CHAPTER ONE

Jan McCann peers at the swath of road illuminated by her headlights, the balding tree branches that form a canopy overhead. The road is empty, the only sign of life a doe standing motionless amidst a cluster of bushes. It never ceases to amaze her how rural the suburb of Wilford is, given that it’s only fifteen miles from the nation’s capital. She switches on her brights, and the deer disappears into the woods. Driving this narrow curving road at night always puts her a little on edge. So easy to miss the turn-off to her mother’s house. Her house. She can’t wait to get home, open a bottle of wine, and try to forget about the meeting she just chaired. There’s nothing more nerve-wracking than clerking a Quaker pastoral care meeting, and tonight has been no exception. In the cramped library adjacent to the meeting room, Jan led a group of Friends through a battery of unpleasant agenda items.

Gus, the mentally unstable Friend of no fixed address, has started showing up at Meeting again. He’s known for going off on angry tirades during worship. There’s reason to believe he’s capable of physical violence. The community is split between those who think he should be welcomed into the Meeting with Quakerly love, and those who think he should be kicked to the curb with Quakerly love.

Howard Gunther, a fifty-something loner, wants to teach First Day School. No one really knows him, and he gives people the creeps. After being batted around from committee to committee, the Howard file ended up on Pastoral Care’s agenda. Some committee members are convinced he should be given a chance to teach alongside a carefully selected co-teacher, while others are adamant that he should be kicked to the curb, along with Gus.

And Joyce Shand has hit the committee up for money again. Her rent is due and she needs to pony up or she’ll be out on the street. She just needs something to tide her over. Her organic fiber War-is-not-the-Answer quilts are selling like hotcakes on etsy.com, and she’ll be able to repay the loan any day now. Which is exactly what she said last month. And the month before.

Connie Ciccione was all for forking over the money. “We’re here to take care of each another, to show one another love and compassion.”

Sondra Flugelhof was opposed. “We’re enabling her. She’s behaving like an addict and she needs us to set some boundaries for her.”

“We’re a church, not a Twelve Step program,” Connie retorted. “A Friend is in dire straits and we should help her, not judge her.”

“We’re not helping her. We’re just letting her live her lie a little longer,” Sondra said. “She’s never going to sell those quilts, because no one wants to buy quilts with pacifist slogans on them.”

As Sondra then went around the room daring Friends to contradict her, Jan realized what an ineffective clerk she was. She was completely cowed by any form of confrontation, especially when it involved people old enough to be her parents. Fortunately, Don Glazer came to her rescue.

“Maybe we could help her find a more lucrative form of employment,” he said matter-of-factly.

“She got fired from the last three jobs we found for her,” said Barbara Birken, Jan’s estranged friend.

“If we don’t give her the money, she’s going to start hitting up people in the Meeting,” said Q, a middle-aged man of an indeterminable race. “Again.”

“So what do we do, let her be tossed out onto the street like a bag of trash?” Connie retorted.

“Doesn’t she have family in the area?” Don asked.

“We’re it,” Sondra replied. “We are her family.”

Sondra’s statement was followed by silence. Jan suppressed a sigh. How many times had they been over this? Around and around they’d gone, without ever reaching unity. Most months the committee came to a grudging agreement that they needed to write out the check. Again. This time, Jan sensed that the mood had shifted; that irritation with Joyce’s flakiness outweighed compassion for her need.

“Friends, I suggest we let this matter lie over until next month,” Jan intoned. To her surprise, no one challenged her.

When the meeting was over, she saw Barbara out of the corner of her eye. Looking at her. Expectantly. But she wasn’t ready to face her. Not yet. Not after all that’s happened. She busied herself with the contents of her bag, pretended to look for something. Besides, the meeting had lasted for three-and-a-half hours, and she wanted nothing more than to go home. Clearly, everyone else felt the same, as Friends abandoned their usual post-meeting chitchat for a quick exit. Only Barbara and Sondra stayed behind, engaged in some sort of animated debate. They stood in the back of the room—Sondra towering over Barbara—and spoke in urgent, hushed tones. Jan couldn’t make out what they were saying, but Barbara’s neck was red, her arms folded defiantly. Jan had intervened in many a disagreement between the two, but tonight she didn’t have the energy.

“Barbara, would you mind locking up when you’re ready to leave?” Jan asked. She knew Barbara was always the last to leave.

Barbara nodded without looking at her. The last thing she saw before she left was Sondra shoving a copy of Friends Journal into her friend’s unwilling hands.

 Wind buffets the car, and falling leaves swirl around in the beams of her headlights. Jan drums her fingers against the steering wheel. She needs to vent. Her mother is gone, and she’s had the falling-out with Barbara. There’s one person who would understand, but she knows she shouldn’t call him. She knows it’s better if she has nothing more to do with him. Still, she longs to hear his voice. Will he even want to hear from her, she wonders? Or does he want to forget their ill-advised “episode?” The night of clumsy groping in her room at the Annual Gathering, fueled by Chardonnay. They haven’t spoken since, though she’s picked up the phone many times with the intention of calling. In Meeting for Worship, where they sit on opposite sides of the room, they pretend not to see each other.

She glances at the luminous dials of the clock on her dashboard. A little after eleven. Byron, a night owl, will be up in his study, tapping away on his laptop, or flipping through tattered manuscripts. Gladys, an early bird, will already be asleep. She hesitates, her heart thumping, then takes a hand off of the steering wheel. On the seat next to her is a Let Your Life Speak tote bag that she got at the Gathering. She rummages through the bag’s contents, her eyes fixed on the road. She pulls out a binder full of committee minutes and places it on the seat. Next she pulls out a tube of lip-gloss, a half-eaten granola bar, and her wallet. She feels along the bottom of the bag, but aside from some crumbs, the bag is empty. She remembers that she had her phone on the table next to her during the meeting. She must have left it there.

She blows a loose strand of hair out of her face. The last thing she wants to do is return to the meetinghouse. The warm bath and bottle of Merlot beckon. But her life is stored in the bowels of her phone. Email addresses and phone numbers, her schedule for the month, her photographs, all of her music. She has no choice but to do a U-turn and go back.

Jan pulls into the parking lot and shuts off the engine. The lot is empty, aside from a dilapidated bicycle slung across a railing. A street lamp illuminates the placard on the entrance of the meetinghouse: *Wilford Friends Meeting. All Are Welcome.* She digs around in her jacket pocket and produces the key to the building. There’s a chill in the air, and dry leaves rustle underfoot. She pulls her jacket tighter around herself and walks up the steps leading to the main entrance. To her surprise, the door is slightly ajar. She shakes her head. She should have known not to entrust Barbara with the task of locking up. She’s been so preoccupied lately.

 She pushes the door the rest of the way open and steps inside. At the top of the stairs, a swath of dim light emanates from underneath the double doors of the main meeting room. The night lighting they installed last month. Otherwise, the building is dark. She fumbles around on the wall for a light switch, but can’t find it. She hesitates at the foot of the stairs and lets her eyes adjust to the semi-darkness. She can just make out the unsmiling portrait of George Fox on the wall next to the meeting room. As she makes her way up the stairs, a floorboard creaks underneath her. She starts. Why am I so jumpy tonight, she wonders? She reaches the top step and hesitates in front of the meeting room. She’s tempted to go through the double doors, take a seat on one of the benches, and meditate. But she’s tired. So very tired. And tomorrow she has to get up early to serve on Lester Stensrud’s clearness committee, a thought that makes her shudder. Lester has long had an awkward crush on her.

 She opens the door to the library and switches on the light. The room is just as she left it: Amidst shelves of Quaker tomes is a table cluttered with flyers advertising the Christmas pageant and copies of that evening’s agenda. At the head of the table, next to where she sat, is her cell phone. She heaves a sigh of relief and walks over to retrieve it. On the floor, near Barbara’s chair, a navy sweatshirt lies in a heap on the floor. The sweatshirt looks familiar. She reaches down and scoops it up, unfolds it. On the front is an oval-shaped logo with the initials PH blending into a tree. Pendle Hill, the Quaker study center outside of Philadelphia. Barbara goes there every so often to detox. She’ll figure out a way to get the sweatshirt to Barbara without having to see her.

 She tucks the sweatshirt under her arm then picks up the phone. She so wants to talk to him. Will it really hurt just this once to call? She’s been such a good girl these past few months. She hesitates then pulls out a chair and takes a seat. She clicks on the phone icon and scrolls down until she gets to the B’s. Bland, Byron. She presses the number, her heart pounding. One ring, two rings, three rings. She stares at the screen in front of her, willing him to pick up. Four rings.

 “You’ve reached the number of Dr. Byron Bland. Please leave a message….”

 She presses the red bar at the bottom of the screen. Probably has his phone off. Byron’s never been very technologically inclined, preferring face-to-face conversations to texting or calling. She sighs and leans back in her chair, realizing again how tired she is, how she would like nothing more than to sleep. In the adjacent meeting room she hears a rustling noise. Is someone in there? The main door was unlocked, after all, and anyone could have come in. A minute ago she was relaxed to the point of falling asleep. Now she is fully alert, straining to hear what’s going on in the next room, her heart racing. At first, she hears nothing other than a lone car driving by on the road below the window. Maybe she was imagining things. She starts to get up, when she hears it again. A rustling in the adjacent worship room, the rubbing together of clothes. She freezes. The rustling is followed by a clicking, the sound of a latch engaging, and then a loud groaning. She would know that sound anywhere. The double doors to the worship room have long needed to be oiled. Someone was in there, and is now leaving.

Without thinking, she springs into action. She rushes towards the library door. She hears the creaking of floorboards outside of the library. Once. Then twice. Just as she reaches the stairway, she hears the door to the building click shut. She takes the stairs two at a time and pushes open the front door. She stands at the entrance, looking out into the parking lot, but no one is there. How could he have gotten away so quickly, she wonders? And how did he get here? Hers was the only car in the parking lot. Then she remembers the bike. She runs down the couple of steps leading to the parking lot. The bike is still there, but there’s no one in sight. Whoever was in the meeting room has vanished into the night. Or maybe he’s hiding in the bushes, waiting for her to come out? She’s heard of young women being mugged at night, even in ritzy suburbs like Wilford. Mugged, and worse. Suddenly, she has no desire to find out who has just fled from the meetinghouse. She’s gripped by fear, and can think of nothing other than getting away from here. She wrenches open the car door, jumps in, and starts the engine. The last thing she sees before backing out is Barbara’s sweatshirt in a heap on the meetinghouse steps. She must have dropped it in her haste, but no force on earth could get her to go back for it now.