

Chapter 1

As far as Sister Felicia was concerned, there were two kinds of goats: those that smelled bad and those that smelled worse. Without exception, the goats at the Blessed Garden Convent fell into the latter category.

Then there was the goat shed.

Sister Felicia looked up and realized Sister Madeline was trying to tell her something. She schooled herself not to let her dislike of the goats show. Her sister nuns might not speak to each other except in the evening hours, but nowhere else was there a group of human beings who read facial expressions more adeptly.

She still hadn't accustomed herself to the Blessed Garden's unique sign language. She wasn't the first to be a slow learner, and the sisters for whom the Blessed Garden was a permanent home were used to patiently teaching the nuns from other orders who came to the convent for a year's retreat. Sister Madeline, however, was not a patient person.

The wrinkled nun made the swift downward jab of her thumb once again. If Sister Felicia hadn't known better, she would have bet that Sister Madeline was telling her where to go.

The thumb whizzed through the air and pointed toward the open goat-shed door. Sister Felicia finally understood. She nodded—a nearly universal symbol with which the Sisters of the Garden had thoughtfully not tampered—and threw her shovel to the side. Then, warning herself not to show disgust as she picked her way across the straw-strewn floor, she grasped the worn wooden handles of the wheelbarrow and trundled it past Sister Madeline to freedom.

Outside the desert morning was clear and cool, no forecast of the day to come. Stars still littered the black velvet sky. Only a thin border of gray along the horizon warned of the eventual onslaught of sunshine that would suck all the water from her slender body until her loose cotton habit was damp with it. For a moment she reveled in the fantasy of removing the veil that covered her cropped black hair and baring her head to the light breeze sweeping in from the west.

There were so many simple pleasures she was no longer allowed. Somewhere she'd heard that it took deprivation to develop appreciation. She wondered if the words had come from the nineteenth-century theological text that Mother Jeanne had droned aloud last night during supper.

As if the other nun had heard her thoughts, Sister Madeline appeared beside her and hiked her thumb toward the expansive vegetable garden five hundred yards away. Sister Felicia nodded and started in that direction. To her relief the other nun turned and limped back toward the house, her job completed. There were probably fifty wheelbarrow loads of straw and manure for Sister Felicia to haul and dump between rows. She wouldn't need supervision for quite some time.

Sister Felicia watched her wrinkled supervisor go, pleased that she would be alone for a while. At the exact moment that Sister Madeline disappeared from view, Sister Felicia practiced her sign language again.

The flip of her fingers would have been understood on any urban street corner.

"You kin bunk here." Ralph flipped his hand in one of the spare, expressive gestures that Gallagher had already come to expect from him. "You won't mind if I clean it up a bit, will you?" Gallagher looked around the six-by-eight room with distaste. There were no windows, and the stucco walls were cobweb-encrusted. An inch-thick layer of dust carpeted the floor and adorned the single bed and dresser.

"Don't care what you do, 'cept talk. I don't hold no store with talkin'. Leave me be, and we'll get along fine."

"If I leave you be, we won't have to get along." Gallagher walked across the room as he spoke and rested one booted foot on the bed, bouncing it up and down. When it didn't collapse, he nodded. "This'll do."

"You want better, you kin go somewheres else."

Gallagher could think of lots of better places. A prison cell. A refugee camp. A Bangladesh flood plain. But the subtleties of that would be lost on Ralph. The old man had apparently been left alone with his own thoughts for too many years. The desert sun had worn away his smarts before it had started on his health.

Gallagher faced him. "I'll scrub the place down this morning. Then you can show me my chores."

"Don't want no help," Ralph said churlishly. "Didn't ask you to come."

"I know." Despite his lack of enthusiasm for this setup, Gallagher felt a glimmer of empathy. The old man possessed so little, and now he was convinced that was being taken from him. "Look, I'm just here until you're feeling better. Father Melrose and Mother Jeanne want you to get well quickly. Just rest and enjoy having someone else do the heavy work for a while. You deserve a vacation."

"Don't want no vacation." Ralph turned and left the room. Gallagher squelched the desire to follow him. If he followed the handyman he might just keep going, and he couldn't do that. He'd given his word to see this through. Besides, how often could a man afford a stay at a Palm Springs resort? Maybe the Blessed Garden wasn't exactly Palm Springs, and maybe it wasn't exactly a resort, but it was close. Only eighty miles from the posh California desert town, the convent of the Sisters of the Garden had some of the same attributes. Sand. Palm trees. Wells to turn the desert into verdant meadows.

And it had females galore, although admittedly his taste didn't normally run to nuns.

A noise in the doorway yanked him to attention. Ralph stood there with a broom and a mop. Wordlessly he handed them to Gallagher, then disappeared from sight once more. Gallagher assessed his chances of removing cobwebs without removing stucco. Since the odds seemed about even, he set to work.

Since arriving at the Blessed Garden, Sister Felicia had spent more time prostrate on the floor than a temperamental two-year-old. Mother Jeanne was a strict believer in total obedience,

and what better way to prove obedience than to lie face down on the tile floor of the chapel until a nun's penance was accepted?

Actually, there were worse places to be at the Blessed Garden. Take the goat shed, for instance. And there were worse positions to be in, like stooping to shovel goat berries into a wheelbarrow. The tile floor was deliciously cool, and lying on her stomach eased the nagging pain in her back. It did nothing, however, for the relentless craving that was worming its way through her self-control.

Cigarettes.

As her sister nuns piously offered their hearts and minds to God, Sister Felicia contemplated the beauties of tobacco. Strangely, in her life before the convent, she had not been a heavy smoker. She had rarely smoked as many as four cigarettes a day, although if she counted secondhand smoke, the daily total soared.

But smoking had been just one of the earthly pleasures she had reveled in, and a minor one at that. Why was it eating away at her now? Was it sensory deprivation? Was the dry desert air so like a beloved blast of tobacco smoke to a parched throat? Was it the same personality quirk that had always made her want anything she couldn't have?

The last seemed a fitting question to contemplate; in fact, that train of thought would probably even be heartily approved by the women surrounding her. She had always wanted the things she couldn't have, and of course Felice Cristy, her name before donning the robes of a nun, had often been faced with things she wasn't allowed.

It hadn't mattered that her parents were wealthy enough to own a sizable chunk of the world and had, in fact, done just that. Felice had been raised in a cloistered atmosphere that made the Blessed Garden convent seem liberated in contrast. She had attended strict Catholic schools, suffered chaperons—a genteel word for bodyguards—everywhere she went and watched from the sidelines as the little girls who had thrown parties she couldn't attend had become big girls going out on dates she wasn't allowed on, either.

Her parents had loved her—still did, in fact—although her vocation was the cause of a grim-lipped silence between them. But as a child they had protected her, just as they had been protected, out of generations of tradition and fear. She was a direct descendant of two of the first Spanish landowners in California, and, as such, her wealth and status had been a weight around her Castilian neck. The expectations she had been forced to live up to had been a mile high, and when she had abandoned them, she had abandoned them but good.

Which was one of the reasons she was prostrate on a cool tile floor at the moment.

The soft swish of cotton alerted her that noon prayer had ended. She waited impatiently for the tap on her shoulder that finally came. Then, with everyone watching, she slunk up to the front and knelt in front of Mother Jeanne, waiting for her nod. She could almost have sworn there was a twinkle in the eye of the stern-faced old nun. “You are not improving,” Mother Jeanne said quietly.

Sister Felicia tried to look contrite.

“You will take dinner to Ralph and the new man as penance.”

“New man?” As soon as she’d spoken, Sister Felicia knew she’d made another mistake. She had just spent half an hour on the floor for being caught talking to herself in the vegetable garden.

If there had been a twinkle in Mother Jeanne’s eye, it disappeared. She waved her hands, and two dozen nuns vanished on cue. “You are not improving,” she repeated when they were gone.

Sister Felicia’s chin dropped to her chest—or as close as it could come with the high white collar of her habit blocking its descent.

“Silence must be observed at all times except when clarifying your tasks or during the brief period between the end of supper time and darkness.”

Sister Felicia nodded.

“Do you want to leave, child? Our regimen isn’t for everyone. I’ll call your Mother Superior myself and tell her you tried.”

Sister Felicia shook her head.

“Look at me.”

Sister Felicia schooled herself to an unwavering stare.

“Perhaps I’ll call your Mother Superior anyway.”

Sister Felicia didn’t, couldn’t, answer, although she had volumes to say about that.

Mother Jeanne sighed. “Go on. Take two dinners to Ralph’s quarters. Then eat yours in the kitchen, where you won’t be tempted to speak to anyone.”

Sister Felicia rose and bowed low, then turned and started down the aisle.

“And since you weren’t listening last night at supper during announcements,” Mother Jeanne said when Sister Felicia reached the doorway, “I’ll repeat what I said then. Father Melrose has sent us a man to help Ralph for the next month or so, until he’s feeling better. You’re to ignore him, just as you ignore Ralph.”

Sister Felicia thought that Mother Jeanne would be surprised at how little she had ignored Ralph—or anyone else at the convent, for that matter. There was no sign language to convey that thought, however, even if she had wanted to. She bowed again at the doorway, then started toward the kitchen.

The Blessed Garden Convent of the Sisters of the Garden was a cool, utterly peaceful house perfectly suited to its desert environment. Built more than a century before of cream-colored adobe around a Spanish-style courtyard, the convent was spacious and simple. One wing, the largest and most elaborate, held the chapel, where worship was conducted three times daily. Another wing held the parlor, where visitors were received, and, behind a heavily barred door separating the parlor from the rest of the wing, the convent living area and Mother Jeanne’s office. The third and final wing was a series of individual cells separately housing the nuns, each with a narrow bed, bookshelf and stool. Like the sisters themselves, the cells were subtly individual, some austere and prim, others surprisingly cozy, decorated with brightly bound books and colorful pictures of saints.

Sister Felicia crossed the courtyard to take a shortcut to the kitchen. Marigolds and passion pink petunias flirted with her from the garden surrounding the perpetually flowing marble fountain. Her leather sandals slapped the bricks beneath her feet, accompaniment for the bees buzzing merrily in the garden. The bees weren't keeping silence, and she for one was glad.

In the kitchen nuns bustled from sink to counter, finishing preparations for the day's meal. Breakfast was always a simple affair of homemade muffins and fresh goat's milk. Dinner, the noon meal, was as elaborate as breakfast was not. There were always at least three different vegetables from the convent garden or freezer, creamy goat cheese and dark whole-grain bread still warm from the oven. Sometimes there was meat, if it had been a bad day for an unsuspecting kid or chicken, or if Father Melrose had come that morning with gifts from his congregation. Always there was fresh fruit and dessert, a goat's milk pudding or frozen yogurt, which the Sisters of the Garden had been eating long before the secular public discovered it.

Today there was meat. Sister Felicia stood to one side and watched Sister Althea pull one crusty chicken pie after another out of the commercial-size stove that had been a recent legacy from the parents of one of the sisters. She struggled not to swallow noticeably or look particularly interested. She knew she'd failed when Sister Mary Grace winked at her.

She smiled her thanks. Sister Mary Grace took down two heavy crockery plates and cut one of the pies, dishing out large portions on each. She set them on a wooden tray and added two bowls of salad and a smaller plate with bread, butter and cheese. Then she gestured for Sister Felicia to take the tray.

She smiled her thanks again. If she'd had to wait until all the sisters had been served, her own meal would have been delayed until it was cold and tasteless. Now, with the tray prepared for her, she could deliver it to the caretaker's house, return and eat before she was expected back in the goat shed.

Sister Mary Grace, with her fine-boned features and ready helping hand, was her favorite sister at the convent. Her gray eyes were often sad, but she didn't stint on warmth toward the

other sisters. There were those who said that Sister Mary Grace was too warm, too giving. But Sister Felicia wasn't at the Blessed Garden to make value judgments.

The walk to Ralph's palm-shaded house took several minutes. A roadrunner crossed her path, and she half expected to see his coyote adversary following behind, but the rest of the trip was uneventful.

Ralph's house—or, more honestly, his shack—had once been a stable. Thick adobe walls and a high roof kept it cool enough for habitation in the summer, with the addition of an air conditioner and ceiling fans. Twenty years before, Ralph had come to the Blessed Garden and claimed the space as his own. The nuns, younger and more self-sufficient then, hadn't wanted him, but he had stayed anyway. Eventually they had learned to coexist with him, and then they had learned to rely on him.

From the beginning, Ralph had taken on the jobs the sisters could not do themselves. He had never asked for a salary, but every day a sister delivered three good meals, and every week his laundry disappeared, to be replaced with clean or new clothes, whichever were needed. Spending money magically appeared in his mailbox monthly, and any gifts to the convent that could be shared with him were. After his recent heart attack, the Sisters of the Garden had quietly picked up the hospital bill, as well as instructions for taking care of a proud old man who wanted to pretend he had never been stricken.

Sister Felicia knew more about Ralph than some of the other sisters did. She knew that he had once been a successful Oklahoma farmer who had lost his land after two years of drought, then lost his bitter wife as a consequence. Afterwards he had wandered the country, swilling whiskey and harvesting the crops of other farmers until the day he had seen the Blessed Garden and decided to call it home. He hadn't had a drop of liquor since coming to live on the convent grounds, and his loyalty to the sisters who lived there couldn't be questioned.

Except by someone who questioned everything.

Sister Felicia lifted the hem of her robe around her trim ankles and took the two steps up to Ralph's porch. These days he sometimes napped in the hottest part of the day, and she wondered if she should jangle the old cowbell hanging from a string beside the door to summon him.

She was saved the trouble by a man. And not an ordinary one. Her lips clamped together to ward off a grunt of surprise.

“What’s this?” Gallagher pushed the screen door open as Sister Felicia took an unconscious step backward.

She considered him as she considered the rule of silence. She decided that in this instance she was perfectly within her rights to answer him. “I’ve brought Ralph’s dinner. Are you his new helper?”

Gallagher took his time answering. He wasn’t sure which was more surprising, to find a nun delivering lunch to his doorstep or to find this nun anywhere. She was an angelic vision, a Madonna in repose. Her face, outlined by a stark white wimple and veil, was oval and her creamy young skin flawless. Her eyes, heavily lashed and faintly almond-shaped, were the green of an island lagoon, and her lips were full and sensual, an odd twist in a face that El Greco would have wept over.

There wasn’t much he could tell about her body under the shapeless monk-style robe belted around her waist with a braided rope, but everything he could see added up to a crying shame. The thought was sacrilegious and sexist, and it didn’t surprise him at all. Despite knowing better, he was perfectly capable of both.

“I’m Ralph’s helper,” he said, when he realized she was staring back at him, assessing him, too. He reached for the tray, and her fingertips brushed his arm as she transferred it to him. He saw that her hands, unlike her face, were old before their time. He was staring at them when he spoke. “It looks like you could use a handyman. Someone’s been working you pretty hard.”

Humiliated, Sister Felicia tucked her hands into the wide pocket made for that purpose in the front of her robe. “We will appreciate your help.”

She took another step backward before turning to go. All her senses were acutely alert, and everything visible about the man was now committed to memory. He was tall, with a wide chest and a rock-hard longshoreman’s physique clothed in low-riding patched jeans and a faded T-shirt with a picture of the San Francisco skyline. He sported a three-day growth of auburn whiskers,

and his hair was a darker, curling whiskey brown that needed a good trim. His down-and-out appearance suggested drifters, sailors' bars and a chest covered with tattoos.

More arresting were his eyes. They were the identical shade of his hair, and admiring, but even as he looked his fill, she sensed he was also perfectly aware of everything else around him. Like a man waiting for something to happen.

Her alarm system screamed a warning.

"I'm afraid Ralph is less than thrilled I'm here," he said. "By the way, my name's Gallagher. Josiah Gallagher."

She nodded. "I'm Sister Felicia."

He thought the name was perfect, except for the Sister part. What this woman had run from or to by becoming a nun was a mystery he would like to solve. But solving Sister Felicia's mystery was not his purpose for being at the Blessed Garden. At least, he didn't think so.

"I must go. We—we're not allowed to speak, you know." He had known this was a cloistered convent but hadn't fully realized everything that meant. His last experience with nuns had been in sixth grade, when a sister a foot shorter than his then five foot eleven had slapped his knuckles with a ruler. He had gently pried the offending weapon from her fingers and snapped it in two. And the next day he'd become a connoisseur of public-school education.

"I didn't know," he said. "I'll remember."

She nodded again, glad for once to hide behind silence. She lifted her robe and quickly took the steps. Then she started down the path back to the convent house. She was sure that Josiah Gallagher watched her go, and she hurried, to give him as limited a view as possible.

The view she gave him was extraordinary, though. Gallagher assessed the sway of her hips and the proud set of her head as she fled down the path. He remembered the mesmerizing glide of the nuns in his elementary school. Apparently, during their novitiate, someone had taught them to walk as if they were floating on a heavenly cloud. No one had taught Sister Felicia to float, but someone had certainly taught her how to catch a man's attention.

She had succeeded in catching his.