



janet  
gilsdorf

*A mother's strength  
knows no bounds...*

a novel

ten days

# Chapter 1

## Anna

The car rounded the turn and she spotted the bridge. From that distance it was tiny, a faraway cobweb stretched over the foggy Straits between St. Ignace on her side and Mackinaw City on the other.

Her fingers gripped the steering wheel. “Who’s going to drive over?”

“You don’t want to?” her husband asked.

“No.”

“Think of it as a highway.”

She turned toward him, bit her lip, and shrugged. She hated the bridge.

“Okay, okay,” Jake said. “I’ll drive.”

Before her, the Mackinac Bridge—graceful, majestic, enduring—spanned the waves, its far end lost in the morning mist. The support cables that looped from the concrete stanchions moored deep into the lake bed grew greener, thicker as she drew near.

“Hey, are we going on that bridge?” Chris called from his car seat in the back.

“Yes, Daddy’s going to drive.” Anna glanced in the rearview mirror at her son. His arm, cloaked in his favorite blanket, stretched toward the front seat. His finger pointed at the windshield.

Three days earlier, on the way to her cousin’s wedding, they had also crossed this bridge, going the other direction. But it had been dark then, and she and the children had slept while Jake drove. She had been awakened by the bump of the tires rolling from the bridge bed to the highway.

“Where are we?” She had yawned. Rocks and pine trees lined the road on her side of the car. A few lights dotted the empty spaces.

“St. Ignace. It’s two hours to Grand Marais. Go back to sleep.”

Now they were at the bridge again, going home. She dreaded the ride over it—too long, too high, too slippery. It was always windy at the Straits, often rainy. And the water below—far, far below—was very, very deep, very cold.

“Can I walk on it?” Chris asked, referring to the bridge.

“No,” Jake said. “It’s only for driving.” He reached into the backseat and ran his fingers into the baby’s diaper. “Eddie needs clean britches and Chris needs to run off steam. Let’s switch drivers at the rest stop.”

“Good idea,” Anna said. She stared at the highway and the bridge ahead, at the cars in the opposite lane rolling toward her. One by one, they all had made it safely across.

“Good idea,” echoed Chris.

She steered the car onto the next exit ramp and Chris started coughing. “Put it in your elbow,” she said over her shoulder. On top of everything else, he was sick.

At the rest stop, she swept dirty popcorn from the picnic table, sat down, and blew her nose. She’d caught Chris’s cold, had coughed all night and gone through half a packet of Kleenex. Even through her stuffy nose, though, she could smell the marine odor in the air, watery and fishy, with an industrial overlay of exhaust off the bridge.

Lake Huron spread to her left, Lake Michigan, beyond the

horizon, to the right. A wall of northern pines rose behind her above the escarpment. Next to her foot, a green dandelion poked through the yellow thatch of last year's grass, a promise of the spring to come. She squinted sideways at the bridge, at the cars, trucks, campers, and motorcycles that sped on and off its deck. Soon she, too, would be on the bridge.

Chris was racing along the water's edge, and Jake, with Eddie in the carrier, followed at a slow stroll. The boy skidded to a stop and scooped a handful of pebbles from the shore. He leaned back and tossed several stones at the gulls that swooped and squawked overhead. The birds turned and, in perfect unison, dived toward him. His eyes grew wide. He raced to his father's side. Jake laughed as he patted him on the head and Chris took off again.

Her son was growing up too fast, loved his freedom too much. He was spunky and curious, loving and smart. She wanted him to stay a little boy for a bit longer.

She turned her face into the wind, breathed the hint of spring. The past winter had been tough. Long nights. Gloomy days. What she remembered most were the snowsuit struggles with Eddie every time they left the house and the endless wait while Chris, at his insistence, pulled on his jacket, hat, and boots himself.

"Slow down, buddy," Jake called to their son. Chris spun around and faced his father, his mouth in a pout.

She didn't like pout. Or defiance. Where did that come from?

Yesterday was her cousin's wedding. As the guests filed into the pews, a groomsman had ushered her parents down the aisle and seated them in the first row, in front of Jake, herself, and the kids. She thought of her mother as stylish, in a matronly sort of way, with her beige lace dress and black leather pumps. When she fanned her face with the program, her fluttery hand motions emphasized the matronly part. Her father, trussed in his winter suit, tugged at his tie and smoothed the hair at his temples—ever the proper businessman. With a flourish, Chris had pointed to her cousin at the back of the church and yelled,

“There’s the bride.” His voice, usually smooth and soprano, was raspy from his cold.

“Shhh,” she had said, embarrassed at his outburst. But, he was only a little boy. With muscles tight and cheeks aflame from excitement, he gripped her knee. A strip of moisture—a leftover from his runny nose—glistened on his upper lip.

She elbowed Jake. “Nose wipe needed,” she said, nodding toward Chris.

“I see Aunt Jennifer back there,” Chris called again. She cringed, reached for his arm.

Anna’s father turned in his chair. Face-to-face with his grandson, he set a finger on his lips. Often during her childhood she had seen that finger, now crooked with age, rise to his mouth. “Keep it quiet,” the gesture said.

The slit-eyed glance that she sent toward Jake begged for help, a signal that meant it’s best not to bother my father. Jake smiled knowingly and pulled Chris into his lap. Together they folded the program in half and then in half again, Jake’s large fingers guiding Chris’s small ones. She watched as they concentrated on their project. Both had the same tall forehead, the same sandy hair—although Jake’s was two shades darker than Chris’s—the same furrow between their eyes. Soon, the paper program had become an airplane.

During the ceremony, she had been struck with her cousin’s serenity as she walked—step, pause, step—down the aisle. Jennifer’s shoulders were square, her chin raised. Her eyes seemed peaceful as they moved from face to face, stopping briefly with a nod and a smile. The chapel lights sparkled off the cream-colored beads on the bodice of her gown, adding elegance to Jennifer’s already splendid presence, and her hair—the penny-colored curls that Anna had brushed into French rolls when they were young—flowed free as spring rain over her shoulders. No veil, no tiara, nothing to tame that wonderfully wild hair.

The night before her own wedding, she had had choking doubts. Did she want to be married? Was Jake the right man? What if she met the real Mr. Right the next year?

“Mom,” she had sobbed, “I can’t go through with it.”

“Of course you can,” her mother had said.

“I’m not sure I want to.”

“Every bride has the jitters, honey,” her mother had said while glancing over her shoulder as she made a last-minute phone call to the florist. “It’ll be okay.” Her mother then reminded her of the months of planning, the expensive tuxedos and dresses, the catered dinner, the flowers, the out-of-town guests stowed in three different hotels.

At two o’clock in the morning, unable to sleep, she had kneeled over the toilet bowl, vomiting. A half hour before the ceremony, she downed a beer, hoping to quell her churning stomach and realign her ragged nerves. Through it all, her head throbbed as if squeezed in a vise.

She picked up a dead leaf from the top of the picnic table, smoothed it against her knee, heard the hum of the traffic on the bridge, and watched Jake trudge toward her. She tried to remember her marriage ceremony, the walk down the aisle as a single woman, the words of the minister, the recitation of the vows, the walk back up the aisle as a married woman. The details were vague.

Now, most days she moved from early morning to late evening without ever thinking about her marriage. It was a state of being that became lost in the crush of her responsibilities, the cooking, vacuuming, grocery shopping, dropping off and picking up the kids at Rose Marie’s, hunting for parking spots at the community college, devising lesson plans, coralling her students’ attention. Through it all, she rarely thought about the man—the real person—who was her husband and was walking toward her.

“Here,” Jake said as he set Eddie in her arms. “I’ll keep chasing Chris.”

“Where is he?”

“Around here somewhere.”

She shifted Eddie to her shoulder, stood up, and squinted at the horizon. “Look, Jake, you can’t just let a three-and-a-half-

year-old go off on his own.” She scanned the water’s edge, the parking lot of the rest stop. “There are a thousand dangers . . .”

“Honey, he’s fine. Just exploring.”

She passed Eddie back to her husband. “What do you mean ‘he’s fine’? You have no idea where he is. He could have drowned, could have been run over by a truck . . .” She headed toward the parking lot.

“Okay, okay. I’ll get him. You stay here with the baby.” He handed Eddie back to her.

Why couldn’t he be more careful? she wondered. He was too willing to take stupid chances with his children. She watched him disappear behind the visitors’ center. The breeze carried his calls. “Chri—is. Hey, Chrissss.”

She stood beside the picnic table, rocking Eddie, patting his back. Where could Chris have gone? She examined the spaces between every car in the parking lot, searched the trees of the dog run, surveyed the water’s edge. Her arms tightened around Eddie and she rocked him faster. What was the matter with Jake? She knew he loved his children. Sometimes he just didn’t think. Farther out, beyond the rest stop, cars and pickups and semitrailer trucks bumped over the edge of the bridge deck.

“Found him.” Jake’s voice cut through the sound of the waves and the wind and the traffic. “I’ll take him potty.”

This time it was fine. This time Chris was safe. How about next time? she wondered.

She sat on the seat of the picnic table and kissed the top of Eddie’s head. He smelled of baby sweat and fabric softener. He had Jake’s wide, blue eyes, her own pointy chin and puckery mouth. He was growing fast. Soon he would grow out of the infant Pampers.

She knew it was unfair to her children to make comparisons, but their differences were astonishing. Eddie was only six months old but was obviously the placid one, satisfied to let the earth turn at its usual, gentle pace. He seemed curious, but in a quiet, contemplative way. On the other hand, Chris had always wanted—and still wanted—to shove the world forward on his

own commanding terms, to upend everything until he figured it out. Jake said he was exploring. That was Chris, all right. Always exploring, under every rock, behind every mountain.

Earlier that morning, she had just finished brushing her teeth when she heard the *kerthunk. Kerthunk. Kerthunk.*

“Don’t let him do that,” she had called, loud enough for her voice to carry into the bedroom.

“Hey, it’s a motel.” Jake had sounded playful.

She stepped from the bathroom and saw Chris suspended midair, arms flung wide, golden hair flying, ankles eight inches above the mattress. “Quit it,” she called as he dropped to the bedspread. “Get off.”

Jake twisted his upper lip and shrugged his shoulders. Once again, their son catapulted up from the mattress and again his bare feet kicked the air. He shot a glance at Jake and then at her. He was weighing his father’s indifference against her directive.

“I told you to get off.”

“Do as your mother says.”

The boy leaped into the air one more time. His legs shot forward and he landed butt down on the bed.

Jake grabbed his arm and pulled him to the floor. Chris squirmed like a skewered worm. Jake tickled him in the armpits. Chris shrieked with laughter and folded into a heap on the carpet.

Why do these confrontations always end this way? she wondered. She had to lay down the law and Jake followed up with the fun.

She waited for Jake and Chris to return from the men’s room—all rest stop bathrooms were grungy and this one would be no exception. She hoped Jake had helped Chris wash his hands. Would the bathroom have a soap dispenser? Paper towels? It turned her stomach to think of her son urinating into a filthy toilet.

She rocked Eddie to the rhythm of the waves, felt him wiggle against her. It was his hungry wiggle. She put him to her breast. The twitch of her baby’s lips and the lap of his tongue against



her nipple drew her milk into his mouth, into his body. Again, she watched the steady flow of the traffic on the bridge. Coming. Leaving.

Someday her boys would do that, would leave her. In some ways, Chris seemed to have already left. And Eddie? As of today he could roll from front to back and from back to front and had just started to sit alone. Next he would cruise and then, in a gesture of extreme daring, would let go of her fingers and stagger forward by himself. In the future he would run from her, would disappear behind the trees in their backyard, would climb into the maw of a noisy school bus, and finally would vanish into the bunker—foreign, inaccessible—of his own life. But for now, he clung to her breast. For now his supple body still fit easily into the pocket between her chest and bent arm.

Chris dashed ahead of Jake and skidded to a stop at her side. His cheeks were flushed. He started coughing.

“Remember . . . in the elbow,” she said.

He reached under the flannel blanket that covered his brother, poked him in the tummy with his finger, and sang, “The itsy, bitsy spider climbed up the water spout . . .”

Eddie drew his knees to his chest and chortled.

“Down came the rain and—”

“Ready to go over the bridge?” Jake asked.

“Yeah,” Chris yelled and danced in a circle on the dry grass.

“We’ll refill the water bottles while you finish feeding Eddie,” Jake said.

His face looked dispassionate, its profile stolid against the cloudless sky. His clean-shaven jaw, the knob on his nose from a hockey mishap, his shaggy eyebrows. These features—his entire body—were as familiar to her as breathing. Yet who was he? Why could he let Chris get lost? At this moment he was a stranger. At his core he was unknowable to her.

Hand in hand, Jake and Chris walked to the water fountain.

Had she married him because he was funny? Honest and loyal? Kind to his mother? Smart and good-looking? True, he was all of those things. He also was incapable of remembering

her birthday. And, in the mornings, he stumbled from the bed to the bathroom without uttering a civil word and stayed crabby until he finished his cereal. The rare times he used the dish rag, he never rinsed it out, but tossed the milk- or coffee- or juice-soaked cloth into the corner of the sink to molder until she retrieved it. Maybe her attachment to him was little more than habit, as automatic as conjuring up the words to the Lord's Prayer she had recited at Jennifer's wedding.

During the service, the best man had read a poem, something about time and rivers and journeys. She had squeezed Jake's fingers. When he returned the gesture, she had grown teary-eyed and swallowed hard to dampen the sob that had been building inside her. He had smiled at her, a loving smile, a smile of understanding.

Now she watched the waves of Lake Huron pound the rocks along the shore, again and again, rhythmic and organic as a beating heart. She found the water petulant and fierce at one moment, soothing as silk at another—rising, falling, giving, taking. Sort of like her marriage, she decided.

As they walked back toward the car, the sunshine warmed her face and seeped through her hair to her scalp. Chris rocketed forward on the path to the parking lot. With each step, the soles of his shoes blinked cranberry-colored light as if propelled by a missile's afterburners.

"Slow down, mister," she called.

"He's okay." Jake patted her on the fanny. "You can't see it but he has an invisible leash that's about twenty-five feet long. He never strays beyond that."

"How about when he disappeared behind the visitors' center?"

"Well . . . that was just a tad over twenty-five feet." He grinned. It was one of his sweet-as-rhubarb-pie grins.

She straggled behind them, feeling as if, once again, she had lost a minor skirmish. Should she send a dart back Jake's way? No. There was no point in escalating this little kerfuffle. She could never win. As always, he would charm his way to victory.

Ahead, Chris bent over and picked something up. Then another thing. And a third.

“What’re you doing?” she called.

“See . . .” Chris opened his fist. On his palm lay three acorns.

She stooped at the base of an oak tree and found an acorn for herself. She turned it over, ran her finger along the rough shell and the smooth nut. She looked up into the bare branches overhead at the network of leafless twigs tipped by buds. This huge tree had grown from a similar, tiny seed.

Jake took the acorn from her hand and rolled it between his fingers. “Think I can hit the lake?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Chris yelled. “Throw it.”

Jake took a step backward and flung the acorn toward the water. It sailed into the sky, then nicked a low-hanging tree branch and tumbled down a rocky embankment. It bounced off a boulder, skipped over a patch of weeds, hit another boulder, and continued down the steep slope until it bumped against the knobby root of a tree. There it stopped. Short of its target.

“You missed,” Chris said.

Jake laughed.

Was there was enough dirt along that tree root for it to germinate, enough water on that steep incline? she wondered.

She slid into the passenger side of the car. Jake strapped the kids into their seats. As he turned the key and started the engine, she leaned against the headrest.

“I sure hope you don’t get this,” she said and blew her nose.

“Me, too. Monday’s a big knee day—two arthroscopies and two total joint replacements. Can’t be sick during those.”

She blew her nose again.

“Have you taken something?” he asked.

“Sudafed. Doesn’t help.”

Within minutes, their car rolled onto the bed of the bridge. “I think we should go on the inner lane,” she said.

“It’s too rumbly.”

“I know, but there’s better traction on the grate than on the wet pavement.”

“It’s not raining.”

“The pavement’s always wet up here.”

Jake changed lanes. The tires hummed as they rolled over the perforations of the grate. The steel blue water of the Straits of Mackinac swirled one hundred fifty feet below.

“Remember that lady who went over the side?” she asked.

“It’s not a good idea to think about that right now,” he said.

She couldn’t erase the image from her mind. Young woman in a Yugo. Stormy day. Running late to meet her boyfriend in the Upper Peninsula. Speeding. Apparently the car skidded and raced toward the side. The flea-weight auto, boosted by the wind, climbed over the tiered barriers at the bridge’s edge.

Every time they drove to the UP, she thought of the lady inside that car as it dove toward the water. Maybe she unbuckled her seat belt in a futile attempt to escape. Maybe she just stared through the windshield at the approaching waves, an endless moment of unmitigated terror. The car would have hit with terrible force. Maybe she was killed instantly from the impact. Or, maybe she watched the water grow darker as the car sank. Probably the lake water seeped in along the edges of the doors and eventually filled the car. Maybe the lady ran out of air before she drowned.

The Bridge Authority pamphlet said the bridge could sway up to thirty feet during high winds. She couldn’t feel the sway but knew it was moving, knew that several forces, all going in different directions, were acting on their car: its forward movement, the sideways sway of the bridge, the oblique push of the wind. When it was too windy and wet, the Authority closed the bridge. They were only halfway across.

Off to her right and far below, a Great Lakes freighter cleared the bottom of the deck as it chugged through the Straits on its way to, maybe, the Port of Chicago or to Milwaukee or Green Bay. To her left across the water was Mackinac Island, the Grand Hotel a white fleck against the dark of the trees. The

waves seemed decorated with silver sequins. These were familiar sights. They helped to ground her during the long, worried journey over the bridge.

Then they were on the other side. Jake drove through Mackinaw City, past rows of cheap motels and franchise restaurants, and headed south on I-75.

“Want to drive again?” he asked.

“You’re doing fine,” she said.