

Prologue

Christmas Eve 1998

Exactly forty days after she'd last held the hand of her husband, Julie Barenson sat looking through her window toward the quiet streets of Swansboro. It was cold; the sky had been angry for a week, and the rain made gentle tapping sounds against the window. Trees were barren, their cragged limbs curling in the frigid air like arthritic fingers.

She knew Jim would have wanted her to listen to music tonight; she could hear Bing Crosby singing "White Christmas" in the background. She'd put up the tree for him as well, though by the time she'd made that decision, the only trees left were dried out and sparse, free for the taking outside the supermarket. It didn't matter. Even when she finished decorating it, she couldn't summon the energy to care. It had been hard to feel anything at all since the tumor in Jim's brain finally took his life.

At twenty-five, she was a widow and she hated everything about the word: how it sounded, what it implied, the way her mouth moved when she formed the word. She avoided it completely. If people asked how she was doing, she simply shrugged. But sometimes, just sometimes, she had the urge to answer. *You want to know what it was like to lose my husband?* she wanted to ask. *Here's what it's like.*

Jim's dead, and now that he's gone, I feel like I'm dead, too.

Is that, Julie wondered, what people wanted to hear? Or did they want platitudes? *I'll be okay. It's hard, but I'll make it through this. Thank you for asking.* She could do the brave soldier routine, she sup-

posed, but she never had. It was both easier and more honest to simply shrug and say nothing.

After all, she didn't feel as if she were going to be okay. Half the time, she didn't think she was going to make it through the day without breaking down. Especially on nights like tonight.

In the reflected glow of the Christmas tree lights, Julie put her hand to the window, feeling the cold press of glass against her skin.

Mabel had asked if she'd wanted to have dinner tonight, but Julie had declined. So had Mike and Henry and Emma, but she'd turned them down as well. All of them understood. Or, rather, they pretended to understand, since it was obvious that none of them thought she should be alone. And maybe they were right. Everything in the house, everything she saw and smelled and touched, reminded her of Jim. His clothes took up half the closet, his razor still sat next to the soap dish in the bathroom, the subscription to *Sports Illustrated* had come in the mail the day before. There were still two bottles of Heineken, his favorite, in the refrigerator. Earlier that evening, when she'd seen them on the shelf, she'd whispered to herself, "Jim is never going to drink those," and she'd closed the door and leaned against it, crying in the kitchen for an hour.

The scene outside her window was out of focus; lost in her thoughts, Julie gradually registered the faint sound of a branch thumping against the wall. The thumping was persistent, steady, and it was a moment before she realized she'd been mistaken about the branch.

Someone was knocking at the door.

Julie stood, her movements lethargic. At the door, she paused to run her hands through her hair, hoping to compose herself. If it was her friends checking in on her, she didn't want them to think she needed them to stay for a while. When she opened the door, however, she was surprised to see a young man in a yellow slicker. In his hands was a large, wrapped box.

"Mrs. Barenson?" he asked.

"Yes?"

The stranger took a hesitant step forward. "I'm supposed to deliver this to you. My dad said it was important."

"Your dad?"

"He wanted to make sure you got this tonight."

“Do I know him?”

“I don’t know. But he was pretty insistent about it. It’s a gift from someone.”

“Who?”

“My father said you’d understand as soon as you opened it. Don’t shake it, though—and keep this end up.”

The young man pushed the box into Julie’s arms before she could stop him, then turned to leave.

“Wait,” she said, “I don’t understand. . . .”

The young man glanced over his shoulder. “Merry Christmas,” he said.

Julie stood in the doorway, watching as he climbed into his truck. Then, back inside, she set the box on the floor in front of the tree and knelt beside it. A quick peek confirmed the absence of a card, and there were no other clues about the sender. She loosened the ribbon, then lifted the separately wrapped lid and found herself staring wordlessly at what she’d been given.

It was matted with fuzz and dwarflike, no more than a few pounds, and it was sitting on its haunches in the corner of the box, looking just about as ugly as she’d ever seen a puppy look. Its head was large, out of proportion to the rest of its body. Whimpering, it looked up at her, a glob of muck in its eyes.

Someone, she thought, bought me a puppy. An ugly puppy.

Taped to the inside of the box was an envelope. As she reached for it, it dawned on her that she recognized the handwriting, and she paused. No, she thought, it can’t be. . . .

She had seen that handwriting on the love letters he’d written to her on their anniversaries, on hastily scrawled messages by the phone, on paperwork he’d piled on the desk. She held the envelope in front of her, reading her name over and over. Then, with trembling hands, she took the letter out. Her eyes traveled to the words written in the upper left corner.

Dear Jules,

It was Jim’s nickname for her, and Julie closed her eyes, feeling as if her body were suddenly growing smaller. She forced herself to take a deep breath and started again.

Dear Jules,

I know that if you're reading this letter, I've already passed away. I don't know how long I've been gone, but I hope you've been able to begin healing. I know that if I were in your position, it would be hard for me, but you know I've always believed you were the stronger of the two of us.

I bought you a dog, as you can see. Harold Kuphaldt was a friend of my father's, and he's been raising Great Danes since I was a kid. I always wanted one when I was little, but since the house was so small, Mom always said no. They are big dogs, granted, but according to Harold, they're also just about the sweetest dogs in the world. I hope you enjoy him (or her).

I guess I always knew in the back of my mind that I wasn't going to make it. I didn't want to think about it, though, because I knew that you didn't have anyone to help you get through something like this. Family, I mean. It broke my heart to think that you would be all alone. Not knowing what else to do, I made arrangements to get you this dog.

If you don't like it, you don't have to keep it, of course. Harold said he'd take it back, no problem. (His number should be included.)

I hope you're doing all right. Since I got sick, I've worried non-stop about that. I love you, Jules, I really do. I was the luckiest guy in the world when you came into my life. It would break my heart if I thought you'd never be happy again. So please do that for me. Be happy again. Find someone who makes you happy. It might be hard, you might not think it's possible, but I'd like you to try. The world is a better place when you smile.

And don't worry. From wherever I am, I'll watch out for you. I'll be your guardian angel, sweetheart. You can count on me to keep you safe.

I love you,

Jim

Through her tears, Julie peeked over the lid of the box and reached in. The puppy curled into her hand. She lifted him out, holding him close to her face. He was tiny, and she could feel the bones in his ribs as he trembled.

He really was an ugly thing, she thought. And he'd grow up to be

the size of a small horse. What on earth would she do with a dog like this?

Why, she wondered, couldn't Jim have gotten her a miniature schnauzer with little gray whiskers or a cocker spaniel with sad, round eyes? Something manageable? Something cute, that might curl up in her lap now and then?

The puppy, a male, started to whine, a high-pitched cry that rose and fell like the echo of far-off train whistles.

"Shh . . . you'll be okay," she whispered. "I won't hurt you. . . ."

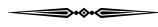
She continued to talk to the puppy in low tones, letting him get used to her, still getting used to the idea that Jim had done this for her. The puppy continued to cry, almost as if accompanying the tune on the stereo, and Julie scratched beneath his chin.

"You singing to me?" she asked, smiling softly for the first time. "That's what it sounds like, you know."

For a moment, the dog stopped crying and looked up at her, holding her gaze. Then he started to whine again, though this time he didn't seem as frightened.

"Singer," she whispered. "I'll think I'll call you Singer."

One



Four Years Later

In the years since Jim had died, Julie Barenson had somehow found a way to start living again. It hadn't happened right away. The first couple of years after his death had been difficult and lonely, but time had eventually worked its magic on Julie, changing her loss into something softer. Though she loved Jim and knew that part of her would *always* love Jim, the pain wasn't as sharp as it had once been. She could remember her tears and the total vacuum her life had become in the aftermath of his death, but the searing ache of those days was behind her. Now when she thought of Jim, she remembered him with a smile, thankful that he'd been part of her life.

She was thankful for Singer, too. Jim had done the right thing by getting her the dog. In a way, Singer had made it possible for her to go on.

But at this moment, while lying in bed on a cool spring morning in Swansboro, North Carolina, Julie wasn't thinking about what a wonderful support Singer had been during the past four years. Instead, she was mentally cursing his very existence while gasping for breath, thinking, I can't believe that this is the way I'm going to die.

Squashed in bed by my very own dog.

With Singer splayed across her, pinning her to the mattress, she imagined her lips turning blue from oxygen deprivation.

"Get up, you lazy dog," she wheezed. "You're killing me here."

Snoring soundly, Singer didn't hear her, and Julie began squirming, trying to bounce him from his slumber. Suffocating beneath the

weight, she felt as if she'd been wrapped in a blanket and tossed in a lake, Mafia style.

"I'm serious," she forced out, "I can't breathe."

Singer finally lifted his massive head and blinked at her groggily. *What's all the racket about?* he seemed to be asking. *Can't you see I'm trying to rest here?*

"Get off!" Julie rasped out.

Singer yawned, pushing his cold nose against her cheek.

"Yeah, yeah, good morning," she gasped. "Now scoot."

With that, Singer snorted and found his legs, further squashing various parts of her as he got up. And up. And up. And up. A moment later, towering over her with just a smudge of drool on his lips, he looked like something from a low-budget horror movie. Good Lord, she thought, he is *huge*. You'd think that I'd be used to it by now. She took a deep breath and looked up at him, frowning.

"Did I say you could get into bed with me?" she asked.

Singer usually slept in the corner of her room at night. The past two nights, however, he'd crawled in with her. Or, more accurately, on top of her. Crazy dog.

Singer lowered his head and licked her face.

"No, you're not forgiven," she said, pushing him away. "Don't even bother trying to get out of this. You could have killed me. You're almost twice as heavy as I am, you know. Now get off the bed."

Singer whined like a pouting child before hopping down to the floor. Julie sat up, ribs aching, and looked at the clock, thinking, *Already?* She and Singer stretched at the same time before she pushed aside the covers.

"C'mon," she said, "I'll let you out before I get in the shower. But don't go sniffing around the neighbors' garbage cans again. They left a nasty message on the machine."

Singer looked at her.

"I know, I know," she said, "it's only garbage. But some people are funny that way."

Singer left the bedroom, heading toward the front door. Julie rolled her shoulders as she followed him, her eyes closed for just a moment. Big mistake. On the way out of the bedroom, she slammed her toe against the dresser. The pain shot from her toe up through her lower leg. After the initial scream, she began to curse, combining profanity

in all sorts of marvelous permutations. Hopping on one foot in her pink pajamas, she was sure she looked like some sort of deranged Energizer Bunny. Singer merely gave her a look that seemed to imply, *What's the holdup? You got me up, remember, so let's get going here. I've got things to do outside.*

She groaned. "Can't you see I'm wounded here?"

Singer yawned again, and Julie rubbed her toe before limping after him.

"Thanks for coming to my rescue. You're worthless in an emergency."

A moment later, after Singer stepped on Julie's sore toe on his way out the door—Julie *knew* he'd done it on purpose—he was outside. Instead of heading toward the garbage cans, Singer wandered over to the vacant wooded lots that bordered one side of her house. She watched as he swung his massive head from side to side, as if making sure that no one had planted any new trees or bushes during the preceding day. All dogs liked to mark their territory, but Singer seemed to believe that somehow, if he found enough places to relieve himself, he'd be anointed King Dog in all the World. At least it got him out of her hair for a while.

Thank heaven for small favors, Julie thought. Singer had been driving her crazy for the last couple of days. He'd followed her everywhere, refusing to let her out of his sight for even a few minutes, except when she put him outside. She hadn't even been able to put the dishes away without bumping into him a dozen times. He was even worse at night. Last night, he'd had a growling fit for an hour, which he'd thoughtfully interspersed with an occasional bark, and the whole thing had left her fantasizing about buying either a soundproof kennel or an elephant gun.

Not that Singer's behavior had ever been . . . well, ordinary. Except for the peeing thing, the dog had always acted as if he thought he were human. He refused to eat out of a dog bowl, he'd never needed a leash, and when Julie watched television, he would crawl up on the couch and stare at the screen. And when she talked to him—whenever anyone talked to him, for that matter—Singer would stare intently, his head tilted to the side, as if he were following the conversation. And half the time, it did seem as if he understood what she was telling him. No matter what she told him to do,

no matter how ridiculous the command, Singer would carry it out. *Could you go get my purse from the bedroom?* Singer would come trotting out with it a moment later. *Will you turn off the bedroom light?* He'd balance on two legs and flick it with his nose. *Put this can of soup in the pantry, okay?* He'd carry it in his mouth and set it on the shelf. Sure, other dogs were well trained, but not like this. Besides, Singer hadn't needed training. Not real training, anyway. All she'd had to do was show him something once and that was it. To others it seemed downright eerie, but since it made Julie feel like a modern-day Dr. Dolittle, she kind of liked it.

Even if it did mean she talked to her dog in complete sentences, had arguments with him, and asked for his advice now and then.

But hey, she told herself, that wasn't so odd, was it? They'd been together since Jim had died, just the two of them, and for the most part, Singer was pretty good company.

Singer, though, had been acting strangely ever since she started dating again, and he hadn't liked any of the guys who'd shown up at the door in the last couple of months. Julie had expected that part. Since he'd been a puppy, Singer tended to growl at men when he first met them. She used to think that Singer had a sixth sense that enabled him to tell the good guys from the ones she should avoid, but lately she'd changed her mind. Now, she couldn't help but think that he was just a big, furry version of a jealous boyfriend.

It was getting to be a problem, she decided. They were going to have to have a serious talk. Singer didn't want her to be alone, did he? No, of course not. It might take him a little while to get used to having someone else around, but he'd understand eventually. Hell, in time, he'd probably even be happy for her. But how, she wondered, was the best way to explain all this to him?

She halted for a moment, considering the question, before realizing the implications of what she was thinking.

Explain all this to him? Good Lord, she thought, I'm going insane.

Julie limped to the bathroom to start getting ready for work, slipping off her pajamas as she went. Standing over the sink, she grimaced at her reflection. Look at me, she thought, I'm twenty-nine and falling apart at the seams here. Her ribs hurt when she breathed, her big toe throbbed, and the mirror, she realized, wasn't helping things. During the day, her brown hair was long and straight, but

after a night in bed, it looked as if it had been attacked by comb-teasing pillow gnomes. It was frazzled and puffed out, “under siege,” as Jim so kindly used to put it. Mascara was smeared down her cheek. The tip of her nose was red, and her green eyes were swollen from the springtime pollen. But a shower would help with those things, wouldn’t it?

Well, maybe not with the allergies. She opened the medicine cabinet and took a Claritin before glancing up again, as if hoping for a sudden improvement.

Ugh.

Maybe, she thought, she wouldn’t have to work so hard at discouraging Bob’s interest after all. She’d been cutting Bob’s hair, or rather what was left of it, for a year now. Two months ago, Bob had finally worked up the nerve to ask her out. He wasn’t exactly the best-looking guy in the world—balding, with a round face, eyes set too close together, and the beginnings of a paunch—but he was single and successful, and Julie hadn’t been on a date since Jim had died. She figured it would be a good way to get her feet wet in the world of dating again. Wrong. There was a reason Bob was single. Bob wasn’t only a triple bogey in the looks department, he’d been so boring on their date that even people at nearby tables in the restaurant had glanced her way in pity. His preferred topic of conversation on their date had been accounting. He’d showed no interest in anything else: not her, not the menu, not the weather, not sports, not the little black dress she was wearing. Only accounting. For three hours, she’d listened to Bob drone on and on about itemized deductions and capital gains distributions, depreciation and 401(k) rollovers. By the end of the dinner, when he’d leaned over the table and confided that he “knew important people at the IRS,” Julie’s eyes were so glazed that they could have flavored a dozen doughnuts.

It went without saying, of course, that Bob had had a wonderful time. He’d been calling three times a week since then, asking “if they could get together for a second consultation, hee hee hee.” He was persistent, that was for sure. Annoying as hell, but persistent.

Then there was Ross, the second guy she dated. Ross the doctor. Ross the good-looking guy. Ross the pervert. One date with him was enough, thank you very much.

And can't forget good old Adam. He worked for the county, he said. He enjoyed his work, he said. Just a regular guy, he said.

Adam, she found out, worked in the sewers.

He didn't smell, he didn't have unknown substances growing under his fingernails, his hair didn't carry a greasy shine, but she knew that as long as she lived, she'd never get used to the idea that one day, he might show up at the front door looking that way. *Had an accident at the plant, dear. Sorry to come home like this.* The very thought gave her the shivers. Nor could she imagine handling his clothes to put them in the laundry after something like that. The relationship was doomed from the start.

Just when she was beginning to wonder whether normal people like Jim even existed anymore, just when she was beginning to wonder what it was about her that seemed to attract oddballs like a neon sign flashing "I'm Available—Normalcy Not Required," Richard had come strolling into the picture.

And miracle of miracles, even after a first date last Saturday, he still seemed . . . *normal*. A consultant with J. D. Blanchard Engineering out of Cleveland—the firm repairing the bridge over the Intracoastal Waterway—he had made her acquaintance when he came into the salon for a haircut. On their date, he'd opened doors for her, smiled at the right moments in the conversation, given the waiter her order for dinner, and not so much as tried to kiss her when he'd dropped her off. Best of all, he was good-looking in an artistic sort of way, with sculpted cheekbones, emerald eyes, black hair, and a mustache. After he'd dropped her off, she'd felt like screaming, *Hallelujah! I have seen the light!*

Singer hadn't seemed quite as impressed. After she'd said good night to Richard, Singer had put on one of his "I'm the boss around here" acts. He'd growled until Julie had opened the front door.

"Oh, stop it," she'd said. "Don't be so hard on him."

Singer did as he was told, but he'd retreated to the bedroom, where he'd pouted the rest of the night.

If my dog was any more bizarre, she thought, we could team up and work for a carnival, right next to the guy who eats light bulbs. But then, my life hasn't exactly been normal, either.

Julie turned on the faucet and stepped into the shower, trying to

stem the tide of memories. What was the use of replaying hard times? Her mother, she often mused, had been fatally attracted to two things: booze and toxic men. Either one without the other would have been bad, but the combination had been intolerable for Julie. Her mom went through boyfriends the way kids go through paper towels, and some of them made Julie feel less than comfortable once she hit adolescence. The last one had actually tried to have his way with her, and when Julie had told her mother, her mother, in a drunken, teary rage, had blamed *her* for coming on to *him*. It wasn't long before Julie found herself without a home.

Living on the street had been terrifying even for the six months or so before Jim came along. Most everyone she met used drugs and panhandled or stole . . . or worse. Scared of becoming like the haunted runaways she saw every night at the shelters and in the doorways, she searched frantically for odd jobs that would keep her fed and out of sight. She worked every menial job she saw offered and kept her head down. When she first met Jim at a diner in Daytona, she was nursing a cup of coffee with the last of her pocket change. Jim bought her breakfast and on the way out the door said he'd do the same thing the following day if she returned. Hungry, she did, and when she challenged him about his motives (she assumed she knew his reasons and could remember gearing up for quite the embarrassing public tirade about cradle robbers and jail time), Jim denied any improper interest in her. And at the end of the week, when he was getting ready to head for home, he made her a proposal: If she moved to Swansboro, North Carolina, he would help her get a full-time job and a place to stay.

She remembered staring at him as though he had bugs crawling out of his ears.

But a month later, considering she didn't have much scheduled on the old social calendar, she showed up in Swansboro, thinking as she got off the bus, *What in the world am I doing in this nowhere town?* Nonetheless, she looked up Jim, who—despite her persistent skepticism—brought her over to the salon to meet his aunt Mabel. And sure enough, she found herself sweeping floors for an hourly wage and living in the room upstairs from the salon.

At first, Julie was relieved by Jim's lack of apparent interest. Then

curious. Then annoyed. Finally, after running into Jim repeatedly and dropping what seemed to her quite shameless hints, she broke down and asked Mabel if she thought Jim found her unattractive. Only then did he seem to get the message. They went on a date, then another, and the hormones were surging after a month together. Real love came a short time later. He proposed, they walked the aisle in the church where Jim had been baptized, and Julie spent the first few years of their marriage drawing smiley faces every time she doodled by the phone. What more, she wondered when considering her life, could anyone want?

A lot, she soon realized. A few weeks after their fourth anniversary, Jim had a seizure on the way home from church and was rushed to the hospital. Two years later, the brain tumor took his life, and at the age of twenty-five, Julie found herself starting over once more. Add in Singer's unexpected appearance and she'd reached the point in her life where nothing surprised her anymore.

Nowadays, she thought, it was the little things in life that mattered. If the highlights in her past set the tone, it was the day-by-day events that now defined who she was. Mabel, God bless her, had been an angel. She'd helped Julie get her license so she could cut hair and earn a decent, if not extravagant, living. Henry and Emma, two good friends of Jim's, not only had helped her fit into town when she'd first moved here, but had remained close even after Jim had passed away. And then there was Mike, Henry's younger brother and Jim's best friend growing up.

In the shower, Julie smiled. Mike.

Now there was a guy who would make some woman happy one day, even if he seemed a little lost sometimes.

A few minutes later, after toweling off, Julie brushed her teeth and hair, put on some makeup, and slipped into her clothes. Since her car was in the shop, she'd have to walk to work—it was about a mile up the street—and she put on a pair of comfortable shoes. She called Singer just as she was locking the door on her way out, nearly missing what had been left for her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spied a card wedged between the mailbox and the lid, right next to the front door.

Curious, Julie opened it, reading it on the porch as Singer burst from the woods and trotted up to her.

Dear Julie,

I had a wonderful time on Saturday. I can't stop thinking about you.

Richard

So that was the reason Singer went bonkers last night.

"See," she said, holding out the card so Singer could see it, "I told you he was a nice guy."

Singer turned away.

"Don't give me that. You can admit you were wrong, you know. I think you're just jealous."

Singer nuzzled against her.

"Is that it? Are you jealous?" Unlike with other dogs, Julie didn't have to bend down to run her hand down his back. He was bigger than she had been when she'd entered high school.

"Don't be jealous, okay? Be happy for me."

Singer circled to the other side and looked up at her.

"Now c'mon. We have to walk because Mike's still fixing the Jeep." At Mike's name, Singer's tail wagged.