

"This Old Testament of yours," Nate continues. "Your family reads it pretty faithfully, right?"

"The first five books, yes. The Torah."

"The Torah. It starts with Genesis. So, let me ask you—how old is the earth?" Clearly Nate doesn't want to talk about his sister. "At the university, the first day I took geology, they showed us a film about the Grand Canyon. No other record in the world tells the story it can tell, you know that? How the land lifted up, like some big ole layer cake at a picnic. Then the Colorado River went and cut right down through it like a knife. There's no formation anywhere on Earth like the Grand Canyon, Professor Butler says."

"Would he be the 'Socialistic?' " Zara ventures.

"One of 'em. Butler likes to call it 'the Grand Canon.' He understands the power of testament, see, being brought up a Baptist just like me. Before he met up with a testament that was more. . . . Here, take a look at this." Shifting his body, reaching into his pocket, as if he were coming to a toll booth, Nate pulls out a small object, and holds his hand over her lap. Zara opens her hand. A rock, no bigger than a book of matches, drops with a tiny thud into her palm. Uncomprehending, she stares at its rough surface.

"Yep. Unique formation. From the bottom to the top, the canyon wall tells the story. More than a dozen different layers, each one just like a chapter in a book. Pre-cambrian, ordovician, silurian, devonian." Silently, Zara repeats the names after him. They make her think of the poetry she listened to in her English class.

## *A Captive's Tale*

"Scientists now, they're able to date these periods. Do you have any idea how old the rocks on the bottom layer are, the Vishnu group, the pre-cambrians? More than two *billion* years old. Now, that little piece of the permian period you've got there, it's way newer. Only two hundred and fifty million. And that's Denny's problem, see—the age of the earth. Not you. Not really."

"The age of the earth. This, your family is fighting about?"

Nathan's hands tighten on the steering wheel and his knuckles grow white under his freckles. "Thing is, my whole family believes in the infallible word of God. Believes in the end-time." He sends Zara a sidelong look. "Now, you really don't know what that is, do you."

"Something to do with a football game?" Zara hazards, though she cannot imagine where G-d comes into it.

"It's the millennium. In *my* conservative family," he shoots her a quick, ironic smile, "they believe that when the millennium comes, all the people who've been 'saved' will be carried on up to heaven to be with Jesus. Everyone else will just, well, go to hell. Including, mind you, people like the Dalai Lama. Oh, yeah! But that's the Rapture for you. So, yes, you bet they care how old the earth is. For them, if you pull on one end of a piece of yarn, in a minute the whole thing rips apart."

"As if one piece of yarn has that kind of power," she says, offhand, before Nate puts a hand over hers and she remembers.

"For plenty of scientists, Zara, it's just not a problem. They can believe in God if they want, they can go to church and still study physics, or faulting, or DNA; only, not the church where Professor Butler grew up. Or First Baptist in Gala Springs, because Brother James tells everyone God created the world six thousand years ago. Six thousand years? My word," he scoffs. "That ain't even pleistocene!"

Dazzled by the way he thinks, Zara laughs out loud and tired as she is, she can't seem to stop. "Just what I've been thinking, Nate," she finally manages. "Not even pleistocene!"