

CHAPTER ONE

Divorce

MY fingers touched the iPad screen. I started to type.

"Charita! Charita, Brett!"

That was my mother hollering up the stairway. She had done it again, breaking my concentration. Still, it could get worse. She could be dreaming up something gross for me to do.

"Haven't you picked up that messy bedroom yet?"

Typical. I returned to the iPad.

Her face showed past my bedroom door. *I'd meant to lock that door. Couldn't I do anything right?* She took in the view and shuddered. "What a *disgrace!*"

I aimed my eyes at the ceiling.

"What if your father happened to drop by, and he saw this room? Wouldn't you feel humiliated?"

Dad, dropping by to see me? Didn't I wish.

She collected my slippers and placed them under the comfortably ruffled bed. *Making neat*, she calls that. In my opinion, neatness is vastly overrated. "Just because your father gave you an iPad doesn't mean you're to hole up in this jungle and spend the rest of your life tapping away on it. By the way," she said, advancing to within inches of the iPad's screen, "what are you working on? Anything I can see?"

"Someday," I said. "Maybe." I clicked off the screen.

She frowned and muttered something I didn't catch and wasn't sure I wanted to.

The point is, Mom hadn't exactly glowed over Dad's gift to me, his only daughter. She thought Dad was overdoing it. He was trying to make up

for stuff that had gone wrong between them, knowing it was making it rough on me. But then, she wasn't happy with *anything* my father did.

She'd been like that ever since she'd heard about his *significant other* and filed for divorce.

In a way, I had done what Dr. Marino, the psychologist at our high school, suggested. "Vent," she'd told me one afternoon when the situation at our house turned extra tense. "Get the pain out. You'll feel so much better."

I'd flashed her the raised eyebrow. "You must be kidding."

"I mean it, Charita," she'd said. "Talk to someone you trust. Perhaps a family member. Or the pastor of your church. Or a best friend."

Since I no longer trusted anyone human, and an iPad would put up with a considerable amount of *venting* and never tell, I had found my best friend.

The cordless phone lying on my bureau rang. Mom waited for me to get up and answer it. I just sat there. She trotted over and picked it up.

After some mumbles and lengthy pauses, she said, "It's for you, Charita."

I said, "Who is it?"

"Your father."

I stood up carefully, needing to let her think I didn't particularly care that Dad was on the other end of the line. Sometimes, trying to play it cool in this *civilized* war between my parents was like walking a tightrope. "Well ... okay"

"If you'd rather not talk to him," my mother offered, "I'll gladly tell him"

I grabbed the phone from her hand.

"Well, baby," his bass voice came through cheerful. "I'm still here. On the job." My father works behind the main window at the Post Office. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Likewise, Dad," I said, glancing sideways at my mother. She was perched on the edge of my bed, pretending not to listen.

"How's it going?"

"Oh ... you know."

"Not so hot, huh? But, hey, it can only get better. Right?"

"If you say so."

A pause while Dad thought that over. Then, "The reason I called ... I talked to your brother a few minutes ago. He's on leave, and he says"

"Jimmy?"

"The only brother you've got." His grin sneaked through the phone. "Anyway, he'll be spending a few days here in Harbinger Falls. So far, all he knows is that your mother and I have split. Since he was at sea with the rest of his shipmates, we decided not to detail everything that had happened until he got here. So if you'll

promise not to clue the boy in until we tell him
...."

"You have my word."

I mean, what else could I say? James R. Brett is a seaman with the U.S. Navy. Until recently, he was aboard a ship somewhere in the Pacific. Now he's about to hear the truth. The gory details of what I'd been living with for the past six months. Jimmy is seven years older than me making him 22, and I, his 15-year-old kid sister. But in a way, he was like an innocent two-year-old about to stumble onto a land mine.

I hung up the phone and gathered my thoughts.

So, here's where it stood: One brother, returning home from the rough seas to learn of the death of *family life* as he'd known it. With crucial roles played by his parents, Robert and Patricia (Rob & Trish) Brett. To be followed shortly by one ugly divorce.

And it was only the beginning of my summer vacation.