

[Sample Chapter]

CHAPTER I—God Died

"How long does it take to die after your head is cut off?" I ask my Dad at the dinner table. I'm five and martyrs are his favorite subject. I hope he likes my question so it can make him feel better.

Because his headache could make him roar. Or go to his office sad.

And I want him to talk to me. No one talks to me. I squeeze my blue dog in my lap.

He smiles! He looks across the table at *me*. "One would die instantly, Marie."

He likes my question. Everything's good now.

He blesses himself. For grace. "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

We all bless ourselves.

He's big in his bright white shirt with shiny cuffs and I'm small but I have a good head on my shoulders he said yesterday, because I told him 706 Twenty-second Avenue, Seattle is our address, so I know how to get home if I get kidnapped.

Grace is over. I unfold my hands. I rub the dark wood table with all my fingers. Everything's good. Dad smiles at something I can't see. Mom stands beside him with the baby, Marietta in her arms. Mom raises an eyebrow.

It's a good question, Mom.

My big sisters Sarah, Madeline, Bridgette, and Cecilia, and my big brother, Martin, didn't think of this question. Of course, the younger kids didn't think of it. Because Jean and Patricia are too small. And Marietta's a baby.

Dad smiles at me again. "Yes. One would die instantly, Marie."

My cheeks get hot. I squeeze the long black ears of my blue dog on my lap.

I put half my potatoes in my mouth. Madeline shakes her head at me. She's twelve.

Mom takes a deep breath. What's she going to say?

"Use your napkins, children."

She didn't like my question.

I don't want her to go back through the swing door, but there she goes. I put my fork down. Pick up my dog. Put my napkin on my lap. Put my dog back. Pick my fork up. It's too many things to do, Mom.

I look at Dad. I can tell he wants me to talk to him some more. "Dad, is instantly as fast as a minute?"

"Much faster."

He's as smart as God. He's not God, he said when I asked him on Sunday. I knew that, but I just asked because maybe he could be God and not know it, but he said no. But he talks like God probably does, even better than a priest.

"What made you ask that, little Marie?" Dad asks.

I poke my fingers through the little wicker work holes of my chair to think, but Madeline shakes her head at my hand. *My* fingers didn't tear the big holes in the wicker work! But I take them out of the little holes.

"Well, because freezing on a lake *seems* worse," I say.

"You're referring to the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste," Dad says.

"Yeah."

"You mean, 'Yes,' " he says.

"I mean, 'Yes.' Well, it seems worse to freeze—that's if I'm a martyr—but if I had to be alive without my head for a long time that would probably be worse than freezing, right?" It would be really scary. "Because St. Winfred's head, well it did make a pretty blue stream for the village after it rolled down the hill, Cecilia said, but if St. Winfred had to watch it roll down the hill. Well, she couldn't."

Dad smiles and nods. He thinks I'm wise.

"Instantly is faster than a *second*, isn't it?" Cecilia says.

I like her white teeth. She's a lot older. Eight. She's so pretty. She just is. Even with no curls. Except she didn't fold the clothes after school. She's scared.

"Instantly is as fast as the stars are far," Dad says. "Martin—how far away are the stars?" It's a test.

Martin sits up straight between me and Madeline. We're all three left-handed. We sit together because if a right-hander sits by us we bump elbows.

"To infinity?" Martin got it right because he's six.

But Dad just takes a bite of meat loaf. He forgets about Martin sometimes.

At church a lady with red lips told Dad he had a beautiful family. Dad said, "Eight lovely daughters! The two littlest ones are home with their mother."

I tugged on his coat. "Dad, you forgot Martin."

"Yes, eight lovely daughters and one son."

I guess Martin didn't get the right answer, because Dad's looking at the chandelier. It can't be dirty because it's not Thanksgiving yet.

"How much does God love you?" Dad looks at each of us.

"'Finity!" says Patricia.

She's right! And she's only three. I like infinity. That's how long Dad will love me because he's a father like God who's infinite. I wish my hair was long and dark, and curly like Patricia's. Not ugly light brown.

"Who else has an answer?" Dad asks.

Not infinity?

"God loves us enough to die for our sins." Bridgette smiles at her plate. Her cheeks look like apples.

*She's* right! I know it.

Dad frowns.

Uh oh.

I count my peas. One. Two. Three. I hate it when Dad's mad. He can roar like a lion. Then no one talks. Everyone goes away mad or crying.

"God *died*?"

He's mad.

No one talks.

"No, his *Son* died," Madeline says. She's brave.

Four. Five. Six. Oh. His Son died. But wait, His Son *is God*, so how come God didn't die?

I don't ask.

Dad nods. "That's right. God's only begotten *Son*, Jesus Christ, died for our sins." He holds up his hand like the priest holds up the chalice. "He shed His *precious Blood*."

How does he make his cuff links stay? His cuffs are so white and they sound like cardboard. Mom gives them extra starch, she says.

But Dad's wrong. Jesus *is* God, and He *died*. I should tell him because Mom always says speak up and tell the truth—that's what the saints did, she says. Spoke up and told the truth.

But I'm scared. Dad's collar looks like snow, just like men on TV. Well, except his tie is loosened. But that's an exception. For his headache—he didn't sing "Hello" like opera when he came home.

"God's Son shed his Precious Blood to save us from the fires of hell. *Us!*" Dad whispers. He taps his fingers on his chest. "We are *nothing* by ourselves."

Nothing?

"Can we make a tree? A flower?" He holds his hands out and shrugs.

No, Dad.

"Can we even *breathe air* without God's willing it?"

Yes. I'm breathing.

"Sarah, I just took a breath," Dad says. "And now I am blowing it out. Isn't that my own free will?"

Sarah sits even straighter. She taps her napkin on her mouth. She's the biggest. Fourteen. Cecilia and Bridgette and I take a breath to see our free will.

Sarah always holds her head up. She walks like a ballerina. Well, she took ballet. She eats with us, but before dinner or after dinner she stays in her room, and no one can go in her room.

She folds her hands in her lap.

See? That's how you can be like Sarah. I fold my hands in my lap.

"It is a choice to breathe only if one is alive," Sarah says, like she's been thinking about this very thing all day. She makes you want to think about it too.

"One could not be alive without God's will," she says. "Therefore, it would not be possible to breathe without God's will."

Ask *her* if God died.

"That's my girl!" Dad laughs.

But Sarah doesn't smile at Dad. She picks up her fork and eats some peas.

Dad looks at his plate.

If I could talk like Sarah I'd show Dad how God did die.

"Now, children, what Mysteries do we commemorate tonight when we pray the Rosary?"  
He's happy now.

"The Sorrowful Mysteries." Cecilia always knows.

Those are the best, they're so sad.

I know I'm right—Jesus is God and He died.

Cecilia says, "The Agony in the Garden. The Scourging at the Pillar."

That's the saddest one.

"The Crowning With Thorns. The Carrying of the Cross. And The Dying On the Cross."  
See? The Dying on the Cross, Dad.

"Very good," Dad says. He looks at his empty coffee cup and frowns.

Uh oh.

"Are we going to have coffee tonight?" he yells at the swinging door.

Everyone stops eating. Madeline whispers to Cecilia, "No cream on the table."

I listen.

"Yes." Mom's all the way in the kitchen.

We wait.

The swinging door opens. She holds the steel coffee pot in one hand and little Marietta in her other arm.

"I'm sorry, honey," Mom says.

I look down, stiff for what's next.

Mom pours his coffee.

"It won't do me any good without cream."

Everything's wrong.

"Cecilia, get your father some cream," Mom says. She looks sad. She pours her own cup of coffee and sets the pot on the table.

Everyone sits still.

I watch the night through the window where it shows between the woodwork and the shade. I'm scared. What if a burglar's out there?

I look at Dad. He'll know. "If a burglar came and killed us would we be martyrs?"

Madeline shakes her head at me. But he likes martyrs.

"You don't have to worry about burglars, because your father is home," Dad says.

"Do burglars know you're here?" I ask.

Dad's eyes look like he's somebody else. That's funny. I want *Dad* back. He squints and smiles at the window. "Let's just say if any burglar gets on the wrong end of my right hook he'll run away fast as lightning!" Dad sounds like Mickey Rooney, but he's not playing.

Cecilia comes through the swinging door and puts the cream bottle next to Dad's cup of coffee.

Dad pours cream in his coffee and stirs it. His spoon clinks in the cup. It clinks onto the saucer. He sips his coffee.

"But if Jesus died, children, how can He be alive in heaven?" Mickey Rooney's gone.

Good.

But God did die.

I stick one pea at a time with my fork. That's a way they kill martyrs, stab them like peas. I just want to be a plain saint, not a martyr one.

Plain saints suffer, but they don't get stabbed. Or boiled. Frozen. Burned. Or their heads cut off. And they still skip Purgatory. It's exactly like Hell, Cecilia said. Purgatory. Only for millions of years, not eternity. Dad will probably still like me as just a plain saint.

Nobody except saints skip Purgatory.

Madeline said I probably can't be a one, though.

But you can't do sins if you're perfectly still, I said. I can sit perfectly still.

"Can you imagine *denying Christ*, after what He has done for you?" Dad asks.

Communists tear your nails out if you don't.

"He allowed Himself to be tortured and killed for *you* Bridgette, for *you* Jean, and *you* Sarah, for all of us."

Jean's fluffy blonde hair moves. She heard her name and she's reading her comic in her lap at the dinner table. She should have her white dog. Both our dogs have black stripes—that's the problem—stripes—I only look at their black ears.

"And me?" asks Patricia. She always smiles.

"Oh you too - every one of us. Why, for us to deny Christ would be like hammering nails into his hands and feet *ourselves*," Dad says.

Mom frowns. She sat down when it was Thanksgiving. She clears her throat loud and hits the back of Marietta's grey sleepers to burp her, but too hard I think.

Why would Dad think I would hammer nails in Jesus' feet and hands?

Jesus wants me to tell the truth. I should tell Dad He died.

Mom clears her throat.

Dad looks at Mom with big eyes. "Yes, Evelyn?" He makes his voice funny.

Mom shakes her head like a bee's in her hair.

Dad raises his eyebrows and smiles. "Isn't it only fair that we be willing to die as martyrs?"

I like her lipstick and rouge on her cheeks. She puts them on when she takes her apron off when Dad gets home from work. She goes back in the kitchen.

"*Imagine the joy of entering heaven and being welcomed by all the happy saints!*" Dad sings.

We laugh at his song.

He looks at the swinging door and we all look at it. "Let's see if she comes back," Dad whispers, to make a fun game.

Mom comes back. Everyone smiles. We watch the game.

"Yah, and all the saints are *protecting* us *now*, too, children. Don't forget that. Not *everyone* has to be a martyr. Jesus wants you to be kind and tell the truth," Mom says extra loud, and nods.

That's right.

"God died." It just popped out.

Mom shakes her head and everyone frowns at me, except Sarah. Sarah makes a small smile.

"Who said God died?" Dad asks.

"I did. Jesus is God and He died." I know I can show Dad how. He'll see I'm smart and talk to me. I just need him to talk to me.

"Listen to me. I'm going to say it just once more. God...did not...die!"

"But on the Cross—"

"I am your father! You will not contradict me!" Dad roars. Like a lion.

I shake. Don't look at him. One, two, three, one, two, three...don't move. Don't shake. Don't cry. I squeeze my dog's black ears tight and cry.

I shouldn't make Dad scare me.

"Could we have some ketchup at this end of the table?" Dad says, mad. He looks at the table beside his plate.

Bridgette gives the ketchup to Madeline. She gives it to Sarah. Sarah puts it by Dad's plate. Nobody talks. Everyone frowns at me. But Sarah. She raises her eyebrows like something's fun. I stop crying. She cuts a tiny piece of meatloaf. Puts her knife down. Puts the bite in her mouth. Sarah's not like the rest of us.

Dad eats his meat loaf and doesn't talk anymore. I feel sad like nothing will ever be good again.

Dad doesn't like me anymore. Everyone's mad at me. I want to die so I won't be in their hair.

Dinner's over. We go in the living room and pray the rosary. I lean against the arm of the green chair. I need to be a saint so people will like me again.

*If I broke my arm*, I wouldn't cry, then everyone would see how brave I am, not bad because I contradicted Dad. The big kids would say softly—like people talk in church, "I think she's becoming a saint." When they thought I wasn't listening. And Dad would like me.

I lower my praying hands so no one can see. I lay one arm across my leg. I use my other arm to push hard on my wrist to snap my skinny arm like a spaghetti noodle. But it doesn't work.

I sit back on my heels. Wedge my foot in the small space under the chair. Now I can lift my knee and break my ankle.

Ouch! It hurts too much. I have to push my ankle against the chair little by little to get it used to hurting. It'll take more than one rosary to break it.

We're done with the rosary and Dad gives a blessing to everyone, even me, but I won't ask him to carry me upstairs to bed like he usually does with all the little kids.

I just climb the stairs myself. My ankle hurts.

It isn't much, just limping. But maybe someone will notice. If they ask what's wrong, I'll say, "Oh, it's nothing."

That's what a saint would say.