



Black  
Raspberries

Jeanine  
Collins  
Malarsky

*JEANINE COLLINS MALARSKY*

**Sample of**

# **BLACK RASPBERRIES**

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*Jeanine Collins Malarsky also wrote:*

Maggie's Mirage  
Unworthy

# BLACK RASPBERRIES

by Jeanine Collins Malarsky

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ISBN 978-1-09947-695-2

# Dedication

*I dedicate this book to my two children, Laura and Jared, who have taught me, by their love and respect, what family truly means.*

## Author's Note

*Though the narrative in this book is based on fact, the passage of time and the vagaries of memory relegate the tale herein to the realm of fiction.*

*To my siblings, whose stories I cannot presume to relate, I offer this quote from Judy Blunt's "Acknowledgments" in her book *Breaking Clean*.*

*"And finally, I want to acknowledge those who might choose a different version of the story than the one I tell. In sharing stories with others who were there, we discover how inevitably each perspective offers its own, sure version of events. I've long since made my peace with that variety of fiction we call truth.*



## PROLOGUE

### **A Bad Dream - 1981**

*The kitchen is dingy. It's evening. My older sister Anita is frying potatoes on an old black stove. Daddy is slouched at a side table, and Sheila, my younger sister, is standing on a chair beside him, sneaking sugar from the sugar bowl. Mother is sitting center stage at a large round table with Dennis and Darel, my two brothers, who are barely visible in the shadows. (I can smell the faint odor of cow manure on their barn clothes.)*

*The radio is broadcasting a news bulletin about thousands of people dying. The city is in chaos because someone dumped ground glass in the municipal water supply.*

*"I know who did it," my mother says looking straight at me. Her black eyes pierce through my skin like they did when I was a kid. I'm condemned.*

*"I didn't do it," I say softly, trying not to sound defiant.*

*"Don't lie to me!" She spits her words through clenched teeth. She drops her poisonous gaze to her lap, slips her left hand into the pocket of her faded chenille bathrobe, draws it back and flings something shiny through the air. The small blades catch the light of the flyspecked ceiling fixture. I feel a searing pain in my arm.*

*Like a robot, I extend my right arm and turn toward my father to show him the knife buried deep in my wrist.*

*“Look what your wife did to me,” I say calmly. He sits there. He doesn’t say a word. He doesn’t even look at me.*

*I stand still, observing the tableau of my family. A wall of glass descends from the ceiling, dropping down in front of me, shutting me off. Silence. I’m standing alone, gazing through that clear wall between my family and me.*

I wake in a sweat, shivering as a chill creeps up my back.

“Look!” I cry out groping in the dark for my husband’s shoulder. “Wake up!” He groans and rolls over to switch on his bedside lamp.

“What do you want?” he asks, groggy with sleep and irritated at being awakened. “It’s 2:30 in the morning.”

“Look at this!” I stick my right hand out pointing to my wrist. “Can you see it?”

“See what?” he asks, closing his eyes against the light.

“Turn the light up brighter and look closer,” I beg him, thrusting my hand in his face. As his eyes adjust, he peers down at my thin wrist defaced by a ragged scar.

“Where’d you get that?” he asks, fully awake.

“When’d that happen?”

“Have I ever shown this scar to you before?”

“No!”

“Have I ever talked about it before?”

“No. Never.” He turns my wrist to study the faded white scar. “How did you get that?”

“I don’t know!” I say softly, somewhat in awe of my own injury. “I have no memory of it. But somehow it seems I’ve known it was there. I just had the most horrible nightmare.”

He packs two thick pillows behind his head and takes me into his arms. “Tell me.”

When I’m finished telling my dream, my husband asks, “Do you think that really happened?” He turns off the light.

“No, I don’t.” I ponder this strange idea as we both slide down under the covers. “And it’s odd because children in families get hurt and the stories get retold over the years, like Darel’s burns and Sheila’s cut from the Ketchup bottle.”

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“You can be damned sure somebody in your family knows what happened. Ask your mother about it.”

“I don’t think she’d give me an honest answer,” I tell him. “Even if she knows the truth, she’d probably lie about it.”

“She’s afraid of you,” he says. “She wouldn’t come near us at Sheila’s wedding last month.”

“She’s intimidated by you,” I said. “She doesn’t dare say one word to you.”

“No, Jeanine,” he argues back. “She’s scared of you because she fears that someday you’ll lash out at her and get even for all the despicable things she did when you were a child. She knows she deserves your revenge. Your peaceful manner only serves to increase her terror.”

Why is my mother afraid of me? I was always scared of her, her vicious temper, and her punishments. Perhaps if I think back I’ll understand. Maybe if I begin at the beginning.

# CHAPTER 1

## **When I Was Three - 1947**

A killdeer rose into the air from the edge of a nearby field filling the late summer afternoon with its plaintive call, "Kill-deee, kill-deee." From my seat on the warm stone steps, I followed its swift flight as I listlessly ran my small hands over the gold and scarlet crushed velvet piano scarf lying across my knees. Packing took forever.

"Neenee!" Mommy yelled from the driveway. "Come on. We're leaving." Finally. I threw the tasseled scarf over my shoulders and dashed for the car, hoping if I got there first, I could ride in front.

"I'm riding in front," Anita yelled in her five-year-old voice of authority.

"I got here first," I yelled back, not moving.

"You can't even open the door," Anita said as she reached over my head for the handle.

"You go on over, Janice," Daddy called from the back door of the small, empty farmhouse. "I'll follow with Dennis in the truck."

Mommy slammed the trunk of our car and said, "You girls can both ride in front. It's the only space left."

Confident she wouldn't lose her place, Anita pulled the car door open and stood back to let me climb in first. With a helpful boost from Anita, I settled in the middle, my legs sticking out straight, my toes almost touching the dashboard.

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Anita scrambled in beside me, talking as she tugged the door shut. "You won't believe how big our new house is. It has eighteen rooms, more than we'll ever need."

"It's not so new," corrected Mommy, starting the car and shifting it into gear. "It was built in the late 1800's so it's rather old." She checked for traffic and pulled onto the road, leaving behind the little farm on Grove Street where she and Daddy had begun married life in 1939, eight years before.

"It's new to us," countered Anita, making her point as usual. "We've never lived there before." Mommy cast Anita an admonishing glance, but Grandma Collins's house came into view, causing Mommy to return her eyes quickly to the road ahead.

Grandma's low, white, two-story house looked innocent enough, resting there peacefully above its sloping front lawn, next to the Union Springs Cemetery. A huge shade tree guarded the house from behind, branches of its dark green canopy resting gently on the orange tin roof.

Muscles tightened in Mommy's jaw reminding me that Mommy hated Grandma. But I liked visiting on Sabbath afternoons when my aunts took pictures of me beside tall pink and yellow gladiolas.

We sped by old Mrs. Monday's house with its white shingles and dark green shutters. Old Mrs. Monday is crippled because when she was little, some kids put her in a baby carriage and pushed it down the long hill in front of Grandma's house and she fell out and got hurt.

Farther down, at the old stone mill, Mommy took a sharp left turn uphill. I squirmed around backwards in the seat for a fleeting look at the faded water lilies in the shadowy over-grown millpond and hopefully a glimpse of Cayuga Lake, way back through the trees. Eager to spot our new house first, I turned back around and pulled myself up on my knees to see over the dashboard.

"There's Millie Smith's house," Anita said, pointing to a dark green farmhouse on her side, just past the Union Springs Seventh-day Adventist Academy. "Millie missed Sabbath School last week."

“Where’s our house?” I asked. I didn’t give a hoot about Millie Smith’s house.

“Not far,” Mommy answered. “You can almost see it from here.” I leaned forward, resting my hands on the cool chrome of the dashboard, just above the radio knobs. “Sit back,” Mommy warned. “You’ll hit the windshield if I stop fast.” I leaned back, just enough to satisfy her.

“See?” exclaimed Anita. “That’s it! Right past those trees on the corner.” I strained forward again, keeping one eye on the trees ahead and one eye on Mommy. “You’ll see it in a minute,” Anita said as the road leveled off. “It’s huge.”

Hidden behind two giant pine trees sat an old tan Victorian farmhouse, its dark windows staring blankly out on the empty porches that clung to its sides. Mommy circled the double garage and pulled into the driveway, passing a large weathered barn with its small milk house and stained cement silo.

Mommy parked beside the wide back porch and turned off the engine. Like a deflating balloon, Mommy released a weary sigh and wilted in her seat, letting her tired arms droop at her sides. From the back seat our baby brother Darel let out a loud wail.

“He’s probably hungry.” Mommy groaned as she slowly climbed out of the car. “Anita, you can unload small things from the trunk. Jeanine, you stay with Anita and don’t wander off while I nurse Darel.”

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For days I followed Mommy and Anita all over the house, upstairs, downstairs, even to the cellar where Daddy stored bushels of new apples from our small orchard.

Finally, Mommy put her hands on her hips and declared to Anita and me, “We’re settled. Or as settled as we can be until I get some papering and painting done.” Then she plunked herself down in Daddy’s Morris chair and said, “I’m not moving again. Ever!”

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November winds brought cold temperatures to upstate New York but only a dusting of snow. While Mommy washed the breakfast dishes and Anita dried them, I sat at the kitchen table, drawing a picture of our cat Tillie sleeping next to the stove. A blast of cold air sent shivers down my back as Daddy entered the kitchen. Tillie stretched her big paws straight out, nearly touching the warm stove, then curled back into a blurry gray and black circle, tucking her head into her furry chest. "Now you've ruined my picture," I told her. She swiped a lazy paw across her whiskers and fell back to sleep.

Daddy hung his winter jacket on a hook near the door and asked, "Did Ward call? He wanted me to go to the cattle auction with him today."

I studied my interrupted picture. Tillie was missing one ear and her head was as big as the stove.

"No, he didn't call," Mommy said applying more elbow grease to the frying pan. "I need the car today. I've made up my mind. As soon as I'm done with these dishes, I'm buying paint for the kitchen and wallpaper for the living room. So, tell Ward O'Hara he can pick you up here."

"You're not buying anything right now," Daddy said as he took a cup from the cupboard, spooned Postum into it and reached for the kettle. "Why isn't this water hot?" He set the kettle back on the stove and fired up the burner.

"Because it's cold," Mommy said turning from the sink and propping her dripping hands defiantly on her plump hips.

"Esther always kept a kettle of hot water on the stove," Daddy said, sitting down at the table to wait for the water to boil.

"Then why don't you go back home and live with Esssster?" Mommy said in a snotty tone. She grabbed a clean diaper and a tiny white undershirt from a stack on the counter and walked over to lift Darel from the playpen. "I'm painting the kitchen bright yellow," she continued, laying Darel on the kitchen table to change him. "Go upstairs and get me a clean outfit, Anita."

I pulled my drawing out of the way and slid off my chair. Darel smelled.

“We can’t afford to fix up this place yet,” Daddy said as he poured steaming water into his cup and set the kettle back on the stove. “You can live with this kitchen a while longer.” He added some milk from a small pitcher, left on the table since breakfast, and settled back in his chair.

“Kitchen!” Mommy cried. “You call this dump a kitchen?” She jammed a safety pin into Darel’s clean diaper, leaving the other pin clamped between her lips. “Look at these dingy green walls.” She snapped the other pin from her mouth and jammed it into the diaper. “Look at the pipes sticking out of that wall.” Her voice grew shriller. “It’s as dark as a dungeon in here!” She rolled Darel’s dirty diaper into a ball and exchanged it for the clean outfit Anita handed her. “Go clean that off in the toilet,” she instructed Anita. Darel grinned up at Mommy and gurgled, releasing a pool of drool all over his clean undershirt. Mommy grabbed him up from the table and held him over her shoulder, unwilling to share the joy on his cherubic face.

“You promised,” she continued, lowering her voice and speaking slowly with emphasis as though addressing a school child. “You promised if I would go along with buying this monstrosity, we could paint and paper the downstairs rooms this winter.”

Daddy straightened up in his chair and looked her in the eye. “I am buying cows so we can produce milk to sell so we can eat!” He could educate too. “Right now there’s no money to waste on decorating frills.”

“Frills!” shrieked Mommy. “Waste on decorating frills?” she shrieked louder.

“God-damn it, Janice,” Daddy yelled. “Shut up!” He slammed his fist down on the table so hard his Postum splashed out of the dancing cup and Tillie rushed out of the kitchen, her tail held low.

I ran after Tillie, but she disappeared around a dark corner. So, I settled for inspecting the big radio in the living room where lively music sprayed out into sunbeams on the smooth oak floor. I

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carefully laid my unfinished drawing on the blue davenport and walked over to stand in front of the floor radio with its carved wooden facade backed with bronzy fabric. I looked up at the ivory knobs but resisted touching them. I'd gotten my hand slapped last time I'd disobeyed.

*Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag*, wafted from inside the radio. Once again I walked around to the side of the radio and wedged my small blond head between the sharp edge of the radio case and the water-stained wallpaper. I closed one eye and squinted. I could almost make out the tiny people in the orange glow of the tubes, but blackness near the base of the tubes seemed to swallow them up.

Farther along the wall, just past a bright sunbeam, the curtain moved and I saw Tillie's tail sticking out. I pulled my head free and sneaked around the radio to see why Tillie was hiding. Within inches of her tail, I heard her squirting sounds and saw the spreading pool of dull green mess as it flowed out from underneath the curtain.

"Mommy! Mommy!" I yelled as I raced toward the kitchen. "Tillie's messing under the curtain!" Darel was back in his playpen and Mommy was wiping her blotchy red face with a damp dishtowel. Daddy's chair was empty, his cold Postum still pooled around his cup where he'd splashed it.

"Where is she?" Mommy asked, instantly alert and eager for combat.

"She's in the living room, near the radio," I called to her back, running after her as fast as I could.

Like an owl on a rabbit, Mommy swooped down on Tillie just as the cat made a mad dash for the front hall. "Oh no you don't!" Mommy said as she snatched Tillie off the floor. "Not this time you don't." The cat twisted in Mommy's grip but she was no match for her captor. Trapping Tillie under her elbow, Mommy grabbed

Tillie's head and pulled her ears back, distorting Tillie's face into a gruesome grin. "This'll teach you." Mommy stooped low and

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dragged the cat's face back and forth through the pool of cat manure. "Shit in my house again, will you? How do you like this?"

One more sweep through the mess and Tillie's toothy grin was lost underneath dripping green blobs. Mommy yanked the door in the front hall open, pitched Tillie out into the front yard and slammed the door. "Stinking filthy cat," Mommy fumed as she headed back to the kitchen for some rags. I held my nose and returned to the window near the radio to watch Tillie push her face along the frozen grass in a vain attempt to wipe off her own manure. With a hateful glance toward the house, Tillie slunk off around the corner.

# CHAPTER 2

## **Memories in Black and White - 1948**

It had snowed for weeks, from late November, all through December and into January. "Thank you, Mrs. Collins," the coalman said as he put the signed paper into a pocket of his stiff jacket. "And Happy New Year. Given any further thought to adding a stoker to that furnace? Be a lot more convenient." His face was covered with coal dust and his hands were as black as his coal-encrusted coat.

"Not this winter, I'm afraid," Mommy said. Anita and I waited patiently beside the kitchen table. Coal dust tingled my nose, forcing a sneeze.

"Oh! So, there you are!" the coalman said, smiling down at us. His teeth were extra white against his sooty cheeks. "I thought you'd gotten lost." He pulled two luscious lollipops from an inside pocket. "I almost forgot you."

"No you didn't," I replied with a big grin as I accepted the much-anticipated treat. "Thank you." I ripped the cellophane wrapper off and shoved the sweet orange candy into my mouth.

"This load should get you through January, Mrs. Collins," the coalman said, turning back to Mommy. "Maybe part of February with this thaw we've got. He tipped his dirty cap and opened the back door. "When you run low, just give me a call."

Anita and I ran to the kitchen window to watch the huge black truck pull away, its dull tin coal chute rattling from the tailgate. "Dennis is home from school!" I yelled to Mommy but she'd left the

room. "Wait 'til I show him my lollipop and tell him he was too late to see the coalman," I told Anita. Anita grinned at me and stuck out her purple tongue.

Dennis jumped out of the car into the slush of snow at the foot of the porch steps and Daddy drove off to put the car in the garage. Older and faster than me, Anita yanked the back door open and yelled, "Look, Dennis. The coalman gave us lollipops!"

"I wanted to tell him," I yelled at her as I stood shivering in the open doorway.

"That's nothing," Dennis said brushing past us and dumping his empty lunchbox on the floor near the coat hooks. "We're getting a dog."

"Who said so?" Mommy asked returning to the kitchen with Darel in her arms.

"Daddy said so," Dennis answered. "We're going Sunday morning."

Mommy smiled and set Darel down in his playpen. "Daddy and I agreed we wouldn't tell you kids until Sunday morning at breakfast. Guess he can't keep a secret."

I stuck my lollipop back in my mouth, disappointed Dennis wasn't the tiniest bit jealous.

"Anita, come help me peel potatoes," Mommy said. "And you'd better hurry up and change your clothes, Mr. Smarty-Pants," she said to Dennis. "You'll be late for chores."

"When's Sunday?" I asked.

"Day after tomorrow," Mommy said.

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The watery Sunday morning sun lent little light to the dull green kitchen. As Mommy set another plate of hot pancakes on the table, Dennis forked two fat ones onto his plate before she could say, "One each."

"Put one back, Jesus," Daddy said. "This isn't the last supper." He grinned at Dennis.

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“Don’t be sacrilegious, Alton,” Mommy said, frowning at Daddy. “You set a bad enough example by not attending church.” She poured circles of batter on the hot griddle.

“Nor did you when I met you,” Daddy said. “I’m going down to check the furnace. Have the kids ready in fifteen minutes. The dog pound closes at noon.”

I always got stuck in the middle of the back seat, but the ride to Auburn flew by as Dennis and Anita debated the new dog’s name and Mommy sang along with the radio while she nursed Darel.

Before I knew it, we had arrived. Moments later Daddy and Dennis came out of the long, low building leading a spotted white dog on a string. Actually, the dog was leading them and barking doggy good-byes to the other dogs inside. Huge, wet snowflakes began to blanket our car.

Dennis opened the back door and let the dog jump inside, right on top of me. “Ooooooh – he licked me,” I squealed, wiping vigorously at my mouth to get rid of the dog’s slobber.

“He likes you,” Dennis said, grinning happily and pulling the car door shut.

“Here,” offered Anita, “I’ll hold him.” But the dog wouldn’t stand or sit in one place preferring to jump from lap to lap, licking our faces and breathing his doggy breath on us.

When we passed the O’Hara’s farm on the way back, I knew we didn’t have far to go and kept a watch out for the Ferris’s beautiful stone house, just down the road from our farm. I watched the thick wet snowflakes pile up on the windshield where the wipers didn’t clean while I dodged the eager dog’s laps as best I could. When I saw the Ferris’s house, I called out with relief, “We’re almost home.”

“What’s that?” Mommy asked from up front. “What are all those cars doing in the road?” Pushing the dog out of our way, all three of us stood up to see over the front seat. Cars were parked at odd angles along the macadam road in front of our house.

“Oh my God!” Mommy cried spotting the red reflections of flashing lights that bounced off the snow banks. “There’s a fire!”

Driven by an awful fear, Mommy quickly laid Darel down on the front seat and lurched across Daddy for a better view. "Get back!" Daddy yelled. "I can't see to drive." Much less excited than Mommy, Daddy drove past our house, turned into the gravel side road and pulled into our driveway, now blocked by fire trucks and crowds of anxious people. "Everybody stay in the car," Daddy ordered as he yanked the emergency brake on and jumped out of the car.

"Don't move!" Mommy cried, leaping out of the car and hurrying after Daddy. But Dennis didn't obey, nor did Anita.

Left alone in the back seat, I scrambled over the front seat, tumbling face down toward the floor in a last-minute effort to avoid crushing Darel. He was sound asleep. I pulled myself upright to stare through the windshield at the charred timbers piercing the gray sky where our kitchen and upstairs bedrooms had been. Steam rose from heaps of soggy black rubble and pushed upward against gray plumes of smoke hanging heavy in the air. Great gaping holes from the main part of our house stared out on the wet afternoon. Black water flowed from openings where walls had been.

Huge men in great black boots and black rubber coats stood in a cluster talking to Daddy and Mommy. Mommy was crying. So, I started to cry. People were talking excitedly and pointing to the barn behind our car. I strained to look out the back window but it was mostly covered with dirty clumps of wet snow. Darel started to cry.

To my relief, Anita rushed back to the car, yanked the front door open and yelled, "They saved our piano! The piano's in the barn! They put all our furniture in the barn!"

# CHAPTER 3

## **We Thank Thee Lord for This Food**

I woke up late that spring morning in 1948 and lay awake in my bed wondering what was different. I listened and didn't hear a sound. I waited. That was it: It was quiet. I couldn't hear any hammering or sawing or men's loud voices yelling orders. The noise usually woke me up. I slipped out of my white iron bed Mommy had found at a dump, and ran out into the upstairs hall. Since the fire had taken the old wing, most of the rooms in the main part of the house had been painted and papered, all nice and new. I had been given my own small bedroom right next to the stairs.

Well, to most people they were stairs, but to Anita and me, in addition to helping us get upstairs from downstairs, they served as vehicles of adventure. One of our favorite games was dressing up in old moth-eaten clothes from the attic and playing travel. We went by car, train or plane, depending on where we sat on the stairs.

Maybe Anita and I could go to Syracuse today, I thought. I made a quick run to her bedroom, next to mine, but she wasn't there. I poked my head into Dennis's room though I knew he'd be at school. Darel's crib was empty as was Mommy and Daddy's bedroom. I tiptoed cautiously back across the wide upper hall keeping my distance from the closed door next to Mommy's room. That was where all the lumber had been stored and that's where all the rats lived! I knew. I'd seen them.

My bare feet made no sound on the newly varnished stairs as I hurried down clinging securely to the broad, black banister. Dennis usually slid down the banister, hopping off at the end, but I was too little to try that. I ran through the pale blue dining room and burst into our new kitchen, all bright and yellow. "Where's Anita?" I asked Mommy. "I want to go to Syracuse today."

"No playing today," Mommy said as she measured another cup of flour into the chipped enamel dishpan and continued stirring. "Hurry up and have your breakfast. It's Friday and there's lots to do." Instead of going directly to the big wooden table in the alcove where Mommy was making bread dough, I detoured past Darel's playpen to pat him on the head. His fat little fists gripped the wooden bars of his prison, now showing signs of weakening under its fourth inmate. He looked up at me and grinned, showing off his new teeth.

I crawled into my chair where an empty bowl sat waiting. "Can I have some Pablum?" I asked. Mommy slowly poured another cup of flour into the stiff dough and gave me a warning look. I settled for shredded wheat, dousing it liberally with sugar.

"What took you so long?" Mommy asked Anita the minute Anita came back into the house. "Did you find your father?"

"Yes. He was up in the haymow."

"Well, start dusting in the living room. I'll vacuum as soon as I set this dough to rise."

I dawdled through my breakfast watching Mommy dump the big lump of dough out on the table for kneading. I watched the milk in my bowl slosh back and forth in rhythm with her elbows and remembered that Friday was a very busy day in our house. Every room had to be vacuumed; floors had to be mopped; toilets and sinks had to be scrubbed until they shined and all the furniture had to be dusted. Sabbath clothes had to be ironed and our Sabbath shoes had to be polished.

When sundown came and the evening chores were done, we had Friday night supper, my favorite meal. We always had Heinz Vegetarian Beans, slices of homemade bread and canned fruit; I

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liked peaches best. "Can we have peaches tonight for supper?" I asked.

"Maybe," Mommy said. She patted the dough with satisfaction and plunked it back into the white enamel dishpan and covered it with a towel.

"Go get dressed, Neenee," Mommy said. "I need you to watch Darel while I clean."

Reluctantly I headed upstairs to dress, knowing Anita and I wouldn't be going to Syracuse today. I climbed the wide staircase slowly, counting off the first five steps where we traveled by car, then the next five where we sat when taking the train. I lingered on the top step where we sat when traveling by plane. I usually chose to fly.

When I returned to the kitchen, Mommy lifted Darel out of his playpen so I could help him walk. When he got bored with that and started screeching, I got the tin mixing bowl out of a lower cabinet and set him in it, balancing him perfectly. I spun it gently in the middle of the kitchen floor. He leaned back and giggled letting his blue eyes roll with the circular motion while drool soaked his clean striped shirt.

Later in the day when Daddy came downstairs from his afternoon nap, Mommy was scrubbing pots and pans in the kitchen sink. The air was heavy with the fragrant smell of bread fresh from the oven. The phone in the back hall rang. "I'll get it," Daddy said. Through the door between the kitchen and the back hall, Mommy could see Daddy leaning against his large roll-top desk. "Who is it, Alton?" Mommy asked.

"It's the vet." Daddy bent his head to light a cigarette, took a deep drag and snapped the lid of his shiny lighter shut, slipping it back into his pocket.

Mommy froze; her hands hung motionless in the hot soapy water. She stared out the window over the sink then looked at Daddy in the back hall, standing there with his back to her, smoking in the house after she had laid down the law he couldn't. How dare he defy her!

The moment Daddy hung up the phone, a dripping cast iron skillet crashed against his shoulder. "Get out!" Mommy screamed. "Damn you! Get out of this house!"

Fear gripped my gut. I'd seen them fight before but this was worse. I dragged Darel into a corner in the kitchen where I felt a bit safer and could watch what was happening in the back hall.

Daddy whirled around and wrenched the skillet from Mommy with one hand while trying to protect his face and glasses with the other. "I told you not to smoke in this house!" she screamed, blindly striking out with her fists as she tried to drive him out the back door. "You don't smoke in Esther's house. You don't smoke in mine." But her shorter, plumper body, already sagging from having four babies, was no match for his taller, leaner frame and sinewy muscles developed by endless hours of heavy farm work.

He dropped the skillet to the floor and gripped her arms pushing her down into the worn Morris chair near his desk. "This is my house too," he said as he held her down. His cigarette bobbed dangerously in his drawn lips. He relaxed his grip. When she didn't rise again, he released her and stepped back a few feet, removing his cigarette from his mouth and spitting out a fleck of tobacco. "Damn you, Janice. Damn you to hell." He took a deep breath and stared down at her. "You were nothing but an ignorant, eighteen-year-old waitress, living in a rented room, when I met you. How in Christ was I to know you would turn into a raving convert?" With a look of withering contempt at her crumpled figure, he clamped his jaw shut and slammed out the back door.

With slow, awkward strides, he crossed the wide gravel driveway between the house and the barn and entered the cool milk house to begin assembling the milkers.

Though I was still cowering in the corner, I'd gone out to the barn enough times that I could picture him as he worked. I could see him as he readied the utensils for the evening chores. Then he would walk slowly through the low-ceilinged barn stopping to turn on the radio before opening the sliding door to the barnyard. The soft music from the radio would begin to calm his frayed nerves as he

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called to his cows, "Ca'boss, ca'boss." I could see him standing aside as his beloved animals ambled past him, each one seeking her own stanchion as she had been trained.

In the old Morris chair, Mommy wept until her apron was drenched and her eyes were swollen and sore. Anita came to stand by her side and pat her wistfully on her arm. Darel and I came out of the corner and stood in the kitchen doorway. When Mommy finally rose from the saggy chair, her frustration and anger had receded and she didn't look so sad.

As I look back now, that was when I should have learned about the 'calm before the storm'. It was her thinking time. It was the period of quiet she needed to plot her revenge.

Friday night found our family quietly gathered around the kitchen table, subdued by heavy tension in the air. As soon as Mommy took her seat, we bowed our heads for prayer. I waited for Daddy to say the blessing, but no words came.

Silence floated around my bowed head but I kept my eyes shut tight. As his pause grew longer, I opened my eyes for a tiny peek. The look on Daddy's face confused me. I followed his gaze to the red bowl of canned peaches sitting in front of his empty plate. His look of surprise bounced from the red bowl of golden yellow peach halves to the larger yellow bowl of Heinz beans and then rose to Mommy's face. Bluish veins rippled along the side of his bony skull. His look of surprise changed to shock and then wrath as he stared directly at Mommy. She stared back, her mouth clamped shut in a grim line and her chin stuck out in stolid defiance.

I glanced across the table at Dennis and Anita. Both of them were staring in horror at the bowls of food. Then I saw the tiny brown specs floating on the surface of each bowl. It was shredded tobacco, tobacco from Daddy's cigarettes. Every dish of food was loaded with tobacco. A dusting of tobacco covered each thick slice of freshly baked bread and a thick layer of brown tobacco floated in the clear glass pitcher of creamy white milk.

The house was silent. There was nothing we could eat. Darel banged his small loop-handled spoon loudly on the tray of his highchair.

Daddy released a deep breath and bellowed at Mommy, “What in the name of Jesus Christ are we supposed to eat?”

Mommy sat calmly, her back straight, her arms folded across her breasts and her dark eyes glittering. She prolonged the silence adding emphasis to her reply. “If you insist on smoking, there will be nothing to eat, not for you, not for your children.” She unfolded her arms and leaned closer to the table. Slowly, with passion, she warmed to her subject. “The children have to go hungry because you smoke. Is that what you want? Would you rather smoke than have your children eat?”

“You insane, sadistic bitch!” Daddy shouted. He looked down again at the tobacco-laden food. “You go to hell!” He tore his chair away from the table and rushed toward the back hall. He slammed the door behind him, rattling the large pane of glass in the upper half. Mommy sat at the table, poised to continue speaking, but her audience had left.

Mommy sent us to bed hungry. Late into the night I heard Mommy and Daddy fighting in their bedroom. I thought about sneaking downstairs to get some cereal, but I was too scared. It didn’t seem fair that I had to starve to death because Daddy smoked. I twisted and turned in my bed as my stomach growled and pinched. I pulled my blanket over my head and whimpered into my pillow.

End of Sample



### **About the Author**

Jeanine Collins Malarsky was born on the shores of Cayuga Lake in upstate New York in 1944. The middle daughter of a peripatetic dairy farmer, she was moved from house to house and state to state east of the Mississippi. She left home to attend college in New England where she met her husband and found a permanent home near Boston, MA.

Ms. Malarsky spent thirty-six years in business management, focusing on financial accounting and computer systems, including twenty-two years operating her own company. Following years devoted to gourmet cooking, sewing, and raising two children, she is now retired and living with her husband, a retired airline pilot.

She has traveled extensively including most of Europe and the Far East, indulging in her love of history and learning. An avid life-long student of human behavior, she now devotes her energies to travel, reading and writing

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