

## *Chapter Six*

There was nothing that Helen could grab on to, no experience or idea or person. Nothing had prepared her for the dark empty street, for the wailing siren, for the red light strobing across their faces. Nothing had prepared her for the sight of a man limp as a rag doll being strapped onto a gurney, nor for the knowledge that her son, her Josh, had put him there. And nothing had prepared her for the force of Hal's fury, or Josh's stunned, pale face as his father stood over him, screaming. She didn't know how long she had stood there, shrinking back from them. Time seemed to stretch out, so that the scene in front of her sucked up all the past, all the future, in an endless black hole.

"Stop it, Hal," she said finally, forcing herself out of her stupor. As she drew closer, she smelled the vomit, felt herself beginning to get sick. She flung her arms out to Josh, but he shook her off. She backed off, feeling useless, embarrassed.

Josh hugged himself, his body convulsed in shudders. He was pale, his eyes empty, alien. A policeman came over to him and began asking him questions and writing things in a notepad. Helen started to say something, but Josh shot her a warning look. He looked so dutiful, so earnest. She strained to hear what they were saying, but then she saw Josh nod docilely and the policeman take him by the elbow and put him in the police car and drive off.

Panic came over her as the lights of the police car grew smaller and smaller, then disappeared into the dark. Ever since they had gotten Josh's frantic call just a short twenty minutes ago, she had rushed single-mindedly to him, only to have him seem to be just out of reach.

Hal had stopped screaming, at least. He seemed suddenly drained of energy, his shoulders sloped, his arms hanging limply at his sides, his eyes wide and blank.

Hal turned to her, his usually impassive face wrenched out of all recognition. "You!" He jabbed a finger in her face. "You! This is what happens when you let him do any goddamn thing he wants!" His face was so red, the veins standing out in his forehead and neck, that she was afraid he'd have a heart attack. She reached out to touch his sleeve, to try to calm him, but he hit her hand away, then sat down on the curb and sobbed into his hands.

Helen couldn't breathe. He had only cried once in their life together, and that had been when she'd broken their engagement.