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Glimpses of Truth

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Glimpses of Truth

By

Sally Kilpatrick

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts in Professional Writing in the Department of English

In the College of Humanities and Social Science of Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw, Georgia

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College of Humanities & Social Sciences
Kennesaw State University
Kennesaw, Georgia
Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of
Sally Kilpatrick

Has been approved by the committee
for the capstone requirement for

the Master of Arts in Professional Writing
in the Department of English

At the May 2010 graduation

Capstone committee:



Member



Member

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Preface

I began writing this novel in the spring of 2002 after my mother passed on a pamphlet advertising the Harriet Austin Writers' Conference. She had received the pamphlet, noticed that the conference was taking place in Georgia and attached a note asking if I was interested. That kick in the pants was just what I needed. Having just had a baby, I was feeling the need to do something with my life, to go beyond teaching, which I had always considered a temporary career at best. I jotted out a quick twenty pages about a girl who came home because I recognized there was a part of me that wanted to go home. I realized I could write about home even if I couldn't actually move there.

Being a novice writer at best, I didn't understand the considerable *faux pas* of submitting only the first couple of chapters to an editor at a conference. She asked for the full manuscript, and I confessed I hadn't finished the novel. She sighed heavily in resignation, but that manuscript was still a finalist for the Mark Austin Segura Fiction Award. I took that finalist status as a strong indication that I should finish my novel and send it out into the world.

I wrote longhand on Sunday afternoons while I taught high school Spanish during the week. The end result was a sprawling three hundred and eighty-three page work that I typed then sent out to at least thirty editors and agents. Not surprisingly, the original editor wasn't interested in my query. I did get one bite, though, a request for a full from an agent who ultimately told me that the story was "not for her."

I started another novel and took a more challenging job as an Advanced Placement Spanish teacher. I took on Spanish Honor Society, Spanish Club, and Gifted Certification. Then I did the single most distracting thing I could possibly do: I had another baby. By this time, I

wrote only sporadically. I had decided to try my hand at a romance novel because, after all, anyone could write one of those. As it turned out, Harlequin didn't want morticians as heroes, and the fact that I wanted to write a story about a mortician should have been a strong indicator that my interests lay well outside the realm of genre fiction. They sent me a lovely rejection letter that mentioned my characters by name and specific plot points, but, no, I was not cut out to write romance novels. At this point, I languished teaching preschool and trying—with little success—to make ends meet while taking care of an infant. That year for Christmas, my husband gave me a shirt box that contained a stack of papers: an application to the Kennesaw State MAPW Program. He told me two things: 1) It was my turn to follow my dreams because I had worked hard to let him follow his, and 2) This novel that I had given up on was something special and something I should finish.

Amazingly, my outlook on life improved considerably once I worked on that application, took the GRE for a second time, and got that acceptance letter in the mail. Over the course of the past three years, I haven't always believed in this novel, but I'm glad I stuck with it because I have learned a great deal from dissecting it, from breaking it down and building it up again. While working on "Glimpses of Truth," I have also finished my fourth novel and started a fifth. I have truly learned both how to be productive and how to revise.

"Glimpses of Truth" began as a slice of life novel, a heavily autobiographical story that captured a lot of what I missed about West Tennessee. Not only did I miss my rural roots, but I also wanted to capture what I could see disappearing: small country stores, backyard gardens, locally owned diners, and tiny churches. I managed to capture my vision of West Tennessee but without the slightest hint of conflict and all through the voice of a heroine that many found to be "whiny" and "spineless." Thus began a second draft told from the far more objective third

person. That improved draft showed a greater knowledge of craft, but I hated it with a passion; I avoided working with it at all costs. What you have before you is the third draft, the fifteenth overall revision. After soul searching about what professors and fellow students liked and disliked, what I liked and disliked, and what Janet Burroway had to say about point of view, I found a compromise: first person from the point of view of another character. Suddenly, Aunt Sam had a tale to tell, and it wasn't anywhere near as straight-forward as I had imagined when she was no more than a secondary character with an intriguing letter in a lock box. Now, I'm pleased that this version carries some slice of life description, a healthy dose of conflict, very little autobiography, and much needed distance from the original heroine of the story. The essay that follows will touch upon the five most important lessons I've learned as this story traveled from first to third draft, a culmination of what I read and what I learned in MAPW classes.

Writers write. I, like almost all aspiring authors have read all of the platitudes about keeping a schedule and about writing every day. I, like almost all aspiring authors, have been prone to making excuses about not being able to write because the muse skipped over me, because I was too tired to think, or because I felt I didn't have anything important to say. In *Advanced Fiction Writing: the Novel*, Tony Grooms had us write at least ten pages a week. I rearranged my schedule to find a time to write, and I kept that time holy. By getting into that habit, I easily finished the second draft of my novel in less than a semester. The next semester, I took *Screenwriting* the next and fidgeted while my fellow classmates spoke of absent muses, distractions, and not having anything to write about. I could have told them what I knew about making writing time sacred, but I knew they would have to make that discovery on their own.

I have learned that writers should treat their gift like a job, and they should punch their time card on a regular basis. Even if you can't write every day, you can rearrange your schedule

to create consistent blocks of time to write. Kelly Stone reinforced this idea in her book *Time to Write*: “Writing as a lifestyle means that you weave writing into the fabric of your existing routine; you make room for it in your day. Overwhelmingly, professional writers do this by using schedules” (19). More importantly, by establishing a set time and place to write, you won’t have to wait for your muse; she’ll learn to come to you.

Writing goes beyond making time to write; writers must also be willing to be flexible in what they write. On the first day of Screenwriting class, Jeffrey Stepakoff had us talk about what we wrote. I called myself a novelist, and he spoke about the dangers of labeling ourselves. He suggested we should describe ourselves as professional writers without any other qualifiers because we should be open to other possibilities lest we miss an opportunity. I’ve thought about that a great deal. My passion may be novels, but I did take advantage of a recent opportunity to write a short nonfiction piece for the Chicken Soup series. They haven’t called, and they may never call, but I would have missed an opportunity to tell a powerful story if I had continued to consider myself a novelist only.

In Readings for Writers: Chick Lit, we discussed ways to write even when we didn’t feel like writing. Melanie Sumner introduced us to freewriting, which wasn’t entirely new to me but not one of my favorite exercises, either. I had never tried freewriting from the point of view of my characters, though, and I learned a great deal from that particular spin. When I came across what Burroway had to say on the subject I knew I had found a strategy I needed in my writer’s tool box: “Freewriting is the literary equivalent of scales at the piano or a short gym workout. All that matters is you do it. The verbal muscles will develop of their own accord” (5).

Writers share. The first draft of this novel needed another ear, many other ears. My husband proofread the first draft before I submitted the full manuscript. He did add insightful

questions as well as a little “Arr!” in the margin for each time I had accidentally typed “me” instead of “my.” His pirate-inspired marginalia made me laugh and softened the blow of some rather poignant criticisms that were voiced later in my workshop classes.

I wrote and rewrote “Glimpses of Truth” over three consecutive workshop classes: Beginning Fiction, Advanced Fiction: the Novel, and Advanced Fiction. In retrospect, it would have done me some good to practice short stories somewhere in that series of courses. Professor Sumner, who was reading a different piece for the Chick Lit class, had the very astute observation that the piece felt “overworkshopped.” Once I could see the problem, I let the piece sit unattended over the summer, and I learned the value of stepping away from a work to get the distance necessary to see both good and bad objectively.

That said, when it came to critiques from my fellow classmates, I had to learn to take the good, dismiss the bad, and completely ignore the insane. Even the student who referred to one draft as “The Untitled Thing” and who commented that “You take every person’s piece of advice and continually change this story to the point that I don’t think it’s even yours any more” helped me. I was angry at first, but then ashamed as I realized there was more than a granule of truth in those seemingly less than constructive comments.

I quickly found that putting my professors’ comments above student comments helped me sift through criticism to find the valid. P.J. was, indeed, a “whiny” and “spineless” heroine in early drafts. There were times the story “didn’t seem to go anywhere,” but there were also plenty of passages that made others laugh. Even better, one of my fellow students stopped me in the hall to tell me she had to call her mom to read a passage about the church seating chart. From comments like that I learned that honest, constructively positive feedback is not only important, but essential to a writer’s development. From that point forward, when critiquing I

have always tried to find something well done to balance out aspects of a work that I felt were weak.

Writers experiment. I have learned not to cling to the page just because I wrote a series of beautiful words there. I have chucked two drafts and am halfway through a third without referring to any of those original drafts. Rewriting, as opposed to revising, has helped me to eliminate some of the autobiographical elements of the story that prevented much needed conflict. Professor Grooms first got me to think about the distinction between revising and rewriting. In the first fiction class I took he asked which draft I had presented, and I said that I had revised the novel three times. He pointed out that a second draft required much more than scratching the surface of a work in search of typos; I have learned an incredible amount from gathering the courage to write two additional drafts. Then I stumbled upon some words from Burroway that resonated: “it might seem dismaying that you should see what your story is about only after you have written it” (398). I had to be willing to put aside the first draft and write another in third person to find one layer of the story; putting that second draft aside and rewriting in first person from a secondary character’s point of view has made the story much richer and more accessible. As Burroway continued, “Try it; you’ll like it. Nothing is more exhilarating than the discovery that a complex pattern has lain in your mind ready to unfold” (398).

In addition to trying different approaches to writing, I also branched out and took other courses, often surprised by how those courses helped me write better fiction. In Screenwriting, I discovered the book *Story* and benefited from the idea of breaking acts down into scenes and scenes into beats of action. In Poetry, I learned to be more concise, which helped me to remove phrases that filtered actions and emotions away from the reader. I also learned to add more imagery, particularly the often ignored smell and taste. In rhetoric, I discovered that many of the

devices that persuade so well in nonfiction can be used in fiction as well. Parallelism and chiasmus bring a special brand of emphasis while metaphors and alliteration add poetry. I would never intentionally start my writing day by saying, "Let's add some chiasmus here," but I'm always gratified to discover rhetorical elements used effectively in my writing.

Writers persist. Taking classes with a community of writers who shared many of my anxieties and insecurities helped me to be consistent with my writing and to make it a priority. Professor Grooms often quoted his mentor, Richard Bausch, as having said, "When you feel global doubt about your talent, that **is** your talent. People who have no talent don't have any doubt." I'm not a great quote collector, but I keep this quote near me always.

I had the privilege of sharing a class with Raymond Atkins, too. He shared his story of receiving ninety rejections before finding a home for *The Front Porch Prophet*. Then I had the pleasure of seeing him win 2009 Georgia Novel of the Year. Similarly, I'm so glad that Professor Grooms invited Mark Fitten to speak to one of our classes. He told an incredible story of how persistence took him to editorship of *The Chattahoochee Review* and about how his novel, *Valeria's Last Stand*, suddenly took off just as he was thinking it wouldn't. These stories echoed what I had read about Stephen King long ago: he used to nail his rejections to his bedroom wall until eventually he had to graduate to a spike to hold them all (King 40-41).

Finally, I have learned one simple truth throughout the course of this program as combined with all of the reading and studying that I have done on my own: *A good story is a good story.* The Readings for Writers Course on Chick Lit was the perfect place to end my course of study. We discussed the differences and similarities between literary fiction and commercial fiction; we looked at how a book like Pearl Cleage's *I Wish I Had a Red Dress*

walked the fine line between literary and commercial fiction. That novel, in particular, inspired me because it was written so accessibly yet contained a great deal of social commentary.

As a part of the Chick Lit course, we read *See Jane Write: A Girl's Guide to Writing Chick Lit*. It wasn't my favorite book on writing, but I loved seeing how many tenets of writing are similar across a wide variety of instructional books on writing. Mlynowski and Jacobs, the authors of *See Jane Write*, say, "Your main character starts in one place and ends up in another . . . part of what guides her on this path is the conflict between what she *wants* and what she *needs*" (71). Janet Burroway puts it this way:

[Characters] need to exhibit enough conflict and contradiction that we can recognize them as belonging to the contradictory human race; and they should exhibit a range of possibility so that a shift of power in the plot can also produce a shift of purpose or morality. That is, they need to be capable of change. (124)

Either way you slice it, a good story shows how a character changes or at least reacts to his or her environment. Those changes may be internal or external, the ending may be happy or tragic, but a story involves change.

Similarly, Burroway says that a "character's purpose—that is, the desire that impels her or him to action—will determine our degree of identification and sympathy" (124) the reader has for the character. Debra Dixon in her book *Goal, Motivation, & Conflict: The Building Blocks of Good Fiction* echoes that sentiment by saying, "Everything is truly possible [in fiction] as long as you help your reader understand *why* your characters do what they do. . . . Think of motivation as the magic that helps the reader empathize with your character" (32). Burroway, of course, is a well-respected author of one of the quintessential texts for college writers while Mlynowski and Jacobs have targeted Chick Lit writers and Deb Dixon's book is frequently referenced by

romance novelists. The idea of character motivation is the same even if the degree and nature of that motivation determine how a writer's piece will eventually be categorized.

In general, my experiences in the MAPW program helped me to see that my novel needed conflict and that I could generate a solid conflict through properly motivated characters. I had to learn not to shy away from conflict, rather to manufacture it: add a future minister next door to my heroine who has seemingly fallen from grace. In addition to the change in point-of-view, this movement toward greater conflict has created a much stronger story. "Glimpses of Truth" is a far cry from its original form as "Persephone."

Through the help of my professors, course texts, and a few other books I picked up along the way, I have learned a great deal about how to craft a story. Equally important, I have learned how to bring those story ideas to paper and what to do with them once they have become a first draft. What follows is a culmination of a thousand lessons learned and sometimes relearned. I am quite pleased by the metamorphosis of my original story, proud of these first one hundred and fifty pages, and more than ready to finish this novel and begin the arduous process of submitting it for publication.

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Prologue

I never expected to attend my own funeral, but the Anderson Funeral Home marquee clearly said Samantha Louise Hughes.

It smelled just as I expected: something suspiciously like formaldehyde mixed with a mélange of waxy sprays from the florist. Subtle chimes played “When the Roll is Called up Yonder” at quarter speed, and everyone spoke in whispers. I peered over the edge of a walnut veneered casket; my embalmed corpse was wearing that damn sunflower yellow, button-down dress I had bought on clearance. Of all the dresses in my closet Cassandra had picked that one. I supposed that’s what happened when a person got too caught up in life to make plans for their death.

Cassandra, my younger half-sister, sniffled and thanked Horace Ledbetter for coming. No one stood beside my coffin other than her, her husband, and her daughter. Because I never

married, I was the end of the line. Cassandra's daughter, P.J., stood there shell-shocked and occasionally looking to her husband who sat on the front row. Any man worth his salt would have stood up there next to his wife in her time of grief, but Lionel wasn't worth a bottle of ten-year-old Mrs. Dash. There he sat in jeans and a tee shirt, leaned back with his legs spread wide as he leered at any reasonably attractive female who walked by. Luke, P.J.'s father, glared through his son-in-law with his fists clenched at his side. P.J. didn't know it, but with one single word she could have been a widow.

That's about the time I felt the warmth just over my shoulder. Beyond a cloying spray of pink carnations, a ball of white light expanded. I looked back to the funeral home pews of people chatting in low voices, but none of them could see the light. Well, no one except Dec Anderson, the funeral director who stood at the back of the room. His eyes met mine, and he nodded in the direction of the light.

I looked back to the orb, fascinated by how it could be so bright without causing me to squint. Shadows appeared in the light, and those shadows gradually came into focus as people I had once known, people who had already passed away. My father nodded to me gruffly, now a younger man in starched new overalls. My mother looked up to him with a smile; she was young, too, and her cheeks far rounder and her eyes far brighter than I ever remembered seeing them. On his other side stood his second wife, my stepmother Callie, who grinned broadly and beckoned me forward. My former paramour, Lewis Biddle, appeared and held up my favorite cat, Tootsie.

Then Melvin House appeared in the middle of the light, just as I remembered him. He yelled to me, his young brow furrowed in either rage or exertion. I couldn't understand a word he was saying, but I wouldn't have listened if I could.

If I'd had blood it would have run cold at the sight of him. What was he doing in the middle of a family tableau? Was it all a trick, a ruse to get me down to hell with only the illusion of my loved ones to urge me to a supposed heaven? Yes, it had to be one of the devil's own illusions because there was a very important deceased person missing from that tableau: my son.

If Melvin House was in the light and my dead infant son was not, then there was nothing there I needed to see. It would be far better to take my chances on earth than to face whatever crazy world lay beyond this one.

I turned my back on the light.

It followed me from visitation to funeral to the graveside service. It followed me when I went home. It followed me around my house as I grew weaker and weaker, and, as I grew weaker, the light grew smaller and smaller until it was little more than a speck of dust.

Then, just when I realized I needed to be around people to survive, that tiny mote of light disappeared altogether. I sat in my rotting, abandoned house because I lacked the energy to do anything else.

Chapter 1

It was like I felt her long before I even heard her wrestle with the front door.

I could move! I wanted to run in circles around the parlor, but instead I waited.

Persephone Jane grunted then the door squeaked before giving way. Sunlight burst through the room catching millions of dust particles dancing through the air. For a moment I was ashamed of the mess—dust, grime, mold, mouse droppings—then I remembered that I was dead. This was her house now and hers to apologize for.

She tippy-toed into the room, lines of worry or grief etched into her forehead. She surveyed the couch with its piles of fluff thrown up from where the mice had burrowed into the cushions. Did she remember “sick days” when I would put a quilt over that couch for her because she told me the cushions were scratchy? Did she remember playing Chinese Checkers on the coffee table, sometimes with the neighbor’s kid Wallace? Her gaze traveled to the coffee table where we once played those games, and she screamed.

I had forgotten about the snake.

P.J. backed out on the porch, and the snake, my only companion that whole summer after my heart attack, lifted its head and tilted it to the left as though listening. It was just an old chicken snake, nothing to really be scared of, but it stretched three or four feet long with brown and black mottled skin. P.J. wrung her hands, and I remembered the time she stepped on a black racer in the front yard when she was five, just a wisp of a thing. Oh, the screaming and the crying. Of course, she made even me cringe with her description of how the hard, supple cylinder rolled under her foot, how the snake let out a deflated hiss when she stepped on it.

I didn't want her to kill the snake even though I was the one who taught her that the only good snake was a dead one. That was just one of the millions of foolish things I used to say when I was alive and thought I knew everything.

She looked to the hedge that separated my house—her house now—from the Church of Zion parsonage. Wallace, her former best friend, came to the foot of the steps, and they stared at each other for a good long while before he finally asked, “What’s wrong? I thought I heard someone scream.”

“It’s a snake,” she said with a regal sniff. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

He looked her up and down and frowned. Her blonde hair was greasy, her toenails ragged, and she had gained at least thirty pounds, most of which hung over the top of her blue jeans in a pale white bulge. Marriage hadn't been kind to my little P.J.

She stared at him just as intently. He was her opposite in every way: trim and neatly dressed in starched white dress shirt and creased khaki pants. His dark hair was closely cropped, and he stood up straight and proud with a gently worn Bible under one arm. He looked kinda like one of those Mormon missionaries, but he didn't have the bike.

“Let me see this snake.” Wallace set the Bible on the porch railing and brushed past her; she closed her eyes taking in the scent of him. He must have smelled as though he had just stepped out of the shower since his hair was still damp.

When confronted with a choice of a woman who smelled of body odor and stale beer or a snake, Wallace chose the snake. He stepped into the room, and his breath hitched as he exhaled, the only indication he didn't care for snakes either. As a man, though, he wasn't going to let her see his apprehension. Instead, he pivoted and walked with purpose out the front door. In just a minute, his head bobbed past the west window, so I could only assume he was headed to the shed.

He's going to chop up my snake.

I tried to warn the snake, to tell it to move before it got hacked into bits and stained my prize Oriental rug. Then I laughed out loud. The rug was already ruined, and it wasn't like the snake could hear or feel me, either.

“You aren't going to kill it in there, are you?”

Atta girl, P.J. Don't let him kill the snake in the house.

“No, of course not.”

He assumed the stance of a warrior, feet shoulder length apart, his left arm behind him for balance as his right hand extended the hoe handle and prodded the snake. The weary chicken snake hardly moved as if it knew the business end of the hoe was behind Wallace. The snake raised its head high like a king cobra facing off with the charmer. Its tongue fluttered in and out for a minute, then it swayed to the side and down from the table, landing in a pile on the floor and slithering slowly in the direction of the chair.

Wallace stepped back then forced himself to step forward, to prod and push the snake back to the center of the room. P.J. leaned into the door jamb wringing her hands like a modern-day damsel watching a modern-day knight battle a modern-day dragon. Finally, the snake had had enough, and it sunk its fangs into the hoe handle jerking back and shaking its head at the hoe's lack of a properly wounded response.

Man and snake eyed each other while woman watched from the door. The snake curled around the handle ready to inflict damage in the way it knew best: constriction.

"There you go, come on and let's take a little walk," Wallace murmured. P.J. leaned forward, straining to hear what he was saying. With the snake safely aboard, he turned slowly and headed for the door, the hoe bowing under the weight of the snake.

"Heavy snake, coming through." He grunted, and P.J. jumped back to give him room. He stopped just past the flagstones and gave the hoe a shake. The snake's tongue flickered in and out, and it decided to leave the hoe behind. Wallace leaned on the hoe, a relaxed American Gothic, watching the snake crawl in the direction of the house.

"What are you doing?"

"Letting the snake go."

"Kill it, Wallace. For God's sake, kill it." P.J.'s hands balled into fists.

"If you want to kill the snake, be my guest, but I would let her be considering all of the mice you have around here."

The snake curled up underneath the azaleas, exhausted from its unwanted adventure. P.J. kept her eyes on the snake, and Wallace kept his eyes on P.J.

"Why don't you kill the snake; I'll get a cat."

His eyes flashed, but she didn't see it because she couldn't take her eyes off the snake. He stomped to the porch and thrust the hoe into her hands. "If you want to kill it so badly, then you can do it yourself."

He took the distance between porch and ground in one easy step then pushed his way through the hedges.

She watched him disappear between the tall green holly bushes then picked up the handle, testing it. The blade at the end wiggled back and forth where the screw to hold it in place had been stripped. Seeing the possibility that the blade might fall off in the middle of the snake's execution, she leaned the hoe against the house and picked up Wallace's Bible before taking a seat in the porch swing.

And that's when I noticed she wasn't wearing a wedding ring.

Chapter 2

I didn't know whether to scold her or make a batch of teacakes, but it didn't matter because I couldn't do either one. Instead, I had to watch her sway back and forth on the porch swing, the chain groaning and creaking in rhythmic complaint while she turned her head every now and then to watch people file into the Ellery Church of Zion across the street.

She sat up straighter when Wallace crossed the street with his father. She frowned at the tableau of Wallace's purposeful strides juxtaposed with his father's waddle without his mother's graceful strides to separate the two. I wanted to tell her that Wallace's mother had run off with a carpet salesman from Dalton, GA, but death really puts a damper on one's ability to gossip.

And that got me to thinking: was there a way I could communicate with her? We used to watch all the ghost shows on TV: *Haunted Houses*, *Ghosts in America*, *Searching for Ghosts*.

P.J. and I would bundle up on a Friday night and giggle at the people who heard voices and felt blasts of cold air. TV ghosts were always sad and sometimes scary; they stole covers and moaned about the past. I didn't feel particularly sad or scary, but that didn't change the fact I didn't know how to make blasts of cold air or how to speak to people. I hadn't given the idea much thought since I decided to stay away from Melvin House and any kind of afterlife that would take him.

So, I decided to figure out what it meant to be a ghost. My first experiment was to speak.

P.J., it's me.

She didn't even turn her head.

P.J.! It felt like a scream, but she stared into space somewhere beyond the bright red double doors Wallace had just entered.

I sat down beside her wondering how ghosts manufactured those blasts of cold air. I touched her but my shadow fingers fell through flesh. She shivered, and my hand burned so I jerked back. I tried to breathe, a ridiculous idea because I didn't have breath. I yearned to do research, but I only had enough energy to turn about a page a day. If I had known, I would have read the entire parapsychology section before I died; Lord knows it would have done me a lot more good than all those Danielle Steel novels.

“Open my eyes, that I may see glimpses of truth, Thou hast for me. . .”

P.J. sang along with the hymn floating across the street, her nasal soprano not meshing with the acapela choir across the street. *“Place in my hands the wonderful key that shall unclasp and set me free. . .”*

I thought to myself, she should really sing alto. If I've told her once, I've told her a million times that she doesn't have the range to sing soprano.

Her next few lines come out in a low, mellow harmony: “*Silently now I wait for thee, ready, my God, thy will to see. Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit Divine!*”

And that was my first answer. Heart-felt thoughts could reach her subconscious, some easier than others. In that case, she responded without thinking because it was something we had spoken about so many times before.

She switched to humming, and I smiled. At Old Hickory Methodist, her church and mine, we were too busy to sing all of the verses. Someone always had a tee time to make so we only sang the first and the last; she didn’t know the second verse. As she hummed, though, she kept the harmony, only occasionally missing a note because she was singing from memory instead of reading the actual music. My being expanded with the small success of our momentary connection.

Over the course of the next week, P.J. hummed Cokesbury favorites to herself while she cleaned every square inch of the house’s two stories. She called for a dumpster and took armloads of mildewed curtains and mouse-infested furniture. She swept and vacuumed and swept again. She arranged for phone service, electricity, and cable—all while ignoring her cell phone each time Lionel’s name popped up.

Late Friday afternoon, she mopped herself out of the kitchen and propped the mop against the door. Collapsing into the folding chair, she surveyed the virtually empty living room. Across the room, her cell phone rang. She groaned, but she pushed to her feet and hopped across the living room to take her phone from the coffee table she had pushed against the wall. She answered it immediately.

“Hello?”

“I’ve been fine, Mr. Monroe, how are things at Calloway High? . . . Really?”

Nosiness had always been one of my weaknesses, so I stood over there with her and leaned closer to the call. Her former principal, Mr. Monroe, was calling to tell her that his last hire had just fallen through. P.J. could still move back to Nashville and teach art.

I didn’t hear the rest of their conversation. I didn’t want P.J. to move back to Nashville. It was more than just needing her energy to feel like getting up and moving around; I needed her. I couldn’t explain it, but I needed her.

She bit her lip, a sure sign she was weighing her options. Heartened, I tuned back in to the conversation.

“Yes, Mr. M, I really loved it at Calloway. . . No, the art position here isn’t a sure thing, but I can’t move back to Nashville now. I just hope you can understand. . . .No, no. I really appreciate that you thought of me and called. Tell everyone there I said hello. . . Yes, you take care, too. Good-bye.”

She snapped the phone shut and exhaled.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” she muttered to herself.

I wanted to hug her and yell, “Brilliant, brilliant, brilliant,” but I couldn’t. She turned around, and she was crying—that made me feel very selfish, indeed.

The door bell clanged with a wheeze, and she swiped at her tears before opening the door. Wallace stood there looking less a choir boy now that he wore faded jeans and a gray tee shirt with an enormous orange T.

“I came to get my Bible.” He shifted backwards and forwards on the balls of his feet, and I wondered how long he had stood on the front porch. I wondered how long his finger had hovered over the doorbell before he actually pressed it.

“It’s over here,” P.J. said with a sniff. She walked into the office to pick the Bible up from the roll top desk that sat in the corner. She didn’t make eye contact as she handed over the Bible.

Wallace stared through her. “Are you crying?”

His eyes traveled to her left hand and took in the tiny white indentation that indicated where her rings had been.

“No, I mean yes, but it’s silly.” She waved away his concern.

“It can’t be silly if you’re crying about it,” Wallace said. For a second there he looked more like the young man who had once been P.J.’s constant companion than the Bible thumping disciple of Frank he had become.

P.J.’s eyes narrowed. “I thought you didn’t want me to come crying back to you.”

Wallace closed his eyes at the echo of his own words from five years ago. When he opened them again, the compassion was gone with cynicism in its place. “You’re absolutely right. Thanks for keeping my Bible safe. Instead of burning it.”

He turned on his heel and marched out the door without bothering to shut it behind him. P.J. slammed the door shut, and I felt a burst of energy. I felt so bad for them, but I felt so . . . powerful? Was it possible that emotional highs and lows gave me energy? I thought of those tough lonely months of lethargy, and it made sense. Besides, I thought I’d read somewhere that ghosts fed off the negative energy of the living.

P.J. swiped at tears as she walked back to the mop. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I couldn’t leave things so unhappy between the two of them. Sure, P.J. had married Lionel despite Wallace’s prediction that it would be the biggest mistake of her life. Even if he was right, that

didn't change the fact he had been judgmental. Living with his father, the pastor, had only made worse. The two of them needed to find some way to meet in the middle.

And speaking of meeting in the middle, Miss P.J. needed to call her mother. I concentrated hard on that one. P.J.'s fingers hovered over her cell phone for at least three minutes before she picked up the phone and dialed. She stuck the phone between ear and shoulder and grabbed the mop and bucket to take out the dirty water. As she closed the front door behind her, she said, "Hey, Mom. . . . No, something just told me to call you."

I had to smile at that. Being incognito was going to have its privileges.

Chapter 3

The next day, Cassandra, my sister, arrived. I called her sister, but she was my half sister: my father's daughter by his second wife. She hadn't set foot in the house since I died except for when she came in to pick out that horrid yellow dress for the funeral. That made two bones I had to pick with her. What was she thinking having an open casket visitation? Miss Georgette had the audacity to lean over to see if she could see my feet when she thought no one else was looking. I think she wanted to see if people are buried without shoes. I'll never tell.

Cassandra reached behind her to close the door when it slammed, and she jumped out of her skin. I was thinking it served her right when I realized that I had slammed the door.

Apparently, my own irritation could generate some psychic energy, too. Between that and the

little argument between P.J. and Wallace, and I suddenly had enough energy to move things. Interesting.

“Persephone?” She called up the stairs, and we both heard P.J.’s feet before we saw her. She wore a tank top and shorts that were two sizes too small.

“P.J., Mom. It’s P.J.” She edged against the wall instead of the railing, trying very hard not to turn her back on her mother.

“Persephone.” Her mother always figured that she could call her daughter whatever she wanted to after going through thirty hours of labor, a subject she was known to bring up on more than one occasion. “I wanted to drop by and let you know that I put a good word in for you at the Board of Education. I have some good news and some bad news—which do you want first?”

“Oh, let’s be different and try the good news first,” P.J. said.

“Edith Lattimore has apparently gone off the deep, so I would say you have a shot at the art position.”

P.J. crossed her arms over her chest. “Okay, so good news for me and bad news for Mrs. Lattimore. What’s the bad news?”

Cassandra cocked her head to one side. “There are about five other teachers already in the system who are interested in the job. Don’t expect a call.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“I wouldn’t thank me yet. This late in the year, the only position that’s definitely open is teaching In-school Suspension.”

P.J. grimaced. “ISS? Really?”

Cassandra shrugged. “Pays just as well as teaching a subject.”

“As long as it pays, I suppose.” P.J.’s voice was a hundred miles away.

Cassandra looked around the room taking in the gleaming hardwood floors and the cobweb-free walls. “It’s looking good; you’ve really been working hard.”

“You don’t have to seem so surprised, Mom.” P.J. blushed.

Cassandra’s hawk eyes fixed her daughter in a tough stare that softened as it lingered. “That’s not what I meant. Do you need any help?”

Did she ever! The child had been on her hands and knees scrubbing floors and cleaning baseboards. She had moved every piece of furniture on the bottom floor to dust, vacuum, sweep, and mop. She took all of the dishes out of the kitchen cabinets and washed them, cleaning out the cabinets before returning them. She even emptied the pantry and the fridge and bathed them in bleach. And the bathrooms? My downstairs bathroom had never seen so much bleach. All that, I used to call her Pig Pen when she was little.

“No thanks. I think I’ve just about got it.”

Cassandra didn’t buy it. “Well, if you need any help, you know where to find us.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

Cassandra walked around the living room to see the fruits of P.J.’s labor as P.J. edged around the room. Then I saw the tattoo, and I hooted with laughter. Cassandra’s baby girl had a tattoo of tiny angel wings in the small of her back and what appeared to be Lionel’s name poking up from the waistband of her shorts.

“Did you hear that?” Cassandra’s voice was little more than a whisper.

Mother and daughter looked at each other with frozen, wide-eyed expressions. Something creaked and tinkled. They look up to the swaying chandelier and back to each other. I was moving things like a pro! I concentrated on the Co-op calendar on the wall, and it fell to the floor with a flutter. Both women’s heads jerked to look at where the calendar lay.

“I think you’ve got a draft in this house. You heard the front door slam.” Cassandra’s words came out clipped and even; she was a woman used to choosing her words carefully.

“I’ve got more than a draft; you should have seen the snake Wallace took out of here the other day,” P.J. said.

Cassandra pounced. “So, Wallace came by, huh?”

“Earlier in the week. Then he came back for something he forgot the first time; it didn’t go well.” P.J. studied every scar in the hardwood as if she’d have to give an account for it someday.

“I see.”

Mother and daughter stared at each other. P.J.’s green eyes were wide; Cassandra’s grey ones, narrowed.

“Well, maybe your father can come by and take a look at things.” Cassandra finally said.

P.J. edged around the room looking like a guilty novice dancer. “Oh, Mom. Don’t worry him with that. It’ll be like all those times one of us heard the car making a funny noise only to be told that it must be our finely-tuned female hearing.”

Cassandra chuckled as she headed for the door. “Still, it’ll give him something to do now that he’s retired. I suppose I’ll see you on Sunday? For lunch?”

“Maybe another time,” P.J. said.

Cassandra’s grey eyes bored through her. “Oh, and can you get me the phone number of your old principal? Coach Graves needs him as a reference.”

“Sure,” P.J. said, her ponytail whipping around as she turned to comply. She bounced back into the living room, ready to please as always, only to come face to face with her mother’s frown.

“So, when did you get the tattoo?”

Her face flushed crimson.

“You didn’t really think I failed to notice how you were dancing around the living room, did you? Is he coming back, or are you done this time?”

P.J. swallowed hard. “Done. The papers are signed.”

Casaandra took P.J.’s chin in her hand. “Persephone Jane Willis, you are twenty-seven years old. Remember that if you want it to be done, it’s done.”

P.J. nodded. The edges of her eyes glistened with tears she didn’t want to shed.

“And you can always move home,” Cassandra said.

A tear escaped, and P.J. swiped it away with the back of her hand.

Cassandra drew her into a hug. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

Daughter broke away from mother and wiped away tears with left knuckle then right.

“It’s not your fault, Mom. Time to grow up; time to face the music.”

Cassandra nodded her appreciation and quickly changed the subject as the Willises had always been wont to do. “Well, you’d better remember to buy clothes that hide that tattoo if you want to teach at Ellery High. They’ve fired people for less.”

“That’s ridiculous.” P.J. rolled her eyes and folded her arms over her chest, an older facsimile of the teenagers she was destined to police.

“Ridiculous it may be, but welcome back to Ellery.”

“Ellery’s better than Nashville,” P.J. said with a shiver.

“Let’s hope so,” Cassandra said as she pushed a loose piece of her daughter’s hair behind her ear only to watch it fall forward again. “Let’s hope so.”

Chapter 4

The next day Wallace peeped through the hedges while he pretended to prune his side of the hedge. Funny he should decide to do a little yard work on the same day P.J. decided to devote her attentions to our yard. God bless him, Luke, her father, had always done a great job of mowing the lawn after I had the hip replacement, but he never cared much for pruning the shrubs or planting flowers. In fact, he had run over my buttercups so many times I was surprised they still lined the driveway.

P.J. angled the pruning shears then craned her neck to look at the open book on the porch. Her head swiveled from plants to the book and back again.

For heaven's sake, you don't have to look everything up in a book!

She whirled around, but there was no one behind her.

Clip just beneath the blossom.

She lifted the shears, hesitated, then brought them down, brow furrowed and mouth pursed.

I squeezed my vision, my awareness to the world, and I concentrated. *Clip just beneath the blossom.* P.J. lifted the shears and held them over the bush. Her hands, and thus the shears quivered, but she positioned the shears, closed her eyes and snipped. She opened one eye then the other then smiled at the perfectly clipped branch.

She continued to prune, finding a steady rhythm completely unaware Wallace watched her. He put his shears down and walked across the yard. When he cleared his throat, she jumped two stories, then wheeled around with the hedge clippers pointed at his heart.

“Wallace, you scared the beJesus out of me. It’s a wonder I didn’t snip off a finger.”

“Or impale me.”

She lowered her shears and grinned with a blush. It was the first time that trip I had seen all of her teeth, and her smile dazzled. One of her hands traveled to her cheek like her jaw that hurt from having not smiled for too long.

“I wanted to apologize,” Wallace said.

“For what?”

“For being so mean about the snake. I’ve thought about it a lot, and I can understand why you wanted to kill it, but I didn’t have to be so mean about it.”

“Oh, that. I didn’t think anything of it.”

He hesitated. “And for prying yesterday; it was none of my business.”

“No, no. I’m sorry I was so mean to you. I would like to say you just caught me at a bad time, but there was no excuse for rehashing old arguments,” she said. She raised her clippers to the delicate branches, and the bush quivered in the breeze.

Wallace shrugged. “I didn’t expect to see you, and I guess I was still mad about, well, you know.”

Mad would be an understatement. Five years before, Wallace and P.J. had had a yelling match in the front yard that attracted neighbors from a couple of blocks over. It was a very public ending to a very private friendship.

Wallace put his hands in his pockets. The Bob Whites called to each other hopefully, and a goat three blocks over baaed. “Well, I’ve thought about it, and I don’t think I’m mad about that anymore.”

P.J.’s mouth opened and closed. “I don’t think I’m mad about it, either.”

It was a far cry from a complete reconciliation, but I figured we all had to start somewhere.

“Guess I’d better go back to the hedge.”

She looked to the hedge. It was already three or four inches shorter than it ought to be.

“Okay.”

Okay? If I could have rolled my eyes, you’d better believe I would have. Better yet, I would have taken a switch to her naked legs for being such a pushover. And Wallace? He was still being proud and stubborn and holier-than-thou like his father. Heavens, how they deserved each other.

One of the branches from the ancient oak tree cracked and fell to the ground just behind P.J. She dropped the clippers and jumped into Wallace who instinctively hooked a protective arm around her. Nose to nose, they stared at each other, each unwilling to be the first to step away. Her green eyes were wide, his brown ones hard and searching. Their mutual attraction crackled—until P.J. took a step back.

“Wallace, do you believe in ghosts?”

“Why, in heaven’s name would you think that had anything to do with a ghost?” Wallace straightened, collecting his bravado one sliver at a time.

“It’s not just that.” P.J. looked left and right, her blonde ponytail hitting one cheek then the other. “Yesterday the door slammed and the chandelier started swinging. Earlier, I could have sworn I heard Aunt Sam’s voice. And now, this.”

“Peej, you have lost your mind. Ghosts do not exist.”

“I’m serious, Wallace. I feel like someone’s watching me, and I have this awful feeling in the pit of my stomach that there’s something I should be doing.”

“P.J., are you sure you’re okay? I know you miss your Aunt Sam, but she’s gone.”

P.J. kicked a patch of dirt.

Wallace took off his cap, scratched the top of his head, and put it back on. “Besides, why would she want to hit us with a branch?”

“I don’t think she did,” P.J. said slowly. She looked to Wallace and then to the house and frowned.

Wallace frowned, too, then his eyes widened and he laughed out loud. “No way. You can’t tell me you believe in matchmaking ghosts.”

P.J. blushed.

“No, I didn’t mean it like that,” Wallace said as he took off his hat again. He walked to the branch and turned it over. “Look, this part of the branch was rotting from the inside. It was bound to fall sooner or later.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” she whispered. “You always told me I didn’t do well with science because I had too much of an imagination.”

She took up her shears and attacked the bush. She clipped with haphazard flair, and twigs rained around her.

“It’s a wonderful imagination,” he said. “Besides you were always more artist than scientist.”

She paused.

“And I don’t think it hurt you any not to make an A in physics—just like your problems with elastic and inelastic collisions never kept you from beating me at pool.”

She pruned on, her lips pursed. Finally, she muttered, “How do you think that imagination will serve me as an ISS teacher?”

He couldn’t reassure her, though, because he had already gone.

Chapter 5

On Monday morning P.J. put on her best suit and headed down to the county office to interview. Monday always used to be my cleaning day, so I had the urge to scrub something. Unfortunately, as I had learned over the past few days, picking up objects took a great deal of energy. Surely, I could find something better to do with that energy than pick up a toilet brush.

I settled into the sunbeam from the side window, and I heard the murmur of voices from the other side of the hedge. Now, gossip had always been worth an expenditure of energy, especially when one of the voices belonged to Frank Dandridge.

I moseyed on over to the other side of the hedge. Wallace was working the vegetable patch in the parsonage backyard while the old man “supervised” from the steps. The younger Dandridge picked up a tomato and turned it over to see a bad spot. Grimacing, he tossed it over the fence into the Gilmore’s horse paddock.

“I told you to stake the tomatoes,” Franklin Dandridge muttered. As if the old codger had ever done a thing in that garden. Wallace and his mother had always worked the garden together. They had never once used stakes, and Melissa Dandridge always had the best tomatoes—probably because she allowed them to roam free on the ground, sharing them with the creatures of earth. Franklin Dandridge, on the other hand, wouldn’t have given away the lint from his dryer on principle.

“Dad, it’s too late to stake the tomatoes, even if I wanted to.” Wallace gently placed the last of the plump tomatoes on top of a five gallon bucket full. He straightened and took the handle, lifting the bucket and taking it to the steps where his father sat. He took an empty bucket and returned to the row of green beans. “You know, you could give me a hand with these green beans.”

“Bah! Women’s work; your mother’s work. I should have known she was going to leave me when she didn’t plant the garden.”

Wallace’s back stiffened, but he only paused for a minute before he continued brushing back leaves and picking one bean after another.

“I don’t know why you planted a garden. You could buy the vegetables in cans and save us all a lot of work.”

Wallace picked up the bucket and moved two steps down the row. “Canned vegetables don’t taste the same.”

“Hmph. It’s worth tasting canned vegetables not to have to put up with a woman.”

He stared beyond the fence as though thinking of plenty of past meals that made women more bearable and his paunch more impressive. His eyes narrowed. “What were you doing next door yesterday?”

The light bulb above him shattered in its rectangular casing. That got the codger on his feet.

Wallace stood and looked at the light then at his father who clutched the pocket of his plaid shirt just above his heart. “What are you doing over there, Dad?”

“I didn’t do a thing. Bulb must’ve burst.”

Wallace walked over and looked through the light fixture to the bulb with a naked filament within. “That’s odd.”

He returned to the bucket he had left in the middle of the row and continued picking beans.

“You didn’t answer my question.” Frank Dandridge eased himself back on the back steps with a grunt then wiped the sweat from his brow.

“What question?”

“What were you doing over there? Did they finally decide to sell the old Hughes place?”

“No, they’re not selling the place. P.J.’s been cleaning up; I think she’s moving in to stay.” He threw another handful of beans in the bucket and took two steps down the row.

“Luke Willis’s girl?”

Wallace glared at his father, hands on his hips and lips pressed into a thin line. Sweat saturated the back of his tee shirt and formed two large circles underneath each arm pit. “Dad, don’t play games. You know exactly who P.J. is. She’s been to dinner over here more times than I can count.”

“She divorced?”

“I don’t know, Dad.” Wallace shook his head and turned his attention back to the row of green beans. A few sharp green tips peeked over the top of the bucket. He had more than enough for a mess, but he kept picking.

“Don’t know? What were you doing over there?”

“Well, the other day she had one of the biggest chicken snakes I’ve ever seen in the house—”

“Cause the Gilmores keep a blasted pasture behind us,” Frank grumbled. “And in the city limits, too!”

“Friday I went to get my—something I’d forgotten, and I went on Saturday to make amends for some things we’d said.” He said it lightly.

“You stay away from her. She married one of the Gates boys. Ain’t a one of them any count so there’s no telling what she’s seen and done.”

Wallace picked the last of the green beans and tossed that handful in the bucket before bringing the bucket to rest beside the one full of tomatoes. “Dad, P.J.’s not like that.”

“Ha! I thought your mother wasn’t like that either. You lay down with dogs and you’re bound to get fleas. You remember that, boy.” He scratched under one armpit, absently proving his point. Wallace picked up the two buckets and gestured with a nod of his head that he would like for his father to move.

Frank grunted and wheezed as he pushed to his feet, but he blocked Wallace’s path. “You just remember what the Bible says. If you get tangled up with her, it’s adultery no matter what papers she signs. Paul said it is better for a man not to marry, and I would have done well to have listened to his advice.”

“I’m a grown man, Dad, and I’ll do as I please.”

Frank stepped to the side. “Ha! You may be a grown man, but you still live under my roof.”

Wallace stiffened but carried the two buckets into the house. Frank stared after him then up to the ruined light bulb, scratching his head through his comb over.

P.J. closed the door behind her softly. The interview hadn’t gone well.

She reached to the bun at the nape of the neck and released her hair, letting it cascade like sunshine over her shoulders. Then she kicked off her pumps and wiggled her toes. She unbuttoned her suit as she walked in the direction of my bedroom. Well, her bedroom. I didn’t see the need to follow her while she undressed. At least not until she screamed.

In the closet, the string attached to the light bulb chain swayed. P.J. stood in her skirt and bra, her hands clutched over her breasts. A bulging safety pin held her skirt closed in the back because button and hole no longer met. I floated past her and peeked into the closet to see my friend, the snake, curled up in the middle of the floor. That snake had taken a shine to a pair of pumps with a Holstein print.

“This is ridiculous,” P.J. muttered, now composed. She had grown up on a farm, and she knew in her mind that chicken snakes were harmless. Deep within, though, she was a woman; it was a snake; and the two had had a rocky relationship since Eve and a certain apple.

“You, stay right there.” She shook her finger at the snake. Thinking twice, she closed the closet door then stuffed a towel under the door—as if that huge snake could slide through a quarter-inch opening.

She fumbled with the safety pin at the back of her skirt, and exhaled with a whoosh once her midriff was free of the band that had left an angry indentation around her stomach. She

fished through the chest of drawers and found shorts with an elastic waistband and a tank top that proclaimed “Mama tried” before stomping out the door, still barefoot.

I had to see how this was going to play out, so I followed her. She squeezed through the hedge and banged on the back door. *Lord, please don't let Frank Dandridge open the door. Please don't. . .*

Frank opened the door, looked her up and down, but grunted and gestured she should enter with one of his beefy paws. The screen door slapped shut in front of me. No matter, I barged into the house anyway. I extended my hand and it poured through the screen followed by the rest of me. And they say you can't teach an old dog new tricks!

Wallace stood at the sink peeling the tomatoes he had picked earlier. Canning tomatoe juice had been on an upswing in Ellery—ever since ninety-five year old Maybelle Andrews had praised tomato juice for her longevity. The stuff had always torn up my stomach, but I had to think I might could have been alive if I could have convinced myself to choke some down every now and then. Of course, if frogs had wings, they wouldn't bump their butts when they jumped, either.

“Wallace?”

“MmmHmm?” He answered automatically, but then her voice registered and he froze.

“Could you show me how you got that snake to wrap around the hoe handle?”

His knife stopped just underneath the red peel of a plump tomato, and juice seeped over his fingers. “Why would you need to know that?”

“Because the snake is in my closet now.”

The knife slipped, nicking his finger in the process. He dropped the tomato into a colander then cursed under his breath while he shook his hand. “Seriously?”

“Uh, yeah, so if you could show me how you got the snake on the hoe, I’ll take it outside and. . .well, take care of it.”

She swallowed hard, and he locked eyes with her. “I’ll come over there and get it for you.”

“But this is the last time,” he said even as he walked to the door. “And I’m not killing the snake.”

“Fine, fine, I’ll kill it.” She brushed past Frank, just catching the screen door before it slammed. Frank closed his eyes against the impact of the door, but it didn’t come. He opened one eye just in time to see P.J.’s fingers finesse the door into place. He shrugged and waddled back in the direction of the television where political pundits yelled the opinions he would echo later.

P.J. skipped to keep up with Wallace who picked up the hoe from where it still leaned against the front door jamb. He looked to her with raised eyebrow, and she shrugged.

“Your closet, right?” He started for the stairs.

“Aunt Sam’s closet,” she says softly.

He nodded and led the way through the sparsely furnished living room and down the tiny hallway to the master bedroom door. He looked over his shoulder to make sure she was still there then took the twelve steps to the closet. He bent to wrench the towel away from the crevice and yanked the door open.

The snake wasn’t there.

Chapter 6

“Okay, P.J., this isn’t funny. Is this some kind of game? If you’re trying to trick me or if you think you’re going to have me as some kind of consolation prize because things didn’t work out with Lionel, you are dead wrong.” He thrust the hoe into her hands. “Kill your own damn snakes.”

Her face bloomed red then faded white. “Wallace.”

“You’re going to cry? You’re going to play that card?” he said.

The snake’s head peeked around the door-facing from where it had wrapped around the mostly bare wooden rod where P.J.’s three Sunday dresses hung.

“Wallace,” she tried again, letting the hoe fall to grab his shoulders and trying to move him away from the snake. He grabbed her wrists instead.

“I know I said I wasn’t mad, but I was just trying to make things right with my neighbor. That didn’t give you license to make up reasons to get me into your bedroom. I’m over you. You hear me, over you.”

He stepped forward, and missed the snake’s snout by less than an inch.

“Wallace, the snake’s right behind you.” He pivoted, coming nose to nose with the snake. It was an eternity that man and snake stared each other down.

I had seen skins hanging over beams in the barn or over the rod of the armoire that sat in corner of the old homeplace, but I still wondered how a creature without arms and legs could climb to such heights. The snake swayed from side to side. This wasn’t an empty, flaccid skin.

“Hand me the hoe, please.”

She bent over to get the hoe and placed it in his hand, wrapping his fingers around the weathered handle. Her fingers lingered for just a second more than necessary, but she drew her hand back.

He lifted the hoe sideways at an awkward angle, aiming to hack off the snake’s head even while it hung from the rod in the closet.

“Wallace, no! Don’t kill it in here! It’ll get blood everywhere.”

Wallace glared at her, but he turned the hoe around to coax the snake outside to meet its demise.

“Okay, the trick is to keep calm.” I wondered what he could possibly know on the subject, but Wallace carefully pressed the hoe handle to a spot behind the snake’s head. The threatened snake jerked and curled around the object. “And to be patient. You can’t jump every time the snake moves, and, yes, I do remember your recurring dream about being tossed into a corn crib full of snakes.”

The snake wound around the hoe handle with weary resignation as though remembering it had done this before. Wallace lurched forward with the snake, and P.J. stumbled backward, almost falling on her posterior thanks to a pair of running shoes she'd left just inside the door. She righted herself and jogged down the hallway to open the front door.

Wallace bore the hoe with the snake in front of him, a grim flag bearer with an odd half-mast flag. He stepped forward carefully and almost plowed into Georgette Howard.

Georgette stood rooted to the spot, speechless. I could have ascended then because I was pretty sure I had seen everything.

Georgette stepped to the side as Wallace escorted the snake into the middle of the yard. He raised the hoe to strike the snake.

“No!”

Both P.J. and Wallace looked to her quizzically.

“It’s horrible luck to kill a snake. If you kill one snake, you’re sure to see another.”

She pursed her lips and lipstick oozed up the tiny wrinkles. She always dyed her hair Lucille Ball red, an orange that clashed with her bluish red knit pantsuit. The knit wasn’t flattering in the least, exposing each and every roll of fat. Still, she wore the suit because the shirt had a crude transfer of a Siamese cat; the decal leaned to the right suggesting Georgette’s granddaughter had had a hand in decorating the shirt. No doubt she had also picked out the matching Siamese cat earrings that dangled from Georgette’s ears.

Wallace looked to P.J, and she shook her head no so he walked back to the porch and let the snake slither off into his hedge. His narrowed eyes followed the snake, and I wondered how lucky the snake would be if their paths crossed on the other side.

“Yes, my granny always told me it was bad luck to kill a snake, always muttering to the first one she saw each spring and telling it they weren’t to meet again that summer. I thought it was just a crazy old lady thing until I was watching PBS the other night about the Navajo and how they see the snake as sacred. Why, they’ll move right out of one of those Hogan things if a snake moves in. You aren’t going to move out are you?”

“Huh? What?” P.J. shook her head to bring her back to the front porch. She, like almost everyone else in town, had learned to tune Georgette out as a defense mechanism. The tongue wasn’t meant to spit out words that quickly, and the ears weren’t meant to process them at such a rate either.

“You didn’t sleep well last night, did you?” Georgette continued. “I see those dark circles under your eyes, which could be an allergy to milk like my youngest sister Louise. I have to tell you; you are going to have to start getting a good night’s sleep because you’re already getting the start of laugh lines, you know those little lines around the mouth. You better wear your sunblock and your sunglasses and take good care of yourself or you’re going to end up looking much older than you are just like Leon Gilford’s girl, bless her heart. She’s spent too much time in that tanning bed, probably frying her ovaries and—”

“Did you say something about snakes, Miss Georgette?”

Wallace came to P.J.’s rescue, a good idea because she was turning a little green at the thought of ending up anything like the ill-named Chastity Gilford who always looked, as my dear crude cousin Bill would say, as though she had been ridden hard and put away wet.

“Yes, the snake. Granny said it was bad luck to kill a snake, probably one of her Cherokee notions. Funny, she didn’t want anyone to know she was half Cherokee, and now everyone and their mama claims to be some kind of Indian princess as though there could

possibly be that much Indian royalty. All I know is she couldn't stand to have somebody kill a snake. Woo-woo, she and granddaddy got into a fight one day because he chopped up this chicken snake that was in the barn. She didn't speak to him for a week over that one. Then this one time—"

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, Miss Georgette, but was there a reason you stopped by? I was thinking about going to the grocery store in a few minutes." P.J.'s interruption sounded more apology than question. She didn't want to hurt Georgette's feelings even if Georgette was as crazy as a Bessie bug.

"Oh, yes. I just wanted to see you were getting on okay, and to bring you. . ." She fished through her huge pleather bag of a third shade of red before bringing out a little mason jar full of jam. "Some muscadine jelly I put up earlier this summer. Thought you might need a little something to remind you of your Aunt Sam."

"Thanks," P.J. said as she took the jelly and cradled it against her chest. Georgette was a colossal pain in the posterior, but she had a kind heart. Either that, or she knew her muscadine jelly was a reminder that mine never gelled quite right.

She pinched Wallace's cheeks. "I'll see you in church on Sunday, young man."

Then she waddled away at a rapid clip, a surprising gait from a woman with such girth.

"Why did you listen to her about the snake?" Wallace's eyes crinkled in confusion, and P.J. brought her eyes to meet his.

"I can't take any more bad luck."

Wallace shook his head as if to say he didn't understand women.

"And I'll take care of the snake myself if it comes back." She took a deep breath and forced her eyes to meet his. "I wouldn't want you to think I'm trying to seduce you."

“P.J., I overreacted and I’m sorry. I—”

“No, no, I can see how you might misinterpret it.” She saw nothing of the sort, but she waved away his apology anyway. She walked to the front door, but her hand hovered over the knob and she turned to face him once again. “And I’m over you, too. Just so you know.”

She entered the house, closing the front door behind her gently, and he stood there on the front porch looking after her, pining some would say. He ran a hand through his dark hair and mussed it as he used to do as a teenager.

“Never knew you had a thing for me,” he muttered before turning back to the well-worn spot in the hedge.

Chapter 7

The kitchen phone growled, an antique bring in a world of cordless phones and cell phones. P.J. jumped out of her skin, but she raced to the kitchen to pick up the heavy olive green receiver from the wall-mounted base with rotary. She unwound the extended and abused curly cord that had tangled up on itself.

“Yes, this is P.J.” Her voice rose two notes too high and her eyes widened.

The voice on the other side of the line droned on like a Charlie Brown adult. P.J.’s eyes slowly narrowed, her smile faded, and her body slumped.

“I see, so you’ve already filled the position for the art teacher, but you do have a position as the in-school suspension teacher.”

The voice on the other end changed to a higher pitch of false enthusiasm.

“Of course, I understand the position pays the same. Yes, I—”

The voice continued on and on and on, a telemarketer instead of the high school principal.

“Yes, I’ll take it. . . No, no, I thank you. . . . Of course, I understand. . . Yes, on Monday, August third. I’ll be there. Thank you. . . Yes, you, too.”

She hung the phone on the cradle, leaned into the wall, and started to cry. They were tiny sobs, and she indulged her disappointment for no more than a moment before wiping away the tears and standing up straight, shoulders thrust back. She walked to the pantry and took out a box of Twinkies. She ripped open the box, took out the cellophane wrapped spongy cake between thumb and forefinger. She shifted the box underneath her arm, her fingers pinched the edge of the wrapper, poised to pull it open.

She stopped, put the Twinkie back in the box and put the box back into the pantry. She walked across the hall to the bedroom and flopped on the bed instead. The force of the flop caused the headboard to slap the wall; a painting fell, bounced off the mattress, and landed on the floor with a clatter. P.J. rolled over, scooted to the edge of the bed and picked up the oil painting of a certain white clapboard house that had always been dear to me.

Holding the painting out at arm’s length, she rested her chin resting on the edge of the mattress to better study her work. She had painted that for me when she found out that my old homeplace was being sold to a developer. She went behind my back and took pictures of the house as it was then before studying Cassandra’s pictures of how it had been. She captured every detail, even adding back the leaning locust tree that had fallen sometime in the sixties.

She didn’t need to be teaching; she needed to be painting.

Obviously, she didn't feel the same way because she put the painting on the ground face down and rolled over on her back to study the ceiling. She clasped her hands over her stomach; for the first time I could remember, no paint stained the creases around her finger nails.

I thought of the attic, and the next thing I knew I was stomping up there. I thought of the swinging chandelier, the branch that fell, the light bulb that exploded above Frank Dandridge, and the painting that fell off the wall. Those things were accidental manifestations of my emotions. Imagine what I could do if I *meant* to. . . .

I focused on everything that made me angry. I thought of how beat up P.J had looked when she first showed up on the door stop. I thought about how stubborn she was being with Wallace and how stubborn he was being with her. I thought about the principal that didn't see true art talent and how her fingers weren't stained with paint. Then I thought about Lionel and the part he played, which reminded me of Melvin and. . . .

The attic exploded with noise; clothes and Christmas boxes scattered leaving a zig-zag path to a pile of canvases. Her feet thumped up the stairs, and she threw back the trap door. Soon her head appeared in the slanted room, and she gasped at the not quite perfect path that led her through the attic to a series of canvases and paint brushes. There weren't many here, but who knew what had become of the ones that had traveled to Nashville with her.

Her fingers trembled as she took the first canvas and turned it around to see her painting of the family's Irish Setter. P.J. had painted it after the dog got run over by a car, but Cassandra had loved the dog so much she couldn't bear to look at the painting. The next painting, a crude still life of daffodils in a Dr. Pepper can, never was one of my favorites but the delicate shadows that played from the petals of the daffodils showed talent. The last canvas was an unfinished portrait of Wallace.

In the painting he stood forever young with a toothy grin and his Cardinals cap worn backwards. White canvas encroached on the painting of the face almost as though the painting had been slowly erasing itself over the years. I didn't know about this one, and I would be willing to bet that neither Wallace nor Lionel knew about it.

"What's this?" P.J. muttered to herself.

In the course of my trying to move so many things at once, I had unearthed a trunk that hadn't seen the light of day for sixty years. My deepest emotions had betrayed me.

P.J. was about to find out my biggest secret, and the thought of it terrified me as much as a ghost could be terrified.

I felt an earthquake even though I could see the world around me still stood still.

Downstairs the chandelier crashed with a sickening tinkle of a thousand shards of glass, and P.J. raced through the attic and down the ladder leaving me alone with a trunk I thought I had buried well.

Chapter 8

Somewhere in the thirtieth year of keeping my secret, I discovered I believed my own revised history, that the ragged gash had healed over. I could forget about my trunk of secrets for months at a time, then years as I worked to get a new County library built.

Even if I could sit with P.J. at the table and ply her with teacakes to soften the blow, I couldn't tell her the story of how I shamed my family. I suppose the documents could have spoken for themselves, but they didn't tell the whole story. In trying to show P.J. what she needed to do to be happy, I had exposed what I needed to do to make peace with the world. And the Lord who came up with that advice not to get a splinter out of your brother's eye when you can't see for the log in yours had to be up there having a big belly laugh at my expense.

Downstairs, the broom scratched against the hardwood floor; glass chards tinkled then scraped into the dustpan. A few minutes later, the vacuum cleaner whirred to finish the work,

whooshing up any remaining splinters of glass. I wanted to float away, to hide between the walls but where could I have gone? Moses got the burning bush. Zechariah had the audacity to question fortuitous fatherhood and ended up mute for nine months. And then there was the story of how Jonah tried to run away only to be swallowed by a whale. I couldn't outrun my secrets any better than those guys. It was God's way of reminding a holier than thou spinster who meddled and gossiped that she could use a little comeuppance, too.

I fell through the floor and found P.J. slouched on her old college futon, staring straight ahead in a daze. Had the paintings reminded her of who she was instead of who she could still be? I couldn't tell if it was shock, depression, or something in between.

Knuckles rapped on the door, and she blinked twice before jumping to the door. She smiled at the sight of her father, a tall and easy-going man with a predilection for blue plaid shirts and Wrangler jeans. He never pulled his Braves cap all the way down on his head, a jaunty look that matched the mischief in his blue eyes.

"Your mother said you have some drafts?"

"Hey, Daddy." P.J. stepped aside and let her father in.

"The hell happened to the chandelier?"

"I wish I knew. It was swaying the other day, but today it crashed while I was in the attic."

He made a show of looking her up and down. "Well, you ain't topped out yet, so I don't think your weight caused it." In his attempt not to smile, his lips moved together and stuck out into a duck-man hybrid.

"Your vote of confidence is overwhelming," P.J. said.

Luke rubbed both of his chins and hooked a thumb in one of the belt loops just under his modest paunch. “Need a taller ladder to put in a new light fixture.”

“Well, I’m more worried about the snake,” P.J. said as she crossed her arms.

“Snake?” His open-mouthed expression was mock concern at best.

“Twice I’ve seen the same chicken snake. Once on that coffee table and the other time in the closet.”

“The house set too long. You’ve got mice and who knows what else.” He closed his eyes and nodded twice. Then, he walked back to the closet and searched the floor also running his knotted and callused hands up the wall. “Didn’t get in here.”

“Then where did it get in? I’m going to pee myself one night because I don’t want to get out of bed for fear I’ll step on the thing in the dark.”

“Whoa, we can’t have that!” The look on his face was faux shock: wide eyes with skin hooded over them, furrowed brow, and mouth agape enough to show a bicuspid missing.

“Daddy, seriously!”

“Drink less water before you go to bed.” He paced the edges of the room sometimes crouching with a grunt to run his leathery hands over baseboards or to look under furniture. P.J. followed him through the house, her hands clasped behind her back. After fifteen minutes, he clomped down the stairs and picked up his hat long enough to wipe the sweat from his bald head.

“I don’t know how the sonuvabitch got in here. Maybe you need some Snake-Away. Or a cat and some De-Con to get rid of the mice.”

P.J.’s face screwed up, and the resemblance between the two of them was overwhelming. Rubber face with elastic expressions, I used to say. “Snake-Away, De-Con, and a cat. Got it.”

He nodded and looked around the room with furrowed brow. “Did a good job in here.”

“Thanks, Daddy.” Her eyes lit up because compliments didn’t come often from Luke Willis, and they were well-deserved when they did.

I don’t know if I was more surprised or if she was when he drew her into a bear hug. “I’m glad you decided to stay.”

“I’m glad, too,” she said.

He let her go. “Think I’ll take a look around the outside to see if there’s a crack in the foundation. Then I might climb up and take a look at the roof.” He nodded to himself and walked to the door, lifting his arthritic fingers as a goodbye.

It was almost dark when Luke got done stomping around on the roof; I built up enough energy to pick up the trunk and let it fall with a thud. Soon I heard P.J.’s light steps cautiously cross the floor.

The trap door to the attic flipped back and a light expanded upward. She gulped for air. Hoisting herself to her feet, she reached for the naked light bulb in the center and yanked on the string that would turn it on.

The trunk now sat in the middle of the attic floor, and she took two steps to reach it, crouching to push back the lid.

I didn’t know a ghost could be nervous, but the house betrayed me. The house shook, and pictures rattled on the walls downstairs. P.J. paused, her hands shaking just over the top of the trunk. She took a deep breath and wrenched the lid back. Dust rose in the air above the trunk, but the house held its breath for me.

She picked up the blanket first, the tiny blue blanket that held him for just a few minutes. She drew the blanket to her chest. The lockbox key fell from its folds and landed on the attic

floor with a ping. She picked it up and held it to the light. Then, she spied the old black and white photo of my newborn baby boy, the only photo of the only child I ever bore.

Chapter 9

It all started when Mama got sick. I was thirteen and old enough to keep the house running, but Daddy didn't feel I was old enough to sit in on the conversations with the doctor. I heard the word "cancer" whispered at every corner, but I wouldn't learn to fear that word until much later in life.

I wasn't in a very good mood on that first day Daddy sent me to teach piano. I knew that we didn't have as much money because Mama wasn't taking in sewing any more, but I was already working hard doing the cooking and the laundry as well as tending the cows and chickens and helping out in the fields.

I walked the two miles to Giles Missionary Baptist, kicking at sticks and leaves. When I entered the sanctuary, Maybelle Andrews sat with her daughter, Louise. Maybelle never looked up from her embroidery just nodded to the piano where Louise joined me on the seat.

I soon discovered that I liked teaching Louise all of her notes and how to play, and Maybelle spared no expense, either. She bought every book I recommended. Of course, Maybelle also made sure that Louise never spoke to me when we met on Main Street even if I was good enough to teach her daughter one of the social graces. I didn't know it then, but the Andrews were headed up the social ladder while the Hughes had taken a mighty fall down.

One day, the Andrews didn't show.

Melvin House, the new preacher, leaned in the doorway. I felt his stare on my back as I played "Whispering Hope," and my cheeks burned hot. To my young mind, he was the most handsome man I had ever seen. He kept his blond hair cropped short and his face cleanly shaven. He stood in the pulpit and delivered fiery sermons that I would later learn he had borrowed heavily from Jonathan Edwards.

He was the youngest preacher Giles Baptist had ever seen. At just over thirty, he was considered quite the catch. All of the eligible church misses—and a few who weren't eligible—showered him with sweets and attention, hoping to be the first Mrs. House. He sat down on the piano bench beside me, and I missed the next two notes. I clasped my hands in my lap.

"Miss Maybelle called to say that Louise has the croup and isn't going to make it this afternoon." He leaned closer, and a soapy man scent wafted my way. "I thought you and I might take this opportunity to get to know each other a little better."

"Certainly, sir," I said once I found my breath. Melvin House wanted to get to know me?

“No, no, not sir. You can call me Melvin,” he said with a chuckle. “What do you know about the Song of Solomon?”

I had learned all of the books of the Bible. I could tell you where Hosea was and Philemon, too. I could find Ephesians 3:13 in a pinch and could recite at least twenty verses from memory, but Miss Prudence Temple, my Sunday School teacher, did not discuss Solomon except to talk about how he wanted to cut babies in half. “Nothing, why?”

Melvin smiled, his teeth clean, white, and straight. His eyes crinkled around the edges reminding me of the jolly Santa Claus on the Coca-Cola calendar at the store around the corner. “Solomon is one of the most important books in the Bible. Why don’t we step back into my office where you can listen more comfortably?”

And I followed him.

At first he just read from the Book of Solomon, explaining the parts of the King James version that I didn’t quite understand. He left out some important details—like the fact that Solomon was writing this to a wife—and he embellished others. It shouldn’t have been a surprise to me when he kissed me.

My heart did a frantic sack race when his lips brushed mine. For that split second, I thought I had found heaven. Then he thrust his tongue in my mouth and kissed me hard, a slobbering, forceful kiss. When he finally needed to breathe he said, “I’m sorry, but I couldn’t help myself. I’ve been trying to keep my hands off you since the first Sunday morning I saw you.”

From that day forward, Melvin adhered to the old adage that the easiest way to conquer temptation was to give in. His hands traveled all over my dress, squeezing my budding breasts

while his tongue took over my mouth. Sometimes I was still, and sometimes I explored. I never lost myself as he did because I was caught somewhere between guilt and curiosity.

I didn't want to go back after that because I knew what we were doing was wrong, but Daddy didn't know what I knew. He told me I had to go back. He said that Mama was getting worse instead of better and that we needed the money to live. So, I went back and my hands learned to explore his body a little more.

I guess I took Daddy's command as permission to feel desire. My body ached of its own accord, leaning into Melvin out of instinct. No doubt, he took my actions as enthusiasm, not the innocent animal response they were. I was drunk on the pride of being wanted.

Maybe being in charge of the house made me think I was already an adult at thirteen, but I wasn't equipped to handle those adult emotions and desires. I was too trusting of my preacher, never doubting we would marry after all we had done. I was too young to know that kissing led to touching and touching led to something more.

One fall day I trudged to Giles Baptist, crunching brown and yellow leaves under my boots. I didn't want to sit in the cold sanctuary and give piano lessons, but the soles of my boots flapped. Cold water seeped into my socks and squished between my toes. If I wanted a new pair of shoes to get me through the winter, then I was going to have to endure more piano lessons. The thought of more Bible study with Melvin House cheered me up a little. I stupidly wished for Louise not to be there despite my frozen toes.

And I got my wish.

On that particular fall day, some niggling part of my conscience told me to turn around and walk out the door, but the wood stove in the corner was cooking, and my toes ached as I

watched the smoke rise. I walked to the stove and held my feet underneath, wincing at the stabbing pain of heat coming to toes that had given up on ever finding warmth again.

Melvin came from behind and wrapped his arms around me. His hands landed on my breasts and squeezed. "Today will be a special day."

"If I don't have a lesson to tend to, I'd best be going," I said. "I have a lot to do to get supper on the table, and I have to draw water for Mama to take a bath this evening."

Melvin pulled out a ten dollar bill, and I sucked in a great breath. That would more than pay for my boots. He was in the habit of paying me what Miss Maybelle would have paid me, but this was considerably more. I forced myself to relax in his arms.

"I may have to go away soon," he said as he planted kisses on my cheeks and blew softly into my ear. "But I want you to wait for me. I want to come back and marry you."

My heart stopped for a minute. Marry him? I was almost fourteen, and it wasn't unheard of. Perhaps, if I married him, there wouldn't be as much laundry. Maybe on a preacher's salary I wouldn't have to keep chickens and pigs or wake up before the sun to milk the cows. My young mind raced with reasons why marriage to Melvin would be better than staying at home.

"Yes," I whispered.

"Yes, what?" he said with a frown.

"Yes, I'll marry you."

He grinned widely, and I admired those straight teeth, unstained by snuff. I ran my hands over his smooth cheeks. Melvin House was going to save me from a lifetime of drudgery. At least that's what I thought when he lay me down on the velvet cushioned pew and raised my skirt.

“I thought this moment would never come,” he said. His hands shook as they made their way to his trousers. I couldn’t see what he was doing with my skirt, but I felt it when he thrust himself into me. I gasped at the piercing pain, and tears leaked down the side of my cheek and into my ears.

He was oblivious to my pain as he thrust, stopping only to fall on my chest heavily. I shuddered for breath, but his weight crushed it out of me. Just as I thought I might smother, he lifted himself up and ran a trembling hand down my cheek. “You sweet, sweet girl.”

“When are we going to run away?”

“Not yet,” he said as he eased away and turned his back to me to put himself back in order. “But soon.”

He told me that at least five more times before I realized that my period hadn’t arrived and he still hadn’t left.

Mama figured it out before I did. She was humming to herself in the kitchen as she made biscuits. She felt good that morning, one of the few mornings that she did. I could hear her humming from the back yard where I was returning from feeding the chickens and gathering the eggs. I just had time to set the basket of eggs on the ground gently before I turned my head and threw up. I wiped my mouth on my sleeve and looked up to the kitchen. Mama frowned; she wasn’t humming anymore.

“Samantha,” she yelled. “Get in here now!”

I picked up the basket and entered the kitchen. She wiped her doughy hands on her apron and took me by the shoulders looking at me one way then the next. She ran her hands over my stomach and frowned. “When was the last time you got your period?”

I swallowed hard. “I don’t remember.”

She slapped me across one cheek then the other, flour dust lingering in the air between us. “Who is he?”

“Melvin House,” I whispered. My cheeks felt at the mercy of a million sewing needles.

She slapped me again. “Don’t blame the preacher for this. Who have you been lying with?”

“I told you, Mama. Melvin House.” I brought up my forearm to shield any more blows, but her hand stopped in mid-air. Her face drained of what little color she had as she thought of afternoon after afternoon of piano lessons.

“How could we have been so stupid? How could *you* have been so stupid?”

“He said he’s going to marry me,” I blurted.

Her eyes narrowed. “That’s what they all say. That’s what your father said, but it took a shotgun to convince him.”

That’s the last thing my mother said to me. She called for Daddy, told him her discovery, and went back to bed. Daddy paced the tiny kitchen, and the biscuits burned in the old wood stove.

“Said he’d marry you, huh?” He stroked his chin. “He’s about to get his wish. You take care of your mama.”

He took off in the direction of the church on an old mule, and I took out the biscuits and made another batch. My biscuits weren’t as good as my mothers, and we had let hers burn. I cried about that, too.

Daddy didn’t come back until late, and he wouldn’t look me in the eye. “Get your stuff together. You’ll be marrying the Reverend House tomorrow.”

I nodded and bustled about the kitchen cleaning up the dishes. After that I went and put my few things into my Hope Chest, the battered brown steamer trunk that had traveled to America with a nameless ancestor. It didn't have much in it, but Daddy hoisted that trunk up into the wagon the next day with a gentle touch; he handed me up to the buckboard with a rougher one.

We rode in silence through the fog of a new morning, the mules not wanting to walk anymore than we wanted to leave. My heart hammered against my chest; now that the time had come, I was scared to live with Melvin. I didn't want to be a mother. But the time for those decisions had long since passed.

Daddy guided the mules through a little opening in the woods that led to the tiny clapboard house that served as a parsonage. Melvin's old Ford wasn't under the shed, and my stomach did an extra flop. Daddy went to the door and knocked, but no one came to the door. He walked around the house, even busted in through the back door. Melvin House was gone.

That's when he got the idea to go down to New Orleans to see my Aunt Ruby.

I wasn't ready to think about New Orleans or what happened there, so I floated back into the present. P.J. had already gone to bed. I sat beside her bed, my bed, and I watched her sleep. Moonlight spilled through the window, washing away her worry lines; she looked much younger than her twenty-seven years, and yet there was a hardness around the corners of her mouth that suggested that she, too, had encountered a Melvin House.

Chapter 10

P.J. showered early Sunday morning and put on one of her best summer dresses, a green plaid cotton number with a halter top that reminded me of the sixties. She applied her makeup with shaking hands then reached for the locket she had given me one Christmas. She grabbed her brown leather purse; it didn't begin to match her white sandals.

She clomped through the kitchen, standing taller with the height of those wedge sandals. She took the lock box key from the counter and put the key in her purse. She planned to get the dirt on me. Let her try! Cassandra knew nothing of the blanket or the key. I had always been very careful to keep my indiscretions a secret because my younger half-sister had always idolized me. If P.J. planned to ask her mother what it all meant, Cassandra wasn't going to be able to tell her a thing.

P.J. paused at the door, her hand hovering over the burnished knob. I recognized that look on her face because I had once worn it myself. For some reason, she believed she was a sinner beyond redemption. My heart flooded with compassion for my favorite niece because I had felt that way once.

Baby girl, you belong in church just as much as anyone.

Goose bumps prickled her flesh.

“Aunt Sam, is that you?” Her voice was just a whisper.

Of course, it’s me baby. Even I could tell my voice was too weak for her to hear.

“Aunt Sam?”

It’s me! It’s me! It’s me! I felt as though I was yelling, but I could tell by the way she strained to hear me that it wasn’t working. The harder I tried, the less she could hear, but the smallest canister on the counter split in half. Corn meal spilled over the broken ceramic and flowed across the counter. P.J. gasped and trotted out of the room with wild eyes that reminded me of Tootsie, that crazy half-Siamese cat I had once, the one old Lewis held up in the light.

I sat down at the table in defear, but the world spun around me, and, when I looked down, I was sitting in P.J.’s Honda. Fast food bags, empty bottles and who knows what else littered the floorboard. She started the car and put it in reverse; I was actually leaving the house. How was I leaving the house?

Her locket winked in the morning light. Could we possibly be connected by the locket, the last Christmas gift she gave me?

We rolled through town passing the post office built in the sixties and the courthouse built a century before. Main Street wrapped around the courthouse in a traditional square, and we made almost an entire block around the courthouse before we found the street that would take

us out of town. Many of the shops had the same awnings from the fifties. The drug store on the east corner had a faded coca-cola advertisement painted on the side wall. Across the square from it, the old library building reminded me of an old west saloon with its narrow wooden balcony.

Through town we continued, past the grocery store and the obligatory Dollar General. We sailed through the first of only two traffic lights and turned left on the highway. On the outskirts of town land stretched still largely undeveloped apart from the occasional car dealership or subdivision. P.J. took a left down a smaller worn road and, within minutes, she pulled into the gravel parking lot of Old Hickory Methodist Church.

I could have kissed the girl. There she sat with her lips pressed together grimly as her white knuckles clutched the steering wheel. She took a deep breath, and her fingers grasped the locket. I burned warmly inside. We, as humans, were attached to the possessions we own. It may have made Jesus' emphasis on getting rid of those possessions take on a whole new significance, but I was glad my favorite niece had hung on to it.

P.J. opened the door and forced herself out of the car. I reached for the door handle, remembered I was dead, and floated through the door instead. P.J.'s feet wobbled over the gravel as she walked to the little church underneath massive hickory trees. Old Hickory was the same as it had always been: a white clapboard building with a tin roof. Many a soul had been saved in the fall when the hickory nuts fell from the trees and banged into that old tin roof. Many a time I had thought it was no coincidence that those nuts rained down as the preacher hit a salient point.

Music spilled from the cracked doorway, a reminder that church proper was going to begin soon. That morning's selection was a rousing rendition of *Love Lifted Me*, and I hoped the

title wasn't lost on my dear little P.J. She took a deep breath and pulled herself to her full height. Then she opened the door and walked in before she could talk herself out of it.

No matter how many times I entered Old Hickory, it never ceased to amaze me that the sanctuary was much smaller than you would think from looking at the outside of the church. Of course, from the outside, you wouldn't know to account for the Sunday School rooms that lined either side of the sanctuary, but, still, the intimacy of a sanctuary only seven or eight pews deep was unexpected. God drew you to his chest whether you wanted to be there or not.

P.J. took no more than fifteen steps to reach the front third of the sanctuary and sit down beside her mother. I watched from the back of church because no reproachful eyes could see me. Sure enough, everyone followed the seating chart almost exactly as they had thirty, forty or even fifty years ago. The Cosgrove's sat in the middle to the left and the Middleton's sat to the back and to the right. The door opened behind me, and I didn't even have to turn around to know it was Pamela Howard. She hurried to her spot on the second row from the front on the right. There might have been new faces and plenty of missing ones, but Old Hickory wasn't a church of change. To tell you the truth, one of my biggest complaints with Old Hickory had always been that visitors weren't made to feel welcome. Heaven forbid if they sat in someone's designated seat! Perhaps that was why the record attendance had been stuck at fifty-two since 1980. And we wouldn't have hit fifty-two if we hadn't had Billy Grimes as guest preacher; half the congregation came looking for Billy Graham.

Cassandra suppressed her surprise and glee with aplomb. She knew not to push such issues with P.J., but I could tell she was overjoyed to see her daughter in church. Luke, for all of his good points, refused to attend church. I never knew exactly why, but it had to have been a strong sticking point if it was worth sending Cassandra by herself each Sunday.

Cassandra held the thin brown Cokesbury hymnal out to P.J., and mother and daughter each took a corner of the book. P.J.'s voice cracked midway through the first line she sang, but no one noticed because folks at Old Hickory weren't that keen on carrying their tunes in a bucket. Even the piano needed tuning, and the organ wheezed. I sank into my spot to the right of P.J.; Cassandra and I had made a habit of sandwiching her in love each Sunday. She seemed to feel the power of that love sandwich, and she closed her eyes and smiled. After all, we were on the last verse, one of the ones she had sung enough times to know by heart.

Her voice cracked again, and she giggled. Even Cassandra grinned because she was no songstress herself. Behind them, Louise Andrews frowned. She sang loud and proud, not realizing that she was nowhere near the soprano she envisioned. In that moment, I saw something I had never seen while I was alive: a medley of imperfections is perfection in and of itself. Humanity is at its finest when it strains to reach the divine—even if it comes up short as it inevitably will.

The congregation turned to the back of the worn brown books for a responsive reading. The Cokesbury must have held at least twenty readings, but the congregation stuck with their four or five favorites. That day, they read about the light of the world in a weary monotone. After the last prayer, the Sunday School superintendent dismissed everyone to Sunday School, and I saw the real reason P.J. chose to come to church that day.

She made a beeline for Maybelle Andrews, the oldest member of the congregation, and an indirect contributor to my shame. She leaned heavily on her cane, her back bowed with arthritis. Her white hair billowed out in one of those perfect coiffures we older ladies liked to have done each week whether we need it or not.

“Miss Maybelle,” P.J. said breathlessly. “I would like to ask you a question.”

“What’d you say, dear?” Maybelle leaned forward, and I thought of a turtle poking its head as far out of its shell as it possibly could.

“I’d like to ask you a question about my Aunt Sam.”

“Well, spit it out, but speak up.” She waved a bony hand full of rings. “I can’t hear for all this racket.”

“Can I ask you in private?”

Maybelle frowned, for she had achieved her ninety-four years by being a woman of routines. She pointed her cane to one of the empty Sunday Schools rooms. P.J. followed her inside.

“That’s better,” Maybelle said. “Background noise messes with my hearing aid. Now, you just ask your question, and I will be on my way because they have sausage balls next door.” She pointed her cane at P.J. “You have to act fast if you want one of those.”

“I just wanted to know if you knew if my Aunt Sam ever had a child.” P.J. said it loudly to accommodate Maybelle’s hearing aid, then looked over her shoulder to make sure no one could hear the question that reverberated around the empty room.

“Ha! Everyone in my generation knew that,” Maybelle said. “Don’t make her a bad person because that Melvin House could charm you out of your last pair of shoes.”

“You saw a baby?” P.J. leaned forward in excitement.

“Of course, I never saw a baby.” Maybelle snorted and used her cane to propel herself to her feet. “Her Daddy drug her off somewhere for a year. Didn’t none of us even see her pregnant, but we figured that’s what happened. Her mama died while she was gone, and we didn’t even know where to send word to tell them.”

“That’s so sad,” P.J. said.

“Not as sad as I’m going to be if all of the sausage balls are gone.” Maybelle pushed P.J. out of the way with her cane, and she inched for the door. “Best for you to stay out of ancient history.”

Maybelle hobbled from the room with a slow but steady rhythm. Sausage balls and tomato juice. Who knew?

P.J. ambled from the room, and I followed her. She headed for one of the Sunday School classes, but I stayed in the sanctuary. Sanctuary. It took ten years for me to walk into a church after what happened in New Orleans. This was Callie’s church, and I came for her wedding to my father; I didn’t expect to find peace here.

Every Sunday I would look at the chancel rail and the humble choir loft with only enough room for one row of seats. Every Sunday I would study the painting of Jesus being taken down from the cross. Every Sunday that I was alive, I would try to forget about Melvin House and try even harder to forget about the baby God had given me only to take him away.

Chapter 11

I'm sure P.J. thought she'd escaped when she pulled into the driveway. She opened the back screen door and fiddled with the lock. The door burst open. Just as she sighed with relief, gravel crunched under tires in the driveway. Her head snapped to the left; her parents had come to take her to Sunday dinner.

Her mother killed the engine, and her father stood and yelled over the hood of the car, "Ho, there, Wallace, why don't you come to lunch with us, too?"

P.J.'s eyes widened. Cassandra picked her way up the driveway. "Coming to lunch with us?"

P.J. looked from her mother to her fridge. I could just imagine her running through the pros and cons. In the end, she reached for the back door and locked it back. "Sure, Mom."

When she saw Wallace's silhouette in the back seat of the Buick, she stopped in her tracks. Her mom's hand on her back tried to propel her forward. P.J.'s eyes widened and her lips thinned. "Say, Mom, did you know Aunt Sam had a baby?"

Cassandra put one hand on the hood of the car and immediately jerked it back, shaking away the summer heat. "Now I know you must be delirious with hunger. That's the craziest thing I've ever heard."

"But, Mom—"

"C'mon, the boys are getting hot in the car. Next thing you know, your father will start his diatribe about being locked in a car with the windows rolled up and how I would treat a dog better than that."

P.J. frowned, but she got in the car, and I squeezed myself between her and Wallace, not a difficult feat since the two of them sat as far away from each other as possible. It was as though they were reliving the third grade when they each had their own brand of cooties.

Cassandra's eyes appeared in the rearview mirror. "So, the two of you had any more snake problems?"

"No," they answered in unison without looking at each other. Cassandra took in their positions hunched against opposite windows and frowned. Now that the car was in motion, it would be difficult to kick one of the mopers out. Not that I would have put it past her.

"Wallace, how's your dad doing?" Luke took a stab at starting a conversation. He used to protest that Wallace and P.J. were being too loud in the back seat on trips to Opryland or Memphis, but even he could see that his lunch invitation might not have been the best idea.

“Ornery as ever,” Wallace said. He studied the rows of corn that flew by in dizzying patterns. P.J. chanced a glance at him but hurriedly looked back to the cow pastures that flew by on her side of the car.

“Did you hear back about the art position?”

“I didn’t get it,” P.J. said. “For the first time in my life, I’m going to ISS.”

Cassandra gritted her teeth. Her baby girl deserved the best position, not the worst. It reminded me of the time P.J. came home to say she had accepted a janitorial position in a office building for her summer job. Cassandra almost bit her tongue in half, but she kept silent and let P.J. work through that summer. To her credit, P.J. didn’t quit.

“Well, at least you don’t have to do lesson plans or grade papers.”

“You’ll have more time to paint.”

No one expected Wallace to say those words, not with the tension between him and P.J. thicker than a London fog. The four of them rode in silence; P.J. fidgeted with her fingers. Wallace’s own hand twitched as though he wanted to cover hers to keep them still. Instead he put an elbow against the car window and leaned his head into his palm.

“The deadline for the Tennessee Heritage Art Contest is coming up.” Cassandra looked to her daughter. P.J. had always wanted to enter the contest but had never found the courage to send in her work. P.J. looked back to the window, an indicator that this didn’t look like a good year either.

Luke looked over his shoulder to address Wallace. “So, still planning on going to seminary, Wallace?”

“Seminary?” P.J. didn’t give Wallace a chance to answer.

Wallace cleared his throat. “Yes, I’ve narrowed it down to two schools; I hope to start in the fall.”

“For the Church of Zion?”

Wallace’s eyes narrowed. “Yes, for the Church of Zion. Do you have a problem with that?”

P.J.’s mouth opened, but the words didn’t immediately fall out. “But I thought...after all of our discussions, anyway...”

Wallace’s eyes glinted. “You thought wrong. A lot has changed since you went to Nashville.”

Less courageous parents would have realized that all conversations between the two of them were going to dead end, but Cassandra and Luke were nothing if not stubborn. Luke sniffed and took a turn. “So, Daughter, did you ever get that cat?”

“No, Daddy. I just haven’t gotten around to it.”

Wallace looked from her to the scenery that had gone from fields to a sparsely populated community of brick ranches. “I thought you were kidding about a cat. The mammy cat at the nursery just had kittens. Do you want to come and pick one out?”

P.J. studied his profile. “You can pick one out for me.”

“Get out to the nursery much?” Luke’s wide callused fingers rubbed the handle above the window.

“Not really,” Wallace said. “If Mom wants it, then she can come back from Dalton and run it.”

P.J.’s eyes widened; Cassandra’s appeared in the rearview mirror for a second. Even Luke chanced a glance over his shoulder. The nursery had always been Wallace’s favorite place;

he had a degree in horticulture or botany or some plant field. I never found out which because I didn't hear from him so much after the great falling out. His sudden fervent desire to go to seminary had only come about after his mother left for Dalton.

Cassandra drove by an older high school, took a right, and parked hastily outside a Mexican Restaurant. "I hope Mexican's okay."

No one protested because they were probably all ready for the car ride to be over. I could have used a margarita myself.

At the table, conversation lagged as eyes darted around the room not wanting to make contact with one another. Sunday lunch had been a ritual from time immemorial up until P.J.'s marriage to Lionel. He had gone once or twice, but I don't think he ever felt comfortable with the inside jokes and the other four talking over each other. He soon made excuses to skip out on both church and Sunday lunch. I'm pretty sure he used that time to meditate with his bong. And the aforementioned Chastity Gilford.

The blare of brass and the wheezing accordion of the Tejano music couldn't make up for the lack of conversation today. Hands didn't collide in the chip basket as they usually did. P.J. and Wallace maintained as much distance between each other as they could in the small booth.

"So, I found an old trunk in the attic." P.J bit into a chip. "I found all sorts of quilts with a baby blanket and a photo on top. Oh, and this." She fished through her purse for the key, accidentally elbowing Wallace in the process. Both of them pretended it didn't happen.

"Probably a distant baby cousin she thought was cute." Cassandra took the key and held it up to the light. "Looks like a lockbox key. Maybe Sam had one over at Farmers' Mutual; that's where she had her checking and savings accounts."

“Well, I asked Maybelle Andrews, and she said everyone in her generation knew that Aunt Sam had had a baby. Something about a Melvin House who was a charmer.”

Cassandra shook her head. “Maybelle Andrews is senile and has your Aunt Sam confused with someone else. I’m telling you that my sister never married, and I know she never had a child.”

Which showed exactly how much Cassandra knew about me.

“Maybe Aunt Sam was really *your* mother!” P.J.’s cheeks flushed. It reminded me of when she was nine and she breezed through both Encyclopedia Brown and all of the Nancy Drew books we had. For the next three months everything was a mystery, a mystery with off-the-wall and seemingly contradictory clues.

“Now that’s the most ridiculous thing you’ve said yet!” Cassandra frowned. “I hate to burst your bubble, but I’m definitely the daughter of Callie Sinclair. We did all kinds of genetic tests when we were trying to get pregnant a second time.”

Luke took a bite from a salsa laden chip. “You broke the mold, kid.”

Before P.J. could interject, the waiter slid sizzling fajitas her way with an admonition of “hot plate.” She poked at the meat and veggies with her fork. “But it is possible Aunt Sam had a son and didn’t tell you.”

“I don’t think so,” Cassandra said. She shook her head as she picked around the shredded lettuce of her taco salad.

“Anything’s possible,” Wallace said. “The person to ask might be the charming Melvin House.”

Cassandra shot Wallace a look that clearly told him not to encourage her.

“And how am I supposed to find him?” P.J. dipped her tortilla in sauce and took a bite.
“He’s probably dead now.”

We could hope.

“You can find just about anything on the Internet as long as you know where to look,” Wallace said with a shrug. He turned back to his carnitas, sawing a chunk of the fried pork medallion into little pieces with his knife.

“I can’t afford Internet yet. I was waiting for my first Yessum County paycheck to set that up.”

“You can always go to the library,” Wallace said.

Cassandra winced. “Before you go, there’s something you should know, though.”

“Oh?”

“The new head librarian is Estelle.”

P.J. choked on her fajita—my sentiments exactly considering Estelle’s condescension, back-stabbing, and general incompetence. She hacked enough for Wallace to finally extend her the courtesy of a whop on the back. After a drink of water she said, “You mean to tell me they replaced my Aunt Sam with Estelle Morgan?”

“It’s Estelle Bray now, and keep your voice down,” hissed Cassandra. “She worked as assistant under your Aunt Sam for three years. What were they supposed to do? Consult you before hiring her?”

“I could have told them a thing or two,” P.J. muttered. It would be hard to say if she was thinking about the time Estelle ran P.J.’s underwear up the flagpole or the time she told Jason Fife not to invite P.J. out because she was having her period. She could have been thinking of the time Estelle tried to pants her on pajama day or how she “accidentally” spilled punch on

P.J.'s prom dress. And the list went on. As much as I would like to claim my niece was innocent in all of this, I had to admit that P.J. had been known to get a few jabs in starting with an unfortunate sandbox incident in kindergarten. Alas, P.J.'s hits were few and smaller in scope.

“Willis, don't be ridiculous,” Wallace said. He sounded more like himself than he had in days, and I realized it was the first time he'd used her last name as he had all through high school. “I go in the library all the time, and Estelle is perfectly nice to me. We've all grown up since high school.”

Mother and daughter shared a knowing look about the true nature of women. “I hope you're right, Wallace,” said Cassandra. “I hope you're right.”

The four ate in silence while more people entered the restaurant, their conversations drowning out the Tejano vaqueros wheedling in Spanish.

Chapter 12

Cassandra's tires squealed on the street. Anyone who didn't know she normally drove like an Indy car racer would have thought she was in a hurry to get away. Of course, even taking her driving habits into account, one could still make a strong argument for leaving P.J. and Wallace in the driveway to duke things out.

"Why did you agree to come to lunch today?" P.J. stood with hand on her hip. Wallace tried not to look at how that caused the front of her dress to gape open a bit.

"I didn't want to be rude to your parents," he said. "Not after all those years of our eating together on Sundays while my parents were still busy at the church."

"So sniping at each other wasn't rude?"

Wallace threw up his hands and they slapped against his legs. "This is ridiculous. I wasn't any ruder than you were."

"Fine. I was short, too. There, happy?"

“No, not really,” Wallace muttered.

“What’s that?” P.J. shifted her weight to her other leg and crossed her arms.

“Nothing. Forget about it. I’ll bring you a cat and then leave you the hell alone.” He took impossibly long strides across the yard.

“Sounds good.” P.J. started fishing through her purse for her keys.

He stopped. “No, you know what. I’m not going to forget about it.”

P.J. looked up to see Wallace barreling toward her. She took a step backward and almost tripped on a tree root.

“The problem here is that you don’t take care of yourself,” Wallace said. His finger wagged in her face as she leaned back farther and farther to accommodate how he was leaning closer and closer. “You get yourself into these messes. I told you Lionel was an ass. I told you you would hate teaching. I told you that you shouldn’t eat too many sweets. I told you that you would enjoy my church. But have you ever listened to me? No. You go off and marry that asshole and make us both miserable.”

P.J. grabbed his finger and twisted it backward until he gasped. “And that’s the problem with you. You think you know everything. You think no rule is ever made to be broken. Did you ever think that I needed to find out if I liked teaching? Did you ever think that dessert was my favorite course? Did you ever think that I was perfectly happy with my own church and that I thought your church was like you: condescending, arrogant, and unforgiving? Did you ever think for one moment that, by telling me what to do, you strengthened my resolve to do the one thing I shouldn’t? Because there is one thing we can both agree on: Lionel is an asshole. And right now? So are you.”

She turned on her heel to retreat with dignity, but stubbed her toe on the same root that had almost tripped her. Wallace grabbed her elbow to help her keep her balance. “I only wanted you to be happy.”

They would have been sweet words if they hadn't been spit out with such vinegar.

“What a coincidence. That's all I've ever wanted, too.” She yanked her arm from his hand and disappeared into the house.

I stayed with Wallace for a while, watching him study the spot where P.J. had been. Now that she was gone, his eyes were more sad than angry. He shook his head as though to clear the memory and muttered, “That was stupid, Dandridge” under his breath. When he disappeared through the hedge, I floated on in to see how P.J. was taking their latest fight.

She sat at the kitchen table and ran her fingers up and down the braided strap of her purse. She stared past the fridge through the windows that looked out into the back yard. That area of the kitchen had been a porch, but the owner before me had walled it in to make a little sunroom. The floor sloped downward, but otherwise it was a really great space for sewing or anything else that required a lot of light like, say, painting?

P.J. pushed her chair away from the table and walked through the house and up the stairs. She flipped back the trapdoor and rifled through her painting supplies. She took the easel then came back to go through brushes and dried up paints. On her next trip she took the unfinished portrait of Wallace and one empty but yellowing canvas. On the last trip, she took the blanket and the photo.

Downstairs, she put the easel in several different positions then looked through her meager supplies and started making a list.

“Just wanted to make me happy,” she muttered to herself as she tested paints and tossed the old tubes and jars in the garbage. “I’m going to show him happy.”

She grabbed her list and her purse and headed for the door before remembering it was Sunday. Her favorite art supply store was in Memphis and was closed. She put the list down, but she didn’t slump in defeat.

“Listen up, world. I’m going to make myself so fucking happy that I won’t be able to stand myself! I’m going to paint what I want to paint, and I am going to date whoever I want to date. Everyone is going to be incredibly damn happy.”

She laughed nervously at her outburst as people often do when they think about how silly it is to talk to yourself. Then she did something else I hadn’t seen her do in a very long time: she went to her bedroom and put on her running clothes including the shoes she’d left out to taunt her all this time. P.J. Willis was going for a run.

Chapter 13

The next morning P.J. groaned with sore muscles as she rolled out of bed. She limped to the shower then back to the closet where she picked out her best jeans and her nicest summer sweater. She turned her attention to strappy sandals then brushed her hair and put in earrings. Remembering that I could travel with her if we were connected through the locket, I hooked my “finger” on its chain and it fell to the floor.

She bent to pick it up, and, just as I had hoped, she unclasped the necklace and reached behind her neck to put it on.

Looking into the mirror, she pivoted left then right. She had lost a little weight just from laying off the Twinkies. She still didn't look like a supermodel, but it was amazing what a little lipstick and better posture could do.

I didn't hesitate to follow her to the car this time; I wanted to know what she was up to. I tried not to look at the disgrace that was her floorboard, but I couldn't help myself. The crushed

beer can sent me over the edge; she would have to answer for that if one of Ellery's finest pulled her over.

She backed down the driveway, oblivious to her pack rat car. Wallace, who had taken his love for yard work to new heights, waved at her with a grim smile; she gave a dismissive wave back. She obviously wasn't dressing up for him.

She circled the courthouse three times before someone backed out and left her a spot that just happened to face the statue of Billy John Yankel. She looked up to the Civil War soldier with her head cocked to one side and smiled.

We used to laugh about ol' Bill. The statue, a gift from the Daughters of the Confederacy back in 1898, stood high on a pedestal with a list of the names of Yessum County's boys in grey. I would have loved to have seen the president's face back when they unveiled the statue in his government-issue uniform and his kewpie hat. Those venerable supporters of the Confederacy had accidentally ordered themselves a Yankee statue, complete with a faded "US" on the belt buckle that could only see if the sun hit the statue just right.

When she was just eleven, P.J. imagined another scenario to explain our traitorous memorial. She asked me if I thought there was some poor Johnny Reb in homespun and a slouch hat standing in a town square up north. That's when we decided to christen our solider Billy John Yankel. Perhaps, there were a few more prisoners of war out there who needed to be exchanged, and Billy Yankel wasn't as unique as we thought.

P.J. took out a notepad from her purse and sketched a rough outline of the statue's profile. From the right angle she would be able to capture the statue, the old courthouse, and the new public safety building just off the square. I could see how Billy John appealed to her sense of what Tennessee history meant: divided loyalties, past and present.

She clipped down the sidewalk with confidence until her wedge sandal caught a crack and she tripped. She looked left and right, but no one had noticed her slip so she pulled herself tall and continued across the street to Farmers' Mutual Bank.

Her body flinched as she walked through the door, and I could imagine the air-conditioning hitting her like an arctic breeze. She smiled and walked past the tellers to the four desks beyond them. Four clerks sat across from four empty chairs, but she walked straight for Tyler Monroe.

He pulled himself up to his full six feet and buttoned his suit coat before fluidly offering his hand for her to shake. She quivered, an indication she harbored the remnants of her old high school crush. Surely, Tyler Monroe wasn't part of her happiness plan.

"Good to see you in town, P.J. I'd heard you were around," he said.

"Yeah, I just moved back. Say, I found this key, and I want to see if my Aunt had a lockbox."

"Sure, sure." He gestured to the seat across from his desk. He waited for her to sit before sitting down himself as if he were a gentleman.

He chicken pecked on the computer—no surprise to me since Dina Moore told me she was basically told to "help" him through algebra or she would be teaching nothing but remedial math the next year. His typing class was apparently no different. That's what Farmers' Mutual needed: a bank employee who was deficient in math and couldn't type.

Finally, he came up with the lockbox number and escorted P.J. to the vault. "You're in luck; your name is on the account, too. Otherwise we would've needed something from the courts to open this box for you."

She flushed. Somehow I knew she would be the one who needed to get into this box, the one who would eventually find out my secrets. It took all my courage to tell Lewis when he asked me to marry him, but I couldn't bring myself to tell Cassandra, and I don't think she would have believed me anyway. Besides, why kill her illusions of a perfect older sister *and* tell her what an ass her father had once been? There were some things better left hidden in an old trunk.

Tyler opened the vault with a flourish, and P.J. giggled. What I would have given to smack some sense into her.

"I'm going to check out front for just a minute, but I'll be right back to lock up." Tyler pointed up to the box in question and ducked out of the vault.

She slid the box out; it was just above eye level, and she had to feel around in the box and bring its contents down to her level. She took out my secrets: the list I wrote when I was twenty-one, a yellowed business card, and the huge diamond solitaire Lewis Biddle gave me when he proposed. She took out less important treasures, too, like savings bonds and a birth certificate.

She put all of these things in her purse then felt the bottom of the box one last time. Her fingers ran across the onion skin of the birth certificate then the yellowed business card, and she put down her purse to open the document. The moment of truth had arrived.

One of the yellowed corner tips broke off the paper and floated to the floor like a sullied snowflake.

"Robert Theodore Hughes? Lived for three hours? New Orleans?" P.J. murmured to herself, her hands shaking.

"Everything okay in here?"

The girl jumped out of her skin at the sound of Tyler's voice. "Yeah, everything's fine. You just surprised me."

"Oh, well, I would never want to do that." Tyler grinned. His teeth were too white; I wondered if they glowed in the dark.

He pushed the lockbox back into place and extended a hand to gesture that P.J. should leave the vault. "Listen, I was wondering if you'd like to go out with me. Maybe do a little line dancing at The Fountain."

"Okay."

Okay? I still can't believe she read that birth certificate and could say yes to a date with a regular Melvin House if I've ever seen one. And she'd already been married to a Melvin House. Heavens, but our genetic code had to be faulty.

The lights in the bank flickered off and on twice before I tamed my temper.

"That's weird," Tyler said.

"Yeah, weird," P.J. said. She looked up to the lights and frowned. She shivered, and I knew she felt me. "Say, you wanna give me a call later?"

"Sure." He took out his cell phone. "What's your number?"

She leaned over his shoulder to tell him. The two of them were entirely too close for my tastes.

She gave him a little wave and walked past the three women tellers she'd passed over to speak with him. On the way out, P.J. hummed to herself as she walked back to the car, the first real smile I've seen on her face in days.

"That's right. I'm going to be really damn happy," she muttered to herself as she threw the car into gear.

Ten minutes later she passed the city limits on her way to Memphis. Apparently, my little overachiever was going to work on a date and painting supplies all in the same day.

Chapter 14

Later than evening P.J. wrestled with the back door lock, bags dangling from her wrists and the screen door slapping her back. Just as she pushed it open with a grunt from her and a squeak from the door, someone knocked on the front door. She dropped the bags and huffed through the house to see who it was.

Wallace stood there holding flowers: a yellow rosebush in a pot. “Hi.”

She closed the door in his face and crossed her arms over her chest. He waited a few seconds and knocked again. She touched the door knob then drew her hand back as though scalded.

Open the door, you stubborn girl.

She shivered and looked over her shoulder.

“Aunt Sam, is that you?” she whispered.

No, it's your conscience. Of course, it's me.

She looked over her shoulder again and then looked up to the ceiling.

Wallace knocked again. "I know I deserved that, but please open up."

She took a deep breath and pulled the door open with a dramatic flourish of her arm to indicate he should enter.

"These are for you," he says. "I ordered them especially for you. They're in a pot. I guess I could plant them for you later. If you wanted me to."

She arched an eyebrow, but she didn't say she had a suggested location for them.

"I'm really sorry I said those mean things, and the more I think about it the more selfish it was, and I was still angry you married him and angry about what he's done to you, and—"

She stiffened and her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, 'what he's done to me'?"

"I mean, you just looked so unhappy when you got here; you didn't look like yourself at all," Wallace said.

She pivoted and headed for the kitchen. He followed her still trying to explain. "You've got a tattoo." He opened three or four kitchen cabinets before finding the one with five bottles of wine and tall bottles of whiskey, vodka, rum, and tequila. "And what is this? And what about how you were sitting on the back stoop smoking a cigarette yesterday?"

"Have you been spying on me?" Her mouth hung open and her knuckles gleamed white around the black plastic pot that held the rose bush.

"No. I mean, yes. I didn't mean to, but I was picking beans in the garden when you unloaded your liquor stash. And I was shucking corn yesterday when I smelled cigarette smoke and peeked through the hedge."

“Now that’s just pathetic.” She slammed the roses on the table, and potting soil scattered over the table. “This is what I was talking about.” She paced from one side of the kitchen to the other. “I can’t believe this. I knew you were mad at me, and I knew Lionel was a jerk and, heaven help me, I finally figured out what a mistake it was to marry him. But you don’t have to be so judgmental about everything.”

He geared up for a fight, but she pointed a finger at him, and the tears welled up in her eyes. “You were supposed to be different. I kept telling myself that not all men were jerks, and you were my example.”

He deflated faster than a Macy’s float with a mile long tear.

“God, P.J., don’t cry. I was worried about you. I’ve always been worried about you.” He started to open his arms for an embrace, but he stuffed them in his pockets instead.

She sniffed and wiped her tears away with right knuckle then with left. “I don’t need worry, Wallace. I need friends. Friends who like me for who I am.”

“All right,” Wallace said. “You’re right; I need to be a friend.”

“And friends don’t get bent out of shape over tattoos, liquor, or cigarettes.”

“Of course not. It’s not like you were out killing or stealing.” He laughed, but there was a hint of doubt in his voice.

Her eyes pinned him to the wall. “Of course not.”

“Why are we arguing when I came over here to tell you I was sorry? Truce?” He opened his arms, and she fell into him. Her arms came up behind him and her hands rested on his shoulder.

She closed her eyes at the feeling of her cheek on his shoulder. “I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you five years ago. I’m really, really sorry,” she whispered. “And I’m sorry I called you an asshole.”

“Well, I’m sorry I told you what to do,” he said. “I guess I deal in solutions, not sympathy.” He nestled against her hair, closing his eyes as he took in the scent. Both of his hands clasped just above the small of her back, and I thought for a minute they would sway into a slow dance. Instead, they broke apart.

“Should we start over?” His hand twitched at his side, and I could imagine he wanted to wipe away the few tears that had pooled under her eyes.

“Let’s start over. Again,” she said with a sniff. “I’m glad you’re here because I need to show you something, and, if we’re friends, you’re morally obligated to not think I’m crazy.”

She pointed to a chair at the table and walked across to her room. Wallace looked at the chair she had pulled out, and pushed it back in. He walked around the oval table to the side where he had always sat in the past and tested the chair. Sure enough the back of the chair wobbled where he had plopped into that darn chair so many times. Then he had the audacity to grin even though he knew how I felt about that chair being broken.

He went to plop in that chair, and it scooted across the floor causing him to land on his posterior. Served him right!

“Wallace, what are you doing on the floor?”

“I—the chair just went flying out from behind me,” he said. “I can’t explain it.”

“There’s been a lot of that around here.” P.J. put a box on the table and crossed to the other side of the table, her usual spot. Wallace got to his feet and placed the chair at the table with the proper gentle reverence before sitting down gingerly.

“Now, what did you want to show me?”

“Well, I heard this crash in the attic the other day, and, just like I was trying to tell Mom, when I went up there I found this.” P.J. took out the blanket and the black and white photo.

“The lockbox key was there, too, and when I opened Aunt Sam’s lockbox, I found these.”

Wallace rifled through the papers studying the birth certificate and the business card the longest. “Your Aunt Sam had a baby when she was fifteen?” He held the thin paper closer.

“And unmarried?”

“Don’t judge my aunt, either.”

Wallace held up his hands in surrender. “Not judging. Just stating what appear to be valid scientific facts.”

“Okay, then. Look at this.” P.J. unfolded my list and slid it in front of Wallace. Good thing I wasn’t visible because I wanted to melt into the floorboard. To say I was melodramatic at twenty-one would be an understatement, and the list of things that would bring me happiness reflected it.

My Happiness List

1. *Buy the red dress from Woolsworth.*
2. *Get the librarian job by any means necessary.*
3. *Buy a new Mustang.*
4. *Find my son’s grave in New Orleans.*

Wallace looked from the list to the birth certificate and back to P.J. “Do you think she ever found the grave?”

“Well, I know she had a Mustang once, and I know she was librarian forever. She had tons of red dresses, so. . .”

Wallace held the birth certificate up. “So, do you think she ever made it to New Orleans?”

“I don’t know.” P.J. leaned across the table and lowered her voice as though I wouldn’t be able to hear her. “Wallace, the chandelier was swaying one day, and it fell and crashed the next. Then, when I heard the crash in the attic, everything was thrown around to make a path to my canvases and easel.”

“Old houses settle, P.J. There’s nothing to that.”

“But I’ve heard her voice.” She reached across the table to grab his hands. He looked down at their clasped hands then back up to her face.

“You’re imagining things,” he said but his tone didn’t hold the same conviction of a few minutes earlier. “You’ve always had an active imagination.”

“Just a few minutes ago, I heard her tell me to open the door for you.”

He hesitated at that. He could see where it might take something greater than his own persuasive powers to get P.J. to open the door.

“Peej, I really think you’ve had a rough time of things, and you’re just imagining things. There is absolutely no scientific basis for ghosts.”

“Wallace, you’re a botanist; you’re not exactly the preeminent expert on ghosts.”

He took his hands from hers and pushed away from the table. “I don’t have to be because they do not exist.”

She leaned back in the chair and crossed her arms. “There you go again; you always have to be right, don’t you?”

“But I am right,” he said. “Ghosts simply do not exist.”

He walked to the doorway then paced back. He knew he couldn't walk out of that argument right then, not if he had any hope of keeping the peace. "Okay, fine. Let's say you heard voices. What of it?"

"Obviously, there's something she wants me to do. That's what ghosts are, right? People with unfinished business?" P.J. stood.

"I wouldn't know because they don't exist."

Just behind him, in the room that had been a porch but now housed P.J.'s art supplies, three canvases crashed to the floor. Wallace jumped up and danced like a little girl. P.J. giggled.

"Shut up. It's not funny."

Another canvas joined the three, and he jumped forward again. P.J. grabbed her side she was laughing so hard.

"You!" He pointed to her. "There has to be a reasonable explanation. The floor is obviously tilted, or . . ."

He looked to the paintings and stared into his own eyes, the eyes of the unfinished painting. "That's me."

P.J. blushed. "Yes, it is." She rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "And it was a painting I wasn't planning on showing you."

I turned off the lights.

"Do you mean to tell me you still don't believe in ghosts?" she asked Wallace.

"Like I said, I'm sure there's a logical explanation—"

"For the lights going off? For the canvases to fall? For your chair to slide out from under you?"

"You saw that?" He wrenched his eyes from the painting back to her.

“Of course, I was standing in the doorway, and you went to plop in that chair like Aunt Sam was always telling you not to do, and the chair just flew out from under you as though someone had grabbed the back of the chair and pulled really hard.”

Wallace ran a hand through his hair. “Then I don’t know what to tell you, P.J.”

P.J.’s lips spread into a grin. “Wallace, I think it’s time I went to the library to look for . . .” She held the certificate up to the light. “A cemetery where Robert Theodore Hughes rests.”

Wallace shook his head. “You’re going to cause trouble if you go there. Come over to my house to use the Internet.”

“And face Papa Frank, the only man who thinks less of me than Lionel? I don’t think so.” P.J. tapped her fingers on the table. “As Aunt Sam always used to say, sometimes nothing but a trip to the library will do.”

Wallace raised both hands in surrender. “Do what you will, but using my Internet connection would be much easier.”

Even as he said it, a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. He wanted to see P.J. mix it up with Estelle just as much as I did. It was good to see some fight left in the girl.

Chapter 15

P.J. parked her Honda outside the new library, a modern brick and glass structure that sat across the highway from the Ellery Ford dealership. As she got out of the car, she looked across the street to a line of Mustangs. She looked to her trusty compact and back to the sports cars. She sighed and patted the roof of her tamed steel steed.

She turned to the library, and we both had to steel ourselves to enter the new building. After working for decades in the crumbling downtown building, I only worked here for a couple of years before it became clear that my “assistant” librarian was being groomed to take my place. The news had been all the harder to take because I knew more dirt on my assistant librarian than I should have. True, one should believe none of what they hear and only half of what they see, but getting to know Estelle and observing her on a daily basis didn’t help her cause.

Not yet aware of who had entered the library, Estelle stood behind the circulation desk, a queen surveying her kingdom. She wore an Alfred Dunner ensemble meant for someone twice her age, a Pepto-Bismal pink polyester suit with a crème blouse and matching earrings. She had her matching paisley scarf tied in a jaunty knot to the side. Her smile faded as P.J. stepped up to the desk.

“Hello, Estelle. I need a pass for the research room, please.” P.J.’s smile didn’t waver.

Estelle blinked twice, her cranberry colored smile frozen in place, too. “I’ll need to see your library card, please.”

P.J. took every last card out of her wallet and checked each pocket twice but couldn’t find the card. “I seem to have lost it. What do I need to do to get a new one?”

“I’ll need your driver’s license.” Estelle held out a hand with manicured claws in the same cranberry shade as her lips. She held the drivers license up and frowned. “Oh, I’m sorry, but you’re not a resident of Yessum County so you’re not eligible for a library card.” She handed the license back.

P.J. took a deep breath. “Estelle, you know I live here. I just haven’t been to the DMV yet. I’m living at 101 Crook.”

“Oh, rules are rules, and I’m afraid I can’t give you a library card without a valid Tennessee driver’s license that clearly shows you are a resident of Yessum County.” At this point Estelle was more benevolently angry flight attendant than librarian. I expected her to point out the exits at any minute.

“Fine. I’ll pay the out-of-county fee.”

“I’m sorry, we don’t issue cards to nonresidents at all; it’s a new policy to help conserve our Yessum County tax dollars. Maybe you can find what you need at the Jefferson County Library.”

P.J. ground her teeth, something she frequently did when she came in contact with Estelle. “Estelle, this is ridiculous. Just look me up in the computer. I know I have a card so I should be on file.”

Unable to argue with that logic, Estelle’s flight attendant smile faltered. Her acrylic claws tapped against the keys, a sound that had always crawled up and down my spine when we worked together. She leaned forward and squinted into the screen for a minute before taking a step back with an ever-widening smile. “Why, you do have a card with us, P.J. It expired seven years ago, and it says here that you owe the library \$315.48 for a copy of *Heart of Darkness*.”

P.J. swore under her breath. “That’s crazy. I returned that book years ago.”

“Well, it says here that it never came back.” Estelle blinked twice.

P.J.’s eyes narrowed to slits. She knew Estelle had worked in the library all through high school. It was possible—in fact likely—Estelle had neglected to check in P.J.’s book.

“Look, we both know this was one of your high school tricks. I’ll just buy a copy of *Heart of Darkness*. Hell, I’ll buy two copies if that’s what you need.” She got out her checkbook.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to go to the library committee for a decision on that.” Estelle pouted. “Who knows how many people wanted to check out that book and couldn’t? There were poor students who needed to read it for school and couldn’t afford a copy of their own. English teachers—”

“Save the drama for your—for someone who cares. What do I need to do to get access to the research room today?” P.J. leaned on the circulation desk, her nostrils flaring.

“Well, normally, I would say nothing. . .” Estelle pursed her lips and looked to the ceiling. “But I suppose you could start by standing on the circulation desk and announcing to everyone that I should have been Valedictorian instead of you.”

P.J.’s eyes narrowed. “I’d rather go to the DMV.”

“Your choice,” Estelle said with a shrug. “But you know if they hadn’t counted my driver’s ed course as a transfer credit then *I* would have been Valedictorian.”

P.J. turned on one heel and headed for the door. The look on her face said she would get into that research room. And that’s how we ended up in the Jefferson County DMV.

It was a normal trip to the Jefferson County Department of Motor Vehicles. We had to sit next to a Hell’s Angel who, based on the crinkle of P.J.’s nose, hadn’t showered in a week. A well-dressed man walked in the door only to have one of the DMV workers fly off the handle. “I told you not to come in here! You have to wait outside.”

She shooed him outside, took an aerosol can from behind her counter and sprayed the Lysol liberally before announcing to the room. “He’s got hepatitis.”

Everyone in the waiting room turned to see the man standing outside with a hangdog expression. Three minutes later, a mother screamed at her daughter, “And you’d better pass the test this time because I am *not* taking another day off from work because you have issues with multiple choice!”

People came and people went, following DMV employees with clipboards and futilely attempting to smile at just the right time for a driver’s license photo. P.J. finished her paperwork

and brought her license to the desk. Since she was changing from Davidson County to Yessum County, it wasn't an involved process. At least not until she turned around and found a person sitting behind her that was far more repulsive to her than bikers, DMV employees, hepatitis, or shouting moms. She was waving her still warm license like a Polaroid picture when she turned to see Lionel Gates.

She lacked the power to move. Fortunately, he was hunched over his clipboard of information, oblivious to her stare. She forced one foot in front of the other and eased out of the room before he could notice her.

She leaned against the rough brick wall just outside the door and forced herself to breathe, then she crossed the parking lot in a quick walk on her toes, the walk you use when you feel as though someone or something is chasing you but you don't want to admit your desire to run. The Honda sputtered then settled into a reliable hum, and she turned the car for home.

Chapter 16

The next day P.J. turned whole-heartedly to her therapy: painting. After a few minutes of moving brush against canvas in tiny strokes, her shoulders relaxed and her breathing evened. Her painting calmed me despite the fact I wanted to go back to the library because I never had gathered the courage to go to New Orleans in search of my son's grave. I had accomplished every other thing on that list and fifty more I hadn't written down, but I had never once dared return to New Orleans. Now, P.J. could probably search cemeteries by typing with her fingers instead of picking her way between tombstones, but she didn't want to risk running into Lionel again. As if he would be found in the library.

She had commandeered the old porch off the kitchen to be her studio. Countless windows flooded that corner of the room with natural light, an advantage that far outweighed the slant of the floor. She sat in one of the dining room chairs with her back to the window. Her

hair was held in check by a red paisley bandana, and she stared through the unfinished painting of Wallace with a brush in her hand.

She cocked her head to one side then the next but couldn't see what was missing. Finally, she took the canvas down from the easel and put up a blank one. Her hands flew in brush strokes, and I wondered how she could envision how each little stroke would come together to create a whole. Of course, I couldn't draw stick people in life, so what would I know in death?

She painted for hours. Her stomach growled, but she didn't notice. The brush slapped the canvas then tickled it. She leaned forward into the canvas, and I could just see the tip of her tongue hanging over her bottom lip. Then someone knocked on the back door and her brush jerked an angry slash of black across what she had painted so far. She sighed.

“Who is it?”

“It's me.”

She frowned at her mistake, but got up from the chair and made sure to turn Wallace's painting to the wall before going to the back door to let him in.

“Morning, Wallace,” she said as he steps into the kitchen.

“Morning? It's afternoon, and I thought—” He took two steps toward the canvas.

“You're painting again. You're really painting again.”

“Um-hm.” She sat down and took a rag to the black slash.

He grinned at the twinkle in her eyes. “What is it?”

“I don't know; it's just something in my mind, and I don't think I'll know what it is until I finish painting it.”

“Don’t people usually decide on something to paint and then paint it?” Wallace pulled out his seat, the one with its back to the refrigerator. This time, however, he kept a hand on the seat of the chair and sat down slowly. If I’d known it would have made such an impression, I would have pulled a chair out from under him a long time ago.

“Not necessarily.” P.J. frowned because she took off a part of the painting she wanted to keep along with the accidental stroke. “Some folks just start painting and wait to see what they come up with.”

“Some people throw paint at the canvas and hope for the best, but you generally think about what you’re going to paint for days before you start.”

She put the rag and the brush down and turned to face him. “How did you know that?”

“I’ve always known a lot more than you give me credit for knowing,” he said. “Just like I know there are at least twenty-four Dr. Pepper cans in the fridge and reduced fat Chips Ahoy in the pantry. I know you are going to make an excuse to get out of running today, and I know I’m going to talk you into it. I also know you haven’t bought any Snake-Away, but you also haven’t gotten out of bed one night this week. And I know you had a run-in with Estelle Bray in the library, but that’s not from psychic ability. That’s from Mss Georgette.”

“Shit.” P.J. walked across the kitchen and reached into the fridge for two Dr. Peppers. She slammed Wallace’s can in front of him. Then, she reached into the pantry for the Chips Ahoy—reduced fat, as predicted—and put the box of Twinkies in front of him for good measure. She plopped into her chair on the opposite side of the table. Her stomach roared again, and she clamped a hand on it, eyes wide.

“Oh, how could I miss the obvious? You worked your way through lunch.” Wallace closed the bag of cookies and pushed away from the table. “Scrambled or omelet?”

“Scrambled, and God bless you.” P.J. opened her Dr. Pepper and let the can linger under her nose to inhale the effervescence before taking a sip.

“So, the real question is why you didn’t go back to the library.” Wallace rustled around in the fridge and came out with two eggs, butter, and a frown. “Miss Georgette said you looked a little hot under the collar. Do you have any cheese?”

“No, sorry. I had to go to the DMV to get a new license to get a new library card, but then I realized I couldn’t pay the fine and I decided not to go.”

Wallace turns around from the stove, skillet in his hand. “Yeah. Right. Now, what’s the real reason you didn’t go back to the library.”

P.J. exhaled with a whoosh. “I saw Lionel at the DMV.”

Wallace faced the stove, but his back stiffened. “So, he’s back in town, and you’re hiding here.”

“Apparently.”

“Well, you knew that had to happen.” Wallace broke the eggs with more force than was necessary.

“No, I really didn’t. I thought he was staying in Nashville.”

Wallace dashed salt and pepper in the eggs, picking them up and chopping them. “Why stay in Nashville when he could be a pain in the ass here?”

Wallace had just slipped up and said *ass*. Maybe he wasn’t too far gone after all.

“You do know he’ll come,” he said.

“Why should he come by? He knows there’s nothing for him here.” She shrugged her shoulders and studied a freckle on her arm. She knew it was wishful thinking to believe he wouldn’t come after her; that’s why she’d been hiding from in the first place.

Wallace snorted. “He’s not right in the head, and, unless I’m mistaken, you were paying the bills. One of these days he’ll show up on your doorstep.” He pointed the spatula in her direction. “You mark my words.”

“I can handle him,” she said.

“Mm-hmm.” He slid the eggs on a plate and handed them to P.J. who turned to the drawer on the other side of the sink to look for a fork.

“Really. Whose side are you on, anyway?”

“Yours, obviously. I’m not in Tyler Monroe’s kitchen making him eggs.” Wallace sat at the end of the table, and she shoved the box of Twinkies in his direction.

She blushed a pretty pink. “Okay, I’m going on a date with him, but I have to question how much time you’re hanging out with the gossips to know all of this secondhand information.”

He sputtered as he rounded the table. “I’ll have you know it was all information gathered unintentionally as Miss Georgette yelled over *Wheel of Fortune* to my father. I was in the kitchen washing dishes.”

P.J. took a bite of the eggs and closed her eyes. “I would call you a regular domestic god in jest, but these eggs are unbelievable. Of course, I suppose you were doing everything in your power not to hear a word of such gossip, but you just couldn’t help yourself.”

“Something like that,” he said as he reached the back door. “Say, why do you keep pushing this box of Twinkies at me again?”

“They’re for your dad so they don’t land on my hips,” P.J. said. “And why are you here again?”

“I could hear your stomach growling from next door.”

“Could not!”

“No, I wanted to see if you wanted to go running again this evening.”

“Want is such a strong word.” P.J. shoved another bite of eggs into her mouth.

He ran a hand through his hair, mussing it. “Fine, do you *need* to go running with me this evening?”

“Wallace Dandridge, are you trying to tell me what to do again?” Her eyes twinkled.

“Are you saying I’m fat?”

“Hell, no! Do I look like a complete idiot? It’s a simple question, do you want to run or not?”

Wallace was quickly devolving into sailor territory, and I had to admit I considered it an improvement.

“Yes, Wallace, I will go run with you,” she said as she finished up her eggs. “Just knock on my door if I’m not on the porch. I’m going to try to get as much painting in as I can before school starts and I lose track of time again.”

“Seven-thirty.” He said, trying to keep his smile in check. “I’ll bring a sandwich at six.”

“You are my hero.” she clasped her hands and batted her eyelashes.

His adams apple bobbed. “Say, have you figured out anything else about your Aunt Sam’s supposed baby?”

“Nope.” she shook her head. “I have to figure out how to get around my supposed fine for *Heart of Darkness* before I’m allowed in the research room.”

“You could come over to my house,” he said.

“I may take you up on that offer, but I wouldn’t be surprised if I didn’t need access to some of the state’s genealogy databases to find anything.”

He looked to the ceiling. “Aunt Sam, you’re going to have be clearer with this girl—maybe hit her over the head with it.” He yelled as if I weren’t standing right there, and he was grinning like a Cheshire cat. The horseshoe above the door twisted away from the nail that held it and grazed his head as it fell to the floor. He jumped forward and reached for the back of his head, turning to look at the shoe on the floor and the nail that had held it firmly in place for over forty years. He tested the nail, but it didn’t even wiggle.

“See there,” P.J. said. “You need to be careful what you wish for.”

He crouched and picked up the horseshoe. “How are you not freaked out about this?”

She shrugged. “I was at first, but now I feel safer knowing I’m not alone.”

He opened his mouth to say something but quickly shut it. With a nod that reminded me of Luke, he turned to the door. P.J., my beloved P.J., watched him go completely unaware of how she mooned after him.

Chapter 17

Four hours later P.J was still brushing paint on canvas in long strokes. In the painting, the pond in the cow pasture across the street from Luke and Cassie's place had slowly emerged from a mélange of greens and blues. Perched on the side of a hill, the pond slanted ever so slightly with a Beech tree on the upper bank. In P.J.'s painting it was fall, and yellow leaves burst from the tree in contrast to the black Angus and red and white Hereford cows that grazed along the far hillside.

The doorbell rang, its sound rusty and out of tune because most people, aside from Wallace, knocked not to hear it. P.J. looked in my direction, and for a moment I thought she could see me, but she frowned beyond me to the door instead. She skipped to the door and flung it open. "Wallace, I've figured out what I'm going to pain—"

She leaned into the door, her knuckles white on the door. "Lionel."

If it were the Old West, Lionel would have held his black hat in his hands. He grinned, showing the chip on his right incisor. He was still the scruffy bad boy with his long blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail and his eyes so light blue they looked white. “P.J. Baby.”

“What do you want?” Her voice cracked.

“I can’t do it, P.J. I thought I could handle the divorce, but I can’t. I can’t live without you.”

She rolled her eyes at the melodrama, but he shouldered into the doorway. She planted a hand on his chest. “Lionel, don’t.”

“What? You want me to tell me how I feel? I can’t turn off my love with a switch the way you did.” Her hand vibrated over his chest, and his eyes were dilated. He was high as a kite.

“Lionel, what’s wrong with you?” She removed her hand and turned it over as though looking for any way in which he could have tainted it.

“Nothing, nothing.” He sniffed, and his vacant eyes searched the ceiling.

“No, you’re high again, aren’t you? You need to go. Now.” P.J. blocked the doorway, but now she trembled, too.

“Nothing’s wrong.” Lionel scratched his neck. “I just had a little joint with my brothers; that’s all. You remember what that’s like.”

“No, I don’t remember much.” She swallowed hard. “And what I do remember I try to forget.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that.” Lionel put a hand to her jaw line to caress it, his fingers jerking a jagged path from ear to chin.

P.J. took a step back. “What do you want, Lionel?”

Lionel planted a kiss on her left cheek. “I told you. I miss you. I’m not the same without you. I had to see how you were doing.”

“I’m fine. You can leave now.” She swallowed.

“Aw, baby.” He pushed her into the living room and closed the door behind him. He wrapped his arms around her, but she didn’t soften into his embrace. Picking up the hem of the back of her shirt, he traced his hand over the tattoo. “See there, it says Lionel, and that’s me.”

He planted kisses down her neck, and she still didn’t move. “You know that you can’t go to another man now. Not after what we’ve shared.”

The words themselves might suggest a special bond, but his derisive tone of voice was more of a threat. P.J. stared through the wall, her eyes glassy and on the verge of tears.

Lionel switched to the other cheek. “Other men aren’t as open-minded as I am. Especially not your Bible-thumping buddy Wallace.”

Push him away! I commanded her with all of my being.

I heard her voice, but her mouth didn’t open. *I can’t.*

The house shook with my fury, but he still had his way with her on the futon. He couldn’t be bothered with removing clothing, so I got a nauseating look at his pale hairy backside jiggling up and down above the waistband of his jeans.

I couldn’t help but wonder, was that how Melvin House looked perched above me?

Chapter 18

I was sitting on the porch swing wondering if images could be removed from ghostly eyeballs when Wallace walked up holding a small brown paper sack. He frowned at the swing; I could only imagine what he thought of the swing moving on its own with the rhythmic creak and grunt of the chain that held it in place. He rang the doorbell, but he didn't get a response so he walked around to the back door and knocked there. When no one answered, he pushed the door open. "Hey, Peej, sorry to interrupt you, but I brought your sandwich."

He looked to the sun porch but only saw the almost finished canvas. He stepped over to admire it.

P.J. appeared in the doorway, hair mussed and clothes rumped. A hint of tears rimmed glassy eyes, and her lips pouted red and swollen.

He glanced to see it was her but quickly turned back to the canvas. "Ready to go?"

"I'm not going," she said.

“Oh, right. I saw the car. I didn’t know you were expecting company,” Wallace said.

“I’m sorry, but I only brought one sandwich, peanut butter and jelly with extra peanut butter.”

Lionel appeared at her shoulder and kisses her neck. “Thanks, pizza face. I’m starving.”

Wallace froze somewhere between shock and anger. P.J. exuded repulsion and shame.

Their eyes locked.

“Then again, maybe we don’t need sandwiches.” Lionel wrapped his arms around P.J., oblivious to how she stiffened at his touch. “We’ll just live on love. Want to watch and see how it’s done, nerd boy?”

“Stop.”

“What?” Wallace and Lionel spoke in eerie stereo.

“Stop talking to him like that.” P.J. stepped away from Lionel. “I think you need to leave now.”

Lionel’s lips pressed into a thin line that threatened rage, but he spoke with honeyed sweetness. “I thought we had come to an understanding that this divorce wasn’t a good thing. We talked about this.”

“No. You did some talking, but you didn’t hear a word I had to say. You never have.”

“No? You can divorce me all you want, but you still belong to me.” He ran his fingers along the small of her back. “Lionel.”

“I belong to myself,” she said, her eyes never leaving Wallace’s. “This has to stop.”

Lionel stepped between the two of them and cupped her face between his hands. “Baby, you don’t mean that. I told you I would never give up on us. Never, ever.”

“I believe the lady asked you to leave.” Wallace stepped forward, white knuckles still clutching the bag with the sandwich he made.

“Lady?” Lionel snorted and ran a hand through his hair. “Oh, Wallace, if you could only see her do some of the things I have seen her do.”

P.J.’s face burned a dangerous shade of crimson; Wallace clenched fists at his side.

“Your opinion doesn’t matter. P.J. told you to leave.”

“Stay out of it, asshole.” Lionel turned to P.J. “Now tell Pizza Face he’s the one who needs to leave,” he soothed.

“No.” She pushed him back.

“P.J., come on now—”

“No means no, Lionel! No means no!” She shoved him and he stumbled backward, but caught his balance, slapping her hard across the face. She fell to the floor, and I tried to hurl the cookie jar from the top of the fridge into Lionel’s head. It flew wide right and shattered against the wall instead.

Wallace picked him up from behind and threw him into the table which splintered under the weight. Lionel bounced to his feet like a cat and threw Wallace into the wreckage of my table. Wallace landed one punch, but Lionel, a demon possessed, punched Wallace several times more. Lionel laughed, blood showing in the lines between his teeth. He stood and dusted off his hands. “Stand up and punch me, Dandridge. We all know you’re just jealous you couldn’t get into her pants first.”

Wallace stumbled to his feet, but he was disoriented from the blows to the head. Lionel followed him as he staggered backwards, an ominous tango. He swung at Lionel but lost his balance and fell into the beautiful painting of the pasture, its colors smearing and mixing with blood.

“Once a nerd, always a nerd,” Lionel said.

“Get the hell out.” P.J. massaged her jaw, now puffy from Lionel’s slap. “And don’t come back. Ever.”

“Aw, Baby, you don’t mean it. I didn’t mean to slap you. I just get carried away sometimes, you know that.” Lionel stepped forward, but she picked up the phone. Her trembling fingers hooked nine in the dial, and it clicked back in infuriating slowness. Dialing one was much shorter. Lionel took a step back.

“I mean it this time, Lionel. Don’t come back.”

Wallace stumbled to his feet but not before he knocked over a can of turpentine. Lionel glared at his rival then inclined his head to the door. “Fine, I’ll go. We’ll talk later.”

Wallace looked at P.J., something between disgust and pity in his eyes. “How could you?”

“You wouldn’t understand.” She forced out the words in a whisper.

“Why do you let him touch you?” His hands clenched into fists. He yelled at her, but I could see his fury was really reserved for himself.

“I don’t know.” P.J. wrung her hands. Inspired, she took a plastic bag from a drawer and went to the freezer to fill it with ice.

“He doesn’t deserve to touch you.” Wallace swatted the bag away, but she covered it in a paper towel and held it to his right eye.

“No one deserves to have to touch me; I don’t deserve to be touched.” She studied the floor even as her hand held the ice to his brow.

He leaned toward her for a minute then forced himself to step away. “That’s the stupidest thing you’ve said yet.”

He batted the bag of ice to the floor and walked across the kitchen, wrenching open both doors. He pulled the wooden door shut behind him then let the screen door bang shut. P.J. jumped and whimpered then crumpled to the floor, her shoulders shaking with her sobs.

Chapter 19

P.J. carried the remains of the table piece by piece to the oversized trash can just outside the door. We loved that table. It was the table where we spent afternoons solving the world's problems. It was the table where we spent Christmases and Thanksgivings and where we lit birthday candles on homemade cakes. It was the table where she laid out college brochures and bridal magazines; it was even the table where she sat for hours as a child with paper and a row of circular vats of water colors, the tip of her tongue sticking out of her mouth as she painted.

She made ten trips to get the last of the table into the can. Then she took the ruined canvas and threw it on top before rolling the can down to the street. When she came back in she went to the bathroom mirror and took off her shirt to study the tattoo in the mirror. She turned to the left and to the right watching how twisting her skin wrinkled the letters. Slowly, she smiled and headed back to the kitchen for the phone book. She bypassed the tiny one that contained all

there was to know about Ellery. Instead, she picked up the larger phonebook for neighboring Jefferson and her finger scanned the yellow pages of dermatologists.

She picked up the phone and cradled it then picked it up again. I could tell from the sound on the other end of the line that she had reached an after-hours message service, but she drew in a breath and requested an appointment anyway. She hung up the phone up with another smile and a “Hmph.”

Then she went to her room and put on her running gear. Just when I thought I was going to be able to sit this one out, she put on the locket and I found myself coming with her whether I wanted to or not. As she dragged me out of the room doing the ghostly equivalent of kicking and screaming, I saw the tail of the snake peeking out from under the nightstand.

One week and one trip to the dermatologist later, P.J. decided to take advantage of the natural light of the great outdoors. She moved all of her things into the backyard and started to paint the old wooden garage complete with the tail end of my Lincoln sticking out. Maybe she was getting ready to sell the thing and wanted to keep the painting as a memory. Maybe she was afraid the garage was about to fall in—possible since it had leaned a little further to the right every year starting in the early seventies.

Or maybe she wanted to soak up the sunshine. The sun heals and purifies. In the old days, if you suspected your mattress was contaminated, you would drag it out into the sun. If you wanted to get the scent of moth balls out of clothing, the sun was the best place to start. And if you had just slept with your overbearing ex-husband? Well, the sun wasn't a bad place to start for that, either.

At first I thought the person puttering on the other side of the hedge was Wallace. He'd been keeping an eye on P.J., but only from a safe distance. At least, I hoped for his sake he was afraid to come over—I was perfectly willing to haunt a different house if he somehow had the idea he was too good for her. The putterer hacked and coughed, and I knew it was Frank before he spoke.

“Persephone Willis.”

She shuddered. No one called her by her full name except her mother. Even Lionel knew better than to do that, and he had done far worse.

She put the brush down and stood. “Mr. Dandridge?”

Here the hedge was shorter because I had planted it a long time after the hedge that separated the front and side yard. Come to think of it, I planted it when the Dandridges moved in because Frank used to sit on the back stoop in his boxers and smoke. Nothing like seeing a fat hypocrite in his boxers smoking on the sly to make you want to will a hedge to grow up a few feet. I should have looked into a fence because even after twenty years it was nothing more than a chest-high barrier between the two of them.

“I was wondering if I could have a word with you.” Frank ran a hand through his comb over.

“Of course.” P.J. wiped her hands on her smock. I thought of my mother and the biscuit dough she wiped on her apron the morning she figured out that I was pregnant.

“It's about Wallace.” Frank exhaled. “I don't want you to see him anymore.”

“What?”

“I don't want you to see Wallace anymore. I had him convinced to follow in my footsteps and to enter the ministry. Then you showed up.”

“That sounds like a decision for him to make, Mr. Dandridge. Besides, in case you haven’t noticed, he left my house in a huff.”

“He’ll get over whatever that was.” Frank exhaled again. “He doesn’t need to get attached to a divorced woman who still sleeps with her ex-husband any time he drops by.”

“He told you?” Her face flushed with embarrassment and anger.

“No, but you just did.”

If I could have wiped that self-congratulatory grin from Frank Dandridge’s face, I would have been a happy woman. I had to settle for helping a hickory nut prematurely fall from the tree above them. The thump of the green boll on his bald head was more satisfying than thumping a perfect watermelon on the Fourth of July.

He rubbed his head and looked up at the tree. “Wallace is a good boy. Even with the bad influences of his mother.” His voice rose and fell with the cadence of any good Southern evangelist. “He doesn’t need to get mixed up with you and endanger his mortal soul by committing adultery.”

P.J.’s lips pressed together in a thin line. Her knuckles shone white from where she gripped her brush tight enough to bend it. “Mr. Dandridge, I say this with all due respect, but mind your own business.”

Turning from the hedge, P.J. gathered as much of her painting paraphernalia as she could carry. She entered the house and peeked through the curtains, not wanting to go back outside if Frank was still there.

Fortunately, Frank didn’t like to stand too much. After five minutes, the mood to condemn must have passed or at least have been overridden by the desire to get off his feet and

out of the sun. When he waddled back to the house, she dashed outside and gathered what she had left, pausing for only moment to consider the hickory tree.

I decided the girl needed to get out of the house. Lionel had invaded her sanctuary, and Frank had lectured her in her own backyard. She needed to get out; she needed to go back to the library. The more I thought about it, the more I liked the plan. Ms. Howell worked the library on Thursdays, and she might be more willing to let P.J. into the research room than Estelle.

The question became how to convince P.J. to go to the library. That's when I saw the answer ensconced on the little shelf in the hallway outside the kitchen: there sat the library copy of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. When one of the casters broke off the table in the mid-nineties, P.J. had decided to express her feelings about Conrad by putting the book underneath that leg of the table. I, as any good librarian would do, rescued the book and placed it on the counter. P.J. forgot about it—probably because she had just started dating Lionel and didn't have her head into much of anything else at the time. Out of spite, I put it on the shelf, determined to teach the child some responsibility.

The teachable moment had arrived. I concentrated as hard as I could on moving the book. Slowly, it slid from the shelf and landed in the middle of the hallway with a plop. Even better, moving the book hadn't taken as much energy as trying to throw the cookie jar.

If Lionel came back, I was going to smash that cookie jar into his head.

P.J. put the last of her supplies down by the easel and headed for the hall, kicking the book and sending it into the living room. She blanched at the sight of the tell-tale white sticker with numbers on its spine, but she kneeled and took the book, muttering some colorful expressions I know she didn't learn from Cassandra.

She hugged the book to her chest then put it on the table and went in search of town clothes. My mission was a success: she was headed to the library.

Chapter 20

P.J. entered the library with more humility the second time around.

Estelle still stood behind the desk with her librarian Barbie smile; that day she wore patriotic colors in honor of the upcoming Fourth of July complete with an American flag scarf.

“Oh, back so soon?”

“Yes, Estelle. I have a new driver’s license, Joseph Conrad, and a checkbook.”

Estelle didn’t have to look up the amount on the computer. “That’ll be \$315.48 made out to the Yessum County Library, please.”

Edith Howell, faithful part-time volunteer, leaned underneath the counter to get some books from the book drop. “Estelle, you know the maximum fine we can enforce is price of replacement plus a ten dollar processing fee.” She shook her head as she scanned the books back in. Edith, a good friend of mine, wore her salt and pepper hair short and wore no-nonsense

khakis with a solid red sweater and a pair of Converse tennis shoes. She darted a glance to P.J. who nodded her thanks before turning her attentions back to Estelle.

P.J. lifted an eyebrow in a way that very much reminded me of her mother. “And what would that be, Estelle?”

“Well, um.” Estelle cleared her throat and began to type, those acrylic nails tapping and scraping the keys. “Yes, that will be \$24.95 plus the \$10 fee.”

“I’ll add ten dollars more for the library’s general use.” P.J. ripped the check from the book with a flourish and a smile. “Now, how about access to the Research Room?”

“Driver’s license, please?” Estelle nostrils flared, but she took P.J. driver’s license and typed in new information.

P.J. smiled at Edith and mouthed, “Thank you.”

Estelle reached into a drawer, her lips still pursed, and drew out a card with a bar code. She scanned the card and clicked around the mouse—extra clicks, not that P.J. could see that. Finally, she extended the card. “Your library card.”

“Thank you, Estelle.” P.J. grabbed the card, but Estelle wouldn’t let go.

Her blue eyes bored into P.J.’s. “I believe you owe me an apology.”

“I’m not apologizing for being Valedictorian.”

Estelle’s lips curled upward, her expression something between a cat and the Grinch. “No, I believe you accused me of intentionally not checking your book in.” Her acrylic nails tapped the offending copy.

P.J. blushed. “You’re right, Estelle. I’m sorry I accused you of not turning in my library book—”

“Thank you,” Estelle said brightly as she let go of the card.

“I’m sure you were actually too busy thinking of more hurtful things to do.” P.J. stepped away from the circulation desk before Estelle could answer the latest charge.

“What are you researching, baby?” Edith put her stack of books on the cart behind the desk.

“I need to do some family tree research,” P.J. said slowly.

“It’s so good to see young people taking an interest in their ancestors. Sam would be so proud.”

Edith started pulling sheets of paper from the literature rack behind the circulation desk. “Here are all of the databases we have access to and the passwords that will let you visit them. You have thirty minutes, an hour if there’s no wait for the computers. You call *me* if you have any questions.” She cut her eyes to Estelle who frowned.

P.J. took her papers and entered the Tennessee Room, as the sign above the door christened the small room with four computers and a series of books and binders on a shelf around the wall. Sunlight flooded the room from a skylight above, but P.J. chose a computer where she could sit in the shade.

She referred to a bevy of colored sheets of paper as she navigated through a series of passwords.

“Robert Theodore Hughes,” she said as she typed. My heart contracted as she said the name. I leaned over her shoulder to read.

Robert Theodore Hughes. d. 1933. Mother: Samantha Louise Hughes (1918-2003). Father: unknown. Cause of death: unknown

“Where are you buried, Baby Hughes?” P.J. searched and searched but came up with nothing. I sat beside her reading along with each new screen, but my baby wasn’t in any of the

cemeteries that P.J. could find. My heart swelled with an impossible hope—what if Lewis had been right this whole time?

“So much for that,” P.J. muttered under her breath. She exhaled with a whoosh. “Let’s try something else.”

She typed in “Melvin House” and came up with forty-seven entries. She narrowed the date of birth to somewhere between 1880 and 1910. The field narrowed to nine, but her eyes and mine zeroed in on one entry in particular:

Melvin House. (1901-1982). Mother: Frances Lowe (??-1923). Father: William Hart House (1872-1908) Married (1934) to Janice Ann Rogers (1910-1940). Married (1941) to Mildred Watkins (1920-1990). No children.

P.J. sucked in a breath, and I choked back a sob. That bastard married someone else a year after leaving me high and dry?

P.J. typed frantically through databases that would locate long-lost relatives. She checked census records for almost all of the fifty states. She finally came up with a Melvin House with the same birth date who had, at the time of the last census, been living in Bolivar.

“I just know that’s him,” she muttered to herself. “Damn.”

So Melvin House had lived in Bolivar a good chunk of the rest of his life. The coward couldn’t even check on me at any point; he didn’t want to know what had happened to his child. He hadn’t wanted to marry me, but he had married someone else a year later.

“What if…” P.J.’s voice brought me back to the library and away from murderous impulses. She typed quickly adding “Robert Theodore” and “1933.” She still came up with hundreds of entries, but only two from Louisiana. The one we’d seen before and a new one:

Robert Theodore Mason. b. 1933. Mother: Ruby Ann Mason (1900-1955). Father: Leroy Giles Mason (1895-1947). Married (1954) to Louise Burdette Malone (1940-1990).

My son had lived. I couldn't tell P.J., but I knew Ruby Ann Mason. I knew her very well.

Chapter 21

That morning in 1933 should have been like any other lazy French Quarter morning. Daddy had gone to do day labor down at the docks. Aunt Ruby had just come home from the cabaret and sat with me on the back stoop that overlooked a patchy postage stamp yard enclosed by a wooden fence. Neither she nor Daddy knew I'd been having contractions off and on since midnight. They weren't anything I couldn't handle—like cramps only more concentrated.

We both drank coffee. I was trying to wake up, but Aunt Ruby claimed she had to have a cup of coffee to wind down enough to sleep through the day in preparation for the night to come. I didn't understand it then, and I don't understand it now.

“Your daddy's rough on you, I know,” Aunt Ruby said. Her orange hair looked best at sunrise; the dim light made it glow instead of look brassy. Her face also looked smoothest in early morning light. In the daytime, I could see where the make-up was caked on, how it hung in

the creases around her mouth and over her eyes. The dark circles under her eyes shone through her makeup later in the morning.

“I reckon he ought to be,” I said.

Aunt Ruby snorted and slobbered her coffee. Some of it landed on her silk stockings and she patted at the brown liquid, cursing at the burn that would be on her leg. “No he shouldn’t be so mean to you. It takes two to get a woman pregnant, and, in my experience, the man is usually more willing than the woman.”

I nodded and looked away to the sun rising over a neighboring clapboard house. Light winked through a decorative curlicue hanging from the eave. “I didn’t really want to at all, not like that anyway.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Aunt Ruby murmured into her coffee cup. “I just wanted to tell you that you’re doing the right thing.” She lay her hand on my rounded belly.

I nodded and looked down at my unwanted baggage. She grabbed my chin and forced me to look into her deep brown eyes. “You don’t understand. I got rid of a baby because my Daddy wanted me to. Now I can’t have babies. Doctor says I’m all scarred up. Then I lost two decent husbands because they didn’t want me no more when they found out I couldn’t have kids, and now look what I do for a living. There are plenty of men who don’t want kids, but they aren’t the kind you want to fool with.”

The baby stretched inside me; my stomach felt like a balloon trying to pop. I covered his little foot with my hand. “Well, Daddy says no one’s ever going to want to marry me after I have a baby. Says ain’t no man who wants to raise another man’s child.”

“Your Daddy’s a fool,” Aunt Ruby spat. I gasped because my mother didn’t allow the original “f” word citing scripture that said calling someone a fool would send you straight to hell.

Aunt Ruby didn't seem concerned as she got to her feet and poured the rest of her coffee beside the steps before offering a hand to help me up. "He and I are going to have a little chat this afternoon before I go back to work."

I followed her into the house, and she disappeared into her boudoir where her roommate and fellow dancer, Sasha, was already asleep. I knew better than to wake the two of them so I went to the kitchen to help Lottie with the dishes. I wasn't supposed to help Lottie, Sasha's mother, because Aunt Ruby paid Lottie to keep the house up. I couldn't get used to the idea of having a maid, though, so I often wandered into the kitchen and washed dishes or stirred pots. Something about the kitchen made me a little less stir-crazy and homesick.

A fierce contraction squeezed my innards while drying one of the plates and I must have paused because Lottie stopped washing to study me. She was an older lady, her skin the color of good French Roast coffee before they added the au lait. She would have looked young except for all of the skin that hung under her neck and underneath each arm. "Miss Sammy, you already trying to have that baby?"

"I don't know," I said. "I've had a little pain, but I thought that was normal."

Lottie laughed under her breath. "It's normal all right. I'd better go get Miss Ruby."

I looked at the clock. Aunt Ruby had only been asleep for an hour. I grabbed Lottie's sleeve. "We can't wake her up yet."

Water whooshed between my legs, a squishy bucket full that drenched my shoes. I screamed, but Lottie, who had had seven children, chuckled and shook her head. "I'm going to get Miss Ruby. Then I guess I'd better get a mop. We'll need us some towels, and some water..."

She kept muttering to herself as she walked to the bedroom. I heard her knuckles on the door then the grunts of both Aunt Ruby and Sasha. I picked up one foot then the other, but I couldn't move. I was disgusted by my body's liquid; I couldn't force myself to take a step in any direction and didn't know where I would step if I did.

"Dammit, Mama, why do I have to go get Miss Genieve? You done had enough babies you ought to be able to deliver one yourself." Sasha stood a foot taller than her mother with a lithe body from dancing. Her complexion had the au lait her mother's lacked, and normally she had the most beautiful almond shaped eyes that I had ever seen. This morning they narrowed at her mother then at me. Lottie took that opportunity to swat her youngest daughter's backside.

"Get on out to Miss Genieve, or I'll really give you a spanking. Don't care if you are nineteen."

"I'm going. I'm going." Sasha's eyes suggested I owed her one.

Aunt Ruby appeared in the doorway. "Just had to have your baby in the day time, didn't you," she said with a yawn. "What're we going to need, Lottie?"

Lottie waved away her question, and the skin under her arms flapped back and forth a dozen times after her arm stopped moving. "I'll get all that; you just get the girl comfortable and calm her down. Looks scared half out of her wits."

"Like you weren't scared your first time," Aunt Ruby said with another yawn.

"Not like you, running around in circles 'cause you didn't know what to do." Lottie had her back to Aunt Ruby, so she didn't see Aunt Ruby's frown.

"You had a baby, Aunt Ruby? You said—"

"Hush up, Sammy. Now's not the time to talk about that." Aunt Ruby's frown was more sad than angry.

“But what happened?” I couldn’t move from the mess at my feet.

Aunt Ruby hesitated, no doubt not wanting to share all of the possibilities with a scared country girl in labor with her first baby. Finally, she spat out the truth. “She died. I told you I’m all ruind inside.”

Aunt Ruby took my upper arm with just enough strength to let me know she meant business. She looked me straight in the eye. “That’s not going to happen to you. C’mon, sugar, let’s go have us a baby.”

Let’s go have us a baby.

The research room swirled around me, and I was once again in P.J.’s car—whatever supernatural law of nature that bound us had stretched as far as it could go before slinging me back to her side.

Let’s go have us a baby.

Did Aunt Ruby know at that moment she was going to take my child from me? Had she and Daddy already hashed out the details in one of their nightly sotto voce conversations? I closed my sight to the world, amazed that I could still feel the sway of the car. Why did I feel? I didn’t want to feel anymore. I would have thought that not feeling would be one of the perks of being dead, but, apparently, *feeling* was one of the few things that both the dead and the living could do. Truth be told, it was a lot easier not to feel when I was living and could push all of these memories into that dusty trunk upstairs.

At least everything made sense now. After that summer, Daddy wouldn’t hear of visiting Aunt Ruby again, and she never answered a single letter I sent. Then, when I tried to call, the number had been disconnected, and, shortly after, my letters came back marked “return to

sender.” I had always wondered why Daddy didn’t seem bothered by Aunt Ruby’s sudden disappearance, but now I wondered if he had orchestrated it.

The only question that remained was how to convince P.J. to look up Robert Theodore Mason.

Chapter 22

Once home, P.J. took off the locket and went for one of her laser treatments. The last “I” of Lionel was almost gone, but I had no idea what she planned to do next. If she could only remove one letter at a time, she was going to be getting treatments until the rapture. Then she’d get another mark, and the whole thing would start over again. Come to think of it, the whole thing was probably part of the dermatologist’s racket.

I slumped into one of the new kitchen chairs, but the vinyl and metal contraption didn’t sit right. I wanted my old dinette set back, but Lionel had taken care of that. And he would be back; he was, after all, the proverbial bad penny.

On the counter lay the papers from the lock box. I took the business card, surprisingly light in my “hands,” and I slid it to the middle of the table where she couldn’t help but see it. The private detective was probably long dead at this point, but the card would be a starting point.

If we were lucky, maybe the man had maintained files. The idea of files didn't jive with a Bogartesque noir detective, but Lewis Biddle had hired the guy so he stood a good chance of being the first OCD PI the world had ever known.

Lewis Biddle. We were in our fifties when he asked me to marry him. He didn't rest until I told him the whole story: the story of Melvin House's seduction, the story of going to New Orleans, and the blur that was my son's birth. I told him about the forty-four hours I paced that row house in the French Quarter and how I would stop when the contractions seized me. I couldn't eat; I couldn't sleep. And Daddy wouldn't let me go to the hospital. The whole memory was a blessed blur, and I passed out twice after Robert finally made it into the world.

The second time I passed out, he was gone when I came to.

Lewis, lovely old Lewis, zeroed in on the part of my memory where I thought I heard a baby cry and thought I felt someone holding him to my breast. Sweet, sweet Lewis. He didn't ask me if I thought there was a chance that my Robert had lived; he hired an expensive private investigator, convinced that I would marry him if he could only solve this mystery.

And solve the mystery he did. His detective searched for several months and found someone who could be my son. Lewis even bought the plane tickets. He couldn't understand why I couldn't face my son, why I couldn't bear the thought of getting my hopes up only to have them dashed. And, really, what was the point? Whoever the man was, he had already lived life with another mother. I had already missed nursing him and soothing him after late night feedings. I had missed sending him off to his first day of school or watching him toss a cap at graduation. Whoever this detective had found didn't need a crazy old lady coming in to mess up his life, and that's what I told Lewis. Then I did the second stupidest thing of my life: I told Lewis Biddle that I would never marry him, that he needed to find a far better woman than me.

Ever the gentleman, he made me keep the ring. And the card for the detective who was certain he had found my son.

P.J. returned from her appointment and dropped the mail on the table. The business card went flying, and she bent down to pick it up.

“That’s odd.” She looked over her shoulder. “I could have sworn I put you over here with the rest of the documents.”

Laying down the card, she picked up my happiness list. “Maybe I need one of these,” she said. Laying the list down too, she walked over to her makeshift studio and frowned at her work. She walked back to the table and picked up a form she had brought in with her. I read over her shoulder to see a Tennessee Heritage Art Contest entry form. Her painting was due at the end of August; she didn’t have much time.

She went through each of her paintings, but even I had to admit that none of them really reflected a sense of Tennessee heritage. Sure, almost all of them spoke of southern heritage, but there was nothing specifically Tennessean. She also had to explain in an essay why she thought the piece expressed what it meant to be a Tennessean, but the whole point of art was to say something without words, wasn’t it?

P.J. snapped her fingers and went to her purse to draw out the sketches of Billy Yankel. She turned the sketches left then right. If ghosts could grin, I would have grinned. She was thinking of the angle of that statue, how the proper painting could capture the Tennessee flag in the backdrop and how Billy Yankel represented a split state and a split country. She snatched her purse and sketchbook and raced back out the door.

Not two seconds after her tires crunched the last piece of gravel in the drive, I heard the back door of the Dandridge house slam. And was that the mew of kittens? I had to find out.

In the backyard, Frank Dandridge stood akimbo, his massive belly sticking out. He looked about eight months along—except for the wisps of comb over that played on the breeze.

“Wallace Dandridge, what are you doing bringing those mangy, flea bitten alley cats over here?”

Wallace leaned over a large box, one hand holding it shut while he frowned at the angry scratches and welts on his other arm. “Dad, the cats don’t need to be over there at the nursery. The mama cat was drinking runoff water that had pesticides and fertilizer and who knows what else.”

“It’s a cat,” Frank sputtered.

“Yes, Dad. It’s a cat. Still one of God’s creatures.” Wallace took a deep breath. “I’m about to open this box, and the mammy’s probably going to jump out of here ready to scratch anyone or anything so considered yourself warned.”

Frank took a step back, and the cat leaped from the box, eyes wild and tail bent over like a bullwhip ready to crack. She raced for the dogwood behind Wallace and climbed as high as she dared, perching on a branch and eying the two men while her tail switched. The kittens in the box mewed and scratched, and Wallace smiled down at them.

“She’s gonna disown those kittens because you touched them,” Frank spat.

“Dad, don’t you have something better to do in the house?” Wallace reached in and scooped up a striped yellow kitten, holding it against his chest. The kitten mewed and scratched at first but settled in as Wallace gently stroked its fur.

“I’ll go. I’ll go, but those cats aren’t coming into my house,” Frank said his index finger out and emphasizing each word.

“No, I’m not in the business of houstraining animals,” Wallace said more to the kitten than to his father.

Frank took two steps to the house and turned. “You brought those kittens for *her*, didn’t you?” The way he sneered it made it seem Wallace had bought a box full of adult toys instead of a box full of roly-poly fuzzy kittens.

Wallace stood straighter, and the kitten yawned, showing off his tiny pink sandpaper tongue. “Yes, Dad. I told P.J. that I would bring her a kitten. I thought the mama cat would be handy to help with the mice, too.”

Color seeped from Frank’s ears through his cheeks and up to his forehead. His jaws mottled with rage. “You stay away from that whore.”

Wallace blinked twice and put the kitten down before pulling himself up to his full height. “You take it back.”

“I will not take it back! She’s a whore, and you’ll be an adulterer if you go anywhere near her. The Bible says...”

“I don’t care what the Bible says.” Wallace’s roar echoed off the parsonage and off my house, too. Frank’s color drained as quickly as it had risen.

Wallace ran a hand through his hair giving Frank a good view of the angry red scratches on his arm. “Look, Dad. I’m sorry. I didn’t really mean that, but P.J.’s not a whore. Not every woman is a whore.”

“Your mother’s a whore,” Frank spat.

Something behind Wallace's eyes snapped. "She isn't. And when you talk like that I can see why she left."

Frank's eyes widened and his mouth open and shut like a fish flopping on a pond bank. "I don't know you." He took another two steps to the house and turned, his index finger pointing and shaking in rage. "But the devil does."

Wallace turned and crouched to look at the kittens.

"Don't turn your back on me, boy."

Wallace looked over his shoulder just in time to see Frank clutch his chest.

"Dad!"

Frank gasped for air. Finally, he spoke. "I think it's a heart attack."

Wallace threw his father's arm over his shoulder and helped him to the Dew Drop Nursery Pick-up. Long after they left, the kittens yowled and scratched against the box, and the mammy cat growled, an unearthly moan.

Chapter 23

P.J. came in from her morning run, her cheeks flushed with exertion. She stood at the sink and drank water so quickly that a good third of it dribbled down her chin. She plopped into a chair, and air whooshed from a slit in the vinyl seat. She frowned; she didn't like the metal and formica monstrosity any more than I did. I slid the business card under her fingers and she frowned. "What are you playing at, Aunt Sam?"

Someone knocked on the back door before I could try to answer. She put the card down on the table but brushed it with her hand as she stood. It fluttered to the floor.

"Hey." She opened the screen door for Wallace. She winced at the yellowish brown bruise around his eye.

"Hey." He studied her, looking for wounds and scars that he knew weren't visible. "I'm sorry about the other night. I shouldn't have left you like that."

She shrugged.

“No, he could have come back.” Wallace’s brown eyes locked with her green ones. A game of chicken began. He caved. “Can I come in?”

She held her arm out in a gesture that he should enter.

“Whatcha got in the box?” she asked.

“A peace offering. Well, another peace offering.” He lifted the flaps to reveal the four kittens. “You can take your pick.”

She picked up a gray brindled one first and lifted its tail. “I’m a farm girl, but I’ve always had trouble with kittens.”

“Girl,” Wallace said.

She picked up another one, a gray one with white feet. It hissed at her before she had the chance to get personal with it. She put it down and picked up the yellow tabby that Wallace had picked up the day before. She lifted its tail. “Boy?”

Wallace nodded.

She cradled the kitten, and he settled into her chest and gave a low purr. “I think he likes me.”

Wallace didn’t smile as she held the kitten up to her cheek and ran the top of its fluffy head underneath her chin. “I think he’s the one.”

“Thank you, Wallace,” P.J. said. She put the kitten back in the box and went to the cabinet for a saucer then to the fridge for some milk.

“Want all of them?” Wallace’s eyes were hungry, not to get but to give. I must have seen that look a hundred times from Lewis Biddle, but I couldn’t see what it was then.

“I think one’s enough. The Gilmores might want some for the barn, though.” She poured milk into the saucer

“Good idea,” he said, finally smiling. “I get the impression the mammy cat isn’t fond of her move from the nursery.”

“Oh?” P.J. crouched slowly, balancing the saucer so none of the milk would spill. Wallace held up his arm to show his scratches. She winced before she placed the saucer in the box. The kittens sniffed it then began to push at each other to lap it up.

“Yeah, she was drinking run-off water with chemicals in it.”

She turned to face him, concern etched into her forehead. “Wallace, that’s terrible. It’s a good thing you brought them all here.”

He smiled at her response, the one he had been looking for all along. “That’s what I said although I was thinking they could take up residence in the old garage if you didn’t mind.”

P.J. nodded her approval of the plan. “Hey, I had an idea for my Tennessee Heritage entry. I talked myself into going next door to ask your opinion, but you weren’t there. Well, and to say I was sorry about Lionel being such an ass. So where were you yesterday?”

“Oh, I took my dad to the hospital.”

She froze just above her chair. “Is he okay?”

Wallace ran a hand through his hair and sat down at the table, frowning at his chair, too. “He had a mild heart attack, and he’s resting. Doc said he should be fine with a few lifestyle changes.” Wallace chuckled. “As if that’s going to happen. I take it you didn’t get my message about the kittens?”

“What? No? I’m sorry. I really haven’t been answering my cell.” She looked to the counter where her phone blinked at her.

“Lionel?”

She nodded.

“You need to change your number.”

“I know, I know. I just can’t seem to make myself go to the store. Ignoring him seems just as easy.”

“Yeah, but there are other people in the world who might be trying to call. Like your friend Wallace who was in the hospital scared his father was going to die before he could say he was sorry.”

“What did you need to apologize for?”

Wallace studied her, weighing what he should say next. “It started when he called you a whore.”

She looked to the floor and closed her eyes.

“Then he called Mom a whore.”

P.J.’s head snapped up, and her eyes met his. “He really likes that word, doesn’t he?”

“Apparently. Then I told him I didn’t care what the Bible says. At that blasphemy, he had a heart attack, and the last thing he told me was I was no longer welcome in ICU much less his house.”

“Oh, Wallace.” P.J. sat down at the table, and they stared at each other. Wallace’s Adam’s apple bobbed up and down.

“So, I was wondering if I could stay with you.”

“Sure, sure,” P.J. said. “I’ve got plenty of room, and—” She pressed her lips into a thin line. “I don’t think future Church of Zion pastors can live with unmarried women. Wouldn’t that be the very definition of living in sin?”

“Living in a glass house is exhausting,” Wallace said. The bags under his eyes and his frown supported his theory. “I’m not sure I can be my dad’s kind of minister.”

P.J. stared through him, smart enough to hold her tongue, but not able to stop a dazzling grin from spreading.

“Don’t say a word,” Wallace said. “I have a lot to think about.”

“Open hearts. Open minds. Open—”

“Not a word!”

P.J. pulled an imaginary zipper across her lips and tossed the key.

“So, can I start packing before I have to bring Dad home?”

She nodded emphatically in a yesward direction.

“Wanna watch bad movies and eat ridiculously buttered popcorn tonight.”

P.J.’s shoulders slumped. “I’d love to Wallace, but tonight’s my date with Tyler.”

“Yeah, that’s right.” Sheepish didn’t begin to describe Wallace’s grin/grimace. He walked to the door, but stopped between screen door and outside door. “And, Peej?”

“Yeah?” She had picked up one of the kittens, rubbing its fur against her cheek.

“You don’t ever have to apologize for anything that Lionel does.”

She nodded as if she knew it, but tears glistened at the corners of her eyes and heat rushed into her cheeks. “At least I don’t have to worry about *my* reputation if you move in,” she choked out with a chuckle. “Mine’s already ruined.”

Wallace shrugged. “It’s not Victorian America, and reputations are overrated anyway.”

“Good attitude to take since you’re moving in with me.” She put the kitten down and brushed her hands on her running shorts as she stood.

“Hey, I just wanted Miss Georgette to bring over her famous apricot salad,” he said with a half-smile. Between his smile and how the morning sun hit his profile just right, he stood so handsome before her, softer around the edges than he had been when she arrived. It didn’t surprise me when P.J. sighed; it only surprised me that she managed to hold it in until he stepped out the door.

During the day, P.J. helped Wallace pack and move boxes over. That night, she dressed up in a gauzy shirt over a tank top and her best jeans, and she added cowboy boots she had bought at the church thrift store. She was trying too hard to fit in with Tyler Monroe and his crowd, and I knew they would see right through her as well as her shirt. I’d whispered everything I could think of to whisper, and she was blatantly ignoring me. Even Wallace’s scowls didn’t phase her, although, in all fairness, he mainly scowled at her back. She did however pick up the locket so I could go with her.

At five minutes until eight, Tyler still hadn’t shown. Wallace had visibly relaxed from where he sat in the living room. P.J. had given up on pacing and sat down at the Formica nightmare to read the paper. Her cell phone vibrated and she took it from her pocket, checking the number before she answered.

“Tyler, there you are!” Her face fell as she listened.

“Of course, we can reschedule,” she said. “No, no, you need to take care of yourself when you’re sick.”

He droned on, and she nodded as she bit her lip. “No, we can go out next week. Don’t worry about it.”

After the customary goodbyes, she snapped the phone shut. He had stood her up, but she was going to go out with him later. She could go to the dermatologist and grit her teeth as lasers cut into her skin to remove her tattoo, but she couldn't tell Tyler Monroe to shove it. Maybe we shared defective genes after all.

Wallace leaned in the doorway. "Hey."

She swiped away a tear and forced her lips into a bright smile before turning around.

"So, he's not coming."

Wallace drew his fingers across his mouth to close the imaginary zipper then zipped backwards to be able to eat the key.

P.J. half-choked and half-laughed. "Oh, Wallace. Thanks for not saying it."

"Wallace, come on in. Let's drown our sorrows in milk and Chips Ahoy."

"Good idea." He pulled out a chair. "If you have time before you head out to the rodeo."

"Ha. Ha. Very funny." P.J. rifled through the pantry for the cookies then reached into the fridge for the milk. Wallace hit the chair but bounced up to go to the pantry for glasses.

"So, what's keeping Tyler? Flat tire? Death in the family? Malaria?"

"No, he said he wasn't feeling well." She poured the milk without making eye contact.

Wallace's eyebrow shot up. He was thinking the same thing I thought: Tyler had found someone he thought would make a better date than P.J. "You know, Peej, I really don't like this table."

"That makes two of us." Or three of us.

"I think I might could make one like the one we had," he said with a frown as he ran his fingers over the metal on the side of the table. P.J. stared through him mid-chew. She'd registered the "we," too.

“Go ahead. I’ll pay you back when I start teaching in the fall.”

He nodded, and they ate in silence for a few minutes. He took a bite of cookie then a sip of milk. She dipped her cookies into the milk before eating them. She’d end up wasting that glass of milk because she really only wanted just enough for dunking her cookies.

“Peej, I think you need to learn to shoot a gun.” She choked on her cookie as he calmly took a bite of his.

“Wallace, I don’t know anything about guns.” P.J. shook her head no while her hands waved with palms out in surrender. “I would probably shoot my foot off.”

“That’s why I’m going to teach you,” Wallace said. “If you’ll let me.”

“Wallace, that’s really sweet of you, but—”

“P.J., if you think for one second that Lionel is going to leave you alone just because you told him to, you are sadly mistaken. He’s going to be back.”

“And I’m going to tell him no,” she said with an affirmative nod to convince herself. “I’m not even going to let him into my house.”

“Peej, you need to do something to empower yourself. I mean, at least I’m here now. For all the good that might do you.” He looked at the floor, memories of how Lionel had pricked his pride by tossing him into the table.

“Actually, that makes me feel a lot better.” She nibbled on the edge of her cookie.

His eyes locked with hers. “But I’m not always here.”

“Wallace, this is crazy. Don’t you have to have a license to own a gun?”

“I do,” he said. “And I have a gun, a smaller one that you should be able to manage.”

P.J. rolled up the sleeve of cookies and went to replace them in the pantry. She reached for the top shelf, and her shirt rode up enough to show what she’s been doing with her tattoo.

Wallace frowned when he saw that only the “I” was missing. “Peej, watcha doing with the tat?”

“Oh, I have plans for it.” She sat down again and put her hand around her glass of milk. She took a few deep breaths to psyche herself up then chugged the glass. “Let’s just say it’s not going to read ‘Lionel’ when I’m done.”

Wallace frowned, his brow crinkled in curiosity. “So, can we start learning how to shoot this gun tomorrow?”

“On a Sunday?” She sat down and leaned on her elbows.

He untwisted the plastic sheath that protected the cookies. “Well, you don’t go to church, so why not?”

She sat up straight. “I have been going to church, so thank you very much!”

“That was one Sunday several weeks ago. Your car is here when I leave and still here when I get back. You Methodists are fast, but not that fast.” He popped his last cookie in his mouth.

“Fine, you’re right. I’ve only been once, but it still doesn’t feel right to take shooting lessons on a Sunday.”

Wallace shrugged and got to his feet. “Suit yourself, but I’m thinking you’ll want to have progressed to a shotgun by the time Halloween rolls around. Unless you just like picking toilet paper out of the trees.”

“Fine.” She sighed. “Fine.”

Wallace walked to the doorway of the living room. “Oh, and I almost forgot! I got you something else.”

“Kittens and guns. What’s next?”

“Fine, I’ll keep it all to myself.” He started for the door, but she grabbed his arm.

At her touch he froze. They looked at each other, neither one willing to move. Until she spoke. “I didn’t mean it like that, Wallace, tell me what it is.”

He gently removed her arm, the good-natured kidding back. “No, no, you don’t like my gifts, so I will take this one to someone who will appreciate it.”

“Seriously, Wallace. I’m sorry. What’s the present?”

He reached to his back pocket and withdrew tickets. “I happened to be at the right place at the right time yesterday, and I won these. I thought you might want to come with me.”

P.J. held the tickets closer to be able to read them. “The West Tennessee Dirt Dobbers?”

“Yeah, they’re box seats for the baseball game this Tuesday night.”

Holding the tickets out by thumb and forefinger, P.J. wrinkled her nose. “Wallace, you know I don’t like baseball; I’m more of a football kind of gal.”

“That’s because you’ve never tried it.” Wallace extended his hand, and she returned the tickets.

“Not true. I’ve watched it on TV. Generally when I wanted to watch something else that had been preempted.”

“It’s just not the same. You know, this is the least you can do for always promising me that you would go to my high school baseball games and always weaseling your way out.” He wagged a finger at her. She winced; she had missed those baseball games because she was with Lionel.

“I’ll go.”

Wallace blinked twice. “You will?”

“Yeah, I owe you that much.”

Wallace studied her, his face suddenly blank. I would have loved to know what he was thinking behind those intense black eyes. “Come to church with me tomorrow.”

He said the words with the same fervor he might have proposed marriage, and all air left the room.

“Dear Lord, not you, too!” P.J. lifted her hands in exasperation and let them slap against her thighs.

“What are you talking about?” Wallace shifted his hands on his hips in a position to stay.

She exhaled a great gust of air. “You’re doing the Church of Zion thing again.”

His eyes narrowed. “And what exactly is the ‘Church of Zion’ thing?”

“It’s the old, please come to church with me because you’re my friend and I don’t want you to go to hell routine.” She batted her eyelashes, and I couldn’t blame him for getting angry.

“You know what? I am concerned for your soul.”

“No, you think. . . you think. . .” She reached for the words. “You think I’m some kind of slut, too.”

“No, I do not!”

“What happened to the exhaustion of living in a glass house? Why not come to my church with me tomorrow?”

“I can’t do that,” he sputtered.

“You can’t, or you won’t?” Her eyebrow shot up, that genetic gift from Cassandra.

“I just don’t understand.” He shook his head.

“What don’t you understand?”

“How our conversations always end up in arguments? Why my best intentions end up making you mad? Why in heaven’s name you slept with Lionel again after divorcing him?”

The last questions sucked any remaining air out of the room, and I thought she was going to kick him out of the house rather than answer but instead she crumbled.

“It was easier,” she said under her breath.

Wallace put a hand under her chin and pulled it up so their eyes meet again. “What did you say?”

“I said, ‘It was easier.’ There. Are you satisfied?” Fat tears rolled down her cheeks.

“If I live to be a hundred, I will never understand women,” Wallace muttered.

“It. Was. Easier. Wallace!” Her voice was hoarse from yelling. “I went through years of marriage when it was easier to let him have his way than it was to fight. The other day I didn’t want to, but it was like I fell into a trance. I was scared of what would happen if I pushed him away. He does weird things when he’s high like that; he’s not your stereotypical mellow pothead.”

“P.J., that’s crazy. He’s an asshole, but it’s not like he would hit you or rape you if you said no.”

She stared through him, tears rolling down her cheeks. Wallace had never considered that there were other ways of manipulating women. Besides, what was rape, anyway? Did it require force? Did it require screaming and thrashing? Did rape begin anytime a woman had sex even though there was an inkling somewhere in the back of her mind that she didn’t want to? Did rape sometimes begin with something as beautiful as the Song of Solomon?

“Dear God in Heaven.” Wallace dropped his hand to his side then opened his arms to her, but she flinched. “Dear Lord, P.J.” He wrapped his arms around her, but she beat against his chest.

“No, I am a whore. You have to get out of here before I rub off on you.” Her voice cracked.

He grabbed her wrists. “I’m not going anywhere.” He said the words so softly I almost couldn’t hear them over her sobs.

“I signed the purity pledge, and I didn’t keep it.”

“The purity pledge was worth the paper it was written on. It was mimeographed in smudged purple ink.” He pulled her closer.

“You signed it, too. And I bet you’re still a virgin.”

“No.” His answer was too quick.

She froze. “Liar.”

His shoulders slumped. “Yes, I’m still a virgin. In the strictest sense of the word, anyway.”

She lowered her arms and reduced her sobs to shuddering sniffles. “Because of the pledge?”

He scowled. “Because of some pledge we signed when we were fifteen asking us not to have sex until after we married? No, the pledge was stupid. Look at all of this guilt it’s heaped on you? You married him because of that stupid pledge, didn’t you?”

She stared ahead.

“Didn’t you?”

She swallowed and nodded.

“How much better would it have been if you’d just chalked it up to a mistake and not married him?” He reached up to brush away her tears with his thumbs. “I haven’t slept with

anyone because I haven't run across anyone I've wanted to marry. I know that makes me weird, but I haven't had a lot of opportunity in the last few years either."

Living with Frank Dandridge, I would say not.

"Still, you're the golden boy, and I have fallen from grace. Far, far from grace."

He opened his mouth and she put a finger over his lips. "Don't say it. Don't ruin this moment by asking me to walk across the street with you tomorrow."

Instead he left a lingering kiss on her forehead and pulled her close to him. Her eyes widened at the kiss, but then she snuggled into him and closed her eyes. They stood that way for a long moment before he turned her around and pushed her in the direction of the living room.

"You need a good movie to take your mind off all of this."

"*Clue*?" She asked with bright eyes.

"I said a good movie," he grumbled as she went ahead of him to the living room then reached for the switch to turn off the kitchen light. I heard the stabbing notes of the opening score of *Clue* then looked to the kitchen table where the PI's business card shone in a perfect moonbeam.

Chapter 24

The next morning P.J. and Wallace met in the kitchen. He wore shirt and tie, much as he had on the day she had opened the door to find the snake. She wore her only other sundress, a blue gingham number that was starting to hang loose.

“You fixed breakfast?” He blinked twice at the spread: biscuits, scrambled eggs, and bacon.

“You don’t have to sound so surprised,” she said as she handed him a cup of coffee.

He opened his mouth to say something then thought better of it. He took a seat at the table, and she sat opposite him. He passed her the creamer.

“Thanks,” she said. “I’ve been thinking.”

“A dangerous pastime,” he said through a mouthful of eggs.

“I know,” she said with a grin at how he remembered the lines from one of her favorite movies. “Seriously, let’s just get this church thing over with. I’ll come to church with you this morning. You can come with me to church next week.”

She extended her hand. He hesitated out of habit because Church of Zion members didn’t, as a rule, attend other churches. After all, why go to wrong church with folks who were clearly going to hell because they weren’t a member of the true church? Something clicked behind his eyes, and he threw his hand forward. “Deal.”

She grinned at him, and he stopped chewing his biscuit for a moment. As domestic as the scene looked to me, it had to feel like a marriage of sorts to the two of them. Wallace glowed, but P.J. fidgeted. They ate in silence for some time. She flinched when the clock in the living room chimed a quarter ‘til. She eased back into her chair, though. No need to leave so early when she was just crossing the street.

“How long before Miss Georgette figures out, do you think?”

Wallace screwed the top on the jelly to keep himself from eating another biscuit. “I give her a week. Normally, it would be much quicker, but Dad does live next door.”

P.J. nodded. “Apricot salad you say?”

Wallace shook his head vigorously. “Oh, yeah. All of the big fact finding missions require apricot salad. That’s what she brought when mom left.”

“Where is your mom, Wallace?”

He studied the branch outside the window above the sink. “Oh, she left with some guy from Georgia who sells carpet. I guess you can see why Dad has a problem with women who leave their husbands.”

P.J. opened her mouth to say something but wisely closed it. Finally, she spoke. “Are you going to visit your dad?”

Wallace shrugged. “Linda came down from Chicago. She said she’d tell me if anything changed. For now the doctors say to stay away.” Wallace studied a crack along the top of the table, running his finger along the uneven groove. “They say our argument hastened the heart attack and it would be better if I stayed away until his heart gets stronger.”

P.J. reached across the table and squeezed his hand. “I’m sorry, Wallace.”

“Well, Linda said it gave her a chance to be the favorite child for a while.” His tone was nonchalant, but it was hard for him. Wallace had always been his father’s favorite, the one destined to follow in his footsteps. Even though he had been running the nursery handed down on his mother’s side of the family, Frank had always considered that to be only a temporary arrangement.

“Hey, we’d better go.” He took his hand from hers.

She handed him all of the things that needed to go in the fridge. That task accomplished, he turned and spied the business card that had been sitting under the tub of butter. “What’s this?”

“Something I found in the lockbox,” P.J. said.

“You should call the number just to see who answers.”

Thank you, Wallace!

“After all this time?”

“Yeah, after all this time. Aren’t you trying to find out if Aunt Sam had a kid?” Wallace put the card on the fridge, anchoring it with two unicorn magnets.

“Oh, she had a kid, but he died right after being born.” She frowned. “But he’s not in any cemetery I could find, and there was this weird entry for a kid with the same birth date, same first and middle names, but a different last name.”

Wallace tapped the card before picking his Bible up from the counter. “And that’s why you should call the number.”

I knew I had always liked Wallace.

“Fine. I’ll call the number this afternoon,” she said.

He reached for her hand, realized what he was doing and quickly put his hand against his pants leg before she saw. Wallace Dandridge had officially passed his puppy love of their kindergarten years; he was utterly and hopelessly smitten.

Fortunately, the powers that be allowed me to enter the Church of Zion because P.J. was not wearing her locket. When I thought about it, I had been in the Church of Zion before. Once. Wallace held one of the double doors open for her, and she took a deep breath and entered. *That’s right, I wanted to tell her. Open hearts, open minds, open doors.*

The sanctuary was far darker than Old Hickory because the stained glass windows were deep blues and browns with a blood red. The pews were mahogany, or stained mahogany, with dark burgundy velvet cushions. They stretched for a mile before an open altar that looked odd without piano or organ to either side.

P.J. murmured along with the songs—she had studied music and knew how to read it—but kept silent during prayers and responsive readings. Wallace beamed, his baritone blending seamlessly into songs and standing out richly during readings. I couldn’t blame him; he had wanted P.J. to come to church with him for years.

She settled into the pew, arranging her skirts and crossing her legs at her ankles in preparation for a long sermon. Dr. Howard Littleman, the associate pastor, stood behind the pulpit, a short bald man in an expensive suit. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his brow.

Littleman read the scripture, a passage from John. His sermon wandered and meandered here and there. At about five minutes after twelve he decided to make a point. “We all know John 3:16: ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.’”

P.J. looked to Wallace and nodded, a gesture that said, “So far, so good.”

“The part you need to think about, though, comes next: ‘For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only son.’”

Littleman stepped to the side of the pulpit. As he mopped his brow for the fortieth time, his gold watch caught the light. “My job is not an easy one. I have to tell my lambs some things that they may not want to hear.”

Wallace sat up straighter, his lips pressed into a frown.

“Beloved, I tell you that saying you believe in Christ is not enough. You must walk down this aisle and give your life to Him and give your service to this church because the time is short. ‘Whoever does not believe stands condemned already.’ Do you believe? Do you believe enough to walk down here and give your life to Jesus?”

Littleman paced to the other side of the podium, and P.J. fidgeted in her seat. “You all know that we lost a pillar of the community last week, a man who gave great service to this

church. Roger Malone attended every carwash and drove the van for every youth trip. He volunteered his time in Mexico and taught at the university. But did you know that Roger wasn't a member of our church?"

The congregation tittered. I recognized Theresa Malone close to the front; she stared ahead, rigid in her seat.

"That's right, Beloved. Roger didn't stand up here and take Jesus into his heart," Littleman continued. "He did good deeds, it's true, but I don't want any of you to end up like Roger Malone on God's judgment day. 'Whoever believes will not perish,' but 'whoever does not believe stands condemned already.' In Romans, Paul tells us that 'all have fallen short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace.' But we have to believe, and we have to accept that grace."

Theresa's head was bowed, and her shoulders shook from weeping.

"That's not right," P.J. muttered. She started to stand, but Wallace held her back.

"He's wrapping it up," he said. His eyes no longer shone bright.

Littleman took a deep breath. "Ask yourself before you partake of the Lord's Supper today, do I truly believe? Have I given my whole self over to God? Remember what Paul tells us in Corinthians, 'Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.'"

P.J. took a deep breath, and Littleman gave communion to the choir and then the ushers. The ushers stepped to the end of the row, directing traffic down to the altar. At first the

procession was eerie without music to accompany the procession, but the choir finally settled in and started singing “Let us break bread together.”

When the usher reached the second to the last row, P.J. stood to follow Wallace to the altar, but he frowned and shook his head, so she took a step back and collided with the lady who had been sitting on her other side. In the end, she shuffled out of the pew then had to shuffle back to her seat as the others proceeded to the front. I stroked her hair. Having never attended any church other than the Methodist Church, she didn’t understand that not all tables were open.

Wallace and her other pewmates returned up the other side of the church. Wallace brushed past her. Her eyes flashed as he passed. She gripped the pew in front until her knuckles turned white, but she kept her mouth closed through the end of the service. She even managed to smile past her clenched jaw as members greeted her at the end of church.

She and Wallace descended the stairs, and still she held her tongue.

“Wallace Dandridge, how did you convince P.J. Willis to come to church with you today?”

P.J. turned just in time to be smothered in a Giorgio-drenched hug from Miss Georgette who wore a purple knit dress with a wide red belt and an even wider brimmed red hat. “Oh, look at you. You are getting so skinny. I’ve seen you running around town. And was that Lionel’s car in your driveway? Are you getting back together with him? It’s always so sad when a young marriage breaks up. Not that it’s not sad when an older marriage breaks up, but we old people have to overcome laziness to break up.” Miss Georgette paused long enough to pinch one of P.J.’s cheeks. “I’m so glad you came to church this morning. I knew that one day ol’ Wallace here would talk you into it. It’s good to see the two of you thicker than thieves again, always so cute running around town together or doing your lemonade stands. Why, I remember—”

“I’m sorry, Miss Georgette, but I think we’re meeting P.J.’s parents for lunch,” Wallace said.

“Oh, well, I certainly can’t keep you. Look over there at poor Theresa. I simply must speak to her. I can’t imagine how I would feel in her shoes. I’m so glad that my John became a member when he did. He died two months later, you know. Took such a load off my mind to know that he was in heaven. Oh, there she goes around the corner. You two enjoy your lunch and you come back to see us, Miss P.J.”

“Don’t count on it,” P.J. muttered under her breath as Miss Georgette waddled around the corner.

“Please save it until we get to the house.”

P.J. shot him a look, but his face was weary, already defeated. They crossed the street and started up the drive narrowly missing Cassandra as she pulled into the drive. Wallace took P.J. by the shoulders. “Can we please not dissect this sermon in front of your parents?”

She pursed her lips and studied him, looking for any signs of superiority. Not talking about the sermon in the car meant automatically losing an ally in her mother. “Okay.”

“Thank you,” he said as he opened the Buick door for her.

Both of them climbed into the car, and we all headed for lunch: one big happy—mostly living—family.

Sally Kilpatrick

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Experience

Writing Coach

8/2009-5/2010 Kennesaw State University

- Worked one on one with students to clarify APA style and to improve grammar
- Presented 3 seminars per semester on varied writing topics

Professional Student/Homemaker

8/2008-8/2009

Spanish Teacher

8/2007 – 7/2008 Lassiter High School, Marietta, GA

- Taught Gifted Spanish II and Gifted Spanish III
- Worked collaboratively to develop units appropriate to those preparations
- Maintain records and communication with parents

Achievements

- Wrote a successful grant to obtain a digital video camera for the department

Preschool Teacher

8/2006 – 5/2007 FUMC Weekday Ministries, Marietta, GA

- Develop and implement activities that are age-appropriate for two and three year olds.
- Maintain records and measure students' progress physically, emotionally, behaviorally, and intellectually.
- Share ideas and develop curriculum with other teachers at that level.
- Work closely with parents to monitor student progress, resolve developmental issues, and provide class celebrations.

Achievements

- Organized 2 class projects for church art auction, one of which sold for the greatest amount of money in its category.

Spanish Teacher

8/2000 - 8/2006 McEachern High School, Powder Springs, GA

- Create and implement lesson plans for Spanish students in levels I through V (Advanced Placement)
- Coordinate collaborative efforts among all teachers of a particular level.
- Maintain records and communicate with parents.

Achievements

- Completed Gifted certification and Advanced Placement training. (2002) Had over sixty students take the Advanced Placement Spanish test. (2006)
- Began Montezuma Chapter of the Spanish Honor Society. (2002)
- Created age-appropriate curriculum for field trip to the High Museum. Coordinated field trip with French classes. (2004, 2005)
- Mentored student teachers from Kennesaw State and collaborated with their professors to promote their professional development. (2003-2006)
- Evaluated AP materials and wrote reviews for College Board. (2004, 2005)

Spanish Teacher

8/1999 - 8/2000

Woodland High School, Cartersville, GA

- Create and implement lesson plans for Spanish students in levels I and II.
- Maintain records and communicate with parents.

Achievements

- Started and sponsored the Spanish Club

Transportation Specialist

8/1998 - 8/1999

Philips Consumer Electronics, Knoxville, TN

- Monitor shipments and create data-based reports to demonstrate efficiency and reliability of shipping companies.
- Act as liaison between Knoxville branch and warehouse in Juarez.
- Specialize in Pinnacle software and assist other employees to use it; troubleshoot problems and act as a liaison between Philips and the Pinnacle Corporation.
- Assist in lode-planning, particularly in last minute shipments.

Achievements

- Wrote winning report for the Team Excellence Award (1999)

Education

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee

- Bachelor of Arts in English with Minors in Spanish and Women's Studies. Graduated Summa Cum Laude with a 3.97 GPA.
- Best English Undergraduate Student of 1997

Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA

- Completed education courses for teaching certificate in Spanish P-12 (2001)
- Earned Master in Professional Writing (2010)

Other Accomplishments/Training Related to Writing

- Finalist for the Mark Austin Segura Award at the Harriette Austin Writers' Conference (2003)
- Attended Break into Fiction Intensive Workshop (2008)

