

***Twice Upon a Time* by Emilie Richards**
Excerpt

Chapter One

"Hey man, you got a cigarette?"

Charles Casey got out of his car and faced the boy who had asked the question. The teenager wore a Cavaliers' starter jacket and a sneer, one as well-worn as the other. "Nope," Casey said. "Not even a stub."

The kid shoved his thumbs in the pockets of his jeans in a stance Casey recognized from childhood street corners. "I bet."

"Sorry, but those things can kill you."

"Yeah? Something else'll get me first." The kid spit on the ground before he sauntered off.

Casey watched for a moment before he realized he ought to lock the car. This was rural mid-America, where "delinquent" was a word the gas company stamped on an overdue bill. In the month since he had left the Big Apple, Casey's street smarts had already gotten rusty. "Welcome to Eden's Gate," he said under his breath.

He twisted his key in the lock and started toward the house where the Sisters of Redemption lived and administered the Eden's Gate Ecology Center. It was a hulking Victorian monstrosity--Second Empire, if his memory of old college lectures served him correctly. He didn't have to knock. Two more teenagers, a boy and a girl, came out the side door with a middle-aged woman between them. She smiled and held the door, and Casey entered the house through a warm, fragrant kitchen.

By the time someone showed him to the administrator's study, Casey had already gotten a feel for the house. The rooms were spacious, the furniture simple and comfortable. The atmosphere was serene, with a subtle character all its own.

As he waited for Sarah Bradshaw he went to the window to contemplate the winter-brown landscape stretching beyond the house. Contemplation was becoming Casey's closest friend. Every night when he was supposed to be sleeping, he questioned the events that had brought him so far from his home in New York. Every morning when he thought about the day stretching in front of him, he considered the decisions he had made.

In between he had plenty of time to ask himself if he had lost his mind.

"Mr. Casey? I'm sorry I've kept you waiting."

Casey turned to see an attractive woman somewhere in her late forties coming through the open door, her right hand extended. He had prepared himself to discover that the Sisters of Redemption were nothing like the nuns that had taught in the Hell's Kitchen parochial school he had attended as a boy. But Sarah Bradshaw was still a surprise. She was dressed in a dark plum skirt with a blouse of palest lilac, and the colors perfectly complemented her ivory complexion and straight black hair with its wide silver streak.

He shook her hand. "I'm pleased to meet you, Sister." He paused at her grimace. "I'm sorry. Isn't that correct?"

"We're an informal bunch here. Just call me Sarah."

Casey stepped around a coffee table as she ushered him to a couch that sat at an angle from a massive rosewood desk.

The office had provided a number of clues to the woman, if he had cared to look for them. Despite the carved walnut paneling and twelve foot ceiling with its ornate plaster frieze, the

room had a no-nonsense appearance. The paired triple hung windows were unembellished, so that the countryside view seemed to come right into the room. Books and photographs were the only adornments on the shelves, and the desk was uncluttered.

Sarah seated herself beside him, which was another surprise, and fluffed the cushions behind her. "You know, you're an answer to a prayer," she said, as she settled back.

He barely suppressed a snort. "That has to be a first."

"Not a religious man, I take it?"

Since adolescence Casey had been much too busy and much too guilty to risk crossing the threshold of a church. "Not so that anyone would notice."

She lifted a brow. "But raised a Catholic."

His surprise must have been obvious, because she nodded. "I can tell. No one knows what to do in the presence of a nun. Catholics think we're judging them for every sin they've committed, and non-Catholics remember the terrible jokes they've heard. But you definitely look like a man hoping to escape a thousand Hail Marys."

He liked Sarah Bradshaw already. "A thousand might not cover it. Anyway, I'm not here for confession. I want to find out if we can come to an agreement about a feature article for the paper."

"And that's the prayer that was answered," she said, going back to her first statement.

"Some decent publicity for Eden's Gate."

"How do you know it'll be decent?"

"Do you mean considering the publicity we've already had? Or your background?"

He whistled softly. "Not pulling any punches, are we?"

"Sorry, but I never seem to have time for tact. Someday I'm going to resurrect my social skills, but for now, I have to cut to the chase. Keeping the center going is a big job."

"Some would say a big, *futile* job."

"Oh, absolutely. Most of the town of Shandley Falls would say so."

A knock sounded, followed closely by the same woman he'd seen coming out of the house. "I have tea and coffee, Sarah, and some of my shortbread."

"Wonderful." Sarah leaned forward and made a place for the tray on a table between symmetrical stacks of *Sierra* and *Utne Reader*. "Marie Bennett, this is Charles Casey."

As he murmured a polite greeting, Marie, a sandy-haired blonde, peered at Casey through thick glasses of a trendy oval design. "Better in person," she said calmly.

"Nicer, too," Sarah agreed.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Casey." Marie turned her gaze back to Sarah. "If you want anything else, let me know. I'm on patrol this morning."

Sarah glanced at her watch. "Any problems yet?"

"Nothing worth noting."

Casey wondered if Marie meant that there was nothing worth noting in front of *him*. He listened with interest.

"No more destruction by the pond?" Sarah said.

"Everything looks peaceful. Most of the kids are washing windows in the greenhouse now." The door closed behind Marie, and Sarah bent to peek inside a white china teapot. "Coffee or tea, Mr. Casey?"

"Just Casey, please. And coffee." He didn't pause. "Tell me about the kids."

"During the school year we have a dozen or so teenagers assigned here for weekends by the juvenile court. In the summer they live and work here full-time. But I bet you knew that

already." Sarah poured a cup from a taller pot and held it out to him. "I'll bet this coffee beats anything you had when you were working on *The Whole Truth*."

"The coffee at the paper's not much better." He took the cup and then a sip. "This is excellent."

"Well, we believe in quality." Sarah poured herself tea. "I hope you do, too."

"My reputation has preceded me." He tried not to smile. He was dark-haired and dark-eyed. He had been told by the only woman he'd ever loved that he had the black-hearted grin of a pirate.

"Your reputation would be hard to hide, wouldn't it? Until just a few months ago I could turn on my television five nights a week and watch you *making* your reputation."

"Or destroying it."

She watched him intently, as if trying to read his thoughts. "It all depends on perspective, doesn't it? You were very good at what you did."

"I don't do it any more. I left *The Whole Truth* forever."

"And moved well down the career ladder to a weekly paper in Ohio where the most exciting story you'll ever encounter will be the one about this center."

Casey, who didn't want to talk about his reasons for leaving New York, realized they were back at the beginning of their conversation. "Let's talk about that."

She didn't probe any further. "We've had more than our share of bad publicity since our center was established. No, it goes even further back than that. It began when the Sisters of Redemption inherited Eden's Gate. Right from the beginning people in Shandley Falls felt our presence could only detract from progress in the community. I'm not sure what they expected, but they did seem to feel we would change the character of the town, and they were right, of course. Because we have."

He pulled a notebook from the inside pocket of his sports coat. "You've been here one year?"

"One and a half. We spent the first six months assessing the property, improving the buildings and working with the local zoning board, the city council." She shrugged to show that the list went on and on.

She didn't seem at all perturbed by the experience. "And then?"

"We began to put together our programs. We made arrangements to work with the local hospice. We built dormitories and opened our program for juvenile offenders during our first summer. We spent that summer fine tuning it and publicizing our goals. And this year we've doubled the number of teens we're working with."

"As I understand it, that means you've gone from nine kids to eighteen, which is still surprisingly few considering how many troubled kids roam the streets of Ohio. Just from glancing around the estate and the facilities, you appear to have room for many more than that."

"Oh, we do. We hope to have up to sixty kids in the next two years, maybe more after we build new dormitories and renovate the barn as a meeting center."

"Has that program remained small because you're still feeling your way?"

"We've remained small because we haven't yet proven ourselves."

Casey's instincts were still intact, despite his career change. He leaned in for the kill. "In fact, haven't you proven that there are good reasons to be concerned about safety here?"

"I suppose if we were on television, this is where you'd zoom in to find me sweating and shaking."

Casey set down his cup, surprised to see that he'd already finished the contents. "Are you?"

"No." She looked absolutely calm. "We've had our share of trouble at Eden's Gate. That's a matter of record."

He opened the notebook. "Let's see. Last summer while camp was in session you had a fire in the girl's dormitory--"

"Which was immediately extinguished."

He continued. "A boy found with a knife on a field trip to the Cleveland zoo, a girl who accused a male counselor of attempted rape--"

"A charge she dropped immediately because it wasn't true."

"And finally, on a Saturday in December a nearly fatal attack on one of your sisters which resulted in permanent brain damage." He flipped through his notebook until he found a fresh page and pulled out a pen. "Am I wrong?"

"Not about the things that really matter, although some of your assumptions are incorrect." Sarah sipped her tea a moment, then she set down her cup. "First, Mary Kate, the woman who was injured, was--and is--on staff, but she's not one of the sisters."

"Really? I was told the teenagers called her Sister Sunshine."

"Their name. Not ours. Mary Kate had been working with us for some time before she was attacked, but she'd never taken vows. As for the brain damage. . ." Sarah looked up. "Her recovery has been astonishing. There was a time, at the very beginning, when we were told she would never walk, talk, laugh, pray. Her heart stopped on the trip to the hospital."

She shook her head. "It was a very difficult time for all of us. We were advised to put her in a nursing home, but no one was willing. So we undertook her rehabilitation here, following instructions and working with her constantly. No one in the medical community was hopeful, but one day. . ." Her voice trailed off.

"She's better, then?"

"Better?" Her eyes widened. "No, Casey. Nothing that mundane. Quite simply, Mary Kate is a miracle."

Mary Kate McKenzie was not a woman to ponder the infinite. In the long months of her rehabilitation she had thought very little about things religious, and only then when she couldn't avoid them. She supposed she believed in God, or at least she had until the moment earlier that afternoon when she'd dug her first scoop of clotted brown soil and found that deep inside the earth was a kingdom of slimey, wiggling worms.

And what kind of a God wasted time making worms? Whose idea of a joke was that, anyway?

The woman pulling weeds at her side looked up and cocked her head in question at the expression on Mary Kate's face.

Mary Kate immediately forced a smile, but the woman shook her head in warning. "Don't overdo, now. I'm sure you're glad to be back in the garden, but we don't want any relapses."

Mary Kate had learned a million things in the last three months, a million things she had painfully sorted from vital to downright inconsequential. And at the top of her list was the one that told her not to argue. She wasn't glad to be back in the garden. As far as she knew she'd never been in a garden in her entire life. But she had learned by trial and error that those kind of revelations were not productive. Or welcome.

Mary Kate drove her shovel deeper into the earth, but only so that she could lean against it. "I *am* feeling a little . . ." She searched for the right word.

"Tired?" Sister Grace Mullens got slowly to her feet. She was a thin woman, with short graying hair and a strong sense of style that could turn even denim jeans and a plaid shirt into a fashion statement.

"Well, that's to be expected." Grace put her hands on the small of her back and leaned against them. "We'll work for a little longer, then we can go inside."

Mary Kate thought about what was waiting for her inside. Simple, mind numbing chores. More time to think. More time to remember that she didn't remember anything. . . "Not tired," she said quickly. "Excited."

"Well, we don't want you to get overexcited. There will be other pretty spring days and lots of help to get the garden ready."

"Your back's bothering you. Why don't you go in?"

Temptation flicked across Grace's tranquil face. "I don't think--"

"Really. I'd like to stay here by myself."

"Oh."

Mary Kate watched as Grace tried not to give in to her aching back, but coupled with a deeply rooted belief that solitude was a fine thing indeed, the desire to go inside was too strong to fight.

The nun tried on a tentative smile. "Okay. But you're sure you'll be all right? You're still recovering."

"I'll be fine. Go on. I'll be in later."

"If any of the teens try to bother you. . ."

"I'm not worried. This time *I'm* the one with the shovel."

Grace jerked to attention, and Mary Kate realized her own error. Two errors, actually. The statement *and* the sudden snarl in her voice. "Not that I'd use it," she added before Grace could respond.

"Mary Kate, maybe I'd better--"

"Please. I'll be fine." Mary Kate gripped the shovel handle until her knuckles were the color of the snow that hadn't yet melted at the edge of the garden pathway. "I'm almost well again. Even the doctor says my recovery is remarkable. You have to learn to trust me, Grace."

Grace looked contrite. "It's not a question of trust."

"Good. Then I'll see you later."

Mary Kate watched as a defeated Grace picked up her basket of gardening tools and wound her way through the precisely laid garden rows crusted with decomposing leaves and windblown winter trash. Fast food wrappers hung from dried up cornstalks and two empty cigarette packs mulched the remains of a row of asparagus, but Grace looked straight ahead and passed them by.

Mary Kate waited until the other woman had disappeared before she exhaled forcefully. "Yeeeeee. . .ssss!"

Somewhere inside her there was an Irish jig, a tribal victory dance, a frenzied forties jitterbug, but Mary Kate stood perfectly still. She knew better than to tempt fate. Her body was not yet totally at her command. She still suffered bouts of dizziness and an occasional queasy stomach to go with them. Besides, the sight of her dancing in the school garden might be just the excuse the sisters needed to make her go inside.

And she never wanted to go inside again.

Against her will her eyes were drawn to the building in question, or rather the buildings. Because there was more than one building that she wished she never had to reenter. A complex stood waiting to draw her through its doors and submerge her in a life that seemed so alien, so

impossible, that if she could run--and if she had a place to run to--she would race there now, screaming all the way.

The field where she stood was situated between a wide gravel driveway and a folk art barn stenciled a generation ago with the Mail Pouch Tobacco logo. Mary Kate would bet a million dollars she had never been inside that barn before her "accident." She was absolutely certain she had never been inside *any* barn. If she had, wouldn't she be used to the rank smell? The rustle of mice running marathons in mountains of decomposing hay?

She didn't remember any of those things. Worse, she found them all disgusting and unnatural. Like earthworms. Or the huge compost pile behind the barn where the sisters faithfully took their vegetable scraps and buried them every night after the evening meal.

Then there was the Victorian nightmare that housed the center staff. Wouldn't something in the house seem familiar to her if, as the sisters claimed, she had lived there for years? If she really had been raised in that house before the sisters took it over, wouldn't she remember something? A room? A stairwell? A gable or an arch?

Beyond small stands of oaks and sycamores and out of sight of the public road stood the new dormitories that held the center's summer campers. These, too, were unfamiliar. Yet the sisters claimed that she had nailed siding and finished drywall.

She was trapped in a life she didn't remember, in a body that was as foreign to her as the view from Mt. Everest or the smell of the Ganges on a hot summer day.

Her gaze moved slowly from the buildings to those parts of her she could see. She started at the ground, wishing she would find that something had changed in the last few minutes. She had a child's feet, probably size five on a hot day, wide little feet with stubby toes. Right now they were encased in red high-top tennis shoes and wool socks that tormented every cell of skin they touched.

Her ankles, like the denim-clad legs connected to them, were sturdy and dependable, but certainly not what she had expected to see when she examined them the first time. Her legs were short; her thighs were solid--and to her eyes, massive--and they melted into hips that were appallingly perfect for childbearing.

The news didn't get any better as she moved up the line. Her waist seemed narrow enough--but what wouldn't, compared to those hips? Unfortunately the waist was easy to evaluate since there was nothing much jutting out below her collarbone to hide it. If she ever planned to nurse a baby--and that was unlikely considering her choice of career--she had better hope the baby had a small appetite and a large supply of patience.

Her eyelids drifted shut in defeat. She knew her body without looking at it, of course. She had been looking at it for weeks, memorizing every detail. Unfortunately she also knew her face, her rust-colored hair, the relentless splotches of freckles that covered otherwise pale skin. The face belonged to a leprechaun, tilted nose, wide mouth, shamrock green eyes. The hair was a mass of Little Orphan Annie curls.

The woman might as well be a nun, considering how little she had to offer the male of the species.

Mary Kate didn't know how long she stood that way, eyes closed, the cool spring sun seeking new patches of skin to freckle. When she opened her eyes nothing had changed, except that a crow had landed on a fence post in her line of sight, and as she watched, he flapped his wings and issued a long, raucous stream of crow curses.

She waved a fist in his direction. "Up yours!" But the crow merely preened his feathers and settled himself more firmly on the post.

She hadn't noticed the post before. Now she noticed more of them, four posts marking the corners of a huge rectangle that adjoined the center's garden. As she squinted into the sun, she noted smaller posts, little more than stakes, in between. Curious, she dragged the shovel beside her as she went to investigate.

The crow observed her approach, but didn't fly away. She wondered if they were friends, that if in addition to all the other virtues she had been told she possessed, she was a female St. Francis of Assisi who communed with wild animals. Perhaps even the barn mice were friends that shared in regular philosophical discourses about the meaning of life.

"Like hell," she muttered.

When she was only a few feet away the crow finally flapped his wings and made a graceful take off. As he drew closer and soared higher, something unmistakable plopped to the ground just in front of her.

Mary Kate leaned against the vacated post and tried to imagine the purpose of marking this plot of land. During the months of her recovery she had paid scant attention to the inner workings of Eden's Gate. She knew the land had been consecrated as an "eco-spirituality" center, a healing place where the earth would be respected and cared for while it nurtured those in the community who were in need.

Four sisters were in residence, and more lived in nearby Cleveland and sometimes helped with programs. The Sisters of Redemption funded Eden's Gate with the hopes that one day the center would be self-sufficient. In the meantime, and in addition to their weekend and summer programs with the juvenile offenders, the sisters did outreach work in the community by visiting terminally ill patients and donating vegetables to the local food bank. In the future, they hoped Eden's Gate would become a retreat center where people in need of a closer connection to the land could live for months at a time.

They hoped for many things, apparently at least one of which had to do with the area staked out in front of her.

Mary Kate's interest waned. She couldn't rid herself of the feeling that none of this had anything to do with her. Everything she knew about Eden's Gate had been explained to her during her recovery. She had no memories and no sense of connection.

She turned away to head back to the garden when her shovel clanged against something jutting from the earth. She stooped to investigate and found a metal marker planted firmly beside the post. Squatting on the ground beside it to look more closely, she read the words inscribed in rounded script.

The Eden's Gate Community Garden, dedicated in memory of Kathleen and Patrick McKenzie by their loving daughter Mary Kate.

Mary Kate felt something rising inside her, something all too familiar and frightening. She understood the term "claustrophobia." She might not remember her short legs, her red hair or any detail of her past life, but she did remember concepts. She didn't remember even one story about a woman who had felt trapped in her own body. Yet the panic rapidly expanding and clawing for release could only be explained that way. She was like a child locked in a dark closet, pounding on the door and pleading for someone to let her out.

"Damn it to hell! Holy shit!"

She broke out in a sweat and the cold air nearly turned it to ice on her skin. She was trembling, and if she had been standing, her legs would not have held her. The world began to spin, and a roaring filled her ears.

She struggled to control her breathing, commanding herself not to hyperventilate. She concentrated with difficulty, forcing the air in and out of her lungs in measured, even breaths, but she was still swamped with dizziness.

Her name was Mary Kate McKenzie. She was twenty-five years old. After the death of her parents she had lived in the old Victorian mansion for most of her life with an aunt and cousin. She had always been a good girl, a religious girl. No one could remember a single sin she'd ever committed. Apparently she had been born to the religious life.

The air wheezed in and out of her lungs, but she still felt as if she were falling through a black chasm, endlessly tumbling head over heels through space.

In high school she had declared her intention to be a nun. No one was surprised. By then she'd already racked up hundreds of hours as an altar girl. In college she had begun to search for the congregation where she could best use her talents. And then, just as she was starting graduate school, her cousin died, followed later by her aunt.

She clutched the ground beneath her, digging her fingernails into the dirt, worms or not. She closed her eyes and tried to envision a peaceful place, a place where she was anchored firmly to the earth and the sun was shining brightly. Some place where she wasn't tumbling, tumbling. . .

Her aunt had left her a sizeable amount of money in her will, but Eden's Gate had gone to the Sisters of Redemption, a tiny, publicity-shy congregation of nuns who were committed to changing the world. She had seen her aunt's choice as a sign from God and decided then to join the sisters in their crusade to protect the environment and provide a safe haven for teenagers who needed a second chance.

Mary Kate's heart began to slow and the world began to level. She could feel the dirt against her fingertips and the spring sunshine trying to warm her.

For some reason she didn't yet understand, she had never taken her vows. She had lived here, worked here, but never joined in fully. Then one day, in the greenhouse just down the path, she had been savagely beaten by one of the teens. For days everyone had been afraid she would never recover, but she had surprised them. She had climbed out of a coma and begun to live again.

And that's who she was.

That's who she was.

Minutes passed before the panic receded completely, leaving her with shaking hands and icy skin. She opened her eyes and took in the earth-tone canvas of an Ohio spring. Only then did she register that she was no longer alone.

"Well, if it ain't Sister Sunshine, alone in the garden."

Mary Kate's eyes followed the baggy khakis up to the Cavaliers' Starter jacket that hung from the young man's shoulders. She tilted her chin to stare at his face. White teeth gleamed against tawny brown skin, and darker brown eyes assessed her, as if scanning for any sign of weakness.

She felt for the shovel, which had fallen to the ground beside her, and wrapped her fingers around the handle before she spoke. "What are you doing here?" Her voice trembled.

"I come here on weekends during the school year. You don't remember me?"

She didn't, of course. If she couldn't remember herself, plans for this garden or the parents to whom it had been dedicated, if she could only parrot what she'd been told over and over again, she certainly couldn't remember anyone else.

"You're not supposed to be *here*, are you?" she countered, looking around for a nun or one of the college students who worked with the teenagers to fulfill course requirements in sociology.

"Sure I am. I'm a scarecrow, come to scare *you*."

Mary Kate considered her legs and decided they were strong enough that she could stand again. She rose awkwardly to her feet. Her coordination was improving every day, but she still had a distance to go. Funny thing, but when your head got smashed with a shovel blade, it took a while to recover.

"You don't scare me." She thrust the shovel out in front of her and leaned on it the way she had before.

"No? You looked pretty scared last time I saw you."

Mary Kate tried to remember if she'd seen this student, obviously one of the court system's finest, during her recovery. Even though the sisters had tried to keep her away from the offender program during her rehabilitation, it had been impossible to keep her away from all of it. She had been re-introduced to the teens gradually.

They were a pretty pitiful bunch, but apparently next to this kid, the others were shining examples of adolescence.

"When was the last time you saw me?" Mary Kate knew there was no point in trying to pretend her memory was intact.

"Me? I was right there when Antoine hit you over the head."

"Were you?" Mary Kate looked past the boy, where a girl in a black biker's jacket was coming toward them. Behind her, another girl without a coat was struggling to catch up.

"You don't remember, do you?" the boy taunted.

"Apparently enough of you kids stood by and watched to fill in every detail." Mary Kate pulled her gaze back to the boy and saw he was smirking. Smirking because she had nearly died.

Rage exploded inside her, a powerful, cleansing rage that made her heart pump faster again. But this time, the feeling was a heady one.

The boy nodded. "Yeah, I stood there and watched. Stood right there."

Rage was like life surging through Mary Kate's veins. It was so good to feel something besides confusion and panic that she reveled in it. She gripped the handle tighter and lifted the shovel off the ground to rest it against her hip. "And you didn't do anything?"

"Sure didn't."

Everything she'd been through flashed across her mind, at least everything she could remember. The months of recovery. The day she had first become aware of her surroundings. Her first steps. The first time she had fed herself again. And just a few moments ago, when once again--as it had far too often--the reality of her situation had overwhelmed her.

"You little prick! Why didn't you try to stop the kid before he hit me?"

"What'd you call me?"

Mary Kate heard the new menace in the boy's voice, but she didn't care. "You heard me right!"

The first girl, a blonde with a buzz cut and a six-inch gold cross dangling from one earlobe, reached them and grabbed the boy's arm. "Tyson, come on. . ."

"Where you think you get off calling *me* names?" Tyson stepped forward, shaking off the girl's hand.

Mary Kate felt fury filling in the empty spaces left by the panic attack. Her breathing sped up, and this time she didn't struggle with it.

She lifted the shovel higher. "I call it like I see it. You're not a man. A man would have stepped in and tried to stop the kid who attacked me."

"Sister, don't talk to him like that--" The blonde tugged at Tyson's arm again.

Mary Kate moved forward. "No? And why not? Is Tyson here the only one who gets to say what he wants?"

Tyson moved closer, too, but she stood her ground. "Out!" she ordered. "Unless you're here to work, get out, and do it right now."

"Or what?"

The other girl finally caught up to them. Her braided hair was as long as the other girl's was short, and her skin was darker than Tyson's. "Tyson, come on," she said, grabbing his other arm. "Break's just about over with. We don't get back, we're gonna be in trouble."

"He's already in trouble," Mary Kate said, without taking her eyes off the boy. "He's in trouble with *me*. This time I'm going to remember your name, kid, and I'll never forget it. Tyson the coward. Tyson the prick!"

"Jeez. . ." The blonde rolled her eyes and tugged in tandem with the other girl. "Oh, jeez! Tyson come on. You come on right now. Remember, Sister's not right in the head. That's all. Everybody knows it."

Mary Kate drew herself up to her full five foot one and raised the shovel in warning. "Well, you can just tell everybody they're wrong, honey. I am not crazy. I'm royally pissed!"

"And royally dangerous."

Mary Kate whirled at the sound of a man's voice directly behind her, and the shovel whirled with her.

He jumped back, but not in time to avoid contact. Mary Kate stumbled forward and didn't have the reflexes to catch herself. The shovel slammed into his thigh, and the woman fell into his arms.