

*Broken  
Promises*

by

**Karen GoatKeeper**

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You can find out more about Karen GoatKeeper by visiting her website at  
<http://www.karengoatkeeper.com>

***Dedicated to  
Marine Private First Class  
Brandon Smith***

# **Broken Promises**

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## Chapter 1 Bad News

Three girls carrying school backpacks climbed up the subway stairs into a strong March wind whipping through the New York City streets. Hazel braced her tall, slender body as her long straight dark brown hair wrapped itself around her face and into her mouth. She spit it out as Candice, a bit shorter and rounder, tossed her short red curls. Her freckled nose crinkled as she laughed.

“That’s fine for you,” grumbled Hazel. “It isn’t funny just because your hair is so short.”

“You should tie it back like mine,” commented petite Desiree flipping her long black hair gathered at the back of her slim neck. “Then it wouldn’t blow.”

“That is an idea,” agreed Hazel.

The three continued to laugh and talk as they walked a couple blocks down the street to Hazel’s apartment building. “See you in the morning,” said Hazel as she turned in the door. She saw her mother across the foyer.

Two Marines in blue uniforms stood next to Hazel’s mother. Her tall, thin body was slumped against one Marine. Her face framed by a golden brown French braid was deathly white. She was sobbing. Hazel’s heart seemed to stop then began to thud with alarm.

“Mother, what’s wrong?” Hazel called out as she ran over.

“Justin, not Justin,” wailed her mother through violent sobs, her body rocking against the Marine.

“I’m sorry to tell you, but your father was killed in Iraq yesterday,” said the other Marine quietly.

“You’re mistaken! It couldn’t be my father!” protested Hazel. The world spun then imploded until she saw only the Marine’s face.

“We’re not mistaken,” answered the Marine. “His convoy hit an IED while moving to a new base.”

The man continued talking but Hazel didn’t see or hear him anymore. Her father was dead? He couldn’t be! He promised! She took in a deep, shaky breath as memories erased the present.

*Hazel hummed a tune from the jazz club the family went to the night before for her twelfth birthday as she bounced down the stairs only to freeze at the sound of her mother’s angry voice.*

*“You needed to tell her two days ago.”*

*“Why spoil her birthday?” answered her father.*

*“Today then.”*

*“I suppose I should.”*

*“Why do you have to go anyway? You’re out next June.”*

*“I’m a Marine. I’m going.”*

*“We agreed not to do this anymore after she was five.”*

*“It’s not my choice. I kept my word and stayed in the Reserves.”*

*Everything stopped as Hazel entered the kitchen. “What’s going on?”*

*Her parents looked at each other. Her father cleared his throat. “I got a letter,” he began. “It says I’m going on active duty next week.”*

*“What’s that mean?”*

*"It means he's going to Iraq," broke in her mother.*

*"Why?"*

*"You know I'm in the Reserves."*

*"Sure, you go on weekends and in the summer. And you are retiring next year."*

*"I was. But the President says everyone is needed in Iraq. I go to Camp Lejeune next week."*

*"But you'll be back in a couple of weeks?"*

*"No, I won't be back for a year. I'll get to see you before going overseas but I'll be there for nine months."*

*"You will come back?"*

*"I promise I'll come back."*

"Is there anyone we can call?" asked the Marine.

Hazel jerked back to the foyer with a start. "I don't know." Her mind was frozen into blankness.

"Can we escort you to your apartment? Are you sure there's no family or friends or church to call?"

Hazel looked at her mother for answers. Her mother was still sobbing, still wailing, not aware of his questions or Hazel or anything. She took a deep breath and tried to focus on something, anything. Apartment. She grabbed onto this.

"You can help get my mother to the apartment. I'll think about who to call."

It took both Marines to guide her mother to the elevator as she tried to collapse onto the floor. Hazel watched this as from a great distance. On the way up Hazel again remembered her father's face looking at her.

*"Do you have to leave?" Hazel asked.*

*"Early in the morning. I'll write. I hear we can call and email sometimes. I'm taking a phone and my laptop. Nine months will be over in no time. Then I'll be back."*

*"You promise?"*

*"I promise."*

*"Cross your heart?"*

*"Cross my heart."*

*"You won't leave again?"*

*"Not if I can help it."*

The elevator doors opened. Hazel focused on her mother and the Marines. They half guided, half carried her mother off the elevator. Hazel led them to the door and got out her key.

"Have you thought of someone to call?" the marine asked. "Your mother really needs someone right now."

"My father is – was – in the Reserves. We know other people in the Reserves. There's a family group. I'll call Amanda. She'll know what to do."

"Your father's body will come in to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware in a few days. Your mother needs to make funeral arrangements by then. The funeral home will know what to do."

“I’ll call Amanda now.” Hazel put her backpack down, grabbed the phone, opened the contact list, looked up the number and dialed. She felt strange, numb, like she was in a dream. This must be a nightmare. It couldn’t be real.

“Hello,” answered Amanda’s voice.

“Hello, Amanda, this is Hazel Whitmore,” she said calmly. “There are two Marines here. Can you come over? Mother’s really upset.”

“Oh, Honey,” cried Amanda. “I’ll come! Of course, I’ll come! Have you called anyone else?”

“I can’t think who else to call. The Marine says Mother must make funeral arrangements. He says Father’s dead.” Hazel’s voice was flat. She didn’t believe the words. They had to be wrong. Father promised to come home and he never broke a promise, never!

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of everything. I’ll call a couple of other people. We’ll be there soon.” The line went dead. Hazel hung up.

“Amanda’s coming,” she told the Marine.

“We’ll wait until she gets here.”

Hazel walked into the kitchen. She looked in the cupboards for an after school snack. Nothing she wanted. She opened the refrigerator and stood there looking. Finally she closed the door and wandered back into the living room.

One Marine looked at her. “Are you all right?” Hazel looked at him blankly and at the other Marine trying to comfort her mother.

Hazel looked back at the Marine without seeing him. She was totally numb, feeling nothing. Her mind was closing doors on her memories and her feelings. She felt calm. Everything seemed unreal. Her mind was floating, looking down on things as though this was a movie. She turned and took her backpack to her room.

She had homework to complete for school tomorrow. She sat down at her desk and took out the first assignment. The problems looked like some foreign language on the page. She took a deep breath then slowly let it out. Her mind was slipping away into nothingness. She grabbed it and pulled it back.

Her insides suddenly went cold. Her mind went cold. Part of her was locked away behind a thick cold icy wall. She looked back at the math assignment and began. The problems were easy and soon done. She turned to the next assignment.

The doorbell rang in the middle of the assignment. Hazel listened. Surely Mother would get the door. The door opened and voices rose in the living room. Hazel turned back to her homework, ignoring them.

“We’ll be going now,” said the Marine from Hazel’s door. “Amanda is here.”

“That’s fine,” answered Hazel. Her mind pictured Amanda, blond, elegant, never a hair out of place, efficient. “Amanda will take care of everything. I have homework to finish.”

The Marine and Hazel looked at each other for a time. Hazel finally turned back to her desk. The Marine turned back to the living room.

“The girl is closing it all off,” Hazel heard him tell Amanda.

“She just needs some time,” Amanda answered him.

“We’ll be going. You have the card with the number to call if you need to.” The door opened and closed again. Hazel continued working on her homework ignoring the sounds of Mother’s crying and Amanda’s soothing voice.

The doorbell rang again. More voices came from the living room. Hazel got up to close her door so she could concentrate. She turned on her radio.

There wasn't a lot of homework and it was easy. She was working on the last assignment when someone knocked on her door. It opened and Amanda came in with a steaming mug.

"June made some hot chocolate for all of us. Won't you have some?" Amanda put the mug down on a corner of the desk.

"I'm not hungry." The smell of chocolate filled the air. "Thanks, it might taste good. I'm almost done here."

"Come on out when you're done." Amanda went back out of the door, shutting it behind her.

Hazel took a sip of chocolate. The warmth rolled down inside melting some of the cold in the pit of her stomach. Hazel felt some of the wall thaw, doors start to open. She slammed them tight again. She would not cry! She would not let herself hurt! Father broke his promise! Tendrils of ice cold rage grew up over the wall strengthening it.

Hazel turned back to finish the assignment sipping the cooling chocolate between questions. She closed her books and put them in her backpack for school the next day. She turned off the radio, opened the door and walked out into the living room.

On the sofa Mother was leaning against Grace whose curled shoulder length dark hair messily surrounded them both. Mother's sobs were mostly gone now. Her face was swollen; her eyes red, tears still ran over her cheeks. Her breathing came in great audible gasps as she struggled to sit up. "Hazel?" she quavered.

"Yes, Mother."

"What were you doing?"

"I finished my homework." More tendrils of anger climbed up the wall. Why had Mother let him go?

"You could have left it for now."

"I need it for school tomorrow. I always do it right after school." Hazel's voice was cold and distant.

"You don't have to go to school tomorrow if you don't feel like it."

"I'm not sick. There's no reason for me to stay home tomorrow. What are we doing for dinner? We had planned to go out."

Mother looked at Hazel blankly. She looked over at Grace, then Amanda. June, short, chunky, Hispanic, maker of delicious foods, bustled out of the kitchen.

"What would you like for dinner, Hazel?"

"We haven't been shopping yet so I don't know what's there. Mother would know."

"Your mother doesn't feel well right now. Why don't you come out and help me find out?"

Hazel joined June in the kitchen. "There's some salad left in the fridge," said Hazel. "And some cheese."

"I've found some macaroni in the cupboard. How about having macaroni and cheese with salad for dinner?"

"I like macaroni and cheese but we always make it out of a box."

"Get the cheese out and I'll show you how to make it from scratch."

"I don't know much about cooking."

"It's easy. We'll need some oil, flour and milk to make the cheese sauce."

Hazel and June were soon busy cooking. Hazel found herself relaxing inside, having fun. “Father likes to cook.” She stopped. The wall was cracking. She piled mortar on. The tendrils of anger grew bigger, stronger. The wall couldn’t break. She would not cry. She tossed her head and went back to grating cheese with a vengeance.

## Chapter 2 All a Dream?

Hazel woke up early, before her alarm went off. Her jaws ached for some reason. She untangled herself from her blanket, tossed it back and got up. She must have had some wild dreams during the night but didn't remember. She pulled the blankets and sheets straight again and tucked them back in as she thought about yesterday.

Hazel started to get dressed and found her hair was one long loose tangle. She got her brush, sat down on the bed and started to brush the tangle out of her hair. Wondering why she was so upset, Hazel again started going over yesterday's events. Every time she hit a tough tangle, it pulled and hurt and she started going over from the beginning. Eventually the tangle was out but she still hadn't gotten to coming home.

As Hazel stood looking in her closet deciding what to wear, she finally remembered the Marines and Amanda. "Father's dead," echoed inside her head as cold numbness returned inside. So she should wear black, shouldn't she? Black was for mourning. All she had was a pair of black slacks, no black blouse. She never wore black like that. Maybe a white blouse? Maybe Mother would take her shopping for some clothes.

The apartment was quiet as she went to the kitchen. It felt empty. Mother was always up by now. There was some cereal, half a box. There was nothing for dinner either. Mother would have to go shopping later.

Amanda walked into the kitchen. Hazel looked at her rumpled clothes in surprise. Last night had begun to fade back into an unreal dream behind her normal morning routine. Amanda jerked her back into an unwanted reality.

"Good morning, Hazel."

"Good morning, Amanda. I was just having breakfast. All I found was cereal. Mother's not up yet."

"Cereal is fine. Your mother had a rough night and is still asleep. I'll check on her in a bit. Are you sure you want to go to school?"

"I don't want to miss class." Annoyance with Amanda's solicitude gnawed at Hazel.

"I will probably be gone before you get home. Grace, June or I will be by often to help you and your mother."

After breakfast Hazel got her backpack, went out into the hall, locked and closed the door. Strangely, everything still seemed the same, except for her. Yesterday's numb feeling of unreality filled and surrounded her. There was that new cold iceberg hidden behind that cold wall. Stubbornly Hazel ignored these feelings, tossed her head and took the elevator downstairs. Her friends met her in front of her building as usual. They chattered on about school and boys. Hazel found she wasn't listening, her mind floating blankly.

School was the same as yesterday too. Hazel was an observer watching her classes from a distance. Nothing felt quite real. It was hard to pay attention or hear what people were saying. Walking between classes and to the cafeteria for lunch was like walking in a dream.

"Hazel! Oh, Hazel." Candice was waving her hands in front of Hazel's face.

"Stop it!" Hazel slapped them down.

"You aren't listening. Are you going on the field trip next week?"

"I don't know. Probably not."

"No? Why not? You want to be stuck here doing some stupid assignment?"

"I don't know when the funeral is. I guess I have to go to that."

“Funeral? What funeral? Who died?”

“The Marines say my father died in Iraq.”

Candice collapsed against the wall, her mouth open.

Desiree breezed up. “Let’s go get some lunch! I’m famished! Is something wrong?”

“Hazel’s f—,” Candice started.

“No, nothing is wrong.” broke in Hazel. “Let’s go eat.”

Hazel stalked off toward the lunch line. Desiree turned to follow as Candice sidled up to her, nudged her and started whispering. Now Desiree gulped watching Hazel.

Lunch was pizza and salad. Hazel started eating. “What’s with you two? It’s good, the best meal they make.”

“Hazel, shouldn’t you tell the counselor or something?” asks Candice.

“Why? I’m okay She’ll just make a fuss.”

“Are you sure?” chimed in Desiree. “After all, it’s your father. Aren’t you upset or something?”

“I’m okay. I don’t want to talk about it. I’m sorry I told you. That field trip sounds like a great trip. Of course, any trip away from school is great. We’re going to the art museum, aren’t we?”

“The Metropolitan Museum of Art has a special show of the art from the historical era we are studying,” said Candice mimicking their teacher.

Desiree and Hazel giggled. “You’re getting good at that,” choked out Desiree.

After school the three friends took the subway and walked back just the same as usual. Hazel still felt a bit unreal. But yesterday was becoming a terrible dream and everyday was again her reality.

Hazel crossed the empty foyer to take the elevator up. Her mother just overslept. She must be up by now. Surely she went shopping for some food. Hazel would tell her she wanted to buy some clothes. She put her key in the lock. It was unlocked! The door was never left unlocked!

“Mother? The door was unlocked. Are you all right?”

June got up from the sofa. “Hazel, put your books down. We need to go to the hospital. Your mother took some pills, but she’ll be all right.”

Hazel stopped and stared at her. “I was hoping yesterday was a nightmare, a terrible dream. But you’re here. What happened to Mother?”

“When Amanda checked on your mother, after you’d gone to school, there was an empty pill bottle on the nightstand.”

“She’s usually up when I get ready for school. Amanda said she was just sleeping late.”

“That’s what Amanda thought until later. Put your books down and we’ll get going.”

Hazel left her backpack in her room. The numbness surrounded and filled her again. Would this nightmare never end? She pinched herself trying to wake up. She was awake. She sighed, tossed her head and walked back into the living room.

“I need to go shopping for some food. I know where my mother keeps her purse. I’ll get some money.”

Hazel went into her parents’ room. Her mother’s purse wasn’t there. She looked around and still didn’t see it. She should make out a list. But she knew most of what was needed from going with Mother other times. She paused while a war of conflicting thoughts raged inside her head splitting her into warring pieces.

Why can't everything be like it was? Nothing will ever be the same again. What if Mother dies too? Why should Mother do this to her now? Father should have stayed home! He promised to come home! How could the President do this to her? All of her thoughts tumbled in a creeping numbness. Her eyes closed. She took some deep breaths to help squelch the warring parts. Slowly she stuffed them behind the ice cold wall.

"Hazel," called June. "I forgot. Amanda took your mother's purse to the hospital for identification."

Hazel took a last deep breath, tossed her head. "I'm coming." and she walked calmly back into the living room.

June looked at her with concern. "Let's get going."

At the hospital the doctor assured Hazel that her mother would be fine. She was now resting quietly. She should be able to go home in another hour or two.

"I'll stay and get her home," volunteered Amanda.

"Good," said June. "Hazel, didn't you say you needed to do some grocery shopping? Why don't we do that then meet Amanda and your mother at your apartment?"

"May I see my mother a moment before we go?" Hazel asked the doctor.

"She's still real sleepy but you can go in for a few minutes. She's in room 115 down this hall."

Hazel went down the hall, hesitated, then opened the door of room 115. Her mother was in the first bed looking very white and still. Her brown eyes were open but not looking at anything.

"Mother?"

The eyes moved to Hazel slowly focusing on her. "Hazel. I'm glad to see you. I did something really stupid last night. I just wanted to sleep until I didn't hurt anymore." Tears started rolling down her cheeks.

"The doctor said you will be fine. Amanda will stay and get you home in an hour or so. June and I are going shopping for some food. Is there anything special to get?"

"I'm not very hungry. I can't think what to get. Maybe some take out food for everyone for tonight. Get some money from my purse. There should be a couple of twenties in it."

Hazel found the purse on the table by the bed. She got three twenties out. "I'll see you when you get home later." she told Mother and left.

June and Hazel went to a couple of local markets to find the items Hazel knew they needed. "Mother said to get some take out food for dinner tonight. What do you like?"

"I don't know if I will stay. It sounds good. What does your mother like? What do you like?"

"I like pizza but Chinese is good too. Mother likes Chinese."

"Maybe we should get Chinese so your mother will be tempted to eat since you both like it."

"There's a place we like just a couple of blocks from the apartment."

"Why don't we leave the groceries at the apartment, then get the food?"

"I can call from the apartment so it's ready when we get there."

"That sounds like a plan."

Amanda and Hazel's mother were just getting in the elevator when June and Hazel came in with the take out. They rode up together. Mother sniffed the rich smells wafting from the boxes.

"Chinese, my favorite. I didn't think I was hungry until I smelled it."

Amanda and June smiled at Hazel.

Once in the apartment Hazel got out dishes and silverware to set the table. All of them sat down to eat. Mother seemed famished. After the food was gone, Hazel started cleaning up with June's help.

"Do you have any family in or near the city who could stay with you a few days?" asked Amanda.

"No," Mother replied flatly. "There's no family to call. I'm sorry I'm such a bother. I guess it's just the shock."

"It's no bother. I was just wondering if there was anyone we should call. You do need to make funeral arrangements tomorrow. I can't come tomorrow but Grace can. She knows how to make the arrangements."

Mother sighed and a few stray tears dripped down her cheeks. "I suppose I must. I would appreciate some help. I don't know what to do."

"I'll give Grace a call. Will you be all right here tonight?"

"Yes. I will be fine. I don't know what happened last night really. I just couldn't go to sleep so I kept taking those pills."

"Then we'll be on our way for tonight. Grace will come tomorrow. Good night, Juliana. Good night, Hazel."

"Good night." Hazel headed for her room to do her homework. The next day was another school day.

## Chapter 3 The Funeral

Hazel stood stiff and dry-eyed looking at her father. He looked peaceful, asleep. She took a breath and held it, clenching her teeth to stifle angry words. Waves of anger consumed her.

“Father, why did you go? You promised to come back! You lied to me! You left me!” The phrases ran endlessly through her mind as Hazel sat down next to Mother.

Mother sat quietly crying. Different phrases joined the endless chain in Hazel’s mind. “She should have stopped him! All she seems to do now is cry. I’m tired of tears. Tears won’t change anything!”

Politely Hazel smiled at the people coming past to say how sorry they were. What a farce! What had they lost? Her father wasn’t important to them! He was just someone they knew or worked with. At least they knew him; unlike that counselor at school with all those drippy “We’re so sorry.” condolences. Hazel found a slight smile on her lips remembering how her teachers fell over themselves trying to be nice to her.

Some people definitely not from the city stopped in front of her mother. An old woman with short unruly white hair dressed in a faded print dress was in front crying. There was a man and woman about her mother’s age dressed in clean but worn clothes and a thin old man in wrinkled jeans with a front and straps over his shoulders. Who were these people?

“Juliana,” the woman choked out, “I’m so sorry about Justin.”

Hazel stared in surprise as Mother looked up and lashed out with her words. “Sorry? Sorry for what? You disowned him when we got married and he joined the Marines. Who invited you to the funeral? You couldn’t answer his letters, send us Christmas cards, even meet your granddaughter! And now you’re sorry? Go back where you came from! Leave us alone!”

Granddaughter? This was her grandmother? Hazel stared at the woman and the others with her. Where were these people from? Why was Mother so angry?

“I told you,” snapped the old man. “You wouldn’t listen to me, had to come.”

“It’s all your fault!” the woman snapped back. “You’re the one who disowned him! You’re the one wouldn’t answer his letters! You’re the one wouldn’t let any of us get in touch! Now it’s too late! He’s gone! My son’s gone thinking I didn’t love him anymore.” The woman dissolved into tears. The younger woman put her arms around the woman’s shoulders and guided her away followed by the younger man. The old man glared at Mother then stomped off. Hazel stared after them in amazement.

“Mother, who are those people?”

“They’re your father’s family.”

“I didn’t know we had relatives. You told Amanda there was no one to call.”

Mother sighed through her tears. “There wasn’t. His father disowned your father when he married me and joined the Marines. Why should we tell you about people who didn’t want to know us or you? I don’t want to talk about them anymore.”

Hazel wondered what other secrets her parents kept from her. She continued smiling at people filing by but stole looks back at these new relatives whenever there was a break in the line. At last everyone was seated. The minister, looking somber in a black suit, stepped to the podium and began the service.

“I didn’t know Justin Whitmore well,” the minister began.

Hazel stifled a snicker. They never went to church. Of course the minister didn't know her father.

"I met Justin when he was called back to active duty," continued the minister. "He was concerned about going overseas as so many service people are. He didn't want to leave his family. He loved them dearly and wanted to stay with them."

Hazel felt pangs of sorrow creep up. She let anger fill her mind and squashed them. The wall wasn't strong enough yet. She had to make it stronger. She wasn't going to cry!

The minister finished without Hazel hearing anything else he had to say. Then various people stood up to talk about her father. Hazel was surprised how many things her father did with other people. She realized how little she actually knew about his life and work.

The old woman, her grandmother, shuffled toward the podium. Mother stiffened, started to protest, but stopped, her face tear-stained but angry as she glared at the woman. Hazel looked at the woman curiously, wondering what she could say.

"Justin was my boy, my oldest boy," she said in gusty bursts. "I loved him. He was a loving boy, smart. He wanted out of our little town. He studied hard, wanted to go to college but his father wouldn't let him. Justin wouldn't give up. He was stubborn that way. First he married his girl and made his father mad. Then he joined the Marines to get out of that town. His father was angry and cut him off. Hearing you all today makes me proud. Justin wanted to make a good life and he did. I'm proud to say he's my son."

Mother stared at her. The anger was fading a bit. The tears were starting again.

"Well, I'm not proud of him!" announced the old man from the back of the room. "He up and left us even when I told him not to! A son honors and obeys his father! He was no son of mine!"

He stomped out of the parlor. Everyone stared after him with open mouths. The old woman shuffled to where Mother and Hazel sat.

"He won't change," she said. "I'm proud to meet you. You must be my granddaughter. What's your name?"

"Hazel."

"Hazel's a good name. Your daddy was a good man. You do him proud now."

The old woman shuffled down the aisle to the door. The others joined her. "You better get out here, old woman. We're leaving!" said the old man.

Hazel joined everyone else staring back at the door. Her mind spun with questions. Who were these people? Why did the old man hate her father, his son? Where were they from? Why did he hate her mother?

Hazel jerked around as an attendant asked them to come with him to a waiting limousine. The closed casket was already being moved to the waiting hearse by six Marines. Hazel and her mother followed the man and got in the limousine. It was big inside with comfortable seats. The windows were dark. A chauffeur dressed in black waited until the hearse drove off then followed slowly on the way to the cemetery.

When the limousine stopped, Hazel and her mother got out. Hazel looked back at the line of cars parking behind the vehicle. People were getting out and walking up to where a canopy stood over a hole beside a green rug covering a pile of dirt. The same six Marines were carrying the casket draped with a flag. They set it on some rails over the hole.

The minister gave another little speech. The Marines picked up and folded the flag handing it to her mother who was crying again as “Taps” played. Marines fired a salute. Then everyone was getting into their cars and leaving.

Hazel realized her father was now gone forever and her throat caught. She tossed her head. She started to fan her anger again. He lied to her! Her shoulders set. He left them! Her lips pressed together. She would not cry. She marched back to the limousine behind her mother.

## Chapter 4 What About Money?

Hazel opened the apartment door and walked in. Her breakfast dishes were still scattered on the table. The curtains were still closed. Mother was probably still in bed. Again.

It had been a month. The only time Mother got up during the day was when Amanda, June or Grace came by. Then things got cleaned up so Hazel didn't have to do it. Then they had something decent to eat. Otherwise all Mother did was stay in bed and cry. How stupid! As if that would change anything.

"Hazel, is that you?"

"Yes." Who else would it be?

"Hazel, please come in here."

Hazel tossed her backpack on the sofa, dropped the mail on the table and went into her mother's room. Mother was sitting propped up on pillows and had blankets pulled up around her as though she was cold. The apartment was never cold.

"You're wearing black again. It doesn't look good on you. And that black lipstick and nail polish looks like Halloween."

Hazel just looked at her.

"I didn't go to the market today. I didn't want to get dressed and see people. Maybe you can look to see what we need. I'll give you some money to get it. Oh, and bring the mail up."

"I got the mail on my way in. It's in the living room. I'll get it for you."

While her mother looked through the mail, Hazel looked through the cupboards and refrigerator. They were pretty empty. Canned, frozen and boxed meals weren't as good as Mother used to cook but she didn't cook anymore. Hazel sighed and made out a list.

Mother was staring at a letter when Hazel went back in her room.

"You open it," choked Mother.

Hazel picked it up. It was from Missouri. The writing was shaky, spiky. They didn't know anyone in Missouri. She frowned, thinking. Had anyone they knew moved to Missouri lately? She didn't think so. Then she remembered the old woman and the others with her at the funeral. Did they live in Missouri? She slit the envelope open and took out a single sheet of notebook paper.

"Dear Juliana and Hazel," Hazel read. Mother looked away at the curtains huddling up even more under the blankets. "I wanted to write. He wouldn't let me. I'm proud of Justin. Hazel looks a lot like him. I hope you forgive me. Write me at Maryann's so I get it. This is the address. Signed Ruby Whitmore."

"I don't know what to write," said Mother. "I don't know if I want to write. I never really met Justin's folks. Just saw them once. His father was furious about me. He started shouting. Ordered me out of his house. Ordered Justin to have nothing to do with me. Called my father a thief and a liar. Justin got in front of me. His father almost hit him. His mother and sister fled into the kitchen. His brothers, I think there were two of them, slid around the room and through a door. I guess she just wants to know about you."

"Why did he hate you? He didn't know you."

"My mother told me my father and Mr. Whitmore went into business together. They bought some cattle. When the calves were born, some went missing. They accused each other of stealing them. I guess the sheriff finally had to close the venture down before

there was real trouble. Turned out someone else had stolen the calves and sold them. Mr. Whitmore didn't believe the sheriff, always believed my father was behind the theft."

"That's stupid."

"Maybe. But some people believe what they want to believe and nothing will change their minds."

"Mrs. Whitmore seemed nice."

"She's scared of him. Rumor was he beat her. Justin never said. I'm surprised she dared to come to the funeral. I wonder how she knew."

"What about your parents? You never told me about them."

"My mother died years ago, when you were a baby. We went to visit because she was sick and wanted to see you. She died the next year. My Dad and I never did get along. We had an argument. He never would answer my letters so I gave up writing a year or two later. Like I told you before, none of them wanted anything to do with us, so we didn't bother you about them."

"Then I suppose it doesn't matter whether you write her or not. She did seem to want to make up though."

"I could ask her how she knew to come. Maybe I'll do that. I'm getting tired of staying in bed. I just don't want to talk to people."

"I better get to the market for some food. There wasn't much in the kitchen."

"Where's my purse? It looks like you'll have to get some money from the ATM again. I guess you should get a hundred dollars out so we'll have some cash for a couple of weeks. Here's the card. Do you remember the pin?"

"Yes."

Hazel took the card and left. It would be nice to have her mother up again. She wondered about these relatives. What could her mother and grandfather have argued about so he wouldn't write her? But Missouri was far away. She would probably never see any of them again so it didn't matter.

Hazel felt like walking so she went to the bank. She put the card up for the teller. "I'd like to take one hundred dollars out please."

The teller punched in the account number. "You don't have that much in the account."

"Could I get fifty?"

The teller handed her the money and a receipt with the balance on it.

For the first time Hazel thought about where the money would come from. Her mother had never worked that she remembered. Her father made the money. There wouldn't be any more from him. What were they going to do?

Hazel was still thinking about this when she got back to the apartment with the groceries. To her surprise Mother was up and had the dishes washed. Together they unloaded the sacks and put things away.

"Mother, I couldn't get the hundred dollars. The bank teller said there wasn't enough in the account. I only got fifty. What are we going to do for money?"

"The Marines sent us some money for the funeral. An insurance company sent us money after that. Amanda helped me with the paperwork and I took it to your father's broker. He's supposed to put funds in the account every month. I'll call him in the morning. There's enough to last a long time if we're careful."

"Are you going to get a job?"

“I might. I might try being a secretary again. I need to improve my computer skills for that.”

“Why don’t you take some classes?”

“I might. I’ll think about it.”

Hazel sighed. At least money wasn’t a problem. And Mother seemed almost normal again. At least she was up and not crying. Everything was going on as though nothing really changed. But that cold empty spot inside and her dimly remembered nightmares reminded her everything was different.

## Chapter 5 Where's the Money?

Hazel had left for school the following morning dressed in her usual black. Mother had an appointment with the broker. She was ready to leave when the phone rang.

"Hello."

"This is Kingston Private Middle School calling for Juliana Whitmore."

"Speaking."

"Please hold for the assistant principal."

Mother grasped her purse tightly. Fear gripped her. Had something happened to Hazel?

"Mrs. Whitmore, this is Mr. Kenton," came a deep voice.

"Is Hazel hurt? Has something happened to her?" Mother almost screamed in panic.

"No, your daughter is fine. This is about a disciplinary matter. It seems Hazel lost her temper with another student, threatened to strike him. No one was hurt. However we would like you to meet with the teacher, the counselor and myself about this. Could you come at one?"

"Hazel hit someone? That doesn't sound like her. Things have been tough here. Yes, I can be there at one."

"We'll see you then."

Mother sat down, her appointment temporarily forgotten. What was Hazel thinking? Everything was just out of control, confusing. Her head settled onto her hands and sobs shook her shoulders. The phone broke in.

Mother looked at the phone apprehensively then picked it up. "Hello."

"This is Mr. Neville's office. You have an appointment for ten. Were you planning to come?"

"Oh, I had another call. What time is it? Yes, I want to come."

"Mr. Neville's ten thirty appointment was early so we could reschedule you for then. It's a quarter to ten now."

"I'm on my way." Mother hung up, grabbed her purse and left. There should be just enough time. The questions she wanted to ask were in her purse. The phone call to Amanda last night helped her make a plan and know better what Hazel and she needed.

"Mrs. Whitmore?" the man said. "You were rather distraught the last time we met. I'm Mr. Neville, your broker. Won't you have a seat?"

"Thank you," replied Mother as she sat down, butterflies fluttering in her stomach. She really didn't know much about financial matters and felt lost.

"I understand you have some questions, Mrs. Whitmore. I'll try to answer them."

Mother took the list out of her purse. "Yesterday my daughter tried to get some money for groceries from the bank. There was no money in the account. I don't remember our arrangements very clearly from before as I was very upset at that time. However I believe money for our living expenses was to be transferred into the account monthly. Is this being done?"

"Let me bring your account up." Mr. Neville turned to his computer and started typing. "Here it is. No, money is only transferred on request."

"I have a copy here of the paper I gave you the last time we met. It clearly says money is to be transferred monthly."

“Really?” Mr. Neville opened a folder and thumbed through its contents. “I don’t seem to have those instructions in here. May I see your copy and make another to keep?”

“Yes.” Mother handed her copy over in confusion. She didn’t remember the previous meeting clearly. It was a week or so after the funeral. She did hazily remember giving him a copy of these instructions. At least she thought she did.

Mr. Neville returned and handed the paper back. He leaned back in his chair to look over his copy. “I’ll have to change some things. Let’s see what we can do. Most of the money is in long term investments. You’ll lose money if you sell many of them now.”

“Mr. Neville, this is the only income we have and we need money to live on. What kinds of investments are you talking about?”

“Well, there is your daughter’s college account. You can’t touch that. Your late husband insisted it be invested in treasury bonds and mutual funds. It is doing fine.”

“What about the rest of it? We received a big check because Justin was killed,” Mother’s voice was getting colder. Her nervousness was now annoyance.

“It’s split between stocks, bonds and an investment fund. About a quarter is in stocks, another quarter in bonds and half in the investment fund. The fund pays a very high rate of interest which I have been reinvesting in the fund.”

“How much is this interest? Would it cover our living expenses?”

“It’s about enough to do that. I could divert the interest into your bank account every month instead of reinvesting it.”

“What is this fund? How can it pay so much in interest?”

“The fund manager is very successful in managing investments. As far as I know, he uses some higher risk investments but spreads the risk out to keep the fund doing well. I know many brokers using this fund. They recommend it highly.”

“What are the stocks?”

“You should receive a monthly statement and they are listed on that. Most of the stocks are financial institutions, mortgage and car companies. They are rated double and triple A. That is a very high rating.”

“Tell me about the bonds.”

“There are a few government bonds. Most are corporate bonds.”

“What is a corporate bond?”

“A corporate bond is a debt instrument issued by a private corporation.”

Mother looked at him blankly. “A what?”

“Simply put, it’s like a bank CD, Certificate of Deposit, but to a corporation. The corporation pays you interest.”

“What companies do we have bonds for?”

“Yours are mostly for financial institutions. There are a few for food and energy companies. They are listed on that monthly statement.”

“What happens to the interest from these?”

“I have been investing it in the investment fund.”

“Justin always said to spread investments out in case anything ever went wrong with one. There seems to be a lot of it in this investment fund and financial institutions.”

“You can’t get such good returns with any other investments.”

“Why not?”

“Interest rates are low so rates offered are low.”

“It makes me nervous.”

“This fund is very highly thought of.”

“I would like the interest from the bonds and the investment fund diverted to our bank account. And I want to move a third of the money from the investment fund into a good mutual fund.”

“Which mutual fund?”

“I don’t know any specifically. Can you tell me about some?”

“Let me print out some information about several. You can take the information home with you to look over. Then you can call me and I can move the money.”

“All right. You will move the interest into the bank account after this?”

“I’ll make those changes right now.” Mr. Neville turned to his computer and started typing. “The interest will divert to your bank account starting the first of the month.”

“That’s a week from now. We will have to use credit cards until then. The money will definitely be there after the first so we can pay the cards off?”

“The interest is paid on different dates. The fund interest is paid on the tenth. The bonds are on several dates. It will be transferred as it comes in.”

Mother sighed. This was much more complicated than she expected. She wished she had listened to Justin more but she didn’t expect to lose him. Maybe it would turn out all right. She would call Amanda tonight for advice.

“Is there anything else? I have another appointment.”

“That covers my list for now. I will be in touch about the mutual fund. I may want to sell some of the bonds and buy a wider variety.”

“My secretary will give you that information on your way out.” Mr. Neville stood up and shook her hand. He was not very happy.

Mother sighed again and left. She took a stack of papers from the secretary. It was just after eleven. Maybe she would stop somewhere for a sandwich and look over some of the information before going to the school. She rang for the elevator.

What had come over Hazel? She realized they hadn’t really talked since before the funeral. She didn’t remember Hazel shedding a single tear. But maybe Hazel cried in her room at night. Her memories of the past month or so, ever since the Marines met her, were so hazy, so unreal. A few tears escaped to run down her cheeks.

Mother took the elevator down then walked down to the subway. There was that nice little place near the school. She would go there. After a sandwich maybe life wouldn’t feel so overwhelming.

## Chapter 6 Burning Anger

That morning Hazel, Candice and Desiree arrived at school with plenty of time to get to their lockers. Hazel dumped her books and pack into her locker. She used to be proud of how neat her locker was. It didn't seem to matter anymore. Homework papers were scrunched up on the bottom. She took out the book for first hour.

"Hazel, did you get that homework assignment done?" asked Candice. "I didn't understand some of it. I called Desiree and she didn't get it either. You didn't answer your phone."

"I didn't do it."

Candice shook her head. "You used to be the best student in sixth grade."

"What difference does that make? I just don't want to do it anymore."

Desiree joined them again as they passed her locker. "Don't want to do what anymore? Homework? I wish I could get away with that. My parents would ground me for sure."

"All Mother does now is lie in bed and cry," grumbled Hazel, anger creeping into her voice. "She was up when I got breakfast this morning. The first time in a month. She'll be back in bed by time I get home."

"Maybe both of you can stay at my place next Friday night," Candice said. "We can watch movies, goof off and stay up all night."

"My parents would let me, I'm sure," said Desiree happily. "It sounds like fun. How about you, Hazel?"

"I don't know. I guess Mother would let me. I'll ask tonight."

They entered their classroom and took their seats just before the tardy bell. The teacher finished roll.

"Please take out your homework." Books and papers rustled around the room. Hands shot up here and there.

"Yes, Candice?"

"I didn't get the last section. Could you explain it?" Murmurs and nods of agreement circled the room.

"It seems several of you need help with that section. I expected that. Let's go over the first parts. Then we will go over that last section. Hazel, what was your answer for number one?"

"I didn't do it."

"That's two days in a row. Curtis, what was your answer?"

Hazel shut out the class and stared out the window. Math wasn't that hard. She could do it if she wanted to. Why bother? Mother didn't care and Father was dead.

The bell rang. Hazel jumped then grabbed her book. She headed for her locker to get the book for second hour. As she rummaged through the pile in her locker, sounds of laughter came from behind her.

"Hazel thinks she's so smart she doesn't need to do her work anymore," laughed a boy.

Hazel froze.

"Just because her Daddy's dead she's too good for us."

Hazel's breath caught then sped up.

"Just because her Daddy was stupid enough to go to Iraq, she can show us up."

“Yeah,” chimed in a girl’s voice. “Just look at those Halloween clothes and stuff she wears now.”

“Shut up, David,” Hazel snapped as she whirled around.

“Oh, I’m so afraid,” snickered David striking an insolent pose and looking toward the girl. He turned back. “You’re going to make me?”

Hazel started to slap David without even knowing her hand moved. Candice grabbed her arm and tried to turn her back to her locker. She yanked loose, the world lost in a white haze.

“Hey! You can’t do that!” David yelled as he backed across the hall.

Blindly Hazel surged toward him as students scattered. David sat down in the open locker on the other side of the hall as Hazel’s hand swiped at now empty air. “You take it back!” Hazel screamed. “You leave me alone!”

Hands grabbed her shoulders. She tossed them off. “Hazel!” snapped a teacher grabbing her again and spinning her around. “Hazel! Let’s go to the office. David, you get to class! We will call you to the office in a few minutes.”

Hazel struggled to get back at David then let the teacher guide her down the hall, her anger seething. She didn’t see the hall or the students. She shook free of the teacher’s hands as she started shaking and the hall came into focus. Anger still burned hotly inside her. Slowly she shoved it back onto that big cold wall of ice.

“Hazel, please sit here for now,” said Mrs. Liu, the English teacher.

Hazel sat down breathing hard. She had never been sent to the office before. David started it. He should be here, not her. Tendrils of anger reached out again. She squashed them knowing they would only make things worse.

“Hazel, come into my office,” said Mr. Kenton. “Why don’t you sit down and tell me what happened.”

Hazel took a deep breath as she stalked into the office, let it out slowly to get control of herself and to think. She sat on the edge of a chair and told him about David’s teasing. “I shouldn’t have gotten mad. He’s always trying to bully or tease someone.”

“It sounds like David at least shares responsibility for what happened. But you tried to hit him. I understand you are still upset but that is unacceptable behavior here at school.”

Hazel looked down at her hands twisting in her lap.

“I was going to talk to you today anyway. Mrs. Cochran reports you aren’t doing your homework. Your other teachers report you sometimes turn assignments in and sometimes don’t. We understand you had a terrible loss. The counselor says you will not work with her.”

This time Hazel let the tendrils of anger escape hearing her words. “I just don’t feel like doing homework. I don’t see the point. No one really cares about my grades. And I don’t see why they’re important.”

Mr. Kenton looked at her. Hazel suddenly felt cold and squirmed in her chair. Then the anger flared making her sit up and glare back defiantly. “Because you did threaten another student,” he told her, “even if you did have a good reason, under school rules I have to call your mother for a conference. I plan to talk to her after lunch. We may have you come in too. You will speak with the counselor about this now. Please go to her office.”

Hazel stalked out of Mr. Kenton’s office. She heard him ask the secretary to call David to the office as she walked out the door letting it bang shut behind her. Mother

had enough to think about without the school calling. He should have talked to her first and found out there was no reason to call Mother! School rules, phooey!

The halls were quiet, empty. Hazel stalked angrily through them to the counselor's office, yanked the door open and flung herself into a chair glaring at the counselor.

"Hello, Hazel," calmly remarked Mrs. Devareau. "Let me finish this. Then we'll talk."

Hazel glared as the counselor calmly wrote a last sentence then set the papers aside.

"I hear there's been a problem. Please tell me about it."

"David made some remarks and I got mad."

"What did he say to make you so angry?"

"He called my father stupid." And suddenly the anger was gone. Hazel fought back tears. She would not cry! Especially not here! Anger again flared, but at her father this time. All this was his fault! She tossed her head, set her shoulders defiantly.

"Losing your father must be very hard."

Hazel didn't answer.

"He was always very proud of your grades. I hear you aren't doing your homework and your grades are slipping. How would that make him feel?"

"He's dead. He doesn't feel anything. I don't want to do homework and I won't do homework unless I want to. You can't make me!"

"You're right. I can't make you do your homework. Your teachers can't."

Hazel glared as she tried to think of a come back.

"As I said, losing your father must be really hard for you. You seem very angry about it."

"I'm still mad at David. He's a stupid boy. He likes hurting people. Maybe you should talk to him!"

"I plan to do that today. If you want to talk about your problems, I'm here."

"Can I go now?"

"Yes."

Hazel stomped down the halls, yanked her social studies book out of her locker, slammed the locker shut and stomped down the hall to class. The door was locked. She banged on it. When Mr. Waddington let her in, she stalked around to her seat glaring at the other students. She dropped into her seat and stared out the window seeing nothing.

"Hazel," called the teacher. "Hazel?"

Hazel looked daggers at him. "What?"

"We're on page five hundred seventy-two. Please open your book and join us."

Hazel slammed the book open. Her eyes closed, she squeezed them tighter. She would not cry. She took some deep breaths grabbing at the anger, shoving it back where she hid it. With her emotions under tight control again she opened her eyes and began to hear the class discussion. It was about the parts of *Diary of Anne Frank* and *Zlata's Diary* the class read the previous day. The stories fascinated and repelled her. The discussion was interesting. She started to relax a bit as the anger again faded away leaving her feeling a bit empty.

"How did Anne Frank feel about her predicament, Louise?"

"She was scared."

"What was she afraid of?"

"That the Germans would come and take them away."

"Hazel, how did Zlata feel about her predicament?"

"She was angry. This war was not her fault but it was ruining her life."

“Mark?”

“I think she was scared and covered it up with anger. Anger’s a waste of energy as there’s nothing she could do about the war.”

“Anger’s not a waste,” argued Hazel. “It helps her fight hopelessness and despair. Anne Frank kept crying.”

“Isabel.”

“I think Zlata wasn’t angry while an attack was going on, just scared. After it was over, she would have time to be angry.”

“Would anger have helped Anne?” asked Mr. Waddington. “Wait, the bell is going to ring. Everyone, please write a few paragraphs comparing how Anne and Zlata dealt with their plights, if they were angry or scared and how this would or would not help them.”

The bell rang and students rushed into the hall. Hazel joined the crowd heading for her locker. Next hour was gym so she just tossed her book in, slammed the door and headed for class.

Gym class started with exercises and running laps. Hazel enjoyed the mindless activity. Her mind gradually cleared so only her movements filled it. They were starting track practice inside the old gym building.

Mrs. Redmond paired the students off to run fifty yards on the track. She was timing them. Hazel and Desiree lined up for the dash. Hazel hated to run, especially dashes. But today she welcomed the challenge. Desiree had always beaten her. She wanted today to be different.

Mrs. Redmond signaled the pair to start. Hazel pushed off and felt her body strain for the finish line. Nothing mattered but reaching that line. Her feet pounded on the floor. Air currents curled her hair around her neck to tickle her cheeks. She reached the finish line, crossed it and pulled herself into a slow run then a trot then a walk to circle back to the teacher.

Mrs. Redmond was staring at the stopwatch. “Hazel, you’ve never done so well! You made it in nine point one seconds!”

Hazel stared now. She never did this in less than ten seconds. Desiree was laughing. “Wow! Hazel! I couldn’t keep up! You were really flying today!”

A happy glow warmed Hazel. Her breathing was almost back to normal. Her body felt free and loose somehow. It felt good.

The last few pairs took their turns. Then it was time to head in to shower and change. Lunch was next. And today was pizza day!