Chapter 1

On Monday morning shortly after her husband Eric left for the airport to catch his flight to Chicago, Allyson Brown heard what she thought was a bird crying on the back porch. Even though she was afraid to leave her keyboard because she might lose the mental image of the advertisement she had just got going, her first impulse was to rush out and save the bird from one or more of the five cats. She listened for the feeble cries, her throat tightening, but even before she swung around in her swivel chair, she changed her mind. By now the cats had surely inflicted mortal wounds.

I'd rather encounter the silent remains than hear the death cries or see the cat neatly cleaning up blood from the still pulsating jeweled body of an indigo bunting. She shuddered, remembering.

Yesterday the cats had left the pinkish brown-tinged feathers of a female cardinal, along with what looked like her liver and gall bladder-probably bitter even to cats-on the porch.

For 10 minutes Allyson tried to drown out the sound, rustling papers and running a print job, and when that wasn't enough to cut off the inner echo of the bird's cries, she typed rapidly and thumped her toe on the gray file cabinet between her desk and the wall. But it wasn't a bird's cry.

Finally she realized it was a kitten's cry instead. She found the animal lying on the green welcome mat at her back door-newborn, gray with a white bib and a white tip on its tail. As soon as she picked it up, the kitten stopped crying. It was hardly bigger than her thumb.

Black Martha's kittens would be three weeks old now if something hadn't happened to them. Allyson looked instinctively for the gold Tom, whom she suspected of eating Martha's kittens. This one must belong to Gray Puss, even though the mother was not fully grown herself. Eric had said only yesterday he was sure Gray Puss was pregnant.

"Probably didn't know what happened when the kitten birthed," Allyson muttered, turning the tiny puckered face with her fingertip.

As if coming in response to her voice, all five cats appeared. Gray Puss grabbed the kitten by the belly and darted up the support post of the porch, then dashed back into the storage space over the utility room.

"Well," Allyson said to herself. She went back to her workstation, the violent images gradually fading even as she battled the indescribable maternal longings she could feel in her womb.

Her fingers gently touching the keyboard, she drew in her breath and stared at the graphics menu. Then hitting "Escape," she flashed back into the master menu. One more keystroke and she was in word processing, staring this time at a blank screen.

Her fingers moved, and words appeared in brilliant white-green letters that seemed almost to come from inside her, drawn involuntarily from someplace ordinarily sealed off from her own inspection. Not clinically her womb, probably, but that's where she felt the pain right now.

"I live in my head.

"I define everything.

"I am compelled to label everything.

"I control things by the words I use to define myself."

Allyson read the words, line after line, slowly, as if she were analyzing advertising copy for customer impact. As if she could make the pain go away by leaving it out of the document on the screen. Twice she ran the cursor up and changed the wording:

"I control circumstances and people by the words I use to describe them. There is only so much of me that I can control. I've got to get out of this house! Office space-maybe in the agency's building downtown…"

She stopped typing, her mind leaping desperately outside the words to pictures so vivid she suddenly felt sick.

Out of this house with its haunting reminders of Heath-Heath roaring up and down the drive on his three-wheeler, in and out the back door for a drink of water from the dispenser in the refrigerator door, Heath colliding with me between the raspberry bushes and the clothesline.

Allyson felt the hot salt of tears, not in her eyes, but burning in her nose. Reaching for a Kleenex, she blew her nose and threw the tissue into the wastebasket.

If I had an office downtown, I wouldn't be interrupted by wailing kittens or even dying birds.

I simply must get rid of the cats.

Twice she had asked her husband to take them to the Humane Society. He had said he would. Then Black Martha had had another litter of kittens. Probably four again, Allyson thought. Four more

incredibly charming kittens that after all might still be alive, about to descend upon them from the storage space over the utility room. And now Gray Puss, one of Black Martha's litter from last fall, with this helpless thing she didn't know what to do with.

Why did Eric love cats? It was Eric who had brought Black Martha home for Heath when he was less than two-not a dog for his son, but a cat. What good would this kind of questioning do? She closed her eyes and saw Heath sitting cross-legged on the porch with all the cats. Saw him as real as life.

By the force of will she blocked out both the cats and Heath for an hour, concentrating on her work.

She was into the final page of the ad proposal she was writing for her primary client when the phone rang.

"Mrs. Brown, this is Sheila Evans with MADD. You know. Mothers Against Drunk Drivers. Do you have a minute?"

Allyson felt her body stiffen. "I'd rather not get involved," she said, shifting the receiver and reaching for a Kleenex.

"I understand." Ms Evans' voice sounded crisp, authoritative. "I've experienced the anger and the grief myself. And then I decided that I had no choice but to do something. I couldn't just sit around home nursing my grief."

"That's not exactly what I'm doing," Allyson said. "I have a home office. I'm busy."

And I'm not a Sheila Evans. I can't parade my feelings naked in front of a support group. God, help me. I can't.

Furtively she glanced about the room where less than a month ago she had tried to get her work done with Heath always interrupting, always needing something. How did the woman know about Heath's death? Probably from the newspaper story.

Great! Now my name's on their list. Maybe they'll ask me to develop a video to show at AA meetings or on local TV. Lots of close-ups of actual accidents. Pictures of Heath's last birthday party and his funeral. It'd really grab their viewers.

She'd missed part of what the woman was saying.

"We'd like you to think of us as a support group as well as an organization to which you can contribute something significant. We want you to think of MADD as a way to make the community safer for other children," Sheila Evans said.

Allyson held the receiver at arm's length as if it were dangerous. Ms. Evans' voice clipped through more sentences from the prepared

pitch. When the woman stopped and she was supposed to reply politely, Allyson silently settled the receiver back in its cradle.

When she reread the last paragraph of what she had written, she couldn't develop it any farther. Pushing away from her desk, she went to the bathroom for the load of laundry she had planned to do while she ate her lunch. Glancing down as she closed the washer lid, she noticed a blue lint ball between the washer and the drier. With the broom handle, she pulled it out, then stooped to pick it up.

When she touched it, she realized it was one of Heath's socks, unwashed and a bit stiff with his toe prints still soiled where he had run outdoors without his shoes on. Allyson grasped the sock to her face, breathing in the smell of her son's canvas shoes. The very smell of him.

I've got to get out of here! Air! Space!

Racing across the kitchen, she pushed the screen door open.

The kitten was on the porch with Gray Puss standing guard over it. Allyson stepped backward, then turning, she walked slowly back to her workstation. As she sat down she regained control of her feelings. But each time she left her work during the day, Allyson encountered Black Martha or Gray Puss, one or the other of them with the kitten in her mouth, charging away from the other three adult cats. She tried to be philosophical-she certainly didn't want another cat. If the adult cats killed the kitten, that was one less problem to distract her.

No point to make supper with Eric gone to Chicago. Eating a bowl of Raisin Bran, she proofread the final draft of her proposal before faxing it. Then she put on her walking shoes and stretched, pulling against the kitchen doorway to loosen her neck and arms, extending one leg and then the other to loosen the Achilles tendons.

I've lost weight. Look at my legs. Look at my arms. Eric always said he married me because he knew I'd age like Dad, straighter and thinner each year. She touched her face. It was thinner too. When a woman's 5'10", being this thin looks ghastly.

Allyson went out the front door so the cats wouldn't follow her. A half mile down the road the tight muscles in her left shin began to warm up, and she lengthened her stride. After walking the edge of the road along the marshy bay of Lake Wilson to the Super Value a mile from the house, she took two laps around the perimeter of the mini-mall, and headed home.

I don't get enough exercise. I'm as stiff as a stick from sitting at that computer all day.

Walking faster, she thought about the plans they had made when they bought this 60-year-old farmhouse and four acres. Plenty of room to raise a child. A hill steep enough for sledding behind the garage. Woods and a tiny field where he could play. "One acre improved organic garden," the real estate agent had boasted in his car on the day he drove them over to see it for the first time. Carl Florian, who owned the remainder of the original farm and the new farmhouse a half-mile down the road, had plowed and disked her garden with his tractor when the soil was barely dry enough this April-the day before Heath died. Allyson stopped at the corner of their property to look at the two-inch velvet of fine grass and weeds covering the garden now. Her nursery orders had come from Burpees and Parks and Gurneys. Inside those "hermetically sealed packages" standing against the garage wall were dry rose canes and blueberries and weigelia that should have been in the ground the day they arrived.

How will I ever plant another garden? Why should I?

Entering the shadowy house, she sat down to take off her walking shoes.

It was about 10:00 that evening when she stepped out to bring in the last batch of laundry from the drier. The kitten was back on the welcome mat, crying again. After all it had been through, she was amazed the creature was still living. Setting the plastic basket down, she picked the kitten up.

But it was not the same one even though it was the same powder gray. It had no bib or white tip on its tail, only white paws. Allyson turned it in her hand and discovered that it had been born only minutes before. Its navel was still wet-in fact, all of its body was damp. And it was much more frail than the first kitten.

With a sigh she turned back into the kitchen.

"You'll never survive what they did to your littermate," Allyson told the kitten as she warmed milk in a tablespoon over a stove burner.

She thought it would choke when she began dripping milk into its mouth with an eyedropper. Liquid ran out both sides of his mouth, making his fur feel sticky in the palm of her left hand, but the kitten only sneezed and began to swallow. Not nearly the whole spoonful of milk, but enough. Instinctively Allyson knew that unless she held the tiny animal warm in her hand through the night it would die. She got a towel, spread it across her lap, and settled in her recliner to watch the sunlight fade beyond the garden and woods where thunderheads were

building. Rain was falling when she got up to feed the kitten at midnight and again at 3:00 a.m.

Allyson awoke with a splitting headache from sleeping in her recliner where she had spent most of the night, the newborn kitten cradled in her hands against her chest. The headache, she decided, was the result of disturbed sleep, or possibly of pressure at the back of her neck where the pillow didn't fit right. Even with her eyes closed, she was aware of her reading lamp, still on over her left shoulder. When she opened her eyes, she saw the outdoors was beginning to lighten although it was still raining and dark clouds pressed over the maples to the west where she could see the sky.

When Allyson moved, the kitten turned slightly in her hands, but it made no sound. She laid it on the towel across her lap, watching it knead the terry cloth with its match-stick legs and paws. It seemed stronger.

Her dreams had so bothered her that it was a relief to awaken, even with a headache, to a situation that required her to do something. Her jaw muscles tightened. Don't think. Don't feel. Do something. Eric says I'm on a denial binge. Maybe he's right.

Two days later the rain had finally stopped, and the kitten was still alive, fattening and growing already, and mewing when she took it every two hours from the box next to the bathtub.

Eric had come back from Chicago. He was asleep now on the sofa on the screened porch, a light sweat beading his forehead and upper lip. As Allyson unpacked his suitcase, she was startled to find his Bible carefully tucked between his jogging suit and the plastic bag with his laundry. Since Heath died, they hadn't had worship together either morning or evening, as if somehow neither of them could face the ritual without their child. Allyson remembered her own Bible lying on the shelf in the kitchen where she had laid it the day Pastor Gage had come to pray with her shortly after the funeral. She hadn't opened it since. Even though she had taught her earliteen class for the first time last Sabbath. Winged it really, without any preparation except to look at the lesson title and to glance at the list of texts. Familiar enough. Allyson drew a deep breath and hung up Eric's jogging suit in his closet and set his shoe bag under it. She picked up his Bible, almost hugged it, then shivered. She would never have guessed that he considered his Bible important enough to take to Chicago when there would be a Gideon Bible in the hotel room.

So many things about their relationship unnerved her now. How after 10 years of marriage could she still know so little about her husband? She stared at the suitcase open and empty on their bed, trying to make her emotions hold still so she could analyze them.

I always thought Eric did the religion bit for my sake, for his folks. Mostly because he's used to living with the Christian label. He was flattered to be a deacon at 25. Elder at 35. Pillar of the church. That sort of thing. Like one job promotion after another-more status-looks good on a man's spiritual resume.

She wondered what her parents would think if they realized what had happened to her own faith. Now when they thought she'd made it safely through the dangerous years to a settled 33. Married to a Christian CPA, both of them invariably nominated to any committee the conference told the church to set up, devoted to bringing their son up an Adventist, solidly behind the church school.

There were times when this PK gave them some anxiety in academy and my first year of college. What would they think now if they knew I'm about ready to accept the law of the jungle as the highest moral authority in the universe? Sorry, Dad. Sorry, Mom.

She remembered Heath's funeral with bitterness.

Bradley Willowick had insisted on preaching his grandson's funeral. As if his triumph of faith would comfort her and Eric more than his sitting there holding their hands and weeping with them. During that sermon her faith began to die, and by the time the sermon ended, all she had been brought up believing had come crashing down.

Dad's a fool. A sincere, well-meaning fool-giving his whole life to perpetuate a game we play with children, hoping they'll grow up gentle and kind, respectful and law-abiding.

During that sermon she had relived her childhood-eagerly listening to Mom or Dad reading from Uncle Arthur's Bible Stories, cutting out felts for Mom to use in kindergarten Sabbath school or at camp meeting, raising her hand and waving it with every appeal from the pulpit for children to give their hearts to Jesus and live for Him. When her brother Sandy refused to be baptized in his teens, she had wept and pleaded with him.

"Heaven won't be heaven without you there."

"I'm not so sure there is a heaven," Sandy had replied. "Dad gets paid to promote celestial real estate. Why shouldn't he develop a convincing sales pitch? I'm not buying. I'm investing in something I can get hold of, and I'm starting with a Porche."

Allyson had remembered grieving and praying about his decision and his dogged persistence in reaching his "worldly goals." He had his Porche now. It had been parked beside Dad's Chevy in the funeral home parking lot. She could smell the tobacco on Sandy's breath and clothes from where he sat on the other side of Mom. Her brother had come to the funeral alone. His boys were with their mother in New Mexico.

So I've kept the faith? My loss is more final than Sandy's. Sandy was right all along. But he's got more nerve than I have. No need to…

All that matters is what you seem to be, Allyson. You're a PR expert. You can do it. No need to tell anyone.

Sitting there on the front row less than a body-length from Heath's coffin, fiercely holding Eric's hand, she had controlled her breathing as if she were under water, coming up every few strokes to gasp. Her mind swam through the months ahead. She saw herself numbly functioning in her customary mode, just out of habit, because everyone expected it of her.

No need to tell Mom or Dad or even Eric.

Her father had finally quit talking. The organ…

She picked out Delia's alto in the ladies' trio. As they sang, she could hear footsteps on the carpet as the funeral director came from the back of the church.

Now, more than three weeks after the funeral, she was still in survival mode. Staring unseeing into her husband's suitcase and disavowing whatever it was that tied her to him.

Please. Nobody expect anything more of me. So I'm a hypocrite. So be it!

As wave after wave of nausea swelled and passed over her, she braced herself in the bedroom doorway. At last she drew a deep breath, no longer tasting hot salt in her mouth, and went to warm a spoonful of milk for the tiny gray kitten with the white paws.

She took the kitten and his warm milk to the screened porch where she sat down in a wicker chair across from her sleeping husband. Even though its eyes had still not yet opened, the kitten anticipated the milk and his mouth yawned in anticipation. When she touched the dropper to his tiny petal-pink tongue, he sucked the milk in with hardly any of it running down the sides of his mouth.

Allyson felt a flush of satisfaction.

"You're learning," she murmured, then added savagely. "You're going to live! I'm going to make you live!"