

FINDING SANCTUARY, BOOK 2

# DEADLY ECHOES

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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To my friend and sister, Jolene,  
who taught me that true friends are friends forever



## CHAPTER

# ONE

The old familiar fear returned with a vengeance, along with the musty smell of neglect and the sweet scent of sweat.

I was back in that small dusty place under the stairs. The one place in the house that escaped Mom's rigorous weekly cleaning. It was used to store things that were only needed on special occasions, like our old luggage and the cane Dad had used when he sprained his ankle.

But this night, the often-ignored storage area was the most important place in the entire world. Hannah's arms tightened around me, and she whispered in my ear that I must be quiet. That I couldn't say a word, couldn't sneeze, even though the dust tickled my nose. The terrible noises from outside had stopped, and now there was nothing except an awful silence. The only sound left was our rapid breathing. Hannah breathed in; I breathed out. Without meaning to, I began to inhale and exhale in harmony with my sister. In and out. In and out. Tears slipped down my face unbidden, but I ignored them and concentrated on our labored breaths. It was the one thing I could control.

Footsteps from the other side of the door stopped only inches

from where we sat. Suddenly our breathing seemed too loud. Could he hear us? Something rose inside my throat. Fear turned into an urge to scream that would surely reveal us to the evil that lurked outside our secret spot. Hannah seemed to sense I was losing restraint, and she covered my mouth with her hand.

“Be still,” she whispered. “Whatever you do, Sarah, be still.”

I tried desperately to hold my breath, not knowing if I could do as she asked. Terror seemed to have wrapped my sister and me in a cocoon of unreality. Surely this could not be happening. Mom and Dad were okay. We would scurry out from beneath the stairs, and they’d laugh at us. Tell us how silly we were to be afraid. Then Mom would make tacos and we’d watch TV. Life would go on as it always had.

All of a sudden, the handle on the door of our safe haven rattled. Hannah gasped and took her hand off my mouth. The small door swung open and light washed over us, blinding me. I screamed and buried my head on Hannah’s shoulder.

Then there was blood. So much blood. Flowers began to rain down from the sky, white orchids mixed with crimson. I screamed again and again until I woke myself up. My body trembled uncontrollably from the fear that gripped me, my sheets soaked with sweat. Pushing myself into a sitting position, I could feel my heart pound. Why had the nightmare returned? I’d been free from it for almost two years.

I got out of bed and made my way into the bathroom. The person who looked back at me from the mirror wasn’t Sarah Miller, the twenty-four-year-old schoolteacher. She was Sarah Miller, the six-year-old child who hid in a closet the night her parents were murdered.

I splashed cold water on my face and dried it with a towel. Then I went into my small kitchen and checked the time. A little

after four in the morning. Although I hadn't experienced this particular dream for a long time, I remembered the routine that accompanied it. There would be no sleeping the rest of the night. I turned on the coffee maker. It would take several minutes to brew, so I opened the door that separated my apartment from the school and stepped into the large classroom. I loved walking through the school when it was empty, before the day began. Desks sat in the dark, waiting for the students who would soon fill them. Since I was still wearing my pajamas, I kept the light off. I walked toward the front window and gazed outside at a bleak winter's day. The streets of Sanctuary were deserted, but an hour from now things would change. Randi Lindquist would arrive to open her restaurant, The Oil Lamp, while across the street, Mary Gessner and her daughter, Rosey, would get ready to greet customers at The Whistle Stop Café, the only other place to eat in town. Of course, Randi and Mary weren't in competition. This was Sanctuary, Missouri. The two restaurant owners were close friends and worked together to serve good quality food to the small town. People in Sanctuary helped one another out whenever it was needed.

A couple of hours later, after the restaurants were already greeting their customers, Rachel Stoltz and her mother would turn on the lights in the quilt shop, while Abner Ingalls got ready to start business at the hardware store. Not long after that, Martha Kirsch would open the library next door, and Evan Bakker would arrive at the post office on the other side of the school. The three of us shared the large brick building that had once housed a saddle and tack store back when Sanctuary was called New Zion, a town founded in the 1800s by a group of Mennonites who sailed to America from Germany. As the Mennonite population dwindled and others moved here, the name of the town was changed to Sanctuary.

Around eight o'clock, the farmers would begin to ride into town. Some of them in trucks. Some of them in buggies. Sanctuary combined modern culture and the simplicity of its Conservative Mennonite citizens with complete success. This was a special place, and everyone who lived here protected the spirit of Sanctuary with quiet zeal. The town's name was more than a label. It was a way of life for its residents, some of whom had come here because they were looking for a safe refuge from the past. Others because they were just looking for a simpler life.

I turned around and went back to my apartment. Once used as storage space, it had been converted to three rooms about a year ago. The efficiency kitchen took up a corner of the living area. A table in the kitchen held my laptop and printer. I used it as a desk to grade papers and create work sheets and tests. I had a desk in the schoolroom, but I didn't like working there alone at night. The front of the room had large storefront windows, and I felt too exposed. I also used the table as a place to eat the meals I prepared when I didn't go to my friend Janet's house to eat. A tiny bedroom held my bed and a dresser. Next to that was a bathroom with a toilet and a tub. I had everything I needed, and I found my little home cozy and peaceful.

I ate a quick breakfast and then got dressed, trading my pajamas for a simple dress that was appropriate for a teacher in a conservative Christian school. After a time of prayer and Bible reading, I closed up my apartment and spent the next couple of hours at my school desk grading papers and preparing for another day of teaching bright, inquisitive minds. I loved teaching, and I loved my students. My life was quiet and safe. Exactly what I wanted.

Around seven-thirty, the front door swung open and my very first pupil arrived.

“Good morning, Jeremiah,” I said loudly.

“Good morning, Miss Miller.” The fourteen-year-old son of Conservative Mennonite parents, Jeremiah Ostrander always came early to help me prepare for the day. After taking off his coat and hanging it up on one of the hooks near the door, he went straight to the large blackboard at the front of the room and began erasing the lesson from yesterday. After that, he would clean the erasers, make sure the chalk was ready, and then sweep the floor. Jeremiah was a quiet boy, but he was fully committed to school. An illness as a baby had caused a profound loss of hearing, so I kept his desk in the front of the room and worked with him after school sometimes to make sure he had everything he needed to complete his lessons. Several months ago I’d started teaching him a little sign language. One sign in particular was extremely useful. When he had trouble hearing me, or when I accidentally turned away from him as I talked, he would make the sign for *help*—his right hand in a fist with his thumb up. Done correctly, the left hand should support the right hand and lift it up slightly, although Jeremiah didn’t usually add the second component. Since it embarrassed him to ask for assistance, he would make the sign so only I could see it. It was my signal to go back over what I’d just said without stopping the lesson because he’d missed something.

His lessons were progressing very well. Sign language had made it much easier for him to learn and to feel a part of class instead of standing on the sidelines. I’d approached his parents, offering to show them how to better communicate with their son, but Jeremiah’s father, William, wouldn’t have anything to do with it. He was a harsh man who acted as if there were nothing wrong with his son. I could tell his mother, Trina, wanted to learn, but she was under her husband’s thumb and went along with every edict he proclaimed.

William had made it clear that he expected Jeremiah to stay in Sanctuary and take over the family farm someday, but I suspected his son had other dreams. I doubted that farming would satisfy his obvious passion for learning. It would be interesting to watch him mature and make choices about his life. I couldn't tell Jeremiah what to do, but I could encourage him to follow his heart. I hoped he would.

The front door opened again, and I looked up from my desk, expecting another student. Instead, it was Janet Dowell, the woman who had become like a mother to me.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

She smiled, her blue eyes twinkling. "I made a large pot of chicken and noodles over the weekend. I'm just dropping some off for your dinner this week."

Janet was a great cook. Even though she'd tried to teach me, I didn't have her knack in the kitchen. I was happy she kept me supplied with plenty of good food.

"Sounds wonderful," I said gratefully. "Can you put it in the refrigerator for me?"

"Sure." She went into my apartment, coming back moments later. "I'm on my way to the clinic, but I'll be home by three. Why don't you come over tonight? I'll make meat loaf."

"I'd love to. I'll be there around four-thirty."

She nodded and waved good-bye. As she walked out, my students began to file in one by one. After a few minutes of greeting one another, we settled down to work. Although the nightmare that had awakened me left me feeling unsettled, as the day progressed, the children helped me push the dark monster back into a place where it lurked quietly, its terrifying power diminished by the joy of challenging young minds.

About twenty minutes before the lunch break, I was surprised

to see Janet return, accompanied by Paul Gleason, a Madison County deputy sheriff who had become a friend to Sanctuary residents during a kidnapping case several months earlier. I knew him to speak with, but we weren't close friends. I actually had a small crush on him, but he was so handsome and self-assured, I was certain I wasn't the kind of woman he'd ever notice. As I swung my attention to Janet, the look on her face stopped me in the middle of my sentence. She walked up to me and whispered in my ear.

“Let the children go home, Sarah. We need to talk to you.”

The fear that had gripped me in the early morning hours returned in a rush that took my breath away. I tried to speak to my students, but nothing came out of my mouth. Finally Janet addressed them.

“Children, school is over early today. I need you to go home. If any of you need a ride, or if someone needs to call your parents, I want you to go next door to the post office. Mr. Bakker will help you contact your folks. If you can't reach them, he will take you home. Please have your parents check with me about school tomorrow.”

The children closed their books and filed out quietly. Jeremiah stood next to his chair, staring at me, his large brown eyes framed by his rather long blond hair. At first I thought he was going to say something, but finally he turned and left, following the others out.

“What . . . what . . . ?” was all I could get out. I felt six again, trying to grasp the idea that I'd never see my parents again. My eyes fastened on Janet's. She asked Paul to lock the front door. As he walked to the front of the room, Janet knelt down next to my chair and took my hands in hers.

“I would do anything to save you this pain,” she said softly,

her eyes full of tears. “But I can’t. I’m here for you, Sarah. We *will* get through this. You’ve got to trust me. Okay?”

I nodded. Tears dripped down my cheeks and landed on my dress. Even before she said it, I knew what was coming. It was the only thing that could plunge me back into darkness. The dream had come to me for a reason.

“It’s Hannah,” I whispered, my voice shaking like an old woman’s. “What happened?”

“I don’t know exactly,” Janet said. “We don’t have many details yet.” She pronounced each word carefully, as if it pained her to speak them. “I got a call this morning from Hannah’s next-door neighbor. Cicely and some other girls were at a sleepover at her house. When Cicely got home this morning, she found her mother . . .” Janet took a deep, shaky breath. “She found Hannah . . .” She gulped and shook her head.

“She’s dead.”

Janet nodded, tears cascading down her face. “Yes, honey. She’s gone. I’m so sorry.”

“What happened? Was it her heart? She had some problems. . . .”

“No, Sarah.” Paul had come back and stood behind Janet. “It wasn’t a medical condition.” He looked at Janet for help, but she just shook her head, overcome with emotion.

He took a deep breath and the words tumbled out in a rush. “She was murdered, Sarah. Someone broke in and stabbed her to death.”

“Oh no. Not . . . not again.” As my mind tried to process the information Janet and Paul had given me, a strange unearthly calm filled my body. Before I could sit down, I felt myself drift away into the shadows that surrounded me. The last thing I remembered was Janet’s arms reaching out to catch me.