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# THE RIVER KNOWS YOUR NAME

*a novel*

Author of the *USA Today* Bestseller *The Girls in the Stilt House*

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**Also by Kelly Mustian**

*The Girls in the Stilt House*

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*In memory of my other mother, Lois*

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# Becca

Becca sat on a bench by a window in the living room, a book open in her hands though the daylight was fading and she hadn't yet switched on the lamp. Would-be rain hung heavy in clouds dark against the silvering sky. She had left the front door open behind her after coming home from work at Dr. Carson's office, an unusually cool September breeze too welcome to bar, even with the screen door off its hinges awaiting repair—an invitation to night bugs.

She could hear Lottie in the kitchen tapping lids back onto paint cans with the wooden handle of a screwdriver, done for the day with whatever she had been painting. Perhaps the cupboard again, or the kitchen chairs. Maybe the buttons on her winter coat or the mate to yesterday's shoe.

The sound sent Becca's gaze to the painted morning-glory vines that twined a gray flood line circling the room a few inches high on the walls. Lottie had embellished it rather than painting over it, acknowledging the great flood of '27, four years back, that had left only a faint mark on their own lives, but had ravaged towns up and down the lower Mississippi River Valley. Lottie, who had been Becca's second mother for most of Becca's life, referred to the morning glories as her collaborative work with the river and had signed it in one corner with her usual *Carlotta!* underscored with two tiny waves. That, like most everything about Lottie, had delighted Becca. Never mind that a young Becca had been informed by more than one schoolmate that Lottie was known as the town nut. Becca had been undaunted by such talk, by the whispers of children in the schoolyard and the

snide looks from the town's elite. Now, at twenty-one, Becca still held that Lottie was the most interesting and brilliant mother in town, rendering all the others utterly ordinary.

Mapleton had loved Lottie once. In the first few years after she arrived there, before Becca came to live with her and for a time afterward, she had been something of a local celebrity, her oil paintings—landscapes and portraits, mostly—having earned her a respectable, though modest, income. Her reputation had spread beyond Mapleton, some of her riverscapes selling to buyers as far away as Nashville and New Orleans, one hanging in a gallery up north somewhere. At home, she had been in high demand, painting portraits for the more affluent families in town, some of whom, those of a certain old-money set, hung them in gilded frames in the ornate foyers of their tarnished antebellum homes.

In time, Lottie had grown weary of all that. She gave up commissioned portraits, painting instead only those faces she found especially interesting, most often farmers or laundresses, the elderly or the very young, misfits of various sorts, some of whom she enfolded as chosen family. Those portraits she gave away, which did not go over well with her former patrons. And with that, the eccentricities that had once lent Lottie an artistic mystique were recast in an unfavorable light.

These days, Lottie preferred painting items around the house, works that, as she told Becca, made her happy when she caught sight of them as she went about life. She had painted intricate borders around their mirrors and doors, and a trompe l'oeil sparrow hatched from an egg on the stovepipe. Their bread box was a masterpiece.

The two of them, Lottie and Becca, were so close that Becca had needed a week to decide if she would rather live with Lottie when Ben Chambers asked her to marry him. She loved Ben, but she had loved Lottie longer. In the end, Ben had won her over, with Lottie's blessing—perhaps because of Lottie's urging—and on this evening, this seemingly ordinary evening, Becca



was six days shy of her wedding.

As twilight dusked the living room, Becca closed her book. Lottie came in from the kitchen to sit beside her on the plain pine bench by the window, taking Becca's hand, as she often did of late, and humming softly. Becca was about to ask her what she had been painting that day, when a lightning bolt flashed sky-to-earth outside the window, chased by an earsplitting thunderclap that startled them both. Immediately following, as if tossed by a divine hand, a yellow globe of electric light rolled through the open doorway. Neither woman spoke as the ghostly sphere, roughly the size of a melon, glided soundlessly into the room. It passed by them mere inches from Lottie's knee. Becca barely breathed. As it continued on, they watched, frozen, as if the slightest movement might draw the thing toward them. They saw it rise slightly, and before Becca could collect herself enough to determine a course of action, the lightning ball found the open window across the room and whirled out into the gloaming.

"What on earth...?" Becca was still clutching Lottie's hand. "If that thing had hit one of us..." Then she was on her feet and dashing across the room to slam the door against whatever it was.

"Lovely," Lottie whispered, her eyes gleaming. Then they were glistening, and a tear slid down her face.

"Lottie? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"You're crying. What is it?"

Lottie stood, her face lined with worry even as her eyes were still lit with a kind of wonder. "You wouldn't understand," she said, laying her hand briefly on Becca's shoulder before turning back to the kitchen.

Lottie was quieter than usual the rest of that evening. Unlike Becca, she did not seem to have been shaken by what had happened. Rather, there was a peacefulness about her, something pensive in her mood that quieted Becca as

well.

Becca might have dismissed the whole eerie encounter as something dreamed in the night had she not awakened the next morning to a steady fall of rain and a newly painted image of the lightning ball on the inside of the front door, exactly where it had made its entrance. And though Becca generally viewed herself as the practical counterpoint to Lottie's whimsical nature, she was left with a sense that the odd visitation, which surely had its basis in science, was, somehow, portentous.

Six months to the day after the lightning ball rolled through the living room, Lottie's long-held theory—that in the hereafter, all souls, raised to their most exquisite states, are equally and blissfully at home—was tested. The pilot of a towboat pushing a barge up the river sighted Lottie's body in the water, lodged in a tangle of wood debris on the east bend at Mapleton, and as he hastily marked the location, a current caught her up and set her free. Becca was bereft.

It was Dr. Carson who delivered the news to her. He rang Becca's nearest neighbor in possession of a telephone in Kendall, where she and Ben had been renting an apartment in a divided house since their marriage. It seemed, the doctor told her in his practiced, clinical manner, that a man walking atop the levee had seen Lottie earlier on that tragic afternoon, sitting at the foot of the levee, close to the river's edge. Too close, the man had suggested. A comparison of that man's account and the description reported by the towboat pilot had satisfied the sheriff that the woman seen in the river was Lottie.

There was more that Becca should know, Dr. Carson said. Sensitive issues best addressed in person. And Ace Harper would need to speak with her when she was up to making a trip to Mapleton. Ace had drawn up Lottie's will. There would be papers to sign.

"Take whatever time you need," the doctor told her. "No immediate

arrangements are necessary.” Meaning, Becca realized, that there would be no funeral arrangements to make, no tombstone to order for Lottie, no gathering around a grave in that town that had not deserved her. In her dazed state, Becca thought that was just as well. There was a morbid mercy in Lottie’s beloved river having given her passage to the beyond.

“Of course, rumors are going about, as is usual in these situations,” she heard Dr. Carson say through the fog that had engulfed her. “I hope you won’t take them to heart.”

# Nell

As children, we shared the same small spaces, walked the same dusty roads, woke to the same views outside our windows, but Evie's world had more colors than mine.

"Mama is red," she announced to me one day, "and Maggie is lavender. And you," she said, pointing at my reflection in the mirror over the sink as I brushed my teeth, "are clear."

That about summed things up.

"What color are you?" I asked her once, and she hesitated before whispering "turquoise," as if there were something shameful, or marvelous, about being blue-green.

Evie's friends all had identifying colors. Every number, every letter, every musical note, anything that could be touched or smelled or heard or otherwise experienced had, for Evie, the extra dimension of hue. She would try to explain it, and I would try to understand.

"It's like summer," she might offer. "What color is summer, Nell? Just try."

"Green, I guess."

Her eyes would light for a second, then she would fire off something else. "And sky?"

"Blue?"

"Oh," she would say, and any hope that I might ever understand her



beautiful mind would be dashed for us both.

The day Evie discovered we weren't really sisters, I pretended to be as surprised as she was, both of us staring wide-eyed at a certificate we'd found tucked inside a copy of *Jane Eyre* in our mother's bookcase. Evie was ten then, and no longer aware of anything before Mama and me. But I knew that Evie had come to us almost two years old, not as an infant, and that she had arrived on my sixth birthday. An unexpected gift.

When we unfolded the paper that accounted for her birth and noted the strange name next to *Mother*—Becca P. Chambers—I cried, so alarming Evie that she swore never to tell anyone what we had discovered. She stroked my hair and wiped my face with her fingertips and promised that I would be her sister until the day she died. That no one would ever know. She thought I was crying because we were not born sisters, or because I was afraid of our mother's reaction if we were found out. But seeing that name, I was devastated at the sure knowledge that Evie, with her tumble of curls and her sweet charm and all her colors, had a mother other than ours and I did not. It was almost more than I could bear.

In bed that night, I tried to remember Evie in those first days after she arrived. And though I had not entirely forgotten life in that house—blue like a robin's egg and so close to a railroad track that the floorboards trembled when a train rumbled by—only snatches of memory were left to me. I could picture Evie eating oatmeal from a white bowl with a blue rim, could see her standing in front of a window, her doll, Maggie, dangling from her hand. And I could still call to mind, sharp and clear and stirring a vague sense of unease, a boxy green truck parked in front of the house on that rainy night—my birthday—and a figure in a dark coat and a hat pulled low climbing the front steps with a small child—Evie—then turning back to the truck alone.

I could recall almost nothing else of the time before our mother, my mother, moved us away from that house by the tracks. But later, in another house, the house on Clay Mountain, there was a night when I woke to the

muffled sound of Evie crying in our bed and looked over to see her sitting up, the blanket pulled over her knees, her face buried in it.

“What’s wrong, Evie?” I asked her.

“I don’t know,” she sobbed. “It’s a silver feeling.” Then she curled up close to me and rested her head on my shoulder until she fell asleep.

Silver, I know now, is the color of loss.

Nell

**1971**

**North Carolina**

# 1

Nell drove home to Clay Mountain for her mother's birthday, but she really went for Evie. It was mid-April, the time of year when spring, after its usual false starts and snowy setbacks, emerges in earnest, affirmed by the most trustworthy of wildflowers—bloodroot and trout lily and phlox, toothwort and golden ragwort.

This had been, for Nell, the first place and the last that had felt like home, despite it all, and when she rounded a hairpin curve in her aging, boatlike Chrysler and was met by the New River running alongside her, it was, as always, a reunion.

Before she'd left Clay Mountain for Charlotte at nineteen, striking out on her own in the big city twenty-three years ago now, she and Evie had, over the years, first waded, then fished, then canoed the river, that progression having marked their growth more fully than the penciled lines on their closet wall where they had measured each other's heights from time to time. It could reasonably be said that the Blue Ridge, with its peaks and balds and falls and valleys, the snowy winters and the summer storms, had raised the two of them as much as—more than, in Nell's view—their mother, Hazel, had, though they were all transplants, not born to the mountains.

Unlike Nell, Evie had stayed. She had migrated only as far as the township of Lillett, thirty minutes from where Hazel still lived in the small, clapboard house they had come to when the girls were so young and Hazel had moved them away from Mississippi, where life had been strange and secretive and



unsettling. Where Nell had first learned the futility of asking her mother for answers. Where Evie, not quite two years old and a stranger to Nell, had appeared on their porch one rainy night with only a scant amount of clothing folded into a wicker handbasket and a cloth doll snugly swaddled in flannel.

Nell coaxed the Chrysler into a too-sharp turn onto an even narrower road, spinning the steering wheel to the left and inching backward, to the right and inching forward, accelerating with a light touch until the tires gained purchase on the sparsely graveled quarter-mile incline that led to Hazel's house.

It had been longer than usual between visits, Nell's circumstances having changed recently, about which—both her absence and the new circumstances—Hazel was certain to put forth at least an implied, if distant, disapproval. Nell's mother had been emotionally remote as far back as Nell could remember. Even before she withdrew more decidedly when the girls were teenagers and able to fend for themselves, putting in her hours at one low-paying job or another and spending the rest of her time in snap-front housecoats and white cotton socks, working crossword puzzles and reading mysteries in her bedroom. Preferring puzzles to people. Avoiding questions. Holding the world at arm's length.

But according to Evie, something new was going on with Hazel. An awakening, of sorts. Evie had called Nell in the big house on the coast—Nell's new circumstances—with the news from Clay Mountain.

“Mama drove down here yesterday, out of the blue, and took me out to lunch. Then we went over to West Jefferson and saw a movie—her idea. Can you believe it?”

As far as Nell knew, their mother had not been in a movie theater in decades. And she was notorious for avoiding outings, offering thin excuses or agreeing to join in, then not showing up, as often as not. So this had indeed been unlikely news.

The next few days had brought a flurry of updates from Evie: Hazel had gotten her hair cut short and frosted. She had asked Evie to go shopping with her. She was singing in a church choir.

“Mom? In a church?”

“I know! One of my neighbors saw her there. I haven’t asked her about it. Come home soon, Nell. You need to see this.”

“I’ll try. You know how it is with my new job. And I’m so much farther away than I was in Charlotte. But the first chance I get...”

“Her birthday’s next month.”

“Maybe then.”

When Nell hung up the phone after that last call, her noncommittal replies to Evie lingered in her head, reminding her of Hazel’s excuses. It wasn’t that she was averse to visiting. She missed Evie. Missed Hazel, too, on occasion. She missed the way she felt more like a daughter and a sister when she was there. But even before Evie’s rash of phone calls, Nell had found herself plagued with thoughts about the past, had been ruminating on those early, troubling years in Mississippi—she and Evie shuttled from one odd living arrangement to another, the sense of secrecy that had never been acknowledged among the three of them, Hazel dodging any questions Nell asked and Evie meeting those questions with a stricken look until Nell stopped asking, for Evie’s sake.

She remembered having determined, when she was quite young, to give up trying to make sense of it all, to let go of the need to know about that shadowy past. She had trained herself to shove aside any questions that crept in, to shut them up behind what she had thought of then as a locked door in the back of her mind, a door she never toyed with opening. But lately, that old locked door seemed to open of its own accord day after day, and there she was. Back in Mississippi. Needing to know.

It had crept up on her, this recent preoccupation with what she did not

know about herself and about Evie and their mother, hardly noticed as Nell acclimated herself to her new job—housesitting for homeowners with luxury properties for sale, homes they or the bankers holding their mortgages preferred not to leave unattended. The opportunity had come via a former coworker, Sheila Adams, at the insurance agency where Nell had worked for fifteen years. Fifteen years at the same desk doing the same clerical work for a man who would never see her in any other role, who praised her for being so reliable. And though Sheila's new business was still a start-up and much of Nell's pay would be in room and board, Nell had surprised everyone by agreeing to give it a try, thinking of it as an adventure, a chance to cultivate a persona more spontaneous than reliable.

Ten months into the job now, she had lived in three extravagant homes in three states, and with that had come some measure of adventure. But the downside was having to erase all traces of herself from a house whenever a real estate agent needed to show it, and to move out within two weeks if it sold. As it turned out, the short notice, the uncertainty of her next destination, the abrupt and frantic packing up and moving on were all startlingly reminiscent of what she and Evie had experienced before Clay Mountain. The past had begun seeping into Nell's present like water breaching a carefully constructed dam.

Nights were the worst. Often, she lay awake until well after the low moan of a distant train whistle signaled half past two or thereabouts, old questions swimming in her head. And foremost among them was the one she had promised her sister long ago that she would never pursue an answer to: *Where had Evie come from?*

Now, as the sun flirted with the distant ridgeline that would eventually steal the last of its light, Nell rounded a curve that straightened out just short of the house on Clay Mountain. And there was Evie on the porch, her arms already open wide.

## 2

“She’s here!” Evie announced. Nell and Evie entered the house arm in arm, and Hazel rose from a balding, brown corduroy armchair as if lifted by Evie’s exuberance.

“You made it.”

“I did.” Nell set her suitcase on the old wooden floor with its familiar patterns of nicks and scratches, and her mother ventured close enough for Nell to offer the traditional hug that always felt one-sided to her, that had prompted a very young Evie to confide, “Mama’s hugs hurt my feelings.”

“You look wonderful, Mom.”

“Doesn’t she? I painted her nails while we waited for you.” Evie reached for Hazel’s hand and held it up for Nell’s approval. “And that dress is an early birthday present. We bought it at Hatley’s yesterday.”

This was a lot to take in. Hazel with painted nails and frosted hair, wearing a dress and hose and taupe ballet flats rather than a housecoat and mangy scuffs, her at-home uniform. Not to mention all this shopping with Evie. Nell thought about her own birthday gift sitting on the back seat of the Chrysler, the annual box of crossword puzzle books and new pencils that had always been well received by the old Hazel.

“Well.” Nell was at a loss for words. “It’s nice...the dress. And your hair... I like it.”

“It was time for a change,” Hazel said, and Nell wanted to ask what had brought that on, but she only said again, “You look wonderful.”

“‘Wonderful’ is a stretch. I’m definitely older than the last time you came home.”

There it was.

“It’s hard to get away, Mom. You know my job is to stay in a house.”

“She’s here now.” Evie led them to the kitchen. “Did you eat on the way? I could heat you up something.”

“And I was here for Thanksgiving,” Nell said.

“I remember.” Hazel flicked a stray crumb off the table with a shiny pink fingernail.

“Something to eat?” Evie pulled open the fridge door.

“I could eat. I made it most of the way on Dr Pepper and peanuts.” Nell sat down at the oak trestle table that had been in the house as long as the three of them had.

“Anything for you, Mama?” Evie carelessly swept back the curls that had fallen into her face with a graceful motion Nell had seen a thousand times.

“I don’t eat this late,” Hazel said, and Nell caught the quick glance sent her way, feeling every one of the twenty pounds she’d been meaning to lose for the last twenty years.

“You go ahead. I’ll be right back.” Hazel started down the hall toward her bedroom, a trace of change even in her stride.

Evie set a plate of fried chicken and a bowl of potato salad in front of Nell and slid into the chair next to her.

“Thanks.” Nell squeezed Evie’s hand, and Evie leaned against her and said, “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Me too.”

Evie lowered her voice. “See what I mean about Mama?”

“I do. I mean, it’s just her starting to get out a little and a new haircut, though. I don’t want to make too much of it.”

“It’s more than that. At first, I was afraid there might be something wrong with her. Something with her health she wasn’t telling us. But she seems fine. Then yesterday, my neighbor said she sang a solo at that church last Sunday. Said she has a gift.”

Nell spooned potato salad onto her plate. “Maybe there’s a man involved?” Not that she believed that. Hazel hadn’t shown interest in a man since, well, not ever that Nell had noticed.

“I don’t think so. But I’m paying attention.”

“We could just ask her about it.” *Like other people would.*

“No. I’m afraid she’ll stop going out if I bring it up. We’ve been talking more, doing things together. She’s opening up some. I want to keep that going.”

There was something sad, Nell thought, in the way Evie was still trying so hard to bond with their mother, even at thirty-eight, even with a husband and twin sons in high school who adored her. One never outgrows the need for a mother, she supposed. Or at least the desire to be mothered. And that was the difference between the two of them, as she saw it. Nell had grown up wishing she and Evie had been born to a different sort of family, while Evie had never stopped working for a sense of belonging in the one in which she’d been cast. Not since that day back when they were kids when they’d found that odd birth record listing a stranger as Evie’s mother, evidence that Evie possessed exactly what Nell had wanted and what Evie desperately had not—an alternate history.

Evie snapped the plastic lid back onto the bowl of potato salad. “You should see her in the other dress we found. I caught her looking at it—it’s a cocktail dress, really—and I made her try it on, just for fun. She looked glamorous in it. I went back later and bought it, and she didn’t make a fuss when I gave it to her. She looked like she might cry.”

*Glamorous.* Not a word Nell had ever paired with her mother.

Just then, Hazel returned wearing a faded robe and frayed scuffs, her stylish new hairdo brushed back to ordinary.

“I’ll be in bed before you’re home,” she said to Evie, then to Nell, “Your sister’s been wearing me out shopping.”

“We had fun, didn’t we?” Evie slid out a chair for Hazel and sat down beside her.

From across the table, Nell watched Evie put an arm around their mother. She noted that Hazel did not stiffen and endure, her usual posture with both of them. And when Evie laid her head against Hazel’s shoulder as she had done with Nell earlier, Hazel reached up and patted Evie’s curls.

Nell was glad for this small show of affection so important to her sister, but she was wary that it might not last. And maybe the tiniest bit...not jealous, exactly, but like a third wheel. She and Evie had always been a team in navigating Hazel’s boundaries, and Nell was thrown off by this new dynamic.

“I wish I could get to bed early,” she said, giving a go at joining in. “I’ve had trouble sleeping lately. It’s hard to adjust to a new routine, now that I don’t have office hours anymore.”

“I still wonder if it was wise,” Hazel said, “to walk away from a steady job you’d had for so many years. All that job security you built up. And a pension.”

“It just wasn’t something I wanted to do forever. And that pension was hardly anything.”

“But what are you building up now? Seems more like a vacation than a job.”

Evie tossed Nell a lifeline. “I think it’s exciting. Those beautiful houses. I have the photos you sent up on the fridge. The boys are ruined for regular jobs now.”

Rescued, Nell asked about Evie’s husband, Rob.

“In Pittsburgh tonight. He’ll be home next week. You’ll just miss him.”

Rob was an airline pilot, based in Charlotte. Nell had expected them to relocate there, but Evie didn’t want to leave Hazel alone, and Hazel wouldn’t consider moving. So Rob rented a studio apartment in Charlotte and made light of the long commute. There wasn’t much he wouldn’t do for Evie.

“He’ll miss Mama’s birthday. We’ll have a little celebration at my house on Saturday. Or we could eat out. There’s that new place on the river.” Evie turned to Hazel. “You could wear your other new dress.”

“I remember a dress you had, Mom,” Nell said, an old image having just come to mind, something she had forgotten until that moment. “From way back.” She felt an old thrill thinking about it. “It was black—satin, I think—and had rhinestones, or something sparkly, around the neckline.”

“I don’t remember that,” Evie said, sounding disappointed.

Maybe this was a memory from before Evie came to them. Maybe that was in Evie’s mind, too, Nell thought, intending a quick detour around that subject, as well, a switch to something less fraught with discomfort. But the image was so enticing. She could see that dress in her head as if looking at a snapshot. She wasn’t sure she’d thought of it at all since the day she’d found it in the back of a closet somewhere. There was no accompanying memory of a house or an apartment or even a room, just the magical dress hanging behind a thin wooden door. Maybe it hadn’t been a closet.

“Was it in a wardrobe?” she asked, thinking aloud. “But I don’t remember us having a wardrobe in any of those places.”

The room went silent. Speaking of “those places” had conjured the frantic moves, the odd accommodations, the underlying instability. Nell cast a casual glance around the kitchen as if she weren’t feeling a growing twinge of guilt. After all these years, she had broken the don’t-bring-it-up code. It was too late to go back to talk of shopping. To toss out a breezy question about what else those two had bought together. There was no easy way to back out of



where she had taken them. The silence held until Hazel's husky voice cut through it.

"You could not possibly remember that, Nell." The words sounded more like a directive than an observation, spoken in the same authoritative tone Hazel had used when Nell asked a wrong question as a child.

Still, Nell could not let go of the memory. It felt like a lost piece of her childhood, a piece of herself almost, and it tapped into that recent sense of urgency to make sense of the past. That dress, she believed now, had been a bright spot in a gray period, and it retained something of that essence still. The elegant black sheen. The glittery neckline. The coolness of the fabric against her cheek.

"You were too young then. Four years old, tops. People don't have memories that far back." Hazel emphasized those last few words as if cementing them as truth.

"I know I don't remember being four," Evie said a bit unevenly.

They were on old, uncomfortable ground, Nell knew. She didn't want to spoil the visit on her first night there, but...

"Was it in the house by the train tracks?" Why was she doing this? Why didn't she stop?

Hazel looked her in the eyes, then dropped her gaze to where Nell was rubbing her thumb in circles over the old, raised scars that covered one of her palms, a nervous habit since a childhood accident with a hot iron that went back beyond the span of Nell's memory. Hazel shook her head slightly, as she used to do when Nell was young, and Nell shoved her hand under the table, her old reaction. Then she glanced at Evie, who appeared, as Nell had been afraid she would, stricken.

"It was someplace else, Nell," Hazel said then. "You don't remember it." An admission and a denial. As if that settled it.

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Despite Evie's gentle efforts at lightening it, the damper on the evening lingered after she left, and Hazel, even as Evie's car could still be heard crunching down the gravel driveway, turned in for the night.

*I'll make up for it tomorrow*, Nell thought. Maybe she would offer Hazel a game of canasta. She always liked that. Evie had to work that day; she taught at the elementary school and wouldn't return until late afternoon. "It'll give you and Mama some time together," she'd told Nell, and though Nell had long filled the role of protective big sister, as an adult she felt a little vulnerable with their mother when Evie wasn't around to steer things in a good direction.

Still thinking of that black dress, she took her suitcase into the bedroom she and Evie had shared for so long. Though she would be there for only three days, tucking her clothes into her old dresser drawer felt like settling into the past, where her thoughts had resided for weeks now. There were still bits of tape stuck to the mirror where she and Evie had posted photographs and movie tickets and Nell's teenage attempts at poetry. The two twin beds were still in their places, Nell's by a window, Evie's near the door.

Nell pulled on her pajamas and flipped back the worn chenille spread on the bed. She read until she thought she might be able to sleep, then curled herself into the unavoidable sunken center of the aged mattress, tugged the chain on a pink plastic lamp with a ruffled shade—Evie's choice a lifetime ago—and the room went on-the-mountain dark. She drew the covers over her shoulders. Closed her eyes. And though she was exhausted, mind and body hovering at the brink of sleep, that forbidden door creaked open once again and the old questions returned. There in her childhood bed her fractured memories seemed closer at hand, like objects in a pool of water, rising to the surface—here, there—then floating away before she could catch them. Fleeting glimpses of the night when Evie first appeared.

*Rain. The house—blue like a robin’s egg. Railroad tracks so close the floorboards trembled when a train rumbled by. A green truck. A figure in a coat and a hat pulled low. A little girl. Evie. The figure—a man?—turning back to the truck alone. Evie in my nightgown. My sixth birthday.*

Driven to remember, as if that day were the key to everything inexplicable about their lives, Nell asked herself what she knew for sure. That Hazel had been gentle with Evie that night. That watching the two of them, Nell had stood with her hands behind her back waiting to be told what this meant, this new presence in their house, this unaccustomed threesome, and that no explanation had come. That in the days that followed, Evie had stood by the window often, as if waiting for something, for someone.

Sometime after that, not long, Nell thought, they had moved away from that house. She could not recall where they had gone first, although she knew they had lived for a while in a roadside motel. Maybe there? That was where she had been tasked with putting tiny, paper-wrapped bars of soap on each sink while Hazel cleaned the rooms, and where she and Evie had been told to call the bearded man at the front desk “Mr. Jack.” Where one night they had stood behind scratchy motel curtains at the window and watched a cat slink across the road toward their room, eyes shining.

Nell pinned down those remembered things, imprinted them in her mind before turning over and wrapping her arms around a pillow. Soon, exceedingly sleep-deprived after so many restless nights, her brain seemed to be doing its overnight work while she was still conscious, observing. Shadows and light swirled behind her closed eyes, merging and shifting, separating into patterns like dream images about to take shape, and then she could no longer discern dreaming from remembering: *rain, the amber glow of a cat’s eyes, a man with a hat pulled low, tiny bars of soap, herself in a black satin dress with rhinestones.*

**Becca**

**1932–1933**

**Mississippi**

### 3

Becca considered Ace Harper from across his ruin of a desk, its years showing in gashes and rings and what would have been a wobble had a matchbox not been shoved under a warped leg. He stubbed out his cigarette among its many predecessors in a green glass ashtray, then held the tray in the air while considering where to dispense with it, finally settling on a spot on the floor near his feet. Ace was not the lawyer of choice among those in Mapleton who could afford more upscale counsel, but he had bailed out more than one of Lottie's misfits in unfortunate situations, and Becca remembered her having spoken fondly of him. He looked to be about Lottie's age, midfifties.

Becca had made the trip from Kendall alone—just over an hour by train—on this third morning after learning of Lottie's death. Ben was away selling tombstones up near the Tennessee line, a last-resort job he had taken on just a few weeks earlier. “Even in times like these, people buy stones for their dearly departed.” That's what Ben had been told by the man who hired him, although Ben had yet to prove him right. Two and a half years now into food lines and lost jobs and bank failures, there seemed no end in sight to what President Hoover was calling “a great depression.” Ben and Becca were better off than many, but they were struggling.

Sitting on a cracked leather chair in this dusty office, back in Mapleton again, Becca found herself thinking of Lottie as still present, as if she were home just down the road, painting or weeding her irises, humming a melody that had been running through her head for days. Becca had not yet arrived at

a place of acceptance, and she steeled herself against that happening here in this room.

“She had been ill for some time,” Ace said now, and Becca’s disbelief loomed larger.

“No. I would have known that.” She appraised this man who was so mistaken—his slight tremor of hand, a fine bloom of sweat on his forehead, perhaps a faint odor of alcohol on his breath. A once-handsome face. Kind eyes.

He tented his fingers under his chin, his elbows on the desk. “She didn’t want you to know.”

During the subsequent pause that would have allowed Becca to reply had the lawyer’s assertion not been nonsensical, those kind eyes met hers with an earnestness so apparent that she could not entirely discount his words.

“Cancer. A rare form of leukemia. She’d known for months. Even for a while before you married and moved to Kendall.”

*Impossible.* Never would Lottie have kept such a thing from her. She and Ben had visited her together twice in the six months since their wedding, and Becca had come a third time alone. There had been letters between them filled with confidences and intimacies. Only recently Becca had written that she believed she was pregnant. She hadn’t told Ben then—she still hadn’t told him—but Lottie knew. They did not keep secrets from each other. She looked at the lawyer as if holding him accountable for something, and the softening of his countenance defeated her again.

“Would you like some water?”

Becca shook her head. What she wanted was the time back—all the days and nights she could have had with Lottie before there weren’t any days left. She remembered the look on Lottie’s face after the lightning ball had nearly grazed her knee. That mingling of wonder and worry. The one tear. Her hand on Becca’s shoulder, and her words: *You wouldn’t understand.* Lottie had

always said that the river talked to her. That she could read the trees. And that ball of lightning had spoken of something to her. Even to Becca, it had seemed to have an essence of foreshadowing. And with that thought, she buried her face in her arms on top of the ancient desk and wept.

When she raised her head, there was a glass of water on the desk along with a wrinkled white handkerchief. The chair across from her was empty. After a moment, Ace returned and sat down. This time, the slight trace of alcohol in the air between them was unmistakable. Becca sipped the water. She wiped her face with her hands, then picked up the handkerchief in gratitude, held it to her cheek, and simply looked at him. *Thank you.* He understood, nodded.

“Why didn’t Dr. Carson tell me? I worked for him right up until I left town.” How many hours had she spent in that office, keeping his books and handling his patients’ accounts, him knowing and saying nothing?

“She swore us both to secrecy. I thought you should know. I urged her to tell you.” Ace ran a now-steady hand through his thinning hair, allowed a hint of a smile. “She said she would haunt me—‘hideously and relentlessly, forever,’ is how she put it—if I sent word to you. If I told anybody. She wasn’t one for public pity, and I’m sure you know how fast news spreads around here. I kept my word. Even though I knew I’d be sitting here with you one day.

“We go back a ways, Lottie and me. I helped some friends of hers the best I could, and she saw me through some hard things. She was still seeing me through some things. You should know...” Ace sighed, leaned forward in his chair, seemed to consider how to make Becca understand what he was about to say. “It was comforting to her to know you were happy and settled for the future. She said she thought of it as a gift—her not telling you what she knew. A gift she was giving you every day. I think that helped her, gave her purpose. The doctor said she was never in pain. He told her she likely wouldn’t be until close to the end. He saw her the day before...before that

last day. He said she felt fine. That she hadn't looked to be declining. I saw her often. At her house. Usually she was painting. If I hadn't known any different, I wouldn't have guessed anything was wrong with her. Of course, she might have been worse than she let on, or worse than she knew. And, too, Lottie was an unpredictable woman."

It was difficult for Becca to listen to this man who had known so much that she had not for so long. "I would have spent every minute with her," she said. "Moved her up to Kendall or moved back here with her. We wanted her with us all along. She wouldn't come. She said couples need time alone in the beginning. To set their course, she said. And that she wasn't done painting the house." Becca dabbed her eyes with the handkerchief. "That she needed to be near the river."

She would not have left Lottie, would not have married Ben if she'd known. Exactly why Lottie had not told her. Why she had seemed to nudge her to marry Ben so quickly, when they'd only known each other a matter of months. Becca knew that Lottie had lived for ten years with someone she'd said was the love of her life without seeing any need for outside validation or anyone's blessing, with no desire for the legalities of marriage. And yet, she'd wanted that for Becca. She'd needed that. And Lottie, with her keen perception about people, had loved Ben from the start.

"She knew the river so well," Becca said. "Knew to take care. If she wasn't weak or frail when Dr. Carson saw her, how could this have happened?" Even as she spoke, she was remembering times when Lottie had taken off her boots and sat with her feet sunk in the mud at the water's edge, though she would never allow Becca to get that close. From their first days together, she had warned about not taking that river lightly. About whirlpools and eddies and riptides. That the Mississippi was a dangerous river. But Becca remembered one alarming day when the water was low and a soggy strip of riverbank had been newly exposed. Lottie, her boots inches thick with mud, had laughed as she'd tried to climb back up the slope toward Becca only to



helplessly slide back down to the water's edge time and again until a fisherman saw her and made his way over, dragged her up from above as if she were on roller skates.

"I can't be certain, of course, but I've thought about it," Ace said then. "According to the man who saw her from the levee, she was on the east bend. That's an outside bend. Water shoots around an outside bend faster and stronger. It's like holding your thumb over the end of a hose to get more water pressure." Ace bent his thumb over an imaginary hose in the air. "I went down there later. We'd had rain. It was muddy. I had trouble staying on my feet near the bottom of the levee. And it being so slippery and all..." He shook his head. "I'm sorry. I probably shouldn't be saying this."

"No, it's what I was thinking, too." Becca reached across the desk and briefly touched the hand of this confidant of Lottie's. "Dr. Carson said there were rumors. Are people saying she...that she meant to..."

"He says there's been talk over at his office. But I can tell you this—" He picked up a pencil from his desk and flicked it nervously between his fingers. "First, forgive me, Becca, but Lottie told me you might have a baby coming."

Becca raised her eyebrows at that.

"And what I can tell you is that Lottie was not planning on missing out on a baby."

"Do you know what was she wearing when that towboat pilot saw her? Did he say? Or the man on the levee?"

Ace wrestled open a stubborn desk drawer and lifted out a stack of papers, paged through them until he found what he wanted, a mimeographed document he held close like a poker player guarding his cards. Shielding her from the contents, Becca supposed.

"The pilot's statement," he said. "From the sheriff's office." He read from it—"Yellow clothing, what I could see of it"—then dropped the paper back into the drawer.

Becca told him about the full-skirted, deep-purple gown Lottie had labored over for more than a year, painting miniature scenes from her life around the hem. For when her time came, she'd said, often reminding Becca to make sure she walked on, as she'd put it, in that dress.

With that settled between them, Ace turned to legal matters.

"She made a will, short and sweet. Left everything she had to you. There's a little money—not a lot. But she didn't owe anybody anything, so you won't have debt collectors hounding you. I can arrange to ship anything you want to Kendall. And I can take care of selling or giving away what you don't want, if you'd like. She asked me to do that. The only thing of real value—speaking in terms of money—is the real estate. The house is small and on a small lot. Taxes are paid up. But being honest here, I'm not sure it's worth holding on to. More of a white elephant, I'm guessing. But it's up to you."

Becca was confused. "But she didn't own our house. We rented it."

"Not the one here." Ace rifled through his papers again, then slid a deed across the desk, flipped it around so Becca could read it. "It's her house in Rodney. She said you knew about it."

*Rodney.* Where Lottie had lived before Mapleton. Where she had lived with the man she'd loved before moving here and becoming friends with Becca's mother. Before the illness that took Becca's parents a few weeks apart. Before Lottie had taken six-year-old Becca's hand, walked her the few blocks between the only home Becca had known and Lottie's rental, and become another mother to her.

"She owned it outright," Ace was saying. "So selling it would be a simple transaction if you could find anybody wanting to buy it, which is doubtful. There's a family in it right now. They don't pay rent, but they keep it up, take care of any repairs. That was Lottie's agreement with them. It's good that somebody's in it, at least for a while. Wouldn't take long for an empty house in a place like that to start coming apart. For nature to take it over. I hear

that's happened to quite a bit of what's left out there. Rodney's down to about a hundred and a quarter folks. The last holdouts. Used to be a major port, way back, but the river changed course and landlocked it, 1870 or so. It's been a slow death ever since."

"I remember Lottie saying Rodney was almost a ghost town," Becca said. She'd never taken Becca there. Hadn't returned in all their years together, as far as Becca knew, and had rarely spoken of it. Once, Becca asked her why she didn't sell the old house.

"I'd sooner give up this house and go back to Rodney."

"But you said it was nearly a ghost town. And that was years ago."

"There are different kinds of ghost towns. Different kinds of ghosts. And I'm kin to Rodney's ghosts."

Before Becca left the office, Ace handed her a notepad, a pencil, and an empty knapsack. She was to go over to the house, her home with Lottie for most of her life, and to make a list of anything she'd like him to ship to her in Kendall. She could take whatever would fit in the knapsack home with her on the train.

"You're going back today?" he asked. "Not staying over?"

"Yes."

"Would you like me to walk down to the house with you?"

"Thank you, but I'm fine. I'll bring you the list in about an hour, if you'll still be here then."

"I'll be here. There are a few other things I need to give you, but I'll hold on to them till then."

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Inside the station late that afternoon, waiting for the train that would take her back to Kendall, Becca sat on a pew-like bench, the knapsack next to her.

Inside were Lottie's bread box and a cloth drawstring bag filled with buttons Lottie had painted over many years, one of them a tiny rendition of the lightning ball. In the end, those had been the only things Becca had taken from the house, as what she held of Lottie in her heart was so much more meaningful. Their things had been picked over. Much was missing. Already the owner had begun painting over Lottie's artwork. It had been heartbreaking, seeing their home like that.

Also in the knapsack were two books Ace Harper had given to her when she'd returned to his office. One was a large family Bible Lottie had hollowed out years earlier as a makeshift safe. Long before any bank failures, Lottie had preferred keeping her money close at hand. "And who would ever steal a Bible?" she'd said. The other book was a fat, leather-bound collection of stories Lottie had read from many nights, sitting on the edge of Becca's bed during their first years together. The book was, to Becca, the treasure that Lottie had known it would be.

When Becca had thanked Ace for all he had done and they'd said their goodbyes, she had turned to the only remaining task left to her before leaving Mapleton, perhaps for the last time. There was one old friend with whom she needed to make peace.

The river was choppy, irascible under a steel-gray sky. Becca looked down at it from the path that ran along the top of the levee. Then she began a slow, careful descent down the back side, the terrain uneven and thick with low growth, to a place she knew where the river was gentler. There, it lapped at the loamy soil of the bank, beyond the pull of the powerful current farther in that revealed itself in massive logs sailing past and hapless driftwood caught in swirling whirlpools. On this day, even at this kind shoulder, water rolled in as low, rippling waves that spilled onto the muddy bank.

Becca had been afraid of the river when she was small, afraid of so many

things after losing her parents at such a tender age. But Lottie had taught her to love it, introducing her to all that was magical about this place—whiskered river otters hiding in the brush, an occasional bald eagle soaring overhead, the way the setting sun lit a golden pathway across the river, the music of water and wind and birdsong. Lottie had brought her here often until Becca had overcome her fear, and eventually time with the river became as essential to Becca as it was to Lottie.

This was where Becca had brought her childhood troubles, where she had wrestled with adolescent angst and gone away again with a lighter heart, a rightened perspective. From higher up the levee, she could look down on the wide, rolling river, watch it swell and churn, surging ever onward, renewing her strength and reminding her that this, too, whatever she had brought there, would pass.

All of this had been Lottie's gift to her, and Becca refused to lose that now. She sat on a log at this spot that offered more comfort than strength, her skirt draped over her knees, her arms locked around them. The doctor in Kendall had confirmed what she had known; she was carrying a baby. She would pass the gift of this river on to her child, and if it was a girl, as she believed it to be, Becca would name her after her own two mothers.

*Eva Carlotta.* She said the name aloud, as if sharing a secret. For a while longer, she sat there quietly contending with the river, and when she rose to leave, she had forgiven it.

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Becca held the book of stories in her lap as the train rumbled to life, shuddered, lurched, then crept forward out of the station. As they gained speed, she opened the book and saw that Lottie had inscribed it with words of love and encouragement. She ran her fingers over the lacy script, over Lottie's beloved name as if it were a connection to her, a final touch. Hoping

to bring back her voice, as well, Becca turned to the first page of the first story, and her breath caught at what she found there. She turned more pages, opened to the middle, then fanned to the end and discovered that Lottie had crowded the margins with stories of her own, with memories and messages and drawings. The book seemed almost alive with illuminated letters in jeweled colors, elaborate illustrations for the stories, and sketches, some of which, at first glance, appeared to be of the two of them walking together through the pages.

Becca quickly closed the book. She would not race through those pages in one greedy feast, but would ration them for times when she was most in need. It must have taken Lottie so very long to accomplish this, she thought. All that time that she had hidden her illness, she had been doing this beautiful thing. All those days and nights that Becca had thought she'd lost, the time she might have spent with Lottie had she known, were here in this book, returned to her.

## 4

The day the letter arrived, Lottie had been gone for more than a year. Unaccustomed to personal letters from anyone else, Becca felt a foolish surge of hope at the sight of a large envelope jutting from the mailbox attached to the porch wall. This envelope, though, was not beautifully painted like those Lottie had sent, was glaringly plain in its whiteness. It was addressed to her—Mrs. Benjamin J. Chambers. There was no sender’s name, only a return address and an ink-stamped postmark indicating that it had come from Lyola, Ben’s hometown. Ben’s only relative still living there was his mother, Mildred, from whom he had been estranged since shortly before he and Becca married.

Lyola was only twenty miles from Kendall, but it might as well have been a hundred, measured in emotional distance between mother and son. Becca had not met Mildred, knew very little about her. The rift was a painful subject for Ben, and Becca hadn’t pressed him for details, had trusted his reasoning. “The woman raised a good-hearted son, and that’s to her credit” is what Lottie had said when Becca expressed some concern, and Becca had trusted Lottie’s instincts about the matter even more than Ben’s.

She did know that Ben had an older brother, Albert, who’d had his own issues with their mother and moved away as soon as he came of age. And that Ben’s father had died a year before she and Ben met. They had that in common—the loss of parents—something that had lent them an easy familiarity with each other that had made a somewhat hasty marriage seem less risky than it might have otherwise.

And now, someone in Lyola had written to Becca.

A little apprehensive, she took the envelope into the apartment and left it on a table by the sofa while she looked in on baby Eva Carlotta, ten months old now and the light of their lives, sleeping in her white wicker crib in her usual manner—on her back, arms flung open, one bare foot having found its customary way out from under the blanket. She had Becca's curls. Ben's dimple. A smile that could melt away worries.

Perhaps, Becca thought, she should wait for Ben's return before opening the envelope. He had left a week earlier to chase rumors of work in another part of the state and might be back any day. "I'll be gone for a week, at least," he'd said, "maybe as long as two." Despite Ben's best efforts over the better part of a year, he'd finally had to admit that he was not cut out for selling tombstones door-to-door. His final attempt had been in Vicksburg, where the landscape was blanketed with Civil War battlefields dotted with thousands of memorial stones. "If I can't sell tombstones in Vicksburg, I'm giving it up," he'd said as he packed his sales case one last time with tiny sample gravestones suitable for a macabre dollhouse with a backyard cemetery.

After Vicksburg had not panned out, he'd worked stints at repairing roofs, digging drainage ditches, making deliveries for the pharmacy. Temporary work that came and went sporadically, but nothing like his office job at the sawmill his father had cofounded, Ben's job when he met Becca in Mapleton. He had gone there with a crew assessing repairs to two government buildings prior to submitting a lumber bid, work that had seemed quite lofty to Becca, though Ben had insisted he was there more as an apprentice than a decision-maker, and as a reminder of his father's authority back in Lyola, an uncomfortable position for him. Becca had come to know all this the day they met, halfway down the levee, Ben intending to have a closer look at the river but getting no farther than where Becca sat on the brushy slope, reading a book. After that first encounter, Ben made many trips between Lyola and Mapleton, few, he admitted later, necessary to his job.



It was during that period that the trouble between Ben and his mother had erupted. Ben left the mill, gave up the security of a role in the family business even while job opportunities were dismal. The timing of the split troubled Becca, coinciding, as it had, with their courtship. But Ben's kindness to Lottie and her affection for him, watching them come to care for each other, had reassured Becca.

Now she sank onto the old sofa that had come with their little apartment and considered the envelope again. She slid her finger under the flap and carefully worked it open. Inside, she found a letter and a document of some kind. First, she sought out the signature at the bottom of the letter. "Mildred Chambers." And just under that: "I would be pleased if you chose to refer to me as Mother, as Ben always has."

Then she looked at the document, which appeared harmless enough. Sentimental illustrations in soft pastels—a mother and baby, pink-cheeked cherubs, bluebirds holding in their beaks a banner that read "Cradle Roll Certificate." The whole of it bordered with flowers and lambs. Printed lines had been filled in with Evie's name and birth date, Becca as mother, Ben as father, and the name of a church in Lyola. Squeezed into a tiny, undecorated space at the bottom was an extra line that had been inked by hand: "Grandmother—Mildred Chambers."

Becca was not sure what to make of it. She and Lottie had spent many Sunday mornings watching the sun rise over the river, worshipping in their fashion, but she had no idea what this "cradle roll" meant, other than that Ben's mother was aware of Evie's full name and her birth date. Back when Evie was born, Becca had proposed contacting Mildred, had gently reminded Ben that his mother was Evie's only living grandparent. She knew they'd been quite close, mother and son, before whatever had come between them, and she'd hoped that the birth of a grandchild might build a bridge. But Ben's response had been only a quick shake of his head.

Listening for any sound of Evie rustling herself awake, and hearing none,

Becca went back to the letter.

*Dear daughter-in-law,*

*If this letter is unwelcome, please accept my apologies. I dare to hope that will not be the case. I have tried to respect my beloved son's decision to separate himself from me over this past year and more, but the situation becomes more difficult to bear as time passes. Lost time for a mother and now for a grandmother.*

*As you can see, I did learn of the birth of Eva, and my heart both soars and despairs holding that knowledge while my arms remain empty. My hope is that as a mother yourself you might understand my wish to mend fences as a family.*

*I don't know how much Ben has shared with you, so I will only say here that I bear responsibility for foolish actions that came of a desire to help my son in these hard times. For that, I have paid dearly and would do anything to right those wrongs.*

*Forgive me for the liberty of entering my only grandchild in my church's cradle roll. It was a small way to feel some connection to her without intruding. Until today, the certificate hung framed on my bedroom wall, but I send it to you now in hope of reconciliation. It stands for a promise made by this congregation to care for Eva in times of need. Perhaps you will see that as the gift I am intending it to be.*

*Of course, I am concerned for all of you during this bleak period in our country. Ben's job with the mill his father built remains ever open to him should he want to return to it. I would happily step away from the duties I took up there after my husband's death in order for Ben to step back in. We have been fortunate that the mill*

*has survived, and Ben has a rightful place there. As he knows and I hope you do, I am always here to help in any way you will allow, financially or otherwise.*

Becca folded the letter back into the envelope. Why had Ben's mother written now, after such a long silence? Or maybe she had tried to contact Ben earlier and he hadn't spoken of it. When he returned, she would insist that he explain to her just what had gone wrong between him and his mother. After this letter, she felt she needed to know. But then Evie's cheerful babbling from the next room kept her from mulling it over any further. She took a moment to put away the letter and the certificate, anticipating Ben's soon return, then rushed to rescue Evie from the prison of her crib, finding her, as always, the happiest of captives.

## 5

Becca did not answer Mildred's letter. Another week passed, two since Ben had left, and none of Mrs. Peterson's children had run over from down the street and knocked on Becca's door, out of breath, with news that there was a phone call for her. Ben had promised to call or send a telegram if it looked as if he would be away longer than planned. But Becca had become accustomed to his absences when he worked as a traveling salesman, and she knew how easily a week could turn into two when Ben's hopes were high. Knew his tendency to lose track of time, to forget to telephone or decide not to so as to save the cost of a call. There had been times when he'd breezed in days late, all smiles, tossing out a sheepish "Maybe I should have phoned" as if he'd only just realized how long he had been gone. So Becca wasn't overly worried.

Still, this trip was different from the others. For one thing, Ben had left by train instead of taking the car that had been passed on to him when his father died. He had planned to drive, as he generally did, but the car had wailed like a banshee the last few times he'd cranked it up, so he'd left it at a bicycle shop that was taking on as many automobiles as bicycles these days. And secondly, Ben was traveling this time with an out-of-work logger he'd met only days before he left. A man passing through town who had heard talk about jobs opening up north of Kendall and maybe east, too. And about investors in a proposed shingle mill who were scouting Mississippi locations. Ben and this logger had planned to meet up at the train station, and Ben had welcomed the company. They would go wherever leads took them, he'd said,

so he wasn't certain just where they would be from day to day. And Becca, occupied the morning Ben left with running a few inches of cool water into the sink to splash over a weepy and feverish Evie, had let him leave without telling her the logger's name or where their first stop might be. Things she wished she knew now.

A few days ago, the bicycle repairman had driven up in front of the house in Ben's car, which no longer screeched and was, as the man had assured Becca, in tip-top shape. She was glad to have it back. With Ben's first lesson, Becca had taken to driving, had loved the sense of freedom she felt behind the wheel. She paid the repairman out of the dwindling remains of Ben's latest earnings, knowing they would soon have to dip into the money in Lottie's Bible, which they had deemed emergency-only funds.

Things had been easier when they were newlyweds and Becca had worked as a bookkeeper for a farm tools store near the apartment. She had an aptitude for numbers, and the owner had been pleased with the ways she had cut corners and with her overhaul of overdue accounts. He'd kept her on despite complaints from out-of-work customers who resented a woman filling a job they felt should have gone to a man, but when her pregnancy became apparent, he let her go. "Can't hold with taking a mother away from her baby," he'd said and sent her home.

When Ben still hadn't returned, still hadn't telephoned, after being away for three weeks, Becca was worried. Frightening scenarios ran through her mind. She wondered about the logger—wondered if Ben was still traveling with him, if the man was trustworthy. The last few years had turned some people hard. She'd read in the newspaper that a full one-fourth of all land in the entire state of Mississippi had been sold on a single spring day in the year just past, mostly due to unpaid taxes and foreclosures. A lot of folks were desperate. Becca had seen people with almost nothing share what they had, and others who took advantage where they could. It was hard to tell one from the other.

For days, she had not left the house, afraid of missing a telephone call or the arrival of a telegram or Ben opening the front door with an apology already begun. But now she had to do something. They had not made many friends in Kendall, Becca being a homebody at heart and Ben private about his family situation in Lyola. They had kept mostly to themselves, and Becca regretted that now. She considered driving to the county sheriff's office to seek help, but with no specifics about Ben's trip, she didn't think anything would come of that. Instead, with Evie heavy on her hip, she walked up the hill to the train station, hoping there would be a record of the ticket Ben had bought, something that might reveal at least a first destination and any stops along the way.

The clerk, bespectacled and suspended, was kind. "Your husband's name?" he asked. Then he ran his finger down lines in a logbook, finishing each one with a disappointed click of his tongue. He shook his head and clapped the book closed. "They don't all get wrote down," he said with an overly sympathetic smile Becca took to mean that he knew about men who boarded trains without telling their wives where they were going, then never came back. Or maybe she was just haunted by an incident with Ben the night before he left. She'd been alarmed at finding him trying to tie up a bedroll and learning that he planned to save money by sleeping heaven knew where rather than renting cheap rooms along the way. In an uncharacteristic outburst probably fueled by his own nervousness about the idea, he had shouted something hurtful about how fed up he was with being responsible and how much easier life used to be. The next morning, he'd apologized profusely and been easily forgiven, but Becca felt the sting of those words again under the clerk's solicitous gaze.

As the evening wound down, Becca filled Evie's bottle with a mixture of evaporated milk and a little corn syrup, an attempt at weaning, as Evie sidestepped around the kitchen table, holding on to the edges, her tongue working a corner of her mouth in concentration. *She'll be walking soon,*

Becca thought, wistful already for one more fleeting stage of infancy. After that bedtime bottle, Becca tried rocking her to sleep, singing a song and patting her diaper as usual, but the corn syrup kept Evie awake an hour past her bedtime, fussy and difficult. She cried, and Becca cried with her, worried about Ben, and they continued on together until Evie quieted down. Finally, Evie succumbed, falling asleep in a little heap in a corner of her crib, her face wet with tears, as was Becca's.

And then Becca was alone with the certainty that something was dreadfully wrong. Ben would have contacted her by now if he were able. He was out there. She had to find him. Before going to bed, she took Lottie's book of stories down from a shelf and opened it at random. On the last page of their favorite story, a legend about a chipmunk and a bear, Lottie had painted a scene: a winding path, a woman and a little girl—Lottie and Becca in their early days together—starting down it as bluebirds flew on ahead. *Bluebirds*. Becca did not believe in signs as Lottie had, but for a moment, longing intensely for Lottie, she allowed for unlikely possibilities. In the living room, she felt for the envelope she had hidden beneath the sofa. She took out the cradle roll certificate, stared at the bluebirds she had remembered were there, and tried to believe that Lottie was guiding her still. She thought about Mildred's letter. About Mildred. What could have been so awful that Ben would have turned away from a solid job at his father's business? Turned away from a mother he had loved, who obviously loved him still and who so wanted to love Evie.

Ben's mother was a partner in a successful enterprise, an employer important to the community. Becca wondered if the clerk at the train station would have made the assumptions she supposed he had about Ben's disappearance if Mildred had been the one asking questions. She looked again at the return address on the envelope. *27 Second Street, Lyola, Mississippi*.

She would wait one more day.

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Lyola was the first stop on the southbound train on Wednesday morning. With the car repairs still untested and Becca already anxious about what she was about to do, the train seemed the better choice. Such a quick trip—just a few minutes—yet Becca felt as if she were crossing the chasm between Ben and his mother.

Evie fell asleep before they were out of the station, and Becca was tempted to wake her, to coax smiles and giggles that would help calm Becca's nerves, distract her from her worries about Ben and her apprehension about showing up in Lyola without warning. Before setting out, she had stopped at the Petersons' house one more time. Mrs. Peterson had met her at the door, already shaking her head. No, Ben had not called.

It almost seemed as if the train had just gained full speed when it began slowing, and then they arrived. A dozen or so passengers disembarked ahead of Becca and Evie, rushing to greet those there to meet them or striding off purposefully to some known destination. Becca stood on the platform, taking in everything along with Evie. Lyola was the county seat, larger than Kendall, but still a small town in their small county. More shops had remained open there. Becca could see that from the station. She sat with Evie on a bench and dug through Ace Harper's knapsack, filled now with fresh diapers and other necessities. Evie waved at everyone who walked past, beaming if they waved back, offering baby chatter to a lucky few. As Becca unwrapped a paper packet filled with cheese shavings and bread, a long-eared mutt darted over and rested his chin on Evie's knee, not at all fazed by her squeal of delight. Becca fished some cheese from the packet.

"Are you hungry, baby?"

Evie babbled a happy response and eagerly closed her fist around a sliver of cheese, then smashed it against her lips, working the greasy mess into her mouth. A second fistful she smashed against the dog's nose, losing herself in



laughter when his long tongue shot out and swiped it into his mouth.

Becca spoke to a stooped, white-haired man sweeping the platform. He stopped his work to answer when she asked if he knew where Mildred Chambers lived.

“She one of the J.C. Sawmill folks?”

“Yes. I think that was her husband’s business. Hers now. And there’s a partner.” Becca knew she was explaining too much, that she sounded nervous. Evie reached out for more cheese, and Becca dug into the packet again, glad for a reason to look away. “She’s a widow,” she added, slipping cheese into Evie’s mouth. “For about three years, I think.” She couldn’t seem to stop the flow of information.

“Head on down to the end of that sidewalk yonder.” The man pointed past a row of steps that led from the platform to a wooden sidewalk along a line of storefronts. “Watch your step with the little one. Some of them boards been stole for firewood. Go left at the bakery, and on about ten minutes you’ll come up to a black iron fence around a brick house. That’s the Chamberses’ place.”

Becca thanked him. She stuffed the packet back into the knapsack, then settled Evie on her hip and started down the platform.

“It’ll be on your left-hand side, that house,” the man called after her, and she turned and waved thanks. Along the way, she jostled Evie until she laughed, and that sweet sound heartened her, as did the sunny day and the wildflowers blooming along the roadside. Lyola was a pretty town, the houses small and neat just there. She wouldn’t mind living in a house like one of those, she thought. When Ben was back and times were better. Her home with Lottie in Mapleton had been larger, but without the cheerful facades of these houses. Theirs had been just one more in a line of ordinary, scruffy, screened-porch housefronts, offering no hint of Lottie’s anything-but-ordinary artwork inside. How Becca wished Lottie were with them now. That

they were making this journey together, the three of them. Then before grief could sidle up next to anxiety in her heart, Becca saw the black iron gate.

The house was not as large as she had imagined it. Only about twice as big as the others on that street, but it lacked their cheeriness. It had a stately appearance. Or a suggestion of former stateliness, Becca thought. Two stories, sharp gables, dark-red brick with black shutters, a profusion of climbing red roses blooming wildly through the bars of the fence. Behind the roses, the yard was deeply shaded under old oaks with gnarled branches and expansive crowns that met in a united front against the sunlight.

“Here we are, sweetie.” Becca gave Evie the hug she needed herself and hesitated before pulling the latch on the gate, which she hoped was not a presumptuous move. Evie squirmed, wanting down, but Becca held her close as she walked up a flagstone path to a semicircle of brick steps that climbed up to the porch. There was a single name on the mailbox anchored to the brick wall: *Chambers*. A black cast-iron door knocker—an owl with enormous eyes, wings spread as if landing or taking off, talons clutching an iron bar—was affixed to the door so that the raptor and Becca were eye to eye.

This was where Ben had grown up. Her playful, funny, loving husband. The warmest man she knew. She thought of how charmed he had been with Lottie’s household artwork, and for a second she thought she might come undone, missing him. But she bolstered herself with the reason she was here, her mission to make sure he was all right, to bring him home. “This was your daddy’s house,” she said, tweaking Evie’s nose, sounding brighter than she felt.

“Da-da-da-da-da,” Evie chanted. Then Becca took hold of the iron bar and tapped it three times against the door.

Nell

**1971**

**North Carolina**

## 6

Nell woke uncertain of her surroundings, by now a familiar consequence of her months of housesitting. Reorienting herself in her old room in Hazel's house on Clay Mountain, she squinted at the clock: 9:27 a.m. Later than she'd meant to sleep.

The room was bright with morning sunlight from the two windows, both curtainless because Evie had so loved the unobstructed views—of the peaks gently folding one into another from Evie's side of the room and of the serviceberry tree, snowy white now with spring blossoms, outside the window by Nell's bed. Views as spectacular as any of those from the windows in the house on the coast, to which Nell would be returning in two days.

She thought of a time one summer when she had awakened deep in the night and opened her eyes to this same tree lit with swarms of lightning bugs, as if its branches had caught the stars. She was a teenager then, and nothing she had seen anywhere since had matched that sight. Evie would have been overjoyed had Nell called out to her then. And though Nell generally shared such things with Evie, she had stayed quiet and still that night. Had kept the moment for herself. She'd felt bad about that afterward, but she understood her reasons now. In those years, she had been shy and awkward, while there had been a brightness about Evie, a beauty of spirit that had drawn people to her. Nell had felt colorless next to her sister, and that night the serviceberry tree, splendid with twinkling light, had seemed to bestow upon Nell a little magic of her own.

She rolled out of bed now, her back stiff, and gave the mattress a look it deserved. Priming herself for a cheerful encounter with her mother after the turn the previous evening had taken, she vowed to stay on safe ground for the remainder of her visit. In the bathroom, she washed her face and combed the morning tangles from her hair, a perpetually unruly bob. Then she made her way into the kitchen, intent upon smoothing things over with Hazel, and was met only by a note taped to the coffeepot: *Appointment this morning. Back around 12:30. Knew you'd sleep late. Coffee's fresh.*

Nell reheated the coffee, which was decidedly not fresh, then took her cup and a cold drumstick to the table where talk of that slinky black dress—and “slinky” is how she now thought of it—had caused such a stir. Not that the dress had been Hazel’s only surprising possession. Nell wondered if Evie, too, had been thinking last night about their childhood raids of Hazel’s personal spaces when the two of them were home alone. Behind the curtain that hid the pipes under the bathroom sink, they’d found a number of small, delicate bottles ambered with age and nicotine, one with a glass stopper, another with a tasseled atomizer, most still holding remnants of perfumes or lotions.

Eventually the bottles had disappeared, but by then there had been other intriguing finds. From the top shelf of Hazel’s shallow closet, Nell and Evie had excavated a padded, burgundy leather case filled with jewelry: long strands of colorful beads, silver bracelets, brooches, a locket, a cameo. A jumble of earrings, Nell’s favorites being bluebirds with blue glass bodies and crystal eyes. Also on the shelf, pushed to one end behind a barricade of mundane clutter, they had found a round, pink cardboard hatbox threaded with a wide, black ribbon as a handle. Nested inside were two hats, one a jaunty green cloche with felt flowers that suggested parties and dancing and laughter, the other a moody midnight-blue velvet with a delicate, black net veil meant to be drawn dramatically over a woman’s eyes.

Nell and Evie had found it difficult to reconcile their mother’s secret

possessions with the woman they knew her to be, a woman who never wore jewelry or perfume, never went anywhere that called for playful or elegant hats. As time went on, they had turned their attention to other things, to grades and friends and the keepsakes taped to their dresser mirror. But Nell had never stopped wondering about the sweet-smelling woman in bluebird earrings and a velvet, movie-star hat.

She poured herself a second cup of coffee and wandered into the living room, glad to be alone in the house for a while. Scanning the titles in Hazel's bookcase, mostly mysteries and Gothic romances, she pulled a paperback from one of the shelves. Predictably, the cover featured a young woman in a long white nightgown holding a candelabra and ascending, certainly ill-advisedly, a shadowy staircase. Nell slid the book back into its slot. *Jane Eyre* was not among the books. It hadn't been there for years, had disappeared not long after she and Evie had taken it down and found that old certificate inside it.

That certificate. A pastel scene. A woman and a baby. Maybe some angels? And lines filled in with neat block letters. Nell could still envision some of what had been printed there. *Baby—Eva Chambers*. Maybe a middle name. She wasn't sure. *Mother—Becca Chambers*. Evie's birth date, the year familiar but the month different from the one they'd always celebrated. Nell thought there had been a father's name, as well, though she couldn't remember it. She and Evie had not focused on that back then. Maybe because neither of them had ever known a father and what had been so startling at the time was the unfamiliar name where, at least to Evie's mind, Hazel's should have been. On that day, with a degree of solemnity rarely achieved by a ten-year-old, Evie had extracted a promise from Nell to never open that book again. To never tell Hazel what they knew. And for all these years, Nell had been true to her word.

Under the spell of childhood memories, Nell peered through the kitchen doorway and checked Hazel's wall clock. There was time enough. And

before she had fully entertained the idea, let alone made a decision, she was standing outside Hazel's closed bedroom door, sheepish as a child. She turned the knob and went inside, telling herself she might never have this chance again. She dragged a folding chair from under a card table over to the closet and climbed up.

The hatbox was where it had been before, at one end of the closet shelf and only partially hidden now by a stack of old towels. Nell paused, listening for any sound of an approaching car, imagining what she must look like—a forty-two-year-old woman standing on a chair in her pajamas and socks, snooping through her mother's closet. She moved things aside, looking for the jewelry case. It wasn't there. With both hands under the hatbox, Nell took it from the shelf and climbed down. It was just as she remembered it—a round, pink box strung with a black grosgrain ribbon. She took it to the table, set it down gingerly, eased off the lid. There was the green cloche with the cheerful felt flowers, more dated and faded than she recalled, but sparking the same thrill she had felt remembering the black dress. She lifted it out of the box and found the blue velvet hat beneath it, every bit as elegant and sophisticated as it had first seemed. Holding it just above her head, she drew the net veil over her forehead, fully inhabiting her younger self. All that was missing was Evie.

In the bottom of the box was a cloth coin purse Nell had not seen before. The kiss clasp was loose and gaped open at first touch. She shook out the contents onto the table—the cameo brooch, a silver bangle, and the bluebird earrings, one of the crystal eyes missing, one of the wings bent. All that remained, she supposed, of what had been in the jewelry case. Things her mother had held on to all these years.

She screwed one of the earrings onto her earlobe, the first time she'd been that bold. When she turned to the dresser mirror and was confronted with a reflection of her invasion of Hazel's privacy, she quickly slipped off the earring. And as she reached for the coin purse to put things back in their

places, her elbow knocked the hatbox off the table and onto the wooden floor, where it came apart. Mortified, she knelt beside it. The only damage seemed to be that a cardboard insert, a cake-pan-shaped base that fit into the bottom of the box for sturdiness, had shifted out of place. But beneath that base were four things Nell had never seen before.

A ring. A sapphire, maybe, in a swirled, gold setting. It felt heavy. Looked real. Unlike the jewelry Nell remembered. There was a matchbook, black with gold foil lettering: *Lost time is never found again—Benjamin Franklin*. And a scrap of paper torn from a ledger, blank except for something scrawled in black ink across two lines: *A&K*. Initials? An abbreviation? A cryptic reminder for Hazel?

Underneath those things was a blue paper folder with a black-and-white photograph inside. A couple seated at a table in what might have been a restaurant, a man with his arm slung over the shoulder of a young woman. The woman, elegantly dressed, was Hazel. Her dark hair was loose and wavy, pinned back at the sides and falling to her shoulders. She wore a dress with a draped neckline and thin straps. Pearl earrings. Nell could imagine this woman wearing the veiled hat, the black dress. Spritzing herself with perfume. This version of her mother almost took Nell's breath away. It occurred to her that the man, a cigarette between his fingers, might be her own father. She searched his face for any resemblance, but saw none. She flipped over the photograph and read, *1934, The Twilight Room*. Perhaps Hazel's handwriting, but with flourishes and polish, much like Hazel in this photo. Nell was full of questions, and her mother, who would be home soon, knew the answer to each one.

Hurriedly, Nell reassembled the hatbox—the insert back in place hiding its secrets, the jewelry returned to the coin purse, the cloche atop the veiled hat, the lid back on. Then she hesitated. Undid it all. Her mother had saved these few things. Maybe she took them out sometimes, looked at them and felt again the way she had when she was young, when she was a woman who



wore a velvet hat, a sapphire ring. Who went out with friends. The smiling woman in the photograph who was twenty-six in 1934, the mother of a little girl who turned six that year. *One never outgrows the need for a mother.* Maybe she and Evie weren't so different in that regard after all, Nell thought. She wavered for a moment, her heart a little broken for Hazel, a little broken for herself. Then she made a decision she felt guilty about already. She told herself it was possible that Hazel never looked at these things, never even thought of them. She refilled the hatbox, replaced it on the closet shelf, half hidden by towels. Slid the chair back under the card table. Everything exactly where it had been before. Except the photograph. She couldn't bring herself to leave that image of her mother behind. She would have a copy made, she thought, then return it.

Twenty minutes after noon, when Hazel arrived, Nell had changed out of her pajamas and was sitting in the corduroy chair in the living room, holding an open book. On the front cover, a young woman in a nightgown foolishly ascended a dim staircase, a candelabra in hand.

"Oh, that's a good one," Hazel said, nodding at the book as she dropped her purse onto the table. "There's a big twist at the end."

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Hazel's birthday party on Saturday was a quiet affair, quickly accomplished at Evie's house. A coconut cake, presents, a canasta tournament even the twins consented to, and much made of how Hazel looked younger than her sixty-three years. At least a decade younger, Nell said, and meant it. At Evie's urging, Hazel had worn the more formal dress, an emerald-green sheath in which she seemed almost glowing, despite herself. Or maybe Nell was seeing in her something of the younger Hazel from the photograph.

Nell would be staying over at Evie's that night, her last night in the mountains. Hazel left in time to be home before dark, and the boys headed

out to meet friends. Nell and Evie ate grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup for supper. Days were warming this time of year, but evenings were chilly, and they sat in front of the fireplace with cups of jasmine tea, talking about the changes in Hazel and about Rob's flight schedule and Nell's housesitting and Evie's current classroom of second graders. Then they were silent for a few moments, sipping their tea by firelight. Night had fallen as they'd talked, and the flames only trifled with the deepening shadows in the room, but neither Nell nor Evie moved to turn on a light.

"What color is night?" Nell asked Evie then, reviving their childhood game. In the warm glow from the fire, she could see Evie's smile.

"Pink," she answered.

"Pink. Of course."

"There's nothing special about it," Evie said. "I know you've always thought that. It's mostly alphabetical. I just see letters in my head. *N* is clear, *i* is white, *t* is red. So *night* is pink. It's almost mechanical, really."

Evie trying to balance their respective fields, as always, Nell thought. "Your thoughts had colors before you could read," she reminded her.

"That's true."

"And you see music in colors in your head as it plays. Tell me that's not something special."

Evie just smiled.

Nell considered confessing that she had found the hats and the bluebird earrings, showing Evie the photograph. But that would raise questions, and the moment was too sweet between them for Nell to risk derailing it. She did not realize she was rubbing her palm until Evie reached over from where she sat and gently brushed her own hand over the scarred surface puckered like badly sewn seams, rough folds of thick, pale skin between purplish valleys stretched thin and glass-smooth. Nell felt both vulnerable and loved and did not pull her hand away.

“You know, Mama was, in her way, trying to spare you when she would see you rubbing this hand and would shake her head. Trying to save you from being teased. I understand that now, as a mother. We want to head off every little hurt for our kids, but we can’t, and we end up causing more harm sometimes, going about things the wrong way.”

Nell’s first impulse was to tell Evie that she was being overly generous. But then she thought of times at school when she’d been mocked by classmates imitating her as she had idly stroked her palm, and she let go of what she’d been about to say.

## 7

Back in the house on the coast, wineglass in hand, Nell strolled the length of the sleek, upscale kitchen with the bored air of one accustomed to elegant surroundings. Pretending like a child. Or as she imagined a child would, though she was hard pressed to remember ever having played those sorts of games. She must have, though. All children pretend, surely. And if she had not, then all the more reason to indulge herself now. She pulled open a French door and stepped out onto a raised patio overlooking a view she would never be able to afford. Sitting on a bistro chair like a solitary tourist, she gazed out over the Intracoastal Waterway to the barrier islands beyond.

The golden hour had begun, the horizon already a molten line of fiery orange, the setting sun its yellow center. A bank of clouds threatened to spoil the show, but the sun set them afire with breathtaking effect. Nell had begun this day with the sunrise at Evie's house in the mountains and was ending it here on the coast after the long drive between, most of which she had spent considering whether or not she should continue with this job that had seemed to knock her off-kilter emotionally. But this evening, at this marvelous house, experiencing this sunset so different from those on Clay Mountain, she was content with her choices.

Later, after a luxurious soak in an inconceivably deep corner tub, she was too weary to reflect on the events of her visit with Hazel and Evie. That could wait. Grateful that the owners of the house had left their castle-size bedroom furniture behind after clearing out most all of the other furnishings, Nell climbed onto the four-poster bed by way of a matching step stool and sank

into the cloudlike mattress.

Ten minutes after eight o'clock the next morning, the telephone woke her. She fumbled for the receiver and managed a falsely bright "Hello."

"I'm sorry to do this to you..." Bill Ross, the listing agent for the house, started right in. "But there's a couple in town for just a few hours, and they want to see the house. Any chance you could be out by nine thirty? I'll owe you, big-time. It'll just be a quick showing, and they're really eager to see it. But if you can't be ready that soon..."

"I'll manage," Nell told him. "No problem."

One leg over the side of the bed, she felt for the stool, then wobbled down the steps to the floor. Not fully awake—she would never be a morning person—she slid her feet into her slippers and scuffed to the bathroom. There, she snatched her still-damp towel from the rod and tied up her few toiletries inside it. In the hall, she stashed the bundle in the closet that was a depository for everything related to her existence and turned the key in the lock. She dressed hurriedly, made the bed, and swept the bedroom clean of herself, dumping her pajamas and slippers and a few things from atop the dresser into her suitcase, which she slid back under the bed. Downstairs, her purse already over her shoulder, she hid her coffeepot and the wineglass from the night before in the cabinet over the fridge and was out the door in record time.

For two hours, Nell lingered over a plate of waffles and several coffee refills at a touristy café down the street while a pack of teenagers in the back booth fed the jukebox relentlessly. The house was empty when she returned to it. Bill had left his card on the kitchen counter, *Thanks, Nell* scribbled across the face of it, and Nell realized that for all her big plans to reinvent herself with her new job, the only person in this town with whom she was on a first-name basis, other than Bill, was Cheryl, the checker at the grocery store. And that was because Cheryl wore a name tag.

At the end of the week, Bill called again to say that the couple wanted the

house. “It’s a cash deal,” he said, “so it’ll be fast. And there’s an inspection issue to deal with first. I hate to ask, Nell...”

But he did ask. He asked her to vacate the house within a week rather than the two-week minimum she had agreed to with Sheila. As unprepared as she was for yet another move, she felt she could hardly refuse to leave someone else’s house, so, reliable as ever, she acquiesced.

Throughout most of that day, she pondered this career path that was not really a path to anywhere. Maybe Hazel had been right about that. She might still be able to go back to her old job in Charlotte. Or she could apply to another agency in another town, go somewhere new. Or study for her own real estate license. Why not? But then, maybe she hadn’t given this job enough time. Maybe the next place would change everything.

This would normally be when she would call Sheila about other houses needing sitters, discuss locations and owner requirements, consider any lag time that would mean arranging to stay somewhere else during the in-between time. Maybe at Evie’s, or, if the time was short, perhaps with Sheila and Mike in Charlotte. Mike had been a real estate agent in Mississippi before he and Sheila were married, a coincidence Nell had never brought up. According to Sheila, the idea of a housesitting business had been born of Mike’s having often needed to find people to occupy opulent antebellum homes he’d listed there.

Resigned to at least one more relocation, Nell went upstairs and slid her suitcase from under the bed. She took out the photograph still packed inside it and considered the two smiling faces, then turned it over. *1934, The Twilight Room*. A restaurant? A nightclub? She couldn’t be certain the photo had been taken in Mississippi, but that seemed likely. *Where was I while Hazel sat at that table? Where was Evie?* That was the year Evie had shown up at the house by the railroad tracks. It was a puzzle, like one of Hazel’s crosswords. Like Hazel herself was a puzzle. And Evie the biggest puzzle of all.

Nell wearied herself with questions. Why were their earliest years, hers and Evie's, blank slates? Why had Hazel always seemed to have something to hide? How much did Nell really know about her own mother? And then an idea came to her. She sat cross-legged on the bed with the telephone in her lap and called Sheila.

Two days passed before Sheila called back with a response to Nell's request. Mike, she said, had made some phone calls about the prospect of a housesitting assignment in Mississippi. He hadn't turned up much.

"But there is one place..."

Nell walked out onto the patio, the long, coiled phone cord stretched almost straight between kitchen wall and bistro table, the morning air brisk, the breeze across the waterway fresh with promise.

"It's not like the other houses you've been in," Sheila began. "This one's in a rural area between two very small towns, a good distance from both. It's an old house, built in the early twenties. Probably a bit worse for wear, Mike says. Completely furnished, though—furniture, dishes, television, phone. You could make yourself at home there. The owner died about a month ago. A widow. She was eighty and the original occupant. The property went to her great-nephew in California, who has no interest in a house in Mississippi. He wants to sell it unseen—the house and everything in it. As is. Wants somebody in it as soon as possible, mostly so word doesn't get around that it's empty and full of stuff. The timing's lucky. And Mike says it's not likely to sell anytime soon. The nephew's asking way too much for it, and he's stubborn about not going lower. So chances are, you could stay put for a good while. You could go straight there from where you are. If you decide you want the job."

Nell wanted the job.

She wasn't sure how she would explain this to Hazel. Or to Evie. But now

she knew where she was going. She would spend a night with Sheila and Mike, then drive straight through to Mississippi.

That night in bed, she had trouble falling asleep, not plagued with troubling questions, but compiling a mental list of what she had to work with on this new mission: The photograph. Her memories of those early years, scanty as they were. The blue house. The green truck. The other mother's name on the certificate she and Evie had found—Becca Chambers.

After a while, her mind finally cleared itself for sleep, and like the first star in a new night sky, a random memory emerged. A name.

*Benjamin. The other name on that old certificate. Evie's father's name. It was Benjamin.*



**Becca**

**1933**

**Mississippi**

## 8

Becca let go of Mildred's door knocker, the iron owl staring back at her with wide, wild eyes as if casting a feral spell. Evie, unusually quiet, laid her head on Becca's shoulder, the nap on the train having been too short. Becca breathed in the sweet baby smell, kissed the top of Evie's head, and that was their posture when Mildred Chambers opened the door. A short silence ensued, Becca waiting for a welcome and Mildred, it seemed to Becca, waiting for an explanation. "I got your letter," Becca said as Mildred stood expressionless in the doorway.

*Imposing* was the word that came to mind as Becca considered her mother-in-law. She was quite tall, large-boned, sturdy in a way that suggested an athletic past let go of but still evident. Her dress was dark—iron gray in keeping with the iron owl and the iron fence—but smart, her black hair silvered as if she had just passed through a cobweb unawares. It had been drawn back severely and anchored in a tight twist in back that Becca glimpsed when the woman quickly scanned the brick porch in each direction.

"Ben's not with you?"

"No, it's just Evie and me." Becca offered a smile that was not returned, perhaps not seen as Mildred's gaze settled on Evie, asleep now in Becca's arms.

"You must come in," she said, moving aside, and Becca walked into the entryway and stood, not knowing where to go until Mildred closed the door and brushed past her, leading the way to what Becca supposed had been

known as the parlor when this house was built. The room seemed well suited to her host, done up in hues of deep rose and forest green, heavy velvets and brocades, a stiff camelback sofa on which Becca took a seat, waking Evie. Mildred chose a wing chair across from them that showed no sign of ever having been sat upon before. The whole room, in fact, seemed untouched, untouchable. In this setting, Mildred became more conversational. In a formal manner of speaking that resembled the language of her letter, Mildred asked about their train ride, thanked Becca for coming, and mentioned the difficulty of her decision to write the letter, as she had not wished to intrude where she was unwanted. However, she said, being separated from the son she loved so dearly had been a daily sorrow.

“And not being able to see this little darling.” She leaned forward toward Evie, who hid her face in Becca’s neck.

Becca was uneasy chatting in this manner, as if she had not come with distressing news. She struggled with how to deliver what surely would be a blow to this stranger who was Ben’s mother. Caught between uncertainty and urgency, she blurted out, “Ben is missing. I’m afraid something’s happened to him.”

Mildred’s reaction was measured, guarded. “What makes you think that?”

Becca told her about Ben’s efforts to find a steady job and how he had been defeated at every turn. That he had left three weeks earlier in search of work and that she had not heard from him since, though he had promised to send a telegram or call the Petersons if he’d be longer than two weeks. “We don’t have a telephone,” she said, her voice breaking. She brushed away a tear before it could fall, determined not to cry in this place where she felt vulnerable. Rather, she wanted to make a strong stand with this woman from whom Ben had distanced himself, even as she sought her help.

When Becca swiped at another tear, Mildred stood up and lifted Evie out of her lap without leave from either of them. Evie was visibly startled but

appeared willing to see what might come of this turn of events, and while Becca felt unbalanced by the sudden emptiness in her lap, she did not protest. All that mattered was finding Ben, so she went on, filled in more details as Mildred planted Evie on her own lap and curled an arm around her, more barrier than embrace.

“He left with a man he’d just met. A logger passing through town, looking for work.”

Mildred lifted an eyebrow. Otherwise, there was nothing in her face that hinted at what she was thinking. Evie made a play for the shiny gold chain around her neck, and Mildred caught her hand in midmotion, a gentle interception, but swift. Evie stared up at the woman, not certain what to make of her.

“I’m your Mimi, dear.” Mildred patted Evie’s head in an awkward fashion. “Your grandmother.” Then she reached beneath the pillow behind her back, pulled out a small cloth bear, and presented it to Evie. Odd that she had such a thing on hand, Becca thought, but she was glad for the impression it made on Evie. Delighted, Evie held it up for Becca to see, then snugged it under her chin, relaxed against Mildred, and, as was her habit when sleepy, tucked her thumb into her mouth.

Mildred turned her attention back to Becca. “I don’t think there’s need for worry.” This was not the reaction Becca had expected, after everything she’d told her. “A week late in calling one’s wife does not seem so very long for a man preoccupied with finding work,” Mildred said. “Nevertheless, I’m glad you came.” She combed her fingers through Evie’s downy curls, and Evie closed her eyes. “Do you know where Ben and this logger planned to stay overnight—in which towns?”

“North of Kendall. And maybe east. That’s all he said. And that they might go farther out if they heard of other leads along the way.”

“Did he tell you the name of the man traveling with him?”

Becca shook her head, angry with herself all over again. “I should have asked. I just didn’t think about it at the time. Ben had been frustrated and he —” She stopped short of mentioning Ben’s having lashed out at her the night before he left.

Mildred narrowed her eyes slightly, but moved on, making plans, telling Becca she would begin by contacting the sheriff there in Lyola. “If you agree, of course,” she added, obviously an afterthought. Becca doubted that any opinion of her own would alter Mildred’s plan. “I’ll pay the sheriff a call in person. Look him in the eye and let him know I’ll be waiting to hear from him.”

Familiar now with Mildred’s manner of looking one in the eye, Becca was hopeful that Ben’s mother would be taken seriously.

“Aside from the sheriff’s efforts, I’ll make inquiries myself—hospitals, train stations on northern and eastern routes, that sort of thing—since I have a telephone and you don’t. If that friend of his was looking for work, he might have come by the mill here first, seeing that he’s a logger. I’ll ask around, find out if anyone showed up around that time. If he was there, someone might remember his name, maybe where he was from. It seems reasonable that he would have come around. There aren’t many mills left in the whole state—the land’s been lumbered out for years. My husband had the foresight to switch to pine before the hardwoods were gone. That’s what saved us.”

Done with the bear, Eviesquirmed out of Mildred’s lap and slid to the floor, fussing with her rubber pants. She crawled over to Becca and sat between her feet, minding Mildred from there. As Mildred smoothed her rumpled lap, Becca considered her as well. She did not know how to interpret the woman’s being so unruffled by news that her son was missing. In Mapleton, Becca had been well versed in dealing with the snobbery of small-minded people, in discerning the phony from the sincere, but this woman had an inscrutable veneer of composure. She was difficult to read.

Evidently satisfied with the state of her skirt, Mildred looked up then. “I think you would do well to stay at home, to be there if Ben should contact you. And to take care of little Eva. Try not to worry. I feel certain that Ben is fine. It’s likely he’s just been inattentive to time. My son has a tendency to... Well, he can sometimes be a bit irresponsible. Although his intentions are good, he does not always stand up well under pressure.”

Becca wanted to speak out in Ben’s defense, but she thought about what he had said that last night—that life had been easier without so many responsibilities—and she held herself back from contradicting his mother. Evie filled the void just then by setting her sights on a small, round, marble-top table holding a crystal candy dish. Becca jumped up and headed her off just as Evie reached out for one of the table’s skinny, brass legs. In answer to the wails of protest, Becca opened the knapsack at her feet and scooped out a few wooden blocks and a ball of yarn that was currently Evie’s favorite thing in the world. While Evie grappled with the mysteries of unwinding the yarn, Mildred spoke again.

“I wrote to you because I was concerned that Ben might be struggling. Most people are now. And he is somewhat ill prepared. His father and I might best have done things differently. Helped him to be more equipped to take a path outside of the family business. It’s just that we never considered that he’d want a different path. Shortsighted of us, I see now. He was good at his job at the mill, but he was not required to answer to anyone there other than his father and me.”

Mildred fingered the gold chain around her neck and focused on something, or nothing, across the room, the slightest of smiles showing mostly in a loosening of what seemed to be a naturally somber expression. “He ran away several times when he was quite small, mad about some trifle or another. Never got farther than the back gate. Naturally, I watched him from the window. He always trotted back after a few minutes. Unlike his brother, Albert. When Albert ran away, he didn’t come back. Of course, he

was a man then, not a little boy.” She seemed then to come back to herself, to rein in her thoughts, dropping the chain back into place on her chest. She fixed her gaze on Becca.

“I suspect they’ve been in touch, my boys. Ben always worshipped his big brother. In one of our last conversations, he talked about finding Albert and showing up at his door. Even as he was angry at Albert’s treatment of me before he left. As children, when Ben got himself into a fix, he looked to Albert, and Albert would show him a way out of his trouble. So it does not seem unlikely to me that if Ben was at a breaking point, he might have traveled on to wherever Albert is. I believe he’s in Kansas, or was for a time. Albert tends to choose geographical solutions to problems.”

Before Becca could imagine any circumstance in which Ben might have left her and Evie behind and sought out his brother, Mildred proposed one.

“Ben had a small breakdown after his father died and Albert left. Out of an abundance of love, he had taken too much onto his shoulders in trying to ease my grief and fill in for those we’d lost. It was overwhelming for him, and something inside him just broke. I was frightened that he might not be able to pull himself back up. So I tried to smooth a path for him, to give him a soft road to recovery. And I suppose I overstepped. He cut me out of his life not long after he met you. Moved over to Kendall. Refused my attempts to speak with him. I wrote to you as a way of letting him know that the door to his old job at the mill was still open to him, in case he was in a dangerous place again. But then, I’m sure you’re aware of his struggles. You’re his wife. He must have confided in you.”

Becca sensed there was something beneath those words, wondered if they had been intended to lay bare the truth that Ben had not confided in her. To elevate mother higher than wife in the family hierarchy. But maybe she was being unfair. She averted Mildred’s piercing gaze by ducking to lift Evie from the floor. With Evie settled on her lap, Becca raised her head and looked directly into that intimidating stare, like looking into the sun. Evie, finding

herself familiarly at her mother's breast, made clear that it was mealtime by clutching a fistful of Becca's blouse and lifting it.

"I need to nurse her," Becca said, glancing eagerly toward the hallway in anticipation of a room in which she could both feed Evie and take a few moments to renew her sense of herself. In her mother-in-law's presence, she had begun to feel almost like a child, diminished in some way she did not understand. And she needed some distance to be able to weigh Mildred's revelations about Ben and her thoughts about his disappearance. "Is there somewhere I could..."

"Just go ahead, dear," Mildred directed. "It's only us here." And Becca, this version of herself that she did not recognize, complied, undid the first few buttons of her blouse and raised Evie to her exposed breast under that unwavering gaze.



## 9

Time took on an erratic nature, fruitless daylight hours racing toward interminable, sleepless nights. In that unbalanced manner, August arrived, and the days wore on yielding no answers. Mildred updated Becca regularly, reporting on phone calls she had made, telegrams sent, the latest conversation with the sheriff in Lyola, none of which had turned up any clues to Ben's whereabouts. No one at the sawmill remembered a logger stopping in looking for work.

Most often, Mildred talked with Becca via Mrs. Peterson's telephone, although twice she had shown up in Kendall with no warning. On those occasions, sitting in the tiny apartment amid the knocked-about furniture that had served many previous occupants, Mildred had seemed less formidable. She had arrived with toys and made stilted attempts at engaging Evie, attempts that had been almost pitiable in their hopefulness, as when she had bent close to Evie and repeatedly chanted "Mi-mi," tapping her chest with each syllable. Evie had interpreted this as a game of chest pounding, whacking herself and laughing.

Through it all—the phone calls, the visits, the updates—Becca tried to veil her panic and her impatience with Mildred's behavior that seemed so out of touch in light of the circumstances. She kept her focus on the search for Ben and the importance of Mildred's role in it, even as Mildred continued to suggest that Ben was probably with his brother, holding to that feeble notion with such conviction that Becca wondered if the woman's heart simply could not entertain any darker possibilities. If so, Becca envied her that.

As a new week shaped up much like the one before, Becca could not bear another day of waiting. She left Evie in the care of Mrs. Peterson's oldest daughter and drove to the two nearest towns north of Kendall. Knowing that Mildred had already been in touch with the stationmasters, she sought out places her mother-in-law and the sheriff were not likely to have checked—cheap diners and dime-store lunch counters where she described Ben to waitresses and cooks who gave her pitying looks, hotels and boardinghouses where clerks and proprietors checked their records to no avail. Even when it became apparent that continuing was futile, Becca forged on until she was simply walking down sidewalks and peering into store windows, as if Ben might be maundering about somewhere. She was more discouraged when she returned home than she had been when she set out.

The next day was bittersweet, as that was the day Evie decided she was done with the limitations of sidestepping around the sofa and the kitchen table, holding on as she went. Becca looked up from the stove in time to see her take one cautious step away from the table, find her balance, then walk a straight line to Becca. Evie grabbed hold of Becca's skirt and, as if it were nothing new, said "Mama!" for the first time. Two milestones, and Ben had missed them both.

That Friday, more than five weeks since Ben left home, Becca realized two things. Her birthday had passed without her notice—she was twenty-three now—and no mail had arrived in quite some time, not even the incessant circulars that went into the wastebasket straightaway. Ace Harper had phoned a while back to tell her that he was moving away from Mapleton and would send her an address when he had one, but nothing had arrived from him. As she thought about it, she could not remember receiving any mail after that letter from Mildred.

First thing Monday morning, Becca stood in front of the counter at the post office. She tightened her grip on Evie's hand as Evie, full of her newfound

mobility, worked to pull free. The postmaster, a small man in gold-rim glasses and a flat cap, returned to the counter and squinted at a form he held in his hand.

“Yes, ma’am. It’s right here. We got a forwarding order on the first of the month. Been sending mail for the Benjamin Chambers family on to another address since then.”

Becca was baffled by what the man was telling her. Was it really possible that Ben could have left her? Arranged for their mail to go to his brother’s address? Did she really not know him at all?

“Where have you been sending it?”

“Just over to Lyola. But if you folks are back home now...”

*Back home?* Evie managed to twist out of Becca’s grasp, and Becca let her go. She didn’t want to raise any suspicion, to say anything that might hinder this man from sharing what he knew, so she took a cleansing breath and centered herself, smiled at him.

“Come back by Mama,” she called to Evie, and Evie put her hands over her eyes and backed into a small niche at the end of the counter, achieving invisibility but for her Mary Janes and socks.

“May I see that?” Becca asked, and the postmaster showed her the form. Ben’s signature was not there, but the address in Lyola was familiar—the iron gate, the door knocker, the wild red roses. The mailbox labeled “Chambers” collecting Becca’s mail now. Maybe even something from Ben. Or something about him.

“Who made the request?” she asked, smiling as if she were grateful that someone had thought to do it.

The postmaster pulled off his cap and scratched his head. “I believe it was Mr. Chambers’s mother. A tall woman? Right handsome. Owns the sawmill over to Lyola? Said Mr. Chambers was traveling, needed the mail sent on for a while.”

Becca looked at the date on the form. Two days after she and Evie had gone to Mildred's house to ask for help. Just two days. So she had been getting their mail for almost three weeks. None of this made any sense.

"You wanting to start up delivery again?"

"Yes, please. Right away," she said, hiding her rising anger as best she could.

"Hold on. Let me take a look in the back. See if there's anything hasn't been sent on yet." The postmaster walked to the back of the room and down a wall of cubbyholes, and Becca noticed Evie playing a one-sided game of peekaboo from her own little cubbyhole. "Best baby ever," Becca told her. She scooped Evie up and set her on the counter, locked her arms around her. "Mama," Evie said, planting her little hands on Becca's cheeks, and Becca was struck with how one moment could hold so much good and so much bad simultaneously.

"Here you go." The postmaster held out a single envelope over Evie's head. "That's all there is. Just a return-to-sender. And we'll get delivery started back up tomorrow."

Becca held the letter out of Evie's eager reach, slid her off the counter, and set her on her feet. By then, Becca had already seen it. Ben's handwriting. His brother's name and an address in Kansas. "Return to Sender" and a pointing hand stamped in red ink on the front of the envelope. She didn't know what any of it meant. She thanked the postmaster, and he nodded amiably, oblivious to the world having shifted. Later, Becca did not remember the walk home, only that last thank-you and the feel of the envelope in her hand and an urgent need to confront Mildred.

She nursed Evie in the apartment, changed her, and walked her to the Petersons' house, leaving her once more in the care of Janie, a sweet, quiet girl Evie adored. This time, though, Evie cried inconsolably when Becca turned to leave, as if sensing that something was wrong. Becca walked back

home and tore open the envelope, afraid of what might be in it, but upheld by the anger that seemed to have hardened her.

“Dear Albert,” it began. “I hope this reaches you. I’m sending it to the last address I had for you.” Ben went on to apologize for not having answered the letters Albert had sent to him. He wrote of Becca and Evie in tender terms, declared that he was learning how to love through their love for him. That he was happier than he had ever been.

Relief washed over Becca. Ben had not left them—of course he hadn’t. But then came fear, solid and heavy as a boulder. That bright-red RETURN TO SENDER dispelled Mildred’s notion that Ben was with Albert, and while Becca had never really put stock in that hope, she thought now that perhaps she had not completely discounted that scenario, one in which Ben was safe and sound. Because without it now, there was only the sure knowledge that Ben had not come home because he had not been able to. She scrabbled for options other than the dark ones that presented themselves: The logger having turned violent. Ben sleeping under newspapers in a tent village like the one by the river outside of Mapleton. Illnesses and accidents and worse. Images that had visited her before, in bed on sleepless nights, but that carried new weight now.

Ben had written, too, about his falling-out with their mother, confiding to Albert details that he had kept from Becca. That in the weeks before he and Becca married, while Ben was still living with Mildred in Lyola, Mildred had threatened him with the loss of his job, with disinheriting him, if he married her. That she had hired someone to look into Becca’s background in Mapleton and reported to Ben what she had learned: “a history of insanity in the woman who raised her,” among other malicious insinuations. And that when Ben had responded by leaving the mill, leaving Lyola determined to stand on his own, their mother had undermined his efforts to find work. Had spread word among employers in Lyola and Kendall that he was not well, that he had experienced a recent breakdown, overwhelmed with

responsibility. The same lie she had told Becca. All to keep him tied to the mill, Ben wrote, dependent upon her. “Nothing that compares to what she did to you,” Becca read. “I should have believed you. I’m sorry I didn’t.”

The next line broke Becca’s heart, but she pressed on through the rest of the letter.

*I’m failing at marriage and providing for my family. Mother wrote to me last month. She wants me to go back to the mill. Wants to pay me back wages to make up for what she did, and wants us to move into the house with her. It was terrifying how tempted I was. She knows we’re running short of money. The woman makes it her business to know everything. And even after all she’s done to both of us, I had to fight with myself not to go back.*

*If things look better where you are, if there’s work to be had there and you’ll forgive me for turning away, I believe Becca would agree to us going there. It would be good to be near you. And away from Mother. You would love Becca, and Evie would steal your heart in a second.*

Becca folded the letter, stuffed it into her handbag, and went out to start the car.

## 10

Mildred was out when Becca arrived, but the housekeeper, Ann, invited her in.

“I’m here once a week.” Ann was young, certainly still in her teens, Becca thought. A wisp of a girl, warm and friendly, in a worn-thin white blouse with a frayed collar and a clothesline-stiff blue skirt. “Mrs. Chambers—the other Mrs. Chambers—” she added genially, “she always goes out while I’m cleaning. She works at the mill on my Mondays.” Ann gestured toward the room where Becca had sat with Mildred before, then followed her in. “Other days, she likes to work upstairs at her desk when she can.”

Mildred being away might be a good thing, Becca thought. Even after the drive from Kendall, she was still too angry to confront her mother-in-law just yet. Evie would be fine with Janie Peterson, however long it took, so she told Ann she would wait for Mildred. The room was just as gloomy as it had been before, even minus Mildred. Becca wondered if the little stuffed bear was still hidden behind the pillow in the wing chair, but she took her old seat on the sofa. There was a scent of citrus and ammonia in the air and an oily sheen on the newly polished side table.

“I’m finished with the upstairs, but I’ve got another hour or so down here,” Ann said. “Might be a good while before she comes back.”

“I don’t mind. Don’t let me interrupt you.” Becca was thinking about that desk upstairs that Ann had spoken of. Wondering if any of her mail, hers and Ben’s, might be there. From the start, Mildred had seemed so calm in the face

of Ben's disappearance. Had he written a letter that Mildred had intercepted? Sent word to Becca that he'd be longer getting home, and letting her know where he was? Had Mildred seen that as an opportunity to win her over before he came home? It was a despicable possibility, yet Becca hoped against hope that it was true. That Ben was safe.

"I'll go on, then, and get back to my work," Ann said. "But can I just say how glad I am that you and the baby'll be moving in here for a while? It'll be so good for Mrs. Chambers. She's been awful lonely since Mr. Chambers passed on. And missing her boys, and all. It's a kindness."

Keeping her face blank was not difficult, as stunned as Becca was. Mildred had asked her once if she and Evie might want to stay with her until Ben returned. While they were looking for him. To save the expense of rent, she'd said. Becca had not considered that for a moment, had made it clear that she would be remaining in the apartment. But now she just said, "Thank you, Ann. I think I'd like to wait upstairs, if you don't mind. I don't want to get in your way down here, and there's a letter I'd like to write, since I have some time. And a book I'm reading, in my bag."

"Of course. You let me know if you need anything."

"I'll be fine."

At the head of the upstairs hallway, doors stood open on either side. A cross-breeze, warm but a blessing in late August, flowed between them, the open windows airing out the freshly cleaned rooms. Becca entered the room on her left, a bedroom with the antiquated ambience of the parlor downstairs. Heavy fabrics, formal furniture, baroque wallpaper. A scent of lavender gone bad. An air of generational staleness.

Keeping her steps light, quiet, Becca crossed the room and entered an adjoining sitting room, similarly furnished. Here were a couch, two tapestried chairs, sconces on the walls for light, and, conspicuously utilitarian among



the other furnishings, a secretary desk. Its hinged leaf had been left down for writing, revealing an assortment of pigeonholes and drawers and small compartments in the open cavity. If Mildred was holding Becca's mail hostage, this desk seemed a likely accomplice.

Becca did not hesitate. Driven by anger at Mildred and fear for Ben, she brazenly ransacked the desk. She emptied compartments and pulled open drawers. Found writing paper, pens, envelopes, stamps. Mildred's own mail—encouraging!—and financial documents from the mill that held no interest for her. Those, she tossed atop the other detritus now littering the desk.

In a longer drawer beneath the open leaf, she found an old photograph of two boys, a man standing between them. One of the boys she recognized as Ben. The other, probably Albert. The man closely resembled Ben as Becca knew him. His father, surely. She touched the image, lingered there for a few seconds as if it were her Ben, a rush of emotion fueling her determination. *I will find you.*

She searched the last few compartments in the desk, even the ones too small for mail. A pencil eraser, a spool of thread, business cards, a jeweler's loupe. In her eagerness, she inadvertently pushed or pulled or bumped something in just the right way, and a small panel fell loose, revealing a keyhole. And now her mission was to find a key that would unlock that drawer. She felt for other sliding panels and found none, inched the desk away from the wall and checked the back side, then the underside. Nothing.

It could be anywhere. Downstairs, upstairs, in one of the rooms Becca had not seen or in the one she was in now. It might be in Mildred's handbag, or on a chain around her neck, for all Becca knew. She thought of the chifforobe in the bedroom and did not relish going through that, handling Mildred's clothes. Instead, she opened what she thought might be a closet door in the sitting room, then stood aghast at what she saw.

This was a room almost garish in its cheeriness. There were ruffled

curtains at the window, a thick pile rug on the floor. A cushioned window seat. Toys and children's books, stuffed animals, dolls in satin and lace. A toddler-size bed with a guardrail and a pillow in a silk pillowcase embroidered with "Eva." A barrel-top trunk, open and filled with baby dresses, diapers, anklets, and little shoes. Across the room was a single twin bed with a white coverlet next to a chest of drawers. Becca found those drawers empty, ready to hold a guest's belongings. She did not need her name embroidered on a pillow to understand that this bed was intended for her.

Mildred still expected to persuade her to move into this room while Ben was away. Had led Ann to believe she'd already agreed to that. And just as Ben had described in his letter to Albert, a most unwelcome temptation seized her. No worries about the rent that would be due at the first of the month or how she could manage without running through the modest funds Lottie had left her—their emergency money. And of more immediate benefit, the removal of those sorts of distracting worries while she focused on finding Ben. How bad could it be? *And maybe it would be best for Evie.* That thought was the snake in the Garden of Eden, and Becca shook herself free of it.

Without any qualms she strode back into Mildred's bedroom and pulled open the top drawer in the chifforobe. Stockings and socks and scarves. Then the second drawer. Belts and gloves. In the third drawer, beneath a stack of yellowed lingerie, was a tiny key.

Ann was hanging laundry on the line beneath the open window in the sitting room, her off-key soprano an accompaniment to Becca's trying the key in the lock. It turned, and Becca drew the drawer out of its casing. Inside, she found a telegram and a brown paper packet with a bulging center. Ann sang of crossing a river, and Becca slid the telegram out of its sleeve. It was not addressed to Becca or Ben, but to the sawmill, and was from the sheriff's office in Exeter, Mississippi, a town unknown to Becca. A short message requested that someone in charge at the mill contact the sheriff about an

urgent matter. Nothing more. Unsure if this had anything to do with Ben, Becca did not allow herself to read too much into it. Still, her hands were shaking when she picked up the packet. She turned it over and saw her own name there: Mrs. Benjamin Chambers, in care of Mildred Chambers. *In care of*. Addressed directly to this house, not forwarded from Kendall. And the return address was the same as the address the sheriff had included in his telegram.

Confused, Becca sat on a chair by the desk and unfolded the previously opened end of the packet. She shook out the contents and saw Ben's familiar wallet, the one he wore on his belt when he traveled, and the compass his father had given him. Her heart dropped. Her fear was so intense that it felt like physical pain. Ann rattled pots in the kitchen now, and Becca quickly stuffed the wallet and the compass into her handbag lest anyone try to take them away from her.

Still in her lap was a letter, typed and stamped with the sheriff's seal. She took a last long breath from that place of not knowing, then started in on the letter.

*Dear Mrs. Benjamin Chambers.*

The sheriff first expressed gratitude that Becca's mother-in-law had responded to his telegram and had advised him as to how Becca could be reached.

*I trust that she was right that the tragic news should come from her first. Everyone here sends their regrets to you and your family.*

If not for anger at Mildred that quickly twined itself around her grief,

upholding her once again and filling the space where hope had resided, Becca might not have been able to continue reading. She gave herself over to that anger, to a hardened heart that would not break just yet, and read on. She learned that Mildred had received the telegram at the mill and telephoned the sheriff, identifying a body in their custody from the description of a compass found in a pant pocket.

*The logger. Becca clung to that thought. Maybe he'd stolen the compass. Anyone might have stolen it and had it on their person. The wallet, too. Maybe it hadn't been Ben at all that they'd found.*

*...and by a birthmark on one ankle.*

And the last trace of hope was gone.

*Following are some details I must relay to you as the next of kin. I am sorry. They won't be easy to read.*

*Details.* Such an innocuous word. Becca ran it through her mind again, as if to lessen the impact of harsher words to come.

*As I discussed with the mother of the deceased...*

*Deceased.* A razor blade of a word.

*We regret that we were not able to identify Mr. Chambers before our summer temperatures required that he be buried. If his wallet had been on his body, we might have identified him in time for a*

*transport. But by the time a maintenance crew servicing the tracks discovered the wallet, the burial had already taken place. They found the wallet on a stretch of track in a sharp curve that trains approach at a slow speed. It's a place where rail riders are known to hop trains. We suspect that was the case with your husband. The distance between where the wallet was found and where the body was found and the condition of both all line up with an unfortunate situation of him being snagged and dragged a considerable piece.*

Words that exploded like grenades.

*We had no way of knowing where he was from, what the starting point of his journey was or the dates of his travels. I'm sure your mother-in-law has explained that the only clue the wallet held was the name of the sawmill in Lyola. Her arrangements to transfer the body to your family cemetery in Lyola are all in order. Enclosed are your husband's belongings. Please accept our condolences.*

She had lost him. Every day for weeks she had hoped to hear him open the front door. There had been times when she thought she *had* heard him. That musical rapping on the door that meant it was him, back home from somewhere. His chair scraping the floor as he got up from the kitchen table. The squeak of the bedsprings as he lay down next to her. Now she would never hear those sounds again. Or she might never stop hearing them and being forever disappointed.

She needed to get out of this house. To be alone somewhere to fall apart then pick herself back up before she saw Evie. Before Evie saw her. Evie was what mattered now. Becca folded the horrible letter and put it in her bag.

How long had Mildred kept this from her and carried on the pretense of

searching for Ben? Becca considered the date on the telegram—two days before she had first knocked on the door of this house. When she and Evie stood there on the porch and Mildred asked if Ben was with them, she had known he was not. When she called with updates and brought gifts for Evie, she had known the truth. Mildred had never held a foolish, pitiable belief that Ben was with his brother. Becca thought of that ghastly room with Evie's name on the pillow. Of the way Mildred had tried to lure Ben back to Lyola, back to her, to this house, by winnowing down his options. Had they not been so cruel, those games Mildred had played, Becca might have mustered some sympathy for her. But now she just felt empty.

Glancing at the cluttered desk with indifference, she dropped the telegram there. She hooked her bag over her arm and made her way across the sitting room and into the bedroom, her movements leaden, as if she were walking underwater or slogging through molasses. As she stood on the landing, she heard Mildred downstairs. Heard her speak brightly to Ann and Ann announce that Becca was upstairs. And then Becca was descending the stairs, the now-empty packet in her hands. Mildred looked up, and Becca met her gaze. Her eyes never left Mildred's as she descended, one step after another. She felt a strange sense of power.

“Ann, you may go now,” Mildred said without turning her head.

“I'm not finished with the kitchen,” Ann said uncertainly.

“Just go on,” Mildred said sharply, and Ann leaned her broom against the wall and disappeared into the kitchen. Becca heard a door close in that part of the house, and she was alone with Mildred.

Mildred glanced at the packet in Becca's hands. “I see you've been through my things.”

“I've been through *my* things.”

# 11

Becca stood on the bottom step of the staircase, eye level with Mildred.

“You knew all along. Even before I came here with Evie. The phone calls you said you’d made. The meetings with the sheriff. Everything. All lies. You had no right to keep this from me.”

Mildred did not rush in with her defense. She maintained the cool composure that had cowed Becca before, but no more. Becca waited. She would not make it easy for her by walking away.

Finally, Mildred spoke. “I planned to tell you when the time was right. That first day, I saw you there with Eva, full of hope that we could find Ben. I couldn’t bring myself to burden you just then with the fresh pain I was feeling. The pain you’re feeling now.”

Becca was not swayed. “Do you expect me to thank you for your kindness?”

“No,” Mildred said. “I expect nothing. But I hope for your forgiveness. I was so full of grief myself. First my husband, and then my son. And maybe I was a little jealous—that you’d had that last year and a half with Ben, while I’d been shut out. I wasn’t thinking clearly. Surely you understand. I know you’ve suffered much loss in your short life.”

A pale ember of sympathy that Mildred’s admissions had sparked was doused by her mention of Becca’s losses, a desecration now that Becca had read Ben’s letter to Albert and knew Mildred’s thoughts about Lottie: *a history of insanity*.

“It’s true,” Becca said, “that I have suffered the loss of people who loved me. But in those cases, the love remains. It’s never lost.”

If that was a blow to Mildred, she did not show it. “My intention was to spare you for just a short while. To give us time to become acquainted, in the hope that we might be of some comfort to each other. I see now that I only added to your pain. I was wrong. We are each other’s only family now, the three of us. Please don’t turn your back on that. Eva needs a grandmother.”

Becca might have spoken of that letter of Ben’s, still in her bag now. Of the lies Mildred had spread about her son as he tried to stand on his own. She might have suggested that if not for that, perhaps Ben would have found work close to home. That had Mildred made different choices, time might have brought healing. She could have said that Evie did not need Mildred’s darkness in her bright little life. But there was nothing more that Becca wanted to tell this woman. She dropped the empty packet onto the floor at her mother-in-law’s feet and started across the room.

“I can help you now,” Mildred said, following close behind. “You could work at the mill. Handle the books. I know you’ve done that kind of work. And you two could move in here. Never have to worry about rent again. Inherit this house someday. And my share of the mill.” Her voice sounded the way it had when she had almost pleaded with Evie to say “Mimi.”

There was no longer any potent seduction in Mildred’s offerings. No dangerous temptation. She could say nothing to Becca that mattered, now that Ben was gone. But Becca did have one last question.

“Did you know already when you wrote to me?”

“No. I wrote the letter because Ben would not talk to me, and I hoped there might be a chance to make a connection with you while he was away.”

There was something wrong in that answer, and Becca pounced on it.

“How did you know Ben was away?”

Mildred hesitated. Becca could see in her face that she knew she’d made a



mistake. She seemed to be struggling to come up with an answer. With another lie. Becca just nodded her head, acknowledging what she saw.

Mildred stood straighter and crossed her arms. In a cold and toneless voice, she said, “I knew my son was away when I sent that letter because a logger had come to the mill looking for work the day before Benjamin’s departure. He was sent to my office.”

Becca was speechless. It was as though Mildred had slapped her.

Mildred’s countenance now was that of a woman with the upper hand. She took her time unspooling her story. “We had no job for him. I didn’t take note of his name. Before he left, he mentioned that he was to leave town the following morning. To look for work, he said. With a man from Kendall. A man named Ben.”

Becca’s anger, her resolve, her apathy all foundered. None of that was holding her up. She stumbled around Mildred, who stood like a pillar between her and the front door. As Becca fumbled with the doorknob, Mildred said, “I’ve made arrangements to bring Ben home to his family cemetery. I knew you would never be able to afford a transport. I have spared you of that burden, as well.”

With the door open at last, Becca rushed to the gate, then to the car. Aware that Mildred was watching her from the doorway, she cycled through what seemed like an endless number of steps required to start the engine, struggling to concentrate on the correct order. *Turn on the gas. Move the spark lever up, the throttle down. Twist the valve. Pop out the ignition switch.* She glanced again at the house, Mildred still there, still watching. *Pull the choke. Press the starter pedal. Push the choke.* And, thank God, the car started. A few last adjustments as it warmed up, and she was free.

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That evening, Becca took Evie on a twilight walk, the kind she and Ben had

favored in Mapleton before they were married. It meant that Evie would miss her bedtime, but Becca needed to walk, needed her daughter. They set out under a sky pink with sunset, first walking hand in hand at Evie's toddler pace. Evie was beside herself at the unexpected adventure. When dusk had wiped the sky clean of sunset and the time was just right, a single bat flapped wildly over their heads on its zigzag journey. Becca picked up Evie and carried her to the end of the street, then turned back the way they had come. She focused outward, on night sounds and smells. Soon the darkness without became as deep as her darkness within, and it was as if she had disappeared. As if she were lost in her own life. But Evie, insisting then upon being let back down, led her the rest of the way home.

Evie was nearly asleep when Becca finished pinning the nighttime diaper. She tucked Evie into the bed rather than her crib—only for a few nights, she told herself—then Becca was alone in the small, uncertain place between a crumbled past and a future too obscure for her to find safe footing ahead. But standing still with only grief to cling to was not a choice afforded to her.

Some time passed before she finally unlatched Lottie's bread box and took out what she had put there after returning from Lyola—Ben's wallet. She cradled it in her hands, a relic now, both holy and horrible. So many times she had seen it resting at his side, strung on his belt at that tender spot she had touched so often in the night. The soft leather underside was only lightly scuffed, was still as it had been before. When she rolled it over in her hands, the front told a darker story, the leather violently scraped and slashed, the belt loop ripped apart. How many times would her heart break before this worst of days was done?

The strap that wrapped around it still held it closed, and Becca tried not to imagine Mildred opening it, handling Ben's things, though she knew she had. She unwound the strap and lifted the flap, took out Ben's folding comb, his emergency peace dollar, a tiny lace-edged sock Evie had worn as a newborn—and Becca's heart broke three more times.

Aside from the silver dollar, there was a total of four dollars and thirty-two cents. No one had taken it, despite the hard times. Ben could have bought a ticket rather than trying to hop a train, if that was, indeed, what he had done. Becca would not have thought it possible that he might do something like that, had she not come upon him trying to tie up that bedroll before he left. He had become so intent on stretching every penny between jobs, and Becca remembered that he'd said the logger had been freight hopping. She closed her eyes to shut out those thoughts but saw an image of Ben standing beside a train track, the logger already up and holding out his hand.

In a thin sleeve inside the wallet she found a business card from the mill. No name, usable by anyone working there. The sheriff's first clue to Ben's identity. The link that had led him to Mildred. Then she took the brass compass from the bread box. Ben had told her that his father bought it for him the day Ben was born. It was cool on Becca's palm, "Germany" printed just over the southern point, not a scratch on the glass cover. Had things been different, Becca might have given this to Mildred in memory of both her son and her husband. But as things were, she would save it for Evie. She put everything back into the wallet except the business card, which she would throw out, then returned the wallet and the compass to the bread box, there with Lottie's hollowed-out Bible, the storybook, and the painted buttons.

For a few moments, she wandered about the apartment. It seemed different now, foreign. Ben's spot on the sofa, his chair at the table, and the place where he'd hung his hat were just a cushion, a loose-jointed chair, an empty hook. As if Ben no longer belonged there. *Evie will forget him*, Becca thought. Maybe she was forgetting him already.

Becca wanted to leave Kendall. She had no attachment to it anymore. Being in the apartment without Ben would only add to her pain, just as being in the Mapleton house after Lottie was gone had been painful. She and Ben owned little of what was in the apartment. She could fit everything that belonged to them in the Model A, even the small wicker crib, if she packed

carefully. She wanted to go to a place where she would never open her door to find Mildred standing there, or be called to the Petersons' telephone for more of Mildred's cajoling. She was no longer angry at her. Not really. Nor was she sympathetic or intimidated. She was simply disgusted by the woman.

So what to do? She couldn't bear to stay, but had nowhere to go. She would have liked to get into the car with Evie and just drive. To sit by the river again and be comforted, regain the strength she would need going forward. But other than the river, Mapleton held nothing for her. Even Ace Harper had left there. And too many people in that town would always see her as the daughter of the crazy woman found in the river. She would never tolerate that or expose Evie to what she had experienced there as Lottie's child.

Rent would be due at the end of the month. Could she leave before then? With what was left of Ben's meager earnings and the money in Lottie's Bible, she and Evie could stay in a hotel or a boardinghouse for a while, but the money would dwindle away quickly without any income. Eventually, she would find work. She was confident of that. Bookkeeping work, or something requiring other skills she had picked up in Dr. Carson's office. She still had the recommendation letter he had written for her. And there were other things she could do. Back in Mapleton, she had been offered work as a live-in caretaker for an elderly and ill widow. Something like that would pay little, but would mean she wouldn't have to hire someone to watch Evie while she worked.

But right now she needed some time to breathe, to learn how to walk through this overwhelming grief and pull herself up as best she could. Ben had been there to help her bear losing Lottie, and now, with Ben lost to her, she had never needed Lottie more. She just wanted to go home to Lottie.

And then she remembered Rodney. That she owned a house there, Lottie's house. She remembered what Lottie had told her. *There are different kinds of ghost towns. Different kinds of ghosts. And I'm kin to Rodney's ghosts.* Lottie

had grown up there. If there was anywhere Becca could find anything of Lottie still in this world, it would be in Rodney.

Nell

**1971**

**Mississippi**

## 12

Nell had lost her way in a labyrinth of forlorn country roads in Mississippi when a gas station appeared like a vision. An overall-clad good Samaritan strode out to meet her at the pumps.

“You lost?” he asked, as if that was his standard first guess when a car pulled in. He had an outdoor face, creased and tanned, suggesting a familiarity with his surroundings that gave Nell hope. She showed him the directions Mike had written down for her in Charlotte.

“I know the house,” the man said, one elbow resting on Nell’s open window. He turned his head and spat tobacco juice, a brown trail left behind at one corner of his mouth. “You know where Gray’s store used to be?”

Nell was pretty sure he knew she did not, but she played along. “Sorry, no. I’m not from here.”

He rubbed a hand over his stubbly chin, cracked a tobacco-stained smile.

“Little Creek?” He squinted at her.

Nell shook her head.

“Creek’s dry right now, so there’s a good chance you’ll miss it. But you’re gonna take a right at the bottom of that hill there, then just short of a soybean field— You know what a soybean field looks like?”

Nell shrugged an apology for her foreignness.

“Well, won’t be no soybeans in it yet, anyway; that’s Crator’s place, and he’s old-school about planting. But it’s the only cleared field around here.

And just before that field, you go left.” He turned away and spat again. “About a mile on from there, first driveway to your right is your house. If you get to a church, all the windows broke out, you’ve went too far.” He asked if she wanted him to top off her gas tank.

“Please,” she said. “And thank you.”

While he cleaned her windshield, Nell scratched out his directions beneath Mike’s.

“Check the tires?” The man was holding up an air hose, so she said, “Sure.”

When she’d paid him, he said, “By the by, you can’t see that house from the road. But there’s a yellow mailbox. Look for that. You might not can tell it’s yellow. Might be faded out. But it’s the only mailbox right there, so just watch for that.”

Fifteen minutes later, a mailbox came into view. A relief, as Nell had thought it possible the man at the gas station had been amusing himself by directing her to the center of nowhere. But true to his word, there it was, a faint trace of yellow paint visible, the flag bleached a pale pink. A long dirt driveway snaked between stands of mostly pine trees, then looped in front of a white two-story gingerbread cottage that might fairly be described either as charming or excessively frilly. The house was showing wear. Lacy trim that skirted the gable roof had crumbled at the ends, and there were cracks in the gingerbread balustrade enclosing the porch. Peeling paint around a few of the high windows had exposed patches of bare, weathered wood, as if this aged lady of a house were going gray.

Nell leaned against the heavy car door and shoved it open, then stepped out and let it slam behind her. On the porch, she checked the back side of a slatted rocking chair, as Mike had instructed, and found the house key taped there. Another relief. She turned the key in the lock and went inside.

“As is” had not prepared Nell for what met her on the other side of the



door. She had expected the homey clutter typical of the houses of people who have lived very long lives within them, but there were no doilies here, no knickknacks or washed-out photos of children in holiday sweaters. Here, there was an eclectic assortment of curiosities, among them a full-size floor harp with graceful lines and broken strings; a rugged, rope-handled chest doing coffee-table duty in front of a blue silk sofa; and, mounted on the back wall, an enormous sea-battered ship's figurehead, a mermaid staring into some unknown watery distance. The room was a time capsule filled with oddities, a setting not unfit, Nell thought, for a Hitchcock film, scored as it was with the discordant ticking of a number of out-of-sync clocks.

Most unnerving, though, was a sense that someone lived there still, someone who might be out visiting a friend or upstairs napping. A pair of reading glasses rested atop an open book on a side table, and a knit shawl lay in a heap on the sofa as if only just dropped there, as if the cushion might still be warm if Nell touched it. A pair of muddy rain boots stood behind the front door, waiting to be stepped into. And those ticking clocks. Likely antiques, judging by those Nell could see from where she stood. Someone had wound them.

She walked through the crowded room and into the kitchen like a trespasser. It was dim there, the sun already creeping low on the opposite side of the house, and it took her a while to locate a light switch inconveniently situated behind the door. It was an old-fashioned, two-button switch, and just as she was poised to punch the *on* button, a burst of otherworldly music exploded from the living room. Nell was already at the back door with her hand on the knob when she recognized the clangs and bongs and chimes of clocks inharmoniously striking the hour. Once the noise died down, leaving only the incessant ticking, she was able to laugh. Still, before doing anything else, she went back to the living room and searched out each clock, halting the ticking in any manner that worked, including stuffing tea towels around the pendulum of a six-foot grandfather that would succumb to nothing else.

By then, the pine trees out front were casting long shadows across the driveway, and she went out to unload the car before dark. She stacked her boxes and suitcases in a small through-room off the kitchen, next to a shiny new washer and a matching dryer, the real oddities in this house. That space opened onto a dining room with a grand European table around which six rustic, mismatched chairs were assembled like a gang of hoodlums, the table set with a single lace place mat. Beyond that, a tiny pink powder room with a steeply sloped ceiling crouched under the stairway.

Back in the kitchen, she found two aluminum trays filled with ice in the little metal freezer compartment of a refrigerator probably circa the forties, and her fingers stuck fast to the frozen lever that loosened the cubes until she ran water over hand and tray to release them. She poured herself a Fresca she'd brought in from the car, then took her first break of that day on the sofa in the living room, uncomfortably aware of the reading glasses, the open book, the shawl, as if cumulatively they made up a presence beside her. A collection of magazines with colorful covers had been fanned out on the steamer trunk. She picked up one at random, leafed through it idly, and was several pages in before she took notice that all the photos inside were black and white. Film stars from old Hollywood—Clark Gable, Jean Harlow, Carole Lombard. She flipped back to the color cover. *Silver Screen*, December 1934. Then she scanned the others—*Hollywood*, *Modern Screen*, *Movie Mirror*—each from the 1930s.

It was disorienting, sitting there among all those stars whose lights had gone out, in this room in which a host of antique clocks chimed an hourly requiem for the past. But the past was why she had come. She looked again at the magazine in her lap. 1934. The year on the back of the photo from Hazel's hatbox. The year Evie had appeared on their porch, somewhere in this state. Perhaps there was no better home base for her search for answers. Here, it would be easy to imagine herself in the thirties. To imagine herself *back* in the thirties, she thought. Because she had been there, too, in 1934.

She and Evie and Hazel and Clark Gable and Jean Harlow.

The trees outside the window were lost in the moonless night when Nell picked up her two suitcases and took them to the foot of the stairway that climbed into utter darkness halfway up. She flicked on the wall switch, and a weak, tawny light glowed from above the stairs, disappointing, but welcome. There were three bedrooms on the second floor, only one with a made-up bed. Nell deposited her suitcases there. The room could have passed for a theater prop room with its waist-high urn filled with peacock feathers, gauze bed-curtains in fuchsia and sage and azure blue, yellowed paper lanterns strung over a fringed fainting couch that begged for a silent-movie actress with a cigarette holder, wearing layers of chiffon.

Adjoining that room was a library with floor-to-ceiling bookcases, slate-gray armchairs, and gentle lamplight, a rest for the eyes after the assault of the bedroom. A half-glass door opened onto a narrow, wrought-iron balcony visible only in the light from the library and bedroom windows. After a quick trip across the hall to an unexpectedly art-deco bathroom, Nell changed into her pajamas earlier than usual. The bed was comfortable enough, although she could not help feeling a little intrusive in it, as if this room were aware of her inadequacy to carry off accessories like gauzy bed-curtains and peacock feathers. But the day had been long, and Nell soon felt herself drifting off.

## 13

In the light of a new day, the house inspired none of the jitters of the night before. Nell sat at the dining room table with a cup of coffee and began making plans. Despite Mike's confidence that the house would not sell soon, Nell didn't want to waste any time. She knew how suddenly a house could be sold out from under her. And she had made peace with the idea of seeking answers to the questions Hazel would not entertain. Already, distancing herself from everything familiar at Clay Mountain had brought some needed clarity about how unreasonable, perhaps even suspect, Hazel's secrecy had always been. How unimaginable it was that she and Evie knew so little about even the most basic details of their own histories.

Once, during a period of mild teenage rebellion, Nell had pressed Hazel about the issue of her birth certificate, something so specific to Nell herself that she had considered it out of the realm of betrayal of her promises to Evie.

"Lost. Back when we moved," Hazel had said, as if there had been only one move, and of an ordinary nature. Hardly worth elaboration.

"I'll need it when I graduate and get a job." Nell was sixteen then, another year of high school left. "To get a Social Security number."

Hazel had waved that away with a flick of her hand. "Just say it was lost, if anybody asks for it. And they won't. A lot of people don't have one. When you were born, they hadn't been around all that long—birth certificates. Not one soul has ever asked me for your birth certificate. Or Evie's." Then, heading off an unasked question, she'd added, "Hers was lost, too."

Time had borne out Hazel's prediction. Nell had never needed a birth certificate. She had been issued a Social Security number at eighteen just by filling out a form. Birthplace—Mississippi. As simple as that.

That encounter was the closest Nell had come to asking about her father since the time, years earlier, when she had broached the subject and been diverted with "I can't talk about that. Don't dwell on the past, Nell." She'd thought then that she could hardly be accused of dwelling on a past she knew nothing about. Now it was time she learned what she could about that past, and then she would decide whether or not to dwell on it.

On the last leg of her drive to the house the day before, she had passed a library, one of those grand previous-century public buildings still standing even in some of the smallest Mississippi downtowns she had encountered. It was in a place called Joppa, about a half hour east of the house. That seemed as good a place as any to make a start, if only to ask for advice about how to go about gathering information. Why not drive back there this morning? If nothing else, she could pick up some groceries. And she needed birthday gifts for the twins.

Of course, soon she would have to call Evie and tell her where she was. Hazel would have to be made aware, as well. News that she was in Mississippi would spark the same reactions that talk of Hazel's black dress had, but on a much larger scale. She had to do it. But not today.

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The library in Joppa was all high ceilings, arched entries, and deep-silled windows with wavy glass. A lone librarian, a woman with a thick braid over one shoulder and reading glasses on a chain around her neck, sat behind a circular desk near the entrance. Nell asked her how to find information about people who lived in Mississippi in the 1930s.

"You're doing family history research?"

“Yes. Exactly.” Family history research. It sounded so benign, phrased that way.

“Census records have a lot of information, but there’s a seventy-two-year rule with those. Records from the 1930s won’t be released until...” The woman ticked off the decades on her fingers. “Until 2002. But city directories, now. They list names and addresses and occupations. You’re looking for someone from Joppa?”

“I don’t really know which towns the people I’m looking for lived in. Just that they were in Mississippi.”

“Oh. Well, you live in Joppa now?”

“No. I’m from North Carolina.”

The librarian’s expression required an explanation.

“I’m staying in a house about a half hour from here. I thought I’d stop in and ask for advice about getting started.”

The woman tapped a finger against her chin, then said, “Some libraries—larger than ours—have newspapers on microfilm going way back. You can scroll through them on a microfilm machine and look for wedding announcements and obituaries. Things like that. But again, you’d need some idea of where in Mississippi to focus on. Some general dates. The same would go for marriage records. Births and deaths. Even phone books. There are some statewide records in Jackson. That might be your best bet. But without any towns or even counties in mind, you might find a whole lot of nothing before turning up something. There must be somebody in your family who can give you some of idea of where to look? Of where your people are from?”

Nell shook her head. “I’m afraid not.” When she’d asked Hazel about relatives in Mississippi, Hazel had just said that hers was a family best walked away from, and left it at that.

The librarian soldiered on. “Do you have some family surnames you could

start with?”

“Brown,” Nell said. “My last name.”

After noting that Brown was a very common name and not much help, the woman asked if there were any others.

“Just that one.”

“Oh, hon, were you adopted? Sometimes it’s hard to trace those lines.”

“Something like that,” Nell said. “Oh, and Chambers. That’s another name I’m looking for.” And now she was all in, she supposed, mentioning that name. Then she asked the woman if she had heard of a place called the Twilight Room. “A restaurant, maybe? Or some sort of club? I think it was in Mississippi.”

“No, I’m not familiar with a Twilight Room. But let me check the card catalog.” She pointed out a table in the back where Nell could wait.

There was nothing in the Joppa library’s card catalog about the Twilight Room, but the librarian brought Nell a stack of books about Mississippi and genealogy in general, along with a few very slim telephone books for Joppa and the other small towns in that county. “Just in case,” she said. “I’m afraid we don’t hold any city directories here.”

Alone at the table, Nell turned page after page of phone listings for Browns, too many to consider cold-calling and asking if anyone might know of a Hazel Brown from someplace in Mississippi in the 1930s. No one named Chambers turned up at all. Paging through a book of family trees of members of the Daughters of the American Revolution and scanning local church membership rosters from the thirties quickly proved futile, but the librarian had been so kind that Nell continued to turn pages until she felt that an appreciative amount of time had passed. Then she dropped off the books at the desk, thanked the woman, and left.

Her expectations had been low this first time out, so she wasn’t discouraged. Walking down Main Street, she looked through smudged

windows and returned smiles to people passing by, wandered into and out of a couple of stores—a jewelry shop with dusty display cases and a pharmacy where she bought a bottle of Prell and a pack of gum.

Enticed by a window display of Mississippi postcards, she went into a place with a sign that read GARVEY'S OLD & NEW. A man in white jeans and a tie-dye shirt introduced himself as Mark Garvey, the owner of the shop, and followed Nell around the store offering enthusiastic appraisals of anything she paused over. "Good choices," he said when she decided on a used 35mm camera for one of the twins and a new watch for the other. At the register, Nell looked through a rack of postcards and took out one with a photo of rows of towering, ornate columns standing alone in a field, connected to nothing, cloaked in fog.

"Windsor Ruins," Mr. Garvey told her. "Was the largest Greek Revival, pre-Civil War mansion ever built in the state. Nothing left now but those columns. Fire took it. Must have been a sight. It's down in Claiborne County."

Tiring of the chatter, Nell slid the camera and the watch closer to the cash register.

"If you like that kind of thing, old ruins, there's a ghost town down that way, too. Rodney. Also eerie. There are stories about that place—"

Nell interrupted before he could start in on Rodney. "Do you know of anyone named Chambers around here?"

"Chambers? Doesn't ring a bell. I'll think about it, though."

"Ever heard of a place called the Twilight Room? Might have been a restaurant or a club of some kind?"

"Oh, yes. I know a little about that place."

At that, Nell gave him her full attention, which he seemed to enjoy.

"There was a woman came in a few years back, looking to sell something from there. A light fixture of some kind. Might have been a chandelier. I



remember she wanted too much for it. Didn't have any papers on it. Could have been from anywhere, you know. But if you're interested, I might have a record of it in my notes. Doubtful, though."

"Where was it—the Twilight Room?"

"Natchez. Over on the river. A dance hall, that lady said. I'd never heard of it, but she claimed it was kind of a big deal back in the thirties and forties. Said it brought in some big acts. Shut down after World War II." He picked up the camera and glanced at the price tag, punched some buttons on the cash register. "I think she said the idea behind the place was to draw some of the traffic from the Eola Hotel there. Now, if she'd had a chandelier from the Eola, I'd have snatched that up. Eleanor Roosevelt stayed there. Douglas MacArthur. Elizabeth Taylor. The Eola's still there, but her glory days are behind her."

Nell could hardly believe it; already she knew where the photograph of Hazel had been taken. Natchez. The shopkeeper was watching her with new interest.

"Maybe I shouldn't have let that piece go," he said. "I could ask around about it. You looking for something from that place? The Twilight Room?"

"Maybe," Nell said. "Not a chandelier, though."

## 14

A woman named Rhonda from the real estate office came by the house the next day to install a telephone answering machine. The PhoneMate 400, just out, she told Nell. Once Rhonda had everything connected and the machine was whirring competently, a thin strip of tape wound reel to wheel, she walked Nell through the steps in using it—announce, record, playback, rewind. She explained that since the agency was in Jackson and this house was their only property out that way, Nell shouldn't expect to see the listing agent unless someone expressed interest in the house, which, as of yet, no one had. "But if Jim needs to reach you and you're out, he'll leave you a message." Permission, as Nell saw it, to travel as needed in search of information.

As soon as Rhonda's car was out of sight, Nell turned on the answering machine, slipped the photograph of Hazel at the Twilight Room into her purse, and set off for Natchez. An hour and a half later, she passed a sign posted at the city-limit line—NATCHEZ, WHERE THE OLD SOUTH STILL LIVES. Natchez proper was situated on a bluff high above the Mississippi River. Nell drove until the road she was on ended at a grassy park at the edge of the bluff, where she had her first look at the vast river, so different from the one she knew back home. There were no friendly shallows for wading or fly-fishing here. This river did not invite tubes or canoes. It was no one's playmate. A crude, hulking barge crawled upriver from one direction. In the other, a white layer-cake paddleboat was docked near a silver bridge glinting in the sun like a tinsel swag strung across the breadth of the

river. Had Hazel known this view? Lived in this town? Or had she traveled here from somewhere else to visit the Twilight Room? *Did I live here when that photo was taken?*

Nell walked away from the river into downtown Natchez along tree-lined streets flaunting old architecture that evidenced much tending to the past. Historical markers presented a shined-up version of that past, buffed of its sins and stains. Nevertheless, it was a pretty town, magnolia trees in full bloom all around. At Main Street and Pearl, Nell came upon the Eola Hotel that the owner of the shop in Joppa had reminisced about. Seven stories high in a downtown of one- and two-story buildings, it dominated the block like a declining monarch. Farther up Pearl Street, a work crew was filling in a pothole. Nell asked a man taking a smoke break if he knew where the Twilight Room might have been.

“I’m not from here,” he said. Then he called over an older man who appeared happy for an excuse to shut off his jackhammer. “Lady’s looking for... What was it?”

“The Twilight Room,” Nell said. “It was here somewhere. Back in the thirties, I think.”

“Now that’s not something I was expecting to get asked about today. There ain’t been a Twilight Room for, hell, twenty-five years, maybe? Excuse the language.”

Nell sighed. “I was afraid it was gone by now.”

“There was some kind of school in there for a while, I think. But I heard it was a nightclub, back in the day. A dance hall.” He raised his arm over his head and swiped sweat from his face with the sleeve of his T-shirt. “But it’s still here, that building.”

“Wait. It’s still standing?”

“Just barely. But it ain’t torn down yet.”

He told her where to find it, on the edge of downtown. Then he unclipped a

pen from his pocket and picked up a scrap of paper from the street gutter, smoothed it out, and drew her a map. Nell hurried back to the car, jogging the last block. She could have skipped the whole way out of pure excitement.

It wasn't far. Nell pulled off a side street in front of a boarded-up building with a once-white stucco facade, streaked now with rusty stains. It had not held up well, but Nell was thrilled to have found it. She took a flashlight from the glove compartment, slipped it into her shoulder bag, and got out of the car.

A sign had been posted on the door: UNSAFE BUILDING. DO NOT ENTER. She tried it anyway. Locked. She walked around to the back of the building, the grass calf-high, broken bottles and crushed drink cans and other debris scattered about. There was a padlock on the back door, but as she drew nearer she saw that the lock was not quite closed and had been turned to appear locked. It could have been positioned that way only from the outside, so she was fairly confident that no one was in the building. She had the presence of mind to unhook the lock from the latch and drop it into her bag, lest anyone come along and snap it closed, trapping her. After a quick glance to make sure she wasn't being watched, she slipped inside, a wedge of sunlight narrowing to a slit as she slowly pulled the door in behind her, then extinguished entirely as the door clicked shut, leaving her in darkness.

Flashlight in hand, Nell explored one circle of light at a time. A wooden floor littered with trash. A stage. A row of mirrors on one wall, ballet barres in front of them. A wide, open room accounting for the majority of the building. Near the front entrance, there was an alcove with a counter and hooks on the back wall under a long shelf. Maybe a coatroom. Or a place to hang costumes, if the school that the road worker remembered had been a dance studio. Following her light, she found a long-ago kitchen recognizable only by a faucet-less sink and a bank of cabinets. Beyond that, she opened doors to two small back rooms that smelled of mildew and nastier odors, then

closed them again without entering.

Now that she knew the layout of the place, she picked her way back to the main room. She pictured small children in tights and pink slippers. Lithe teenagers lined up, ankles hooked over the barres, studying their postures in the mirrors. Twirling across the wooden floors. But there was evidence of an earlier iteration. A plaster medallion on the ceiling. A railed balcony around the room, overlooking what once must have been a dance floor. Nell imagined swing bands on the stage and couples dancing. Tables arranged in the margins where revelers sat with drinks, Hazel among them next to a man with his arm slung over her shoulder.

Nell moved slowly through the darkness, dust sparks swirling in the beam of light. In an unexplored corner of that main room, she swept the flashlight from side to side and stopped when it lit a brass switch plate with a filigreed design of vines and flowers. She reached for her purse, felt inside it for the photograph, then opened the paper folder and held it under her light. There, just over the shoulder of Hazel's companion, on the wall behind them, was the switch plate, or one of a matching set. Nell was struck with the notion that she might be standing exactly where that photograph had been taken in 1934. Standing there now, in 1971, looking into the phantom face of her mother. Maybe Evie would have a color for the way Nell felt just then. Nell had no word for it. When she found the back door again and slipped out of the building, she returned the padlock to the latch and snapped it shut, sealing in Hazel's memories.

**Becca**

**1933**

**Mississippi**

## 15

The road into Rodney was dirt turned sludge, so waterlogged that Becca feared bogging down or sliding around a curve and into the woods. With each bump and swerve, she glanced back at her sweet baby girl, sleeping on, mercifully unaware of the rough road ahead.

Until now, the only difficulty on the journey from Kendall, other than Evie's rambunctiousness, had been a tire fizzing out in Vicksburg, a fortuitous site for a flat. Becca had found someone to replace the tube and been back on the road with less than an hour lost. Evie had finally slept then, on the back seat in her wicker crib, its short legs folded up, the whole thing wedged tightly amid the belongings packed in the car. Although Becca had appreciated the respite, her heart had been heavier without Evie's distractions, and she had often reached into her pocket and closed her fist around Ben's peace dollar as she drove, the nearest she could come to holding his hand.

Now, with a tight grip on the steering wheel, she leaned toward the windshield as if she might gain better traction there. Was this the flooding Ace Harper had warned of? The river that had abandoned the once-bustling port town, left it landlocked and destitute, creeping back to flood the roads? Becca drove through a muddy hole she'd missed, and the car wobbled precariously, waking Evie. She sat up and rubbed her eyes, her sleep-sweet face shiny with sweat even with the windows down, the air so heavy with humidity. She whimpered a little and held out her arms, implored, "Mama. Up."

“We’re almost there,” Becca told her. “Sit tight, sweetheart.”

Woods crowded the road on either side, opening briefly for a field or a pasture, then closing up again. Vines choked the limbs of trees that stood in tangles of wild brush. Clusters of purple wildflowers that hung their drenched heads in the late August heat lifted Becca’s spirits as she wondered what would meet them at the end of this road, if the house would be any sort of refuge for them, even for a short while. But if coming to this place proved to have been a foolish whim, leaving Kendall behind her, even the driving itself, had felt liberating.

The last time she’d heard from Ace, months ago, he’d told her the family living in Lottie’s house planned to leave Rodney in July. That someone else would be keeping an eye on the place afterward. So the house should be newly empty now. And if it was not habitable, or if she didn’t feel safe, she would drive back to a hotel she’d seen a while back. Either way, she wanted to see where Lottie had lived. Where she had grown up, had fallen in love. Maybe someone in Rodney still remembered her, knew what she had been like when she was young.

Evie had reached her limit with sitting tight. She lobbed one leg over the side of the crib, and Becca slowed enough to reach an arm back for her and drag her into the front seat. Soon, they came upon an old, wooden building, then another, both having far outlived their last paint jobs, if they had ever held paint at all. There was a small store in similar condition, but open, men gathered out front watching as she drove slowly past. Traces remained of the former life of this town now going to ghost. Three still-beautiful belfried churches stood stalwart despite flood lines and deterioration, out of place now in the gone-wild setting. Simple houses and other wooden or old-brick structures were scattered about, some almost entirely claimed by vines, some whose walls had already been taken down by the woods, others in various stages of collapse or survival but still in use, still serving their appointed purposes, most of which were not immediately evident to Becca. And in the



distance, back beyond the road, were a couple of houses from a more recent period, conspicuous in their soundness, like outliers yet to prove their resilience.

Evie climbed onto Becca's lap and stared at a skinny, barefoot boy staggering in the center of the road, seemingly ill or otherwise impaired. Becca stopped the car. Evie shouted a warning—"Boids!"—as two buzzards careened in the sky over the boy, swooping in circles that tightened and dropped closer to him with each turn. He fell to his knees, then onto his back in the road, not moving as the birds swooped lower still. As Evie cried out again and Becca yanked the door handle, the boy bounded up, arms flapping, laughing as the buzzards made a haughty retreat. A young woman, also laughing, came up the road from behind Becca's car, holding the hand of a toddler in only a dingy diaper. None of the three showed any acknowledgment of Becca and Evie or even the car. As if the two of them were ghosts themselves.

"That silly boy," Becca said, and Evie laughed, a sound that was, to Becca's mind, as pure and true as any bell that had ever rung from the belfries of Rodney's churches.

She found Lottie's house, plotted on a map attached to the deed Ace had given her, and parked in front of it. Bare wood, tin roof, small, like most of the others. Freed from the Ford, Evie went straight for a patch of mud, digging her hands in deep. Becca didn't stop her, glad for anything that eased this transition. Three older men eyed them curiously from across the road. One raised a subtle hand belt-high, another nodded. With Lottie's bread box under one arm, Becca tugged Evie away from the mud, enticing her with a whispery "What could be inside that house?" Becca watched as Evie looked at the house, as strange a house as she'd had occasion to encounter, then back at the comparatively ordinary mudhole, and made her choice, ready to go inside.

The door was not locked, and Becca was about to nudge it open when she

saw a gap appear between curtains at a window, then close up again. Not surprising, she thought, that someone might feel free to go in and out of a house known to be empty for a month now. Even if the couple had not moved out, she could at least have a look around. She owned the house. Had a right to be there. Then the door creaked open, and a woman stood there. Petite, around fifty, Becca supposed, with a pixie-ish face. She wore a too-big shirt over a too-small skirt. Her hair, auburn and graying at the roots, had mostly escaped a bun at the crown of her head.

“Yes?” A question delivered in the way she might have addressed a brush salesman or a peddler of things no one in a place like this had need of.

Evie, at that moment, realized she did not like mud once it began drying, and she raised her crusty hands in protest, wailing “Up, up, up!” until Becca put down the bread box and lifted her up. As Evie’s arms went around her neck, Becca felt mud crumble into the back of her blouse.

“I’m Becca Chambers. Becca Pruitt,” she said, offering both her married and maiden names, as though she did not know who she was anymore. Then, at risk of confusing matters further, she added, “Lottie Barton’s daughter.”

Becca saw recognition cross the woman’s face.

“You knew her? Lottie?”

“Yes.”

There was an implied period after that “yes,” and Becca wasn’t sure how to proceed. She didn’t want to mention Lottie’s death. Not yet.

“I’m Dory,” the woman said, supplying no surname of her own. Then she waited, searching Becca’s face as if that name might have some effect on her. Becca saw Evie plant her muddy thumb in her mouth, and she gently pulled it away, wiping it dry with Evie’s shirttail.

“I offered to look after the house when the Coles moved out a few weeks ago,” Dory said then, not yet inviting them in. “I stopped in a while ago on my way back from...” Her words trailed off, as if she saw no need to specify

where she had been. “Well, I’ll get out of your way now. You must want to look around. I did hear about your...your mother’s passing. The Coles got a letter from Mapleton about it. From her lawyer.”

And still the two women kept their places, Dory looking past Becca toward the car, Becca’s belongings piled high behind the windows. Then she seemed to notice the bread box for the first time, and Becca thought maybe there was a flicker of recognition with that, too.

“You’re planning to stay the night?” Dory asked, casually tucking a lock of hair back into her bun.

“Maybe more than a night.” Becca smiled.

“Oh,” Dory said. Then she moved aside to make way for Becca. “Best mind the little girl around here,” she said. “Watch out for the cisterns.”

Becca swung Evie over the threshold and set her on her feet, then picked up the bread box and went in herself. Dory, with a less than convincing “Pleased to meet you” moved past Becca and out toward the dirt road where the three men were still convened.

Now that she was inside, Evie balked and stiffened, not wanting to enter the unfamiliar room when Becca took her hand and tried to coax her forward.

“It’s a funny old house, isn’t it? Let’s see what’s in here.”

Evie let go of Becca’s hand and took a few bold steps forward, looked about the shabby room warily, and said, “Uh-oh.”

Plank floors, freshly swept. Kerosene lamps and a kerosene stove. Worn curtains at windows with a few cracked panes. Wooden table. Wooden chairs. A spring bed frame with some broken wires and no mattress. Rustic, but considerably better than Becca’s worst fears. Habitable.

She found a place for the bread box in a cupboard in the kitchen. Lottie’s bread box in Lottie’s house. That felt right. She brought in a few things from the car—clothes, linens, a box of books, her sewing kit. Atop the books was the envelope with Mildred’s letter. The letter went straight into a wastepaper

basket, but the cradle roll certificate was too precious to do away with because Ben's name was listed there as Evie's father. With her sewing shears, Becca cut off the bottom margin where Mildred had added her own name as "grandmother" and tossed that away as well. Mildred had no place here. The certificate, folded twice, went into a book from the box—*Jane Eyre*, a favorite—and the book into the bread box.

Becca had just changed Evie's wet diaper, was still holding it with the ends tied together, wondering about the water situation and how best to rinse it out, when she heard someone on the porch. Standing outside the screen door were the woman and the toddler they'd seen in the road. Thrilled at the appearance of this colleague, Evie tugged on Becca's skirt and, with much frustration, declared "Baby!" in reprimand of the screen door still being closed between them.

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Lucy was a wealth of information, and Evie and Rose were in a world of their own from the moment they were free of that screen door. Though Becca had guessed her to be younger, Lucy was twenty-one, only two years behind Becca. Lucy was all smiles, but Becca saw sadness there. She recognized a woman struggling with loss, knew the brave face reserved for children and strangers. They sat on wobbly, slat-back chairs the Coles had left behind while the girls climbed over and under a mound of blankets and pillows Becca had brought in from the car and piled on a sacrificial sheet laid over the floor.

Lucy had known the Coles, was familiar with the kerosene cookstove that Becca knew nothing about operating. She told Becca that there were three no-frills country stores still operating in Rodney and what each one carried, where she could buy oil for the stove or vegetables and eggs and meat, lard from the wild hogs that roamed the woods and rooted in fields.

“You’re lucky this house backs up to a spring that runs out of the bluff. It’s the only house I know of with a spring-fed cistern. Most of them fill with rain runoff from the roofs, those that aren’t broken up or caved in. They’re very old. It’s hard to keep the roots and such from breaking through. Some folks just draw water from the creek and boil it.”

Lucy said she’d been told that Rodney had been built over a fault. “So you can’t dig any wells here. That’s why there’s all the old cisterns,” she said. “The one at my house is too far gone to use. And it’s under my porch. There’s a trapdoor in the porch floor for dropping down a bucket. Maybe that would’ve been a good idea somewhere the roads don’t flood, but I carry a fear of it caving in and taking the house down with it.”

At some point, the girls fell asleep on their blanket pile, and Becca told Lucy why she’d come to Rodney, leaving out Mildred’s role. She told her that her husband had died suddenly and she’d needed a place to collect herself before making a new start. That she’d inherited the house from her second mother, the woman who had raised her after her parents died. She avoided details about Ben, her grief always so close that it could easily spill out in a way she couldn’t control.

Lucy was shy, but seemed hungry for a friend, and with loss an understanding between them now, she opened up about her own story. She’d been in Rodney for a year and a half. Had married a man who grew up in Port Gibson, not far from Rodney, who had gone to Lucy’s Oklahoma hometown to work in the oil fields there. When things got tougher and those jobs dried up, he bought a house in Rodney with the last of their money.

“For a song, he said. He didn’t tell me until it was done. Said at least we’d have a place to live if things didn’t get better soon. We’d been staying with my uncle, and he was tired of us being there. He didn’t much like Russ. They got into it one night, and Uncle Ray turned us out. I didn’t know it then, but I was already carrying Rose.” Lucy laid a hand on her flat stomach, remembering. “We came here, moved into the house. It’s not like this one,”

she said with a wistful glance at the room Becca had deemed “habitable.”

“Russ couldn’t handle living here. I didn’t know how bad he was taking it. I should have seen it. He was always talking about the rattlesnakes, how they’re crawling most all year, only slowing down some in January and February. Somebody told him alligators come around sometimes when it floods, and he talked about that, too. He thought it’d be easy here, the house so cheap and all. But it didn’t leave us much of anything to live on. It wore on him. Back in Oklahoma, he had big dreams about living off the land. Hunting. Raising a garden. Had a picture in his head that didn’t match up with his nature. Three months ago, he just took off. I found a note he left. Said he wouldn’t be coming back, and me and Rose could have the house. I don’t know where he went.”

There was a vulnerability about Lucy, a frailty of confidence. Her manner was that of a woman who expected people to not think much of her. Downcast eyes. Nervous hands. An air of apology. Becca knew Lucy had reached the end of what she could share about her husband without breaking in some way, because Becca knew that place as well.

Lucy ran her hand over her hair, a gesture that had the effect of a long sigh, a change in perspective. “But at least we have a place to live, me and Rose.”

“I met Dory earlier,” Becca said, “I wouldn’t say she was glad to see us.”

Lucy looked away, then down at her lap. “Takes some people here a while to warm up to somebody new moving in. That hardly ever happens—people moving in instead of out. But she’s okay.” Lucy twisted her hands. “I don’t know her much.”

Before Lucy left, Becca asked her about the water pump. They woke the girls and took them outside with a bucket. Both Rose and Evie were transfixed by the magical pump. Lucy, who showed herself to be good with children, held the girls’ hands in hers one at a time and praised them for pumping water. Becca insisted that Lucy take a bucket of spring water home

with her, because by then she was pretty sure that Lucy was among those drawing creek water.

As she was leaving, Lucy brought up the cisterns again. “There’s some open ones around some of the empty houses and in the grown-over places where there used to be houses. Six feet wide, some of them, maybe more. People try to keep them covered over with boards and such, but they can’t get to all of them. Be real careful. I just keep to the roads,” she said.

## 16

At the little country store just down the road, just over a week into her stay in Rodney, Becca gave the storekeeper a list of items she needed, including food for cold meals until she could master the oil stove, candles, matches, and cans of kerosene. She had been there before, had talked with this man then—Gus, he'd told her to call him—but she still felt like a curiosity. Evie flirted shamelessly as Gus, short and stocky with an Abe Lincoln beard, pulled items from the shelves.

“Here you go, miss,” he said to Evie, passing a paper fan from a stack on the counter into her outstretched hand. He chatted with Becca about the weather—September starting off just as sticky and hot as August had; the price of oil—too high; and what the going rate for pecans was likely to be when they started falling—too low. He filled the basket Becca had brought in, and Becca set it on the floor.

“You needing anything else?”

“Not unless you’ve got a mattress on one of those shelves.”

“Not likely. But I’ll check behind the canned goods and let you know.” Gus laughed, and smile lines broke out around his eyes, curved around the corners of his mouth. “I know there wasn’t much in that house after the Coles left. They had it fixed up nice, but they took all they could manage with them.”

“So you’ve seen it? The house?”

“I’d venture a guess there aren’t many around here that didn’t take a look



inside when they were gone. Not meaning any harm, of course. Just curious. Not much to do in Rodney.” Gus had a trace of an accent Becca couldn’t place. It was soft and lilting and she liked listening to him. “Nobody’ll be bothering you here. We all look out for each other, what’s left of us. How’re you two getting on?”

There were two women in the back of the store, and Becca sensed they were listening. So far, people in Rodney had been polite, if not exactly welcoming.

“Pretty good. I’m hoping I don’t burn the house down trying to work the stove.”

“Billy, take them oil cans over to her porch,” Gus said to a boy sitting on the floor behind him with a marble he’d been holding up to the light from a window. The boy scrambled up. He looked too small to manage the cans, but he easily picked them up by the handles and swung them at his sides as he went out. Becca noticed he didn’t have to be told which house was hers.

By then, Evie had taken the lighter things out of the basket and was building a precariously stacked tower with them. Becca asked Gus about the river, how far away it was now and if it was possible to get there on foot.

“Possible, but I’m not recommending it. Anybody told you about the snakes this time of year? They love it here. The more people move out, the more snakes move in. I’m talking rattlers and moccasins. The kind’ll kill you or make you wish you were dead. And you’d be traipsing over somebody’s private property for about three miles to get there. Would have to have permission. It’s wild brush and woods, then close on to the river, it gets marshy. Always a chance somebody might be out hunting that day. You got your biting bugs, too.”

Becca mentioned that she had gone to the river often with her mother in Mapleton. That it had been a special place to them. It was the first time she had said those things aloud to anyone other than Ben, and it felt good to

Speak of Lottie. She told him her mother had died in an accident at the river they'd loved so, and that she missed going there with her. And then she asked Gus if he'd known Lottie.

"I knew her. We went to school together, her and me. She was a few years older." Gus didn't ask about the accident at the river. Becca thought maybe he'd known about it already.

"Listen," he said. "If you decide you need to go out to the river, I might could find somebody with some sense to go with you. Not that I'm recommending it."

Becca was moved by his kindness. "Thank you," she said, a slight tremble behind the words.

Evie's tower had fallen, and she'd switched her attention to a bunch of ribbons laid out on a low shelf, one already in her hand. When Becca tried to pry open her little fist, Gus said, "Let her have it. My compliments."

"Can you say 'thank you,' Evie?"

"Danx."

Becca asked for another can of milk. For Lucy, she thought. Lucy had stopped by a few times since that first day, and it was good to have a new friend. As she counted out money for Gus, she caught a glimpse of Dory entering the store behind her. Less than a minute later, Becca turned to leave, and Dory was not there. When she pushed open the screen door and stepped outside, she saw her. Dory, hurrying back down the road empty-handed, already far ahead.

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Another week passed, and Becca was still waking in the night reaching for Ben, surprised to find that he wasn't there, then remembering, the truth a cold rain washing away her sweet expectations. She was accustomed now to pumping water from the cistern and lighting the kerosene lamps at night. To

the drafty outhouse Evie refused to enter and the chamber pot under the bed. To no electricity and drawing water from the creek for rinsing out diapers and doing laundry, because using spring water for those purposes, especially when so many had none, seemed thoughtless. Despite the challenges of this lifestyle, Becca liked living as Lottie had, in the house where Lottie had lived at a time in her life that Becca knew little about, so different from the life they'd shared.

The apartment in Kendall had been so empty of Ben in those last weeks there without him, but Lottie's house had the opposite effect. Becca felt close to her here. As she moved through the days, she imagined Lottie at her easel in front of the window that lent the best morning light. She saw shadow images of her standing at the sink, walking up the road, sitting on the porch with her one great love. But things were different at night, with Evie asleep and the house dark, Becca lying on layers of blankets that fell short of cushioning the metal bedsprings. In those hours, that bed was just as empty as the one in Kendall had been. There was no shadow Ben there. The loss was too fresh. Too great. But Lottie met her in the mornings.

Lottie's house, her Rodney, was a rustic but soft place for the time being. Not much was required to live there. No rent. There was plenty of sun for the gardens. Produce, eggs, pork from the wild hog hunters, all to be had cheaply. What was left there was a motley community of people with ancestral ties to that place, bound to Rodney as much by its diminished present as its renowned past. Farmers with multigenerational claims to the land, merchants whose forebears had known prosperity there, immigrants and the children of immigrants. Descendants of the enslaved and descendants of slaveholders, the former far outnumbering the latter. This was the place that had shaped Lottie, had set her course in the world. In one of Becca's conversations with Gus in the store, he'd said, "I've lived long enough to tell you time don't heal old wounds. But people in a sinking boat tend to pull together."

One day that week, Becca went out with the intention of starting the car and warming up the engine, as she did every few days to remind the Ford of its job. A couple of times she had driven it a short distance down the road leading out of Rodney and back. But this day, not long after sunrise, she stepped out onto the porch and found something surprising there. Folded over a rickety wooden chair that the sun had dried almost to kindling was what appeared to be, at first glance, an oversized pick sack, stuffed full. On closer inspection, she saw that it was a mattress, probably made of pick sacks sewn together, generously filled with what felt like cotton and just the right size for the wire-spring bed frame that Becca had been only just managing to tolerate.

Gus, surely, she thought. But when she and Evie walked up to the store to thank him and to pay for it, Gus denied any knowledge of the mattress or who had delivered it.

“I don’t sell mattresses,” he told her. “Most folks just make their own or buy one off of somebody with leftover cotton. There’s still people picking cotton this week, so could be anybody. Somebody doing a good deed. Or maybe looking to get into your good graces,” he said, with a suggestive wink. “Whatever, it ain’t my doing.”

Becca had met a few people, but she hadn’t really gotten much beyond a passing “How’re you?” and the requisite “Fine, and you?” with anyone other than Lucy and Gus. Puzzled, she walked to Lucy’s house from the store to ask her if she had a guess as to who might have brought the mattress. Only one end of Lucy’s house could be seen from the main road. It was the last surviving structure on a path that had once been one side of a square of old roads now mostly confiscated by woods. This was the first time Becca and Evie had been down that way. If the porch was an indication of the rest of the house, it was in much worse shape than Becca had imagined. There were splintered boards, rotten boards, missing boards. Two windows with canvas patches instead of glass. Lucy’s embarrassment showed when she opened the door, but Rose was delighted. She squeezed past her mother and wrapped her

fat little arms around Evie's neck.

The inside was testament to Lucy's current destitution. Becca could feel a bounce in the floorboards as she walked into the front room. A washtub sat in a corner to catch water from a leak that had blackened the roof, and across the room, a gap had opened up where wall should have met floor, big enough, Becca imagined, for the snakes Gus had warned of to crawl through. There was no stove, just a fireplace with a shallow, broken-brick hearth, and on one side of that, a canvas patch like those at the windows had been nailed to the wall. The room was dim with the window openings covered, and Becca heard Rose say, "No! Not safe!" when Evie stood too close to a closed door that Lucy gently steered the girls away from.

Filled with anger at the husband who had left his wife and child in such deplorable conditions, Becca wondered if Lucy would be offended if she offered to let the two of them move into Lottie's house with her and Evie. She didn't mention the gift of a mattress left outside her own door that morning. Instead, she asked if Lucy might give her a lesson in using the stove the next day, hoping she could find some way to lighten her friend's load, if only with a few hours away from this room.

That night, Evie would not go to sleep, perhaps unsettled, Becca thought, by the visit to Lucy's house. Becca sat with her on the bed and read a story from Lottie's book, showed her Lottie's illustrations and sang songs to her while petting her hair in the way she liked. Then she kissed her good night and went to the kitchen to read at the table by the light of the kerosene lamp. By then, it was fully night, and Evie became afraid of the dark. She called out several times, making certain that Becca was nearby, until finally Becca went to her, lifted her out of bed, and whispered soothing words.

"Remember when we took a walk one night?" Still holding Evie, Becca unlatched the door and took her out onto the porch, relieved that the night was clear, the sky filled with stars, a bright slice of moon like a smile shining down at them. Sitting on the porch chair with Evie snuggled in her lap, Becca

pointed out the moon and the stars, talked of how beautiful they were. How quiet it was at night. Not like the noisy daytime. “I love nighttime,” she said. “Sitting on the porch under the moon and the stars. Just you and me.” She rocked side to side and sang softly until Evie was rubbing her eyes and yawning.

When Evie’s breaths were deep and steady, her body limp in Becca’s arms, Becca sat there, still. Ben was in her thoughts then. She wondered if Evie remembered him. All this time, she had been afraid that talking about him might make the loss worse for Evie. Under that night sky, as a lone mockingbird sang as if it were morning, Becca thought about her own parents for the first time in quite a while. Her few memories were mostly of them sick in bed. *When she’s older, I’ll make sure she knows all about her daddy.* She thought again about Lottie growing up in this place, one more barefoot kid running down the dirt roads. And later, as a young woman in love, had she sat on this porch at night in the peaceful darkness and marveled at the sky? Knowing Lottie, Becca was pretty sure she had.

Becca was lonely. But all the same, she wanted to close herself and Evie off from the world for a while longer in this strange place, a ghost of its former self. Just like Becca felt she was.

Evie roused herself then. She raised her hand toward the night sky, and in a quiet, sleepy voice said, “moom...tars.”

Becca let her tears flow in the dark. “Yes, sweetheart. The moon. And so many stars.”

## 17

After a lesson from Lucy, the kerosene stove wasn't all that intimidating, though it had its dangers, as with most things in Rodney. It was heavy, made of cast iron, with a glass oil tank on one side. Lucy instructed Becca in lighting a lamp wick soaked in kerosene and fit into a metal channel beneath the burner, then adjusting the flame with a knob.

With Evie and Rose giggling behind a sheet Lucy had draped over the kitchen table, Becca left them in Lucy's care and took a basket up the road to buy eggs from an elderly woman named Tillie. Becca hadn't met Tillie yet, but she recognized the house by the prodigious number of chickens roaming the yard. Tillie, a spindly woman with ruddy cheeks and a pronounced stoop, stood among the chickens, leaning on a stick.

In answer to Becca's request, Tillie took her to the porch, where there was a box of freshly gathered eggs. She counted out a dozen and packed them into Becca's basket, then hooked the basket over her own arm rather possessively.

"I was a little girl when the river changed course," she said then, the first words she had spoken since Becca's arrival. She spoke as if continuing a conversation in progress. "It happened over some years. A sandbar built up first, and the grown-ups knew it was trouble. You heard about that?" She didn't wait for an answer from Becca. "Come 1870, the river was gone. Kaput. My daddy was a riverboat captain. That was the end of that."

"Yes, I heard about what happened to the river," Becca said. She held out the money she owed for the eggs, but Tillie looked out over a memory of the

river until Becca drew back her hand.

“I ain’t but seventy-six; I know you think I’m older.” She gave Becca time to contradict her, which she did by shaking her head, though somewhat dishonestly. “Ain’t but seventy-six, but I remember when this town was something. Stores, lord. People came from all around. We had us a bank and a hotel. The best bakery you could want for. Everything. People landing at the dock from all over. Busiest port between St. Louis and New Orleans. Just ask around, you don’t believe me.”

“I believe you. I wish I’d seen it back then.”

“I was just a girl. But I remember. It’s still up here,” she said, tapping her temple with an arthritic finger. “Then the river was gone, and a fire like hell itself almost wiped out everything. Won’t never forget that. But we’re still here, those that’s left. The real Rodney folks, that’s what you’re seeing here now.” She moved Becca’s basket to her other arm, then sat down on a tattered, upholstered armchair, stuffing that had shed through worn-out or clawed-open slits dusting the porch floor like snow.

“You’re staying at Lottie’s house,” she said then, slyly, as if that was secret information but she had her ways.

“You knew her?”

Tillie smiled in a wouldn’t-you-like-to-know way, then said “Yes, I did.” She leaned back with a satisfied look, the person who knew things other people, people like Becca, did not.

“There’s plenty here who remember her. She was a little off, you ask me. Always running out to the river—two, three miles away. Painted her front door like some kind of fairy castle. When she was just a kid, she’d knock on your door and hand you a picture she drew of you, and scamper off. Did one of me that didn’t look near as good as I did then. I was something when I was young. I looked after her sometimes. Changed her fool diapers when she was a baby. She could have done a better job drawing me.”



“Do you still have that drawing?”

“Maybe.” She got up from the sunken-in chair with surprisingly little trouble. “There’s some here older than me. Ones who remember her mama better than I do. Maybe even her daddy, but I think he died early on.”

*Those ghosts Lottie talked about being kin to.*

Becca could have stood on that porch for hours, listening to more about Lottie, but Tillie picked up her stick again and held out the basket of eggs. When Becca took it from her, the woman held out her hand, palm open, and Becca laid her money there.

“They’re in the cemetery up the bluff behind the church,” Tillie said, as if she’d read Becca’s mind about the ghosts. “She used to go up there a right lot, too. Sitting with the dead.”

Then without another word, Tillie turned and went inside, pulling the screen door shut behind her.

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Lucy came back the next day to watch the girls, as Becca had hoped she would. As soon as she arrived, Becca laced up Ben’s work boots, a sock balled inside each toe box. Then she walked down to the Presbyterian church, found the scrubby path up the bluff to what was known as Cemetery Hill, and began the climb. Steeper than she had imagined, and the path not always clear, this was the bluff that had once stood above the river.

Gus had told her that in winter when the leaves were off the trees, a person could still catch a glimpse of the now-distant river from atop the bluff, but Becca felt certain she would be gone from Rodney by then. Now, in September, the foliage was dense. Startlingly large spiders hung from nearly invisible webs, and she maneuvered around fallen limbs along the way. Several times the trail petered out and Becca guessed at how to proceed, “up” the only direction she was clear on. She was short of breath, her face beaded

with sweat, when the hill plateaued and a field of tombstones spread out before her.

She could see that there had been recent attempts at cutting pathways among some of the graves and clearing weeds around headstones, a losing battle for those already consumed by the woods and those that clung precariously to the crest of a crumbling hillside. There were beautifully wrought fences still standing guard over their charges, and orphaned segments of fences standing alone or leaning or lying flat, as were many of the tombstones themselves. Spanish moss hung from the limbs of the old oaks, as moody a backdrop as if both the trees and the moss had been created for this very place.

Becca wandered about searching for Lottie's ancestors, venturing as close as she dared to that crumbling ridge in an old section and peering over the edge at what was now a cemetery for the fallen gravestones resting at the bottom. Others were lodged in the slope itself, awaiting whichever rain would finally take them and the bones that belonged with them the rest of the way down. Becca stepped back and left them in peace.

A brown mouse scurried just beyond the toe of one of Ben's boots, then across a plastered brick tomb in the shape of a cradle, the names of two infants on the headstone, deceased on the same date in 1847. A little farther along was the stone of a woman whose life had been long.

*Go lovely one, yes, go to rest,  
Where the weeping willows wave,  
And leave the bosom thou hast pressed,  
For the pillow of the grave.*

Every stone told a story. Even those whose inscriptions had been long worn away, the ornate and the rudimentary sharing an ultimate anonymity.

There were stones that evidenced wealth. Stones that evoked enslavement. Epitaphs that spoke of love or bore more stoic witness. A grave from 1828 and a grave from 1928. Becca wondered about the man Lottie had loved, wondered if there was a stone for him here, or if he might be one of the men who gathered on the porch of the store, still, or who set out in groups to hunt, rifles over their shoulders.

She hadn't been there long when she found a pair of graves that she thought might be those of Lottie's parents, or other of her relatives. Two Bartons—Mae and Ralph—with likely birth years. His death earlier than hers, matching what Tillie had said about Lottie's father. As she stood looking at the stones, she became aware that someone else was there in the cemetery, a woman walking among graves farther along the bluff. Becca saw her stoop before two side-by-side graves and lay flowers there. Then she straightened and turned toward Becca. Dory. Becca was sure the woman had seen her, though she moved as if she hadn't, looking off to her left as she progressed. She stopped a few graves short of where Becca stood and laid the last of her flowers on a grave there. Then she heaved a sigh and faced Becca.

Becca took a step toward her, close enough to read a name on the stone where she'd placed the flowers. Josh Canfield. His birth year the same as Lottie's.

"Hello, Dory."

Dory didn't answer.

Becca said she had been looking for Lottie's family, and with no more invitation to converse than the cold stones around them had offered, Dory pointed to the two graves Becca had found and said two words: "Her parents."

Although she would have preferred a more private moment for doing so, Becca stood between the graves and touched both of the headstones, thinking of Lottie, trying not to think of Dory standing just behind her.

“That one back there,” she heard Dory say. Becca turned to her, and Dory nodded at another nearby stone. “That’s her uncle. Her mother’s brother.”

“Thank you.”

Then, looking at the tombstones rather than at Becca, Dory said, “If you want to know about Lottie here in Rodney, there are things I could tell you.”

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That evening, with Rose and Lucy gone and Evie put to bed a little early, Becca heard the light knock at the back door that she had been expecting. For the first few moments after Dory stepped inside, things were awkward between them, Becca offering water and Dory shaking her head, the two of them taking seats at the table, Becca making an effort to break the ice by thanking Dory for having tended to the house while it was empty.

“It was kind of you,” she said.

“Not kindness. Wasn’t that.”

Becca saw the other woman’s coolness become something else, something edged with apprehension. Or maybe she had read Dory wrong from the start.

“You want to know about Lottie. There are people here who can tell you stories about her. Things she did and what she was like. My story’s different, and you might as well hear it from me.”

Now Becca felt her own apprehension. After all the childhood whispers about Lottie being the town nut, she did not want to imagine Lottie in a similar situation in this place she had held close in heart her whole life. If Rodney had not loved her back, Becca would rather not know about it. But she so hungered for anything of Lottie that she could gain here, even her name spoken by someone else who had known her, that she gently encouraged Dory to go on.

“We went way back, Lottie and me. She was six years older, and I looked on her as a big sister. I wanted to be like her—she was so bold and colorful

and creative.”

Becca nodded encouragement, and Dory seemed determined to lay out her story.

“We went to school together for a time—different ages, different grades, but we were friends. Her daddy’d been gone since she was little—I never knew him—and her mother walked on when Lottie was in her last year of school.”

*Walked on.* Becca had not heard anyone other than Lottie speak of death that way, and those words drew a sense of Lottie into the room more than anything Dory had yet said. Becca was grateful for that, even as it was painful to know that Lottie had lost both of her parents before she finished school.

“After that, she was at our house a lot, and me at hers. I’d stay over with her often.” Dory looked at Becca as if watching for a reaction, and said, “Even after she and Josh moved into this house together.”

*Josh.* The name on the tombstone in the cemetery. The grave Dory had laid flowers on. Becca did not interrupt, tried to hold forth softness in her expression.

“I’ll just get to it. There’s details I won’t go into, but here’s the truth. Lottie and Josh adored each other. They moved in together, and Josh never stopped asking her to marry him. For ten years he asked her, and she just didn’t see the need. She was free like that in her thinking. She didn’t go by everyday rules other people did, and that’s what made her so different. Part of it. Lottie just sparkled. She was the best friend I ever had. We were together most all the time. She made me her family, and that never changed.”

*Like the misfits,* Becca thought. She could imagine what Dory was describing.

“I had some challenges in my homelife. Lottie knew about them; nobody else did. Not Josh. And I had a big crush on Josh. Even all those years him

and Lottie were as good as married, I was head over heels for him. There were ties between my mother and his family—old friendships that went back generations—and he trusted me.” She looked over at the water pitcher on the sideboard and said maybe she’d take some water, after all. Before Becca could push back her chair, Dory was already up, seemingly relieved for a distraction. She took two glasses from the shelf and poured water for each of them.

At the table, she took some time with her water, sipping slowly, nourishing her resolve, it seemed. Then she said, “I told Josh some things about Lottie that weren’t true. Hurtful things. He wasn’t the kind to think I was lying, and he believed me like I knew he would. I was twenty-seven then, old enough to know better, but I did that knowing what it would do to him. The things I said hurt him so bad that he was vulnerable to being comforted in the moment. I was counting on that. It was the worst thing I ever did.

“I was pregnant right off. It was just that one time. And what made it even worse, if that’s possible, is that Lottie hadn’t been able to get pregnant. She wanted children really bad. I think that was how she came to almost mothering me. Soon as I knew I was expecting, I confessed to her. Told her what I’d told Josh, and why. That I’d deserve whatever my father would do when he found out about my condition. That I’d deserve that and more because of what I’d done to her.”

Dory looked so broken that Becca reached out for her hand, but Dory pulled it back out of reach and shook her head, rejecting any show of mercy. As heartsick as Becca was for what Lottie had suffered, she couldn’t discount this woman’s pain in carrying the guilt of her betrayal for so many years.

“Lottie never even tried to defend herself to Josh. Never told him I’d lied about her. She left Rodney right off. I knew she was hurt that he believed all I’d told him about her. I was so young that even though I was truly sorry and would have taken it all back if I could have, I couldn’t deny that I was happy to have Josh. I tried to believe that in time, despite it all, I’d win his love. But

what I won was a man who married me but loved Lottie. Loved her his whole life. He was good to me and our Bobby, but he loved her. I knew that. We never spoke of it, but it drove a wedge. Ours was not a happy marriage. And I lost the best friend I ever had. The best person I ever knew. And that was Lottie. I miss her every day. I think she left me with Josh because I was carrying his baby. She left him to me, to ease my situation.” Then Dory broke down, and Becca walked around the table and put an arm around her until she had gathered herself again.

“I’m all right,” Dory said then, still reluctant to be comforted. “I brought this on, and I’m sorry. I thought you ought to know the truth.” Becca went back to her chair.

“When I found out Lottie had walked on, Josh was already gone six years. Bobby was grown then; he’s twenty-two now. The Coles had got that letter from Lottie’s lawyer, and I called him and told him I was her old friend. That Bobby and me would look after her house when the Coles moved out, would keep it up every way we could handle. Because that was the only thing I could do for Lottie. I took Josh. I took her chance that maybe someday they might’ve had a child. Pushed Josh into a life of regret. So I started sweeping the floors in this house where they’d lived together, where they were so much in love. It was like I was trying to pay for all I did by sweeping and scrubbing. Laying out traps for mice. Cutting down weeds.”

“Sending me a mattress?”

Dory managed a weak smile, a nod.

“I never told her I was sorry. Not in all the years I was married to Josh and the years after he was gone. I didn’t know where she was. Not until she was gone, too, and it was too late.”

Dory stood then, the old wall back up, done with tears. “So now you know. I don’t expect you to forgive me. There’s plenty here who still haven’t, and they don’t know as much as you do about it all. I need to go now.” And then

she was across the room and out the door before Becca could decide what to say.



Nell

**1971**

**Mississippi**

## 18

Finding the Twilight Room had been like opening a secret passage to the unknown past, and it was with some reluctance that Nell stepped back into the present day, out of the dusty darkness of the old building and into what seemed, in comparison, a lackluster sun-drenched afternoon. She considered possible next steps as she started up the Chrysler. Then she rolled down the window and asked someone on the street for directions to the library.

The Natchez library was much larger than the one in Joppa, and soon Nell was sitting at a table with three city directories stacked in front of her: 1928, 1932, and 1934. She began with 1928, turned to the listings for Browns, then to given names beginning with *H*: “Hadley, Hal, Hamish, Hank, Hannah, Harlon, Harold...” No Hazel.

Closing that book, she moved on to 1932 Browns. Hal again. Hannah, Harlon—and there she was: *Hazel, hat-check girl, Twilight Room, b23 French St.*

Another glimpse of her phantom mother. Nell thought of the alcove in the Twilight Room with the counter and the hooks on the wall. Of Hazel, two years younger than she’d been in the photograph, taking hats and coats, smiling. She was only twenty-four then, and Nell felt a forty-two-year-old’s tenderness for that young woman.

A librarian passed behind her then, pushing a cart of books she was reshelving. Nell showed her the listing and asked about the *b* before the address.

“Boarder,” the woman said. “In a room in somebody’s home or a room in a boardinghouse. Could have been a lot of boarders in one house in those years. It was the thick of the Depression, and some people rented out every possible space to keep from losing their houses.”

Then the librarian continued down the aisle with her cart, and Nell eagerly opened the 1934 directory. Again to the *B*’s, then to the Browns. To Hal, still in Natchez, still a metalworker. She moved down the line, and there was Hazel again. At a different address. Still employed at the Twilight Room. But with a new occupation. *Singer*.

Twenty-three French Street was a metal prefab box of a building, a car parts store with a grand opening banner over the entrance. Nothing in the neighborhood appeared ever to have been a residence that might have housed a hat-check girl in the 1930s.

Holding hope for Hazel the singer, Nell spread a city map over her lap and put her finger down on a short, threadlike line that was Langley Road, the second address she had found for Hazel. It was close enough to the Twilight Room that Hazel could have easily walked between the two. Langley Road, when Nell arrived there, held some promise—a few small, run-down houses, old enough, she thought, and some unkempt empty lots with FOR SALE signs out front. Nell drove slowly, watching for street numbers on mailboxes and porches, looking for number twelve, not knowing if the numbers had changed over so many years. The road dead-ended abruptly, and Nell almost missed a faint spray-painted 12 on the curb. An empty lot. Bare dirt and crabgrass, high weeds. Discouraging. But here she was, so close to where Hazel had lived, where it was possible that Nell herself had lived, and she got out of the car. She waded into the weedy yard, pausing to tuck her pant legs into her socks against chiggers and ticks, something she and Evie had learned early in the mountains.

Although there was no evidence of a previous house, she walked past where a house might once have stood and up to an embankment that bordered the back of the lot. There, something stirred in Nell. She almost wanted to scramble up that hill and somehow knew just what it would feel like to do so. There was a narrow clearing amid the overgrowth, and she walked toward it sensing what she would find there—an easy way up the embankment and, at the top, railroad tracks. She went up. The tracks were there, weedy like the lot had been. Unused now. And yes, she knew this place. Now that she was here, she knew it. She remembered hopping from one railroad tie to another and the sharpness of the granite gravel between the tracks. Remembered balancing on these rails like a tightrope walker. Sitting on the ground and popping sticky creosote bubbles that formed on the ties on days that were hotter than this one.

This was it. The site of the house she remembered—blue like a robin’s egg. Floorboards that trembled when trains went by. Where one night, Evie had arrived with someone who left without her. As Nell stood there with those memories, something else came to mind. Something less clear, maybe less reliable.

*Climbing the embankment with Evie and Hazel. Crickets chirping in the night. Walking down the tracks. Hazel dragging my wagon behind her. The gravel rough under the soles of my shoes. Evie crying and Hazel putting her in the wagon.*

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“But why a house in Mississippi? That’s so far away.”

There was a hint of wariness in Evie’s voice that Nell had expected even as she had dialed Evie’s number the morning after the trip to Natchez. She sat in the kitchen at a vintage telephone table with an attached chair, feeling like a too-tall kid at an elementary school desk and picturing Evie on her end of the

line, as cautious at hearing *Mississippi* as a deer in the woods alert to danger. Nell thought it must be exhausting, Evie's ongoing diligence, and she answered her with the sort of customary reassurances that had helped keep the past at bay, safely obscured, for most of their lives.

"This is opening up a whole new area for Sheila and Mike," she told Evie. Which was not entirely untrue, though she felt guilty dancing that close to lying to her sister. "It happened so quickly," she went on, caressing her palm and choosing words carefully. "I just got in on Monday. Late." And then the familiar diversion: "But this house, Evie. I wish you could see it."

She talked about the house and its quirky furnishings, the unnerving chiming of the clocks, the old magazines, what she supposed was a loose pipe that banged against the wall when she showered. The gas station attendant. And after they had laughed together over all that, Nell brought up Hazel and said she was not looking forward to telling her about being in Mississippi.

There was the briefest of lulls in the conversation, then Evie said, "Maybe it's best that we not tell her just yet."

The three of us, all keeping secrets, Nell thought. The family tradition. She so wanted to tell Evie about finding Hazel in the city directories. That their mother had been a singer in Natchez. Would Evie want to know that? What if she told Evie only about the singing, nothing else. But then she would have to explain why she'd been searching through city directories. That she'd found the photograph in the hatbox in Hazel's closet with *Twilight Room* written on the back. That she'd been to the empty lot by the tracks. It was all or nothing, and she knew Evie wasn't ready for *all*. She might never be.

Aside from that, Nell could not deny that in some small way she enjoyed keeping those discoveries to herself. Holding those hidden gems close, untarnished by Hazel's disapproval or Evie's dismay. So she just asked about Rob and the twins, then said she should go, as she didn't yet know the rules about long-distance calls at the new house. And she promised to phone again

soon.

After an evening shower and wrapped in a robe, Nell went into the library with its walls of bookcases filled with novels and poetry, with classics, philosophy, and history. Volumes of photographs from around the world. She found an old travel book, a guide to Mississippi published in 1938 with a 1940 Mississippi road map folded inside it. She set that aside to take downstairs later, chose a novel, and settled into an armchair to read. When she was several chapters in, she heard wind whipping up outside, and she looked up to find the windows black with night, more time having passed than she'd realized. Rain began to fall, pinging against the metal floor of the balcony outside. And as the wind and the rain grew stronger, she heard something else. Uncanny, she thought, how much the sound was like footsteps on the balcony. She listened, and it came again and again, sounding for all the world like someone walking from the bedroom end of the balcony and on past the library, traveling in one direction only, never back again.

*Old house peculiarities*, she told herself. After a while, the wind died down and there was only the gentle patter of rain. Nell closed the novel, tucked it and the guidebook under her arm, and switched off the lamp. When she opened the door to the bedroom, the hinges squeaked and the floorboards creaked as she stepped over the threshold.

Before her morning coffee the next day, while the sky was still streaked yellow with sunrise, Nell stood on the balcony outside the library shaking things and listening for a sound that matched what she had heard the night before. It was quite narrow, that balcony. A place where people might stand single file to watch some activity going on in the backyard. She reached over one end of the railing and wiggled the gutter that ran down the side of the house. There was only a slight squeak. A mouse of a sound. She pushed against the wrought-iron railing and tested a shutter hook on the wall, but they both held tight. Then she jiggled the shutter itself, and that was it. The

sound she had heard from the library. She walked the length of the balcony shaking the shutters at each of the windows, producing “footsteps.” So it had been only the wind passing along the shutters, always in the same direction.

Having put that to rest, she breathed deeply of the morning air. With the sun now fully risen in the sky, the last hints of its golden entrance ceded to the pale blue of a newborn day. Nell gripped the railing and peered down at the garden below, a riot of spring flowers and weeds vying for territory between rows of untamed boxwoods and azaleas. In other circumstances, Nell would have enjoyed pulling weeds and loosening dirt, making room for the flowers to spread. Bringing the garden back to what it had been. But she was only a visitor here.

While she was still gazing down at the garden, a man walked around the corner of the house. He was about her own age, Nell guessed. Jeans and a T-shirt. Thin. Broad shoulders. He hadn’t seen her yet, and she watched him move past the garden to the storage room off the back porch. He unlocked the door—surely a thief wouldn’t have a key—and went inside, then emerged with a ladder he propped against the wall near a window with a broken pane. He looked up then, obviously surprised to see her there. Between the two of them, Nell thought, she probably appeared more suspicious, like a squatter at best—a wild-haired woman in pajamas on the balcony of a seemingly unoccupied house for sale. Nothing to do but offer a queenly wave. The man shouted up his name, Tony Marshall, and established that he mowed the lawn and made occasional repairs to the house for the real estate agency. “I wouldn’t have come by this early if I’d known someone was here.”

Nell shouted back that she was a housesitter. “Nell Brown,” she said. “I haven’t been here long.”

“I wondered where the house key was when it wasn’t behind the rocker. Good to know nobody stole it.”

“I’ll come down.”

Nell stopped in the bedroom long enough to change into jeans and a shirt and to run a comb through her hair.

“I’ve been coming over and mowing the lawn, keeping an eye on the place, since Estelle died.” Tony leaned against the storage room wall, one foot crossed in front of the other.

*Estelle.* The first time Nell had a name to go with the things in the house. “That’s a lot of grass to mow.”

“I always did it for her. I like to think I’m still doing it for her.” He told Nell he’d done some work on the house over the years, had built the bookcases in the library. That he and Estelle had been friends. “We had things in common. An interest in old things, for one. Like her clocks. She said they were good company. There are some great old pieces in this house. Nothing the new owner’s interested in, though.”

“The nephew in California?”

“Great-nephew. Yes. Truth is, Estelle didn’t really want to leave the place to him. She loved this house, and she knew he’d sell it right off. But he was her sister’s grandson. She did it for her.” Tony tucked his hands into his pockets. “I’d buy this place if I could. The nephew’s got a California price tag on it, though.”

Nell offered to start a pot of coffee.

“Tea, maybe?”

“Sure. Tea would be great.” Nell wanted her morning coffee, but was trying to be as accommodating as possible before admitting what she had done to the clocks. She led him inside.

“How about I brew it?” Tony said.

“Please.”

He chose from among the antique, jewel-tone cloisonné tea canisters lined up on the counter, Nell’s big red coffee can shamelessly pedestrian at the end



of the row. Then he asked her what she'd like, turning over the canister in his hand so she could see a white label with "Oolong" written in a childish hand.

"That's good with me."

Tony filled a copper kettle that was at the ready on the stove, then opened a drawer and took out a silver infuser on a chain and filled that with tea. Opened a cabinet full of delicate, ornate teacups and seemed to give some thought to his choices. Nell could see that he and Estelle had shared more than a few cups of tea in this kitchen. They sat at a small, round, bronze-and-glass table that in a different sort of house might have been only ornamental, but set with Estelle's cups and saucers was inviting. Tony talked about the history of some of the things in the house. "It's an eccentric collection," he said. "An eccentric house, in general."

Nell told him about hearing the pipe banging against the wall in the bathroom the first time she'd used the shower and about the footsteps on the balcony the night before.

"And then a stranger shows up in the backyard. So you've been initiated," he said, smiling in a way that led Nell to tell the story of the clocks all going off at once her first night in the house and what she'd done to them.

"I tried to be careful shutting them off, but I was pretty rattled at the time. I don't think I caused any harm. I hope I didn't."

Tony apologized. He'd been there earlier that weekend and couldn't resist winding the clocks. "I always did that for Estelle," he said. "Someone should have told me you were coming. And for the record, I don't have a key. I always used the one behind the rocker." After making the rounds of the disabled clocks, he pronounced them all survivors and showed Nell how to wind them, how some could be set to chime less often or not at all, which of them needed winding every week and which would run for thirty-one days.

"Might be best to just leave them unwound, though."

"I'm obviously not to be trusted with clocks."

Before he left, Tony told her that Estelle had lived in the house since it was built in 1924. That for a few years before then, in her twenties, she'd been in vaudeville in New Orleans. "She never quite got that out of her system—performing," he said. "But she grew up just down the road from here. When her mother was really ill, Estelle came home to take care of her. She'd gotten married in New Orleans. An older man she was crazy for. And he built her this house. She was the star of her own show here for the rest of her life."

It was lonelier in the house that night, after someone else had been there. Lonelier, but less unsettling. Nell turned on the television in the living room for the first time and dialed through the channels until she found two that were clear, the others all snow. Then she stretched out on the sofa, considering Estelle. The old movie magazines made sense now, as did the bedroom decor and some of the more dramatic pieces in the living room. She was curious about Estelle, gone only a month, now. Nell felt almost as if they were roommates, the sense of the other woman's presence so strong in the house. Estelle was eighty when she died, and Nell rolled her age back to the year that had become so significant of late—1934. Estelle must have been about forty-three then, just a year older than Nell now. There was something companionable about that, too.

## 19

Nell was thinking of Tony one morning as she filled Estelle's infuser with tea from one of the cloisonné canisters, her own coffee can relegated to the pantry now. Tony had come by again twice in the two weeks since they'd met, mowing the lawn, checking out the loose pipe in the bathroom, staying to talk over cups of tea. Nell had learned that he was a landscape architect and designed public spaces around the state, that his work at the house was more a labor of love than a job.

The last time they'd talked, Nell had come close to telling him why she was there. About her childhood and the questions she was trying to answer. But she had held all that back, and the conversation had moved on to Tony's having been married briefly, much too young, and Nell's having called off an engagement that had gone on much too long. As they spoke of those things, Nell realized that she was rubbing her palm and that Tony had noticed. Rather than slipping her hand into her lap, she'd made a point of letting it show, and Tony had neither stared nor tried not to look, hadn't commented with sympathy or asked how it happened. He'd only started in on a new story about Estelle that set them laughing, and Nell forgot about her scars.

After Tony left that day, Nell thought about Justin of the broken engagement. Justin had suggested more than once that there were doctors who might be able to "fix" her hand. In the five years they had been together, the last two officially engaged, Nell had never stopped hiding her hand from Justin, and he had never held that hand, only her other one, except for one time when he'd forgotten and quickly corrected the mistake.

As Nell stirred sugar into her teacup, she considered the day ahead. Since the discoveries of the Twilight Room and the site of the blue house, nothing new had turned up in Natchez. She'd been back a few times, searching city directories line by line for anyone who had worked at the Twilight Room when Hazel was there. It was tedious, mind-numbing work, and she hadn't yet gotten to the end of the first volume. As for the current telephone directory, there were too many listings for Browns to be of help, even if cold-calling potential relatives of Hazel hadn't been a line Nell wasn't willing to cross. She had, though, made an attempt at tracking down her own birth certificate, had sent a letter to Jackson. She was waiting to hear back about that.

Sitting at the table with her breakfast of tea and toast, Nell picked up the book she had brought down from the library, the Mississippi travel guide from the thirties. She unfolded the road map she'd found inside it, 1940 printed at the bottom. There were advertisements for Mississippi attractions in the margins, and one of them caught her attention—a sketch of a lighthouse with pink and green stripes that swirled around the tower, a yellow beacon slanting from the lantern. An ad for the Lighthouse Motor Hotel. An image took shape as Nell stared at the ad—a key attached to a key tag with that same sketch printed on it. She could feel the thick cardboard tag in her hand, as familiar now as the coolness of Hazel's black dress against her cheek. There had been a pegboard, she thought, hung with rows of keys with lighthouse tags, presided over by "Mr. Jack," a dark beard all that Nell remembered of him. Nell had carried that key, clutching it tightly. Had been warned not to lose it. And Hazel had sometimes given it to Evie to play with, to occupy her while she cleaned rooms in that motel where Nell had stood on her toes to place paper-wrapped soaps on bathroom sinks.

The ads on the map were numbered and the locations marked, the motel between two towns with names in the smallest print. Maybe thirty minutes from the Gulf Coast, according to the mileage scale. About two hours from

the house. Nell dialed 411 and asked the operator for the number of the Lighthouse Motor Hotel, which she assumed had long been gone.

“One moment, please.” When the voice returned and recited a string of numbers, Nell let them roll over her like an incantation, forgetting that she should write them down.

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The motel was still there, just off the two-lane highway, nothing else in sight that wasn't verdant countryside or blue sky. It was a dive, of course. Long and low and mint green, a string of doors painted in pastel colors. A roadside sign raised between two poles—LIGHTHOUSE MOTEL, CLEAN, QUIET, VACANCIES, and an only slightly updated image of the pink-and-green-striped lighthouse from the map and from the key tags Nell remembered. Other than a Harley-Davidson and a yellow Volkswagen Beetle with a missing front bumper, the parking lot was empty. Nell pulled into a space in front of one of the rooms.

She had packed a bag, just in case, before switching on the answering machine and heading out, but she would not be staying here overnight. She did want to have a quick look around before opening the door to the office and asking questions she hadn't really thought through yet. So far, nothing here was familiar except the lighthouse on the sign. She walked around to the back of the motel where a deep ditch, thick with briars and shrubs, fell off just beyond the outer edge of a sidewalk that ran along the wall. A door stenciled with HOUSEKEEPING ONLY spurred nothing in Nell's memory. But something about that ditch, maybe. A remote sense of fear, like a siren sounding from far away. She couldn't be sure.

She walked back to the front of the building and, a little nervous, entered the office. It was empty. She tapped a bell on top of a glass case stocked with combs and razor blades and toothbrushes. Chocolate bars and packs of

chewing gum. She thought maybe she remembered chocolate bars in a glass case, but didn't let her imagination run wild. Eventually, a man with shaggy, white hair and a surprisingly brawny build came down some steps at the back of the office.

"A room for one?" If a question could be a sneer, that one was. Nell was pretty sure an affirmative answer would be considered a character flaw. She tried not to stare at the wrinkled tattoo of Lucifer peeking from the neckline of the man's dingy undershirt.

"No, I just...um...I remember this place from way back. Around 1934, actually. I was just a little girl. My mother and my sister and I lived—"

"I wasn't here then," the man said, flexing a veiny bicep as he reached up and scratched his head, meeting Nell's eyes now with a look that seemed like a dare. Nell was suddenly more aware of the empty road in both directions and the yellow Beetle being the only vehicle in the parking lot other than her Chrysler and the Harley that she was guessing belonged to this guy.

"I just wanted to look around a little. See how much it had changed." She smiled. The man did not. When she mentioned a man named Jack who had worked there before, his eyes narrowed in a deliberate manner. He reached under the counter and took out a plastic comb, began cleaning his fingernails with the teeth. So much about this man's demeanor was just for show, Nell thought, and she looked at him expectantly, as if waiting for a more reasonable response.

"Don't know any Jacks," he finally said.

She considered asking if she could see one of the empty rooms but thought better of that, unwilling to be accompanied by this man, no matter what memories she might be able to retrieve from a motel room.

"Do you know of anyone who might have been here back then? In the thirties?"

"You wanting to rent a room?" As if he hadn't heard her question.

Renting a room was the last thing Nell wanted just then. “No. Thank you. I was just driving by and remembered the motel. Thought I’d take a look. Thanks, again.”

She made a quick exit and didn’t look back on the way to her car. Only when she was inside did she turn her head enough to see him standing in front of the office next to the Harley, arms folded across his chest.

“I hope that old coot didn’t scare the crap out of you.”

Nell had backtracked a few miles to a diner where she stopped for lunch and some recovery time. She’d been unnerved by the experience at the motel, and when the waitress looked down at her kindly and called her “hon,” she felt her body relax.

“Well, he didn’t offer me a tour,” she said.

The waitress, Evelyn, according to her name tag, made it clear that she did not think much of the new owner of the Lighthouse. “Burl Deets,” she said. “Everybody steers clear of him. He showed up about a year ago and bought that old place from a nice couple who’d run it for ages. Hardly anybody stays there anymore, as far as I can tell.”

Nell told Evelyn that her mother had worked at the motel. “She was young then. Back in the thirties. We lived there for a while when I was a little girl. I drove down today hoping I could look around the place. Maybe go inside one of the rooms, see if I remembered being there.” She asked Evelyn if she knew of anyone in the area who might remember her mother. “She was a singer.” That was the first time Nell had said those words. It seemed odd, describing her mother that way. As if she were talking about someone else.

“Everybody knows everybody around here. There aren’t that many of us. But that was a long time ago.” Evelyn tossed her bar rag onto Nell’s table and sat down across from her to mull over the possibilities, drumming her fingernails on the table. A hopeful sound. After a moment, Evelyn said,

“There is somebody might have known her.”

An older woman, she told Nell. A friend of the man who had run the motel before the couple who sold it to Burl. “Jack Rayburn. I don’t know how far back he was at the motel, and he’s passed now. But Arlene—that’s her name—she and Jack had a thing going on back then. She’s a cousin of my husband’s mother—distant. Used to come in here and talk about the old days when she was young and the Lighthouse did more business. There was a honky-tonk across the road from the motel in those days. It was still open when I was in high school. Knowing Arlene, I’m guessing she spent plenty of time over there.”

“Do you think she’d mind if I called her?”

“Arlene has a phone, but she won’t answer it. It’s okay to just go on over there, though. People do. She won’t admit it, but she likes when people come by. Now, she’s a character, just so you know. But harmless. Has no use for Burl Deets; I can tell you that.” She said Arlene lived in a mobile home not too far from the diner, but way down a backwoods road. “Best to go around noon. Before she’s had too much—” Evelyn held up an imaginary cup and drank from it. “But late enough that she’s up and around.”

Nell checked her watch. Ten after three already. Lucky, she thought, that she’d packed a bag.



## 20

At a quarter to noon, Nell checked out of the hotel Evelyn had recommended—a tired, drab building a few blocks from the diner. It was a bright May day on the cusp of summer, already hot and humid. Nell seemed to be on the verge of something herself, on her way to meet a stranger who might know things about Nell’s life, or her mother’s, that Nell didn’t.

She took the only turn in Evelyn’s directions, onto a country road with scenery Nell had come to expect—tangled woods, fallow fields, occasional pastures dotted with cattle. As she drove, time seemed a fluid thing, prone to slipping out of sequence in this state where her life had begun. She was a woman and a little girl, was forging her own path and being taking along for a ride, uncertain of where she was going or where she had been.

She found the trailer. A flat-roof single-wide with a built-on porch and board steps. Metal roof, metal siding. An air conditioner jutting from a window. The front door was open, and she knocked on the metal frame of the screen door.

“Come on in. I ain’t getting up.”

Nell pulled open the screen door and stepped inside where an older woman, her hair dyed a coppery color but for her gray temples, sat in a recliner, bare-faced and braless, clad in a wrinkled slip that, from the looks of it, had been slept in the night before. Her hair was gnarled on one side, matted flat on the other. A TV tray in front of her chair held a mug and half a sandwich which the woman, presumably Arlene, was using as an ashtray.

“Arlene?”

When the woman looked up and saw Nell standing there, she straightened out of her slouch and ran a futile hand over her hair. She clutched at what might have been the collar of a shirt or a dress had she been wearing either, then looked down at the slip and surrendered to the situation, slouching again.

“Yeah, that’s me,” she said. “Wasn’t expecting company.”

Arlene appeared to be on past tipsy, though short of drunk, and Nell apologized for showing up without warning. She introduced herself, mentioning Evelyn from the diner.

“Take a load off.” Arlene lifted the mug in the direction of a couch. “What brings you out here on—” She coughed a smoker’s cough and cleared her throat with a gurgle, then slid a hand down the neck of her slip where Nell guessed a tissue might have been stuffed into her bra, had she been wearing one. “Well, hell.” She felt along the chair cushion until she found a crumpled tissue, then turned away and spat into it.

“Evelyn said you might remember the Lighthouse Motel back in the thirties. Back when Jack was running it.”

Arlene perked up at that. “You knew Jack?”

“I knew somebody who knew him. She worked for him for a while. At the motel.” Nell hadn’t planned to be dodgy, but something kept her from revealing her connection to Hazel.

Arlene lit a cigarette and drew hard on it. She rubbed her eyes, then turned a closer look on Nell.

“That somebody got a name?”

“Hazel. Hazel Brown. She cleaned rooms. I don’t think she was there long.”

“Had two girls? Little bitty things.”

“Yes, that’s her. I was wondering if you might be able to tell me something about her.”

“She in some kind of trouble? I wouldn’t be surprised.” Then she seemed to rethink having said that. “No disrespect. You a friend of the family, her and them girls? Or kin?”

“Kin,” Nell said. “And no trouble. Just wanting to learn more about what she was like back then.”

“She had some airs, that one. No offense.”

“No. Anything you can remember, I’d appreciate hearing. Good or not so good.” Nell smiled.

“Jack was good to her. Real good to her. He had a soft spot for strays, people and dogs. Too soft, I used to tell him. Ended up, she walked out with no warning, left him high and dry, no maid to clean the checkouts that day. Took off in the night, if I’m remembering right. Didn’t surprise me none. I figured something like that would happen.”

She picked up the ashy sandwich like she might take a bite out of it, then put it down again. “Back then there was a place across the road from the motel. A honky-tonk. She used to go over there sometimes. Would leave the girls with Jack’s mother—she lived in the motel, too. She’d walk across that dirt road—it was just dirt then—and she’d walk across it in some fancy getup and high heels.” Arlene swigged something from her mug. “Made me laugh.”

“Do you remember what year that was?”

“Lord, no. I can’t hardly remember yesterday. That joint burned down in ’42, though. It was flimsy as flypaper and went up fast. We watched it, me and Jack, from the motel. She was long gone by then, though. What was her name again?”

“Hazel. It was a long time ago, I know. I imagine it’s hard to remember. Especially someone you didn’t know much about.”

As if that were a challenge, Arlene said, “She used to sing all the time

when she was cleaning the rooms. She'd leave the doors open while she worked, and I'd hear her sometimes from the parking lot when I came by to see Jack. Singing like she was on the radio instead of cleaning toilets."

Arlene went back to her cigarette, burned down to mostly ashes. She took two quick puffs, then eyed the nub thoughtfully. "Thinking about it now," she said, "it could be her leaving like that had something to do with a man that came around asking Jack about her. Maybe he spooked her. I don't know."

"Did you see the man? Do you know who he was?"

"No, I never seen him. I figured probably an old boyfriend. Jack didn't say much about it, and I didn't much care to know. Truth is, she kind of rubbed me the wrong way. Like I said, she had airs. No offense."

"Not at all."

"Had a right good voice, though. I'll give her that. Deep and smoky for somebody young as her. Lord, we were all young then."

Nell couldn't remember her mother singing. Not at the motel or even on Clay Mountain. One more precious thing Hazel had put aside, she supposed, like the hats and the jewelry and the bottles of perfume.

Arlene rested her head against the back of the recliner, then, and closed her eyes. Nell thought maybe she was remembering Hazel or Jack or what it had been like to be that young. But then she began snoring softly, and Nell stood up and let herself out as quietly as she could.

Becca

**1933–1934**

**Mississippi**

## 21

Becca and Evie spent Thanksgiving in Rodney. They were still there at Christmas and for the dawn of the new year, 1934. And when half of January had passed, Becca had not yet made a decision to move on. Evie would soon be a year and a half old, and her vocabulary was growing daily. She was collecting words in this place where Lottie had learned her own first words, a connection Becca cherished.

Becca cut a slice of the sweet potato pie Dory had brought over earlier that morning. She set it in front of Evie at the little pine table Bobby had built for her, their Christmas present, his and Dory's, for Evie. Dory's gift to Becca had been a quilt she and Lottie had worked on together, another treasure.

*What would Lottie think of this?* Becca wondered. Of this unexpected friendship with the woman who had betrayed her. Of Dory doting on Evie, who by rights belonged to Lottie. *She would be glad for it.* Becca knew that. Glad Becca had a friend in Rodney. That Evie had a stand-in grandmother. Lottie would have forgiven Dory. Probably she already had, long ago.

And today, Dory and Bobby were taking Becca to the river.

Lucy had said no to going with them, her worries about hidden overgrown cisterns and snakes too great. So she stayed behind with the girls at Becca's house. Becca met Dory and Bobby in front of the Baptist church, an architectural gem despite its unfortunate location, subject to persistent flooding and instability. A beauty even without a trace of paint left to it. The three of them started out, Dory in rubber boots up to her knees and Becca

hoping Ben's boots were sufficient for any watery parts of the nearly three-mile trek. Not far beyond the church, Dory pointed out where the house Lottie had grown up in had once stood, brought down years before by creeping vines and hostile woods, the remaining rubble swept away by floodwaters.

They hiked down a dirt trail, then on muddy paths that wound through the wild green expanse leading to the river. Along the way, Dory told stories about the times she and Lottie had made the trip and how the landscape had changed since then. Whether Dory was intentionally bringing Lottie along with them or her presence among them was organic, Lottie's spirit was there. Dory talked about Lottie's internal light, of the wild joy that some had mistaken for peculiarity, but most had understood as a brighter-than-ordinary manner of living. She spoke of how tenderhearted Lottie had been, even as a schoolgirl, never returning evil for evil. "There were no consequences to being overbearing or judgmental or unkind to Lottie. Some people took advantage of that," Dory said as the wooded terrain gave way to marshy land that sucked at Ben's boots with every step Becca took.

Bobby had his own stories about reckless adventures at the river with friends when he was still in school. The parents of one of those friends owned most of the land the three of them were crossing today and had granted them permission. For a while, they skirted a wide creek, forced to wade only a short, shallow section, Dory offering Becca her rubber boots, Becca, of course, declining.

The river, when they reached it, was as blue as the sky above, the day so clear that the water mirrored sparse clouds so white they seemed to emit light of their own. All three of them fell quiet then. Becca took in this new view of the old river she and Lottie had loved in Mapleton, just as wondrous here as it was there. She gazed across it to the Louisiana woods on the other side, watched it wind away as far as she could see in both directions. And though she knew the river flowed through many states, from the far north to the Gulf

of Mexico, she felt that it belonged especially to Mississippi, or that Mississippi belonged especially to it. It had staked its claim there, had swallowed up many Mississippi towns and left its mark on those it had simply abandoned, like Rodney. Had given life and taken life, enriched and devastated, was a fickle and unpredictable lover, but today, as always, Becca found strength and comfort in this river that belonged especially to her.

After a while, the stories started up again, and eventually the trio headed back, lighthearted and bonded by the river. They were laughing when they emerged from the woods behind the church, weary comrades back from an adventure, and laughing still when they could see, through the trees, people gathered in the vicinity of Lucy's house. When they rounded the church and met the dirt road out front, they saw another group clustered on a porch farther down, people going in and out of that house. There was a sense of gravity, of emergency, about the scene. Becca looked back toward the path to Lucy's house in a daze. She felt Dory take hold of her hand. *They're not at Lucy's house*, she told herself. *Evie's not there. Whatever's happened, they're all safe at my house*. Then she saw Gus on his way to meet them.

Gus explained what he knew. That a boy from somewhere else, twelve years old, was there visiting his grandparents. He'd been seen bouncing a rubber ball against the side of Lucy's house, likely thinking no one lived there. A wild pitch. The ball stuck on the roof. The boy with a long stick, jumping up and down on the porch, swatting at the ball. The wretched porch planks caving in over the old brick cistern.

"He's all right?" Dory's voice was thin and strained and devoid of any conviction.

"Don't know yet. Riley Sims went down on a rope and got him out. Doctor's on the way. Boy hasn't come to, last I heard."

When they reached Becca's house, Gus's wife was there, her arm around Lucy, who had been crying. Rose was playing with a toy, taking in stride the



somber feeling in the house, her reaction to most circumstances. Evie stood off to the side, looking bewildered. Becca knelt down, and Evie ran to her. Dory went to Rose, sat on the floor beside her, and pulled her into her lap.

“Gus told us,” Becca said, and Lucy just hung her head.

The boy was dead when the doctor arrived. He never woke. There was talk of laying him to rest on Cemetery Hill, able men of Rodney prepared to band together and dig a grave, build a coffin, whatever was needed, as was their habit when one of their own passed away, any disagreements or debts forgiven, injustices set aside for a time. But the boy’s parents came for him and took him home, away from Rodney.

In the days that followed, Lucy received some hard looks. Some people avoided her, looked away when they saw her coming. Gus put a jar on the counter at the store for contributions to the boy’s funeral expenses, and Becca saw Lucy slip her wedding ring into it when the store was empty and Gus’s back was turned.

Several men arrived at Lucy’s one day and patched the porch floor. To make sure nothing like that happened again, they told her. She had no money to pay for even the boards, which made her more miserable, although Gus told her the boards had been salvaged and most people had no more money than she did.

One day, the boy’s grandmother knocked on Lucy’s door with a basket of warm biscuits and a jar of muscadine jelly. She made a point of sitting on that newly repaired porch where everyone could see her, eating biscuits with Lucy and Rose. A good woman. Over the next weeks, things seemed much as they had been before, but Becca and Dory knew the boy’s death weighed heavily on Lucy.

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On a cold, windy day in late February, Lucy and Becca were returning after dropping some mail into the slot in the postmistress's front door. Rose and Evie had scurried ahead when Dory met Lucy and Becca in the road. Bobby, she said, had seen a strange man hanging around Lucy's house earlier. Strange because Bobby didn't recognize him and he was dressed more nicely than usual for Rodney on a Saturday morning. Probably nothing to be concerned about, Dory told them, but they all walked together to Lucy's house, and Becca went inside with her while she looked around. Nothing was missing. All was in place, what little Lucy had. Probably just someone assuming the house wasn't occupied, they decided.

Dory took Evie home with her so Becca could go into the store to log inventory. She'd been setting up a new bookkeeping system for Gus, being paid in groceries. As she walked on toward the store, Tillie spotted her from across the road, one of her chickens at her feet, and hurried to intercept her.

"I seen that man over at Lottie's house yesterday," she said, insinuation running through her words. She had an I'm-wise-to-you grin on her face.

"What man?"

"It weren't Josh, neither."

*Josh?* So Tillie was confused, Becca thought, Josh, of course, long dead. Becca had noticed it before, Tillie having days like that. Maybe she'd seen the man Bobby had spotted that morning and thought it had happened the day before, gotten the houses confused, as well. Becca spoke tenderly to the woman.

"You mean at Lucy's house? This morning?"

"You can't put this on her." That same grin, like she knew something naughty was going on. "Lottie's house. Where *you're* staying. And not today. I know my days. Yesterday, I seen him. Looking at that car in the yard. Going around back of the house, looking in the window. You wasn't there. I knew that. Yesterday. I know my days." That grin so big now that Becca was

embarrassed at whatever Tillie thought she was guilty of. Then Tillie stuck her hands in the cuffs of her jacket for warmth, turned around, and walked away.

At the store, Becca asked Gus if he'd noticed the man Bobby had seen that morning. "Or yesterday," she said, thinking of Tillie's account.

"Was a car parked in the grass at the head of the road this morning. A blue Ford. Saw it when I went out. I don't know about yesterday. Nobody new has come in here, though."

"We were just wondering about him."

"Could be somebody down on his luck, looking for a house to move his family into. Wouldn't be the first to come around here looking for a place to rent cheap, or thinking on slipping into an empty house, times being what they are these days. I don't begrudge it. And could be somebody sent by the county to survey land about to be foreclosed on. That wouldn't be a first, either. Or a hunter. There's good hunting out here. Maybe somebody looking for a place to set up a hunting camp. Sometimes people just show up out of curiosity. Wanting to see what Rodney's come to now. I wouldn't worry about it. Strangers get noticed real quick around here. Not likely anybody'd have a chance to cause any harm, even if they wanted to."

Becca tended to agree with him. Still, she would make sure to latch the doors at night and brace the windows so they couldn't be raised from outside. And keep the car locked. When she went to collect Evie that afternoon, she told Dory about the odd conversation with Tillie and what Gus had said.

"Maybe that man was just looking for an empty house. And Tillie probably just had things mixed up."

"Maybe," Dory said, like she didn't believe that for a minute.

## 22

The mysterious man, if there was anything mysterious about him at all, made no more appearances. There was a change in Lucy, though. It was as if a shadow had fallen over her, and not even Rose and Evie in their most heart-tugging moments could draw her out of it. Her unhappiness at having been left on her own in Rodney was more apparent, and she had taken to shutting herself up in that tragic little house.

The accident, the stranger, and Lucy being more withdrawn lately all had Becca thinking more seriously about the need to leave Rodney. She and Evie had been there much longer than she'd planned. She was stronger now. Rodney had been a good decision. Moving herself and Evie out of reach of Mildred and her manipulations had been like breathing fresh new air. Becca rarely thought of Mildred at all anymore. And living in Lottie's house in her hometown, listening to Dory's stories of her had given Becca new memories to soften the space where loss resided. Even her grief over losing Ben, the sharp, crippling pain that had been all-consuming when she left Kendall, had become a dull ache, ever present, yes, but allowing room for her to attend to carrying on. And it was time to carry on. To decide where to go, where to reenter the outside world from the refuge of a ghost town.

More than half of Lottie's money remained in the Bible. Becca was confident about finding a job. She had work experience. Now that a year had passed since President Roosevelt had been sworn in, there was new optimism about his efforts to pull the country out its troubles, to get people back to work. This was the time to go. A town of some size—large enough to have

job opportunities, but not so large that she would face an overabundance of competition—would be ideal, she thought. Once she was on her feet, was employed and had found someone to look after Evie while she worked, maybe she could help Lucy find work. She wouldn't mind the two of them sharing an apartment. Helping each other out. Caring for the girls together. That made for a nice picture in her head.

That same day, Becca told Lucy of her decision to move on. They were at the creek drawing water for laundry, the girls collecting rocks in the soon-to-be-spring sunshine.

"I do know one place you might could go." Lucy spoke with a downheartedness that almost made Becca rethink her timing. *She'll be sad to see us leave.* Becca was missing her already. Lucy had been a good friend, and Rose and Evie were so sweet together.

"There's a room in Natchez I heard about from the iceman when he came around yesterday. His aunt's moving out of it soon, and he said it'll go quick because the rent's so low. Maybe because it's on the riverfront, and not everybody wants that. But I know how you love the river..."

Becca had never been to Natchez, but she knew about it. Knew it sat on a bluff with an especially grand view of the Mississippi River. That it was famous for its old architecture and rolling hills. Lottie had told her about it. Had talked about taking her there when she was a girl, but they'd never made the trip.

"He said Natchez is doing better than most places right now. Just an hour or so drive from here, is what he said. It's in a house at the bottom of the bluff. Under-the-Hill, they call it. He said the sunsets over the river are beautiful."

"They are," Becca said, remembering sunsets at the river with Lottie. "That might be just what we need."

"It's on the second floor, separate from the rest of the house. Stairs going

up to it from the outside.” Lucy told Becca everything she’d heard about the room and the town, looking bright one minute, sinking again the next.

Natchez did seem like a good choice. If the room was as cheap as Lucy said it was, she’d have time to find work or to give up on Natchez and move on before running out of money.

“You can always come back here,” Lucy said, “and make a new plan. Your house will be here. We’ll look after it, Dory and Bobby and me.”

Becca had followed bluebirds to Rodney. Why not follow the river to Natchez?

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The day she left Rodney, Becca offered to let Lucy and Rose move into Lottie’s house. Lucy shook her head quickly as if the idea pained her, and Becca let it drop. “You know where we’ll be,” she said. “Just write if you change your mind.” Lucy turned away then, and Becca’s heart went out to her.

Becca had telephoned the woman who owned the house in Natchez and had agreed to take the room sight unseen, relying on Lucy’s description and the owner’s confirmation of what was truly an extremely low rent, just as Lucy had been told.

“Rent’s cheaper under the hill than up on the bluff,” the woman had said. “And I’ve got a houseful here, so it can get a little loud with the young folks sometimes. But won’t nobody bother you up in that rental room. I’ve got one other boarder, with his own entrance, too. He’s been here for two years.”

That seemed like a good sign. The woman agreed to hold the room for five days, and Becca had scrambled to get packed and ready to leave that quickly. She would have preferred a longer goodbye with Dory and Lucy, but she didn’t want to risk losing the room.

Dory was stoic with her farewell. “There’s no way this is a real goodbye,”

she told Becca. “You get settled there, find you a job, and we’ll plan when to get together after. There’s roads out of Rodney and into Natchez,” she said. “And they run both ways.” Becca slipped one of Lottie’s painted buttons—a flat disk with the sun rising over the river—into Dory’s hand, a remembrance of their time together at the river and of Dory’s trips there with Lottie.

The car was packed tight again, the wicker crib wedged in the back seat as before. Evie had outgrown it, but Bobby had opened it up at one end so she could sleep in it, her feet on the seat during the drive.

A small group had gathered to see them off. Along with Lucy and Rose and Dory, Bobby and his girlfriend were there. And Gus, taking a break from the store. Some children from down the road huddled around the car, more interested in it than the departure. Even the two elderly sisters who ran a tiny library of collected books in their living room and were Rodney’s foremost purveyors of gossip had come, as well. Tillie stood across the road watching. Others who were out and about nearby raised a hand in greeting—hello or goodbye or just from habit.

Lucy seemed ready to break into tears. When Becca hugged her, she felt her shaking with emotion. “Say goodbye to Rose,” Becca told Evie, who was suddenly shy. Becca nudged her toward her friend. Normally, those two hugged often and long, but today they were awkward with each other, and Evie’s chin was trembling. “Bye-bye,” she said, and Rose’s sudden tears set them both off. Lucy did not wait to watch Becca and Evie climb into the Ford and drive away. Lips pressed tightly together, she touched her cheek briefly against the top of Evie’s head, sent Becca a feeble wave, then swung Rose into her arms and carried her off down the road.

Bobby had already started the Ford, had it warmed up and ready to go when Becca settled Evie into the crib with Maggie, the doll that had become essential although it had been a gift from Mildred back in Kendall. A jug of spring water sat on the front floorboard along with cookies and cheese sandwiches Dory had packed for them.

Evie was quiet, her hands flat against a back-seat window as Becca started up the road and the car rolled away from the house, away from those people in that place they had both come to love, leaving Lottie's ghost among them.

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Natchez was a world apart from Rodney. Paved roadways that led to downtown streets filled with automobiles, people milling about on sidewalks outside still-open businesses of every kind. Becca's hopes soared as she passed two hotels, a theater, a newspaper, a college. It was a bustling, vibrant town of moderate size, just the sort of town she had hoped to find. Hers was only a first impression, of course, but a good one. *Somewhere in this town there's a job for me.*

Downtown Natchez stretched almost to the edge of the bluff it was built upon, high above the river which was even wider and seemed stronger and more massive here than at Mapleton. As her new landlady had instructed, Becca turned onto a side road, Silver Street, that slithered down the bluff to the riverside. To Natchez Under-the-Hill, the woman had told her. And Under-the-Hill, as Becca saw then, was nothing like the charming town above. There were no elegant buildings, no automobiles in sight just then. Here, there was a loading dock where men hoisted wooden crates onto their shoulders. A ferry landing. A smattering of river shacks on a dirt lane that doglegged off Silver Street. On the other side of Silver Street, which was, in truth, a short, rugged road, optimistically named, was a row of old brick and wood buildings—a saloon, a grocery, a perhaps intentionally rustic restaurant, and others Becca couldn't yet identify.

It appeared as if the river had been eating away at the land between it and Silver Street, encroaching rather than removing itself as it had with Rodney. Becca crawled along behind a rickety wagon pulled by mules, past a pier surely destined to fall into the river before long, past clutches of men, working or not. There were few women about. The atmosphere of Under-the-



Hill was that of a place to which people came for a particular purpose, rather than a place of residence. Certainly not as encouraging as the town above had been, but the river was glorious, and that was a plus. Evie was still asleep in the back seat, missing it all. Becca was amazed that Evie could sleep so deeply despite the sound of the Ford's engine, but car rides seemed to soothe her.

Becca found the house—a wooden two-story, squared off and simple, with an old coat of white paint. She parked on a strip of grass around the far corner, per the owner's instructions. Two sets of stairs, one on either side of a corner of the house, climbed up to separate doors on the second floor. Evie, when Becca woke her and helped her out of the car, was astonished at these new surroundings. "Water!" she said, laughing and clapping her hands, as if the river were the best thing ever.

"That's the river, sweetheart."

Evie tried out the new word, w's in place of r's, and Becca knew she would hear that word spoken just like that in her heart for the rest of her life. She had been told to knock on the back door at the foot of the stairs, but while Evie was still captivated by the river, the door opened and a man, tall and lanky in pleated trousers and an open-neck shirt, came out to meet them.

"Hi," Evie said, then she ducked behind Becca and hid.

"Hi, back," the man answered, and there was a muted giggle from Evie.

"You're Becca?"

"Yes. And that's Evie, back there."

"I was surprised to hear that we'd be graced with a little princess," he said. Another giggle from Evie.

"Are you a boarder?" Becca asked him.

"Me? I'm just the gardener."

Becca hadn't seen any garden. She was pretty sure he was joking and gave

him a look that said so.

“The other boarder, yes. Drew. Nice to meet you.”

Drew didn’t seem all that much older than Becca. Ten years, at most, she thought. He told her that the owner liked to be called Bett. “She’s been married three times and isn’t fond of any of the husbands, so she’s given up last names. She’s not here today, but she asked me to show you around. To give you the lay of the land, so to speak. By which I mean ‘the rules.’”

Evie decided to reveal herself then. She stood next to Becca and looked up at Drew, her face scrunched as if sizing him up, a look he sent right back to her.

“So Bett is...we’ll say ‘particular’ about her privacy,” Drew said. “And about the privacy of the others in the main house. And yours. No one bothers you, and you don’t go into the main house without being invited. Except here.” He opened the door he’d come through and held it for Becca and Evie. Inside was a small square area with an icebox and some shelves. Besides the door through which they’d entered, there were two others. “This,” Drew said, opening one of them, “is your bathroom. You’ll be sharing it with Bett and with me—there’s another one for the rest of the crew—so if you try the door and it’s locked, one of us has beat you to it. Bett takes a full bath on Sundays and Thursdays at one o’clock. You can set your watch by that. I, however, am more spontaneous about bathing, and about life in general.”

Becca looked at him as if he were joking again.

“Utterly serious,” he said, smiling in a way that left room for doubt. “Really, when you’re in there, absolutely pull the latches on both the doors inside or you will likely be walked in on. You and the princess,” he said, winking at Evie.

“That door”—he pointed across the bathroom—“leads to Bett’s private rooms, her bedroom and her office.” He held up a finger and shook it. “Squelch any temptation to open that door. Cerberus stands guard on the

other side.”

“And me without a lyre.”

“Ah, versed in mythology. Duly impressed,” Drew said.

Back in the entryway, he told her the icebox was for their use at any time. Then he pointed to the other door, opposite the bathroom door, and said, “That’s the kitchen. Your hours there are seven o’clock to eight thirty every morning and three to four o’clock in the afternoon. Starting today.” Becca was not to enter that room at any other time. Drew bent over Evie and added, “Kitchen hours are strictly enforced.” Becca smiled, and Drew said, “Joking aside, you don’t want to break that rule.”

“I won’t.”

“There’s a door to the living room in the kitchen. That’s off-limits,” he said, definitely serious then. “Again, strictly enforced.”

“I understand,” Becca said. But she wasn’t sure she did.

Drew asked if she was comfortable with him taking her up to see her room. She was, and the three of them climbed the stairs, Becca close behind Evie as she took each step two-footed. The room was fine, cozy, Becca thought, after the starkness of Lottie’s house. A narrow bed and a cot for Evie, both made up. A pitcher and bowl on a table. A small chest of drawers.

“The family gets a little lively sometimes,” Drew said. “Lots of friends in and out. And they love a party. But there’s a bit of a buffer around the boarders’ rooms, yours and mine. The best fried catfish in Natchez is right here on Silver Street. And the worst bar. It’s a mixed bag down here. I’d consider staying in late at night. Actually, I *do* stay in late at night. Bett’s probably left you...” He bent down and looked under the bed. “Ah, yes, the old chamber pot. But the house is safe. And it’s full of people. If you were ever to have any trouble, which I never have, and I’ve been here two years, just bang on the back wall right here.” He pulled open a curtain hiding a small closet. We share a closet wall, and chances are I’d hear you.

Eventually. Good lord, I'm not very reassuring, am I? But welcome to the madness that is Natchez Under-the-Hill.

Drew helped her bring her things up from the car, Evie constantly weaving between them, getting in the way. Drew was quite taken with Lottie's bread box. "That's some beautiful work," he said. "Did you do that?"

"My mother. She was an artist."

"She surely was."

Before he left them, Drew gave her the key to her room, then one to the back door downstairs, reminding her to lock it behind her when she went in or out of the entryway. Then Becca gave him a month's rent for Bett. Drew looked at what Becca knew was a scant number of bills and seemed surprised, but he said nothing about that, just tipped an imaginary hat and went on his way.

## 23

At three o'clock sharp, Becca opened the door to the kitchen downstairs. After the kerosene stove in Rodney, she was glad to see a gas stove like the one she'd been accustomed to in Kendall. A long, pine table dominated the room, benches on either side. Cupboards, a cabinet, a larger and nicer icebox than the one in the entryway, a deep sink. This would be fine, she thought, even with the regimented hours. She wondered if Bett had rules about the others in the house not entering the kitchen during Becca's hours, or if there might be an opportunity to meet some of them here. She had come armed with toys for Evie, those that made the least amount of noise. Maggie, of course, among them, along with some doll clothes Dory had made. Becca set them up in a corner, and Evie started right in on undressing the doll.

Becca put on water for rice and opened the can of beans she'd brought, keeping an eye on the clock on the window sill behind the sink as she worked. As the water boiled and Becca stirred in the rice, a young woman came in through the forbidden door to the living room. Her hair, long and dark, was tied at the nape of her neck except for a fringe of wavy bangs. She introduced herself as Jill, and Evie turned away from her play, interested.

"Aunt Bett asked me to check on you since she's away, to see if you need anything."

Becca was curious about the new landlady, but she was glad to meet her niece.

They talked a while, about the arrival of spring and Becca's room upstairs

and Evie about to turn eighteen months old. Jill was soft-spoken and hospitable, and Becca liked her right away. Jill told her about an Under-the-Hill laundress she said Bett would like Becca to use for diapers. Rather than the shared bathroom and sink, Becca supposed.

“Miss Jones comes around once a week to pick up and drop off. She takes care of all our laundry. It’s not expensive. You can leave bundles for her just inside the back door. There’s a crate there to set them on.” Jill noticed Evie edging toward her and smiled. Evie rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand.

“It’s been a big day for her,” Becca said. “All the goodbyes before we left this morning, then the drive and unpacking the car. We walked up to the park on the bluff and looked around for a while. It’s so pretty there.”

And then Evie, so tired, climbed right into Jill’s lap, to Jill’s delight, and soon fell asleep there. Becca and Jill talked quietly as the rice steamed and Evie slept on. Becca mentioned that she would be looking for a job as soon as she could find someone reliable to watch Evie for a couple of hours at a time while she was out. Maybe Bett could recommend someone, she said. “I wouldn’t be able to pay as much as I’d like to, at least until I find work, but I’d do what I can.” She would need a reference, she said. A recommendation of some kind, since she didn’t know anyone in town yet.

Jill said that she had helped raise her little sister and that she loved children.

“Looks like they love you back,” Becca said, Evie right at home in Jill’s lap.

“What time would you need a babysitter?”

“Mornings. Maybe from nine to eleven, something like that.” Becca glanced at the clock and decided she’d take their bowls of rice and beans up to the room for their supper. It was earlier than they were accustomed to eating, but they would adjust.

Jill offered to watch Evie while Becca was job hunting. “As long as it’s okay with Aunt Bett. And with you, of course. You wouldn’t have to pay me,” she said softly. “I’d just love to do it. I miss my sister. She’s across the river now, in Louisiana. With my grandparents.”

Becca thanked her for offering, though she wasn’t certain about the idea. “I’m sure your aunt would vouch for you,” she said.

“My aunt?”

“Aunt Bett?”

“Oh. Of course. Yes. And I could give you another reference. I know you’re new in town and have to be careful. I’ll get a letter from my...my recent employer.” Evie turned her head in her sleep and laid her hand on Jill’s chest.

“I’ll think about it,” Becca said. “I’m not ready just yet. But I should get started soon. Maybe next week. Cross your fingers that someone will hire me.”

Jill held up her hand, fingers crossed.

Before it was fully dark that evening, heeding Drew’s advice about not being out late at night, Becca sat with Evie on the top step of the outside stairs, watching the lights on a barge anchored in the river. The stars weren’t out yet, but the river filled Becca’s soul in a way that nothing else did. A cool breeze from over the water brought a faint, fresh tang, the smell of the river. Becca remembered the smell, breathed it in deeply, and just as she had in Rodney, she felt close to Lottie there. She watched as the activity on the riverfront lessened, the people on the street breaking up and going off in separate directions, some headed up the bluff, some toward the saloon down the road or to some other place Becca didn’t know about yet. Some children disappeared into one of the old river shacks she had seen driving in.

Later, the river would blend with the darkness of the night, a black void,

but now it was still there in front of her, the lights on the barge twinkling as twilight began to fade. They should go back in, she thought, reluctant to part from the river just yet. And then she heard muffled music start up from downstairs in the house. A piano. Lively and cheerful. She wondered if Jill was the one at the piano. Then she rose and took Evie back inside.

Two days later, during Becca's morning hour in the kitchen, Jill came in again, this time with a sheet of paper in her hand. Evie made a beeline for her, and Jill held out her arms and lifted her up. Then Jill shyly handed Becca the paper—a glowing recommendation letter from a Natchez city councilman, the city seal embossed at the top.



## 24

Early in her second week of canvassing downtown Natchez for work, Becca returned to the room under the hill with news. “It’s only a ‘maybe,’” she announced, “but a prospect!” Evie responded with a happy little bendy-knee dance at whatever *prospect* meant, and Jill said, “I’m so glad. Here’s hoping!” Already, Becca had grown fond of Jill. She knew that Jill sometimes worked a late shift, and she appreciated her willingness to watch Evie three mornings a week while Becca made her rounds.

“A doctor’s office,” she said. “He wants a nurse, but hasn’t found one. He likes that I’ve worked for a doctor, and he asked me to stop back in next week.”

“I’m sure he’ll hire you,” Jill said.

“It would have been good to leave a telephone number, but I didn’t want to give him your aunt’s number without asking first. Do you think she’d mind?”

Jill seemed reticent about speaking for Bett. “She’s not here right now,” she said. “She’ll be back this afternoon. But she’s busy a lot in the afternoons.”

*The elusive Bett*, Becca thought. If she hadn’t spoken with her by telephone from Rodney, she’d be questioning whether or not the woman really existed. One would think she’d want to meet a new boarder in her house, if only to feel comfortable about her. For that matter, Becca had not met any of the rest of the family living in the house. She and Drew crossed paths now and then, going in and out of the back entryway, and they’d had

some conversations in the kitchen. Had cooked together once. And Drew had begun hanging a hand towel from the bathroom doorknob to let Becca know when he was, as he'd termed it, performing his ablutions.

One thing she had learned while inquiring about work was that Natchez, as promising as it had appeared when she drove in, had been subject to the same troubles as everywhere else these last few years. A druggist had wished her luck, but told her that people here were holding fast to their jobs, even through pay cuts and longer hours, hoping to ride out the financial woes along with their employers. And walking through town, Becca had seen that some of the storefronts and offices whose signs she had noted so enthusiastically were, in fact, locked up and emptied out. Still, she was hopeful.

On Thursday, Becca rushed through her afternoon kitchen hour as usual, preparing supper to take up to their room. She had brought a basket filled with the laundress's latest delivery of washed and folded clothes and counted the extra work she'd have refolding them worth keeping Evie busy and quiet emptying and refilling the basket, wrapping Maggie in diapers, and sitting in the basket like a cat in a box—some of Evie's favorite games.

Becca was not yet accustomed to the perplexing kitchen regulations. The house always seemed eerily quiet during her hour and a half in the early mornings. No one other than Drew, and occasionally Jill, ever entered the kitchen while she was there. She wouldn't have minded some company. In the afternoons, she could hear people moving about upstairs and in the room behind the swinging door next to the icebox, but that door never swung open, and she dared not open it herself. The rent here was much too low to risk losing her room. She had just packed their meal and gathered up the stray laundry when the clock showed four o'clock, and she snatched up the basket and rushed out with Evie like Cinderella at midnight.

It was only four thirty when Evie became aware that Maggie was missing—Maggie, Evie's constant companion and without whom she would be

utterly distressed at bedtime. She looked up from her dinner plate and over at the empty chair next to her, where the doll usually sat at mealtimes. “Maggie?” she said, squirming to free herself of Ben’s old shirt, which Becca had buttoned around both Evie and the chairback to keep her secure at the table. There was no stopping her, so Becca helped her down. Evie padded around the room, checking the most likely places, then held up her palms and turned a concerned face toward her mother. “Maggie?”

Becca dumped everything out of the laundry basket. She checked under the bed and the cot, behind the closet curtain, in the drawers of the chest. No doll. Then she remembered that while she had been washing up the dishes in the kitchen, she had seen Evie, ever diligent about Maggie’s naps, lay the doll on the end of one of the benches at the table and tuck her in with a diaper. She looked again at the clock. Four forty, now. Evie had been through so much upheaval since Ben’s death. She’d found a friend in Rose only to lose her, and had left Dory and Lucy behind. Becca would not watch her daughter cry herself to sleep because of some ridiculous afternoon kitchen curfew.

“Let’s go get Maggie,” she said, and Evie nodded emphatically. Becca held a finger to her lips, and Evie followed suit. In a conspiracy of silence, they went outside. To save time, Becca carried Evie down the stairs. Once in the entryway, she perched Evie on the wooden crate where bundles of dirty laundry were left for the laundress on Saturdays and clean laundry was returned on Wednesdays. Then she locked the back door and told Evie to stay put, to be very quiet. Evie understood the gravity of the mission and raised a finger to her mouth once again.

Becca checked the bathroom—empty—then crept toward the kitchen door like a criminal. “Maggie,” Evie said in a stage whisper from her seat, and Becca shushed her. She put her ear against the door to the kitchen and heard nothing. Then she cracked open the door and peered through the narrow slit. The kitchen was empty. Becca could see the doll, still where Evie had left it. *Four seconds*, she thought. That’s all she needed to reach it. Four seconds

more, and she'd be out again.

It was too early for the usual piano music. There were no signs of any supper preparations. Just eight seconds, she thought, and with a last warning glance back at Evie, she slipped into the kitchen. Within the allotted seconds, she snagged the doll, then turned back, her eyes on the swinging door between the kitchen and the rest of the house. The door that was off-limits to Becca. And standing there clutching Maggie, something came over her.

She had not seen a single member of the household other than Jill, and here she was, so close—*two seconds*, she thought—to that swinging door behind which there might be some clue about the people who lived there. And instead of taking those last steps back to the entryway, she swiveled and took three steps to the swinging door. She pressed the tips of two fingers against it, moving it just enough that with one eye closed and her face nearly touching the door, she could see into the next room.

It was empty except for a fluffy white cat sleeping on a cushion near a window draped in red satin that fell in lavish folds into a liquid pile on the floor. There was the piano, against a wall, a stool with a pink velvet seat like a lady's powder puff ready for the pianist. Painted glass pendant lamps hung from the ceiling over threadbare couches in sumptuous fabrics.

As Becca was puzzling over the odd decor, three young women spilled down a staircase and into the room, chattering and laughing, one shoving hairpins into her up-done hair, another with a compact in her hand, dusting her nose with powder, each of them primping as if on their way to an evening out. Except they were all wearing negligees.

## 25

As limited as her life had been growing up in Mapleton, Becca was not unaware of situations like the one that was taking shape in her head as she and Evie climbed the stairs back up to their room at toddler speed. Lottie, standing in as Becca's mother, had not missed many opportunities to teach her that the human experience was not reassuringly black and white, nor fair. She had brought her up to understand that there were diverse reasons why women might, for instance, find themselves in a profession requiring negligees. Perhaps reasons purely financial or borne of desperation or of something worse. Becca held no judgment. Nevertheless, this new knowledge had come as a shock.

In their room, while Evie comforted newly rescued Maggie, Becca remembered that Drew had mentioned his surprise at Bett renting to a mother with a child. And she thought of Jill's discomfort discussing Aunt Bett and her rules. The house rules made some sense now. But Becca needed more than just speculation about what was going on in this house. Exactly what had she gotten herself into? If she gave up this room straightaway, without a job, she would run through the rest of her money in short order. But she needed to know that she and Evie, especially Evie, were safe there until she could find work and afford a place up the bluff. And that the law was not going to swoop in and arrest everyone there, boarders included.

She pushed the curtain back at the little closet, took off her shoe, and knocked on the back wall, four urgent raps. Within seconds, four knocks came back in return. She tapped out a long series of raps meant to signal that

she wanted to talk, then listened at the wall. What she heard next was a loud clomping on the stairwell, then aggressive banging on the door. Then Drew's voice. "Becca?"

When she unlocked the door and pulled it open, Drew entered in a breathless rush, brandishing what Becca guessed might be...a harpoon?

"It's a hand-forged, antique whaling harpoon," Drew said, once he'd caught his breath and was sitting in one of the ladderback chairs at the small table in Becca's room. "From Alaska. If you'd been attacked by a whale, you'd be thanking me right now."

Becca thanked him anyway. She poured him a glass of water, and he explained that he had an antique shop in town. "Antiques and other old things," he said. A friend had asked him to try to sell the harpoon, and he hadn't yet decided about taking it into the shop. "It's not the sort of thing people come in for," he said. Becca wondered why someone who owned an antique shop was renting a room at a brothel, but that was a question she wasn't going to ask. Not yet, anyway. She asked if he could wait a minute or two while she put Evie to bed, and he agreed. It was two hours before Evie's bedtime and still light outside, but Evie didn't protest.

Putting her to bed meant simply tucking her in with Maggie on the cot across the room and hoping for the best. Becca kissed her forehead, then Maggie's cloth head, and said "Two stories tomorrow, all right?" And though she hadn't expected Evie to sleep with voices in the room, even as Drew was still talking about the would-be rescue, how he had grabbed the harpoon and made his most knightly stomping noises coming up the stairs, Becca saw Evie with her thumb in her mouth and her eyes already closed.

Then she told Drew what she had done, that she had broken the house rules by going back for the doll. And while admitting to having peeked around the swinging door was embarrassing, she made a full confession.

“It was just a matter of time,” Drew said. “I didn’t know any more than you did when I moved into my room. In fact, I was oblivious for much longer than you were. But Bett expected I’d figure it out, and I’ve no doubt she’s thought the same about you. It was surprising that she’d allowed a kid to move in, but she probably thought you were in need, and she’s sympathetic to women in need. You don’t want to cross Bett, but she’s all bark. Squishy inside. I think she rents out the two rooms to give some credence to her saying she runs a boardinghouse. If you stay, and if things go along as they did with me when I was new here, no doubt there will be some loosening of the rules. So there’s that.” He smiled gamely. “The last person in your room was here for a year. I’ve been here for two.”

“Why do you stay?”

“It’s hard to say, really. Acceptance, for one thing. A complete lack of judgmentalism. A kind of banding together over time, everybody looking out for each other at the house. All things that were new to me when I moved in. I won’t be here forever. Maybe not for much longer. It was always meant to be a temporary situation. But there are things, people—a person in particular—keeping me around. There’s something of a family feeling here, even living in an outside room and not being involved with the goings-on in the house.”

Becca thought of Lottie and her little band of adopted family and knew she would have liked Drew. Becca told him she was worried about safety, and Drew said he didn’t know of any real trouble ever having happened at the house. “Maybe because there are prominent regulars in and out of here a lot. Bett has some powerful friends in town. It might not be exactly legal—or legal at all—but the authorities don’t give Bett any trouble. Even the garden club ladies leave her alone. And they’re the really important people in town.” He flashed his trademark grin.

He was trying to make her feel better, Becca knew. And she did feel better, talking with him. But she was deflated, too.

“Not that there isn’t an occasional incident on Silver Street,” Drew said. “I don’t want to mislead you. Under-the-Hill was notorious in the old days, and I’m sure I don’t get wind of everything that happens. But I haven’t seen anything other than personal skirmishes. There’s some rowdiness at the bars sometimes. But again, I’m guessing mostly personal stuff. Grudges and old feuds. That sort of thing. I know this might sound ridiculous, but Bett has standards. She only lets in people she knows. She counts on a few of what she calls “respectable regulars” to keep her going, and they don’t disappoint. People know not to mess with Bett. But then, I’m not a mother with a little girl. It’s different for me.”

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The next time Jill arrived to watch Evie, she showed no signs of being aware of Becca’s discovery, and Becca was glad for more time to come to terms with it herself before discussing it with someone else. She just kissed Evie goodbye, thanked Jill for taking care of her, and headed out as usual, her need for income that would allow her to move up the bluff more pressing than ever. Even so, once she had walked up Silver Street to the strip of park at the edge of the bluff, she knew she was not up to job hunting that day. Instinctively, she wandered to the fence where she could look down at the river sparking silver in the sun, so powerful, so splendid here. It looked different down below near the landing and the dock. The water was muddier up close, like life, she supposed.

Rather than walking into town, she sat down on a bench between a pretty, octagonal bandstand and a colossal live oak tree, its ancient limbs twisted and bent, some resting on the ground as if no longer inspired to reach for the sun. Becca hadn’t been there long when a man in a business suit walked up, forty or so, she guessed, a paper sack in his hand and a book under his arm. He bade her good morning and asked if she minded if he took a seat. Becca slid aside on the bench, offering him more room. Always curious about books,



she asked about his. He turned up the cover. "Norse mythology," he told her. "A gift for my intended. Maybe not the most romantic of subjects, Viking gods. But the binding's nice." He sounded uncertain about his choice.

"I'd read it," Becca said. "I love mythology."

"Well, that's encouraging." He set his hat on the bench between them and said, "I'm Walt Newman. Of Newman's Watch and Clock Repair on Canal Street."

"Becca Chambers. Unemployed and in need of a job."

Walt laughed. "Can you repair a watch?"

"I'm afraid not."

"That's good, because I can't afford to hire anyone. I have doughnuts in this bag. Would you like one?"

"Yes, I would," Becca said. She needed cheering up, and a doughnut was a good start. When he passed one over, she broke it in two and wrapped one half in a handkerchief from her handbag. "For my little girl," she told him.

"Generous of you. How old is she?"

"A year and a half."

"Do you and your husband have just the one?"

"Just one." And though the word always pained her, she added, "I'm a widow."

"I'm sorry."

Becca bit into the doughnut rather than answering.

They talked for a while. Walt was so kind and Becca so discouraged that she told him about having had no luck finding a job. "But there is someone who asked me to come back next week. I'm hoping that works out."

"Then I'll hope with you. I know it's hard. Jobs have dried up here, like everywhere. So many closings. I'm lucky to have held on to my shop. And with a little girl—that must really be tough. I do hope you find something

soon.”

She told him about her experience with keeping books and with working for a doctor. Said she was looking toward the long term and regretted not having gone to college when her mother, meaning Lottie, had wanted her to. That she hadn’t wanted to leave her then.

“I’d hire you myself if my business wasn’t in trouble. I could use a bookkeeper,” Walt said. “I might be looking at closing shop soon, if things don’t ease up.”

They passed a moment of quiet commiseration.

Then Walt told her about a woman he knew, also a widow, but with three children. “She’d fallen on desperate times, and she learned that there’s a shortage of nurses statewide right now. And that nurses can always get work.” He said she’d found a nursing school not far from Natchez with an accelerated program geared toward filling the most basic and immediate needs of local hospitals, granting a nursing certificate in seven months. “Just a limited certification,” he said, “not a full-fledged license. But enough to ensure a job. So she applied. And that’s when she learned that nursing schools only accept unmarried women with no children.”

“That’s so unfair.”

“Yes. But she’s a fighter, and like I said, she was desperate.” Walt went on to say that this woman had looked into one of the many children’s homes that had cropped up since ’29, places that cared for orphans but also gave temporary accommodation to other children while their mothers or fathers looked for work and got back on their feet. “They’re run off donations and government aid,” Walt said. “It was a lifesaver for her. Her kids moved in there—it was like a boarding school, she said—and she went off to nursing school without mentioning that she had children. Turned out, plenty of other students were doing the same thing. She visited her kids every weekend. And now she’s a nurse at a hospital in Hattiesburg. She and her kids share a rental

with another nurse in a nice neighborhood. It worked for her.”

Becca said she was glad for his friend, but that she could never do that herself. “I would break into a million pieces without Evie.”

When the two of them parted ways, Becca still had some time before she would need to relieve Jill. The conversation with Walt had her thinking of Lucy and the hard time she must be having. Becca missed Lucy. It would be good to hear her voice. She walked into town and paid to use the telephone at the telegraph office, gave the clerk the number for Gus’s store. She would ask Gus to tell Lucy to be in the store at this time tomorrow, and she’d call again then. Gus was happy to hear from her, but Becca was happier hearing his voice. Before she mentioned why she had called, he told her that Dory was in the store. And then she heard Dory’s voice.

“I’m so glad you called. I’ve been trying to find out how to reach you. Are you all right? You and Evie?”

Becca apologized for not having been in touch sooner. She told her she’d been looking for work. She did not tell her about the brothel. Dory would worry, would insist that Becca drive right back to Rodney.

“There’s news about Lucy,” Dory said. And now Becca was worried.

Dory told her that Lucy had disappeared. One night she was there, the next morning she was gone. “Her and Rose and all their stuff.” She said nobody had heard from her since.

“Why would she leave without saying anything?”

Dory didn’t know. But she did know that a man had come for Lucy and Rose. “Before full light,” Dory said. “Hilda Dean saw him. And it wasn’t Lucy’s husband. Hilda said he pulled up in front of Lucy’s house in that same blue Ford Gus saw parked off the road that one day—the day Bobby saw a man hanging around Lucy’s house. They loaded up Lucy’s things and drove off without a word to anybody. And there’s something else.”

Becca’s head was already spinning.

“When I went out on the porch that morning, before I knew she was gone, there was a note pinned to my door. From Lucy.”

“What did it say?”

“It said, ‘Tell Becca I’m sorry.’”

*Sorry for what?*

What had Lucy meant with the note she'd left? Back in her room after Jill had gone, Becca was trying to understand all that Dory had told her. Had Lucy known about the brothel all along? Becca did not believe her friend would have sent her there, certainly not with Evie, had she known. Had Lucy found out later and then been sorry for not having called to warn her? Or sorry, perhaps, that she'd known the man in the blue car when he came around the first time, and not said anything? But she hadn't seemed to know who he was. Could it be as simple as Lucy being sorry for leaving Rodney without letting Becca know she was going?

It bothered her, not knowing, but now she needed to remain focused on finding work and another place to live. This was Friday. On Monday she would speak again with the doctor who had told her to check back. And if that didn't pan out, she would ask him about any patients who might need a live-in caretaker. Or anyone needing help to run a household or care for children. She was more willing now to consider lower pay with the provision of a room. A situation that would not require paying someone to stay with Evie while she worked. An interim step, until she could find a better position.

When she and Evie went down to the kitchen that afternoon, Becca feeling overwhelmed with the events of the past two days and planning to put together only a quick meal to take back to the room, there was an envelope on the table with her name and Evie's on the outside. Was she being evicted

for cracking open the swinging door or spending an extra ten seconds in the kitchen? Was she being summoned for an audience with the mysterious Bett? Becca was not up for any more surprises, and she opened the envelope reluctantly. The contents, though, made her smile, pinned her drooping spirits back up.

*Bearers are invited to dinner at Drew's abode tomorrow evening at 7:00. Please RSVP by knocking on the closet wall between 10:00 and 11:00 this morning. Three knocks to confirm, forty knocks to send regrets. (This is meant to discourage regrets.)*

Becca showed the invitation to Evie. "Should we go to Drew's room for supper tomorrow? You and me and Maggie?"

"Yes!"

The kitchen door swung open then, and a man stepped inside, startled to see Becca there. He met her eyes, then shrugged his shoulders and said, "Excuse me, dear," before quickly backing out of the room. The man was Walt, from the bench on the bluff, and Becca did not know which of them had been more surprised at being found by the other in a brothel.

She cracked open the door—easier the second time—and peered into the other room. The only occupants were Walt and a lone woman in ordinary clothes eating a chocolate bar. The woman casually waved him on, and he started up the stairs. Evidently a regular. Becca eased the door closed and wrapped up their food in napkins from a drawer. Then she picked up Drew's invitation and took Evie's hand, and they went out the back way.

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Drew's table was set with plates and bowls that might well have been propped in display stands on high, untouchable shelves rather than there

between silver forks and spoons awaiting a plebeian assault of meat and vegetables.

“Drew, they’re beautiful,” Becca said. “It’s almost a shame to eat from them.”

“I’m a believer in using beautiful things. We deserve them as much as anyone. Especially you, this week.” Speaking, Becca knew, of the revelation about the house.

“But Evie? I’m not sure you want to take that chance.”

“Evie is most deserving of all. I’ve taken precautions.” Drew produced a child-size spoon carved of soft wood. “And I have confidence that she will eat like the princess she is. And if that means a bowl is sacrificed, so be it.”

Drew lined a fancy armchair with fancy pillows and pushed it close to the table. “Will this do for her?”

“Perfectly,” Becca said. “Though I worry for your pillows.”

Dinner for the adults was a hearty cabbage soup with corn muffins, and there was pasta in a silky cheese sauce prepared especially for Evie. Strawberries and cream for dessert.

Over dinner, Becca told Drew a little about Ben, and about Lottie, leaving out the saddest details. She told him about her one pending job prospect. Drew invited her to stop in at his shop sometime, said he was lucky that so far it had stayed afloat. “It’s not a bad time to have a low-rent room,” he said. “And I don’t require much.” He talked about coming to Natchez two years earlier, wanting to sell antiques and imported collectibles, the business his parents had made a success of in Vicksburg. “I was thirty-one then and found myself in need of a change of scene. Natchez draws a lot of tourists, and that seemed like a plus. I found this room and was able to afford it. Had no idea of the nature of the place, but Bett and I sort of hit it off. I’d lost my father, and she’d lost a son. Different kinds of losses—mine being metaphorical and hers physical—but a connection between us. Most everybody here has been

shortchanged, one way or another, with family relations, and as trite as I'm sure it sounds, it does seem a bit familial here at times. I'm at something of a distance, being a boarder, but here I am, still in this room."

After dinner, Evie traipsed around the room, enamored with the multitude of treasures Drew had had the foresight to place out of reach. Lovely things that had come to him from his parents or through his shop, he told Becca. Evie was spellbound by a set of golden angel chimes, and Drew took it down for her. "It's magical," he said. "So be careful." With one chubby finger, Evie touched one of the metal angels and a shiny gold bell, glancing at Drew for his approval.

"Do you want to see them fly?" he asked Evie, who most definitely did. Drew asked Becca to hand him the matches that were on a table behind her. She found a matchbook, black with gold lettering, and read the inscription aloud: *Lost time is never found again—Benjamin Franklin*. She passed them to Drew and picked up a book from the table. *Norse Mythology*.

"That's funny," she said. "I saw another copy of this book yesterday morning. At the bluff. I met a man there who said he'd bought it for his girlfriend. Then I saw him again in the kitchen in the afternoon. He just opened the door and—"

Drew looked up.

"Actually," Becca said, as much to herself as to Drew, "what he said was that he'd bought it for his 'intended.'"

Drew smiled an affirmative smile. *Oh*, Becca thought.

"Another surprise," Drew said. Then he struck a match and lit the candles beneath the golden angels and put them back on their shelf. Soon they were spinning and the bells were tinkling and Evie was completely enchanted.

"It's one of the reasons I've kept this room," Drew told Becca after he had walked around with Evie and taken down each thing she pointed to with an



accompanying “Dat!” Then he’d set her on the floor with a doughnut just like the one Walt had given Becca at the bluff. “Walt and I met soon after I moved here,” he said. “He has a watch and clock repair shop in a little storefront in town, and I took a clock in for repairs. Since I was a new boarder here, and seeing as I wasn’t as bold as you about peeking past the kitchen door, I was still in the dark then about the rest of the house. The rent was cheap—though not nearly as cheap as what you’re paying, I might add.” Becca remembered Drew’s suppressed surprise when she’d handed him her rent the day she moved in. “Anyway, it was cheap, and I was trying to hold on to what I’d saved to open a small shop. Walt and I started seeing each other. Not long after that, I had, like you, a moment of discovery about this house.

“As it turned out, the house is a perfect cover for Walt. Personally, I don’t care so much about what people think of me—maybe less than I should—but Walt... He grew up in a rough family. Has a couple of brothers back in his hometown who found him out and made his life miserable until he was old enough to get out of there. They’re scary, those two, from what I’ve heard. And Walt doesn’t want any repeat performances of that kind of thing now that he’s got a business in town and a more peaceful environment. He’s vigilant about privacy in his personal life. For good reason.

“So he comes here, right through the front door, and Bett, who knows about us and enjoys the bit of intrigue, treats him like one of her best regulars. Sometimes he runs into his repair shop customers in the parlor. So Bett sends him up the stairs on the arm of one of the girls, which always makes him blush, and the other men grin and there’s some elbow jabbing until he’s out of sight. Then he turns down a little side hallway away from the girls’ rooms and unlocks a door to a storage room. At the back of that room, he opens another door.” Drew pulled aside a curtain that matched the one at his closet, revealing a narrow door. “This one. And no one’s the wiser. This door was boarded up when I moved in, and it was Bett’s idea to open it up for

us. The girls know, of course. They love Walt. And Walt doesn't have to worry about the kind of trouble he's had in the past, brothels being much more acceptable in a lot of people's eyes than what we are—a rather mundane couple spending more than the average amount of time reading books together.

“Walt's a master clock restorer. Makes duplicate replacement parts for antiques the same way the originals were made.” Drew picked up the black and gold matchbook and said, “He gives these out to customers. I told him he should have put his shop name on here somewhere.”

And then, as only a mother could, Becca saw in Evie's eyes a plan for reaching the angel chimes and caught her just in time.

Nell

**1971**

**Mississippi**

There were two messages on the PhoneMate when Nell returned to the house, still thinking about Arlene's memories of Hazel at the Lighthouse Motel. The first message was from the twins, talking over each other to thank her for the birthday gifts she had sent. The second was from Evie: *Just checking on you. Call me back.*

Nell took time to think about what to say and what not to say to Evie. She could tell her about meeting Tony and learning about Estelle. She could not tell her about searching for Hazel in city directories or tracking down the motel where they had lived or questioning Arlene in her mobile home. Not yet. Then she sat down at the telephone table and dialed Evie's number.

Evie chatted lightly about the twins and the school year having ended that week. About having agreed to teach a classroom of older children in the fall. "Fifth graders, heaven help me." Her rhododendrons, she said, were already budding. Nell could tell there was something behind the chitchat.

Then Evie reminded Nell of the neighbor whose mother had mentioned Hazel singing at her church. "I ran into her at the mailbox today. She saw me and rushed right over, said she just had to tell me again what a beautiful voice my mother has. And then she said, 'We're so lucky to have her in the choir, with her background, and all.'"

Nell could not believe Hazel had said anything to anyone about her past. Maybe because she was singing again, reliving that part of her life, she had let something slip. Nell felt a pang again for that beautiful thing their mother

had lost.

“Do you know why she would say that?” Evie asked her.

Nell considered this a yellow-light question—proceed cautiously—rather than a green-light go-ahead. “Well, if you still don’t want to bring up the subject to Mom, I could dig around some, see what I can learn while I’m here in her home state. Surely there are people around who remember her.”

“Probably,” Evie said. She sounded thoughtful rather than unshakably averse to the idea.

Maybe Evie was opening a window just a crack, Nell thought. She asked, “Do you remember when we lived for a while in a motel? Before Clay Mountain. You were very young. I barely remember it.”

“I don’t remember anything before Clay Mountain.”

“Do you wish you did?”

Evie didn’t answer right away. Nell was ready to tell her everything, if things went that way.

“I’m not sure,” Evie said, her voice small and quiet. Another pause, then, “I don’t think so.”

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Nell went back to Natchez once that next week, picking up where she had left off searching the city directories for anyone who had worked with Hazel at the Twilight Room, and finding nothing before marking her place and heading back to the house.

Tony arrived early the next morning to clear some fallen branches and mow the lawn ahead of the midday heat. When he knocked on the door afterward, Nell had already brewed tea, this time pouring it over ice before they sat at the table to talk. She had been tempted before to tell him why she had come to Mississippi, aside from her housesitting job, and this time, she

did tell him. Not everything, but about Hazel and her secrecy, the abrupt relocations she only vaguely recalled. How she had found the site of the blue house and what she had remembered there on the railroad tracks. About the Lighthouse and tracking down Adele. She was careful to leave Evie out of the story—her strange arrival, her name on the certificate they'd found, her vulnerability about her place in the world. Without Evie, the telling seemed scattered and disjointed. Evie was central to it all.

When Nell received a letter from Jackson notifying her that their records did not include a birth certificate for a Nell Brown born in 1928 and suggesting that perhaps hers had been an unregistered home birth, she decided to take a few days off to clear her head. She began weeding Estelle's flower garden, satisfying work that required no strategizing or decision-making beyond separating flowers from weeds, purely subjective choices free of guilt. She read books from Estelle's library, watched a few staticky television programs on the old set, and took long baths in the clawfoot tub. Exploring Estelle's bedroom closet turned up garments worthy of a room with a fainting couch. Flowing, floor-length gowns and fluttery tea dresses. Sequins and beading and fringe. Glitzy things, all hung where Estelle would have encountered them daily, mingled with her everyday clothes. Nell was forming a picture of Estelle from the things in the house, and talking to her had become Nell's latest housesitting pretense.

Revived and with fresh resolve, Nell returned again to Natchez, to slogging through the 1932 directory resident by resident. She was bleary-eyed, barely registering what she was reading, when something sent her back a few lines. There she began again, her finger underlining each word until she arrived at those that mattered: *Iris Ledford, cigarette girl, Twilight Room*.

She found a pay phone down the street from the library, a telephone book attached by a chain. When she opened it, she found Iris listed there as well, still in Natchez in 1971, still with the same last name. Nell fed the phone a dime and waited.

“Hello?”

“Is this Iris Ledford?”

“Speaking.”

“You don’t know me, but my name is Nell Brown...”

Iris was sitting at a table in the café she had suggested when Nell arrived. Nell thought Iris looked more Sunday school teacher than nightclub cigarette girl in her pink dress and pearls, a white patent leather purse hooked over the back of her chair. They ordered coffee and peach cobbler, then Iris asked about Hazel, and Nell told her she was well. She thanked Iris for agreeing to meet.

“I’m glad she’s doing good. I have happy memories of those days, working at the Twilight Room with your mom. And I remember you, too, sweetie. Just a little slip of a thing. There were times she’d sneak you in and set you up in the coat closet behind the hat-check counter. She had a regular babysitter most days, but sometimes she was in a bind, and Mr. Myers would let her get by with hiding you back there, so long as the customers didn’t know. Mr. Myers was the manager in charge of everything at the club. And you were an angel. Quiet as a mouse. We all loved you.”

Nell had been so intent on discovering who her mother had been when Iris knew her that she hadn’t expected this picture of herself. It was moving, imagining herself playing in the coat closet while Hazel checked hats. She felt protective of the child she had been then.

“It was exciting for us, young as we were. We had some big names come in. Bands and singers from all over. They’d hit Natchez sometimes after New Orleans. I didn’t know Hazel all that well outside the club, but we had fun working together.”

Iris recounted some highlights—mishaps and scandals, how they had often collected money for people from the club who had fallen on hard times. “It

was the Depression, you know. We were lucky to have work. Mr. Myers was good to us. I was still living at home with my folks. Your mom had it harder, though. I didn't know anything about her family, but I got the feeling they weren't in the picture much."

Nell asked if she remembered how Hazel had come to move up from hat-check girl to singer, at which Iris shoved aside her plate and leaned in.

"This is how that happened. We were shutting things down one night. I was tallying up my cigarette sales behind Hazel's hat-check counter, like I did every night. Hazel taking stock of the unclaimed hats and whatnot. All the customers were gone by then, and Hazel, kind of by accident but not really—you know what I mean?—she happened to be singing when Mr. Myers walked by, close enough to hear. And I mean crooning out a song with that deep, heart-wrenching voice she had. And he came over and said, 'You've got a fine voice there, Hazel,' and walked on by. After that, she made sure he *accidentally* heard her sing several more times, different songs to show what she could do. Then he started letting her sing the early set some nights. Before the crowds got big.

"It was good for both of us, because when she was on, I juggled hat-check and cigarettes, and I got extra tips those nights. But Hazel—people started asking for her. Asking Mr. Myers what somebody with a voice like that was doing behind the hat-check counter. And pretty soon, she was singing most nights. And then there was a new hat-check girl behind the counter, and Hazel was bringing in big tips and even headlining sometimes, and Mr. Myers was paying her more. She was every bit as good as most of the big-time singers who came through. It was wonderful to see that happen for her. After that, if she brought you in with her, you mostly stayed back in the girls' dressing room. She had a space set up for you, but you liked to climb into the wardrobe where the singers' gowns were. Sometimes you fell asleep in there."

*The black dress behind the wooden door, Nell thought. That must be where*



*I saw it.*

If Iris was wondering why Nell hadn't heard these stories from Hazel herself, she didn't let on, and Nell was glad for that.

"I don't think she ever brought you back into the club after that business with your little hand." Iris made a sad-clown face, as if Nell were still three years old. "I hope you don't remember one bit about that."

"Not one bit," Nell said, sliding her hand under the table and hoping this story was forthcoming.

"Well, your mother was just devastated. She'd brought you in that afternoon. It was just a rehearsal before the club opened. Somebody was keeping an eye on you back in the dressing room while she ran through her songs for that night with just the pianist. And while she was singing, just casual and all, we heard the saddest scream, and then crying and you calling for your mama. Cracked my heart in two. We all went running to the dressing room. Hazel got there first, was sitting on the floor rocking you, shouting for somebody to get y'all to the hospital. The poor girl who'd been ironing costumes was a wreck. Said she'd just turned for a second to hang something up. That you weren't anywhere near the iron. But somehow, you'd gotten over there quick as a wink and laid your hand flat against that hot iron. I thought they were going to have to carry your mama out of there, she was so broke up over that. I'm just glad you don't remember," she said.

Somewhere deep within herself, where all her hazy memories and unanswered questions lay, Nell had always held an assumption that her scarred hand had been a result of her mother's distance. That it had been distraction, or even disinterest, behind whatever had happened. And now she knew the truth. She asked Iris how long Hazel had worked at the Twilight Room.

"Oh, it must have been close to four years, all told. We lost touch after she left. That took us all by surprise, her leaving. She called in sick one day, then

never came back. Nobody knew for sure if she and Mr. Myers had some kind of run-in, or if she got a better offer somewhere else. Some guys in the orchestra said a big club in Jackson had tried to hire her away, but nobody knew if that was true. People said Mr. Myers was worried something bad might have happened to her. He asked me if I knew anything about it. Of course, I didn't.

"Later on, there was a rumor that a teenage boy who came into the club some and had it bad for Hazel heard she was sick that day she didn't come in. The story went that he was young enough and drunk enough to think he might win some points going out to check on her after the club closed that night. Claimed he knocked on her front door, and she didn't answer. Now, mind you, Hazel didn't know that kid from Adam, and she had too much sense to open up her door to some stranger late in the night. But that set off a lot of wild talk about what could have happened to her."

Iris patted the back of Nell's hand and said, "I'm just so glad you called me up and here we are, you all grown up, and me finding out Hazel's alive and well."

"It's good to talk with you, too," Nell said. The time seemed right for the question she really wanted to ask. "Did she ever bring another little girl into the club? Besides me?"

Iris looked at her with some confusion. "Another child? No, I don't remember any other child."

"Might have been a little girl around two years old." Nell could tell by Iris's face that she'd gone too far, or maybe Iris didn't like the change of tone. This seemed to be the moment at which the woman understood that these were questions Hazel had been unwilling to answer.

"I'm so sorry, dear," she said then. "Here I am gossiping away as if you don't know more about your mother than I do." She pulled her plate closer and picked up her fork. "I liked her so much. I really did. You give her my

best, okay?” Then, signaling an end to any further gossip, she set about finishing her cobbler.

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Nell spent the following Saturday morning planting flowers in a neglected bed around a maple tree in the backyard. Perennials that would testify to her having been there after she was gone. A claim of sorts to this state, now that she could imagine herself having once belonged here. When the plants were in the holes she'd dug and she had tamped loose dirt around them, had watered them well, she went inside to clean up.

Tony would be coming over later, bringing pizza and a bottle of wine, having promised to correct a scrolling screen problem with the relic of a television set and to tune in something they could watch together. When he'd called with that suggestion, Nell had a moment of flittery Is-this-a-date? anxiety, which she dismissed as ridiculous. They would have two channels to choose from unless one of them went outside and turned the antenna pole while the other stood in the doorway and shouted when a picture appeared on the screen. Not very romantic. Nothing to make too much of. She hadn't yet told him about finding Iris, and now that she had let him in on what she was doing, she was eager to catch him up.

She took her time showering and getting dressed, even put on a little makeup. In the kitchen, she arranged cookies on one of Estelle's cut-glass trays, considered the results, then rearranged them. “What do you think, Estelle?” she asked the empty room. She was setting out glasses and napkins when she heard Tony's car pull up out front.

“You're early,” she said as she pulled open the door. But it wasn't Tony she saw standing there. It was Evie.

**Becca**

**1934**

**Mississippi**

An hour later than usual, Becca was in the kitchen with Evie. As Drew had predicted, her kitchen schedule eased after she learned about the house business. Two weeks later, now, she still had not met Bett, who had sent word of the extended hours through Drew. Nor had she found work. The doctor who had been her only prospect had located a nurse after all, and though Becca had redoubled her efforts and Jill had pitched in by committing to sit with Evie an extra morning each week, nothing had turned up. Rather than offering prospective employers the address of an Under-the-Hill brothel, Nell had rented a box at the post office and checked it daily. But as much as she did not want to give up on Natchez, boarding at Bett's much longer with a nineteen-month-old was out of the question.

Today, though, she could see from the kitchen window that this was as splendid a spring morning as any she had known, the river shimmering with morning light, a breeze rippling the surface of the water as if skipping invisible stones across it. The ferry floated toward Louisiana. Workers ambled to the dock, perhaps taking time to enjoy the slight scent of April wildflowers that bestowed a hint of the more cultivated beauty of the town atop the bluff upon this poor relation below. Today, Saturday, there would be no job hunting, and Becca was making pancakes.

The door swung open, and Lila and Phyllis, two of the house residents known now to Becca, came in from the living room, sluggish and yawning and wearing comfy, well-worn nightclothes, not at all like the frilly things Becca had seen them in that first day.

“Pancakes!” Phyllis squealed. “I’m absolutely famished.”

Becca was already dealing extra plates onto the table. She offered to scramble some eggs, and Phyllis was all for it.

“Hi, there, kiddo.” Phyllis tweaked Evie’s nose, and Evie rubbed it to make sure it was still there. Buttoned up securely with Ben’s shirt in a chair at the head of the table, sitting atop a pillow, Evie presided over the kitchen like the princess Drew kept telling her she was. She looked past Phyllis at Lila, her favorite after Jill, and blew her a kiss.

“What do you have to do to make the grade with this one?” Phyllis sat on the end of the bench near Evie and winked at her. Phyllis and Lila, both from Memphis, were as different as night and day.

Then Crystal, also newly known to Becca, strolled in, already dressed in outside clothes. Becca knew she was headed to confession at St. Mary’s. Crystal had a little boy who lived with her mother in Alabama. She was trying to pull herself together after some kind of trouble about which Becca knew little, intending to get back home once she felt ready.

Phyllis harbored an altogether different outlook. She had an oft-touted list of things for which she was saving up, including an automobile and a house, and which she intended to purchase for herself, by herself someday. Lila was quiet, and whatever her hopes were, she didn’t speak of them. There were two others Becca had not met. All of this Becca had learned since the day she first peeked through the kitchen door.

The girls were digging into their pancakes, even Crystal, who generally did not eat before confessing, when the swinging door swooshed open and a slight but stern-faced woman, obviously the matriarch of the house, swooped in—long skirt, gray hair pinned up, glasses low on her nose, a silver hip flask lodged under her waistband. Undoubtedly, the heretofore inaccessible Bett. She stood, the essence of authority, surveying the scene. The younger women put down their forks, casting sheepish glances at each other. As Bett’s heavy

gaze settled on Becca, bringing to mind her recent kitchen door infraction, Becca held to her belief that if anyone had reason to be miffed at how things had played out, it was herself. She laid a protective hand on Evie's shoulder. The room was silent. Even Phyllis didn't offer a quip.

"Hi," Evie said then from her throne, the center of attention now. She picked up the pancake she'd been eating with her fingers and held it up for Bett's inspection. "Yummy!"

Bett looked at Evie, who was flapping the pancake in the air as if to entice her, and after visibly struggling to hold herself firm, let out a laugh. Then she sighed and shook her head. In a raspy smoker's voice, she said, "I suppose I've gone soft."

Phyllis grinned. Lila resumed eating. Crystal excused herself, rinsed her plate at the sink, then left for confession. The madam turned to Becca and said, "You understand that nothing leaves this kitchen. Not one word that is said here. And that you are not to open that door." Bett's head swiveled only slightly toward the swinging door.

Becca decided that this was not the time for hashing out grievances or reasoning about who was and who was not the guilty party here. So standing there with all her unspent indignation, she looked at Bett and simply said, "Yes."

Bett stacked two pancakes onto a plate and drizzled syrup over them. "You're going to spoil my girls," she said, her aspect a shade softer, as if the first of several veils had fallen. Then she took up her plate and swept back behind the swinging door.

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"So Bett's not really your aunt," Becca said.

Jill had arrived to tend Evie on a new Monday morning. Until then, the two women had simply kept to their routine and avoided discussing Becca's new

knowledge and Jill's role in the house business. Becca had genuine affection for Jill, appreciated her gentle spirit and the care she showed Evie. She hadn't wanted to embarrass her or to pry. But it was time to clear the air.

"No. We just call her that," Jill said. "She can be tough, but she's got another side. We'd all rather be somewhere else, better off in better times. She says she takes people in until they can make it on their own. I know that's shining a good light on it all, but there's truth to it, too."

And though Becca did not ask, Jill opened up about how she had come to be there. A little sister with an infirmity. Grandparents who had raised Jill and were still caring for her sister just across the river, her grandfather, as Jill put it, "going daft." A looming foreclosure on their homeplace. All leading to Jill's having made many ferry trips to look for work in Natchez.

Right off the ferry, her first time over, she'd met Bett sitting outside with her coffee at dawn, and Bett had listened to her story, had given her some advice. "She told me that low places aren't forever and everything changes, up and down and back again. I asked her about the cotton mill, and she said it had been scaling down for a couple of years, but it wouldn't hurt to try. That first day she told me about the girls and the house. That they'd all walked some hard miles. She wished me well. Said the door was always open, for food or drink or just somebody to talk to. Or for work, if I wanted it. And I did not. I made that clear.

"That was just last fall. Things were bad, like they are now. Four years since I finished high school, and I hadn't ever found a real job. I wasn't having any luck in Natchez, either, and we were scared we'd be put out of the house with my grandpa and little sister to take care of. I started stopping in at Aunt Bett's early every morning, just to talk. She always welcomed me. Never brought up working at the house, after that first day. She told me things about her life, her own hard times. I don't know why, but she did. Then one day I asked her how much money the girls made. Just curious, is all. When she told me, it brought a pain, me thinking about the difference that



much money would make.”

That’s when Bett had told Jill about a request she’d had for an exclusive arrangement. A nice man, she’d said. Important in town. Bett had turned him down, told him she ran a small house and couldn’t agree to something like that. But she’d been thinking about Jill. Wondering. She’d have the smallest room in the house, she told her, tiny, really, but she would fix it up the nicest. She’d charge the councilman for that. And she could arrange for Jill to meet him somewhere in town first, to see what she thought of him.

“And we’ve met the house payment every month since,” Jill said. “Four months. My grandparents don’t know. They just know I have a room and a job in Natchez. And I go home on the weekends and help with Grandpa and Mandy, give my grandma some time to do something besides looking after them. And he *is* kind, the councilman. It’s not a love story, but he’s kind.”

Evie brought over a paper bag she’d been scribbling on with crayons and dropped it in Jill’s lap. “For Jill,” she said, and Jill pulled her into her lap and praised her work.

“It’s just until things get better and there’s more work in town,” Jill said over Evie’s head. “I can’t deny I’m shamed by it. Please don’t think hard of Aunt Bett. It’s true she has a soft heart for people in a hard place. And not just us girls. I remember the day she said she must have taken leave of her senses, but she was going to rent to a boarder who had a little girl. A favor for an old friend, she said. And here you are.”

*A favor for a friend? What friend?* What was Jill talking about? Becca asked her if she knew any more about that, but Jill looked worried, like maybe she’d said more than she should have, and Becca brushed away the worry, citing gift horses and luck. Then she left to make a quick round of calls in town, pondering Jill’s comment.

Through all the time Becca had been in Natchez, there had been only one real

job prospect, the one that had fallen through, and this morning had been no different from the others—no openings, promises that ears would be kept open, suggestions that she stop in again, maybe in a month or so. Becca walked back down Silver Street, low on money and low on hope, her thoughts cycling through all her options, none of which seemed feasible—Rodney, Mapleton, running through the last of her money in a room up the bluff—and ending where she knew they would, with the dreadful room in Mildred's house in Lyola.

There was another possibility. She could buy herself some time by selling the car, use some of what she got for it to rent a room downtown, and pray to find work before she ran out of that money. There were still streets she hadn't tried, businesses she hadn't approached. She was not completely down yet. But as if fate had been listening in on her thoughts, when she climbed the stairs up to her room and glanced beyond the corner of the house at the grassy strip where she kept her car, the car was gone.

“Have a seat, ma’am.”

Becca sat in front of a desk at the police station where an officer asked her questions and made notes for his report: her name, year and model of her car, time the theft took place. And then—the last known location of the car. Becca hesitated. He repeated the question, head bent over his notes, and Becca answered with the street address of Bett’s house. The officer looked up from his pad, pushed his hat higher on his forehead, and met her eyes. “And the address of your residence?” Becca looked at him straight on and repeated Bett’s address. “I’m a boarder,” she said.

The officer ducked his head, but Becca saw his smirk. Words flowed across his pad. Becca’s face burned, but she sat tall, shoulders high. He asked if she had proof that she owned the car. Anything with her name on it. She told him she did not. That it had been her husband’s car, and he had died the year before. And with that, it seemed his report was finished. “We’ll keep an eye out,” he told her as he ushered her from the office, his face composed. “Ma’am,” he added, and that word was a second smirk.

Her car having been stolen made Becca even more uneasy about living at the house, about living under the hill at all. She felt trapped there without the car, felt the loss of the safety net that selling it might have provided, if only temporarily. Days went by with no word from the police, though two officers had shown up one afternoon and parked in Becca’s old spot. They’d kicked around some dirt and examined that side of the house, suspiciously close to

an open window, and laughed. Becca saw them from the window in her room. The men drove back up Silver Street without speaking to anyone.

How Becca longed for Ben then, for their life together. She understood now how he had felt, so desperate for a job and so worried about money that he would hop a train to save the cost of a ticket.

That evening, she read two stories from Lottie's book to Evie, reading through to the end of the second one even after Evie was asleep beside her. Then she eased herself out of the bed and stood by the window looking out over the river. It was graying along with the sky. Soon it would disappear into the night. If she opened the door, she knew she would feel the river in the air, would breathe its watery scent, that at-home smell of the river she had known nearly her whole life. But now she was afraid to go out and sit on the top step alone and feel the river in her bones as night fell. And she would be afraid to sit there with Evie as the first stars came out during a restless evening. The car thief had robbed her of that, as well.

When she woke the next morning, her worries already scrambling to present themselves anew, she saw that something had been slipped under her door. Drew, she thought, trying to cheer her up. She picked up the folded sheet of paper. Written on the outside was, *I heard about your car. Am sorry that happened to you. If I can help, please call me.* The handwriting was not Drew's. She unfolded the paper. Inside was the name and telephone number of the nursing school and the name of the children's home Walt had told her about on the bluff. *Just something to have in your back pocket. Walt.*

Nell

**1971**

**Mississippi**

## 30

Far and away the most astonishing of Nell's discoveries since arriving in Mississippi was opening the front door and seeing Evie standing there.

"How did you know where to find me?" Nell was sure she hadn't said anything specific about the location of the house.

"The return address on the gifts you sent the boys," Evie said. "And stopping to ask people along the way. I think I met the man at the gas station you told me about—'Do you know what a soybean field looks like?'"

"That's him, all right." Then they were laughing and hugging and Nell was pulling Evie inside. There was an arrangement among airlines, a complimentary sharing of seats for pilots and their immediate families, and Rob had secured such a seat for Evie on a flight to Jackson and a rental car for her to drive the rest of the way.

"Oh, look at all this." Evie went to stand beneath the mermaid figurehead. "Can't you just picture her on the bow of a ship? I need a tour of this house."

Nell thought of Tony, surely on his way over with pizza and wine for their planned get-together. It was too late to call him. Now she would have to tell Evie what she'd been up to here and, maybe worse, tell her that Tony already knew about much of what she had learned. And Tony... Tony didn't know that she'd kept all this from Evie, or why. Nell looked at Evie standing before her, smiling, full of good feelings at having pulled off this surprise. What a mess.

"Okay, there are some things I need to tell you," Nell said in a rush, and

Evie's face clouded with worry. They sat down together on the sofa.

"Are you all right?"

"It's nothing bad," Nell said, thinking, *Oh, this is so bad*. This was not the way she wanted to apprise Evie of what she had done, dumping it all in her lap with someone Evie didn't know already on the way there.

First, she explained about Tony. That they were friends, that he would be arriving soon. "Just pizza and watching television. Nothing at all more than that. Not a date. Nothing like that." And the way she stumbled around those words made her blush. Evie seemed instantly relieved. She apologized for not having called ahead. "I wanted to surprise you."

Nell assured her that no apologies were needed. Of course they weren't. "I'm glad you'll have a chance to meet Tony. You'll like him. But before he gets here, we do need to talk."

Time was short, and all she could do was come out with it, unless she wanted to send Tony away the moment he arrived, before anything could be said by anyone. "Since I've been here," she said as brightly as she could manage, "I've done some research into Mom's past. And just recently, I told Tony a bit about what I've turned up." She quickly clarified that she and Tony had spoken only of things she had learned about Hazel. "Nothing about you," she said awkwardly, meaning the document they had found in Hazel's book and their uncertainty of Evie's history. And while Evie was absorbing each of those revelations, before Nell could say anything to try to ease her sister's mind further or explain anything about the discoveries she had made, there was a knock at the back door. Evidently Tony had driven in the back way, and he'd probably missed the rental car.

"I'm so sorry, Evie. That's Tony. I didn't mean for..."

"No, I should have called and let you know I was coming. I should have asked if it was a good time." She sounded unsure of herself or of how she was feeling, which Nell guessed was wounded. And for good cause.

“No,” Nell said. “It’s always a good time to see you. This is the best of surprises. And I’m sorry to spring so much on you like this.”

“You should let him in.” Evie said, though without the absolution that was customary when she knew Nell was feeling guilty.

Miserable, Nell left her and went into the kitchen. She opened the back door, and Tony jubilantly raised a bottle of wine in one hand and a pizza box in the other. Nell noticed the button-down shirt and the crisp, stiff jeans that looked suspiciously new, both his appearance and his demeanor suggesting “date.” Or maybe she just wasn’t accustomed to seeing him dressed for anything other than mowing grass or making repairs. But she couldn’t think about that now.

“My sister’s here,” she said rather breathlessly. “Just arrived. A surprise.” She couldn’t seem to string together more than two or three words, so anxious about how this evening could go.

Tony lowered the wine and pizza to a less exuberant level and told Nell they could do this another day. “You should spend time with your sister.”

“No, I want you to meet her,” Nell insisted. And though she didn’t say it, she wanted him there while she tried to sort things out with Evie. “Good thing you brought a large pizza.”

“Extra-large,” Tony said in a way that sounded to Nell like *It’s going to be okay*.

She lowered her voice to a whisper. “I haven’t told Evie what I’ve been doing here. But I’m going to have to tell her tonight.”

Tony seemed uncertain about the implications of the whispering and the anxiety.

“Are you sure I shouldn’t leave?” He was whispering as well.

“So sure,” Nell said, way too urgently, and Tony laughed. “I brought wine,” he said, raising the bottle again, and when he winked reassurance, Nell was even more glad he was there.



The evening began well enough, Nell's secret activities the elephant in the room as she divvied up the pizza. They chatted through the meal, Evie slow to sip her wine, alert as always to anything that might ripple the dark waters of the past. Despite the conversational hazards, eventually Tony charmed Evie, or Evie charmed him, and Nell relaxed enough to make a start at balancing the levels of understanding in the room.

She began with Evie and the most innocuous, and most irresistible, of revelations. "Should I catch you up on what I learned about Mom's singing?"

Tony offered again to leave them to talk alone, and this time Evie insisted that he stay. As those two traded niceties, Nell made a quick trip to the kitchen for the photograph of Hazel at the Twilight Room. She handed it over to Evie and said, "It all started with this." Then she had to admit to her solo raid of their mother's closet, feeling as criminal as she had that day in Hazel's bedroom. There was no turning back now. And though she tried, she could not read Evie's face.

She told her about finding the Twilight Room and the two listings for Hazel in the city directories. About the Lighthouse Motel and the surly manager. Her unannounced appearance at the mobile home of a woman who remembered their mother—"and us!"—from the motel. Things Nell had already discussed with Tony. Then she re-created for both of them her recent meeting with Iris Ledford. "She was a cigarette girl at the Twilight Room when Mom was a hat-check girl. And when Mom started singing there." She told the story of the manager overhearing Hazel sing and putting her on the program.

Throughout the evening, Evie returned to the photograph often, still giving away nothing of how she was feeling. Maybe because Tony was there, Nell thought, Evie always so gracious.

After Tony left, Evie and Nell sat side by side on the sofa. Nell said, "I still can't believe you're here."

“I’m sorry I crashed your date.”

“It wasn’t a date.”

“I think it was.”

Nell smiled. “There’s more,” she said now, ready to come clean with everything. “Things I haven’t told Tony. I remember some things that you don’t. Just scattered memories that I needed to try to understand. That’s what I’ve been doing. I wanted to tell you from the start. But I wasn’t sure...”

Evie didn’t ask about those other things.

“I probably shouldn’t have talked to Tony about it.” Nell couldn’t say she was sorry for confiding in him. She had always stopped short of lying to Evie.

“I’m glad he’s been someone you could talk to. I do like him.”

Evie letting her know she was forgiven, though Nell felt some strain between them. Evie picked up the photograph and said, “I don’t remember ever hearing her sing.”

“I know. I don’t either.”

Then, for the first time that evening, Evie asked a question.

“Could I see it? The Twilight Room?”

## 31

It was like old times. Nell and Evie scavenging together again, but this time outside the limits of Hazel's closet. They went to Natchez, and Nell parked in front of the old Twilight Room. The padlock was as she had left it before, snapped tight in locked position, so Nell's description of the inside had to suffice. Nell drove through downtown to the river, and she and Evie crossed the manicured lawn of the narrow park that ran along the edge of the bluff. They watched a single towboat push along a fleet of lashed-together, flat-deck barges so large that Nell declared them capable of transporting the whole of Clay Mountain. "I was told," she said, "that there's a road up here somewhere that goes down the bluff to the riverside where there used to be a ferry. Before the bridge went up." They climbed onto a Victorian-style bandstand and took snapshots of each other with Evie's Instamatic camera, the river as backdrop. Then Nell said, "There's somewhere I want to take you."

They left the bluff and Nell drove to the empty lot where the blue house had once stood, their first home together. Nell was tender with Evie there. Standing where she supposed the old porch to have been, she recounted for the first time what she recalled of the day Evie had first arrived. Parceling out details, she gauged her sister's reaction to each before offering another, working her way through that rainy night—the green truck, the man who climbed the porch steps with Evie and left her there, the doll in a basket that held all of Evie's possessions that day.

"Maggie?"

Nell nodded, and Evie's arm slid around her waist. "I don't remember any of it," Evie said. "I never thought about where Maggie came from."

"Do you still have that doll?"

"Yes, of course."

"Want to see something else?"

Evie was willing, and they climbed the path up the embankment to the railroad tracks. "I don't remember this either," Evie said, and Nell detected something new in her voice. For the first time when speaking of the past, Evie seemed to wish she could remember more. And that prompted Nell to share what she had remembered when she'd gone there earlier alone: Playing on the tracks. Popping creosote bubbles on the ties. The feel of the gravel under the soles of her shoes.

She watched Evie's expression—pensive, but no longer dismayed—and then she told her about the other wisps of memory, the ones that had come more as feelings than images: Walking between the tracks. Being thirsty and tired. Hurried along by Hazel. Confusion and reluctance and inevitable, unwelcome change.

The day after their Natchez excursion, there were times when Nell thought Evie seemed troubled. In those moments, Nell stayed back, gave her sister time to work through whatever she was dealing with. But by the following morning, Evie's last full day in the house with Nell, she was her old self again. Nell enlisted her help in Estelle's flower garden, where things were now blooming with more dignity and less abandon. They avoided topics that might set them back, reminiscing only about carefree, happy times on Clay Mountain. Nell wasn't confident that she was on completely safe ground with Evie yet, or that Evie was on safe ground with what she knew now. But today, they knelt in the dirt and pulled weeds and told stories and seemed to be knitting together anything that had come undone. Tony brought over some

daylilies, and once the new plants were in the ground and watered, he left the two of them alone in the last hours of their last day together.

After dinner, while Nell cleared the table and put away leftovers, Evie strolled through the house admiring more closely Estelle's odd collections and calling out to Nell about her favorite pieces. She especially loved a sweet little gilt box with a bird that popped up and chirped when a latch was pulled. Nell made up the bed in one of the extra bedrooms that night and slept there so Evie could experience Estelle's movie-set bedroom. Evie, of course, was entranced. Before she was due to leave for the airport the next morning, her suitcase already standing by the front door, she sat down on the sofa and patted the cushion next to her. "Come sit with me a minute," she told Nell. Then she reached for both of Nell's hands, clasped them, and said, "When we were there at the railroad tracks and I said I didn't remember anything?"

"Yes."

"That's true. I don't remember the house or any of those things you remember. But there was something strange. It was when we were walking between the tracks and you were telling me how you had remembered us walking there before. About Mama taking us away. And you said you remembered that mostly in feelings."

"Yes. Urgency, and confusion about what was happening."

"That was a real memory, and what I'm going to tell you is not that. It's not a memory. I don't know what it is, really. But as you were talking, I kept thinking, *I used to be afraid of the dark*. I don't remember a time when I felt afraid of the dark, and I don't know why that thought kept coming to me there. Maybe I was just imagining, hearing you talk about remembering feelings. But I was sure then that there was a time when I was terribly afraid of the dark. And I could feel that darkness."

With Evie gone, on her way to the airport and back to Clay Mountain, Nell

wandered about the house, looking at Estelle's things through Evie's eyes. Missing her. In the dining room, she wound the golden bird box that Evie had loved and pressed the latch that made the bird pop up and sing. It had been Estelle's habit to attach notes to many of the things in the house, detailing specifics about the items themselves, recording where they had been purchased or found, paying tribute to the kindness of friends for gifts given. Much of what she had collected was of little material value, but had warranted notes, nonetheless. Nell opened the key drawer in the bird box and took out a note that was not in Estelle's now-familiar handwriting. *Manufactured in France, circa 1890. Date of sale: October 21, 1949. A&K Treasures, Natchez, Mississippi. Restoration of hinged cover by Walt Newman, 1933.* From the seller. Not surprising, Nell thought, that Estelle would have shopped for pieces in Natchez, with that town's preoccupation with bygone days.

She looked again at the note. *A&K*. Probably she just had her head too much in the past, but her first thought was of the scrap of paper she'd found in Hazel's hatbox. She was certain that *A&K* was what had been written there, in black ink on thin, lined paper. There was only the slimmest possibility of any link between the two. But then, Natchez was a link, wasn't it? Tony would be coming by later to trim the boxwoods in the garden, and Nell would show him what she'd found. And later, when she knew Evie would be back home, she would call and tell her about it, too. No more secrets.

**Becca**

**1934**

**Mississippi**

Becca plunged a hypodermic needle into the orange she held in her hand, through the rind, past the membrane, and deep into the carpels. The first two months of her training at the Mariette Salton Nursing School in Graydon had been mostly lectures and studying anatomy books, but now, in the third month of the accelerated fundamental skills program, she had moved up to more hands-on exercises: injections, dissections, breaking apart regurgitated owl pellets so as to pick out tiny bones from the bird's last meal, generally a mouse, and reassemble the tiny skeleton—skull, jawbones, vertebrae, leg bones, ribs. This week, students were practicing injecting water into satsuma oranges shipped up from the Gulf Coast, destined to reappear, pitted with needle marks, in bowls on the meal room tables at suppertime. And whether injecting oranges or dissecting frogs or picking through pellets, Becca was thinking of Evie, wondering what she was doing at those particular moments, hoping she missed her mother as much as Becca missed her, then desperately hoping she did not.

If Becca continued to fill her free time with studying and passed every advanced test, she could finish her course of study in just seven months rather than the usual twelve required for certification in the emergency program designed to address the most pressing needs of hospitals, sanatoriums, and schools in that area of the state. A full nursing degree required a significantly lengthier term, as much as three years. Out of the question for Becca.

Even with her rigid schedule, Becca took the train every Saturday morning and checked Evie out of the Open Arms Children's Home in Meadow,



Mississippi, just two towns over from Graydon. She did her best to fill their time together with things that were fun for Evie, making the most of every second and staying with her until the last train that stopped in Graydon pulled out. When she had to say goodbye, she tried to make Evie understand that this routine was only for a little while and then they would be together again. During the tearful train rides back to the nursing school, Becca reminded herself that it would all be worth it in the end, that she would be able to provide a stable, if modest, home for the two of them. That she would have steady work.

In the time she'd been at the school, she had come to suspect that there were quite a few other students who had enrolled without revealing children or husbands back home. The application form had included small print stating that only unmarried, childless women would be considered, but there had been no specific questions requiring an answer from Becca about her status. And at the school, no one in authority had inquired about that. There seemed to be a look-the-other-way policy now that so many women were finding themselves in desperate circumstances at a time when nurses were in demand. And just as Walt had said, the school received consistent requests for graduating nurses at all levels, available positions posted on the student bulletin board.

When she was at her lowest with missing Evie, second-guessing her decisions, Becca often thought of Lucy and Jill and what an opportunity like this could mean for either of them, and she tried to remain grateful. Tuition had cost her most of the remains of Lottie's funds, but had she not taken this step, room and board provided at the school, she would have been in much the same financial state by now, with nothing to show for it. With every lesson and every test, as she read textbooks into the night, and even now, as she withdrew the needle from the orange in her sticky hand, she felt as if she were living someone else's life, as if she *were* someone else. And it had been that way since the first morning she had walked out of the children's home

without Evie.

Becca had not given the idea of nursing school any serious consideration when Walt offered to drive her to the children's home to speak with the woman who ran it and have a look around. But with her car stolen and no news having come about that, and with employment in Natchez looking bleaker every day, she finally had agreed to arranging an appointment. Days before she and Walt left, Becca had spoken by telephone to the woman he'd told her about, the widow whose children had lived at that home while she earned a certificate at the nursing school. A hospital nurse now, she had sung the praises of both the home and the school, claiming that her decision had been life-changing, that her children were thriving and happy and she was making ends meet. Mrs. Livesey, she said, the administrator at the home, was kind and welcoming and lovely to the children, empathetic and understanding with their parents.

On the day of the appointment, Walt had remained in his truck with a book as Becca went into the four-square pink-brick building and was led to the office of Mrs. Livesey, a woman who looked to Becca as if she might be the mother of older children or the grandmother of younger children, but who, in any case, had a distinctively motherly bearing.

Becca was uncomfortable with not revealing that nursing school was the reason she'd come there, but Mrs. Livesey made that easy for her, never asking for a reason. Becca told her of her husband's recent death, her fruitless search for work, her bookkeeping experience that had proved to be of no benefit, after all. That competing with a sea of unemployed men for that sort of work, for any work, had come to seem hopeless.

"The world hasn't caught up to women yet," Mrs. Livesey said. "Many of our children here are children of mothers like you. Parents who, for the first time, find themselves unable to provide for their children or who need a hand while they look for work. That's why many homes like this one have sprung up in the last few years. To give you some background, we're funded mostly

by donations from local businesses and individuals. A small amount comes from the government. People are generous in dropping off food and clothes and other supplies. It's a community effort, keeping up a place like this."

She told Becca there was no set amount of money she would have to pay. "You just send whatever you can, whenever you can. And if you can't send money, don't worry. More than half of our children's parents are in that boat. That's why we're here. About the schedule, the school-age children have classes during the week, and the little ones, like your Evie, have playtime learning activities led by staff members. And daily story time with our volunteers. Evie would have lots of friends her age to play with."

That went a long way in making up Becca's mind. Opportunities for Evie to interact with other children had been too few, and Becca had long felt bad about that. No siblings, no cousins, no neighborhood playmates. Except for her time with Rose in Rodney, Evie had spent her short life in an adult world, and Becca could not deny that playmates would be a gift for Evie. She and Ben had hoped that someday she would have a sister or brother, but Becca wouldn't think about that now.

"You could visit her on Saturdays as often as you'd like. We do ask for notice if you need to come on a weekday or a Sunday, so arrangements can be made. We keep visiting hours on Saturdays as much as possible to prevent the children who don't have visitors from feeling left out or alone. They have special activities outside the house that day. And of course you could check her out for longer periods anytime, if you find you're able to do that. We would hold her place here for a week or two at a time, though longer than that, we'd have to be open to other children who might need her place."

Whether or not Becca was ready, her hopes rose, and her decision began taking shape. And when it had been made, she told herself that she could take Evie back any time she chose if she could not bear the separation or if Evie seemed unhappy there. Rodney was, for the time being, anyway, still there.

Mrs. Livesey went over the paperwork for a no-adoption child and set a date for Evie's arrival. "She's young," she said reassuringly as she walked Becca to the front entrance. "She won't remember the absence later on." Becca held those words in her heart until she was outside the building, then sent them up as a prayer. When she opened the door of Walt's stubby green pickup truck and slid onto the seat, she thought of Evie with Jill back in their room under the hill, oblivious to what was in store for both of them.

Not long afterward, when Becca returned to the children's home with Evie, Becca's application to nursing school accepted, Mrs. Livesey met them at the door, holding on to the hand of another little girl about Evie's age, and Becca hoped heaven would send down blessings on this woman for her thoughtfulness. Later, in the playroom, when Becca knelt to hug her little girl goodbye before the short train ride to the nursing school in Graydon where Becca would begin her studies, Evie looked up only briefly from the toy in her hand. She landed a wet kiss on Becca's cheek and said, "Bye-bye, Mama," before returning to her play. Her innocent, trusting face had haunted Becca every day since.

But today, when this class ended in just a few minutes, Becca could mark off another week on the calendar she kept in the dormitory. And tomorrow, she would be on the sunrise train for Meadow with a satsuma in her purse for Evie.

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When Becca pulled open the door of the children's home for another Saturday visit and walked down the hall to the family room, only a few parents had arrived before her. Twenty or so children of various ages were assembled there, awaiting visitors. Becca's arms were around Evie before Evie realized she was there. "My mama," Evie said to the little boy beside her, and Becca lifted Evie off her feet in a hug. She would have swung her in joyous circles had there not been so many people around.

“Becca Chambers picking up Evie Chambers,” she said to a woman at a desk who marked their departure in a notebook. Then they were off.

They visited their usual spots. A store with handmade wooden toys. A bakery where they bought tea cakes that they ate in the courtyard of an old stone church, watching squirrels chase each other around tree trunks and listening to birds scold each other for territorial transgressions. The diner where they always ate their Saturday lunches. Outside the diner, they stopped to pet a stray ginger cat coyly stretching on the warm sidewalk. “Hello, kitty cat,” Evie said, squatting flat-footed and petting in the wrong direction, ruffling the cat’s fur, though it didn’t seem to mind.

It was challenging each Saturday to keep Evie, twenty-three months old now, entertained in a downtown of only three streets when there was a playroom chockful of toys and a host of new friends back at the children’s home. Nap time was strictly enforced at Open Arms, and when Evie started rubbing her eyes, Becca always found a shady spot where she could rest rather than returning Evie a moment earlier than she had to before the last train out of Meadow in the afternoon.

Becca noticed that Evie was more subdued than usual this visit, that she had held a little tighter to Becca’s hand, stayed a little closer. Nothing to be alarmed about, Becca thought, but something. Today when Evie tired, Becca held her in her arms on a seat in the waiting area of the train station, Evie’s legs dangling on either side of Becca’s lap, her head on Becca’s breast. When Evie woke after sleeping just long enough for one of Becca’s legs to go pins and needles, they left the station and wandered over to a field of white clover flowers behind the newspaper office. They sat on a mat of cool clover and Becca strung together a flower necklace for Evie, making buttonhole slits in the stems with her fingernail and threading them with blossoms. All the while, they carried on conversations. Becca, who until recently had been aware of every word in Evie’s vocabulary, noted an impressive stockpile of new words. That saddened Becca a little, though she still understood Evie’s

toddler speech, was still, she was sure, her best translator.

When it was time to leave the field and turn back toward the home, Evie seemed reluctant. She looked at Becca and said, “Me, me.” *She wants to go back with me*, Becca thought, both elated and brokenhearted, but mostly brokenhearted. “It won’t be long, sweetheart. You’ve been such a good girl, and we can go home soon. We’ll be together every day.” She spoke words that she knew Evie would not understand, words like *weeks* and *months*, the measures of time that would have to pass to equal *soon*.

Then Evie moved closer and looked up at Becca. “Me, me, me,” she said, patting her chest with the words, as if Becca were not understanding, not appreciating these words.

“Baby, soon. Soon. We’ll go home soon.”

Evie tried once more, louder this time, as if increased volume might change the outcome. Was it just the difficulty of having to part? Was this some new phrase Becca should praise her for, as she’d been doing with others?

“Do you like Mrs. Livesey?” she asked, and Evie nodded wearily.

“You like your friends? Like Sally and Ruby?”

Evie wrapped herself in a hug and rocked side to side to show how much.

“That’s good. Are you okay?” Becca chose words she knew Evie understood.

“Okay.” Evie offered a smile that was a little weak, but genuine. *Just missing me*, Becca thought. *Missing being home, somewhere, with me.*

“I miss you,” Becca said.

“Miss you,” Evie echoed. She curled her arms around Becca’s neck. Becca lifted her up and, happily entangled, started back toward the children’s home. Before long, Evie was mingling with her toddler cohorts in the playroom, her usual happy self. Becca noticed two women she had spoken with before,

workers at the home who often looked after the toddlers and babies on Saturdays. She asked if they had noticed any changes in Evie, any growing unhappiness at Becca's Saturday departures. Both remarked about what a happy child Evie was. And it was true, Becca thought. Evie was an especially happy child by nature. It was to be expected that she would want to leave with her mother. She asked if she could speak with Mrs. Livesey, but was told she'd been away for several days fundraising in Jackson and wasn't due back until later that evening. With the train to meet and a test on Monday that was crucial to keeping her time at the school to a minimum, Becca wrapped Evie in a hug and whispered, "I'll be back very soon. I love you."

"Love you," Evie repeated, and then a little girl with freckles across her nose tugged at Evie's arm and pulled her into one of their little games.

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After supper on Sunday, Becca went to the dormitory with a shared biology book she had checked out for the weekend. She lay on her bed, hoping to get in a little more studying before her test the next morning. Some of the other students were chatting and laughing before quiet hours would begin at seven o'clock. A few were playing cards. One was doing needlework. Probably good at injections, Becca thought. The tinny sound of a radio came through the wall from the communal room next door. Becca managed to read again a chapter she almost knew by heart already, then closed the book. Maybe after classes tomorrow she would write to Dory. Catch her up on things. And maybe to Drew at Bett's, with a note for Jill. She supposed Drew was still away, spending time with his mother who had fallen seriously ill. He'd left for that visit before Becca left Natchez, not sure his mother would recover or how long he would stay with her. But Becca would write anyway. Planning these little upcoming activities in the evening felt like checking off another of the days that stood between her and Evie.

She smiled thinking of Evie. Their visit the day before had been the first

time Evie hadn't asked for Maggie since Becca had left the doll and Lottie's bread box with its contents in Walt's care, unwilling to risk losing those most treasured things at the children's home or the school. Becca was still amazed at the growth in Evie's vocabulary, the words she could string together, the colors she could name. Time was flying. Except when they were apart and it dragged relentlessly.

She thought again of Evie's earnest *me-me* and how she had longed to tell her, "Yes! I'll take you with me now!" Odd, she thought, that Evie hadn't simply said, "Me go, too," a phrase Evie knew well and used often. And she'd seemed frustrated, as if Becca hadn't understood what she'd been trying to say.

Then a memory broke through her thoughts, steely and cold. That day in the apartment in Kendall when Mildred had tried to coax Evie to call her "Mimi," tapping her chest, emphasizing each syllable, and Evie, too young then to speak the word, had laughed and slapped her own chest. Becca had been so full of worry about Ben that day. But that image—Mildred patting her chest...

Then Becca knew. It hadn't been "me, me" that Evie had been saying. Evie's new word was *Mimi*, delivered in Mildred's manner. And that sent a chill over Becca.



Becca walked to the train station in the predawn twilight, the stars waning but holding on, the moon ghostly pale. The Monday-morning test that she would miss was of no concern to her now. She had slept only in fits and starts before dressing silently as the other students slept in rows of beds in the dormitory. She had not given Mrs. Livesey the requested advance notice for a non-Saturday visit, but all that mattered was what Evie had really been saying on Saturday and what that meant. That Mildred had somehow wormed her way back into their lives. Unless Becca was wrong about that, and she was sure she wasn't, she would have to take Evie out of Open Arms. Nursing school had been a mistake. She had gambled almost all of the money she had left on that one means to an end, hoping it would prove justified. But she had been wrong.

Thinking of Mildred and all her deceit and manipulation filled her with dread. She couldn't bear the thought of another encounter with her. How had she found them? Becca knew she had hired an investigator before. Had she done that again? The man in the blue car in Rodney? Tillie had said he'd been nosing around the Ford, had looked in the back window of Lottie's house. Could Mildred have sent him? But there had been no word from Mildred in Rodney or in Natchez. No attempt to make peace. Still, Becca put nothing past Mildred in trying to have her way. With Ben, with Albert, and now with Becca.

When Becca arrived at the home, the front hall was empty. She tried the door to Mrs. Livesey's office, but found it locked. There was no answer when

she knocked. Farther down the hall, she knocked on another door, and a young woman appeared, seeming startled to see Becca standing there.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” Becca said, “but I’m looking for Mrs. Livesey. I’m Evie’s mother. Evie Chambers?”

“I’ll get Mrs. Livesey,” the woman said, edging around Becca, then striding off, high heels clicking in the empty hall. Soon she reappeared with Mrs. Livesey.

“I’m here to see Evie,” Becca began, intending to apologize for having come with no notice, but then Mrs. Livesey, with a terseness Becca had never heard from her, said, “I’m afraid that’s not possible.”

“Look, I’m sorry for not letting you know I’d be coming today, but it’s important that—”

“I’ll just open my office and we can talk there,” Mrs. Livesey said, as if there was a matter at hand, which there was, but this seemed to be about Mrs. Livesey’s matter, not Becca’s. Becca sat down in front of the desk of this woman who had always been so kind and understanding but who now exhibited the firmness of a school principal about to render consequences for bad behavior. And while Becca would have liked to laugh at such silliness, what she was feeling just then was fear.

“It’s Monday, I know, but I’m not a visitor. I’m Evie’s mother, and I need to see her.”

“There has been a change in circumstances.”

“What circumstances? Is Evie all right?” What if it was worse than she’d thought? What if Evie had been trying to tell her that she was ill?

“Evie was checked out this morning.”

“Checked out?” Becca’s mind was blank. She didn’t recognize those words in this place, in Mrs. Livesey’s new voice.

“I’ve been told to direct you here with any questions.” Mrs. Livesey held

out a card that Becca did not want to touch. Touching it would make the altered circumstances, whatever they were, real. She could see it well enough from where she sat. A familiar card. Identical to the one that had been in Ben's wallet when he died, except this one had a name printed on it. *Mildred Chambers*.

"She took her?" Suddenly lightheaded, Becca gripped the edge of the desk, afraid she might faint. "You let her take Evie?"

A flicker of concern, maybe compassion, crossed the woman's face, but then all traces of that were gone. "I had no choice. There was a legal document. I verified it myself with a phone call. There's no more that I can say about it. Mrs. Chambers asked that you be directed to her house, should you come here. Evie is safe, of course, in her grandmother's care. You have nothing to worry about in that regard."

"But why? Why didn't you contact me?" Then she remembered that she had left Walt's telephone number as the way she could be reached, since she couldn't reveal that she was living at the nursing home. But Walt knew to call the school immediately if he heard from the home. And he hadn't called.

"There is an explanation. But this is a family situation. Mrs. Chambers is expecting you. She has your best interest at heart. I'm convinced of that. And Evie's, too, of course. It's best that you talk with her."

*Is that all this is? Mildred trying to coerce us to move in with her? To give her another chance?* Had she somehow discovered where they were and assumed control, relocating Evie just as she had forwarded their mail from Kendall to her house? Why did people just accept her authority? Becca decided not to waste any more time with Mrs. Livesey. She would get nowhere sitting in this office. So she stood up and excused herself, walked up the hall and out the front door and down the steps, where she let her tears fall. She was confused. Broken with worry.

As she composed herself, one of the older girls in the home, an orphan

who helped with the youngest children, stepped around a shrub at a corner of the building and motioned Becca her way. Becca had spoken with her before. Olivia. She was usually around on Saturdays, playing with the children and changing diapers. Becca went over to her. “Mrs. Chambers,” she said. “Probably I shouldn’t be saying anything. But when I saw you crying, something just told me to talk to you. To tell you something.”

“What is it?”

“Well, I was with Evie yesterday when that woman came to take her out. She was in Mrs. Livesey’s office a long time, and I don’t know what all they talked about. And then Mrs. Livesey said to go on and let her check Evie out. But what I wanted to tell you is that I saw that woman before. And please forgive me if she’s close to you and you don’t mind her taking Evie out, but you don’t seem all right with it...”

“I am not all right with it.”

Olivia nodded and went on. “Well, like I said, I saw her once before. Last week. Mrs. Livesey was gone for the weekend, and I was with some of the little kids, and that woman walked right into the playroom and said she was Evie’s grandmother, just passing through town, and wanted to see her. I let her come in, but I stayed. Evie didn’t seem to know her, but she kept telling Evie to call her “Mimi.” Said that over and over, like she was drilling it into her. I didn’t mention her to anybody. I didn’t think too much about it, her being her grandmother and all. And she didn’t stay very long. But then she came back yesterday, and, like I said, she was in Mrs. Livesey’s office a long time. She had a bunch of papers with her. Then she took Evie. There was something about the woman I didn’t like. Nothing I can point to. But when I saw you so upset, I just thought I ought to tell you she was here that other time nobody knows about. And that something about her didn’t feel right.”

Becca was the first to board the only train leaving Meadow for Lyola that

day, lucky that there was a train stopping there, lucky she hadn't missed it. That trip seemed like the longest forty-five minutes of her life. When she arrived, she remembered the way to Mildred's house, climbed down the platform steps, walked along the wooden sidewalk then past the pretty little houses with summer flowers in the yards. The black fence, the bloodred roses. The cast-iron, wild-eyed owl on the front door. She glared at the owl and banged the bar in its talons against the doorplate more times than she bothered to count, kept knocking until the opening of the door pulled the bar from her fingers. Mildred stood there, looking just as she had the first day Becca saw her. Same dark clothes, dark hair, dark countenance.

"You know why I'm here. I'm taking Evie now."

"Eva is not here. She's with someone who's caring for her for a while, someone who has been alerted to report to the police, should you show up there."

That damned calmness of hers. Becca could have slapped her. *Just more lies. Ridiculous that she thinks I might ever again believe anything she says.*

"She's safe, of course. Now that I've intervened."

Becca laughed at how foolish, how powerless the woman's words were. Ben had seen through her. Albert had. Maybe Mrs. Livesey hadn't, but Becca did now, even as Mildred stood looking more arrogant than ever. She pushed past her into the house, scanning the cold front room, stepping into the kitchen she'd not seen before then.

"Where is she? How do you dare to take her from the children's home without permission?"

And then it was Mildred who laughed, a sound like cracking ice, and Becca felt herself wavering. But Mildred had no ground to stand on. Becca was Evie's mother. This was a criminal act, surely. A misunderstanding on the part of anyone who might have been duped into issuing Mildred permission to remove Evie from the home, even if the document she had

shown Mrs. Livesey was real. Becca turned away from that chiseled face and charged up the stairs, feverishly searching for Evie, first in that dreaded babyish room. She would have been glad to have found her even there, but the room was empty. She shouted her name, listening for any returning sound, but there was none. She pulled open every door, looked under every bed and into any space that might hide a small child.

Mildred had not bothered to follow her. When Becca descended the stairs, it was with none of the strength she'd felt when she had come down them with evidence of Mildred's deception about Ben's death. This time, she was utterly defeated, willing to beg, to promise anything Mildred asked of her, to embrace her and kiss her hands if that meant she would present Evie, safe and sound.

Mildred hadn't moved, stood just where Becca had left her, looking smug and amused. Becca called on every ounce of her own love for Evie to rouse herself, to tell Mildred that she would go to the authorities, explain what Mildred had done.

"They're expecting you, dear. They won't believe you."

"What do you mean?"

"Why don't you sit down, Becca? You don't look well. Sit down, and I'll explain what I mean."

She led Becca into the old parlor, her fingers gripping Becca's elbow like the owl's iron talons gripped its bar. Becca collapsed as much as sat on the sofa, and Mildred sat beside her, too close. Becca realized she was trembling, and she crossed her arms to hold herself together, to try to hide the trembling from her mother-in-law. And then Mildred lifted a candy dish from the marble-top table that Evie had nearly turned over when they were there together and picked up a sheaf of papers beneath it.

She began with a report from an investigator she had hired to track down Becca after her departure from Kendall. "You see, he already knew about the

woman who raised you, because I'd hired him before to look into your background, the background of the woman my son was proposing to marry. So finding a will leaving you a house wasn't difficult. He spent two days in Rodney observing the conditions you were living in with baby Eva. A decrepit house in the ruins of an old river town. Conditions no child should have been subjected to. Rotting houses. An infestation of venomous snakes. A history of flooding and fires."

"Evie was never in danger there. Do you think I would have let her be in danger for one moment?"

"Let's see." Mildred turned over one page and took up another. "Open, last-century cisterns. A child killed while you were there. Fell through a crumbling porch into a cistern at a dilapidated house occupied by a woman you habitually left Eva with while you were elsewhere."

"I never left Evie at her house." Becca heard the weakness in her voice, the weakness of her argument. Then she said what she was thinking. "He had a blue car."

"What? You mean the investigator?" Mildred looked at her with surprise, amused again. "Yes, I believe he has a blue car."

Becca couldn't make sense of it. That man had moved Lucy out of Rodney. Bobby had seen him at Lucy's house. *Tell Becca I'm sorry*. That's what Lucy's note on Dory's door had said. Lucy, who had been so desperate to leave Rodney. She'd have been no match for Mildred's schemes. But what could Lucy have offered? That was before they'd gone to Natchez, she and Evie. She didn't understand.

And what of Bett's favor for a friend that Jill had spoken of in Natchez? A favor Jill believed had been for Becca's benefit. Had the iceman's aunt really boarded at Bett's or had someone else suggested the room to Lucy? Or convinced the iceman to lie to Lucy about it. Had that been part of the investigator's duties? It seemed important to Becca that she put all this

together, as if there was a riddle she had to solve to get to Evie, and she struggled to order her thoughts.

Mildred flipped over another page. “We’ll leave his report on Rodney there, except for his confirming the presence of my car at your house in Rodney.”

“Your car.”

“Yes, the automobile that belonged to my husband and passed to me when he died. The one we allowed Benjamin to drive. I am the legal owner. But before we leave Rodney, there’s this.” Mildred held up a typed document, pointing out the signature. “This is an affidavit signed by Lucy Atwood, the woman in question at Rodney. Attesting to your leaving Eva with her regularly. I won’t read it fully, but it confirms your absences. Your neglect. The risks to which you exposed my granddaughter.”

“You paid Lucy. She was desperate to leave Rodney, had nothing, and you paid her. Paid the investigator to move her somewhere else. And I don’t believe she said those things.”

“I’m afraid what you believe or don’t believe is not what matters here. But we’ll move on. I have other affidavits as evidence of your neglect and endangerment of my grandchild.” Another paper, then, in Mildred’s hand. “You took her to live in a bordello where you, let’s say, *resided* for an extended period. In an area known to be a seedy, crime-ridden environment. I have the dates here from your madam.”

*As if I had been one of Bett’s girls.* Had Bett attested to that? “I was a boarder,” Becca said. “That must be somewhere in those documents. I didn’t know what kind of place it was when Lucy told me about it. I don’t believe Lucy knew. I think you tricked her.”

“That’s absurd. I worry about your mental condition, dear.”

“Like you worried about Ben’s mental condition?”

Mildred’s face set like stone. She lifted another document. “Then you



abandoned Eva at an orphanage. There's verification of that here, as well. You enrolled in nursing school under false pretenses, denying having any children, denying that you had ever been married to my son. You shed yourself of Eva and went off to live as a single woman."

Becca could not catch her breath. Her chest was tight, and she felt clammy, as if she were going to vomit. Symptoms of shock that she had studied in preparation for the test she'd been scheduled to take...when? This morning? Was it still Monday? Yes. Monday. Mildred was droning on about affidavits and evidence, holding up sheets of paper. The words rolled over Becca like a cold shower. Like waves of river water sweeping her away as they had swept Lottie away.

Then Mildred held a document in front of Becca, close enough that she couldn't avoid reading it. A police report from Natchez about the car having been stolen, listing her address at Bett's house and the words *known brothel* along with other accusations: *No proof of ownership. Automobile later determined to have been stolen previously.*

"Stolen?"

"Yes. You didn't own that car. Of course I reported it stolen. I haven't yet pressed charges, since I was able to send someone to recover it in Natchez. But perhaps I will. Regardless, the sheriff for this county is aware of your automobile theft, along with everything else I have here." She tapped her stack of papers.

"All of this together is why I have been named Eva's guardian. Let's see, there's a document here somewhere." Mildred rustled the papers while Becca's thoughts swam in dizzying circles. Then Mildred read, "It is in the child's best interest that there be no contact with the mother, who is not to be informed of the whereabouts of the child and is not to be allowed contact with said child or with the child's grandmother." Mildred looked at Becca. "She's in my custody now, legally. Paperwork is being drawn up to add

consequences to your approaching either of us.”

Mildred did not stop talking then, but Becca stopped listening. She heard only some familiar names. Mrs. Livesey. Miss Embry from the nursing school. Bett, again. Lucy. And then the last name she expected to hear in Mildred’s voice—Dory. She was dazed, her thinking foggy. Another symptom of shock she remembered studying, even in her state. All those people she had trusted had proven untrustworthy. But they couldn’t all be, could they? Maybe she was losing her hold on what was real and what was not. Maybe it was herself she couldn’t trust. She was afraid to go to the sheriff and accuse Mildred of lying. Afraid he wouldn’t believe her. That he might officially sever her claim to Evie. Or that maybe he already had. She didn’t want to do anything that might hinder her ability to find Evie. All these loose thoughts in her head seeking purchase in a plan she wasn’t capable of making in that moment. And then Mildred’s talons were clutching at her elbow again, prodding her to her feet.

“I think it’s time you left my home. I will be generous, this one time, in not notifying the sheriff that you came here making threats and ransacking my house.” She walked her to the front door.

“Please don’t do this,” Becca said, tears streaming down her face. “Please. Let’s work this out.”

“I’ve already worked it out, dear.” Then she opened the door and nudged Becca over the threshold.

# Hazel

You don't give up on a dream all at once. First you pare it down some. Could be you dreamed a little too big, you think. Reached a little too far. You're older now, a grown-up, so you whittle a little more off that dream. Work it in around everything else. Give it some time here, some hope there, whatever you can spare. Then life throws you some curves, and you tell yourself it's just going to take a little longer, is all. A few more years, maybe. Time goes on, and the day comes when you realize that most of those big things you thought were going to happen in your life, all the places you were going to see and the things you were going to do, aren't going to happen at all. You see that even if you had nothing else to do but check off that old list of expectations, the time left would be too short. You've waited too long, squandered too much time. And you haven't worked nearly hard enough on that thing you started out wanting more than anything else. That rusty old dream has eluded you, and you're left with a life made mundane by one thing that did not happen. That's how it was with me and singing, for a long time.

**Hazel**

**1934**

**Mississippi**

## 34

Hazel left the stage as the orchestra's last notes faded and the applause began to subside. The lights dimmed, and she made her way discreetly from the stage door to a table at the back of the room where a lone man sat, two drinks served and waiting. There was a good crowd in the Twilight Room that night, and Hazel was loving it.

Two years ago she had been checking hats and coats behind the counter in the lobby. Now she was singing, a regular on the program. Twenty-six with a five-year-old daughter, estranged from her family, living mostly hand-to-mouth in two rooms in a five-room house so close to a railroad track that dishes rattled in the kitchen with every train, a house so unfortunately located that the other rental rooms hadn't been occupied since she moved in. But a few nights a week, she stood on a stage—a low and shallow stage, but a stage nonetheless—wearing a glamorous gown and lit from above by a spotlight that made the rhinestone neckline of her black satin gown sparkle or the scattered sequins that spilled down the front of her strapless red tulle twinkle, and that made up for so much else in her life so far.

But the singing itself would have been enough. The pure joy of it, from the moment the circle of light hit her to the last whoops and whistles as the applause died down. And the in-between moments when people wiped away tears as she sang or caught her in passing later to tell her how they had been moved. Her life was a dream on that stage.

Tonight, an itinerant photographer was there, winding his way among the

guests seated at tables arranged behind the dance floor and on a low balcony surrounding the room, handing out business cards as he went. He stopped at their table.

“Hello, Charles,” Hazel said. “Good to see you back.”

“Hazel. Walt.” Charles nodded at each of them. “I’m trying to get the hang of these new bulbs, since flash powder’s a no-go in here. How about a shot of you two?”

Walt slung an arm over Hazel’s shoulder and leaned close.

“Smile, and hold still,” Charles said, and they froze as he performed the ritual required to coerce a foil-filled bulb to flash in sync with his shutter. “I’ll leave a print at the hat-check when it’s ready. If it turns out. No charge,” he said. “Have fun, kiddos.” And Charles moved on.

“How are things at the shop?” Hazel asked, adjusting the drape of her gown’s cowl neckline. Walt had worked at the Twilight Room when Hazel was a hat-check girl, before he opened his watch and clock repair shop. He’d helped set up for visiting acts, moved furniture, whatever was needed. Made sure all the equipment was working the way it should. Lights and sound. Electrical or mechanical—he could fix anything. Stood in for the bartender a time or two when he didn’t show. Usually his work had been finished by the time the singers got started. One night, not long after Hazel had graduated to singing, he’d stopped a drunk who’d been coming on to her. After that, Walt had made a habit of sitting in the back of the room when she went on, and she would come down and sit with him between her sets, discouraging any unwanted advances. She would sit close to him like they were a couple, and they got a kick out of it.

“Still in a lull, but getting by,” he said now, raising a glass that Hazel clinked with hers. Walt had opened the shop hoping that folks strapped for funds, as most were then, would consider repairs to watches and clocks to be essential expenditures, stretching the life of necessary items they couldn’t

afford to replace. He'd made a success of it, though Hazel knew things had been a little slow at his shop lately. Unlike at the club, where people were more than willing to invest in drowning their sorrows with drinking and dancing. The overturning of Prohibition almost a year back was still cause for celebration. The club was a place where, for at least a few hours, patrons could almost believe the bad times were over.

Walt didn't come into the club as often as before, but Hazel was always happy to see him when he did. They sat at their usual table then, always just the two of them, Walt always smoking, lighting new cigarettes off the old ones or with matches pulled from the matchbooks he gave away in his shop. Hazel had a feeling that Walt had met someone who was keeping him occupied. Although they were good friends, were deeply fond of each other, Walt was very private about his romantic life. He kept that separate from everything else the two of them shared freely in their Twilight Room-only relationship, and Hazel thought she knew why. They had both removed themselves from unpleasant family situations, had come to Natchez from separate nearby towns and made new lives for themselves there. And while Walt had not spoken about it outright, he had said enough, deliberately, Hazel was sure, to let her know that his romantic inclinations did not run toward women.

He *had* spoken openly about his brothers. Two older brothers who had bullied him ruthlessly. Dangerous sorts who had made his younger life hellish. The brothers still lived a few towns away, in the same house they'd all grown up in. Walt had cut ties with them, with the whole family, when he'd come to Natchez. And he still seemed afraid enough of them that Hazel was sometimes afraid for him.

Although Hazel's family situation was different, bad in other ways, they had both resorted to complete separation, Hazel having gone as far as adopting a new surname, Brown, when she'd found herself pregnant. A name too common to suggest a particular family connection, which suited her just

fine. She and Walt could talk about such things.

Hazel looked at him now, across the table, and thought he would have made a decent husband, under different circumstances. Might have been a good father to Nell. But just as well, she thought, sipping her drink. After her bad experience with Nell's father—not that he'd stuck around long enough to earn the title—she wasn't in any hurry for a till-death-do-us-part commitment. She had her hands full with her new singing career and taking care of Nell. And maybe good friends were better than husbands.



One rainy night, after an especially heavy week's schedule for Hazel at the club and before a three-day break, Walt made a rare appearance at Hazel's door. In fact, the only other time he'd been to the house was when he had helped her move there from a room in a boardinghouse, her things and little Nell's filling only a corner of the short bed of his truck. She and Walt were close, but theirs was not the sort of friendship that included visiting each other at home. Yet here he was, unannounced. And this night, Walt was agitated, troubled. Hazel had never seen him like this. She stood in the open doorway, Nell behind her, and rather than entering, Walt asked her to come out onto the porch, said he needed to talk with her. So upset he was short of breath, he sat down heavily in one of the chairs on the porch. Hazel instructed Nell to play inside, then turned on the porch light and shut the door.

"Walt? What's going on? Are you all right?" Hazel pulled a second rusty chair close to his and sat down. Then Walt launched into an explanation that spilled out so fast Hazel could hardly keep up with it. He said that earlier that day he'd been at the house where his very close friend was a boarder, meeting Hazel's eyes to emphasize "very close" in a discreet manner Hazel understood, and she nodded him on.

"He was due back in an hour or so after being away for weeks taking care of his mother. She'd been ill. And I wanted to leave something there for him." Walt rushed on rather breathlessly. It seemed that while Walt had been in his friend's room, someone had called the house asking for a former boarder, a woman with whom both Walt and his friend were acquainted. Walt

had been summoned to take the call.

Hazel focused intently on Walt's words, which were flying now and not always cohesive.

"Her name was Lucy—the woman on the phone," Walt said. "And she was at the train depot here in Natchez, her train just in. She was desperate to find this former boarder."

Then Walt skipped beyond everything that might have made sense of what came next and blurted out, "I need your help." He said he couldn't say much about what the caller had told him—"Not yet"—but he asked Hazel to trust him.

"This Lucy's in trouble. She had a little girl with her, and this little girl, almost two years old, is in grave danger. She was stolen from her mother. Taken by someone devious and heartless. A woman with means and influence who'll do anything to keep her. You know I wouldn't come here and ask for your help if this wasn't a most serious situation. The little girl's mother is that former boarder. A wonderful mother. A beautiful person. Hazel, it's partly my fault. I encouraged her to enroll in a school I knew about — Oh, you don't need to know all the details. It's better that you don't. But I have to get this child back to her mother. It has to be fast. Please trust me." And then the words stopped.

Hazel sat in stunned silence, not understanding her role in any of this.

"I just need to leave her with you for a couple of days, this little girl."

"Walt, I can't—"

"Wait, hear me out. I wouldn't ask if there was any other way to keep this child from ending up worse off than either of us were, growing up. It's the most important thing I've ever done, and I'm going to make this right. I have to get to her mother now, before it's too late. Two days, three at the most—that's all I need. And then I'll be right back with her to pick up the kid." Walt looked at Hazel as if he were speaking straight to her soul and said, "Imagine

if someone took Nell from you.”

“Why haven’t you called the police? Isn’t this a crime? Kidnapping?”

“I can’t explain now, but we can’t call the police. The wrong people would suffer if we did. That woman at the depot? Lucy? It’s possible she’s risked her life for this little girl. I need to leave her with you tonight. No one knows you, and the police aren’t involved. She’ll be safe here. Just a couple of days, and then I can explain everything. If you don’t take her in, I’ll have to take her with me, and that’s just going to slow everything way down. And frighten her.”

Hazel was thinking about her own troubled childhood, and Walt’s. He was a good and honest man. She knew that for certain. Looking at his face, hearing him talk, she understood how serious this was. And she knew firsthand that children often had no safe place to be heard, to be taken seriously, including at police stations. And she did have three days off.

“Where is this little girl?”

“In the truck. Asleep.”

Hazel stared into the night, rain pelting Walt’s truck.

“For God’s sake, bring her inside.”

Walt gripped Hazel’s shoulders and kissed her cheek. “You are an angel.”

“Hardly,” Hazel said.

As Walt dashed out to the truck, Hazel went inside and told Nell they were going to have some company for a few days. “A little girl.” Nell went to the window and watched. Hazel stood behind her. In the light from the porch, she could see Walt with his hat pulled down over his forehead in the rain, holding one side of his raincoat around a very small child, the handle of a basket hooked over his other arm, which pressed something bulky against his chest under his coat.

As soon as Hazel opened the door and let them in, Walt was in a hurry to

leave. “We’re doing a good thing, I promise you. No one will look for her here.” The little girl, with big brown eyes and brown curls damp with rain, stood quietly beside him, looking from Hazel to Nell, then edged closer to Walt. He set the basket on the table, saying, “I’m afraid that’s all I have of hers.” Then he carefully loosened his hold on what he’d held inside his coat—a lavishly hand-painted bread box. “I’m going to leave this with you, too. It belongs to her mother, and I promised to keep it safe for her.”

Walt knelt beside the little girl and explained to her that he was going to fetch her mother and bring her back there. Hazel allowed them the moment. She checked the contents of the basket—a few sets of clothes and a cloth doll wrapped in flannel—noting there were no diapers. Walt stood then and told Hazel, “Remember, you can’t tell anyone about her. Absolutely no one. You’ll understand when I get back. If anyone comes around—and nobody will—but if someone does, don’t open the door. Don’t trust anyone, no matter who they say they are.” A few quick strides and he was at the door. He looked back and grinned nervously. “Her name is Evie. And for what it’s worth, you’re the only one in the world I’d trust with her.”

Before Hazel could get out the words already on her tongue—*Wait, this is scaring me*—the door closed behind Walt. She almost ran after him, but there was the little girl, Evie, standing beside Nell now, both of them at the window watching Walt climb into his truck in the pale light from the porch. They all stood there together as the truck’s lights receded into the night. Then Nell turned around, her face full of questions and Hazel without any answers.

That first evening, Evie didn’t speak. She clung to the doll that she’d pulled from the basket on the table, only putting it down when she crouched to look under Hazel’s bed, then up at Hazel questioningly. Looking for a chamber pot, Hazel thought. She’d noticed that the child wasn’t wearing a diaper, as Nell had at that age. Although the house was small and there were the thunderous trains to deal with, it had the advantage of electricity and, in a

small room meant to be shared by tenants from both sides of the house, a toilet. Hazel took Evie's hand and led her there, and Evie, still not speaking, knew what to do. She climbed onto the toilet, expertly gripping the seat and locking her arms, and after Hazel turned away, she managed on her own.

Hazel didn't know how long it had been since the child had eaten. She spread jelly on a roll, and Evie ate it sitting between Nell on one side and the doll from the basket on the other. Nell talked to her, not seeming to mind that she didn't answer. "Today's my birthday," she told Evie, then she pointed out the gift Mr. Myers from the Twilight Room had brought by the day before—a small red wagon. Later, Nell pranced around the room pulling the wagon, hoping, Hazel knew, for a smile from Evie, which she finally got. Hazel left them to themselves, thinking that best, until she heard a wail from Evie. She hurried back, finding Evie crying and Nell gearing up to join her.

"What's happened?" She looked to Nell for an answer.

Nell pointed to the wagon. Hazel saw the problem. Nell had gone too far in seeking smiles from Evie, had placed Evie's doll in the wagon and taken it for a spin, one loss too many for poor Evie. Hazel quickly returned the doll to her arms.

"I'm sorry," Nell told her, but Evie held tighter to the doll and turned away.

Already past Nell's bedtime, Hazel readied the girls for bed. Evie was still and compliant as Hazel dressed her in a nightgown Nell had outgrown.

"You get into bed first," Hazel whispered to Nell, "and maybe she'll get in with you."

Obediently, Nell climbed into her bed with her own doll while Hazel sat on the edge of the bed across the room.

"Where would you like to sleep, Evie?" Hazel asked.

"With me?" Nell called to her hopefully.

"Or you can lie down here with me," Hazel said, patting the bed.

Evie looked from one to the other and slowly walked over to Nell's bed. "Put her next to the wall," Hazel said, "where she can't fall." Then she kissed them both on their foreheads, turned out the light, and went back to the front room, staying close enough to hear any trouble. A while later, when she'd thought they were asleep, Hazel heard a tentative voice: "Her is Maggie." Then a whispered answer: "Hi, Maggie. I'm Nell."

Walt didn't return the next day, though Hazel had held faint hope that he might. Evie warmed up to Nell, eventually becoming her shadow except when drifting to the front window now and again and standing there as if watching for someone to return for her. Hazel wondered what this little girl had been through, and she found herself standing at the window herself many times that day, hoping to see Walt's truck. Hoping Evie's mother would step out of it when it arrived.

At the end of the third day, Walt still had not returned. Hazel, who until then had managed to maintain at least a surface level of calm, was feeling frantic. The next morning, knowing that at four thirty that afternoon the teenage girl who watched Nell when Hazel sang at the club was due to arrive, Hazel walked the girls up the road to a gasoline station. When the owner wasn't on the premises, the mechanic would let people use the telephone for a nickel a call, which he would pocket. A practice Hazel didn't hold against him. First she tried Walt's shop. No answer. But when she called his apartment, a man picked up. Walt's landlord, he told her.

"I'm his cousin," Hazel said, sensing something was wrong and wanting to be told what it was, her current circumstances certainly warranting a small deceit.

"Well, ma'am, you being kin, I guess you've got a right. The law called me trying to track down some family of his. It ain't good news, but I'll say it right out. Your cousin, he had an accident two nights past. Or three. Don't

quite remember. They think he had a heart attack while he was driving. Ran his truck into a tree in the rain. He didn't make it, ma'am. I'm sorry about that. Some people stopped and got him in their car, but he was gone by the time they made it to the hospital. I sure am sorry."

Hazel looked at Evie huddled close to Nell, the ever-present Maggie tucked under one arm. The girls looked up at her in unison. Hazel was terrified.

"Ma'am? Ma'am?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. Thank you for telling me."

"About the law looking for family. What was it you said your name was?"

Hazel hung up the phone.

She gave the mechanic a quarter and placed two more calls, one to the babysitter to say she wouldn't need her for a few days, the other to Mr. Myers at the club. She told him she was sick and asked him to find someone to cover her sets that week. But Walt wouldn't be back next week. Or the week after. And that hadn't been part of their plan.

It was about three in the morning when Hazel woke to someone banging on the door to the other side of the house. She froze in her bed, Walt's warnings an alarm ringing in her ears. The original front door led to the other apartment; the door to her side was tucked into an alcove at the end of the porch, easy to miss in the dark. She did not move except to slide her hand under the edge of the bed for the heavy iron trivet she'd put there the night Walt left the house. She'd been thinking of those brothers of his, wishing she'd asked him if they were connected to the mess with Evie and her mother. Likely, they weren't. But Walt had left no doubt that lives were at risk, and now Walt was dead. Hazel pulled back an edge of the curtain at the window by the bed, and thanks to a full moon, could see a car out front. A dark color. A Ford, it looked like. And then she saw a man, just from behind,

walking back toward the car.

The girls hadn't awakened, thank God. Hazel lay still, her hands wrapped around the handle of the trivet, until the car pulled away. For a while, not trusting anything, certainly not the man in that car, Hazel still did not move. *I am in possession of a stolen child.* Walt had warned her not to go to the police. And if she did, aside from whatever Walt's reasoning had been, why wouldn't they arrest *her* for kidnapping? *Kidnapping!* How could she explain to them the presence of this child? Or why she hadn't called them before? Walt wasn't there anymore to take responsibility, to vouch for her. And now, someone who definitely was not a policeman had found the house. Had found her. She was not going to wait around for his next appearance.

She got up, still afraid to turn on a light. By moonlight and instinct, moving as quietly as possible, she began taking clothes and shoes out of drawers and from her tiny closet. Laying them on the bed. A hatbox. Her jewelry case. Some toiletries. She opened her two suitcases and began packing things inside them, setting aside a couple of extra dresses she thought she could wear in layers to free up enough space in one of the suitcases for the bread box Walt had left with her. Then she went through the rest of the house, opening curtains to the moon but switching on no lights, packing only what was most important until the suitcases could hold no more. She stacked one on the other in Nell's birthday wagon, along with the hatbox, a handbag holding every cent she had at that time, including the past week's pay and tips, and a paper sack with food fit for travel and two milk bottles filled with water. After slipping into the bedroom and sliding Maggie the doll out from under the blanket in the girls' bed, she put the doll into the wagon with everything else. Then she pulled on three lightweight dresses, one over the other, all she thought she could bear in the late-summer heat. With all that done, she woke the girls and subjected them both to a quick once-over with a wet washcloth in the dark so they would at least start out clean, then got them dressed.



“What’s all that in my wagon?” Nell asked as soon as they stepped into the front room.

“We’re going on a trip,” Hazel told her, and Nell’s eyes got wide. “Where?”

“I don’t know, Nell, but we’re leaving now.”

“It’s dark outside!”

“I know that.”

And then Evie said, “I want Maggie.”

The darkness was beginning to ease its grip outside as they scrambled up the embankment to the tracks. Hazel had to make several trips up and down with the things from the wagon, then with the wagon itself. After that, they walked down the tracks toward the train depot, Hazel pulling the wagon, Evie sitting on top of the suitcases most of the way, Maggie in her lap. Nell, as usual, asking questions. Hazel had a plan. Probably a crazy plan, but it would do until she had a better one.

By the time the sun cleared the horizon, the depot was in sight. There weren’t many people inside when Hazel and the girls entered, Hazel padded with extra clothes and pulling the red wagon. She asked about a train for Caldee, Mississippi, and after an hour in the back of the lobby, Hazel feeling as inconspicuous as a circus act, they boarded that train.

One of the musicians at the Twilight Room was from Caldee. He’d often joked about how he had played his first gigs at a honky-tonk near there, across the road from a motor hotel where he had lived for a while. Way out in the sticks, he’d said. The kind of place nobody stopped at unless they ran out of gas. And way out in the sticks seemed awfully good to Hazel after her middle-of-the-night visitor.

## 36

One week rolled into a second week, that one into a third, and Hazel was still at the Lighthouse Motor Hotel in Caldee, cleaning rooms in return for accommodation in the unit at the far end of the row, she and Evie and Nell sharing a bed, Hazel afraid every time a car pulled into the lot out front. She worked at not looking past the moment at hand or dwelling on those behind—those moments onstage at the Twilight Room—because fear and heartbreak were too much to shoulder simultaneously. She sang as she cleaned rooms, and when Jack, the man who ran the Lighthouse, suggested that she go across the road to the Buckthorn Tavern and tell Bucky Sloan she could sing, Hazel thought she just might.

“Ain’t nobody there but folks from around here,” Jack told her in a kind way that made her think he knew she was hiding from something and he understood. Jack’s mother, Louise, lived in the room closest to the office, and if not for Louise, Hazel thought she might have drawn too far into herself to ever find her way back out, as afraid of the world as she was just then. But Louise was a natural with kids, and Evie, for whatever reason, gravitated toward her. She seemed to feel safe sitting with Louise, and when Louise wrapped her in a bear hug, Hazel could see Evie’s little body go loose. Louise got Evie talking again, beyond just a few words here and there, speaking mostly to Louise, at first, then to Maggie the doll, then Nell, then Hazel.

Hazel had considered the advisability of calling the child something other than Evie in light of what seemed to be their fugitive status. But once Evie

was talking more, she was insistent about her name. “Me Ebie,” she would say, though she was unable to supply a last name or the name of her mother when Hazel asked. Evie had been robbed of so much already, and Hazel could not bring herself to take away her name as well. And changing Evie’s name might seem suspicious, should Hazel be caught with her and Evie identified. So Hazel added those worries to the other things she was trying not to think about.

Not that she was all that successful at managing her thoughts, especially as she came to care more for Evie day by day. She was such a sweet little thing. Hazel hadn’t been able to save herself from her own childhood trauma, and Walt had maintained that Evie’s risk was much greater. She wouldn’t turn away from trying to keep Evie safe until she was returned to her mother, and Hazel had to believe that would happen, somehow. And Nell, old enough now to sense Hazel’s anxiety, to question why they were living in this place so far removed from anything familiar to her—what a trouper she’d been. She would have to find a way to make it up to Nell in a future that Hazel could not yet imagine.

One evening, they were all visiting Louise in her room, Louise teaching Nell to knit, and Nell, just six years old, following her movements, actually knitting. Louise had never spoken of Nell’s scarred palm. Had never asked any questions about where they had lived before or why they were there, and Hazel was grateful for all of that. As Hazel sat watching Nell’s needles move in slow motion to her rhythmic chant of “in, around, under, and out,” Louise told stories of where she had come from, as she often did, keeping Hazel engaged in that way.

“I was a schoolteacher when Jack was a boy. Up at Clay Mountain in North Carolina, where I grew up. There were two of us teaching in a one-room church building back then, three grades on one side, four on the other, a come-to-Jesus aisle running up the center. I taught the older grades. Not everybody saw the need to send their kids to school, especially the little ones,

since there was a good, long walk for everybody—a mile for me. You have to work to get to know your neighbors there, everybody so spread out. Some folks would say there's not a lot to do in a place like that, but it sure is beautiful in those mountains. I never lacked for something to do. Every walk in the woods was worth taking.”

“Deader than dirt—Clay Mountain,” Jack said, coming through the door with dinner he'd picked up at the diner in the little blink-and-you'll-miss-it town a couple of miles down the road. “But can't say things are jumping around here, either.” He started laying out plates of food on the bureau. “Brought enough for everybody, so don't be shy.” Jack was good about sharing the stove and icebox in his living quarters behind the office. Hazel would leave a grocery list on his desk, and he'd picked up what she needed when he did his own shopping, dock the cost from the little she made in addition to the use of her room. Hazel suspected he sometimes underpriced the groceries. Like Louise, he had been pulled in by the girls.

The evening Hazel decided to cross the road and go into the Buckthorn Tavern, lonely for singing to people instead of to dirty sinks and unmade beds, she left Nell and Evie with Louise, which seemed to please all three of them. At first, Nell had asked to go with Hazel, tacking on “like we used to.” Hazel's first clue that Nell, too, felt a sense of loss at what they'd left behind.

“This is a different kind of place,” she'd told her. “You'll have more fun with Louise.” And Nell had seemed satisfied. Back when Nell was born, Hazel hadn't been sure she was cut out to be a mother. Now she had two little lives in her hands, and she didn't know what God was thinking, doing that. She said goodbye to the girls and started across the road, feeling guilty for leaving them, worrying about the people looking for Evie, and telling herself it would just be this one time. An alcoholic's excuse, born of her thirst for singing.

From the road, she could hear the nickel-plated twang of a banjo—something never heard in the Twilight Room—and she followed that sound

to the open door of the Buckthorn. She walked through a hovering cloud of cigarette smoke and took a seat inside the dim room, paying little mind to a few raised eyebrows and a man at the next table who lowered his glasses on his nose and sent her a look she couldn't quite translate. There was a faint wet-animal scent in the air, and though there weren't all that many people inside, the room's small size effected an illusion of a sizable crowd.

As soon as the frenetic banjo solo ended, a heavy-set man with a sweat-slick face over a triple chin stood up and ambled to the wood slab at the front that served as a stage, climbed the two steps, and reached for a saxophone resting in a dark corner. And once he'd started in on a song she knew, Hazel lost herself in the music. With the first notes of his second offering, a woman, seventy if a day, stood up. The saxophonist toyed with superfluous runs until the woman was onstage and nodded at him, and then her voice slid around the opening notes of "He's Gone Away," and it was as if Hazel had never heard that song before.

*And who will tie your shoe,  
And who will glove your hand,  
And who will kiss your ruby lips  
When he is gone?*

Then came more from the banjo, some guitar tunes, a mandolin added to the mix. More people straggled in. Couples crowded a skinny strip of dance floor in front of the stage, and women without partners left their shoes under the tables to dance barefoot. The saxophone player passed by Hazel's table on his way to the counter where a bartender was filling drinks, and on the trip back he stopped and said, "You mind?" touching the empty chair across from Hazel. She nodded and waved him into the chair, partly because he was blocking her view of the woman who was back on the stage, singing with a guitar player who'd gone up from one of the tables.

When the song was over, Hazel and the saxophonist—Eddie, he told her—struck up a conversation about the bar and how long it had been there, about the woman with the slinky voice who, Eddie said, rarely came in anymore. About how good it was that Prohibition was over and how bad most everything else was in the country. Nothing personal asked or offered beyond their names, Hazel calling herself Betty. She said she hadn't known what sort of music to expect there, and Eddie said they got all kinds and this was a good night. "Sometimes it's only Bucky with his harmonica," he said, pointing with his thumb at the bartender. "He ain't no good, but he owns the joint."

When Eddie started fidgeting with his collar, pulled a comb out of his pocket and slicked back his hair like he was getting ready to make another play for the stage, Hazel said, "Can anybody go up there and sing?"

Eddie looked at her curiously. "You asking for yourself?"

Hazel just smiled, and then they were talking songs, settling on a favorite from Hazel's Twilight Room days. Eddie rose while a Carter Family tune was winding down, staking his claim to the stage, and as he maneuvered around tables and between dancers, Hazel followed.

"This little lady's going to sing for y'all. It's her first time, so play nice. I ain't never heard her, so I ain't taking credit or blame for what y'all are gonna hear." He winked at Hazel and swiped the mouthpiece of his sax with his shirttail, then raised it to his lips. And then Hazel was singing again, crooning a ballad that hushed the noisy crowd. When she'd sung the last note, the applause was rowdy and raw and hearty and Hazel felt an empty place inside her filling up and overflowing.

Over the next two weeks, Evie continued to emerge from her shell, still shadowing Nell, Nell gentle with her. Hazel bestowed on Nell the responsibility of keeping track of a bag of paper-wrapped soaps and leaving one on each freshly cleaned sink as Hazel made the rounds of vacated rooms.

Nell would always entrust a tiny soap to Evie, including her in the task. Evie called Nell *El-El* and didn't seem to know what to call Hazel. But she didn't appear burdened with unhappiness, though who knew, Hazel thought, what was going on inside her.

After that first night at the Buckthorn, Hazel went back the next two Friday nights. That third time, as she crossed the road back toward the Lighthouse, she was alarmed to see Nell and Evie standing at the window in Louise's room, backlit but clearly two little girls staring out into the night. Anyone could have seen them there, Hazel thought. She had put Evie at risk, perhaps Nell, too, leaving them so she could sing at the Buckthorn. *No one knows we're here. No one has any way of knowing.* She tried to show herself some mercy, but she knew she would never again cross that road. As she stepped into the parking lot, Jack opened the door to the office and called her over, steered her inside and closed the door quickly behind her. He led her to the back of the office, out of sight of anyone who might come in and ring the bell. Jack told her that while she had been out, a man had come by asking about her.

"He knew my name?"

"Asked for Hazel. Just Hazel. From Natchez, he said."

And now Jack knew she was from Natchez. Jack had never asked her where she was from, and she'd never told him. Hadn't told Louise, either.

"Do you know who he was?" she asked.

"He said he knew somebody named Walt. That this Walt had told him about you."

All Walt's warnings to speak of Evie to no one, to trust no one, no matter who they claimed to be, came back to her in Walt's urgent voice. Walt would not have told anyone about what Hazel was doing, would not have spoken her name. She was certain of that. But someone had found her. The people Walt had been afraid might find Evie now knew to come to the Lighthouse to

look for her. She had told no one where she was going. Even Walt hadn't known anything about this place. How could anyone have found her here? But someone had.

"Did you see his car?"

"A black Ford," Jack said. "I didn't ask his name. He was tall. Thin. I was in a hurry to get him out of here before you came back. I told him I didn't know of anybody named Hazel. He mentioned a woman with a little girl." Jack looked closely at Hazel. "I said I hadn't seen any woman with a little girl."

"Thank you, Jack. Thank you. I know it must seem... I just can't talk about it, but I promise you there's a good reason for everything. A very good reason."

"I don't doubt that. He asked me to get in touch with him if you showed up here. Told me where I could reach him. I have no intention of contacting him, didn't write down the place he named. But it was A&K something." Jack tore half a page out of his receipt book and scribbled down A&K, then passed the paper scrap to Hazel. "In Natchez," he added.

Since Walt hadn't told her who the dangerous people were, Hazel was afraid of everyone—the man who had banged on the door of her house in the night, Walt's brothers, everyone who had been involved in taking Evie from her mother, and anyone who might be trying to arrest Hazel for being in possession of a missing child.

"I have to leave. Before he comes back. I don't dare stay."

"You have somewhere to go?"

"I have a place in mind," she said. "But I'd rather not say. Best for both of us."

"I could drive you to the train station tomorrow. It's not open at night. You saw how small it is. Just a stop behind the diner."

"I don't feel safe staying here tonight."



“You could stay with Mom in her room.”

“I don’t think so. There’s a whole lot at stake, Jack.”

“If you’re set on leaving tonight, there’s a place I know of. It won’t be fun, but it’s not far from the diner. You could walk over in the morning, easy. If I knew where you were going, I could call and find out when there’s a train headed that way.”

It would have been a relief to let Jack help her, but she’d never thought anyone could find her there, and they had. She didn’t dare tell even Jack where she was going.

“This place you know about,” she said. “Is there anyone else there? Anyone who would know we were there?”

“Not a soul. You would be completely alone. There’s not even a window.”

“I’d be grateful, then, if you’d take us there. If I have to wait a day or two for a train, could I stay there that long?”

“Yes.”

It was dark, that place. So dark that without lighting one of the candles Jack had given them, Hazel could not see her hand held close to her eyes. Even stalwart Nell cried because of the darkness. Evie was frighteningly silent, occasionally making a mewing sound like a kitten. It was a concrete-block storage building on land that belonged to Jack’s brother, who had moved away a year earlier. An old hayfield and an empty pasture stood between the building and the train stop, easily passable on foot, Jack had assured Hazel, even pulling a child’s wagon.

There was a dirt floor, and Hazel was grateful for the tarp and blankets Jack had left with them along with the candles and matches. He’d warned against a kerosene lantern in such a small space with little ventilation. Before leaving them, Jack had handed Hazel an envelope holding the last of her pay. From the weight of the envelope in her hand, Hazel had suspected it held

more than what she was owed, but she wouldn't open it until morning. A deeper gloom had settled over her when Jack's car had pulled away and she had closed the door, pulled the inside latch tight.

With the candles lit, offering little more light than animal eyes glowing in the darkness, Hazel told stories to the girls, said prayers with them, tried to make a game of eating their biscuits and bacon in the dark. When they lay down to sleep, candles extinguished, Hazel tucked Evie between herself and Nell, low enough that Hazel could reach over her head and hold Nell's hand until Nell's fear eased. Evie, who usually relied on Nell for comfort, clung to Hazel as they lay there in that impenetrable night. After what seemed like a long time, when Hazel was certain that Nell was asleep, Evie whispered, "No moon, Mama. No stars." Hazel wasn't sure for whom those words were meant, but she hugged Evie tighter.

The first train arrived at the stop behind the diner just after eight o'clock the next morning, and the three of them were waiting there, suitcases, bread box, and hatbox in Nell's wagon. The train would leave again soon in the direction Hazel wanted to go, and their tickets had been purchased. There would be connections along the way and long rides between, but in the end, they would arrive at the station in West Jefferson, North Carolina, the stop nearest Louise's Clay Mountain.

Nell

**1971**

**Mississippi**

Once again, when Nell dialed 411 and asked for a telephone number from the past, an operator reeled off a number very much in the present. A&K Treasures, where Estelle had purchased the bird box in 1949, the box repaired by a Walt Newman in 1933, was still in business in Natchez. It was Evie who had brought attention to that box, and Nell considered this discovery rightfully hers. Perhaps, she thought, she should phone Evie before taking any further steps. But all she had to go on now was the memory of that scrap of paper in Hazel's hatbox, A&K scribbled on it, and a telephone number that might not be related at all. And even if the two were linked, surely there was little chance that anyone at that shop today could shine light on how that paper had come to be in a bedroom in North Carolina. She'd call the shop before calling Evie.

"A&K Treasures." A friendly voice. Female.

"Yes. My name is Nell. Nell Brown. This is going to sound a little odd, but I'm hoping you can help me."

"I'll try. What are you looking for? Or do you have something to sell?"

"No, not that." Nell hadn't thought ahead about how to explain herself. "I'm from North Carolina, but I'm here in Mississippi for a while. I found a box, a sort of music box with a little bird that pops up and sings. And there's a note in the box from your store with the date it was purchased—1949."

"Oh, my. That was quite a while back. I don't think I remember a box like that."

“So you worked there then?”

“Yes. I started here during the war. World War II, I mean. I was friends with the owner, and business was doing so well he could afford to hire me. It’s funny how that war pulled us right up out of the Depression that went on so long. But I’m sorry, what was it you wanted to ask about that box?”

“It’s not really about the box. My sister and I are doing some research about our family history. My mother was from here before North Carolina. She has an old hatbox with things in it from when she lived here. She was a singer back then. And when I saw that bird box in this house where I’m staying now, and saw that it had come from A&K Treasures, I remembered seeing that—A&K—on something in my mother’s hatbox. Just a scrap of paper. And I wondered if there might be some connection.”

“What a mystery. I’m curious now. What was your mother’s name?”

“Hazel Brown.”

“I don’t remember that name. But, oh, that was so long ago. Let me jot down your name. It was Nell, right? Nell Brown?”

“Yes, and my sister’s name is Evie.” There was a pointed silence then. Not even the sound of breaths or of a pencil scratching out their names.

Finally, the woman spoke. “Evie. That’s Evie Brown?”

“Well, she was. She’s Evie Rutherford now.”

“I see.”

“But she was Evie Chambers before.”

Another silence, this one seeming electric.

And then the woman said, “There’s someone I think you need to talk to.”

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“He was so nice, Evie. His name is Drew, and when I called him, he said he was the one who sold that bird box to Estelle back in 1949. At a shop in

Natchez.” Nell was at the telephone table with a glass of red wine she had poured to celebrate this latest development and to level out her excitement before speaking with Evie. “And there’s more,” she said, trying to infuse calmness into the conversation through the telephone line. “He said he knew you when you were a very little girl.”

“He knew me? How did he know me?”

“He didn’t want to go into details over the phone, but he invited me to his house. He lives in Vicksburg now, has a second antique shop there. But he knew you in Natchez.”

“I don’t understand.”

“He told me that the woman who answered the phone at the shop in Natchez when I called there knew you, too. Back when he did. Her name is Jill. She runs that shop now.”

“Those names—I don’t know them. I don’t know what to think about this. And he was nice, this man?”

“Very. He said he was a friend of your mother. Not our mother. I mean—”

“I know who you mean.” Evie was speaking softly and slowly.

“You could fly back down here and go with me. We could talk with him together. Or we don’t have to talk with him at all, if you don’t want to.”

“I think...” Evie took a few seconds, then said, “You go for both of us. Then call me. I’d rather hear it from you.”

Tony arrived, as steady of hand and heart as Nell was jittery. He was to drive her to Vicksburg, was happy to do it, and Nell was happier still to have him along. Tony sat in the living room reading one of Estelle’s magazines as Nell fluttered about, up the stairs and back down, picking up her keys, losing them, finding them again. Thinking maybe she would take the bird box along, then deciding to leave it. Wondering if she really wanted to know what this

Drew Hollis was going to tell her, and more importantly, if Evie would want to know whatever it was. Wondering if his words might convict Hazel of something Nell had not yet imagined, might unhinge the three of them from each other in an irreparable way. *Where are the keys? I just had them. I don't need them. Tony's driving. The house key. I need that.* And then she felt Tony's hand on her shoulder, as light as if asking permission to rest there.

"Just breathe," he said, and that easily, Nell's world seemed to spin more slowly.

Nell had never been in Tony's car. Usually, he pulled up in his truck, there to do some job or another in his ongoing labor of love in tending to Estelle's house. He'd brought a photograph of Estelle with him once. At about the age Nell was now. In it, she'd worn a caftan printed with enormous flowers that were spectacular even in black and white. Long strings of beads around her neck hinted at a flapper past, bringing to Nell's mind Hazel's green cloche with the felt flowers. Estelle in the photograph matched well with the Estelle in Nell's head, her imaginary housemate.

Tony opened the car door for Nell, and it closed with a soft thud rather than the heavy clank of her Chrysler. He slid behind the wheel and asked if she'd remembered to bring the address. Nell dug through her purse, dropping things into her lap, her anxiety rising again. "Here it is. I have it," she said, and as Tony drove down the driveway, she reloaded her purse, feeling certain she must have forgotten something she would come to need.

"We've got about an hour and a half ahead of us," Tony said. "Unless we want to stop to eat."

"I don't think I could eat anything before..." Before whatever was coming.

"After, then."

"Yes. After."

Not long into the trip, Nell began telling Tony the things she had held back. Evie's story. Nell had asked Evie if she minded Tony going with her to

meet Drew, and Evie had said that Tony needed to know everything first. About finding the birth record when they were children, about their not knowing where Evie had come from or how she had ended up with Hazel. Nell laid out everything there in the car: her questions, her fears about the answers that seemed to be imminent, and the promise she had kept for so long to let those secrets remain buried. Her worries, too, about Hazel's part in it all. And when Nell's voice broke, Tony reached for her hand and held it most of the way to Vicksburg.



Drew Hollis was tall and square-shouldered, a man who seemed to have entered the autumn of his life robustly. There was a casual elegance about him that put Nell at ease right away. His house was lovely, reminiscent of Estelle's fondness for unusual pieces, but styled with a more disciplined eye for artful cohesiveness.

After coffee and water had been graciously offered and politely declined, Tony and Nell sat side by side on a love seat facing Drew in a nearby chair, and soon they were all leaning over the note Nell had found in Estelle's singing bird box. Drew read the details aloud and smiled. "Your Estelle came into the shop in Natchez a few times when I was still there. An utter delight. Memorably unconventional."

"She was definitely that," Tony said.

Drew returned the note to Nell. "And you said you found the name of the shop in your mother's house in North Carolina?"

"Only A&K. Written on a scrap of paper. I didn't know what that meant. But I knew my mother was from Mississippi, a long time ago, and when I saw those letters on this note in Estelle's box, I wondered if there could be a connection. I doubted that was possible until I called the shop and then talked with you. But you know all that."

"A for Andrew," Drew said. "K for my mom, who supplied most of my earliest inventory. Jill wanted to keep the name when she took over the shop, though she's co-owner now and does all the work there. I keep telling her she

deserves an initial of her own.”

“I don’t know where my mother got that scrap of paper, or why she kept it.”

Drew appeared to be considering possibilities, but made no comment about that. Instead, he began the story they had come there to hear. Nell didn’t have to ask probing questions. She simply sat there next to Tony and listened to all that Drew told them. That he and Becca had both been boarders at a house in Natchez Under-the-Hill in the 1930s. That a few months after Becca left Natchez, and after Drew had been away for some time caring for his ill mother, he had returned to his room under the hill and found a friend of his there, along with a terribly frightened young woman and two very small girls.

“One of those little girls,” he said, “was Evie.”

“It’s hard to believe we’re sitting here with someone who knew my sister before I did,” Nell said.

“I imagine so. It’s strange to me to sit with someone who knew your sister after I did.” Drew went on with his story. “So, my friend explained that he had come to my room earlier that day to fill some vases with flowers as a way to welcome me home. That friend was the Walt Newman on the note from your bird box. We were a couple, and he was thoughtful that way.”

Nell noticed that Drew said “*were* a couple” rather than “*are*,” and sensed something sad behind that. Tony stretched his arm across the back of the love seat then, and Nell would have liked to lean against him, if only to fix herself in the present as the past rushed in, but she thought maybe it was too soon between them for that. “I wish it were my box,” she told Drew. “But it goes with the house.”

“You’re part of its provenance now, just as Walt is, and Estelle. A pity its next owner won’t know its true lineage.”

“Estelle would have loved that,” Tony told him. “She would have said it was meant to be, her picking up that box in your shop.”

“Indeed,” Drew said. He drank a little from a crystal water glass etched with ferns that had been on the table beside him, considered it thoughtfully, and set it back down. “I didn’t know the woman with Walt that day, or the other little girl. It had been only a few months since I’d last seen Evie, but I wasn’t sure she remembered me. She was very young, and she seemed wary, so I didn’t rush to her as I wanted to. We had been friends, Becca and Evie and me, though for a short time. Walt knew Becca as well. I’d been away when Becca moved out of her room, and there had been no chance for a proper goodbye. I hadn’t heard from her since, but I knew she was busy, enrolled in nursing school in another town. But there was little Evie, in my room, without Becca. If that hadn’t been enough to signal that something was dreadfully wrong, one look at the face of the woman standing beside her left no doubt.”

“Who was she? Was she Hazel—my mother?”

Drew shook his head. “No. Her name was Lucy. Walt didn’t know her, either. When he’d been there earlier that day, with the flowers, a call had come in on the house phone downstairs—a woman asking for Becca. Someone ran up to see if Walt knew how to reach her, and he went down and took the call. Lucy was frantic. She was calling from the train depot up the hill and desperate to locate Becca. She said she had Becca’s little girl with her, as well as her own, and that they were in trouble. Immediately, Walt picked them up at the depot and brought them back to my room, where I walked in on that strange group moments later, in time to hear what Lucy had to say.”

Drew picked up his water glass and found it empty. He stood up and stretched his shoulders, said he was going to dash into the kitchen for a refill. “Water, either of you? Or a glass of wine? Unless you find it offensively early for that. I’m afraid there’s a lot more to come.”

“I could drink a glass of wine,” Tony said.

“Water would be nice,” Nell said. “Can I help you with that?”

“Not necessary. It’ll just be a minute. If anyone needs to freshen up, first door on the left, down that hall.” Drew pointed in one direction and headed off in another.

As glasses and dishes clinked in the next room, Tony asked Nell how she was holding up. “If it starts to feel like too much, we can always come back another time.”

“There is no way I’m leaving until I’ve heard everything.”

Drew returned, expertly balancing a tray of grapes and cheese and filled glasses. When they had each claimed a glass and a small, gold-rimmed plate much like those in Estelle’s cabinet, Drew said, “I believe I left off at Lucy and what she had to say.”

“Yes. And thank you for being so open with us.” Nell was realizing just how new openness was to her.

“I hope that before you leave you’ll understand how grateful I am that you’ve come,” Drew said. “Now, there’s a tidbit of information you should know before I go farther. That house where Becca and I were boarders was, speaking delicately, a house of ill repute.”

With that, Nell thought she could see something of the younger man Drew had been in the thirties. There was a hint of mischief in his eyes just then.

“So my sister, Evie, was living at...”

“A brothel. A detail Becca had not been made aware of before renting a room. Just as I hadn’t been before renting mine. The two boarder rooms were separate from the rest of the house. They each had a private outside entrance. A newcomer could live there for quite some time with no knowledge of the nature of the rest of the place.”

Then Drew returned to Lucy’s account as she had related it that day in 1934. Nell learned that Lucy and Becca had become friends while living in a onetime river town all but gone to ruin. Rodney, Lucy had said. Nell

remembered the shop owner in Joppa mentioning Rodney, calling it a ghost town.

“Becca was a new widow then,” Drew said, providing an answer to one of Nell’s old questions—Evie’s father was dead.

As Drew told it, Lucy had spoken that day of an investigator hired by Becca’s former mother-in-law—“Mildred Chambers,” Drew said, “a nasty piece of work”—to track down Becca in Rodney and convince her to move into the room in Natchez. For help with that, he had enticed Lucy with the promise of money, room and board, and a job in the town where Mildred owned a sawmill. Not much of a job, as it turned out, mostly copying documents by hand, which Lucy had done for hours at a time while looking after her little girl, Rose, in a room Mildred provided for them in her own home. A room Lucy said had been extravagantly fitted out for a little girl like hers.

Lucy, by her own admission, had doubts from the beginning about the benevolent motives the investigator ascribed to Mildred and that Mildred maintained afterward—that she simply had been providing assistance that Becca would have been too proud to accept. That she had arranged with an old friend—“our Natchez landlady,” Drew told them—to pay most of the rent for the room, with Becca none the wiser. And Lucy, living in atrocious conditions in Rodney, had been desperate enough to wish away her doubts. But she had soon come to feel trapped in Mildred’s house, to sense that Mildred was holding Lucy’s involvement in her scheme over her head to control her. She was relieved when Mildred offered her a two-room apartment connected to the sawmill, then horrified the day Mildred showed up there with a child she expected Lucy to take in for a while. A child Lucy knew well. Evie. The daughter of the friend Lucy had betrayed, though she’d never imagined a betrayal so devastating.

Even when Mildred offered evidence that she had been named her granddaughter’s guardian, Lucy did not believe Mildred’s claim that Becca

had spiraled out of control with grief and neglected, then abandoned, Evie.

“And in a grand act of redemption,” Drew said, “Lucy fled to Natchez with both little girls in tow, hoping to find Becca still in the room in Natchez, intending to then board a train for Oklahoma, to an uncle she hoped would help her. And that’s where Walt came in. He felt responsible for it all. He wasn’t, of course. He’d simply recommended to Becca a course of study that would guarantee her a job during the Depression. Told her of a place he trusted to care for Evie while she attended classes. And while Becca was attending that school, Mildred stole her child from her.”

Nell’s heart broke for Evie, for Becca, too. “How was she able to bear it, being separated from her little girl? How did either of them bear it?” Nell told Drew about those early days after Evie arrived. How she had stood staring out the window as if waiting for someone. And how, when they were a little older, Nell had heard Evie sobbing in bed. “I asked her what was wrong, and she said it was ‘a silver feeling.’ Evie has this sense of color for words and thoughts and music. It’s hard to explain. But that silver feeling was something very sad.”

Drew cleared his throat, then stood up abruptly. “Excuse me. Please wait.” He left the room, and Tony wrapped his arm around Nell and pulled her in close. Nell thought of Evie, of how their lives, Evie’s and Hazel’s and her own, were forever changed now.

After a while, Drew reappeared, apologizing for having taken longer than he’d meant to, and he finished up the rest of his story quickly. He told them how that night had ended. That Evie and Lucy’s little girl, Rose, had played in a corner while he and Walt and Lucy had huddled around the table, nerves on edge, each of them fearful that someone might have followed Lucy there. They all agreed about the danger of contacting the authorities, all understood the risk to Lucy, an easy target for arrest, as vulnerable and heavy with guilt as she was, and the risk to Becca as well. And to Evie. Lucy made certain the others knew how dangerous Mildred Chambers was. That she had the support

of the sheriff in Lyola, who, given an opportunity, would surely return Evie to Mildred.

“Walt was determined to make it right. He was immovable about that. He was insistent that I speak to no one about any of it,” Drew said. “Then he took Lucy and little Rose to the train depot and saw them off for Oklahoma, left Evie in the care of a close friend I didn’t know, and set out to drive through the night to the town where Becca was enrolled in nursing school. He swore he’d find her, even if she’d left the school. That he’d bring her back to Natchez to collect Evie and take them on to somewhere safe until they could sort out everything, get legal counsel, find a way. He promised he’d be back in a few days.”

Drew lifted his wineglass and drained what was left in it. “That was the last time I saw Walt. Dashing out with Lucy and the two little girls. Several days passed before I learned he was gone. A heart attack—that first night, on his way to Becca, in a rainstorm. His car crashed into a tree.”

“Oh God. I’m so sorry.” Tears welled in Nell’s eyes.

“The friend Walt left Evie with was, as perhaps you’ve guessed, your mother. He’d told me only her first name—trying to protect me along with everyone else—and that she had a little girl of her own. And I’m guessing that’s you.”

“Yes,” Nell whispered.

Drew sent her a sideways smile. “And now maybe you understand, at least partly, why I was so glad to hear from you.”

“I do.”

“I searched for your mother. After a while, I found a ticket agent at the depot in Natchez who remembered a woman and two little girls who had made quite a picture, the woman dressed oddly and pulling a toy wagon loaded with their baggage. They’d bought tickets to Caldee, considerably south of here. A little hole-in-the-wall water stop, he told me. I went there, of

course. Stopped in at a tiny hotel in Caldee and at a motel outside of town, just off a road that was desolate except for the motel and a bar across the street. No one had seen Hazel. I told both managers where they could reach me—at the shop in Natchez. I never heard from them. Months later I found out that someone named Hazel had worked with Walt at a nightclub before I met him. People there told me she disappeared one day and no one ever saw her again. I knew that was her.”

“The Twilight Room,” Nell said. “She sang there. I found out about that just recently. She didn’t tell us anything about Mississippi. She wouldn’t talk about the past.”

“She was probably afraid,” Drew said. “Walt kept our relationship private. He had good reasons for that. He probably never told your mother about me or my shop. Becca was afraid, too. She never stopped looking for your mother, but she was always afraid to contact the sheriff, to seek any kind of legal remedy. Afraid they would stop her from being able to search for Evie. And afraid she might do or say something that would land Evie back with Mildred. She knew Walt had trusted your mother with Evie, and Becca trusted his decision. Especially after I found Becca and told her everything I’ve told you today. You have to understand that Mildred had located Becca before, in Rodney, then again at the nursing school. And Becca was unwilling to do anything that might lead Mildred to wherever Evie was hiding. It was more important to Becca that Evie was safe than that Becca had her back. She loved her that much.”

Nell brought her hands to her face and closed her eyes, taking in everything Drew had said. There were no words adequate to address such loss, such love. Tony was quiet as well. Drew seemed to understand, had fallen silent himself.

Drew had not mentioned Becca in the present tense, and Nell didn’t want to ask if she was still alive, so she asked if Becca still lived in Natchez.



“No,” Drew said, and Nell prepared for the worst.

“She lives here,” he said then.

Nell spirits rose. “Here in Vicksburg?”

“Here in this house.”

“She’s here now?”

“Yes. Forgive the intrigue. We weren’t sure what to expect. And I wanted to spare her revisiting all these painful details. But she’s eager to meet you.” That mischief from before was there again in his eyes. “I caught her in the kitchen eavesdropping. Not the first time she’s done that.”

Drew stood up, and Nell turned to see a woman enter the room. She was younger than Drew, maybe close to Hazel’s age, with Evie’s curls—the same soft brown, though threaded with gray. Drew met her where she stood, and with his arm around her waist, she reached up and brushed some curls away from her face, looking as overwhelmed as Nell felt. She smiled at Nell and Tony, walked over and held out a hand to each of them. Then she sat down in a chair that matched Drew’s and said, “I’m Becca.”

Soon, Nell found herself in the role of the person holding answers to the questions of others. Becca and Drew wanted to know where Evie and Nell had been all these years, where Hazel had hidden them, and Nell told them about Clay Mountain. Told them that no one had ever come there looking for them. “Evie was safe with us,” Nell said.

After that, there were few questions about the past. Becca wanted to know about Evie now, Evie as Nell knew her.

“She’s happy, has a family of her own. Twin boys.”

“Twins!” Becca said, joy all over her face.

“She’s a teacher. Fifth grade, this fall.”

After a while, it seemed as if they had all known each other for years. There was such warmth among them that Nell hoped they would become

friends. She felt as if they had already. “Evie was with me at Estelle’s house just last week,” she said. “It was Evie who mentioned the bird box and led me to find the note inside. If I’d found it only a few days earlier, she could have come here with us.”

And then Becca had to see the note from the box. She read it, then held it to her chest.

“I have a photo,” Nell said, then she stopped herself. *Why did I bring that up? She’s so happy.* She turned her head so that only Tony could see her regret.

“A photo?”

*She thinks it’s a photo of Evie,* Nell thought. She had wanted to offer something more after the note had been so meaningful, and what she’d offered was an image of the only mother Evie remembered. “I’m sorry. I don’t have a photo of Evie. I so wish I did. But I’ll make sure you have one soon.”

“That’s all right,” Becca said. “We have plenty of time ahead. What photo do you have?”

“It’s just something I found. It was what inspired me to start looking into the past.”

“I’d like to see the photo that sent you here,” Drew said. “If you’re willing.”

“It’s just my mother. In 1934. I don’t think this is the time—”

“Your mother! Please. Please show it to us,” Becca said.

If Becca had asked her for the moon, Nell would have done her best. So she opened her purse and took out the photo. She handed it over to Drew and heard him take in a quick breath. “Walt,” he said. He held the photo so Becca could see it. For a few seconds, they were both somewhere else, remembering.

“And this is your mother,” Becca said. “This is Hazel. I owe so much to both of them. And to you.”

Nell

**1971**

**North Carolina**

Nell and Becca climbed a mountain road in the valiant Chrysler, water trickling in slender waterfalls down walls of cut rock that loomed high above them on one side, steep drop-offs falling away on the other, revealing sweeping views of peaks and valleys. Higher up, past those narrow switchbacks, the landscape broadened around them, and they rode on in the wider embrace of the Blue Ridge.

Conversation during the drive from Mississippi to North Carolina had been much different from that of the emotionally charged hours at Drew's house in Vicksburg. This time, Nell and Becca were getting to know each other in a more individual way. They discovered a mutual love of books, discussed some they had both read, and recommended others. Nell learned that Becca had built a bookkeeping business for herself, adding new clients over the years, eventually hiring two other female bookkeepers. Early on that path, Becca had begun using her maiden name, Pruitt, perhaps why she hadn't turned up in any of Nell's searches.

She had lived alone in Vicksburg for many years, not far from Drew and from Drew's longtime love, before he died. A few years after that loss, when Drew broke his ankle and was facing surgery and a lengthy recovery, Becca had moved in with him to help out, and the two of them had learned that they enjoyed living together. Neither had ever strictly adhered to a narrow conception of family, and they had naturally eased into a compatible routine, siblings at heart. With Drew, Becca told Nell, there had been no need to try to explain the inexplicable events in her life. They understood each other. Becca

had known Drew's Walt, and Drew had known Becca's Evie, and that had brought immeasurable comfort to each of them, had kept those loved ones present in their lives. In time, with Drew fully recovered, Becca sold her house and moved back in with him. Maybe not forever, Becca said. But there was more than one way to grow old with someone.

Nell had begun the trip talking about Evie and the twins, their accomplishments and exploits, anything insightful that she thought Becca would want to hear. But Becca always returned to asking about Nell's life, to learning more about her, which took Nell by surprise. She tried not to show how deeply that kindness affected her. Becca was easy to confide in, and Nell opened up about her friendship with Tony that she thought might be growing into something more. She spoke of having always felt unrooted in a way she didn't quite understand. That she liked to pretend that she and Estelle shared the house in Mississippi.

"I lived with a ghost in my house in Rodney," Becca said. "A very beloved ghost. In fact, it was her house more than mine. So I understand. There's a difference between pretending and placing people back in their old spaces, doing the things they once did there."

"It's exactly like that," Nell said. She had never been able to talk with her mother in this way, and she was thrilled to be delivering to Evie the gift that this woman was.

Nell and Becca had pushed through most of the journey the day before, stopping at a motel after dark, then starting out again early in the morning so they could arrive rested and refreshed before noon. And now, as she made the last turn before the house on Clay Mountain, Nell felt herself slipping into that awkward daughter persona that visits home always seemed to bring out in her. She could tell that Becca was nervous as well. It was good, she thought, that Evie knew everything. Nell had called her immediately after she and Tony returned from Vicksburg. And Evie had promised to pass on all that they had learned to Hazel, which meant telling her what Nell had been

doing in Mississippi. But Nell reminded herself that this was what she had always wanted. No secrets.

At the house, she switched off the car and dropped her keys into her purse. Then she mentioned again how excited Evie was about meeting Becca. “She’s a little nervous,” Nell said, hoping that would ease some of Becca’s own nerves.

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Nell, Evie, Hazel, and Becca sat in Hazel’s kitchen eating crustless, bite-size sandwiches Evie had made. Hazel was once again in her birthday-gift shirtdress and ballet flats, nails unpainted, but her new hairstyle kept up. When they all moved into the living room, Hazel claimed her recliner. She sat on the edge of the seat, poised, it seemed, to brave any attack or to flee. Becca chose the sofa, sat in the center with room for someone else on either side of her, open and welcoming. Nell stood back, pretending to search for something in her purse, allowing Evie next choice, hoping she would sit beside Becca rather than in the only remaining chair—brought in from the kitchen table before their arrival and set apart, under a window. Nell watched her hesitate only slightly, ever considerate of others, then pick up the kitchen chair and move it next to the recliner. Nell’s eyes went to Becca, who smiled panoramically, including each of them before picking up a throw pillow beside her and holding it in her lap. Nell put down her purse and went to sit beside Becca. As she did, she thought she caught the slightest flinch on Evie’s face. Nell knew her well enough to know she felt some guilt about her choice of seats.

Because they had exhausted most small-talk topics in the kitchen, the mood in the living room was weightier. Becca was the first to speak of the past that connected them all. She addressed Hazel.

“How can I thank you for what you did?” The way Becca spoke left no

doubt about her sincerity. “You kept my baby safe when she was in such danger. You took her in and shielded her, putting yourself in even greater danger. I know what you sacrificed to do that. You gave up one life and took on another. I can’t begin to express how grateful I am to you.”

What happened next was the last thing Nell had expected when she’d tried to imagine how this day might go—Hazel broke into tears. She bent over her lap, put her hands in her face, and sobbed. Nell had never seen her mother cry, had never seen her close to tears. Evie leaned over the arm of the recliner and held Hazel, her cheek against Hazel’s forehead. Nell took Becca’s hand and held it between both of hers, uninvited but met with a misty-eyed “thank you,” mouthed silently.

Over the next hour, the four of them pieced together the past, asking questions and supplying answers that fit into a puzzle each of them had been able to see only a small portion of before. Becca took the story up to the day she had discovered Evie missing at the children’s home and learned that Mildred had taken her, fresh regret sounding in her words, even now, for having enrolled in nursing school. Hazel told of the night Walt had shown up with Evie, of how she and the girls had fled from the house by the tracks after a man had banged on the door in the middle of the night. Nell recounted what Iris, the cigarette girl at the Twilight Room, had said about a drunk young man driving to Hazel’s house to check on her late one night, and that piece of the puzzle fell into place.

Then Hazel spoke of their escape from the Lighthouse Motor Hotel after a man had shown up there asking about her.

“Drew,” Becca said. “If only you’d known.”

When Hazel described the night spent in a windowless, concrete-block storage building—“the kind of dark your eyes don’t adjust to,” she said—Nell and Evie looked at each other. Nell suspected they were both thinking of the day they had climbed up the embankment to the tracks when they’d



visited the site of the blue house in Natchez and Evie had felt an old sense of being terribly afraid of the dark.

“Evie was so very frightened.” Hazel looked at Becca and said, “That night, I heard her say, ‘Mama. No moon. No stars.’” Hazel told her that, Nell thought, as if she were returning something that didn’t belong to her. There was a quiet gasp from Becca, a small sound Nell heard only because she was sitting so near her.

Through it all, Evie was unusually quiet. Though she spoke kindly to Becca and answered any question that was asked, she stayed close to Hazel, making sure, Nell could see, that Hazel did not feel displaced. Nell was glad for that. Evie was so much better at that kind of thing than Nell was. And Becca, who truly had been displaced, bore all the sadness with grace and gratitude that humbled Nell.

One thing Nell did not bring up then was that she had been to the Twilight Room. She had asked Evie not to mention that as well. She wanted to wait until she and Hazel were alone to tell her about having gone there. About being inside that building. Seeing the stage where Hazel had sung. Imagining her there.

Mid-afternoon, as Evie and Becca shyly prepared to leave for Evie’s house where Becca would have use of the guest room for two nights, Hazel asked them to wait. “I have something of yours,” she told Becca. She made a quick trip down the hall and returned with something Nell had never seen before, an exquisitely hand-painted, old-fashioned bread box. The kind of thing Estelle would have loved. Becca reached for it the moment Hazel set it on the table.

“How did you... Where...” Becca was overcome with emotion.

“Walt left it with me the night he brought Evie. He told me so little that night. I didn’t know anything about it, but I took it with us everywhere we

went.”

“I thought I’d never see this again.” Becca lifted the lid, then closed it again quickly. “This box and the things inside it are the most important things I’ve ever owned. I can’t tell you how much they mean to me. You have been an angel in our lives.”

“Hardly an angel,” Hazel said in the familiar flat tone of the old Hazel, but Nell did not miss the crack in her voice.

As much as Nell was hoping that Evie and Becca would have a tender, private reunion at Evie’s house, she couldn’t help wishing she was going with them when they said their goodbyes, rather than staying behind with her mother. Foremost, because she didn’t know what Hazel needed just then, or how to offer something that might be helpful to her. Once Evie and Becca were gone, Nell was surprised when Hazel didn’t retreat to her bedroom. She was most comfortable alone. Nell knew that and knew that the revelations of the last few hours, the asking and answering of questions that probed the deepest parts of her mother’s life, must have been exhausting. But without even trading her shoes for her slippers, Hazel sat down at the kitchen table where family talks, few as they were, generally took place. Nell joined her there, hoping to say the right things. She was still pondering what those right things might be when Hazel cleared her throat, signaling something to come.

“For years—the whole time you girls were growing up—I was afraid. Afraid that one day someone would knock on the door and take me to jail, or do something even worse. Afraid Evie would be sent back to dangerous people. I was afraid for you two to get too close to me, to need me too much, because I might be taken from you, or you from me. I was afraid to tell you anything you might repeat. I didn’t feel entitled to mother Evie when her real mother, whoever she was, was out there wanting her back. And because I didn’t want Evie to think I loved you more than her, I stayed back from both of you. I let you two grow close to each other rather than to me. I became someone I didn’t recognize. I told myself I was protecting you. But I think,

too, the only way I could hide from all that fear was to close myself off from everything. So you didn't have a mother. Not either of you. Not really. And I'm sorry for that. I loved you both, all that time. I'm not sure I loved myself, but I loved the two of you. Even if you didn't know it."

Nell took a deep breath. She couldn't reach Hazel from across the table, but she held out her arm, palm up, and Hazel reached for her scarred hand. "What Becca said is true," Nell told her. "You gave up everything you knew, everything that might have been, to keep us safe. I am astounded at how brave you were, at the sacrifices you made."

"Those weren't noble choices, Nell. This was laid on me. I had no other choice."

"You chose not to take Evie to the nearest sheriff's office or to leave her on the steps of a church and go back to your life. There were so many other choices."

"Well. Let's not dwell on the past," Hazel said briskly, then they looked at each other and laughed.

"I have one more question," Nell said. "That beautiful bread box was in this house all the years we lived here?"

"I can hide things when I want to," Hazel said. "I knew you girls were into everything every chance you got."

Nell was surprised, and Hazel was amused.

"That poor old hatbox. I hid a few things under the bottom and let you two have fun with the rest. I want you to have it now. Take it with you when you go. My gift to you."

"I love that hatbox. Thank you."

"I would like the photograph back, though."

"You knew I took it?"

"Of course I knew."

“It’s a beautiful photo of you. But I did plan to return it. I brought it with me so I could put it back. I’d like to have a copy made, though. If that’s okay.”

Nell opened her purse. She found the photo and gave it to Hazel.

“It’s Walt and me. I miss him.”

“Taken at the Twilight Room.”

“Yes.” Hazel turned the photo over. “You read that here.”

“I was there,” Nell told her.

“Where?”

“At the Twilight Room.”

Now Hazel was surprised, and Nell was amused. Nell got up from the table and went to open a cabinet across the kitchen. “Do you have any tea?”

Hazel told her where to look.

When Nell found it, she said, “Let me put on a pot of water. I have lots to tell you.”

Becca

**1971**

**North Carolina**

It was just the two of them, this first night. Rob was away on a flight. The twins were staying with friends. *I am in Evie's house.* Becca sat in the living room facing her daughter. *I am with Evie. This is Evie.* It hardly seemed possible. A miracle, a gift beyond measure, overwhelmingly joyous. And yet. Being here with Evie did not fill the empty gulf of so many lost years. The loss of that little girl who had been so much a part of her was still a loss. Becca wanted to fill herself as much as possible with this Evie, this poised and gentle woman, this mother and wife and teacher with Ben's sparkle in her eyes and Becca's own curls.

And she wanted to return to this Evie some of what had been lost to her, those memories that adults hold of their earliest years only because of the stories told and retold to them so often that the stories become memories ingrained. Becca wanted to give that to Evie. Memories of precious things Evie had said, had done. Of tender moments and happy times and people who had loved her. And of the love the two of them had shared, those best of all moments stored up in Becca's heart. *Does she want those memories?* Becca didn't know. *How many will be too much? Are they gifts I want to give to her, or do I just want her to know that she once loved me? A gift to myself.* She supposed it was all of that. Too much for one short visit.

So Becca told Evie about the little family Becca had made for herself of Drew and Jill, Jill's husband and their two little girls, and Dory, until Dory died at ninety years old ten years back. She didn't mention Bett. Didn't tell Evie that she and Drew had visited Bett not long before she died in the forties

or what Bett had told them then—that Mildred had been one of Bett’s first working girls under the hill in Natchez, back when Mildred was a young woman. And that Bett had never known of Mildred’s true motives with Becca, had not been party to Mildred’s deceit.

“You’ll meet Drew, if you visit,” she told Evie. “You loved him when you were so very little.” Becca had heady memories of Evie in Drew’s room in Natchez, the golden angels spinning, chimes tinkling, Evie’s eyes lit by the light of the candles as Drew held her up to watch. A memory Becca would have told Evie so many times that she, too, could see it played out, if only...

“What you said about my...about Hazel,” Evie said then. “About the sacrifices she made and how grateful you are to her for keeping me safe. I want you to know how grateful I am to you. You were so strong, setting out on your own, working to build a good life for us when times were so hard. And you kept me safe by not shouting to the world the name of the woman who had your child, making sure I wasn’t found by anyone else. Even if you couldn’t find me yourself. I don’t know how to thank you for loving me that much.”

Then Evie’s tears finally came. Becca stood, and Evie met her with open arms. As they held each other, Becca said, “This is enough. You, standing here, are so much more than enough.”

Later, they sat together in Evie’s kitchen with Lottie’s bread box between them. Becca gave Evie Ben’s compass and told her how wonderful her father had been, how much he had loved them both. They spread Lottie’s buttons over the tabletop, and as they pored over the tiny painted scenes, Evie became acquainted with the grandmother who had loved her before she was born. Depicted on those buttons were the belfried churches of Rodney, starry night skies, purple irises, sunsets and dawns, views of the river that Lottie had loved.

“What’s this one?” Evie asked.

“Let me see,” Becca said. “Oh, yes.” And then Evie heard about the evening a ball of lightning rolled through the living room of the house in Mapleton, just missing Lottie’s knee, foreshadowing something only Lottie had understood.

Next, Becca took out Lottie’s illustrated storybook—oh, how she had missed that book—and Evie marveled at the artwork and the messages and a woman with the heart to create such a thing. Along with the compass, Becca wanted Evie to keep the buttons. Becca would take home the bread box and the storybook and Ben’s wallet. She’d been without them for so long.

Without the distraction of the things in the bread box, and even after the sweet words and the embrace that had brought some healing to Becca, there was still some awkwardness between them. But they each promised to visit the other, and Becca held much hope in that.

Gathering up the buttons, Evie said she was sure she would have liked Lottie. “Her name is dark blue,” she said, smiling. Then she began an explanation that Becca interrupted with, “*Lottie* is light green to me.” And that sent them into comparisons of their colors for letters and numbers and musical notes, neither of them having met anyone else with that sense of color.

A little later they said good night, and Becca tucked the bread box under her arm. As she was walking down the hall to the guest room, she heard Evie call after her—“My color for *Mom* is yellow.”



Nell

**1971**

**North Carolina**

Nell didn't sleep well the last night on Clay Mountain. Sometime in the wee hours, the night moonless and deeply dark, that old imaginary door behind which she had shut up all her childhood questions so long ago opened again, one lone question, a new one, residing there now: *Had Hazel tried to find Becca?*

That old document she and Evie had held in their hands as children, and what had been printed there—*Mother: Becca Chambers*—was weighing on her. They'd found it in one of Hazel's books in Hazel's bookcase. It might have been there for years, that book, *Jane Eyre*, before she and Evie found it, before it disappeared soon after that. If Hazel had known Becca's name back then, had she looked for her? Nell needed to know.

This visit with Hazel had gone so well, been so moving. Hazel was so much lighter and brighter now that everything, or almost everything, had been brought into the open and shared among the four women. Nell did not want to make a misstep now.

When she woke again after a few more hours of sleep, she chose carefully the time for broaching the question with Hazel, then waited until it was nearly time to leave to pick up Becca at Evie's house for the drive back to Mississippi. Then she stood in front of the bookcase and cursorily scanned the titles, Hazel behind her in the corduroy armchair working a crossword puzzle, no need now for retreating to her room with it.

"Mom," Nell said, running a finger down the spine of a book. "Do you

remember an old copy of *Jane Eyre* that used to be here?”

First there was silence. Nell turned and saw only a perplexed look on her mother’s face, not the guardedness of the past. Then Hazel answered. “Yes, I remember that book.”

“Whatever happened to it?”

“It came from that bread box of Becca’s.”

Nell saw in her mother a new willingness to answer questions.

“I only opened it one time, that box. It wasn’t mine to open, and I felt bad doing it, but I had to see if there was anything there I needed to know about. There wasn’t anything valuable or important in it. A Bible with a hollowed-out center, empty. A man’s wallet—not much inside. A compass that might’ve been worth something. A child’s storybook and some fancy buttons. Nothing else but that copy of *Jane Eyre*. Back then, when I was so afraid all the time, reading books helped take me out of those dark places, and I’d heard about that one. It didn’t seem like anything personal, so I set it aside before I hid the box somewhere I knew you and Evie wouldn’t find it.” She looked at Nell then with a smile so open and unburdened that Nell felt a rush of tenderness for her.

“I put it in the bookcase for later, but every time I thought about reading it, I remembered where it came from and everything I was so frightened of. So I just left it there, stopped thinking about it. It sat there for a few years. Then one day, I took it in to the thrift shop—you remember when I worked there? And I dropped it in a free-book bin.”

That was the longest answer Hazel had ever offered to any of Nell’s questions. It was a marvel.

“I guess you saw it there, in the bookcase?” Hazel asked.

“Yes, I remember seeing it there. So, you never read it?”

“Never even cracked it open,” Hazel said. “Why? Did it mean anything, that book?” The old worry crease between Hazel’s eyes was back.

“No, Mom. It didn’t mean a thing,” Nell told her. “I just remembered it being there.”

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*She’d had Becca’s name from the start and never knew it.*

As Nell drove to Evie’s house, she wrestled with this new knowledge, this secret. That Hazel might have searched for Becca, might have somehow returned Evie to her, had she read that book, had she even opened it. That Evie might not have grown up on Clay Mountain, and Nell might have grown up without her sister.

But maybe it would have been disastrous, Hazel searching for Becca. Maybe she would have tipped off the wrong people, Evie been sent back to Mildred Chambers, Becca and Lucy put in greater jeopardy. Nell had no way of knowing.

Telling the others would not change the past. Surely this revelation would burden Hazel with an even greater share of guilt and regret than she’d been laboring under for so long. It might wear down Becca with might-have-beens carried into the future. And what good would come of telling this secret to Evie? None at all. She was better off not knowing. Nell imagined that was what Hazel had told herself while keeping secrets from her and Evie. *They’re better off not knowing.*

When Nell and Becca left Evie’s house to head back to Mississippi, they stopped to take a walk along the New River at a spot where the water was shallow and clear, rippling over low rocks and swirling around larger ones, perfect for wading on warm days like this one. Something Nell and Evie had done countless times.

“I miss this river,” Nell said.

“It’s a good thing to belong to a river,” Becca said. “And this one is

lovely.”

“It’s one of the oldest rivers in the world. Some say the second oldest,” Nell told her. “Despite its name.”

They stood still for a moment, listening to the water rush past. There in the shallows, Nell could see the pebbly bottom of the riverbed, reminding her of searching with Evie for the most lustrous golden stones glistening underwater, only to have them dry an ordinary dull brown, lined up on their windowsills.

Then Becca said, “My mother, Lottie, used to say the river talked to her. Our river—the Mississippi.”

“I’ve seen that river. It’s magnificent.”

“They have personalities, don’t you think? It seems that way to me.”

Nell agreed. “This one,” she said, “flows backward.”

Becca considered that, then said, “I think Lottie would have found something profound in that. Your river, the New River, flowing backward.”

# Epilogue

**1975**

Nell took her tea out to the garden to escape the racket the workers were making. By now, she had become so accustomed to the knocking of loose pipes and other quirky noises in Estelle's old house that she was afraid she might miss them when the restoration was complete. Tony's new landscaping contracts with the state had allowed them to begin bringing back to the house its 1920s charm.

The garden was blooming as profusely as it had this time last year when she and Tony had been married right there in front of the redbud tree. Evie had come, of course, with Rob and the twins, and with Hazel, who, after much prodding, had agreed to sing. Standing there among the daylilies and the glads and the zinnias, singing "Always," she'd looked as happy as Nell had ever seen her. Becca had been there, with Drew and Jill and Jill's daughters—Nell's new Mississippi family.

Her life had become so full with her marriage to Tony, her new career as a real estate agent, and with Becca, who had become something of a second mother to Nell. "Chosen family," Becca had said of the two of them, and that had meant the world to Nell. Becca often drove over from Vicksburg to visit, sleeping in the bedroom Nell and Tony had redecorated and christened "Becca's room."

Evie visited regularly as well. Nell had watched her relationship with Becca bloom with the promise that Evie's love might one day catch up with

Becca's. Evie and Rob still lived in Lillett, as Nell expected would always be the case, and now Hazel lived with them. Hazel's awakening, still a mystery to Evie and Nell, had backslidden somewhat. She no longer sang in churches, could not be coaxed to go shopping for dresses with Evie. But she sometimes went to the movies with a man who lived down the street, a new secret Evie had told Nell.

Nell sipped her tea and admired the garden and considered how much her life had changed in just a few short years. How her venture into the past had led to a future she could not have imagined. Tony came out then to sit beside her. He reached out to hold her hand and said, "The glads are pretty spectacular this year, aren't they?"

Nell looked over at him, the only person who knew all her secrets, the man she might never have met had Hazel opened Becca's copy of *Jane Eyre* before she and Evie had. "Yes," she told Tony. "Just beautiful."

## Author's Note

Unlike many of the towns mentioned in this novel, Rodney, Mississippi, is real. Some might say it *was* real, but I am convinced that everyone who stumbles upon the remains of that ghost town leaves with a haunting sense of place unique to Rodney. That said, this book is a work of fiction. Although I conducted extensive research and made every effort to do justice to Rodney, to create an authentic atmosphere for readers, this setting is an imagining of that place. In truth, there is little information to be found about Rodney in the 1930s. There are numerous newspaper articles and other accounts from earlier decades when the town was a major Mississippi River port, and afterward as it fell into decline. But the thirties are something of a historical wasteland with regard to Rodney, too late to be newsworthy and too early to be remembered by people today. Members of the Rodney History and Preservation Society and some former residents of Rodney who lived there when it was mostly gone to ghost patiently answered my questions as best they could. While I have been true to some of the known physical details about Rodney or have offered a nod to such details, the specific characters and structures in the story (other than the churches) are products of my imagination.

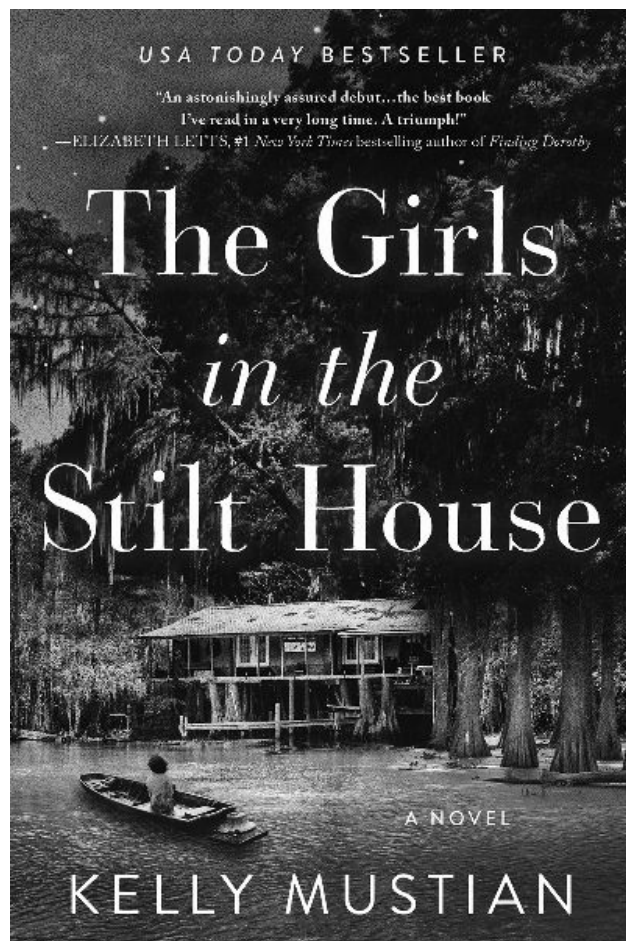
My portrayal of Natchez Under-the-Hill is fictionalized as well, although I grew up in Natchez and spent much time on the river bluff there. My familiarity with that setting informed the creation of Becca's Under-the-Hill of the 1930s.

Both of these settings have places in my heart, their physical pathways that



I have walked and the imaginary versions in the story. One truth that I've planted amid all the fiction is my lifelong love of rivers, especially the Mississippi. Becca got that from me.

**Read on for a look at *The Girls in the Stilt House* by Kelly Mustian.**



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## Prologue

The two girls climb down from the wagon and land with gentle thumps on a mat of damp leaves. They move quietly against the dark expanse of forest behind them. Overhead are a hazy half-moon, a few scattered stars. Ada waits as the other girl nudges the mule forward and loops his leather lead around a branch. With a glance back at the wagon, which the girls have steered off a weedy dirt road and close in to the trees, Ada follows her companion, dependent upon the sounds of twigs and old acorns crunching under boots until her eyes adjust to the deeper darkness of the woods. Even then Matilda's face, her arms, her bare legs beneath the hem of her drab dress blend with the night, while Ada considers herself as pale as the moon, conspicuous to anyone passing by. She worries a finger-sized hole in the pocket of her skirt. Surely anyone spotting them would wonder what two girls of their ages—Ada sixteen, Matilda probably some older—and of their sorts were up to out here on this remote stretch of the Natchez Trace near on to midnight. Ada says as much, her voice a hoarse whisper.

“Ain't nobody *passing by* in the thick of these woods this far off the Trace, day or night.” Matilda's voice rings through the dark night unhushed, and Ada feels a thrill run up the back of her neck. She is nearly overcome by the newness of the feeling. Anything, it seems to her, might come of this night. And almost anything would be better than what has come before.

Deeper in the woods, a canopy of old-growth trees blots out even the faint moonlight. Matilda lights a small lantern, and an army of moths rises to claim the flame. Ada follows the swinging light, and the girls walk on in silence.

After a time Matilda says, “There they are,” and stops.

Ada steps up to two lichen-encrusted tombs—brick and limestone—rising just over knee-high from the forest floor. She kneels beside one of them, slides her hand over the cold stone top, and is almost convinced she is not dreaming.

“They’re Confederates,” Matilda says, and though the girl’s voice is still unfamiliar to Ada’s ears, there is no mistaking her lack of sympathy. “Somebody laid them out in style, sixty-some years ago. Had the slabs carved up and hauled out here where almost nobody’d ever see them. There’s the crack, on that one there.” Matilda sets the lantern on the other tomb, and in the small splash of light, Ada can read bits of a worn inscription: *Died October 18, 1862; Colonel; steadfast; and Asleep in Jesus.*

Roots of the old trees have worked themselves under the tomb, buckling the brick frame and loosening the stone slab on top, cracking it in two across the sagging middle. Ada runs her hand along the dogleg crevice. She can just shove her little finger through it, which she does, raising the hairs on her neck again.

Matilda tries to lift a corner of the slab. “Give me a hand here,” she grunts. Ada fits her fingers under the stone, and the girls pull in tandem. They manage to slide it several inches.

“All right, then,” Matilda says. “We found them. Let’s go back for the tools.”

“And for...for him?”

“Unless you’re planning on leaving him buried in hay in the back of the wagon.”

The two girls trudge back the way they came. Ada follows Matilda, wordlessly working on the hole in her pocket until she can slide her whole hand through it.

## Part One

# **Ada Morgan**

# 1

## **Spring, 1923**

Ada smelled the swamp before she reached it. The mingling of sulfur and rot worked with memory to knot her stomach and burn the back of her throat. She was returning with little more than she had taken with her a year before, everything she counted worthy of transporting only half filling the pillowcase slung over her shoulder. It might have been filled with bricks, the way she bent under it, but mostly it was loss that weighed her down. The past few days had swept her clean of hope, and a few trinkets in a pillowcase were all that was left to mark a time when she had not lived isolated in this green-shaded, stagnant setting. When she was a little girl, she had believed she loved this place, the trees offering themselves as steadfast companions, the wildflowers worthy confidants, but passing through now with eyes that had taken in other wonders and a heart that had allowed an outsider to slip in, she knew she had only been resigned to it. As she was again.

She had heard it said that children who lose their mothers early are childlike for the rest of their lives. As it happened, she had *overheard* those words on the morning of her mother's burial, whispered by the preacher's wife to the preacher, who had cast a doubtful glance at nine-year-old Ada, finding it unlikely—Ada's being childlike—even then. Nevertheless, Ada had held on to the thought, sliding it to the front of her mind often in the weeks that followed until it became undeniably apparent that her mother's death was not, after all, going to usher in an era of ongoing playfulness.

Seven years had passed since then, and if there had been a childlike moment in Ada's life, it had been the one in which she slipped out an open window to run away with the first boy who looked her way. Childlike because she had hardly known him. Because she was only fifteen at the time. Although no one who knew her, or knew her father, would have tried to stop her. She had drifted through the following year in a sweet dream, and when she woke to find she was left with nothing and no one, with nowhere to go but back to her father, the only thing that was surprising to her was that anything as wonderful as Jesse, as their tiny room over the white barbershop on Harlow Street in Baton Rouge, had happened to her at all.

Now she found herself on the last leg of a journey she had promised herself she would never take. She had left Baton Rouge at daybreak, traveling first by train, then in the buggy of a charitable stranger, and finally on the back of a produce wagon that raised a cloud of dust in its wake, obscuring all that lay behind her. The vegetable peddler had taken her far beyond the limit of his usual route, well past the last smattering of rickety houses on the fringes of Bristol, Mississippi, to a wild, desolate strip of the Natchez Trace, an old Native trail cut through the backwoods and now only partially passable. He had let her off where the Trace began to swing away from an increasingly marshy terrain, raising an eyebrow before lifting his hat as Ada slipped down from the wagon and murmured a word of thanks. She had watched him maneuver the horses back the way they had come, then disappear behind a new cloud of dust.

Now she pressed on, both hands wrapped firmly around the twisted end of her pillowcase, not thinking about where she was going or where she had been, but only of forward motion. After some time, at a spot where the old road narrowed amid wild overgrowth, she turned off the Trace and onto a grassy trail hemmed in by a dense canebrake on one side and a mixed-wood forest on the other. The sun, not due to set for a few hours more, abandoned her for the far side of the canebrake, and she knew to watch her steps in the

false twilight, alert to any stick that might be a rattlesnake, any root a copperhead, as the path curved around the cane and the woods closed in behind her. A mockingbird trilled overhead, lazily acknowledging her presence in his woods, but she did not stop to look at him or to pull up the socks that had slid under her heels and bunched beneath her feet, though she felt the sting of new blisters.

After a while, the trail took a sharp turn. Without warning, but coming as no surprise to Ada, the wall of river cane fell away, and there it was. Familiar as her shoes. As her squarish hands and her long tangle of pale-brown curls. Still, it was alarming.

The swamp. It stretched before her as if she had arrived at the utter end of a dismal world. Shrouded in a thin fog, giant bald cypress trees rose from the still water as apparitions, their gnarled limbs trailing tendrils of Spanish moss, their buttresses bulging above the water's surface, exposed to hordes of insects that chirped and screeched an afternoon dirge. All that was left was to follow the edge of the swamp, and she did. The nearer she came to her destination, the more slowly she walked. In time, she was hardly moving at all. And yet, she arrived. Home.

Small and boxy, the house was raised on a network of cypress stilts facing the swamp. A year had not changed it much. Its bare-wood exterior was still a weathered mushroom gray, its tin roof still rusting through an ancient coat of white paint. The house did not seem of slighter scale, as Ada knew houses often did when people returned to them older. If anything, it was taller than she remembered. More forbidding, somehow. Or perhaps she just felt smaller. It did seem more ramshackle, as if it might fold its stick legs and collapse under a good wind, but she knew that was because Baton Rouge, even Harlow Street, was luminous in her memory. Bright and shiny and as solid as the swamp was soggy.

She stood there for a minute or two, breathing old air from her old life that did not seem to fill her lungs anymore. Jesse was less than twenty-four hours



behind her. Her hair still smelled of the mossy cavern under his arm where she had asked, had begged, to keep her head for an extra few minutes before they left the little apartment. She had wasted those moments crying, but he had let her stay nested there until the last second. She doubted he knew how grateful she was to him for that and for every other moment spent with him. But that was done.

There was no sign of her father's wagon. When she rounded the house and checked the pole barn that slumped against the tree line at the edge of the woods, his mule was not there. So he was away, she thought. There would be no gaining permission to reenter her previous life, and Ada was reluctant to barge back in without leave. A thousand insect voices urged her up the front porch steps, pressing her to pull open the screen door and knock. When she did, there was no answer, but even so, she called out before pushing open the front door, then called again after.

The main room was as changed as the swamp was the same. Half living room and half kitchen, it was cluttered with dirty dishes, grimy clothes, newspapers, trash, and empty bottles and mason jars. It was like a way station for roving bandits. A jumble of skinning knives and leather sheaths rested on the roughly hewn pine table, some of the knives standing with their blades lodged in the wood. This was the table her mother had set for supper when Ada was young and that Ada had set for her father in later years. Now a hacksaw lay across the cookstove at one end of the room, and at the other end a greasy sawtooth trap caked with dried blood and matted fur occupied Ada's old bed, a thin straw mattress laid over a narrow rope bed frame. With no female presence to contend with, her father evidently had relocated the tools of his trade from the tin shed out back to the house. All around the room his drying boards, stained with animal oils and pocked with nail holes, leaned against the walls. A wooden barrel, chest high and filled with sawdust, stood behind the front door.

Ada dipped her hand into the barrel and let a mound of sawdust sift

through her fingers. Her father used it to clean his pelts, dusting them with it and brushing it through until the fur was soft and shiny. She remembered a time, when she was very small, when she had sprinkled a handful of sawdust into her rag doll's yarn hair, delighting her father to no end. He had squatted down to her level and eyed the doll. "Good girl," he'd said. "Should we scalp her now? Mount her pelt on one of my boards?" He'd held out his hand, and Ada had wordlessly handed the doll to him. Her father had howled with laughter.

"Virgil, please," her mother had said, taking the doll and tucking it back into Ada's lap. Ada wondered what became of that doll, but then she pulled her thoughts back to the present. She had found it was best not to let them stray.

As she stepped around the stove on the kitchen side of the room, Ada choked back a scream. An alligator hide had been nailed to the wall, the creature's mouth frozen in a bisected grin. Spilled from an overturned cup on the floor were what looked to be the beast's teeth, yellow and sharp and curved like machetes. Ada raised her hands to her face and felt them trembling as she backed away.

She was almost glad her mother was not alive to see this, to have to live with this, which she would have, her mother. Ada remembered that much about her. Her mother had not been the sort to confide in anyone, but it had not escaped Ada's notice, even as a young child, that her mother was well schooled in living with things. With enduring. And until the day Ada met Jesse, she had followed her mother's lead.

She went over to the window. Through a filmy layer of grime that dimmed the room like a shade, the swamp was a blur of green and brown. She had a thought: perhaps even her father was not living like this. The trash, the broken bottles, the foul air—it all squared with abandonment. Maybe he had moved on, somewhere farther north with better trapping. It was possible. Or there might have been an accident while he was setting his traps and snares in

the woods or stringing a trotline in that bend of the Pearl River where the current was fierce. Such things had been known to happen. He could have been shot by a hunter taking him for a deer. That last thought was not entirely unpleasant to Ada, and though it shamed her some, she let it linger. Soon she was mentally clearing the house of the tools and the trash, erasing the subtle stink of decomposed carcasses, turning the room back into the clean, spare space it had been when she was a little girl and her mother was young and still somewhat resilient. She stitched imaginary curtains for the windows and twisted rag rugs for the floors. She stuffed dried wildflowers into milk bottles and allowed herself a slight smile.

When she crossed the dim, dogtrot hallway that divided the house into two rooms, intending to make similar improvements to her father's bedroom, all the pretty pictures in her head fell away. She tripped over a tub of greasy tools, and reaching out to catch herself, she caught hold of the cold, smooth barrel of her father's deer rifle mounted on the wall. Her father would have left his leg behind before leaving his rifle, had he moved on. It was much more likely that he was away selling pelts, hauling a load to Jackson or to Vicksburg to be shipped up the river. He would be back. Unless he really was dead. Ada entered the bedroom cautiously. Her father's mattress, lying atop a box bedstead, was bare except for a thin blanket twisted into a rank wad. The window on the back wall was greased black to keep out the sun, but a small circle had been rubbed clear, letting in enough light for Ada to note the array of empty bottles surrounding the bed. Her father had not lost his taste for rotgut. She hadn't supposed he had.

The room was so small a person with some talent could spit tobacco juice on each of the four walls while lying in bed, something her father had been proud to prove to her more than once. She noticed a scrap of her mother's Christmas tablecloth, embroidered with holly leaves and berries, caught in a crack in one of the baseboards, pulled through by mice, she imagined. On the windowsill, within reach of the bed, was another mason jar half-filled with—

Ada leaned and sniffed—pee.

She returned to the kitchen and sat down on an old cane chair that groaned even under her slight weight. Living here hadn't seemed so bad, she thought, when she had known nothing else. But now it was nearly unbearable. She shoved aside a dirty plate and rested her forehead on her arms crossed over the sticky tabletop. It wasn't that she and Jesse had had much, but what they'd had was all Ada would have needed for the rest of her life. It had been more than enough. It had been everything. When she left Baton Rouge, she had nothing. And now she had this. This house. In this place. It was less than nothing.

She thought maybe she would try praying, went so far as to fold her hands under her chin there at the table, but she couldn't come up with any words that did not mean "Please let my father be dead" or something just as likely to send her to hell. And what if her father really did not return? What if God chose that moment to answer an unspoken prayer? Who would she look to then? There was no one to tell her what to do, and she had no experience with making plans of her own. She stood up. She opened the front door and let the late sunlight spill across the room. She filled an empty bucket with dirty dishes and dropped in a brittle slice of dirt-lined soap she found wedged in a crack between wallboards in the kitchen. Then she lugged the bucket down the back porch steps and out to the pump behind the house. She would make herself useful.

The woods had crept closer while she had been away, and perhaps the canebrake to the north, as well. In time, she supposed, if left unhindered, they would overtake the entire yard, then the outbuildings and the house, creeping right up to the edge of the swamp.

She dumped the dishes onto the grass and set the bucket under the spigot. With a familiar rhythm, she worked the handle up and down until a trickle of water grew into a stream and she was able to loosen a layer of sludge in the bottom of the bucket. As she bent to replace it under the spigot, she caught a

flash of movement in the woods. A quick flicker of light or shadow that could have been anything and was likely nothing, but she thought perhaps she had heard something, too. Something not quite right for those woods at that time of day. She scanned the overgrown edges for anything that might emerge, a raccoon or a fox or a muskrat, perhaps, and told herself that the woods were full of ordinary creatures darting or waddling through the brush, sounding like things they were not. A squirrel dashing through dry leaves could sound like a bear. She knew that. Still, she turned back to her task uneasy.

She would fill the bucket and wash the dishes as best she could. Before the last of the light was gone on this first day home, she would bring in a fresh bucket of water and begin cleaning the house. When it was too dark and she was too tired to work anymore, she would take Jesse's shirt from her pillowcase and slide it over her arms, button it over her blouse. She would brush the layer of dust off the old oilcloth table cover folded behind the stove and spread it on the floor, find an old pillow. She was a light sleeper. She would wake to his foot on the steps, to his crossing the porch, should he come in the night. She would call out to him. "Daddy," she'd call, and he would know it was her, would put down any weapon he had in his hand. He wouldn't shoot her. What would be the fun in that? And her father, Ada knew, would have his fun with her return.

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# Reading Group Guide

1. What kind of influence does Lottie have on Becca's life even after Lottie's death?
2. Lottie does not reveal her illness to Becca, as she wants Becca to be free to establish a new life with Ben. Do you think that was a good decision?
3. There are many other examples of sacrifice in this novel. What are some of them?
4. Throughout their lives, Lottie and Becca find strength and comfort at the river. Is there a place that offers you something similarly meaningful?
5. When Mildred first reaches out, her intentions are unclear. In Becca's circumstances, would you have made a decision to seek help from her?
6. After Mildred's many deceptions were revealed, what did you think of the choices Becca made in dealing with that situation?
7. Many characters in the novel develop familial relationships that are made rather than born into: Lottie and Becca, Hazel and Evie, Becca and Drew. Can you think of others?
8. Do you think Lucy redeemed herself, despite the things she did? Do you sympathize with her?
9. Of the many settings in the story—Rodney, Natchez Under-the-Hill, Estelle's house, the Lighthouse Motor Hotel—which did you find most evocative and why? What role do you think landscape plays in the novel?

10. The story unfolds from three perspectives: Becca's and Hazel's in the 1930s and Nell's in the 1970s. As you read, how did this structure change your understanding of the characters and their motivations?

# A Conversation with the Author

**What inspired you to write *The River Knows Your Name*? Why did you choose to set it in the 1930s and the 1970s?**

My earliest inspirations were, as they almost always are with a new story, related to landscape and setting. I knew I wanted to revisit Mississippi, particularly the historically notorious Natchez Under-the-Hill and the old ghost town of Rodney, each rich in literary possibilities. I grew up on the Mississippi River in Natchez, and like Evie and Lottie in the novel, I made friends with the river early on. Both the Mississippi River and the New River in North Carolina, where I live now, inspired what became a river theme running through the novel.

Many of the stories my mother and grandmother told me about their young lives were from the 1930s, heavily influenced by the Great Depression. As a result, I felt at home writing in that decade, could envision life in a dusty ghost town or in a river house under the bluff in that period. And I had my own memories of Mississippi in the 1970s to draw from as well.

With not much more than those settings and periods and a kernel of an idea about two sisters living in the shadows of their mother's secrets, I began writing. And as usually happens, the story took shape, scene by scene, chapter by chapter, my progress like driving on a dark road with the low beams on, seeing just far enough ahead to make the next turn.

**The characters move from place to place throughout the story, yet each location is distinctly atmospheric. What difficulties did you encounter in**



### **working with multiple settings?**

It's important to me to steep a story in its setting, to give readers a sense of being right there in that place, wherever it is. With so many relocations to deal with, sustaining the kind of atmospheric nature I'm always striving for was difficult. With that in mind, I worked with detail and description, with sights and sounds and smells, and with tying especially emotional scenes to the characters' surroundings in ways that I hoped would engage readers' emotions and perhaps remind them of something deeply felt in their own lives.

### **What was your process for writing this book? Did you first write the storylines separately, or did you work on them together?**

My process involved a notebook with detailed and ever-changing timelines, a wall of color-coded sticky notes, and kids' bathtub crayons in my shower because that seems to be where all the best ideas present themselves.

Sometimes I wrote many chapters of one storyline before switching to another. Often I returned to the beginning and started again, working through the chapters in a straight line, making sure everything fit together.

With Nell reaching backward from 1971 and Becca and Hazel moving forward in the early 1930s, each of them providing unique clues to what happened in 1934, the weaving together of their stories became quite complex. Every change had a wide ripple effect on other chapters. My wall of organized sticky notes helped me to see the whole picture clearly from draft to draft.

### **What kind of research went into the writing of this novel?**

I reread old notes I'd made about my mother's and grandmother's reminiscences of Mississippi in the 1930s. (Ball lightning really did roll through my mother's childhood home one day!) I ferreted out what little information there is about Rodney in the 1930s in books and periodicals and

historical records. I pestered an online group of kind people who have family ties to Rodney, a few of whom lived there themselves as it was fading away. I was granted permission to see the upstairs rooms of a two-hundred-year-old building—currently a long-established saloon believed to have had an early history as a brothel—in Natchez Under-the-Hill, and though by then I had already written the chapters that are set in a brothel, walking through those old rooms was like stepping into those scenes. I took research trips to Rodney and Natchez—walked the dirt road through the ghost town and stood on the bluff at Natchez—and in my writer’s head and heart, it was 1934.

**Evie and Becca associate colors with words and, in Evie’s case, music. What is behind that sense of color they shared?**

That was inspired by my son’s own experience with synesthesia. He sees words and musical notes in colors in his head, much as Evie does in the story. I’ve always found that fascinating.

**Why did you choose to end the story as you did?**

It’s a tragic story, so a conventional happy ending would not have fit. In a sense though, the ending is something of a fulfillment of Nell’s early sentiment that as a child she had wished for a different sort of family, while Evie had desperately wanted a sense of belonging with Hazel. Nell found a second mother in Evie’s Becca, and Evie gained the bond she had longed for with Hazel.

**What do you want readers to take away from this story?**

What I’ve come to believe after hearing from so many readers of *The Girls in the Stilt House* is that there is nothing better to hope for than that something in this story will connect with the personal experiences of readers and offer them something meaningful. That makes all the hard work worthwhile.

# Acknowledgments

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## About the Author

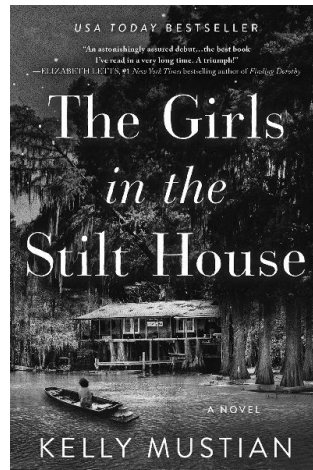


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Kelly Mustian is the *USA Today* bestselling author of *The Girls in the Stilt House* and *The River Knows Your Name*. She is the recipient of the Mississippi Library Association's 2023 Author Award for Fiction, and *The Girls in the Stilt House* was shortlisted for the 2022 Crook's Corner Book Prize for best debut novel set in the American South. Her work has appeared in numerous literary journals and commercial magazines. Originally from Mississippi, she currently lives in North Carolina.

## ***The Girls in the Stilt House***

**Two teenage girls in 1920s Mississippi, brought together through murder.**



Ada promised herself she would never go back to the Trace, to her hard life on the swamp and her harsh father. But now, after running away to Baton Rouge and briefly knowing a different kind of life, she finds herself with nowhere to go but back home. And she knows there will be a price to pay with her father.

Matilda, daughter of a sharecropper, is from the other side of the Trace. Doing what she can to protect her family from the whims and demands of some particularly callous locals is an ongoing struggle. She forms a plan to go north, to pack up the secrets she's holding about her life in the South and hang them on the line for all to see in Ohio.

As the two girls are drawn deeper into a dangerous world of bootleggers and moral corruption, they must come to terms with the complexities of their tenuous bond and a hidden past that links them in ways that could cost them their lives.

***“[A] nearly flawless tale of loss, perseverance, and redemption.”***

**—*Publishers Weekly*, Starred Review**

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