Tears threatened, and she couldn't let them get the better of her again. If she started crying

now, she feared she'd never stop.

Outside the bus waited. She climbed aboard, fighting the impulse to look back. Knowing that if she did, she might regret leaving, and leaving was something she needed to do now. She squeezed her eyes shut and breathed deeply. But as the bus lurched forward Justin's name drifted through her mind and she turned to look out the window despite her intention not to.

Justin stood, hands on his hips, head hung in dejection. Glancing up as the bus turned to leave the parking lot, he noticed her watching him. He took one step, then another toward the bus. Elaine pressed her palm to the window in farewell then turned away as the bus pulled onto the highway.

1

Blithe Settlement, Texas

Five years later

“Aunt Laura?”

The screen door closed with a creak behind her as Elaine stepped tentatively in among the golden oak paneled walls of her great aunt’s living room. Chilly air from outside had come in by way of the wide open front door. No telling how long it had been open. She pushed it closed, and set her purse and suitcase on the floor next to the staircase.

“Hello?” The television was on with the volume turned up as loud as it would go. “Aunt Laura?” She retrieved the remote from an end table and turned the sound down. The whir of an electric mixer came from the direction of the kitchen.

She shed her jacket and hung it on the coat rack, then turned and surveyed the room. She might as well have stepped back in time twenty years. The Christmas tree, with fat twinkle bulbs, crocheted snowflakes, and angels, stood grandly in its traditional place next to the staircase. An evergreen garland spiraled around the banister. A crackling fire burned in the fireplace, already overcoming the chill that had settled in the room.

She sucked in a breath and held it, steeling herself

against the warm fuzzy nostalgia. She wasn't coming home. This visit would only last a few days. She'd check on her aunt, make sure everything was OK here, then she'd go. Lately this place; the town, her old friends, her home all seemed to draw her back as the details surrounding her departure grew hazy and indistinct. Her motivation for leaving faded a little from her memory with each passing day. But Blithe Settlement was still the last place she ever wanted to be.

The sound of the mixer stopped.

"Aunt Laura?" She stepped toward the kitchen.

"Elaine, honey, is that you?"

"In the flesh." Elaine found her aunt standing over the kitchen counter in a pink terry cloth bathrobe, quickly dropping spoonfuls of divinity onto a sheet of wax paper. Her silky, fine hair had gone completely white since Elaine had been away, but her fair skin was still smooth and soft looking.

Finished, Laura put the mixer bowl into the sink and turned to Elaine.

"Let me look at you!" She outstretched her arms for a thorough hug and then stepped back again. "You've gotten taller."

"No." Elaine grinned.

"You've gotten thinner?"

"Maybe a little."

Laura stepped back and examined her with a critical eye.

"You've cut your hair!" she said. "And had your eyebrows waxed! Oh, good for you. It was unfortunate that you inherited the Maitland brow. I'm sorry for that."

"Well, it wasn't your fault," Elaine said with a

smirk.

"No, it was your grandmother's. Did you just get here?"

Elaine nodded.

"Oh, did you close the front door?"

Elaine nodded again. "Mm hm. I also turned the T.V. down a little."

"Was the movie over yet?" Laura furrowed her brow. "When it's over it's time for me to start getting ready."

"Well, I don't think it was, but halfway or so." Elaine leaned over the counter. Divinity was a family Christmas tradition. Her mouth watered at the prospect of sneaking a piece while it was still soft and warm. "You know, you *could* put a clock in here. Or get a new microwave. They have clocks built right in now."

Laura gave her a glance that blatantly accused her of being too big for her britches. "My life's too close to finished to start messing with clocks, honey. Or new microwaves, for that matter. And that old one works just fine. Oh, go ahead and have a piece." She pointed a rubber spatula at the setting divinity.

Elaine took a piece of the soft, warm candy and bit into it, barely suppressing a blissful groan and letting her eyes roll heavenward at the taste. "What do you have to get ready for?"

"We're having a Christmas party tonight at six o'clock."

Elaine choked. "We are? Tonight? At six?"

"Yes, did you bring something nice to wear?"

"Uh...I, uh...Depends on what you mean by nice."

"A Christmas party dress, honey." Laura began scrubbing the dishes in the sink.

"I didn't bring anything really nice. I guess I didn't plan on going to any fancy parties while I was here."

"Don't worry about it." Laura dismissed the error with a wave of her soapy dishrag. "I picked you out something from downtown. Just in case."

"Aunt Laura, you didn't have to—"

"It's just a little pre-Christmas gift." Laura shot her a coy glance. "Besides you're the guest of honor. You have to look special."

Elaine grinned. Something made of gold lamé, no doubt. Or covered with sequins. Or possibly both. Then Laura's words caught up with her.

"Guest of honor?"

"Yes, honey." Laura sounded as if she thought Elaine had gone stupid. "Now go take a bath."



Elaine examined her reflection in the full length mirror in her room. The outfit *was* a little on the sparkly side. And the shoes...She'd never owned a pair of shoes with such pointy little toes. Another item that Laura had thought to include was a clip for her hair. Elaine picked it up off the dresser and ran a finger over the shiny gold and silver beads. She raised her free hand and smoothed the short fringe at the nape of her neck. She had loved her long hair when she'd been younger. Richard had adored it. She couldn't remember what had prompted her to have it cut. But she *could* remember how she'd nearly burst into tears right there in the beauty salon at the sight of her long, dark tresses scattered on the floor.

She smoothed a lock behind one ear and sighed. In this mirror she could see so clearly how the years had

changed her. Her complexion was pale, her grey eyes dull, and she looked older. She ran a hand lightly across the skin of her cheek. No, she wasn't as pretty as she'd once been. But she was stronger. The thought gave her a small measure of satisfaction.

The doorbell rang and she dropped the hair clip back onto the dresser, half-heartedly fluffing her hair once more before heading to the staircase to join the party. Already the voices of old friends drifted up the stairs and through the hall, underscored by soft instrumental Christmas music. *The Holly and the Ivy*.

And that was Ed Lacey's robust, twangy voice greeting Aunt Laura now. Elaine felt a smile soften her features as she reached the top of the stairs and saw him standing there next to his wife, Dot, both of them completely unchanged.

Ed looked up and caught sight of her. His open stare was curious at first, but then recognition lit his features and he bounded halfway up the staircase to greet her with a tight hug and a big grin. He squeezed a little laugh out of her, and it was only his burly arms that kept her from losing her footing and tumbling the rest of the way down the stairs.

"Elaine!" He looked her up and down as if he couldn't quite believe his eyes. "Elaine! Darlin' it's so good to see you. Where have you been?"

"Um...San Antonio mostly."

"We've missed you, girl." Ed's voice was tender. Almost as tender as it had been the day he and Justin had come to her door to tell her that her husband was dead.

"I've missed y'all, too." She looked away, swallowing down the ache that began to form at the back of her throat. *Do not cry! No one here wants to see*