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**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON**  
**FACULTY OF LAW, ARTS & SOCIAL**  
**SCIENCES**

School of Humanities

**Paradidomi: Magical Realism and the American South**

by

**Jennifer Maria Young**

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

June 2009

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF LAW, ARTS & SOCIAL SCIENCES

SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES

Doctor of Philosophy

**PARADIDOMI: MAGICAL REALISM AND THE AMERICAN SOUTH**

by Jennifer Maria Young

The thesis is comprised of a novel and a critical reflection. The novel component, entitled *The Mathers' Land*, draws on traditions of magical realism, storytelling, memory and metafiction. The framing narrative of the novel follows Luanne Richardson, a librarian who has moved South with her new boyfriend, Kenneth Miers. As soon as they arrive in Peebles, North Carolina, Kenneth disappears. Luanne only knows that he last visited a particular house that belongs to the Mathers, the richest family in Peebles. Luanne forces an encounter with the head of the family, Walter Mathers. Despite her initially confrontational contact, Walter Mathers offers Luanne a job to construct a history of his family through interviews and records. He hopes the history will provide an answer to why his only son Eric has not produced an heir.

Luanne's research draws her into a claustrophobic society where no one seems to notice the frequent deaths of the wives of the Mathers family or their odd attachment to roses and a dogwood tree, as elements of magical realism occur in the frame story. The interviews Luanne conducts appear on the pages of the novel as fully developed stories, which draw on themes of tradition, loss and family attachment. These themes are explored through perceptions of memory and storytelling.

The critical reflection component considers both what methods and writings made it to the thesis as well as what methods and writings did not. It explores the modes of construction, from the use of Oulipian and metafictional techniques to the use of magical realism. The major influences from specific writers are addressed in terms of structure, magical realism and Southernness, specifically Harry Mathews, Joseph McElroy, Mischa Berlinski, Sharyn McCrumb, Randall Kenan, Steven Sherrill, and particularly Doris Betts. The reflection concludes by addressing what it means to be an expatriate 'Southern' writer.

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Jennifer Maria Young declare that the thesis entitled Paradidomi: Magical Realism and the American South and the work presented in the thesis are both my own, and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research. I confirm that:

- this work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
- where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
- where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
- where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
- I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
- where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
- none of this work has been published before submission, **or** [delete as appropriate] parts of this work have been published as: [please list references]

**Signed:** .....

**Date:**.....

Dedicated to the memory of my grandmother,  
Rebecca T. McCombs,  
who instilled in me a love of books

### Acknowledgements

My writing life has always been supported with unswerving faith by my family, and I am incredibly appreciative of my parents, Cathy and Dave Young and my grandparents, J.W. McCombs, Jr. and the late Rebecca McCombs, to whom this work is dedicated. My husband Joe Flatman has constantly provided encouragement, support, counsel, tea and blankets, and I cannot thank him enough.

My supervisors and advisors, Peter Middleton, Mary Hammond and Aamer Hussein, have supported me enormously and guided me through my many elaborate plans and structures.

Numerous friends and colleagues from both the University of Hertfordshire and the University of Southampton have encouraged me endlessly. In alphabetical order, they are Steve Bennett, Mandy Bloomfield, Helen Boak, Owen Davies, Stephanie Grainger, Ross Hair, Rowland Hughes, Sarah Lloyd, Nicky Marsh, Andrew Maunder, Tim Parke, Sandeep Parmar, Victoria Sheppard, Lucy Watson and Rachel Wagstaff. Nicole King at the English Subject Centre provided professional guidance. During my time at Cardiff University, Patience Agbabi, Lindsay Clarke and Lauri Ramey offered much assistance. Without the teaching of Doris Betts, Marianne Gingher and Bland Simpson at UNC Chapel Hill, I might not be writing today.

I wish to thank the following for their support, friendship and patience: Alec Badenoch, Carina Buckley, Sally Cameron Griffiths, Bethan Crockett, Geoffrey Craig, Holly Dove, DM, Rob Epstein, Martin and Frances Flatman, James Kidd, Kyra Larkin, Jason Lucas, Kathy MacDonald, Matt O'Neill, Wayne Powers, Karen Randell, Richard Rhoades, Marcy Rockman, Dinah Roe, Della Scott-Ireton, Damian Sutton and Chris Willis. Tea ReX graciously supplied me with technical advice.

My PhD studies were supported by an Overseas Research Studentship provided by Universities UK and a studentship from the Arts Faculty of the University of Southampton. The London Library graciously awarded me a grant, which enabled me to complete significant research.

## The Mathers' Land

### Chapter 1

'Ms Richardson?'

The hunch of the old man's concave chest almost cupped my head as he stood over my chair. 'Mr Mathers?' I asked. The reek of cigarette smoke oozing out of his plaid shirt overwhelmed the coffee oils clogging the air of the café.

'Sam Kestle. I mostly get the paper to read the obituaries, you know, but I saw your thing in there. I just wanted you to know that Mr Mathers is a fine man, and he wouldn't have nothing to do with your young man running off. Excuse me. Sorry, but it's true.

I nodded. Not a thank you moment.

'Ma'am.' He shuffled towards a table behind me, all but doffing an imaginary cap.

My ad, my *thing*, sat, neatly boxed in black, at the bottom of page four of the *Peebles Independent Times*.

An Open Letter to Walter Mathers, Mathers Street, Peebles, North Carolina.

Dear Mr Mathers,

My fiancé Kenneth Miers disappeared on July 15<sup>th</sup>.

Fiancé. The word alone sprang a ticklish excitement in my body, never mind the verb that followed. Sixteen days together and he proposed. He'd outstayed his Greyhound bus ticket to remain in New York. With me. After the first night, he hadn't left my tiny apartment or my bed. Then we drove south towards his new job until the rain pushed us off the interstate into Peebles.

That night he told me stories about the last time he'd been in the town, and the next morning he'd left before dawn to take photos, to see what had changed. I took my cell phone into the bathroom while I showered, so when he called I could just clamber out. He said he loved me while water from my hair soaked the bath mat and pooled around my feet. And told me that he had lost track of time – the big old Mathers' house had changed since he'd last been there. He promised to come back before check out. But he didn't.

I looked back at the ad.

His last known location was on your property on Mathers Street. You have refused to answer both my requests and

those of a private investigator to discuss the events of the 15<sup>th</sup>. The police assure me they have no legal justification to question you.

I know that you knew Kenneth Miers almost twenty years ago. I believe you have information that could help me find him.

I couldn't read the rest of my words. Asking, no, imploring Walter Mathers to meet me today at Dodd's coffee shop. To tell me what he knew, since he refused to speak to my detective.

I started filling in the crossword. *Intent. Axiom. Transmogri-fy* stretched across the middle like a belt. I had a writing professor at university who said doing the crossword in ink was an act of supreme arrogance. Waiting on a very rich man to come and help me topped that. *Ember. Flail.*

The stories Kenneth had told me about his mandatory period in Peebles. Teaching photography to the elderly. Their shaking hands on the cameras and their jerky images with odd trails of light. He even practiced the tremulous technique until he got it right in the first picture he took of the girl he had loved. His serious, straight face when he said he would have married her, if she'd had him. She chose money, he said. Not love.

I waited for him to touch my hand, to say he loved me more. When he didn't, I felt Lu-like enough to say we wouldn't have met. He smiled, his perfect teeth as regular as sugar cubes, and leaned over the table to kiss me. My gin and his apple juice mingled sharply in my mouth.

*Ravelling.* A woman in her fifties, thick with perfume and orange make-up, told me how good the Mathers were.

Had the girl he'd loved married into the Mathers family?

*Discombobulate* traced down the grid's side, and the crossword was done. Walter Mathers wouldn't meet me any more than he'd answer my phone calls. But I only needed to visualise Kenneth's long fingers tapping against the steering wheel, gripping a waxed cup from our fast food lunches or resting on my stomach to feel my face flush and my leg muscles quiver.

I had to find out what had happened.

I circled seven typos in an editorial about fast growth timber. Two men in their forties, not smokers, gave me their positive opinions of Walter Mathers. None of their business, of course, they said, but they thought I ought to know. And they all sat down around me. My little table felt surrounded.

Surely small town friendliness. I got up to order another cup of tea.

Hot air beat against the fabric of my skirt as the door opened. Someone offered assistance to an expensively suited man in a wheelchair. He smiled and refused. The chair made

an audible clunk as the wheels came up over the doorframe. Another old man to tell me how the Mathers had built up Peebles?

‘Luanne Richardson?’ It should have seemed awkward, looking down at him in the chair, but I felt tiny. And entirely out of place as his eyes flicked from my worn sandals to my frizzy hair. Hot water sloshed over the edge of my mug and scalded my fingers.

‘Mr Mathers, what can I get you, sir?’ asked the girl behind the counter.

‘Black coffee please, Bella.’ He wheeled himself towards my table. How did he know? Women waved, and men offered their hands up for a tight, quick clasp. The swathe he cut rippled through the room.

Mr Mathers’ silver hair had been shorn aggressively into a crew cut. Someone silently removed a chair from my table, and he spun his wheelchair neatly in its place.

Did everyone wait to comply with his commands? My knees creaked as I sat opposite.

He stared at me, perhaps counting my freckles. Deciding if I was the type who should be run out of town. Where once everyone watched me, privacy shutters must have come down when he came to the table. No one looked at us. His cheekbones, thinner than a finger, pushed hard at the skin of his face, like they wanted to escape. His eyes were either grey or green, and urgently, I needed to determine one shade. The counter girl brought him a cup of coffee.

‘Sugar, cream, sweetener?’ she asked. She didn’t sound bored around him.

‘No. Thank you, Bella.’ He handed her a five-dollar bill. ‘No change.’

Did he know her name or did he use Bella as an endearment?

‘You wanted to see me,’ he said.

‘Yes.’ The crossword’s boxes burned into my eyes. I had a plan, once. ‘My fiancé, Kenneth Miers, disappeared eight days ago. He was taking pictures at your property.’

‘If he was, and I must emphasise, if, he would have been trespassing.’

‘You own this town.’ The adjacent tables had cleared.

‘Melodramatic. That would suit Mr Miers.’

‘The high school here is Mathers High.’ I would not be drawn in. He knew Kenneth. He’d just admitted it.

His lips pursed. ‘You have no job, you’re living in a motel, and I can only assume your savings are nearly gone. What are you going to do?’

‘The library is named after you.’

‘So are many things.’ He smiled. ‘The girl behind the counter – Bella Langford. Her grandfather worked for me, her father works for me. You call that disturbing; I call it building the community. She’ll be eligible for our employee college scholarship programme.’ He sipped his coffee. ‘I assume you have a point to make?’

‘I think you know what has happened to Kenneth.’ I had no proof, just a feeling. My skin prickled, but I wouldn’t scratch, not in front of him.

Mr Mathers placed his cup on the table. ‘Can I point out that my house sits in five acres? I don’t know if Mr Miers found his way onto my land or not. He could have driven off in a completely different direction.’

‘He said he was there.’ I could be stubborn. I had to be stubborn.

‘Does he answer his phone now?’

Every phone call went to voicemail, every text message flew away.

‘You have been dumped, Ms Richardson. Stop making rash claims in the newspaper, or I will take legal action. I understand you already face that over your rental car.’

‘Have you seen Kenneth Miers, Mr Mathers?’

‘I knew him, years ago. He was a man of impulses then. I assume he remained so. Incidentally, are you aware the last time he stopped in Peebles it was to serve a criminal sentence?’

The girl, the suicide note clutched in her hand, his speeding car, its metal striking her flesh. He’d laughed at the way I clung to the car door handle after he told his story. Said he was a careful driver now. ‘Did you, or your staff, see him last week?’

‘This isn’t New York, Ms Richardson. We don’t have security cameras everywhere. And I don’t have staff at home. You aren’t living in a movie. You just chose a man particularly badly.’ His hand reached over towards me, and I flinched. He placed a cream rectangle on the table, next to my mug. His left ring finger bore something yellow, something prickly, but he moved too quickly for me to study it. The rectangle was his business card.

‘You won’t need to contact me again. However, if you do, please avoid the newspapers. We do have telephones here.’

‘Telephones you refuse to answer,’ I shouted as he backed up from the table. ‘Do you know how many messages I’ve left?’

He executed a quick two-point turn, and then he wheeled himself out. Someone held the door for him.

The room snapped back into focus: the clink of spoons, the whirr of the espresso machine. People talking, staring at me accusingly. Shouting at an old handicapped man.

My teabag had stayed in through the whole conversation, and the tea tasted horribly bitter. I pushed back from the table and shoved the business card into my purse. I had to leave. Voices quieted as I stood, then picked back up as I paced – although I wanted to run – towards the door.

Cars, tightly sealed boxes of air conditioning, rushed past me. At the intersection, passengers locked their doors anxiously. Here, pedestrians couldn’t just be pedestrians. I might as well have had a sign that said, ‘homeless, out of work, please help.’

Except it would be true.

A foot had crushed the flowers in the bed beside the sidewalk. The bruised petals looked bewildered. They'd been just like their neighbours, normal cheerful little floral citizens. The heat here, the air as thick as oatmeal, had nothing in common with my life in New York, the shaded, airless enclaves between skyscrapers.

Kenneth had prowled silently around my apartment, the lens his third eye. Photographing my body, naked and segmented, images I wouldn't want to show to anyone. My stories poured out, my own voice rising and falling. My sister, Amelia. My useless mother. Tim, my first lover and the night Amelia disappeared at sixteen. I cried for the first time for years. Six shots snapped and whirred before he put down the camera to hold me, to rub my tears away. But artists were different, everyone knew that.

What I could hear clearly from him was my name – a version of my name. Lu. I'd never had a nickname – Annie was a no goer from the start. But his drawl of Lu, whispered into my hair in the art galleries I dragged him to. A nickname I didn't mind. Kenneth licked, stroked and loved me until Lu, a new, sexier, confident woman emerged, until I stopped worrying about the width of my thighs, the weight of my body on top of his pale frame, the frizziness of my red hair out of the shower.

Alone in the hotel room for the past week, Luanne re-emerged. My shoulders dipped. Only one shirt button undone, not two. Hair tightly tamed with ponytail holders and bobby pins.

A bird persistently whistled and another responded – or was it the same bird? A low whistle, then a higher chirp that sounded like an answer to a question. I couldn't go to the motel room, the almost like but not quite the room I'd shared with Kenneth. Nor could I drink more tea. Or eat.

I could find the library. But going to a library would only remind me of my lost job, my lost professional status.

To my right, a building's pale bricks reflected sunlight. The bricks' edges were soft, rounded, not precise like the sidewalk's. The red door stood open. A voice bellowed distantly, and a smell of cleaning products battled with a stronger smell of damp. The news last night had reported on the continuing drought, despite that rainstorm that forced us into Peebles. And this building had damp?

My shoes stayed soundless on the stone floor of the entryway. I peered through the windows set in the interior double doors. A sanctuary. The local church? The handle felt cool under my hot hand. I pushed it open.

I stood over a grating in the floor beside the door, and blessed cold air blew under my sweaty skirt. I closed my eyes. Silence. No bird chirrups, no cars, no slightly hysterical voice.

When I began to shiver, I stepped off the metal grid towards the rows of pews. The occasional bursts of coloured light shone through the stained glass. The dimness felt restful. I'd never been to church much, but I could pick out a pulpit and a baptismal font in the front.

Red light crept through the stained glass on the right side. Not enough to tell what the glass depicted. I drew closer. I could search for the light switch, but the identical fluorescent bars up there would only shine harshly. I didn't want harshness. I wanted this soft, grey coolness.

I threaded my way down the pew towards the redness. Towards an irregular shape blocking the light. A small tree. Who would plant a tree in a church? Carpeted floorboards formed a neat box around its base. Not a Christmas decoration in mid-summer.

The bark appeared as geometrically grooved as the brickwork outside. I touched one grid just the size of my fingertip. I felt a tiny shock, as if I'd sparked off a piece of metal. The leaves glowed in the red light.

I sat on the pew that butted up against the tree. A cross hung over the altar. No Jesus, so it must be Protestant. Wasn't North Carolina in the Bible Belt? I didn't even know if Kenneth went to church. He hadn't the two Sundays we'd been together.

Would praying help? I couldn't go begging when something went wrong, although I'd whispered prayers when Amelia had disappeared. And the day I walked back from lunch to the library and found the police walking through the stacks. I'd even said a thankful murmur when I woke to find Kenneth beside me, after that first night. Filling the void of my lost job, lost way of life.

My private detective had not been encouraging – apparently people didn't pay attention to missing posters of balding middle-aged men. I'd half stopped trusting the detective when he wouldn't interview – forcibly, if necessary – Walter Mathers. Or the unseen son, Eric Mathers. Anybody connected with that house.

I pulled the card out of my purse. Mathers and Son. Why singular? A yellow rose encircled a tree trunk above tiny print. *'Quality timber for 150 years. Building the proud State of North Carolina.'*

The text tinged into clarity, and my hands burned red as light poured through . . . no, out of the tree.

Trees didn't – couldn't light up. Fear wanted to fizz in my stomach, but my nerve endings lay calm under my crimson skin. Safe. From the tree. Light poured from its branches, from each leaf, life pulsing in its veins. The tree exhaled a small, intimate sigh. Its breath whistled past my ear, almost hitting the same low pitch as the bird's opening note.

My scalp, the flesh of my hands tingled, particularly the right index finger that had touched the bark. I felt warm. Not the nausea inducing sauna of outdoors, but comforting, like soaking in a hot bath. Safe. I hadn't felt this safe in years. Not since – not since Amelia's father left when I was nine.

Tears trickled down my cheeks, splashed on my fingers and the Mathers logo on the card. Something solid clattered to the ground, and the light began to dim. I wanted it to stay, to hold me, to soothe my worst fears.

The sanctuary gleamed only with faint sunshine when I finally stood up from the pew. I touched the bark again with a tear-dampened finger. The same quiver, but smaller, gentler. Like the tree had expended some level of energy.

What had rattled down to the floor? I squatted down. My hands felt carpet edges, then down an inch to soil. Moist soil. Beside an exposed root, a smooth flatness. Round. The edges were sharp. About the size of a saucer, but very thin, so thin as to be almost translucent. Not a plate, a disk. It smelled of freshly cut wood.

The door of the church swung open, and I pushed the disk onto the pew seat.

The lights switched on, whitely fluorescent.

‘Hello there. I’m Pastor Stephens.’

‘Luanne Richardson.’ I wiped my cheeks. ‘Sorry, the door was open, and . . .’ How to explain scrabbling on the floor of the church?

‘We’re happy to be a haven for people who need it. Although you’re lucky I was here, we have to keep the doors locked more than we’d like.’

A pleasant, flat-featured face. Dark rimmed glasses matched his clerical shirt. His smile encouraged me to talk, but how did I explain what had just happened?

‘We have some rotting roof beams. North Carolina’s been in a drought for three years, but there was rain last month and again last week. A small leak was enough to damage the wood. That’s the smell.’

And suddenly I smelled the mould. Heard the traffic and birds and workmen’s voices. What had happened? Why had it been so silent before?

The door barged open. ‘Sorry, Pastor Stephens. Thought I’d left the light on.’ The woman held a watering can and a handbag.

‘Siobhan, I was just talking to Luanne here. She’s . . .’

‘I saw you at the police station,’ she said. The minister turned to face her. ‘Mary’s parrot,’ she added, as if it explained everything. He nodded, and they both looked at me.

‘My fiancé is missing,’ I said. My fingertips found the fuzz of the pew cushion for the disk and card. I caught myself slightly on an edge. The disk or the paper? I shoved them in my purse, ignoring a tiny trickle of blood. The minister offered platitudes, prayers, counselling. The door slammed again.

‘Pastor Stephens, you need to see this beam,’ a male voice said.

‘Ladies, excuse me.’ He walked past the woman.

I clambered along the narrow pew, banging my knee on the seat. I kept my eyes on the blue carpeting.

‘I saw you at the Mathers’ house too. I’m sorry; I’m not following you. Are you ok?’ She pointed at my finger, the blood dark under the fluorescent lighting. ‘Come on, I’ll get you a band-aid.’ How rude would it be to just escape out into the heat? But she headed out of the sanctuary, and I followed her down a flight of stairs and along a darkened corridor. Through an

open door, and suddenly, clear, ordinary windows lined the outside wall. She went past an office into a kitchen where an industrial icemaker hummed. She put the watering can on the floor and her purse on a metal counter top.

‘It’s crazy, all these procedures. But I have to, as a first aider.’ She opened a first aid kit and pulled on gloves.

‘Why were you at the Mathers’ house?’ I asked.

‘I garden for them. Is it a paper cut? I’m a teacher – horticulture – at Mathers High School.’ She tore open an antiseptic wipe.

Mr Mathers’ voice. *So are many things.* Her gloved fingers felt cool as she lifted my hand.

‘Oh, this is tiny.’ She swabbed the wipe over my fingertip. It only stung a little. ‘How long have you been in Peebles?’ She spoke so rapidly. I’d been led from TV to expect all Southerners to drawl slowly.

‘Eight days. I’m from New York.’ Her glasses looked even thicker than mine. ‘We were just here for the one night, but he . . . We’re passing through.’ I kept my eyes on the blood that oozed slowly out.

‘I can’t imagine what you must be going through. I’m not getting on very well with my husband, but I can’t imagine. If he disappeared.’ She wrapped a band-aid neatly over the cut. ‘There. All better.’ Her half smile hinted that she knew the band-aid couldn’t fix me. She snapped off the rubber gloves.

‘Thanks. What’s wrong? With your husband?’ Amelia would call my need to fill in, to finish stories, rude.

‘He dropped his aunt Mary’s birdcage, which he took for an inheritance. The bird, not the cage specifically. It’s a long story.’ She scribbled something on a form. ‘When’s the wedding date?’

‘He just proposed. The night before.’ I kept talking, despite the quiver in my voice. Just a shitty hotel room, but transformed by the pressure of his arms around me and the air that whooshed under my skirt as he scooped me up and stepped over the doorframe. By his words, that he’d like to do this for real. My breathless me too. By the ripples our words set off in me – the cascading images of a future – a house, kids, morning kisses and night time cuddles. Forever.

‘Wow.’ She smiled. The police hadn’t smiled. ‘Look, would you want to come over to dinner tomorrow night?’

I knew no one here. And she didn’t tell me I’d been idiotic about Kenneth. ‘That’s really kind of you.’

She plucked a paper from her purse. ‘One of Mary’s missing parrot flyers.’ She scrawled on the back. ‘This is the address.’

The written name, Siobhan, looked nothing like the way she said it.

‘It’s pronounced She-vaughn. Weird, I know. I’m part Irish American, part African American. My maternal grandmother was black.’

‘It’s pretty.’ I wrote my cell and motel number on the top of the flyer. I tore the strip off and handed it to her. What had I just agreed to? Siobhan showed me out of the church, locking the door behind her. She patted my arm.

‘He’ll be back.’

I walked to my motel. Unlocked my room door and sat on the bed. Too many memories, but not even of this bed, this pillow. I had nothing that held his scent. I dumped my purse out on the bed. I lined up the items precisely, carefully. Lipstick, wallet, empty glasses case. I had left my prescription sunglasses loose in the rental car. Cell phone, no missed calls. Tissues, pen, notebook. Random crumpled receipts. Mr Mathers’ business card. Siobhan’s address. The disk I picked up last. As pale as my mother’s mother of pearl pendant, but the surface had a definite wood grain. The thin edge must have snagged my finger – dried blood dotted the edge. I turned the disk over. Four shapes had been cut equidistantly into the surface. Letters.

A-I-T-W. I rotated the disk slowly. W-A-I-T. Capital letters, classic font. Printed. I touched the W. The material was so thin surely nothing could be carved into it, but my fingers met a clear dip down.

No one else had been there. Just touching the tree had caused my finger to burn and tingle. The light fell on me before I heard the disk. Surely it had been meant for me?

But how could a tree intend for anything to go to a person? A tree couldn’t carve itself!

I concentrated on the feeling of safety and warmth from the tree. I would stay longer. I would wait for Kenneth.

My blood had smudged the business card, just over the company slogan.

## Chapter 2

‘Like I said, Al won’t be home for another half hour or so, and Mary’s out, Lord love her, putting up more flyers.’ Siobhan’s voice came from her kitchen. ‘Dinner’s just a lasagne, and it’s cooking nicely.’

The living room had one bookcase. Real wood, not the plywood cheapo ones I’d had all my life. And the shelves held only cookbooks. Paper and hardback, so it wasn’t like she put her expensive books on show. Maybe she was a teacher who didn’t read. The room smacked of the perfect life that I imagined Amelia had in her Atlanta house, the one I’d never visited. Amelia certainly wouldn’t have any books.

Siobhan handed me a glass of wine. ‘Al gives me a cookbook for every possible occasion. Shorthand shopping. All my real books are upstairs.’ She tapped my glass with hers. ‘Cheers.’ The wine traced a cool path down my oesophagus. I had resisted drinking alone since Kenneth’s disappearance.

‘Why did you invite me over?’ I asked. Did Mr Mathers tell her to?

Siobhan picked up my free hand and examined the tiny cut. ‘That looks better. Please, sit down.’ She curled into the armchair. I collapsed into the sofa. Not overstuffed, but very welcoming after a week of sitting on a motel bed. I wouldn’t relax.

‘I’ve had a bad summer,’ Siobhan said. ‘Not compared to you, I know, I’m sorry. My best friend Joanna moved to California, my husband Al is, well, and then Mary is living with us. I’m lonely. I mean, I’m surrounded, but I’m lonely. I thought you, well, seemed lonely too.’

I’d never been surrounded by people.

‘The whole thing . . .’

‘Is Al’s fault,’ a voice said. An older woman walked in, swamped by a red tank top. The front dipped low enough to reveal an intensely purple bra. Despite the colours, she looked miserable.

‘Luanne, this is Al’s aunt Mary. She came up from Florida a few weeks ago,’ she said. ‘Mary, we’ve got to go shopping.’

‘I’m shrinking. I look like a pissant under a collard leaf in this, I know.’ Mary sat down beside me on the sofa and handed me a flyer. ‘Have you seen any parrots?’

‘No, but I have seen your flyers around town.’ Mine had yielded nothing.

‘Did Mr Mathers come to the coffee shop?’ Siobhan asked. ‘I saw your ad in the paper.’

‘Yeah. But he didn’t know anything.’ I felt tears start and tipped up my wine glass to hide my face. I hoped.

‘Walter Mathers? I was at his wedding, you know. It wasn’t just everybody who got an invite. Well, not that I actually got one, but I went with my boss. I was really young,’ Mary said.

‘Was it a date?’ Siobhan asked. ‘Do you want some wine?’

‘Of course not.’ Mary’s laugh creaked deep inside her, like a lung cracking. I bet she’d smoked. ‘You know enough of the Taylor family to know I wouldn’t be allowed to date an older man. My boss was a woman. Katherine Miers. Yes, please.’

Siobhan disappeared into the kitchen again.

‘Mary, is Katherine Miers still alive? My fiancé, he, his name’s Kenneth Miers.’

Mary pushed off her shoes. Each toenail was painted a different shade – all ten of them – in rainbow order. ‘Why don’t you ask him? She’s dead though, died early this year.’

Siobhan brought back a glass for Mary.

‘What was the wedding like? How did you get invited?’ Siobhan asked.

I needed to know more about Kenneth.

Mary jumped up and paced barefoot along the length of the enormous birdcage, touching the perches, straightening the toys. Cage seemed the wrong word – that implied a small curved dome. This stainless steel enclosure had to be seven feet long and at least six feet high. ‘I miss him so much. My Walter.’

‘Mr Mathers?’

‘Her parrot,’ Siobhan said.

Mary smiled. ‘Named him after Walter Mathers though – he was awfully handsome at the wedding. Never saw another wedding like it.’

‘Miss Katherine owned a candy store. I just wanted money to buy records and make-up. I know I’m old and wrinkled now, but I did like some nice make-up when my skin was smooth. So I dressed carefully – neat and modest – and rode my bike to the shop after school.’

‘There was this little bell, sort of tinkled when you pushed the door open. Then this waft of sweetness. And the smell of smoke.’

‘Was it on fire?’ Siobhan asked.

‘No, Miss Katherine used to smoke in there. Her store, after all, and her mother’s before that, I think. Before all this silly law making about smoking. Personal liberties, that’s what they’re taking away.’

‘Siobhan, I’m home,’ a male voice called from the kitchen. I liked the idea of Kenneth coming home at night. Calling me Lu and kissing me hello.

‘But smoking where children are regularly, surely that isn’t a good idea,’ Siobhan said.

‘Who’s smoking around children?’ The man in the doorway wore a pale turquoise polo shirt. His face shone with heat, but his shirt looked perfectly dry.

‘In the, what, 1940s, 50s? When Mary was a teenager,’ Siobhan said. ‘How was the game?’

‘Hate it. Have to do it. Golf, you see. You must be Luanne.’ Al gripped my hand, painfully tight. ‘Hi Mary,’ he said. She didn’t speak to him. His hair formed a perfect wave. He played golf in July and didn’t get sweaty? I must be a horribly damp person.

‘1960,’ Mary said.

‘You were a teenager in 1960? How old are you?’ Al asked. His smooth hair must conceal a brain frantically doing the math of a woman who was actually in her 60s who promised him an inheritance. She ignored him.

‘Let’s eat then.’ Siobhan rose. ‘More wine, Mary?’

During the meal, Al embellished on his golf game, stressing its importance for his work. Sanitation, apparently. Management, not riding on the back of a garbage truck. Mary told bits more about working for Miss Katherine or raised a pointed comment about Walter the parrot liking certain things. They spoke to Siobhan and me, but Mary and Al ignored each other completely.

‘Elinor Mathers’ wedding dress, I’ve never seen anything like it. That wide skirt of shining satin,’ Mary said, just after Al described his attempt at the ninth hole.

‘Luanne’s engaged,’ Siobhan said, bringing dessert from the kitchen. Al looked at my bare finger, and I slid my hand in my lap. Siobhan placed a bowl in front of me first. Vanilla ice cream, the surface pitted with deep purple berries. ‘Huckleberries,’ she said.

‘Weren’t you going to make a pie?’ Al asked when she passed him his. Why didn’t she snap back?

‘What did your young man look like?’ Mary asked.

‘Red hair, sort of, well, thinning. Tall, clean shaven.’ Straight teeth in a sharply angled face that could form a perfect smile. One that distracted from the worry marks around his eyes. Hair much darker than mine, embers to my pale fire.

‘Did he hunch his shoulders? Mind you, I guess most people do that at a funeral,’ Mary said.

Why refer to him in the past tense? ‘A little, I guess.’ The stoop that I first attributed to his height, but as he talked I understood that it sprang more from the losses in his life.

‘Really skinny?’ Mary spoke around a creamy mouthful. I nodded. ‘I reckon I saw him at Miss Katherine’s funeral. Talking to the Mathers. Well, Walter anyway – who did not age well, by the way. Course, look at me. You two girls stay out of the sun. Moving to Florida was the worst possible thing I could have done for my wrinkles.’

Siobhan laughed. ‘Remember I grew up in a beach resort town.’

‘At least you have that lovely dark complexion. You don’t have to worry about burning, do you?’

‘I still have to wear sun block,’ Siobhan said. She flushed slightly.

‘Kenneth talked to Mr Mathers?’ I asked. And Mr Mathers claimed not to have seen Kenneth in ages?

‘I think so. He sat in the family pew – he looked like you said and Miss Katherine was a Miers. He looked so tall standing next to Walter’s wheelchair. That shocked me – almost as much as him aging. Nobody seemed to know what happened – Al, do you?’

Al looked up at her direct address and then immediately back down to his bowl. 'I didn't even know Miss Miers.'

'To Mr Mathers. The wheelchair,' Siobhan said.

'Old age, I think. I've never heard of anything specific. He seems perfectly healthy otherwise. God help us if he dies – we'll be left with his wastrel son.'

What could Kenneth need to talk to Mr Mathers about? Moreover, why didn't Kenneth say he'd been back here recently? Kenneth, next to Mr Mathers' chair. Did Kenneth feel small when Mr Mathers stared at him?

'It's like Prince Charles,' Siobhan said. 'Always waiting for his inheritance.'

'I wouldn't work up too much pity for Eric Mathers. He just hangs on, barely says a word in meetings. Lacks vision. I heard that from Mr Mathers himself,' Al said, digging in his bowl.

'Really?' Hard to fathom Mr Mathers speaking out of clan, after his bristling in the coffee shop.

'Well, his secretary.'

Al, whispering with a secretary, waving his perfect hair at her to get secrets. Mr Mathers wheeled out in my mind, swiftly firing them both. 'What business do you do with the Mathers, Al?' How could Siobhan live with this pomposity?

'They are our largest industry. Naturally I have to liaise with them about the waste management of their sites. And when I run for office, I'm confident of Mr Mathers' support.'

'Eventually,' Siobhan said, dabbing at her mouth. 'I do the Mathers' roses. Everybody works or has worked for the Mathers in some way. Or their family has. The Mathers Memorial Library, the Mathers Elementary School.'

'That's why your letter was so misjudged, Luanne,' Al said. 'The Mathers have helped our town so much. They are, well, statesman like.'

'Without running for office?' A corrupt family who owned the town.

'Miss Katherine got them to lower her rent on Walter's wedding day. She hinted hard at something. Something a little . . . well, it worked, didn't it?' Mary put down her spoon and wiped her mouth. 'She got her rent lowered and stayed open almost until she died.'

I wanted to ask her more about the rent, but Al started talking about his golf friends. The Mathers as a topic clearly had moved off the table.

Since we'd all had wine, I insisted on getting a taxi back to the motel. Siobhan walked me to the front door alone.

'I'm really sorry about Al. Things have been so stressful, since Mary's parrot. I hope this was ok – please do come back. Or let's meet in town.'

'I'd love to.' I meant it. I didn't know how long I'd be here, but I liked Siobhan.

Back at the motel, I pulled the covers tight. Defence from air-conditioned air, from unknown monsters. The sheets felt abrasive. Their whiteness surely carried bleach residue, not rinsed properly. Despite full length sleeved and legged pyjamas, I had already found rashy patches on my skin.

Would I have a satin wedding dress when Kenneth returned? Satin would inevitably break my skin out in some unforeseen manner. If he returned. I let my fingers brush over the WAIT wooden disk on the nightstand. If vegetation wanted to communicate with me, clarity would have been nice.

I visualised Kenneth sitting in a pew of the church. The tree on his right hand side, way back behind him. His shoulders bowed. He didn't look at the tree; he barely looked at the casket. Not at any people, no one who might remember his shame. Who didn't believe that the girl had been committing suicide when she leapt in front of his car, note or not. At least that's what he assumed the people of the church whispered.

Kenneth thought about his aunt. His lost chances. Whether or not that rich girl would come to the funeral. Speak to him and lay her thin hand on his arm, on the one suit jacket he owned. Three shades darker than the trousers, since he'd worn them so much more. If her lip would curl at his poverty or if she would smile. He touched his forehead, remembering the full head of dark red hair he'd had when she saw him last.

I didn't even know her name. Ridiculous. He wouldn't care anymore. Except when he told me the story, over the gin that I drank more and more quickly, he clearly did care.

He wondered if Aunt Katherine had left him anything more than just sugary candy. It was all she'd ever given him before.

He stood when the others stood. The creak of bones, the whisper of fabric, the clunk of shoe heels prompted him more than the minister's indistinct voice. He didn't bother to sing or to open a hymnal. He stood, he sat, he closed his eyes when the minister prayed. That was all.

Then a girl – the girl – walked up to him. Didn't speak, just kissed him full on the mouth. He pushed her down on the pew beneath him, with everyone watching, lifted her dress, like he'd lifted my skirt.

I turned over, keeping my sleeves tight against my wrists as voices from dinner began playing in my head, overwriting my imaginings. Better to analyse and overanalyse every word than to imagine Kenneth with that girl. Eric's wife?

The disappointing son. Would he talk to me any more than his father? But everyone worked for the Mathers. Everyone must have opinions. Stories, like Mary's.

### Chapter 3

‘Mathers and Sons,’ I said to the taxi driver.

‘Which one?’ he asked.

Damn. Some researcher I was. ‘How many are there?’

‘Two, locally. The timber mill, well, three. No, four. The woodlands, too. The closest one’s in growth, not many people there, I’d reckon. The main office is all the way in Milbury now. That’d be expensive.’ He kept talking. The Mathers consumed a childish map in my mind, oozing yellow over all the boundaries.

Maybe the employees at the mill would be chatty. About anything. About Mr Mathers.

‘The mill then, please.’ Silver duct tape sealed a hole near my elbow. Adhesive formed grainy balls, rough like the rash on my back.

The taxi dropped me outside a low grey building. Five men in jeans stood around, hard hats in hand, laughing and shouting insults at the driver of a massive transfer truck who attempted to reverse into a loading bay. The truck with the rose and tree logo bucked forward, straightened, and began backing again. As the blue cab eased backwards, I saw another figure. Someone who had been on the opposite side of the truck. Heat rose in distorted lines from the truck, twisting my vision, but I knew that shape. Joy clogged my throat with the dust. Here. How dare he let me worry so?

‘Kenneth,’ I called over the din. The truck finally made it into the bay and killed its engine. Kenneth walked towards me in the terrible heat. His body heavier. Hair lighter. A moustache? Ten days.

‘Ma’am? We aren’t open to the public.’ ‘Ma’am’ sounded Southern, but completely wrong. And he carried a hard hat?

‘I’ll have to ask you to leave.’

A little paunch pushed out his blue t-shirt. No tattoo on his stiffly held forearm. That voice asked my name. I turned away and vomited into a sweep of yellow pollen on the black asphalt.

‘Ma’am?’ The world darkened around me. Heat stroke? I’d only been outside for a few minutes. Not-Kenneth grabbed my arm, even as I tried to pull away, even as I tilted.

Dampness trickled over my eyelids. I blinked and felt for my glasses. Still on my head. Something rasped against my forehead. Paper towels, coarse and industrial. I wiped my eyes and tried to sit up.

‘Careful.’

My legs hung off the edge of a small half sofa, too tiny to sit more than two adults on. A dark red that clashed with the institutional green walls. The colour of a hospital or an uncaring business. The Mathers' business.

Not-Kenneth leaned against the desk, just in front of the keyboard. The office chair had been pushed out of the way. A framed picture of kids to the right of his body. My purse on his left. I tried to read Not-Kenneth's t-shirt, the words circling his chest, but the letters had faded. A university seal? Anything to avoid his face.

'Hey,' he said. Cheerfully.

My body didn't ache, not like it should if I'd hit the asphalt. Not-Kenneth's blue hardhat spinning on the ground as he grabbed my sagging body, hoisting my weight into his arms. None of the romance of Kenneth's arms around me, lifting me over the threshold of the motel room. Just me being idiotic in front of an audience of those men. I forced myself to look up at him. Nothing at all like Kenneth. Paler hair, although darker than mine. That ridiculous moustache.

'Luanne, right? I'm afraid I checked your wallet. Mystery woman fainting in front of me and all.'

The scratch of the towels sent chills over my body. My mouth felt vile, almost lemony. I couldn't remember the last time I threw up. I wasn't a pukey person, as my brief attempt at sharing my apartment with a college student had taught me. She started each morning with a little vomit. Nausea rose again. He went through my wallet?

'Can I ask what you're doing here? We aren't open to the public, and you just appeared.'

He must have reached past the disk in my bag to pull out my wallet. Touched it. Maybe read the word. 'I took a taxi.' He fiddled with the frame, not looking at me. Probably regretting that he'd come to work today. The kids ran through autumn leaves with open arms. Towards him. His wife. He would build them tree houses, chase them around their big suburban backyard.

'What are you doing here?'

'I wanted to talk. I know the Mathers are incredibly popular and benefactors and you clearly work for them but something's not right. My boyfriend is gone, no explanation, and Walter Mathers lied to me. I don't even know if you could help me, but . . .'

Tears rose, but I belched a little instead.

'He doesn't lie, as a general rule.' His moustache bristled.

'I get that he's good for Peebles.' My raised voice echoed loud over the distant whine of saws. Tight circles throbbed around my eyes. He wore a heavy cologne, too strong for the small office. Too strong for any space. Something that started as a vague spiciness until a purple smell overwhelmed everything else. Would it be on my clothes, my skin, if he had carried me in here?

‘He is. And I can’t think of a time he’s lied to me in forty-six years of being my father. So I really doubt he lied to you, Ms Richardson.’

Eric Mathers. Dammit.

He stood up. ‘Now, if you’re all right, I’ll drive you back to – where are you staying? Somewhere near Dodd’s Coffee Shop, I take it.’ He sounded as harsh and unyielding as his father.

‘Do you have any idea what it’s like to have someone just go? Just like that? No explanation at all?’

‘In my experience, it’s by their choice.’ He shoved the red office chair forward so hard the armrests crashed against the desk. The photo wobbled. ‘Pete needs his office back.’

Not his office, not his kids. ‘I’ll get a taxi.’ Just making sure I was off the site. He extended his hand, palm side up. For the wet lump of towels, not to help me up from the sofa.

The leather strap of my purse felt slick against my damp hand. I got to the door first. A man in neatly pressed trousers and a polo shirt hovered just outside.

‘Thank you,’ I said, addressing his shiny black shoes against the polished concrete floor.

‘All ok, Eric?’ he asked, as if I hadn’t spoken to him. Maybe he actually wanted to ask if I’d been sick again in his office. What the crashing noise has been.

‘I’m going to run Ms Richardson home. Thanks for letting us borrow your office.’

The manager hadn’t been one of the men outside, so at least he hadn’t seen me vomit. His hair receded hard in the middle of his forehead.

‘You haven’t cleared this form. Or this one.’ Pete handed Eric a clipboard. ‘And you missed, again, the . . .’

Eric flicked through the pages. Kenneth’s fingers were thinner, more elegant. The kids must be Pete’s. Walter Mathers probably wouldn’t like a mixed race marriage for his son, anyway. A sign on the wall depicted a blue face in a hard hat and goggles. Strict warnings about danger. Through the window, men and women in earplugs worked at massive machines that made the raw timber wall quiver beneath my hand. The entire place smelled like my friend’s Joan’s house, when it had been brand new. Sharp and clean.

‘And you didn’t check . . .’ Pete said.

‘Pete, it’s fine. It’s always fine.’ Eric scrawled on several sheets and handed the clipboard back. He walked towards a labelled fire exit. He held the outer door open for me, and I brushed past his tattoo-less arm. When Kenneth first kissed me, first drew me into my bed, I’d thought dimly that I’d have to start ticking the box on the form to donate blood about having had sex with a person with a tattoo. Kenneth’s had been thick with vegetation, a swarm of petals and leaves.

We emerged under the Mathers and Son sign. A man in jeans smoked, leaning one heavy boot against the wall.

‘Ma’am. See you next week, Eric.’ Had he been outside before, seen me?

‘Bye, Joe,’ Eric said. ‘Give my best to Tanya.’ Maybe Joe and Tanya’s kids would get the employee scholarship Mr Mathers seemed so proud of. Joe certainly sounded friendlier than Pete.

I followed Eric across the sweltering parking lot as he headed for the very back corner, near clumps of weeds. He’d probably lead me around the parking lot for a while; pretend he couldn’t find his car. He easily outpaced me, his legs as long as Kenneth’s. How many men in the world must be roughly 6’2”?

He unlocked a low-slung sports car. Baby blue. And I understood why he parked in the far corner of the lot. AI surely classed this shiny car in the wastrel son category. Eric leaned into the driver’s side. White papers cascaded into the back as he tossed them.

‘Get in,’ he said.

I opened the passenger door. The papers carpeted the tiny backseat. I slid in and hooked the pale blue seatbelt into the blazing buckle.

Eric drove off, retracing the route of the taxi. Faster. His cologne permeated every fibre of the interior. It filled my lungs, my sinuses. Nausea gripped my throat again as my head pounded. And still we hurtled forward. Eric shifted gears next to my knee.

‘Who did you want to talk to?’ he asked.

I shrugged. If I spoke, I couldn’t control the sickness.

‘We can’t have people on the site. It’s a major health and safety violation. People can die.’

My oesophagus felt hot.

‘See, the thing is,’ Eric said. He kept talking. The black texture behind my eyelids wobbled and jarred. Straight ahead, the car seemed to eat the asphalt in front of us.

The car turned sharply; my stomach lurched.

‘Mr –’ Stop, I tried to say. I leaned forward.

‘Eric,’ he said. ‘Nobody . . .’

I retched, vomit bubbling from my mouth onto my shoes, my purse. His pristine car.

‘Crap.’ He pulled the car over onto the side of the road. I clambered out, but my empty insides only twisted. All of my stomach’s contents were on his floor. What could I possibly say to him? Accuse his father of lying and then puke in his car?

‘Here.’ He handed me a pack of tissues. Warm. From his pocket?

‘I’m . . .’

‘Forget it.’ He put my purse on the ground and lifted out the floorboard mat. I tried to take it from him. ‘Ms Richardson.’ He sounded stiff again, controlled. I let go of the mat’s edge.

I wiped my shoes, my purse with the tissues as he whacked the carpet against the grass. How could I have just met him and now he cleaned up my vomit? I pushed the foul tissues back into the empty plastic pack. No trash can. I held it uneasily.

‘Can I ask you a personal question?’ The sun outlined his shoulders, broader and straighter than Kenneth’s. His upbringing no doubt demanded good posture, just like Amelia’s husband. And even as it irked me, I looked down at his hands, still holding the floorboard mat. And my sick.

‘Are you pregnant?’

‘Why – what do you mean?’ God. A baby. With Kenneth.

Without Kenneth.

‘In the last fifteen minutes, you’ve fainted and thrown up twice. It’s a pattern, of sorts.’

‘It’s a bug. I can call a taxi.’

‘I said I’d drive you.’ He wedged the mat back in the foot well and pulled a handful of papers from the backseat. He scattered them over the stains.

The car had not been designed for a slightly plump woman to get in with ladylike ease. Not when she felt as sweaty, pale and disgusting as I did. Eric closed the door behind me. Surely my breath would rival the cologne.

He slid gracefully into the driver’s seat.

‘I’m sorry. I was rude,’ Eric said.

‘God. I’m sorry.’

‘Are you ok to go on?’

I nodded. He shut his door. Bile and cologne warred for air space. He slid the windows down three inches and pulled back onto the road.

My nausea had gone. As much as I tried to call it back, to will it into a virus, my head felt clear. A very quick stomach bug. I’d taken my datebook out of my purse. Nowhere to go. No appointments. All my time calculations revolved around Kenneth’s departure. My last period had been – when? My months didn’t usually include getting fired, packing up my life and moving with a new boyfriend. Fiancé.

Trees sped past. ‘Where are you staying?’ His voice reverberated, deeper than Kenneth’s had been in our small car.

I gave the name of the motel, refraining from mentioning its position across the street from Dodd’s.

‘Who?’ Insensitive, but I’d already vomited in front of him. And he’d asked me about my sex life. ‘Who did you – lose?’

Silent minutes ticked over on the dashboard clock.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said finally. Accuse his father, ask prying questions. Practically be sick on top of him.

Eric clicked his turn signal and shifted gears to turn on to a side street I didn’t recognise. ‘Nearly sixteen years of marriage and my wife just left one day. I got a voicemail from the highway. Telling me what stuff she wanted.’

Kenneth had sounded positive. Said he loved me. No voicemail of departure.

The blurred street signs all seemed to have big American car names – Cadillac, Ford, V-8. He drove through a back entrance into the motel lot.

‘Which side are you on?’ he asked.

Side? There were sides in this? He manoeuvred around a line of baked cars towards the motel building.

‘Front,’ I said. Clearly not shame of being seen there. He hadn’t even shouted at me about his ruined interior.

Eric stopped in front of the motel. The desk staff peered out the plate glass window at the sports car.

‘Ms Richardson, I’m afraid you’re wasting your time. Just forget it. I never trusted Ken, and I think you shouldn’t trust him now.’

‘Thank you for the ride, Mr Mathers. I’m sorry about . . .’ I stepped out of the cool car. The asphalt felt squidgy beneath my shoe heels. ‘I appreciate your assistance.’

‘Don’t mention it,’ I heard as I slammed the door. Of course don’t mention it. The Mathers wouldn’t want it known that they helped me. Not with my lack of an old Southern family. I expected him to reverse at high speed, but the car didn’t move. He waved as I walked up the staircase. His red hair, nothing like Kenneth’s.

I unlocked my room door as my stomach cramped. At least the air in my room smelt relatively fresh. Before closing the door, I peeked out. The blue car backed out slowly and drove out of the lot. He really had stayed to see me get inside. When had anybody last done that?

My insides clenched. I brushed my teeth, tentatively rubbing over my tongue. Dropping my sweaty, dusty clothes, I crawled under the sheets. Definitely a stomach bug. I didn’t even wonder about the wisdom of sleeping naked on the bleached sheets, the sensitivity of my skin, my nipples, to allergens.

I woke to dimmed sunlight and my cell phone’s ring. Amelia’s name appeared on the screen, so I didn’t pick it up. She’d just shout at me. Tell me I was crazy for following Kenneth, ignoring the fact that she set up our blind date. I had wondered, after that first crunch of fear, if she’d set me up deliberately as retribution for chasing her when she ran away at 16.

That night, I had been on at date. My fifth with Tim Oakes, from my writing class at university. He would be heading home for Easter the next day, so we slept together for the first time. I told him I had to go home afterwards. He held me and asked me to stay, said he had clean sheets. I could imagine his mother, a sane loving woman, packing him off to New York with two or even three sets of sheets, although not thinking about the probability of him sleeping with a virgin. But I said my family would worry. Not that I had no family left except my sister. Turned out Amelia and I shared a lie on that point.

I tingled all the way home. Tim loved me as me. He didn’t expect or demand that I be the rational, logical one who would carry all the weight.

‘Amelia, sorry I’m late.’ 45 minutes past our agreed, or rather, my imposed, mutual curfew. No answer. The light in her room shone mercilessly on her more than half empty closet.

I called every friend she’d ever mentioned. The frantic 19-year-old me impressed none of their parents.

I went to the police, still stinking of sex, blood crusting my panties. Explained I’d been on a date; I had custody of my sister. Watched the officers assess my worthiness as a sibling. Her friends wouldn’t tell, and all I could remember was the name Stuart, his perfect posture under his pink Izod polo shirt and a Southern accent. The South swallowed up my sister in a dark, hot hole.

Two weeks later and with all our savings gone on private detective fees, I stood outside a palatial white house in Atlanta as police officers went through the front door. And found Amelia playing Monopoly with the entire Grant family. Nothing ‘untoward’ had happened, Mrs Grant insisted. The Grants believed that Amelia’s loving, married parents had given her permission to visit over Easter. I morphed into the evil, atheist sister, the bad guardian, baking under the Southern sun. Maybe their own shame coloured the way the Grants looked at me, but it felt like judgement. Their maid Rose brought lemonade to the cops, pink and cool, like Mrs Grant’s skin.

Tim came back to university to a frantic new me, incoherent and desperate for support he couldn’t, or wouldn’t give. By the time we graduated, Tim had proposed to Pamela Dixon, not me.

I spoke to that maid Rose a lot, after Amelia returned South at eighteen. Out, Rose always would say. I never knew if she wrote down my name or my message. Amelia never called back.

Ten years passed before Amelia contacted me.

I closed my eyes.

I walked out into the steaming dusk, but only as far as the gas station adjacent to the motel for crackers and ginger ale. Boxes of condoms and one pregnancy test hung behind the attendant’s head.

I pointed. ‘That too.’

His hand hovered over a box of blue condoms.

‘The test, please.’

He added it to the bill, which suddenly meant I had to use my debit card, not loose change. My bank balance shrank daily, even discounting the rental car bill. I retreated back to the chill environs of my room.

Take in the morning, the test box said. The use before date was ok though, a good start. I disappeared into evening TV. Ignored the test box. I felt fine. A short bug, nothing else. In

bed, I lulled myself by thinking of Kenneth whispering to me as he stroked my skin, kissed me in my New York bed. The hotel in Maryland. I ran my fingers through his gloriously tactile red curls. Suddenly, I saw only Eric Mathers' thicker, paler hair over his concerned face. I tried to pluck the image out.

Kenneth loved me.

## Chapter 4

In the morning, I vomited again.

I paced the tiny bathroom while I waited for the water to warm. Five weeks since my last period. Did seven days count as late with my current levels of stress?

Kenneth's last phone call, while I stood in a shower like this, just a few rooms away. Why hadn't I stolen his pillowcase when I checked out? I had nothing that smelled of him. Nothing of his.

My phone rang and I stopped breathing. I clambered out of the shower. Timing meant nothing. Unknown number.

'Ms Richardson?'

'Yes?' Frantic scenarios rolled through my mind – found his body, found him with amnesia, found the car, found . . .

'Walter Mathers. I'd like to meet with you. Today, please.'

'Mr Mathers?' I croaked.

'Eleven o'clock, my office. Mathers Building, Independence Plaza. That's in Milbury. Ask for me.'

'You're finally . . .' What? Ready to confess?

'I'll see you in an hour.' He hung up.

Shit. An hour. I rinsed fast and found some clothes that weren't too crumpled. It'd have to be a taxi. More cash out. Why couldn't we have met at two? I could have figured out public transport. I pulled my hair back into a ponytail. No time to dry it smooth.

No time for a pregnancy test either. I called the taxi company, who again failed to feel my urgency.

I wove through men and women in suits until I reached a central reception desk, flanked by security guards. According to the signs on the marble direction plates, Mathers and Son occupied the top five floors. They eschewed the rose and tree logo here. Other businesses filled the rest, along with restaurants. My stomach rolled. No real food since the crackers last night, and a lot of vomiting.

'I have an appointment with Mr Mathers. 11 o'clock,' I said. Three minutes to spare.

The woman in the blue blazer beamed at me. 'Of course, ma'am. Ms Richardson, right? May I see some ID please?'

I handed over my card. She took some time to figure out that I had a New York photo ID, not a New York driving license.

She passed it back to me. 'Daniel will show you to the correct elevator.'

Daniel turned out to be the security guard to the left. He walked three paces in front of me. We passed employees swiping cards to reach a bank of silver elevators. I turned, but Daniel kept going.

‘This way, ma’am.’

I followed him down a hallway, and around a corner. Daniel slid an ID card into a slot outside a single elevator. When the doors opened, he motioned me in. He reached through and pushed a button.

‘This will take you straight to Mr Mathers’ office, ma’am.’ He didn’t join me. The doors skimmed shut. PH was illuminated, in an elevator that had three buttons. PH, G, and LG. The building had been awfully tall for only three buttons.

The doors opened after a long two minutes.

‘Silly, isn’t it?’ Mr Mathers’ voice came from somewhere outside the elevator. ‘The idea that a man in a wheelchair needs the top floor. They dread fire alarms here.’

A framed photograph hung in front of me. Eric, significantly younger. Mr Mathers standing next to an older man, clearly Mr Mathers’ father. Their suits matched, and all three had a hand on a yellow rectangle. The signature on the mat – an enormous sloping K, then a scrawl. Kenneth’s signature.

‘Your Mr Miers photographed my son’s wedding. Do come in,’ Mr Mathers said.

I couldn’t just stare, gap mouthed, at younger versions of the Mathers men I’d met. I had questions. Serious questions. I stepped into the main room.

I stood under a perfect pink curve. The entire top floor. The sun shone directly onto a massive glass and steel desk. It bore only a fountain pen and three stacks of paper, edges neatly squared. Did he have a laptop tucked away somewhere? No desk chair, but of course he’d roll up to it. Wooden floorboards carved clear paths for the wheelchair over deep carpet.

Grey sofas lined the two flat walls. The elevator formed the end of one curve and a closed door the other. From the taxi, the building had looked like an outscale jukebox. What type of music would Mr Mathers have loaded up?

He watched me. I would not be awed by the surroundings.

‘You saw Kenneth at his aunt’s funeral six months ago,’ I said. ‘You-’

‘Seven months, and his great-aunt, actually,’ Mr Mathers said. ‘You could consider sitting down. Admire the view. Social niceties.’

I had to be brave. I stepped a little closer to his chair. ‘You implied you hadn’t seen him for years.’

‘Your assumptions will not wring apologies from me. Please sit.’ He rolled along a path to the window.

The deep softness of the carpet pushed relaxation up my spine. I would not weaken. I perched on the edge of the sofa. I refused to look out the window. Or down.

‘I’m not giving up,’ I said. ‘You can threaten all sorts of things, but I’m not leaving until I find Kenneth.’

‘And how will you support yourself?’

‘I’ll find something.’ Bar work. Maybe at Dodd’s.

‘You met my son.’ He drummed his fingers once on the arm of his wheelchair.

Mr Mathers probably knew all about me being sick by now.

‘I am concerned about him.’ Mr Mathers looked out the window as he spoke.

‘His marriage?’ Why did I volunteer what little information I had for him?

Mr Mathers shifted his chair sharply. ‘You talked?’

‘He kindly drove me to my motel.’ I looked at the weave of the carpet. Eric’s ruined floor mat.

‘The Mathers have a long tradition – an unbroken line of sons for generations. And Eric has no son. I understand that you are a researcher, by degrees and experience,’ he said.

My head jerked upright. He smiled. What did he know about my departure from my last job?

‘When someone accuses me as you did, I check up on them. Your father is doing well – relatively well – in Louisiana, by the way.’

‘My father?’ What did this man do? I stood, half stumbling in the depth of the carpet.

‘Ms Richardson, please sit. You look very pale.’

How could he find my father? Why would he?

‘I have an enormous amount, an archive, I suppose, of family papers at my house. Decades and decades. I’d like you to research them. Discover if the family has ever had such a crisis before.’

‘A crisis?’ My brain felt like I swam through molasses. He knew where my father was.

‘The lack of an heir. For this work, I will settle your car problem. There will be a salary. I assume it will take some time to sort the papers.’

My forehead felt clammy against my cold fingers. I should have had breakfast. How could this warm, concerned man be the same person? What happened to his sharp bark in the coffee shop?

‘I understand family papers,’ I said. ‘I understand archiving, sorting, but not in what way it can help you get a grandchild.’

‘They aren’t divorced yet. I have hopes. We simply need more information. There also will be some interviewing.’

This didn’t sound at all like my type of project.

‘People in the family and those associated with the family. To gain insight into what has gone wrong.’

I could imagine this man would have been handsome on his wedding day, like Mary said. The pressure Mary said Miss Katherine applied to get her rent lowered. Could I trust him?

‘I can’t understand a need for this research.’ That’d never stopped me taking an assignment at the library, but academic research had a purpose, if not a clear cut necessity.

‘You need a job. Would you not rather work with papers and content than serve hamburgers and beer?’ Ice spiked his voice again.

‘But I’m annoying. You said so. Why give me a job?’

‘I didn’t unders- I underestimated you. There is something oddly enjoyable about being disagreed with.’

His face didn’t reflect any enjoyment. ‘If I do this, you use the resources you used to find my father to help me find Kenneth.’

‘Done.’ Mr Mathers rolled to his desk. ‘Would you like his details? You might wish to convey your good news to him.’

‘After thirty-six years, I’m not sure a new job qualifies.’

Mr Mathers gathered a stack of papers and wheeled back towards me. I stood, despite feeling unsteady. If I didn’t eat, what could I expect?

‘I meant your pregnancy, of course. Most people want to hear they are going to be grandparents.’ His hand brushed against my stomach, searing my flesh even through the fabric of my shirt. I fell backwards onto the sofa, my head bouncing against the glass wall.

‘Careful,’ he said. ‘Sure you don’t want to add health insurance to the deal?’

‘This is outrageous. My answer is no.’ Nausea rolled through my oesophagus. A baby.

‘Don’t be foolish, Luanne. You’re flying through your savings. You can’t afford to pay off the rental car. This is a lifeline. Do this, I’ll give you a good reference, and if you’re pregnant, you go on your way with a bouncing son. Easy. I’ll throw in insurance.’

‘Why?’ He pushed papers towards me, but I didn’t take them. My fingers felt too chilled to hold onto anything.

‘Kenneth Miers has a connection to my family. I’d like to help him, if I can, or by extension, you. I doubted your sincerity. I apologise.’

I took the papers. The post-it note on top, an incongruous hot pink, bore my father’s first name, Douglas, with another surname. When had he changed Richardson to Johnson?

‘When you have signed the contract, the same company will look for Kenneth. Come out to the house, day after tomorrow, at three o’clock. I believe you’ve already been?’

My frantic taxi trip, the evening Kenneth hadn’t returned from his dawn exploration. I had banged on the door and rung the bell for over half an hour.

He headed back to his desk, picked up the phone. He must have really strong arms to wheel himself everywhere. ‘You don’t drive, correct? I’ll have someone take you to your motel.’ He spoke into the phone.

I didn’t argue. I couldn’t stop staring at my father’s name on the post-it note.

As the elevator swished down, I examined my face, warped by the shiny walls. Pale, as Mr Mathers said.

The doors exhaled open, and I smelt exhaust. I emerged into the dim greyness of a concrete parking deck.

‘Ms Richardson? I’m Curtis,’ said an enormous man. He stood next to a silver car, probably twice the size of Eric’s. It looked just as expensive. ‘I’ll drive you, ma’am.’

Curtis drove steadily, magically avoiding stoplights. I sat in the front seat, in part because I so clearly was expected to crawl into the back. Curtis accepted my excuse of carsickness without question.

‘What do you think about the Mathers – working for them?’ I asked. I plucked at my skirt. I needed better clothes to be chauffeured home. Not home, motel.

‘I work for an agency, not directly for the Mathers. Mr Mathers is a nice client.’ He turned into the motel parking lot.

‘In what way?’

‘Respectful, polite. Some clients aren’t.’

I thanked him and climbed out of the car. The motel couldn’t be accustomed to such expensive cars. Would he really tell me if Mr Mathers fell into the ‘nasty’ client category?

One job. I didn’t have to know why Mr Mathers was angry or why he was willing to pay such a high amount for labour that while, yes, specialised, was not out of the ordinary. Lots of people could have advised them on the storage of family documents. He could have looked on the web.

The cover sheet of my contract, on cream, watermarked paper, bore the company logo – Mathers and Son. The first page looked standard – L. Richardson identified as the employee, W. Mathers as employer. Odd. Not Mathers and Son, but W. Mathers, the person. The print was so fine I had trouble making out anything but the bolded headings:

Role

Duties and Responsibilities

Confidentiality

Confidentiality seemed to be the biggie – it went on for pages. Nothing about how to do my job, nothing about the interviews. No list of names of interviewees. I hid the pink post-it note in a pocket of my wallet. I should tell Uncle Kramer. Amelia wouldn’t care. Why contact a man I’d never seen?

I left the contract on the table. My fingers felt frozen, but I unpeeled the cellophane from pregnancy test box. Followed the directions, except for the time of day. I tried to ignore the whispers that I didn’t really doubt the result. And I knew my faith in the result came from Mr Mathers’ conviction. Rational, sane explanations existed – Eric saw me be sick. Not some strange power belonging to the family.

I paced the rectangular bathroom – four tiles in between the toilet and shower, two and a half to the sink. Who would I call? Siobhan? My sister? Karen in New York? What would I do? Would Kenneth be pleased, when he returned?

I leaned into the mirror. The yellow light cast odd shadows on my freckled forehead, the two sharp lines between my nearly nonexistent eyebrows. The features I'd never considered beautiful until Kenneth called them so, photographed them so. My face looked softer in the pictures he'd taken then it did in the mirror now.

The allocated time had lapsed, but I didn't pick up the plastic stick. Since I'd never had a long-term boyfriend before Kenneth, babies had never seemed an option. I couldn't face the idea of a sperm bank, nor did my work hours seem conducive to babies. I'd done such a poor job pseudo-parenting Amelia for two years, how could I have a little life reliant on me?

I pictured Kenneth's face, asleep in my bed, his fingers long and thin against my purple bedspread. His profile, driving the car as he sang along to the radio. Laughing when I forcibly removed the camera from his eye to kiss him. I tried to blend his features with mine to create our child. His dimples, my chin? Green or brown eyes? A blended shade of red hair or maybe even Amelia's strawberry blonde?

Two pink lines lay calmly, darkly on the panel. I double checked the directions. Two equalled positive. Pregnant.

I sat down on the floor. What could I do? Have the baby? Not? At thirty-six, would I get pregnant again?

The first time we'd slept together. Me saying I think I love you. With the words, a swelling in my chest, as the weight of my worries evaporated. Joy. Expanding disproportionately as he tore my practical cotton underwear – red though, for the unexpected date – and slid inside me, his hands stroking my skin above the stockings he found so erotic. No one had ever wanted me this much – still dressed! Against the wall of my studio apartment. Clinging to his curved shoulders, teeth and lips busy until colours coalesced around me in a blur.

Feeling him hold onto the condom when he pulled out. Seeing it stuffed back into the blue packet in the trash. But looking at the pink lines on the test, I remembered too being extremely wet when I peed. Excitement, I knew. Because otherwise . . . it was nonsense. It said right on the box that condoms weren't 100%.

The disk had told me to wait. For how long?

I stumbled to the bed, crawled under the sheets, clothes and all. I fumbled for my phone.

'We're going to have a baby. You're going to be a father!' I texted. The exclamation point hung forlornly at the end. I added 'I love you L x.' I sent it, watching the envelope icon fly away. I never imagined I'd notify the father by text.

I could take this job. Then we'd figure out the next steps, when he returned.

## Chapter 5

Siobhan helped me move my stuff to a cheaper long stay hotel. I joked that there should be losing fiancé insurance, but Siobhan knew enough not to laugh. She didn't shout at me about being pregnant either, not the way Amelia had.

Siobhan plunked a mug of decaf on the table in front of me. Back in Dodd's Coffee Shop.

'Joanna, my friend who moved to California, used to say as a horticulture teacher, I should drink tea made from loose leaves. She always went on about the agony of the leaves.'

'What's that?' The tree's leaves had certainly moved. Glowed. Did producing the cut wooden disk hurt the tree?

'It's the term for the dried leaves writhing as water hits them. I like my plants alive. Plus, coffee comes from a plant. I still don't understand what the Mathers are paying you for exactly.'

I turned my mug in my hands, watching darkness seep out from the tea bag. No leaves to wiggle. Or hurt.

'But then the Mathers are weird,' she said. 'They pay me to take care of three bushes, despite the fact they have a gardening service.' Siobhan cut into her cake.

'It's mostly research. And producing a history of the family.' I closed the baby book we'd just bought. The illustration of the coiled up foetus terrified me. 'I can do the archival research, no problem. Done it for years. But interviewing people? That scares me.' I seemed to be using that verb a lot.

'Didn't you have to write papers for your degrees?'

'It's not the writing, it's the interviewing.' I looked at Siobhan's bent head. 'Can I practice on you?'

She glanced up, and then went back to methodically proportioning the icing on her cake.

'Tell me about something. Something funny at school or something about Al. Where you went on vacation this year. Anything.'

'Even if it doesn't relate to the Mathers? I mean there are the flowers and bits I do for them.'

I pulled out my new notebook. I would not look at the cover of the baby book.

'About a year ago, Walter Mathers dropped something off for Al – something to raise at a meeting, I think, very above board, definitely. He saw our roses out front.'

I wrote frantically. I should have taken short hand.

'Ask Mr Mathers for a recorder. The school has a couple,' Siobhan said. 'Or what if you wrote just salient details? Mr M to house see Al saw roses. Then you add to it later. Like when you tell family about something that happened at work.'

What would it be like to go home to Kenneth each night, tell all the silly things that happened at work? Assuming that we both had work. I had to get a good reference from Mr Mathers.

‘But those stories are never the same,’ Siobhan continued. ‘Definitely a recorder. Anyway, Mr Mathers admired our roses. I guess Eric’s wife Gwen had done theirs, but she left them in a state. Not for the money, you understand, but they’re such an important family around here. Al thought I should.’

Gwen. Her name was Gwen. Kenneth pushed her back down on the pew, crawled on top of her.

Stop. Siobhan still spoke.

‘I water, feed, prune – generally care for their roses. There’s a very old original one, and then two from cuttings. They do have other roses, but like I said the gardening service takes care of those. I also water a tree in the church, like the day we met.’

My hand slowed. ‘The tree?’

‘It’s a dogwood – that’s a lovely legend, do you know it? White flowers with a red tip on each of the four petals. It’s the four wounds of Christ, with a centre that looks a little like a crown, if you use your imagination. The legend is that the dogwood didn’t used to grow sort of crooked the way it is now, but very tall and straight, and they made the cross out of it. Of course that’s nonsense, dogwoods don’t grow in the Middle East, but the story stuck. It’s our state flower, but not the tree. I think that’s how the Mathers got it into the church.’

‘Because it’s the state flower?’

‘Its religious history, well, mythology. Have you called a doctor yet? I can give you the details of my gynaecologist.’

‘Does the tree shed, um, anything?’

‘Petals. Berries. Normal stuff.’ She leaned back, twisting her fingers in her short hair. ‘I wish I could get pregnant, but it’s difficult without Al’s participation.’

Siobhan took care of the tree, and she’d never seen flashing lights. Disks.

‘He won’t hear of it. Babies, I mean. Sex has been off the table too, with Mary around. She’s downstairs, but he gets weirded out. Hey, I could tell you about that. Certainly the biggest thing of the summer so far, getting Mary.’

We finished our drinks, and Siobhan drove me back to the new motel. I squinted in the sunlight, longing for my sunglasses.

That night, I tried to start writing up what Siobhan had said from my scrawled notes. Her story jumped around too much. Surely I could have more creative leeway. Reorganise. Elaborate. I started on a new page.

‘I blame you,’ Al said, dropping the briefcase that cost more than any handbag I’d ever owned onto the kitchen tile. I continued stirring oil and vinegar together for a dressing.

‘Dinner’s almost ready,’ I said.

‘I had a phone call this afternoon.’ Al had removed his tie in the car – the sign of a truly bad day. ‘Aunt Mary has us in her will. And it’s your fault.’

‘How is it my fault? [No. Maybe.] Is she dead?’

Not first person. I would have cried when he said it was my fault, not kept making salad dressing. As if I knew how to make salad dressing.

I looked again at my notes, both while she talked and the expanded ones I’d made afterwards. Siobhan had more . . . not anger . . . edge to her than I did. Less fragility. I started again.

Siobhan checked the clock over the kitchen sink. Al should be home by now. Finish the salad dressing.

The back door opened.

‘I blame you,’ Al said, dropping his briefcase onto the tile.

‘Hello to you too. Bad day?’ Siobhan could tell that already, because the tie had come off in the car. He shrugged out of his suit jacket. Siobhan mixed mustard into the oil calmly.

‘Mother got a phone call today. And it’s your fault. Writing to her.’

Siobhan opened the oven door. The chicken glowed golden under the electric coils. Al threw his tie on the kitchen table.

‘I’m just about to set that, do you mind?’ He jerked the red strip off. ‘I haven’t written your parents since we went to the beach last summer.’

‘She called me at work. Interrupted a serious, important meeting.’

All meetings were important to Al. ‘Is she upset?’

‘Great Aunt Mary. It’s her will.’ Al paced the length of the kitchen, about four of his long strides. He opened his shirt collar.

The oven door shut, the whoosh of hot air making her dizzy. ‘Great Aunt Mary is dead?’ All those letters, without a single reply.

After just writing that much, I felt exhausted. Pregnancy or my dread of the meeting at the Mathers’ house tomorrow? I tucked myself into bed, wrapping the sheets around me. I texted Kenneth goodnight.

Siobhan, talking about Al’s lack of participation. I turned over onto my stomach. That first time, I’d seen Kenneth roll the condom on. But had he taken it off again under my grey skirt? Why would he want to get me pregnant?

I backed my memory up. My skirt flared around us, my hands closing on his hips, his jeans pushed down but not off. I couldn't see our bodies coming together, only feel as he pushed deeper and deeper inside. Bumping my cervix. Why did anatomy words always pop into my head during sex? Cervix, fraenum.

I'd asked, when I came out of the bathroom. He waved the torn blue package, the flaccid plastic hanging out over the edge.

'Good, 'cause I'm not on the pill,' I said. Good because of his tattoo, good because I'd known him four hours. But then I remembered that wild stretch of joy and love. He kissed my lips, my eyes, my cheeks and started undressing me properly, replacing fabric with kisses and strokes. Leaving on my stockings. I had enough sense, or perhaps sultriness, to not tell him that I wore them not for seduction but for comfort. His flesh, stretched tight over his thin body, exuded a perfect balance of moisture, like essential oils coating my fingers as I stroked his smooth chest. No rashes, no dry patches, no nail marks from scratching itches. I saw the condom that time.

But now I was pregnant. And alone.

## Chapter 6

The last time I'd gone to the house, I'd taken an expensive taxi. I couldn't continue with such extravagance. I carried the sketched map the front desk clerk had made me that day. One week, five days and 18 hours ago.

After about two minutes of walking outside the town proper, the sidewalks stopped. At first, I walked past houses. White clapboard one storey houses, virtually identical in a windows-and-door faces of childhood drawings shape.

I put on my brimmed hat. No skin cancer for me. Kenneth laughed when I'd bought the purple hat at a rest stop in Virginia, pointing out that the sun was the same in the South as it was in New York. To my right, a neat front porch boasted a swing and quilted pansy flag on a short flagpole. The house next door had a profusion of toys and bicycle parts on the porch, and a broken down car marooned in the middle of yellow bleached grass. All the windows stayed tightly sealed. The motors of over-used air conditioners whirred loudly.

Had he driven this way at dawn? Past the auto parts store with a cheerful, blank eyed figure made of carburettors and a funnel hat? Past the church whose sign proclaimed the Reverend Kelvin Smith as the minister, who I hoped hadn't approved the message written in movable letters: 'We are all Gods' children'. The door over the letters was locked, so I couldn't rearrange the apostrophe.

Did the car flip over? The camera strap catching on the gearshift for the sake of some picture he tried to take as he drove? His forehead bloody as he crawled – or was dragged – or was cut from the wreckage. His ID would list his last address, nothing about me. Amnesia, as stout nurses brought him glowing cubes of Jello and begged him to remember his loved ones.

My shoe brushed against a large mushroom, and it exploded in a stinky cloud. I walked faster, but I kept my eyes on my feet.

The car hadn't been found. And the hospitals had no record of him.

The houses and businesses thinned out after I passed a small service station. They didn't even have pay at the pump, which I had used all the way down from New York. Except when Kenneth went inside to pay with cash. Eventually he admitted he didn't have a credit card, long after I'd signed the rental car forms.

I now walked under pine trees, so tall that their lowest branches hovered over my head. I felt squashed, dwarfed by the vast expanse of trees. Wind rushed through the treetops, as if they laughed at me. The same bird whistle sounded, undisturbed by the red car that zoomed past, honking at me. Were pedestrians that uncommon? It couldn't be physical attraction, swathed in light reflecting clothes as I was. Only Kenneth had made me feel beautiful, made me look beautiful in the pictures he'd taken of me. I leaned down and picked up a pine needle, the two slivers bound tightly at the top. Like thinly painted tar, but bumpy and irregular. Did the needles start off split on the tree, or did they dry out? The halves fit together perfectly. I held the

strands together in the dim sunlight under the tree. My finger slid across one half, and the needle slit into one layer of skin.

I pushed the pine needle in my pocket and passed a three-way intersection. This I remembered from the taxi. I kept behind the ditch, not wanting to be too close to the cars, the bright brittle sunlight bouncing off their windshields. The red dirt of the ditch blurred into the burnt orange pine needles. I wiped tears from my cheeks again. I needed to start carrying repair makeup.

Sky never burned this blue in squares over buildings. My legs carried me past twenty, thirty, forty tree trunks and then I stopped counting. According to my map, a break would indicate their driveway. My feet pushed against the needle carpet. No cars sounded, so I emerged back out to the side of the road.

Ten minutes later, I saw the brick columns framing their driveway. Last time, after the rain, the Mathers land seemed to be almost a frothy green, masses of plants teeming.

Maybe Mr Mathers stood grandly – or rather sat in his wheelchair – on the porch of his huge house and ordered Kenneth away, off his land, away from his wife. It'd have to be Eric though, not Mr Mathers. And I couldn't imagine Eric ordering anyone. I passed through the columns.

Birds scuffled in the undergrowth. The green seemed calmer, safer. A squirrel gambolled along a tree branch. Pink flowers bloomed at the base of the tree. I took off my hat. The taxi had chugged up a steep hill. But the driveway evened in front of my feet.

I stopped. The land stayed flat and gentle. Maybe I misremembered it. It couldn't just flatten out. The trees met in a graceful arch over my head, letting in dappled sunshine, not brazen rays. How could it feel so different? A breeze stirred my skirt.

Last time I had expected a plantation house, something like Tara. Instead, the Mathers had a fairly simple house, more tall and deep than broad, of yellow brick. Not a crayon sun colour, but a creamy mustard yellow. Surely yellow brick had been expensive in a county of red clay earth. It stood taller than any other house I'd seen – three, maybe four storeys.

The gravel sidewalk crunched under my shoes. I rang the front doorbell, which set off a series of peals through the house. If they had been at home last time, they had heard but ignored me. The door jarred, but only slightly. Then with a crash, the door opened. Eric Mathers steadied himself against the frame.

'The door sticks – we hardly ever use this one.' He smiled. He wouldn't have stood here and shouted at Kenneth. His neatly cropped hair, basketball team t-shirt and jeans didn't fit in my daydream at all.

'Why do you live in a brick house if you're timber magnates?'

'Hardly. We used to be farmers – the house was built then.'

I wanted to ask why a man his age lived with his father too, but one insensitive question had to be my limit per contact with my now boss's son.

‘Where’s your taxi?’ he asked.

‘I walked.’

‘From town? By the woods?’ The moustache grew thickly, obscuring the edge of his lips. ‘Check for ticks. Especially your hair. Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever is very dangerous.’

‘What?’ My scalp began to crawl.

‘Is she here?’ Mr Mathers’ voice echoed from inside the house.

‘This way,’ Eric said. I tried to resist scratching. How did I check for ticks? I tottered slightly on the first deep step just inside the door, a step that seemed designed to disorientate guests. Eric wedged the door shut again and turned a key. Three steps led upwards in front of me. The main floor of the house? Why such a deep well? The granite and the cold air conditioning made me feel like I had entered a tomb.

‘Is she here?’ Mr Mathers repeated, more loudly.

‘Yes, Dad.’ Eric climbed the three steps quickly. We emerged into a buttery painted entryway. No draped cobwebs or black candles. Just a sunlit room, albeit double height, with a mahogany staircase curving upwards to the left. My entire New York apartment easily would fit into it, bathroom and all. Perfectly normal except for an odd statue of a woman, from mid-thigh up. The pale body stood centred on a table at the far side of the hall. Her face pointed away from the door.

‘We didn’t really meet properly before. I’m Eric.’ He extended his hand. Watching me vomit twice didn’t count as properly meeting?

‘Luanne.’ I grasped his hand; far too briefly to learn anything other than perhaps he didn’t like shaking a sweaty hand. Eric went to the right through a short hallway to a kitchen. I got a quick impression of dark wood cabinets before a blurred image flickered over the white refrigerator door. They must have a TV embedded in the door in an ostentatious show of their wealth. Mr Mathers wheeled back and forth with jerky movements in the hallway beyond the kitchen. Impatience at my slowness or nerves? Did he have a reason to be nervous of me?

Eric led me into a room I would call a study, but I bet they called it a library. Bookcases lined the walls, all the way to the ceiling. Two doors broke the run of shelves – the one I stood in, and one in the opposite corner. They even had a couple of library ladders. Very few of the books appeared to have been opened. The spines sat too crisply, too perfectly on the shelves. The computer looked incongruously modern on the leather-topped banker’s desk.

‘Here are the papers.’ Mr Mathers waved a hand around the room. Large cardboard moving-boxes covered the desk and stretched across the floor. I estimated well over fifty. Maybe the answer to Mr Mathers’ twitches lay there – his wheelchair couldn’t have moved very far into the room.

‘And I’m to do what exactly?’

Eric smiled. He benefitted from a comparison to his father.

‘Archive them,’ Mr Mathers said. ‘We’ll get to the interviews next week.’

‘In what?’ I explained I’d need specialist materials. The types would depend on the boxes’ contents. Acid free folders, boxes.

‘It’s just papers. Photos. Some daguerreotypes. Eric, give her a credit card. Order what you need.’ He rolled away through the kitchen.

‘The closest bathroom is through the other door, down the hall.’ Eric gestured with his wallet. He pulled out a silver credit card. No, platinum. ‘That computer has internet access. Just order what you want, have it delivered here, and leave the card when you’re done.’

I insisted he input the card details himself. It took me a while to find all that I might need to start with, and Eric didn’t offer to chat. He used three fingers to type in his information.

Over the next week, I trawled through the endless papers about timber by year and the Mathers who signed them. William, 1890s to 1930s. Graham, 1930s to 1960s. Walter, 1960s to the mid 1990s. Eric’s papers must still be in use. Photographs were easy to sort by era. The daguerreotypes I found marginally more interesting.

I tried to fight it, to remember that the job paid for the car, paid for the search for Kenneth, and no more. Still, I fell into the archiving. The texture of the paper, the curve of the letters, the words that someone valued enough to save. It didn’t matter that I cared not a jot about timber production. Kenneth had distracted me from the loss of my job, but I needed to work. This absorbed contemplation and solitude had formed the centre of my world after Amelia left. And I was good at it. Plotting an order for histories.

Every day, Eric popped by the study and asked if I was ok. His smile stayed sweet, and I usually found myself smiling back. Then he’d be gone. I could never decide if I smiled in reflex to his question or at the silliness of his red moustache.

I found one wedding photo randomly stuffed in the middle of papers. Huge bangs puffed into a lacquered poof dated the bride’s photo to the nineties. She wore a white mini dress, the fabric clinging too tightly to shift in the breeze that bent the trees around her. She stood in the town square, on knee-high pink platform boots. The veil fell just to the length of her sleek hair, barely brushing the elegant curve of her boobs. Tall, skinny, and a 30B cup, I’d bet.

Gwen, the love – the previous love – of Kenneth’s life. He loved a girl who wore a sleeveless white tube – only extending three inches or so from her crotch – as a wedding dress? He’d been young. And he’d chosen me. Just as I’d chosen him. Even if I wasn’t a 30B, tall or skinny.

My detective still had no information.

I couldn’t even imagine Eric with her. His t-shirts and jeans didn’t seem to match the micro mini dress.

I kept working, but I broke one of my rules. I just tossed the photo in a box with others. I’d never been so unprofessional in my work. Well, except I had. But not in sorting archive materials.

Eric stopped in at noon a few days later. I ate at the desk with paper towels spread over the red leather desktop to catch crumbs.

‘What are you doing?’ He didn’t smile this time.

I waved my sandwich. The air conditioning had cooled it only slightly from the heat of my walk out from town this morning. ‘I moved all the archive papers first.’

‘Use the kitchen. Do you want some coffee? Or can you . . .’

‘I’ve never drunk coffee.’ My pregnancy was none of his concern.

‘I think we have some tea bags. It’s ok to leave this room, you know.’ Now the moustache curved with his lips. I followed him to the kitchen. He rummaged in a cupboard and pulled a slightly squashed box of herbal tea from a high shelf, one I couldn’t have reached.

‘Thanks,’ I said. He pulled out two mugs. I filled the silver kettle at the sink. It felt almost companionable. The gas of the stove burner caught with a whoosh.

Eric picked up a tea bag. Dark blue trickled down from the pincer of his forefinger and thumb, spiralling over the pale fabric of the bag.

‘Is that some kind of joke?’ How far would he go to get me to smile?

‘What?’

I pointed. The blue tendrils swirled faster over the bag and made stabbing dips into the tea leaves.

‘It seems ok,’ Eric said, sniffing the bag. Blue writhed over the surface, snaking under his fingers. Could he not see it? He threw the bag in the mug. The next tea bag danced with colour.

I stood close enough to watch when Eric poured the water. The tea bags pitted when the stream hit them. The leaves pressed against the translucent wet paper when Eric spooned them out. Eric took his mug and disappeared upstairs. I stared at the fridge.

An ordinary white door – not a TV at all. Oddly free of any decoration, not even a single magnet. The tea looked normal, tasted normal, if stale. Flat driveways. Swarming tea bags. I went back to work.

The second week, I started on a new box. Predominantly photographs, 135mm film, slightly browned in tone. I pulled them out carefully to spread across the desk. The child smiling in the top photo could only be Eric. He even looked cute in a striped t-shirt, his smile showing a gap from a missing front tooth. I reached back into the box, and something sharp pressed against my healed cut. My fingers explored the shape. Flat. Smooth. Round. The faint grain I felt daily in my handbag.

I didn’t have to look at it. I knew it’d be exactly like mine.

I ran to the bathroom. I slammed the door and made it to the toilet just in time. I retched out my delusions. The disk made me feel special. A link to Kenneth.

I sat on the cool tile. The disk didn't mean anything. My disk. Except that I had decided to stay here on the basis of finding it. Why did I find a replica in a box from the seventies?

'Luanne, are you ok?' Eric's soft drawl came through the door. He said my name with a slow extension of the syllables. But not like Kenneth's Lu. Didn't Eric ever go to work?

'I'll be right out.' I washed my hands, rinsed my mouth. I'd hardly slept for three weeks. Pregnancy. High stress. Eric needed the bathroom, never mind that the house seemed to have at least two others on the ground floor alone. Maybe he had heard the door slam. Certainly it wasn't that he watched out for me.

When I emerged, Eric had gone, so I ducked into the study. Maybe a drink of water. I heard voices on the way to the kitchen. The door opposite the study had never been open before.

'... a Yankee,' Eric said.

'This is the way it works.' Mr Mathers sounded fierce. 'It's necessary. No more discussion.' Mr Mathers' wheelchair hissed as it rolled over thick carpet. I retreated to the study desk. They hadn't been discussing a Yankee at work. Me. What was necessary?

The open picture box. I could ignore the disk. I could be professional. Photo, photo. Eric, the same slightly weak chin, getting younger with each layer of film. His baby picture, in the hospital, made me queasy again. The disk had fallen to the floor. The same light scent, the same wood, pale against the dark floorboards. I turned the disk over.

This disk had M-A-R-R-Y inscribed on it. Not WAIT. Was that the next level?

I felt stupid enough believing in the disk, but surely theorising it became idiotic.

But Kenneth had proposed. He would return. And marry me. Each time one of my friends in New York had married, I'd tottered up alone. Chris refused to go with me to Rachel's, shortly before I realised he was already married. Karen put me in a horrible sea green bridesmaid dress that she said would set off my red hair. I concentrated on visualising each ruffle, each strap on my silver shoes. How Karen had laughed when I said Kenneth had red hair too. Redheaded babies, she'd said.

By now we would have been installed in his new job. Who had gotten this disk? When? I flipped through the remaining items in the box. No other disks. What if the Mathers had stacks of whitish wooden disks stashed away somewhere? Walter Mathers could have hurled it from across the church that day, and I wouldn't have noticed. The lights had transfixed me.

Not just the lights. The feeling of safety. The hum of good will the tree exuded.

'I see you found a disk,' Mr Mathers said. I jumped and dropped it. His voice sounded so oily I felt soiled. He didn't know about the WAIT disk.

Mr Mathers wheeled himself into the room. From the other door, not the one near the room he'd been in with Eric. 'Ah, my wife's disk. Elinor. Wonderful, wonderful woman.'

'What is it?' I hoped my voice came out evenly. Mr Mathers pulled a printed list I'd created closer as if for inspection, but he left it resting on top of his son's face.

‘There’s a tree in a church in town – occasionally it gives disks when it’s time for someone – a woman – to marry. Elinor got one,’ he said.

I nodded, trying to concentrate on my role as archivist. My time to marry. Kenneth had asked, and I had answered. I moved the disk off the pictures, checked to make sure the disk’s fall hadn’t dented the images.

‘Eric said he thought you were unwell?’

I picked up more photos, checked them for foxing or fading. I didn’t want to think about his hand on my midsection. Even the doctor’s exam had elicited a memory of my physical revulsion.

‘Has your detective found anything about Kenneth?’ My voice didn’t stay steady.

‘Pretty brave, giving up everything for someone like Mr Miers,’ he said. ‘A bit unreliable as a partner, a parent . . . Of course, you had already left your job. In awkward circumstances.’

I felt nauseated again. Dust from the box. A faint smell of wood, impossibly fresh after thirty, forty years. Mr Mathers had told me he’d checked my previous employment. The library had promised me a civil – i.e., damning – reference: Luanne worked for the library for thirteen years and terminated her employment by choice.

‘What will you do when this is finished?’ Mr Mathers asked.

I checked three photos of a young Mr Mathers. Dark red hair swept back, darker than Eric’s.

‘Travel, perhaps,’ I said.

‘Am I correct? You are pregnant with Kenneth’s child?’

‘Yes,’ I said, turning my body away, ostensibly to write a note. Why did I tell him anything?

‘Excellent. I’m ready to talk about the interview portion of your job, if that’s all right with you.’ He jammed a memory stick into the back of the computer and opened a file. ‘The car’s paid for already, by the way.’

I nodded again, looking at the creamy flesh of the MARRY disk against the crimson leather desktop. Wait for Kenneth. Wait for the baby.

He opened a new computer file, a document. A list of names. He swiftly highlighted and deleted a name, but not before I saw ‘Kenneth Miers’ in fourteen point font.

‘That’s – you want me to interview Kenneth? Has he been found?’ I asked. Hope pressed down on my diaphragm.

‘Sorry, old list. Those are the people to interview.’ The printer clicked to life. ‘Plus whatever you can piece together from the archive.’ He closed the document and ejected his memory stick. ‘I’m afraid nothing has been found.’ He touched my hand. The contact didn’t horrify me, not like before. ‘Yet. I’m hopeful.’

‘What am I looking for?’ They found my father in no time at all. What if Kenneth didn’t want to be found?

‘What went wrong. Why Eric’s wife left. Why they had no heir.’

‘You could ask them.’ But I’d have no job, no insurance. I took the sheet from the printer. Eric Mathers and Gwen Mathers appeared on the list. ‘How do you want the report?’

‘What report?’ he asked.

‘On the interviews. The research.’ Did he expect me to report verbally each day?

‘Oh, use your best judgement. Your field, not mine. Something I can read.’

What did he think I’d do – sing it? At least I wouldn’t have to turn up each day, recite my findings to him.

‘Go for today. You look horrible. Eric will drive you.’ He wheeled out of the room. I held the sheet of paper, counted the names. When I looked up, Eric had silently filled the space vacated by Mr Mathers.

‘Do you want to go home?’

A motel is not a home. Tears clogged my throat, so I nodded again.

The car smelled like cleaning solvents. I put my purse on the mottled white patches that marred the blue carpet. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said. He backed out of the garage and did a quick three-point turn. He drove down the level driveway.

‘Is your driveway always like this?’ It had been flat, every day I’d walked to the house. I’d just misremembered it.

‘Gravel? Yeah. Better drainage.’ Eric turned onto the main road. ‘I haven’t said congratulations.’ The word ended almost as a question. Maybe he feared me being sick again.

‘Your father knew before I did,’ I said. For that matter, Eric had suggested it before his father.

‘We – I desperately wanted a child. I read a lot about it. Learned the symptoms.’

The seat belt clasped over my stomach. It looked exactly the same, not flat – but then my stomach had never been flat. Viable pregnancy, the doctor said.

‘What does your mom say?’ Eric asked.

‘Not a thing.’ This year I’d hit the fifty percent mark – eighteen years with her, eighteen years without. She left a scrawled note saying she could trust me, responsible Luanne, to look after Amelia. And that gave her the freedom to go onto the next phase of her life. What kind of mother did that? My systematic search for her started in Washington State. Directory assistance calls, personal ads in newspapers. I worked my way across the states in rows, as if I could read my mother’s location off the map. I tried any city over 80,000. She always said her lungs seized up in the country. After three years, when Amelia left again, I stopped. In Utah.

‘Sorry.’

I shrugged. The trees blurred past the window. Peebles had maybe 40,000 people, tops, and yet my lungs kept inflating. Over the baby. The little pulsing light the doctor showed me on the scan.

‘This is a long walk, especially heading into fall. And even more so pregnant. I’ll talk to the county about extending the sidewalks,’ Eric said.

It was barely August. But Siobhan would start teaching next week.

Eric tapped his thumbs on the steering wheel, as if ideas came with the rhythm. Could the Mathers just ask for more sidewalks and get them?

‘Or if you wanted, there’s a cottage. Completely separate. You could move there.’

‘What?’ Cottage sounded like something out of a fairy tale, not a habitable place for an adult. And a growing belly.

‘On our land. Apparently we used to have staff ages ago. It has everything – you’d be independent.’

Independent. I’d stopped being independent before I even met Kenneth. ‘I’m not sure.’

‘Maybe later,’ he said.

My purse was unzipped. A clear sign of distress – unzipped meant stealable and dippable in the city. Not that Eric would steal my wallet. I could see the edge of my disk. Could Kenneth? I meant, could Eric?

## Chapter 7

A week passed. I kept sorting papers and photographs, which allowed me to ignore the interview list.

When I arrived at the house the next morning, I filled a glass at the tap. I ignored the flicker of the fridge. Mr Mathers rolled in, practically bright in a blue suit. Did he ever dress casually?

‘How goes the pregnancy?’ he asked. ‘You seem to be sick more than my wife. But you are older.’

I clenched my arms over my abdomen. His son was nearly fifty, so how much did he really remember?

‘Your baby is important. Don’t push yourself too hard; the job gets done when it gets done. Your pay should be in your account today. And the insurance information – you found it?’

A boss who said ‘don’t work too hard’? ‘Thanks. Oh, can I buy a recorder?’

‘Why?’ His face stayed blank.

‘For the interviews.’

He pulled out a credit card and then slid it back in his wallet. ‘I forgot. You won’t use one. Get the best they have.’ He held out a stack of bills. The prickly ring on his left hand bore two tiny yellow buds on a black band. Floral rings seemed like a thirteen-year-old girl thing, not something for a man in his seventies.

‘It’s just my wedding ring. Would you like to take the money?’

‘Sorry.’ I flushed and held the cash uneasily. ‘Has the detective found anything?’

‘No.’ He wheeled himself towards the hallway. A few minutes later, I heard a car door slam outside.

‘He’s very agile,’ Eric said. He stood right behind me. How could I hear a car door but not his approach? He opened the fridge. Bare feet. I didn’t want to see if the door shifted or not. ‘He went into a wheelchair not long after Gwen . . . after we split up. I think it was disappointment.’ His voice echoed from the refrigerator, but his tension filled the room. He closed the door but didn’t seem to have taken anything out. He pushed his hands in his jeans pockets.

Dark red hair dotted his toes. I didn’t have anything to offer – I’d never had a father to disappoint. The money rustled between my fingers, and Eric looked up. ‘He gave me this to buy a recorder.’

‘I could drive you, if you like. There’s a thing I have to go tonight anyway. In town.’

I put my glass in the dishwasher. ‘Thanks.’ Eric trailed after me to the study.

‘How’s your motel?’

‘It’s a motel.’ I turned on the computer, forcing a smile. I didn’t say that I’d bought a sleep mask to block all the neon light that flooded in through the thin curtain. Or that the mask fooled me into thinking I’d slept well.

‘I don’t mean to go on about this, but there is that cottage here. It’s a way off from the house. But there’s a path and no cars – completely safe.’ He pretended to study a bookcase. They never touched these books. ‘And free.’

‘Let me think about it.’ Last night my doorknob had rattled fiercely. I eventually figured out that a drunken businessman had confused my room door with his. It had unnerved me, as had the painful lurch let go of the possibility that it had been Kenneth. Surely he could find me just as easily at the house as at the new motel? ‘Ok, I will. Thanks.’

‘That was quick. Wonderful.’

His face, in profile, showed only joy and – could that be relief? How could he be so unflinchingly nice when his father seemed so odd?

‘When do you want to move in? Tonight?’ He picked a volume off the shelf and brushed at the dust.

‘Maybe tomorrow. I need to pack.’ His eagerness put me off slightly. He took the book with him when he left.

The windshields and asphalt in the electronics store’s parking lot bore a thin layer of yellow pollen dust, but the air seemed fresh after the cologne in Eric’s car. He drove off only after I walked into the bright entrance. Eric’s attentiveness sprang from his loneliness. That was all. And he reminded me to do all the pregnancy things like elevating my feet and taking vitamins. And to be careful. I had too few friends in North Carolina to dismiss that, even if he was my boss’s son.

Siobhan called me, and we met for dinner in town. We settled on recording the story of Aunt Mary and Walter the parrot, and we got all the way to Florida before Siobhan said she had to go home.

‘Do you want to come over for dinner tomorrow night?’ she asked. Her car was perfume-free.

‘I’m moving into the Mathers’ cottage tomorrow. I can’t really keep paying the hotel bill.’ I stared at the pool of lighting that flashed over my lap as we passed under streetlamps.

‘If it weren’t for Mary, you could move into our spare room.’

I couldn’t possibly live with Al. ‘Eric suggested it, again. I’m broke. And scared.’

‘Of the ticks?’

‘Yes.’ Siobhan stayed quiet. ‘He’s nice.’

‘I could drive you tomorrow morning.’

I didn’t mention that Eric had given me even more cash for a taxi. I’d give it back to him.

‘And I’m out doing the flowers the day after, so could I stop by? We could finish the story.’ She too waited for me to get inside before driving off.

I very carefully, locked my hotel door behind me. It didn’t take me long to rearrange my few clothes and books in the summer suitcase. The suitcase with winter clothes I hadn’t opened.

I started writing up my conversation with Siobhan. I backed up and replayed the tape eight times.

Mr Mathers said he didn’t care what form the reports took. Could I go back to the way I’d started with Siobhan’s story?

Al’s mother told Siobhan, in a rare moment of intimacy over some Christmas eggnog, that Mary hadn’t always lived the way she should. Siobhan assumed she meant drugs, sexually transmitted diseases, maybe even fraud. Couldn’t be murder, Mary wasn’t in jail – just in Florida. Mrs Taylor had mouthed ‘living with a man’ to Siobhan. It explained Al insistence that they get married right out of college.

But it had something to do with why Siobhan decided to write to Aunt Mary when she assigned her tenth graders to write a letters to an out-of-town relative or friend to ask about their local plants. Mary never replied.

Since it was summer, and as Al put it, Siobhan had nothing to do, he left her to organise the trip to fetch Mary’s parrot. She got his car serviced, bought gas, planned a route. Got up at five to pack a lunch and snacks.

She placed the frozen plastic apple on one side of the six-pack of colas in the cooler, and the plastic pear on the other. Al clattered downstairs in heeled dress shoes. He walked into the kitchen and immediately poured himself a cup of coffee from the pot Siobhan had brewed to put in the thermos.

‘That was for the trip.’

‘Good morning.’ His cheeks, even on Saturday, were pinkly hair free. He put bread in the toaster. ‘Are we ready to go? Map? Food? Drinks?’

‘Will you carry this to the car?’ Siobhan kicked the cooler, her sandaled toes striking the blue plastic.

‘Remember though, we take the bird, but we do not, under any circumstances, make any promises to keep it.’

‘Al –’

‘We can talk about it on the way down.’ He dolloped jam onto his toast and started chewing. Loudly. Siobhan turned on the radio.

‘Weather.’ He’d never noticed that she hardly ever ate in silence with him. The noise of him chewing was enough to drive her mad.

Dear Aunt Mary,

Al thinks it's ridiculous to get my students writing letters. Email, even web design – that's the way of the future. The corporate future, I say. Besides they're writing to their grandparents mostly – why not let lonely people have a little contact that doesn't come through a computer screen? Then we had the same argument again that the practical aspect of horticulture does not mean that it isn't academic.

I don't know if Mrs Taylor (Al's mother I mean, not you obviously) told you, but Al got a promotion at work. He's, we're very proud. Bought himself a new really nice briefcase – not as a celebration, it must be made clear, but because his new role demands it. At least one new suit will be next, I expect.

Looking back, I've realised this letter is all about Al. Well, he is your relative, after all. My best friend Joanna is moving soon, I just found out. All the way to California.

Most of my students have either not heard back, or gotten an email in reply.

Warm regards,  
Siobhan

Al did carry the cooler to the garage, but not that final half foot to the car. Siobhan hoisted it in, wedging it in the foot well behind the driver's seat.

'I was going to do that,' Al said.

Then why had he just dumped it on the ground? He held his laptop case. 'Al, it's just an overnight trip. Do you really need that?'

'It's just a weeny bit of work that needs doing. I won't spend the whole time on it, I promise.' He kissed her shoulder. 'What if she's died already?'

'Al.'

'Well, we might get out of the damn bird.'

They'd been driving south for twenty minutes, silently. The normal exit for 'nice' evenings out – Milbury, the nearest city – had already been passed. Not a big city, but a good city, as Al liked to say. Boring, Siobhan called it. When Al promised her they would move to a city, after two years in his home town, she'd taken him at his word. She sometimes wondered if their definitions of 'city' matched. He seemed to think Peebles' increase in population to 40,000 and incorporation counted.

‘She must have liked you. Putting you in her will,’ Siobhan said.

‘She gave me a really good fire truck the Christmas before she left.’ He stretched his arms out against the wheel. ‘I hope this isn’t a con. You know, we take the bird, she lives for another fifteen, twenty years and there’s no money. Mother told me I shouldn’t trust her.’

‘Because she moved in with someone? In what, the seventies? Hardly radical that, except in your family.’ The way Mrs Taylor had looked at Siobhan when Al told her that Siobhan’s parents ran a motel. And in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, the summer haven of people that the Taylors just didn’t associate with. At least, that was how Siobhan interpreted Mrs Taylor’s look. The Taylor family went to the upmarket side of South Carolina beaches, Cherry Grove, or to the North Carolina beaches. Despite what the Taylors thought, Siobhan didn’t regret her childhood of ocean breezes, the eternal smells of coconut sunscreen and new friends to play with every two weeks. She tried to forget that horrible moment when Mrs Taylor had commented on how tan she was for February. Had Al neglected to mention she was mixed race?

‘My family has values,’ Al said. ‘And that’s important to an electorate.’

‘You haven’t run for anything yet.’ They passed a billboard for a cigarette warehouse, one for a fast food chain. One that had half a car sticking out into space. ‘Somebody really ought to do something about these billboards,’ she offered quietly.

‘Absolutely. They’re an eyesore. I was just . . .’

And he was off. A pet topic. One that would lift him out of his sulk. Siobhan closed her eyes.

Al had stopped talking. He patted his fingers on the steering wheel in time with the music, a clear sign of improved mood.

‘Have you heard from Joanna?’

‘We need to take down the ceiling fans. Especially in the living room. They’re dangerous.’ The parrot book Siobhan checked out from the library terrified her – all about the stress levels of rehoused parrots. Siobhan missed Joanna. They met when they both first started teaching. The horticulture space consisted of only a greenhouse, so she got plunked into a shared office with Joanna on the English corridor. Their friendship had cemented in the tiny space.

‘After eight years? They cut down on our electricity bill in the summer.’

‘For parrots.’ Half her fingernails bore no clear gloss. She’d meant to fix them.

‘Nothing yet.’ Maybe he baited her as much as she did him. The empty mailbox or the stack of junk catalogues. No letters, no postcards.

‘Not as good a correspondent as you?’

‘She just moved.’ With her three beautiful children and her husband. Leaving Siobhan to share the office with a perky new breed of teacher who had subject expertise but no teacher

training. Kimmie colonised the small space instantly with her knitted tissue box covers. Siobhan couldn't wait until the students heard her pink, perfumed voice grate against the chalkboard.

'Don't you realise people don't write back to you?'

'I'm going to have to ask that new teacher to stop wearing that hideous perfume. Let's look for a rest stop soon.'

'We're barely out of town. We are not stopping every half hour.'

'Now.' The car's motion, even the smell of him. Sickening. She would have imagined that she could be pregnant, but she knew no chance of that existed. Not even that.

Siobhan leaned against the car's door, its heat imprinting her spine. Silver, so it wouldn't show dirt, he said. Never mind that he washed it faithfully every Sunday.

'Aren't you going to go?'

'I need some fresh air.' And to be still. And to be alone. As invariably her summers were.

'It smells like dog shit here.' He opened his door. 'Hurry up, before the inside gets hot.'

I had to ride to the cottage with Al. Siobhan delegated the job to him after someone called Mary about a potential parrot sighting. Al insisted, even when I begged to be able to take a taxi. Mary had a far more justified reason than me to point blank refuse to ride in Al's car.

'Who will be letting you in the cottage?' Al asked. He drove far more slowly than either Eric or Siobhan, braking carefully and accelerating in a way that he said maximised gas mileage.

'Eric, I guess.' At least Al's car didn't have the overwhelming spiciness of Eric's cologne. The interior gleamed. I couldn't be sick here.

'Not staff?'

So much for Al's much vaunted knowledge of the Mathers. 'All they have is a cleaning lady every so often, as far as I can tell.'

'Surely a chef. At least a cook.' He tidied a wave in his parting as he stopped at a traffic light.

'No, just them.' Their refrigerator's relatively empty state implied a lot of restaurants, but I didn't volunteer that. 'Thanks for this. I know how busy you are.' I prayed he'd start talking about business. He watched his mirrors carefully, but he stayed quiet.

Al's car crept up the hill of the driveway.

The hill.

Maybe the incline just showed up because of Al's old-mannish driving. But my window, the rake seemed obvious. When Eric drove, it remained flat. And his car hurtled much faster than Al's.

Eric stood outside the house. I hoped that Al would just dump me and my bags out, but he parked the car a few feet away from Eric. Before I had even unhooked my seatbelt, Al bounded out of the car, hair bouncing.

Al shook Eric's hand enthusiastically, pumping it up and down. Next to Eric, he looked suddenly short. I slid out of the car, ignoring the fragments I could hear of Al's monologue. Waste efforts or something. I tried to pull one bag out that Al had wedged it behind the passenger seat. I twisted it, but it didn't move.

'Let me help, Luanne,' Eric said. He sprinted towards the car. 'You shouldn't be lifting heavy things, in . . .'

'Thanks,' I said, before he could finish 'in your condition'. I stepped back and he pulled the bag free.

Kenneth had mocked me, gently, for packing so much stuff. He'd travelled with one backpack on the Greyhound bus. Why had he carried all of my bags into the motel that night?

'I'll just take you straight to the cottage,' Eric said.

Al popped the catch on the trunk and hoisted out the large bag. A wordless tussle ensued between the men. It didn't look like Al planned on leaving soon.

'Which way?' I asked. Eric strode into the lead, away from the house. Al insisted on taking my suitcase. I carried only my purse with the wait disk.

I followed Eric beyond the house and separate garage. Three rose bushes grew close to the house. The petals matched the house's yellow exactly.

'What do you think of the new plans?' Al asked.

'Honestly?' Eric pulled my bag onto a dirt path that led off to the right. 'They aren't a quarter of what I'd like to see implemented, but my father says I have no sense of making a profit, either.'

Red dust swirled around Eric and my black suitcases as Al expounded the benefits of his new plan for Mathers and Son. Birds sang from trees with dark leathery leaves, but not the weird whistle I'd heard in town.

The puffs of dust stilled when the path stopped at the edge of a clearing. Grass led to the front white step of a small cottage. The sun felt gentle here. Low shrubs cuddled close to the yellow blocks. Paint, not the decorous brick of the house. This grass showed no signs of scorching, and the rounded tips didn't flatten under my suitcases. Al kept talking, but I shut it out.

Eric handed me a heavy key, the stem nearly as wide as my pinkie finger. 'I know – it's silly. Perfectly secure though. And you have a chain on the inside.'

'What is it, an antique?' Al asked.

For a lock on a house made of concrete blocks? The key turned smoothly. I opened the door and saw a bright living room. Eric let me precede him in, and then he lifted my bag up over the low step. Al followed.

‘It’s all a bit faded – you can see the amount of morning light – but I made sure everything was clean.’

The living room contained a sofa and a couple of non-matching leather wingback armchairs arranged around a coffee table. A TV.

‘Eric, thank you.’ I wanted to add stop worrying, but it didn’t seem appropriately grateful, given the amount of work he’d done. And not in front of Al.

‘Lots of light,’ Al said. Did he ever listen? ‘Siobhan would say good for plants. Ask her to help you find some nice ones.’

Eric had put out a selection of current magazines, including a couple of maternity ones and the TV listings. I stepped closer to the once blue sofa.

‘Bedroom to the left, kitchen to the right,’ Eric said. ‘Bathroom at the back. Sort of circular. I’ll leave you to settle in.’ Al had drifted towards the door at the back of the room.

‘I can unpack tonight. I have work to do.’ I couldn’t explore with Al here. I locked the door behind us. Eric turned automatically towards the side door once we reached the drive.

‘Bye, Eric,’ Al said brightly. Eric kept going, barely inclining his head. Maybe just looking at the gravel.

Al patted my shoulder. I crossed my arms, blocking any potential hugs.

‘If you need anything, just call us.’ His eyes kept flicking from my face to behind me, measuring the distance Eric had gone. Al finally leaned close and whispered, ‘I told you. Even he admits he’s not a good businessman. We’re doomed.’

He waved energetically as he drove off. I’d now firmly committed to the Mathers’ cause. Saving money for the baby. I allowed a brief caress of my stomach. Daily attempts had helped to block the memory of Mr Mathers’ touch.

Eric stood beside the door, hands in his jeans pockets. My face flushed.

‘I just wanted to say I put sheets on the bed, gave you towels and stuff. I didn’t know what you had.’

‘Thanks.’ Very little, and I hadn’t planned that far ahead. He held the door open for me, another Southern touch I couldn’t get used to. Most of the men I knew wouldn’t have considered it, certainly not when walking into their own home.

‘Speaking of family,’ Eric said. ‘Dad’s away, for work. Would you want to have dinner here tonight? Before you go to the grocery store and stuff.’

I accepted. I wouldn’t make a habit of it. As I worked that day, I pictured how my belongings would look, if I had them shipped from New York. My pictures on the walls, my throw cushions. The sunlight pouring into the cottage. How warm the sofa cushion had been under my hand. I pulled out a sheaf of the dulllest timber papers. A short-term job. This was not a home.

Dinner turned out to be a heated frozen pizza with salad. Eric didn't know how to make salad dressing either, although he seemed equally impressed that Siobhan could. He insisted I perch on a kitchen barstool while he gathered plates and glasses.

'What kind of plans was Al talking about?' I asked.

'Environmental stuff,' he said. I listened for any hint of stress in his voice, but he sounded perfectly calm. 'He advised Dad, and we're doing the legal requirements. The minimum. I'd like to do more.'

'You'd think that it'd be the opposite – government wanting more, and business wanting less.'

'Me, not the business. I have very little say, for all the business will, should be mine one day.' Eric opened the oven and peered at the pizza.

'But you drive a sports car.' Inheritance should probably go in the report.

'I didn't say I was trying to save the world.' He picked up an oven mitt. 'Besides, I like my car. And don't you dare apologise again.'

'I wouldn't dream of apologising for liking buses.'

Eric's laugh reverberated around the kitchen. I smiled back at him. A tight knot in my chest loosened, and I felt comfortable here in the house and with him.

We carried our pizza, which Eric didn't deem too heavy for me, through to the living room and ate in front of an enormous TV. He was companionable and undemanding, which suited me entirely. I walked to the cottage feeling more cheerful than at any other point since the first morning in North Carolina. I could finish this job, and move on. And Kenneth would be back.

The key felt heavy in my hand as I opened the door of my little cottage. My own little space. The living room I'd seen, but I'd missed that bookcase in the corner, only half full. I could put out some of my books.

'Not my house,' I whispered aloud. The ceilings seemed low, especially compared to those in the main house. Almost like crawling into a bed and pulling up the covers.

The smell though, slightly old person, slightly . . . The kitchen cabinets were white Formica, not the heavy wood of the house. The refrigerator door stayed still. Eric had more than provided sheets and towels; the refrigerator contained a gallon of milk and other basic staples. The vase of yellow roses on the kitchen counter tempered my gratitude. My sinuses pounded. Ever since the doctor took me off hay fever medication, my tolerance had nosedived. I put the roses straight into a trash bag, tying it tightly together. If the roses been here this morning, surely I would have noticed the heavy scent. Unless Eric brought them out during the day. But I had only been in the house for a few minutes this morning. I'd find out where to put trash tomorrow. I double bagged it, but the smell lingered.

Even with a double bed, a deep wardrobe and a nightstand, I could still walk around the bedroom. This 'tiny' cottage had twice the space of my New York apartment. The bathroom felt

luxurious, the most Mathers-like of all, with deep enamel bathtub, plus a walk in shower. For servants? Maybe the tub had been original and they added the shower. Pale aquamarine paint, so icy that the white of the hallway walls felt warm in comparison. I sat on the sofa's soft corduroy. I could finish up what I had of Siobhan's story before going to bed. A few times, I seemed to see something – ink maybe – flush over a blank sheet of paper. When I studied it, the page stayed clean. I kept writing.

Back in the car, Al refused to let Siobhan drive. It impinged upon his masculinity. Just like her taking out the trash – especially like her taking out the trash. Although any reference to sanitation as he carried out their domestic waste was not viewed as humorous, as Siobhan learned just after he got the job. Right after they got married. At least it had gotten them their own house, and an escape from camping out in his astronaut themed bedroom at his parents' house.

Her pen had fallen to the bottom of her handbag. Waterproof ink, fine tip. Specially chosen for postcards. She scribbled her parents' address on one of the giant peach water tower cards she'd bought, even though their route didn't go near Gaffney, South Carolina.

'What are you doing? This isn't a vacation. We haven't even crossed the state line.'

'People like to get mail, Al.'

'How would you know?'

'You haven't been up with me to see my family since just before Christmas. Maybe we should do that for the Fourth of July. Or I could just send them this postcard. Fifty-five cents for the card, plus postage. Worth it?' The Fourth was always spent with Al's parents, just like Christmas Day. Her parents weren't much better than Al's though, ever since the property developers bought their motel at an inflated price to build condos. Somehow watching the wrecking ball slice through the two storey space reduced her lively parents to sitting silently in their small living room, watching TV in the house they'd bought half an hour out of Peebles, to be close for the grandchildren Siobhan had as yet failed to produce.

'I don't understand how you turned out so normal,' Al muttered.

Only after they married did Siobhan realise that dating her at college had been Al's rebellious phase, and he was exactly like his parents. But with targeted ambition.

'You can drive. If you're just going to write, and not even talk to me.'

'What do you want to talk about?' Siobhan put her postcard into the tray on the car door. Twelve hours was a very long time to stay in a metal box with an angry husband.

Al wanted to talk about work. Specifically, the quarterly visit to the dump, to see the men. He chatted for a while about the limits of the landfill, and their worries, before getting around to the key issue.

'Should I wear like normal clothes? Casual? So I'll blend in?'

Siobhan couldn't imagine that Al's polo shirts would blend in with men who worked in a landfill site.

'Or maybe a suit, just in case there's any press.'

'You normally wear a suit.' He normally expected the press too, but they never showed.

Dear Aunt Mary,

I had high hopes that we'd be pregnant this month, but no. Al's not keen, even though it's surely a recognised fact that every politician must have two smiling children. I hoped he'd just be happy if it happened, but it hasn't yet. It doesn't help that the next door neighbours home school their child, who mostly runs around with a BB gun. Not an encouragement for Al.

The students have stopped the letter writing – it was just supposed to go through Christmas. I don't know if any of them will continue. I think I will – as long as you don't mind?

What do you do for Christmas? The school sells the poinsettias the students grow each year – a very good bargain at \$7. The money goes into seeds and tools. It's the time when a horticulture teacher gets to show off a little.

We go see my parents just before – usually the 23<sup>rd</sup>, and then we stay overnight at the Taylors' house. It's a bit weird, being in Al's old room, but they insist. It's only a twenty minute drive, but they want us there all day.

Whatever you do, I hope you have a really happy holiday.

Love,

Siobhan

Al insisted on stopping for lunch, despite the sandwiches Siobhan had made, separating the lettuce to avoid sogginess. The restaurant someone at his work recommended turned out to be one of a chain that they frequented in the city. Al pointed out helpfully it meant they could order their favourites.

Siobhan emerged feeling sleepy. The heat of the car wouldn't help. Al followed her to the passenger side door.

'You can drive for a while. I think I need a nap,' Al said, sliding in the seat.

Siobhan threw her handbag in the back and drove off. His car had a faster acceleration speed than hers.

Al fiddled with the radio dial until he found a talk radio station. He closed his eyes, but fidgeted, pulling on the seatbelt. Siobhan merged into the highway traffic.

‘I should do that work. Do you mind?’ He switched off the radio, and leaned back to pull his laptop case into the front seat.

‘Yes. I want the radio on.’ Her stomach felt too full, and she still had a slight anger headache, despite the ibuprofen she’d taken with lunch.

‘Classical then. Something soothing. It’s budget stuff.’

Siobhan had grit in her right sandal. She wriggled her toe to push it out.

‘You’re surging. What are you doing?’ Al held on to the handle grip of the door, as if her driving were dangerous.

‘Nothing.’ She stilled her foot.

‘You got the car serviced?’

‘Yes. I was trying to get some dirt out of my sandal.’

‘Siobhan, you’ve got to be careful. We’re going seventy. Seventy-five? You can’t afford to get another ticket.’

‘One. In nine years.’

‘These things all add up. And they matter.’

Maybe to him. What voter would care if his wife got a speeding ticket seven years ago? ‘You’re going to run this year?’ He’d been saying this for the past five.

‘This is budget stuff. It’s important.’

The ink, or whatever, still floated occasionally over clean pages, but my own handwriting writhed, twisted into foreign shapes, too indistinct to read. I threw the paper onto the floor. The back of my eyelids stayed plain. The lines of the corduroy sofa cushion stayed still.

In the kitchen, the refrigerator door remained solid white. The tap water cooled my cheeks. I crept back to the sofa and picked up the pages.

My handwriting looked like my handwriting. Solid. Maybe I’d fallen asleep, in a quick narcoleptic burst. I used to wake up with fully formed stories of bizarre other worlds. Sometimes I remembered long enough to write them down.

The sheets smelled softly fragrant. I’d have to look for perfume free detergent, hopefully the brand I’d used in New York. But Eric had been kind to put sheets on the bed, and, blessedly, the room stayed dark. I kept my eyes open, my glasses a dim fold on the nightstand beside me. A ceiling fan, the blur of the wardrobe. If Al worried about Siobhan getting grit out of her shoe, he certainly wouldn’t have approved of Kenneth’s relief from boredom idea on I-85 in Virginia. Tree and trees and more trees. Straight trunked, thick green pine needles. No advertising, no towns, just the trees, occasionally broken by exit ramps that must lead to something beyond the forest. Cities, maybe. Eventually.

Kenneth's zipper sounded loud, even over the radio he'd turned up. He grabbed my left hand and slid it into his open crotch, onto his perfectly moisture balanced penis. He held it there, even when I tried to pull away. Said he was bored. Called me Lu.

'You're driving. It's dangerous.' This time Lu didn't make me feel sexy.

'Says the woman without a license.' But he let go of my hand.

'We could play a game,' I said. Car trips had never been part of my childhood.

He flipped my skirt back, traced a path across my thighs, keeping his eyes forward on the road. I pushed my skirt back down.

'If you're so . . .' Bored seemed the wrong word. Horny maybe. 'Let's take an exit. Explore.'

He changed the radio station and sang along. Then rain started, and Kenneth had to actually pay attention to his driving. Three hours later, water sheeted against the windshield, too fast for the wipers to clear. So we took the exit to Peebles. A motel for the night. The motel where Kenneth carried me over the threshold and proposed.

His disappearance had nothing to do with me refusing in the car. We'd made love that night. The next morning, he kissed me goodbye with whispered words of explanation. Me squinting as the grey light floated in through the open door. The quick sharp click as he pulled it to.

I imagined Kenneth smiling outside, his teeth as pristinely white as they had been in the bar the night before. Opening the car door, placing his camera on the passenger seat. Driving out of the lot, confident in turns. But this time, he didn't turn towards the Mathers', towards the cottage I lay in. He retraced our route to the interstate and merged – south? North? Away. Laughing as he drove the new car. Calling me from the road, just like Gwen had Eric.

Except I heard birds in the background, not the whoosh of a car pushing over asphalt, the purr of air resistance. Ok, so he stopped at a rest area to call. Near woods.

Lied. And kept driving.

What early purpose would it serve to bring me south and leave me in a motel room? I wouldn't believe it. No matter what was said or suggested.

The crickets chirruped on. The wind sounded loud, even over the air conditioning.

I dreamed that my body formed a book. My chubby little head popped out over my red leather spine. A black string twisted around my middle, like one coiling around an expensive journal. A handsome book, of dark blue leather, told me to pay attention. My duty, he said, would be to record all he communicated to the humans through the tree.

How, I asked.

You will know best, he said. The book of my body opened. Instead of pages, I found my own internal organs beating and pulsing against a white page. A tiny white nebula hovered. The baby.

Lines crossed my pages. How could I be filled with lined paper? Seeing no alternative, the black string began to write to my dictation, scoring the words onto the lines and into my internal organs. It only tickled on the lines, but the organs made me cry. Cry such that I could hardly see what the blue leather book did. Soon the lines ran out, and the string carved deeper and deeper into me. Remember. Remember.

I woke and switched on the lamp. Still the smell of roses. Stale and heavy, but a sharp freshness, somewhere. I checked my abdomen under my pyjamas. No words carved into my flesh. The garbage bag in the kitchen stayed tightly sealed. It had to leave the house now.

I unlocked the door with the heavy key and stepped onto the mat and into pain. The hall light revealed more yellow roses on the mat – complete with thorns. A drop of blood pooled on my heel. Cinderella and her stepsisters indeed. Any putative virginity was long gone, as was my prince. I opened the trash bag, broke the new rose stems as best I could, wedged them in and tied the bag shut again.

I left the bag full of roses on the mat outside. I scrubbed my hands hard, and then crawled back to bed. The smell lingered. Probably in my clothes. My hair.

Someone from the house had left me the roses. Unlikely to be Mr Mathers. The grass to the cottage had been roughly mown, but it would be difficult for his wheelchair to cross. Siobhan didn't come out until tomorrow. Eric? I'd have to explain how ill they made me.

The scent of roses followed me into my sleep.

Siobhan knocked on the back door of the main house late in the afternoon.

'Can I peek? I've never been in here,' she asked.

I showed her the study, with the decreasing number of boxes and my filing system for the archive. We glanced into the kitchen, but then she refused to go any further.

'But you wanted to look around!'

'Yeah, but they might be home. Al would kill me. Show me your place.'

She pointed out the persimmon trees to me as we crossed the lawn, their alligator bark, and the orange fruit I could expect in the autumn. The range of animals that fed on the fruit made me less comfortable. The varieties of sex-changing plants mini lecture took us to the cottage.

She glanced around the living room. 'Faded, but good quality,' she said, patting the sofa. She walked to the kitchen. 'Basic, but clean, as it should be.'

I'd left my papers last night on the coffee table. My handwriting uncoiled, looping and swirling around the pages. The fridge door suctioned. The letters snapped back into formation.

'Eric put some ice cream in the freezer,' Siobhan shouted. She came to the kitchen doorway. 'Sorry, forgot how small the place is. Want some?'

I didn't mention the paper.

Al drove off the interstate towards Aunt Mary's town while Siobhan talked to Aunt Mary on her cell phone. Al flicked on the headlights. A lot of time had been lost at lunch.

Siobhan ended the call and checked that the address she'd scribbled was legible.

'She sounded quite frail.'

'But she's home?'

'Yes.' She drew a small flower in the corner of the scrap of paper. 'Apparently we take the second turn at the top of the exit and then a right – well, I have it written down.'

'I wonder what she'll look like now.' Al switched the radio back on.

Siobhan wondered how much longer Mary would be alive. And what it would be like to meet the woman she'd written to for ten months.

Outside the air conditioned car, the night air smelled deeply of tropical flowers. Sticky. The local flora Mary had failed to write her back about. The parking lot's asphalt squished beneath Siobhan's sandals.

Al checked that he'd locked the doors, again, and they headed for the illuminated building.

'I didn't know she lived in a complex.' Siobhan had pictured a small house, maybe an old fashioned apartment. Nothing this modern – all concrete, pink plastic and glass. Did Aunt Mary cross the dark expanse of parking lot by herself? She should have a big dog, not a parrot.

'What was the number again?'

Siobhan leaned over him to push '18' on the intercom panel. Static, then a thin 'hello.'

'Aunt Mary? It's Al. And Siobhan,' he bellowed. The door buzzed, and they pushed the glass door open.

'She isn't deaf, as far as I know.' Siobhan squinted at the elevator. The floor, white, fake marble, looked treacherously slippery. And it smelled of vanilla-scented cleaning products.

'I don't trust those phone things. It stinks here.'

Siobhan expected that Mary would have shrunk since the wedding. She had seemed pretty old then, although Al's mother didn't seem to know her exact age. But Al's father had corrected them: Mary wasn't Al's great aunt, but his aunt. Al's father was the youngest of five children, which explained their confusion. Maybe Mary would be in a wheelchair. But the woman who answered the door seemed sprightly. Or at least her clothes did – a pink tank top and bright purple skirt. Regular maroon splotches marked the shrivelled skin on her arms. Maybe a result of her thinness.

'Albert! Wonderful to see you out of that suit. I've seen pictures, you know. Your mother and Siobhan keep me right up to date.'

She mispronounced Siobhan's name. And called Al by his full name, which he hated. Better 'Al' to be a man of the people, or some nonsense like that.

‘And you!’ Mary hugged Siobhan tightly, her nails grinding into the weave of Siobhan’s cardigan. Pointed, long nails, painted deep red. Mary released her grip. ‘This is wonderful. Now, before you put anything down, we need to ride Walter around the block. Get him used to your car.’

‘I just drove for twelve hours. You must be joking.’ They hadn’t even walked through the door of her apartment.

‘You rest.’ Siobhan touched Al’s shoulder, her own stubby nails pale against his dark polo shirt. ‘I’ll go. You don’t need to get used to the car.’ Her feeble joke failed to even raise a smile. ‘We’ll get some supper. Pizza?’

‘Do you have anything to drink here?’ Al sounded petulant.

‘All the usuals,’ Mary said. ‘Cabinet is next to Walter’s cage. He likes the sunlight bouncing off the glass.’

Al didn’t normally drink. Not like his mother.

Mary pulled the car keys from the pocket of Siobhan’s sweater and unlocked the car. Siobhan’s arms ached from the weight of the cage. Mary clambered into the backseat to spread towels. Extraordinarily mobile. How old was she? Siobhan’s arms ached, and her fingers felt cold against the bottom of the cage. Walter screamed. Still.

‘Much longer?’ Siobhan gritted her teeth. Gardening didn’t use the same muscles as holding a seventy-five pound cage.

‘Now. Just pop him inside. There, sweetums.’ They buckled in the cage. In the dome of the car, his screams pierced even more loudly than in the elevator. Mary produced a shrill whistle that Walter echoed. Tomorrow would be a long day.

Mary directed Siobhan to the pizza place from the backseat. Siobhan drove, the streetlights splashing illumination on the wizened lady and the big birdcage in the backseat.

‘It’ll be wonderful to spend real time together.’

‘Walter and us? Yeah.’ Al would try to dump Walter at the first exit. And she would have to beg him. She started revising the reasoned approach she’d take, before she moved to crying. Mary still spoke.

‘And tonight.’

Siobhan had hoped to sleep, but maybe Mary had lots of parrot wisdom to impart.

‘But mostly in North Carolina,’ Mary continued.

‘Yes. I hope Walter likes it.’ Mary laughed a long trill that Walter mimicked eerily. The chorus ricocheted off the car’s interior. Siobhan pushed the window button down, and warm air blew in.

‘Oh, no, dear. Walter gets chills very easily.’ Siobhan pushed the button and the cabin of still air enclosed her again. ‘Now, are you pregnant?’ Mary asked.

Siobhan shook her head wordlessly. She stared at the yellow stripes on the road so hard that she almost missed a stoplight. Siobhan slammed on the brakes, and Walter screeched and flapped wildly in his cage.

‘Be more careful. See why I have to come with you? I’m glad you aren’t pregnant – not yet anyway. It’s best if you wait a bit – let Walter find his rightful place in the family.’

Siobhan drove on. Al’s mother never called Siobhan and Al a family – she considered them a couple. Her accent lingered on the ‘cu’ of the word, as if there was something wrong.

‘Come with us?’ Siobhan repeated.

‘Of course. I can’t leave Walter. Turn here! Right here!’

Siobhan pulled the wheel and glided into the pizza parking lot. Aunt Mary, all the time. Al was right – what had Siobhan done?

Walter cooed.

‘We came here a lot when we had our car. They like Walter in there.’

Before Mary could reach the cage’s seatbelt, Siobhan said, ‘Stay! I mean, I’ll just run in.’

Siobhan slammed the car door, which Walter clearly didn’t like either. Mary looked accusingly at her, and then smiled. She clearly assumed that Siobhan could learn to modify all her normal behaviours for the bird. And Siobhan’s new best friend. The bright lights of the shop felt raw, but the dough smelt good. It smelt great. Al always said Siobhan was a stress eater, and until she controlled it she’d never lose the ten pounds. Or what had been ten pounds the year after their wedding.

‘Ma’am? Can I help you?’

The boy at the counter must have said that already. Siobhan moved out of the doorway.

‘Pickup. Taylor.’

‘The U-Haul will be here at eight. I knew you wanted to get away early,’ Mary said over breakfast. The cherry sateen ruffles of her bathrobe cupped her neck.

‘How much stuff does Walter need?’ Al asked. Siobhan put a cup of coffee in front of him. Better that he have some before he heard.

‘Thanks,’ Al said.

Unusual. But Siobhan wouldn’t feel guilty for not ruining both of their sleeps.

‘Most of it’s for me,’ Mary explained. She drank some orange juice.

‘We can drop you wherever you’re going.’ His voice was grudging.

‘It’s not out of your way at all. Since it’s your house.’

Al spooned sugar into his coffee. ‘Our house?’

‘Mary can’t leave Walter. He’s bonded to her,’ Siobhan said quickly.

‘For how long?’

‘Until I die, of course. I thought I made that clear on the phone.’

‘Your condo?’ Al tapped Siobhan’s hand, but she refused to look at to him. She focused on the too pale toast.

‘Rented it out. Cleaning lady comes this afternoon, and tenants are in tomorrow.’ Mary sounded cheerful. ‘This’ll be your inheritance – sell it, whatever. When I’m dead. Until then, rent provides my upkeep. I figured \$800 a month for room and board was reasonable – money enough for a whole apartment, much less a room.’

‘We aren’t poor, Great- Mary,’ Al said. When Siobhan instructed her in how to pronounce her name, Mary insisted they drop the Aunt, and certainly the incorrect Great.

‘You certainly jumped at an inheritance. I won’t be around too long. Maybe.’

‘Are you sick?’

‘Old.’ Mary plucked her toast from the plate and walked it to Walter’s cage. ‘You seem lonely, Siobhan.’ She pushed the toast through the bars, and Walter grabbed it in his beak.

Exactly what Siobhan needed, a reminder for Al. And a senior citizen best friend.

‘Some wives sew,’ Al whispered.

‘And you’re darn lucky to have this one, Albert. I have other nephews, you know.’

Walter dropped the toast into his water dish. The spray sparkled on the silver bars.

It took hours to leave. Two to dismantle Walter’s normal indoor cage, which had to be seven feet long. Mary didn’t have any tools – she’d given all of Jacob’s away when he died. Siobhan had to drive to a hardware store to get the right ones. Siobhan then took the cage apart, since, as Al put it, she possessed manual skills that he didn’t.

Then they loaded the U-Haul. The one Mary ordered was too small, so they ended up driving to the rental place to exchange it for a bigger one. Even so, Siobhan sat in the back seat with a hat box on her lap as they finally left Mary’s town. Mary deserved the front seat, on the basis of age if nothing else. The air came on, cooling Siobhan’s arms, even though her fingers still burned from wrestling the seat belt around Walter’s cage.

Walter hissed at Siobhan through the bars. She drew out some paper.

‘When are you running for office, Al?’ Mary asked.

Al mumbled through a vague answer. Siobhan held her pen, wondering what excuse he’d give.

‘Your mother says you won’t because of Siobhan,’ Mary said. ‘I told her that’s nonsense. Look at Obama. Lots of my neighbours got visits from grandchildren over his campaign. Surely having a part black wife would be an asset.’

Siobhan had never heard Mrs Taylor’s views stated so baldly. Gussed, yes. Said, no. The answer to why Al didn’t want to have children? Why not just divorce her and marry someone white?

‘That’s not it at all. I have to find the right time. It’s just not yet.’ Al didn’t sound at all perturbed, or surprised. He had clearly heard these things from his mother before.

Siobhan started writing to Joanna, the words blurred by suppressed tears. About Mary. About Al's mother. About hearing suspicions voiced. About what the 800 a month could be used for. Never mind the inheritance, what about IVF? If Al would even have a baby with her.

What was she thinking? This couldn't be written. Not to Joanna – not to anyone. She crumpled up the paper. The blues and yellows of Walter's wings merged as he fluttered quickly.

'That reminds me, do you use Teflon pans?' Mary asked. 'You'll have to throw them out. Very bad for parrots.'

'Is there anything that we won't have to change?' Al asked.

'When are you having children?' Mary asked.

'We aren't. Not anytime soon,' Al said. Siobhan closed her eyes. Of course not.

'That's good. Walter might get upset by a baby.'

Maybe that would convince Al, if nothing else.

'You lose all your free time when you have miserable little brats running around.' He beamed at Siobhan in the rear view mirror. She looked at Walter instead, pink claws gripping his wooden perch. Bevelled for travel, Mary said.

'You must like kids, if you teach, Siobhan,' Mary said. 'How many of them got replies?'

'About five. Out of thirty-odd.'

'Did anyone else get a parrot?' Al asked.

'Albert, I know my brother did not raise you to be this rude. Walter needs a break. Pull off at the next exit.' Mary's spine visibly straightened. Amazing what rage could do. Today, Siobhan felt too tired to be angry.

They crossed into Georgia. Once Siobhan used to sing when they saw the 'Georgia on Your Mind' splashed across the welcome sign to the state. Once Al would have laughed and teased her about her singing. But Siobhan stayed silent too.

Mary jerked away. She glanced back at Walter. 'We need to think about a hotel soon.'

'It's only four o'clock,' Al said. 'We'll easy make it back tonight.'

'Walter can't drive all day! He needs some space. I've researched some hotels that will take birds.' She scabbled in her purse. Walter chirruped to her, and Mary cooed back.

'Mary, I have to be at work tomorrow. Remember? It's a Monday.'

'We simply must stop. It's very disturbing for Walter.'

Siobhan heard for the first time a little quiver in Mary's voice. She suddenly seemed her age. Whatever it was. 'You could call your secretary, Al,' Siobhan suggested.

'Yes, Siobhan says you're a supervisor now. That means you can take time off. You're important.'

'No, it means I have more responsibility for a reason.'

But it was settled. His voice rounded out, smug on his own importance. Remind him of his power and his amenability increased.

His mood dropped again in the motel, with its seedy neon sign and flies buzzing in the reception area. But it took birds. Mary stayed in the car with Walter, so Al had no compunction about insisting on a room far away from hers.

They climbed up the external stairway, the pale wood of the banister baked and cracked in the sunshine. Blobs of dried gum stuck to the concrete steps.

‘This must look pretty familiar, huh?’ Al asked, hoisting their suitcase.

‘You take that back.’ Siobhan stopped on the landing. ‘You stayed at my parents’ motel; it was nothing, nothing like this. I will not be talked to this way.’ She didn’t care that her tone had slipped into that of one of her teenage students. Insufferable Taylor pride.

‘Look, I’m sorry. I couldn’t sleep at all last night – I kept hearing that thing moving around.’

Walter had been in his cage all night, and Siobhan had heard nothing.

‘Don’t you see how interrupted our lives are going to be?’ He unlocked the door. ‘This was a terrible idea.’ He collapsed on the bed, rubbing his back. He insisted that he’d pulled it getting Walter’s cage out. Siobhan had put it in the car, twice now, and it wasn’t that heavy.

The bathroom light showed a fairly clean sink area, and a sanitized band wrapped around the toilet lid. Ok. Slightly damp smelling, but ok. Siobhan had cleaned the motel bathrooms as a teenager, and she knew damp was hard to shake in a resort area.

‘We can’t just drive off and leave them here, can we?’

Siobhan turned on the water to drown his voice. She unwrapped the small pink bar of soap. Methodically sudsed her hands, smoothing the soap over her fingers, rings, nails. Like Walter preening his feathers with his beak. She rinsed just as carefully and dried, particularly under her wedding rings. Her fury calmed slightly, as if it had washed down the drain.

‘Florida property prices are very unstable. All those hurricanes. And it was very retirement village – you heard her – we couldn’t sell to it to any one young.’

‘Old people have more money.’ Siobhan pushed off her glasses and surveyed the now fuzzy room, Al just a patch of colour against the bedspread.

‘And we won’t have our own space.’

She slammed her glasses back down on her nose. ‘What will you miss? Or me? What do we have that we’ll lose?’ All the meals they had shared in silence, the nights they barely spoke before going to bed. As long as they had their biweekly night out, Al considered them to be perfectly happy. Their ‘date nights’ would no doubt make a great campaign sound bite. ‘Is that really why you won’t run?’ She tried to make it seem offhand.

‘My mother isn’t – no. You know it isn’t. It’s utterly insane.’

The waves of Al's hair had collapsed in the heat. Another element of his campaign. Siobhan would probably have to get contacts again, unless he got a different wife.

'I'm not having her and that thing in my house. It smells.'

Why didn't he say 'our' house? 'You aren't sitting next to it. And it doesn't.' The smell he meant was almost certainly Mary – her powders and lineaments that Siobhan had seen when packing her bathroom. 'I'm going for a walk.'

'Where?'

Siobhan left. The slamming door echoed, and then the world returned to silence.

Dead leaves coated the parking lot at the back of the motel, even this far into summer. Sparkles came from the leaves – glass? She stopped walking. Sandaled feet didn't seem prudent in that no man's zone of broken beer bottles.

Siobhan had left her sunglasses in the car. The plastic frames would be meltingly hot against her face, even if she had the car key. She squinted instead through her regular glasses. Nothing but bright sun and soft, pungent asphalt. Fading yellow parking lines.

Yellow. She hadn't arranged for anyone else to water the Mathers' roses. She'd have to call the gardeners, or even Eric, if necessary. 'It's just summer,' she said aloud. The endless, quiet months, inside her air-conditioned house.

'I thought that was just Floridians,' Mary said. 'So much damn heat.'

'Nothing to do in summer.' Siobhan kept looking at the wavering horizon. Except care for other people's plants.

By Al's fast driving and rushing them at every Walter-rest stop, they made it home by two o'clock. Al popped the emergency brake, and Siobhan felt sick at the sudden cessation of movement.

'I'll be in the office by twenty to,' Al said. 'I'll take your car, Siobhan, and you two can unload the U-Haul.'

Siobhan would unload the U-Haul – Mary wouldn't be much help. Surely Walter had an elaborate routine to be introduced to his new home.

'Walter goes in first,' Mary said.

Al pulled open the passenger back door. 'I'm glad I don't have to pick this damn thing up again.' He hefted the cage. Maybe it was his back, already pulled. Maybe he felt unsteady in the heat, or giddy from the fast driving. He stumbled, and the cage fell in agonising slow motion from his hands, bouncing against the car door, and crashing onto the concrete driveway. No one moved, it seemed, although Siobhan threw herself across the back seat towards Walter. The seat belt cut across her stomach.

Walter screeched and pushed himself up from the edge of the cage. And flew out between the bars of the open door. Al shouted, Siobhan screamed, and Mary begged them to be quiet.

‘Siobhan, quickly, get some of his food out.’ Mary spoke in an even voice, as if talking to a fractious baby.

Siobhan pulled out the treat bag from Mary’s case. She carefully unbuckled her seat belt and slid out of the car. A lawnmower buzzed in the distance, but the street stayed silent.

‘Get me out one of the treats.’

‘Which one?’ Assorted sizes filled the bag.

‘It doesn’t matter.’ Siobhan could hear the anger building in Mary’s voice. Walter hadn’t shown himself in the tree.

Al unlocked the front door and went into the house, holding his back. At least he didn’t slam the door, but how could he cause this and then leave?

Mary cooed softly, holding a treat. Maybe Walter would come down. Maybe it would be ok. A cacophony of noises crashed at once. Tim, the boy next door, slammed his front door and dropped his BB gun on the front porch. Al trundled open a window upstairs, forgetting the screen would stop him from reaching Walter, even if he could be grabbed across a distance of more than six feet. A car, or maybe the lawnmower, backfired. The explosion of sounds jarred Walter into flight, despite Mary’s soothing noises, rendered inaudible by the racket that Siobhan wouldn’t normally even notice. Walter rose higher and higher from the cedar tree. He shone brightly, red and blue and yellow, against the baking summer sky as he flew away. Mary kept calling to him. Siobhan grabbed Mary’s arm, and only then did she see the tears pouring down Mary’s face.

‘I’ve lost him. He doesn’t know this as home yet. He won’t come back.’ She sank onto the white concrete of the driveway, a pathetic lump of primary colours.

Al came through the front door, slamming it this time.

‘What do we do now?’

‘You go to work, since that’s obviously important to you.’ Mary’s voice didn’t conceal her acid anger.

‘Mary, I’m sor . . .’

‘You can apologise to Walter when we find him.’

‘We could drive his flight path,’ Siobhan said. ‘He went that way.’ She pointed. South. Surely he wouldn’t fly to Florida?

‘We’ll leave the car doors open. Maybe it will be familiar.’

‘Don’t you dare say a word, Al Taylor,’ Siobhan said before Al could protest about his upholstery.

Al said nothing, but he opened the trailer and carried a bag inside.

‘So that was it?’ I asked.

‘It’s only been a couple weeks, well, a month. Mary is hopeful, even though that place we went yesterday was somebody else’s parrot.’

I took our ice cream bowls through to the kitchen. Images flickered over the paper towels sitting on top of the refrigerator.

‘It’s seriously made me think about leaving Al though. Did he do it deliberately? Did he not?’ She gestured towards my stomach. ‘And there’s pregnancy as well and . . .’

I squirted soap into the sink and turned on the hot water. ‘Sorry.’ I pulled on rubber gloves. Irrational to dread solid light coloured surfaces.

‘Don’t be silly. If I want kids, I need to have them soon. I have to force the issue with him.’

That night I finished writing Siobhan’s story. Would Kenneth welcome our pregnancy or be as difficult as Al?

A faintly sweet odour lingered in the air. I blew my nose, but it didn’t budge. My maternity book suggested warm baths to help with sleeping, so I filled the claw footed tub. A bath as excitement – the wild life of a pregnant librarian.

The steam lifted and circulated the scent. More fucking roses.

Nothing on the front mat. Ignore the imaginary smell, just like I ignored the moving surfaces and the driveway. A soak, then bed. I slammed the front door. As it connected, something fell on my hair. It crunched between my fingers as I pulled it out. A bug in my hair, plus its little corpse smeared on my fingers?

A broken rose sat in my palm. Potpourri. I pulled over a chair and stepped up carefully, very carefully, balancing myself with a hand on the ceiling. Dried roses lay dotted over the door frame. I brushed them away, and then clambered down to tip the handful into the trash.

The scent in the bathroom had increased. I found potpourri over every single door in the entire cottage. This had to stop. The lintels weren’t dusty, so the roses couldn’t be that old. Walter Mathers couldn’t do this from a wheelchair. Why would Eric? I had to convince him it wasn’t a little joke.

## Chapter 8

‘How’s the cottage? I forgot to ask yesterday; I talked so much.’ Siobhan asked as I slid into her car. Eric hadn’t appeared when I left the house, but I saw a curtain at an upper window twitch.

‘Fine.’ Except for the odd movement of words or the profusion of dried rosebuds. ‘Do you want to read this? Check it, I mean?’ I pulled from my bag the print out of the version of her story I’d written.

She glanced at the first page, maybe long enough to read ‘It’s your fault’ and then started backing out of the long drive. Under her tires, the land tilted sharply. So sharply she used her brake. She didn’t mention the grading. ‘I don’t think I should. It’s one thing to tell somebody about your marriage, but sort of something else to hear their version of it, you know what I mean? I trust you completely.’

I hadn’t considered that at all. Could I write any of these responsibly?

Siobhan drove into her eerily neat garage. Tools hung off pegs on the walls, in a way I’d only ever seen in magazines. Maybe if I ever had storage space, it would make me magically organised. Siobhan opened the kitchen door – the door Al had come through in her story. Not her story – in her real life. I had to keep my intentions clear. Not hurt anyone’s feelings.

‘I thought you were going away,’ Mary said. She sat at the table, surrounded by open envelopes and a few loose flyers.

‘What are you doing?’ Siobhan asked. She put the grocery bags on the countertop, and took the one bag she’d let me carry.

‘I’m going to mail a flyer to all my neighbours back in Florida. Al will pay the postage, I’ve decided.’ Mary licked an envelope back and sealed it tightly. ‘Ick.’

Should I be doing this for Kenneth – sending out mailings, feverishly sticking them on telephone poles and under car windshield wipers? My hand drifted to my stomach. I had to trust my detective, and Mr Mathers’. Kenneth’s baby needed my protection right now.

Siobhan dampened a paper towel and handed it to Mary.

‘Use that instead. Luanne’s here for dinner – I told you, remember? She’s working for the Mathers.’ Siobhan started unpacking the groceries.

‘What are you doing for them?’ Mary asked. She switched to rubbing the paper towel over the adhesive strip. A stack of at least forty envelopes rested in front of her.

Siobhan opened a monstrous fridge. Cold air rushed over me, and I stood a foot and a half away from the open door. How could two people need that much space?

‘Some paper based research, and some interviews. Family history,’ I said.

‘Whatever happened to Elinor Mathers? Didn’t see her at Miss Katherine’s funeral,’ Mary said.

‘Elinor died. Almost twenty years ago,’ I said. I had learned this from the enormous family Bible. And that it happened on Eric’s wedding day. Would a straightforward death be easier to accept than my own mother’s disappearance? Eric’s green eyes filling with tears. Maybe one or two splashing down on the wedding suit I’d seen in the pictures, even if Mr Mathers considered it inappropriate to weep. No death could feel purely straightforward.

‘Shame. She was a nice lady.’

Surely Mary’s story – account of the wedding, rather – would be useful. And if it was her memory of years ago, I couldn’t hurt any feelings about current marriages. Even Aunt Mary didn’t feature on Mr Mathers’ list. And Siobhan said she had lost it slightly after her parrot flew away.

‘Would you be willing to tell me about the wedding, Mary?’ I would write it as she told it, not with interpretations or extrapolations.

She laughed. ‘If you’re really interested. I just want to mail these, and then put up these new flyers.’ She held up a poster, laid out like a Western wanted poster, Walter’s photo centred like a mug shot. ‘Catchy, right? Should be Al’s picture though. He lost him.’

‘We could help you afterwards,’ Siobhan said. ‘Tomorrow morning. I think it’s supposed to rain tonight. They’d just get messed up.’

Mary wiped the damp paper towel over the envelopes. I seemed to feel the rough paper towels of the Mathers and Son mill scraping across my forehead. Eric had been so sharp, and now . . . so friendly?

‘Al never wants to hear my stories. But if you’re sure you’re interested,’ Mary said.

I would record it as she told it. No matter what.

Mary pushed open the door of Miers Candy Shoppe, the bell jangling loudly. A waft of sweetness rushed over her, along with the acrid smell of smoke.

‘I hear you need help,’ she said, looking at her shoes.

‘Do you see a sign? Don’t you think I’d put up a sign if I needed help?’

Mary peeked up. Miss Katherine perched on a stool at the end of the counter, swinging one stockinged leg. A cigarette smouldered in the ashtray next to her. Her dark hair was pulled into a tight bun, and her dress looked like something Mary’s grandmother wore, only fitted over her slim frame.

‘No, ma’am, but I thought I’d check.’ Mary tried to stand still under Miss Katherine’s inspection, knowing she wasn’t as pretty or as old as Pearl, her previous helper.

‘Could you get here fast after school? That’s my busiest time.’

‘I have a bike.’

Miss Katherine told her the salary and asked her first name.

‘Mary Taylor, ma’am.’

‘I know you’re a Taylor. You didn’t steal. Your oldest brother did.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘He’s married now,’ Miss Katherine continued.

‘With a baby, ma’am.’

‘Stop the ma’ams. I’m not that old. How old are you?’

‘Fifteen.’ Mary stopped the ‘ma’am’ that wanted to follow.

‘Well, get started. Put on an apron and start filling up those jars. Stock room is downstairs.’ She pulled on her cigarette as the door opened for four kids.

Mary moved quietly downstairs to a tiny room full of small cardboard boxes and plastic tubs. The closest box said lemon drops in block letters, so Mary carried it upstairs into the empty store. Miss Katherine lit another cigarette and didn’t say a word to Mary.

The bell rang and Elinor Woodard came in. Her hat matched her cherry red dress. Elinor’s red lipstick looked glamorous, sexy even. Like she should be in a movie. On Miss Katherine, the same shade looked witch-like.

‘Shouldn’t you still be at work, Elinor?’ Miss Katherine asked. She didn’t stand up or put out her cigarette.

Mary carefully scooped lemon drops, one by one with the silver spade. Each fell into the glass jar with the tiniest noise. She didn’t want to miss anything.

‘I’ve quit. To get ready for the wedding.’ Elinor leaned against the countertop. ‘Have you heard anything?’ She looked more distraught than most movie stars.

Miss Katherine shook her head. ‘Pearl’s a clever girl. She’ll be fine.’

‘She’s so young.’

‘Nineteen’s not that young.’

‘New help?’ Elinor asked, her voice quavering.

‘I don’t reckon I’ll get Pearl back – not to just a candy shop job,’ Miss Katherine added, when Elinor rubbed at her eyes. ‘This is Mary.’

Elinor handed Miss Katherine an envelope. ‘I’d like you to be at my wedding.’

‘Me? At a Mathers’ wedding?’ Miss Katherine laughed, but it resonated deep in her chest. It didn’t sound funny.

‘Pearl adores you. It’s the closest I’ll get . . .’ Elinor stopped. ‘Thanks again, Miss Katherine. Please call if you do hear.’

‘Absolutely.’ Miss Katherine turned to Mary as the door closed. ‘Hey there, that scoop holds thirty-four drops, not one. You’ll have to work faster than that.’ She opened the envelope and took out a heavy card, covered with a sheet of tissue paper.

‘Want to come to a wedding, Mary?’

Mary’s mother had quite a shock that evening – not only did her youngest daughter have a job, but she also had an invitation to the social event of the year. Some questions fluttered about the propriety of a fifteen-year-old going with a near stranger, but Mary’s mother

dismissed them quickly. A new dress had to be purchased – a regular church dress wouldn't do. Mary's last dressy dress had been for Ralph's wedding, but Mary had grown several inches and gotten her first bra in the two years since his wedding.

Mary met Miss Katherine at the church. Miss Katherine's only concession to the festive nature of the event was to wear a dress of such a dark green that it might as well have been black, with a small red floral print. The cut was the same as every other dress Mary had seen Miss Katherine wear.

Miss Katherine today was actually taller than Mary; the heels today had to be an inch higher than her normal shoes. Mary's toes rubbed against the soft velvety leather of her Bass sandals – not yet compressed dark and shiny from a summer of running. Maybe she should have worn the proper shoes her mother bought. But Miss Katherine held her elbow tightly, so she couldn't run home to change.

'Bride,' she heard Miss Katherine say as she let go of Mary's elbow. An usher offered her his arm. Mary remembered this from her brother's wedding, but then it'd been his friend George, not a man six feet tall. She took his arm and he escorted her down the aisle after Miss Katherine. They were near the front of the bride side – almost no one was there. Mary suddenly heard music from the church organ. Not the normal organist – Ralph's wedding hadn't featured any of the trills and dips that this music had.

'Very little family, the Woodards. Particularly with Pearl gone,' Miss Katherine whispered. 'That's what they like.'

An elderly woman with a cane tapped her way to the front row on the bride's side.

'Her aunt.' Miss Katherine knew everyone. The businessmen on the groom's side – the people who bought the timber that the Mathers sold. She even pointed out the ones with dubious business skills. Mary recognised some of the primary school teachers and her own second grade teacher. Elinor had been her teaching assistant, Miss Katherine explained.

Walter took his place at the altar. Mary decided she would marry somebody just as good looking, with the same dark red hair and broad shoulders under his suit coat.

'His father,' Miss Katherine added as a man about her age stood beside him. 'Graham.' Her voice lost its gossipy edge when she said his name. Both the Mathers men wore what Mary would later recognise as morning dress, grey cut away coats over perfectly creased trousers. Even their shoes were grey – and Mary had never seen men in anything other than black or brown proper shoes.

The mother of the groom walked down the aisle with another tall groomsman. She wore a dark yellow dress, with a corsage of the same colour pinned to her shoulder. Her shoes matched too. She already had a handkerchief out. Mary's mother had waited for the vows before crying.

Mrs Mathers didn't take a seat on the front pew of the groom's side. She glided forward all the way to the altar to stand opposite her son.

'Unusual matron of honour,' Miss Katherine whispered.

Everyone stood for the bride, and Mary forgot her surprise at the mother of the groom.

The principal of the elementary school, Mr Mosby, escorted Elinor down the aisle, his white hair neatly combed and jacket buttoned. Mary remembered him mostly slightly mussed and patrolling the halls, windswept from having played a few minutes of ball with kids at recess.

Elinor's dress put Mary's sister's-in-law to shame. The tight satin of the bodice dipped into a heart shape. From the curve, sheer fabric stretched up to a small band of lace encircling her neck. The full skirt cascaded so wide that it brushed the pews, almost as wide as the skirt on the cover of Mary's mother's album of *The King and I*. Mary slipped her hand out so the cool satin swept over her fingers.

Mr Mosby pushed back Elinor's short veil and kissed her cheek awkwardly. He joined the aunt on the front row.

As Elinor took her place at the altar, next to Walter, sunlight poured in and illuminated the little tree on the right side of the church. Pink light filtered through the stained glass. Some even reached over to Mary on the left side, casting cerise patterns on her skirt.

Mary fixed the details of the back of the dress in her mind to report to her mother. The service seemed pretty much the same as her brother's, except Mr Mosby didn't make the giving away speech. No one did. Mary liked that – Elinor was herself.

Mrs Mathers took the wedding band off her own finger before accepting Elinor's bouquet to hold. Her bouquet was the same yellow as the mother's corsage. Elinor gave the ring to Walter, who put it on Elinor's finger, saying, 'I wed you with flowers.'

Mr Mathers passed a ring to Walter, who handed it over to Elinor. It looked entirely different. Again, the words were wrong – 'I wed you with flowers.' Mary craned her neck to see, but the rings were at their sides, hidden by the massive skirt.

Then the wedding party swept out to happy music. An usher walked the aunt down the aisle.

'Reception now,' Miss Katherine said, standing.

'Isn't this early for a wedding?' Mary asked. She tried to speak knowledgably. Her mother had said it, as she pushed Mary out the door, along with don't run, don't arrive out of breath.

'Lots for the family to do today, I expect.'

The pews began to empty as voices rose over the organ music. Mary followed Miss Katherine. When she got married, she'd have a dress exactly like Elinor's. She'd definitely have her friend Pam as maid of honour though – the mother-in-law was too weird.

Miss Katherine and Mary waited to go through the receiving line. Mary tried to remember details of the other women's clothes: a lime green straight dress, a dress entirely of lace, in a paler pink than her own. Mary wanted the woman's pink pillbox hat. The guests at her brother's wedding looked like they wore church clothes. Miss Katherine jogged her elbow as they approached the family.

Mrs Mathers didn't say a thing as she took Miss Katherine's hand, then Mary's. Her skin was cool, but damp. Mr Mathers hesitated before shaking Miss Katherine's hand.

'I didn't realise you were coming today, Katherine,' he said.

'I was invited, Graham.'

It was only a slight pause, and surely he was just tired from the line of people. His ring matched his son's - black bands with flowers on top. Mr Mathers had three yellow rose buds, and Walter had two. Mr Mathers' hand engulfed Mary's, but she didn't think he'd even seen her.

'Congratulations,' Miss Katherine said only to Walter and Elinor. Elinor hugged Miss Katherine, looking weepy.

'Thank you for coming, Mary,' she said. How wonderful that Elinor remembered her name, even on the wedding day.

When it came time for the toasts, they were brief. The principal said they'd miss Elinor and wished them well. Mary sipped punch from a tiny glass cup. Lines crisscrossed the surface, and it felt remarkably heavy. Nothing like the glassware at usual church dinners. The fizzy punch tingled in her mouth. Maybe she could get some more.

Walter's father stood.

'I'd like to welcome all our valued friends and colleagues, and thank you all for helping to celebrate this happy day. I remember my wedding day, just like yesterday. My beautiful bride of 32 years, ladies and gentlemen, Rosemary Mathers.'

People applauded, a little uneasily. Her father hadn't said anything about her mother in his speech at Ralph's wedding. The yellow mints on Mary's plate were darker than the lemon drops at work. They matched the roses in Elinor's bouquet. Mary put a mint on her tongue. It burned after the gingery punch.

'Rosemary has been a stellar bride. As lovely as she is loving, she is all a man could ask for in a wife.' He leaned down to take Mrs Mathers' hand and kissed it. There was a moment of silence. Mary wondered if they should drink now.

'And Elinor is just as lovely. My son is a lucky, lucky man. To the happy couple!' He raised his glass and everyone drank.

'That seemed weird,' Mary whispered to Miss Katherine.

'Just watch,' Miss Katherine said.

Mr Mathers pulled Rosemary from her seat. He led her slowly to the centre of the floor, and they danced a slow waltz, her yellow dress bright against his grey suit.

‘I thought the bride and groom did the first dance, not the parents,’ Mary whispered.

‘Not in this family.’ Miss Katherine fingered a pack of cigarettes in her purse, but didn’t light one.

‘The parents are doing all the bride and groom stuff,’ Mary said. ‘Ralph didn’t have any of this.’

‘It’s an important day for them too,’ Miss Katherine said.

As it turned out, Elinor and Walter didn’t dance at all. Music played as they cut the cake and spoke to all the suited businessmen. Rosemary hugged Walter, and Mary watched Rosemary pat Elinor’s cheek.

Elinor and Walter walked Walter’s parents out of the reception room. Miss Katherine stood and strode towards the door. Perhaps she needed a cigarette. Mary followed Miss Katherine anyway.

‘Graham, I need to speak to you,’ Miss Katherine’s voice echoed in the narrow, darkened hallway. The Mathers – all four of them – stopped. ‘In the last ten years, you’ve raised my rent. Disproportionately to the rest of the shops in the arcade.’

Mr Mathers turned towards them. He looked fierce, and Mary stepped slightly behind Miss Katherine. The lingering smell of smoke seemed comforting.

‘I’m quite busy today, Katherine. This is not a time for business.’

‘Is that why all the guests, except for the teachers, are your business associates? It seems a perfect time for business. Should I tell them what you all do tonight?’ She took a deep breath.

Mary couldn’t figure out why Miss Katherine wanted to announce what clearly would follow – sex and then a baby. Too horrific to contemplate when it’d been her brother, but Elinor and Walter were glamorous. Like Doris Day and Rock Hudson. And not Mary’s family. Miss Katherine shouldn’t be so difficult.

‘You wouldn’t dare. Walter.’ Mr Mathers signalled his son away from Rosemary. ‘Take care of this.’

Anger flashed over Walter’s face. Mary watched as he turned to hug his mother, and then walked towards Miss Katherine and Mary. Mr and Mrs Mathers slipped out the side door.

‘What seems to be the problem?’ Walter asked.

‘My rent. I’ve realised it is six times higher than the neighbouring shops.’

‘It was four times lower for the better part of twenty years.’ Walter looked over Miss Katherine’s shoulder directly at Mary. ‘Look, Katherine, let’s not talk about rent now. Let’s keep this a happy day.’ He placed his hands on Miss Katherine’s shoulders. Elinor’s embrace in the receiving line had been the first time Mary had seen anyone touch Miss Katherine, except

for a handshake. Certainly not someone like Walter. Mary was glad when Miss Katherine pushed his hands away.

‘As happy as it can be, considering. Wouldn’t it be an interesting tidbit to share with all those people in there? And you can call me Miss Katherine, Walter.’

‘I have no idea what you mean.’

Elinor walked up beside them, her enormous dress sending air currents across Mary’s skin. Mary tingled.

‘You’ve been a good friend to my wife.’ Elinor smiled at the word.

‘Miss Katherine, thank you so much for coming,’ Elinor said. She took Miss Katherine’s hand, holding it between her body and Walter’s. ‘It means so much to have someone who loved Pearl here.’

‘You look lovely. I’m sure Pearl would agree.’

‘Thank you. What is this about rent?’

‘I can’t drop your rent to a pre-war level, but we’ll put it with the lowest current rent in the arcade,’ Walter said. ‘Nothing important, just some business Katherine was eager to discuss. And now it is resolved. We should go.’

Elinor released Miss Katherine’s hand, and she and Walter left out the same side door as his parents.

‘Miss Katherine,’ Mary started.

‘Time to head home.’ Miss Katherine looked at her wristwatch. ‘Only noon. I didn’t have to close for the day after all.’

She and Mary walked out the door, into the bright sunshine. Light reflected off Elinor’s white dress at the end of the walkway.

Miss Katherine lit a cigarette.

The next morning, Mary sat at the breakfast table. Her parents looked flat and dull, their Sunday church clothes boring after the glamour of the wedding. Her father didn’t even speak; he just read the paper. She bet Walter talked at breakfast.

‘Rosemary Mathers died late last night, it says here.’ Her father snapped the paper. ‘A sudden heart attack.’

‘That poor couple,’ her mother said. Did she look funny at the wedding, Mary?’

‘She was fine. Dancing and eating cake.’

Her father turned the page and drank his coffee.

‘It’ll mar their first year of marriage,’ her mother said. ‘Mary, finish your breakfast; we’ll be late for church.’

Monday afternoon, Mary raced to the shop.

‘Did you see about Mrs Mathers? It’s so sad. She didn’t look well, did she?’ The damp hand now seemed horribly significant to Mary.

‘She looked fine,’ Miss Katherine said, dragging on her cigarette. ‘Not such a surprise though.’

The next Saturday, the mailman handed Mary a stack of letters for the shop. A postcard signed P was on top – from North Dakota. Miss Katherine took the mail away immediately, before Mary could read the writing upside down.

Two hours later, Elinor came in. Her red lipstick had disappeared. In fact, she wore very little makeup. Mary wondered if it came from grief or what her mother called ‘letting yourself go’ after marriage.

‘Horrible about Mrs Mathers, ma’am,’ Mary said.

‘Yes. Have you heard from Pearl?’

‘No.’ Miss Katherine patted Elinor’s hand and then turned around to scoop out some lemon drops. ‘How are you doing? Married life ok?’ She tipped the lemon drops into Elinor’s hand.

‘Not exactly what I thought. But neither was teaching. Or being an adult.’ She laughed hollowly. She wore a pastel blue dress, so simple it might have been one Mary’s mother would wear. ‘Miss Miers, what do you know? How did you get your rent lowered? On my wedding day?’

‘Walter is the third generation of Mathers men I’ve known. You have to ask for favours on emotional days. That’s all. His generosity.’

Was it Mary’s imagination, or did Miss Katherine’s teeth click on the word ‘generosity’?

‘It means I can stay open. I was on the verge of having to close the shop.’ The door opened, and several children came in.

Mary listened carefully, even as she put candy in bags for the kids. Miss Katherine didn’t mention the postcard at all.

Elinor left, with more lemon drops – the only free candy Mary ever saw Miss Katherine dispense.

‘Miss Katherine?’ Mary asked as they closed the shop down.

‘I did what was best for me. You’re going to have to learn that, Mary. Especially when dealing with Mathers men.’

‘Did you ask her what she meant?’ Siobhan asked. I looked up. Somehow Siobhan had almost finished making dinner during Mary’s story. The air smelled of tomatoes and garlic, when before I would have sworn Miss Katherine’s cigarette smoke floated around me.

‘Lord, no. She gave me fifty dollars when I went off to college though – a fortune. I think she liked me ok, but not like Pearl. Pearl sent cards like clockwork. Elinor came at least every other week – eventually bringing little Eric with her. Never once did Miss Katherine mention Pearl’s postcards.’

‘Can you move that stuff off the table? Since it’s just the three of us, let’s eat in here,’ Siobhan said.

I helped Mary shift the sealed envelopes and the remaining flyers, to a desk in the far corner of the kitchen.

The last time Mary had mentioned Mr Mathers’ wedding, I’d considered a satin wedding dress when I walked up an aisle to meet Kenneth. Now I couldn’t budge the image of white satin stretched over an obscenely bulging stomach as I waddled down a church aisle. No groom seemed to be at the front of the church.

‘Where are the plates, Siobhan?’ I asked, aware my voice pitched just a little too loudly, even for the large kitchen.

Siobhan and Mary laughed freely over their wine glasses, until Al came into the living room. His tie had come off in the car.

‘How was your meeting, dear?’ Siobhan asked, offering up her cheek for a kiss. Mary didn’t say a word

‘Long.’ He flounced down on the sofa. Did Mary sit in his accustomed seat in the largest chair?

Siobhan’s – account – was too fresh in my mind. I read antagonisms and hostilities everywhere.

‘I think I’ll call a taxi,’ I said finally, shifting forward to the front of the sofa seat. ‘Thanks so much for dinner – again. You’re going to spoil me.’ My voice hadn’t been this wooden before Al came home.

‘No, that’s expensive,’ Siobhan said. ‘I can drive you.’

‘Not with that much wine in you.’ Al stood up. ‘I’ll take you back, Luanne.’

In the car, Al immediately switched on a talk news show. I tried to chat, but he stayed silent until we reached the Mathers’ gates.

‘You know what? Mary was lax with that damn bird.’ His voice rang harshly over the end of the weather forecast. ‘I’ve read about it. Most people clip their wings when they travel. Or they make sure the cage door is shut. Some birds can even pick their cage doors. I’m not sure he couldn’t.’ He flicked his turn signal and swung into the Mathers’ drive. ‘They don’t want to believe that though.’

He should tell Siobhan this, not me. ‘I’m – I’m sorry.’ The newsreader announced the latest stock exchange prices.

He pulled the car to a stop and looked up at the main house. Light shone out of an upstairs window. What did Eric do at night, when his father wasn't home?

'Thanks again.' Al didn't wait for me to get to the cottage. Gravel spun under his tires as he reversed. Did he tell me about the parrot for me to pass on the hurt feelings to Siobhan – or to the Mathers? Who would he consider to be more important?

Something moved over the house wall to my left. Maybe a curtain shifted with the air conditioning. It had been at a window, not the brick of the building. Because things didn't move over brick.

## Chapter 9

‘You shouldn’t work so late. You’ll need food.’ Eric stood by the study door, already out of his suit and wearing one of the sporting sweatshirts he seemed to love. How could he wear a sweatshirt in August? Even with the air conditioning. I went back to the computer monitor.

‘Soon.’ I could figure out the bus timetables. In New York, they were everywhere and you just learned them. Here they were buried on a website and incomprehensible. No wonder the buses were always empty. I gritted my teeth. My rage at the timetables had nothing – well little – to do with public transport, and much more to do with my sister. And her sudden reappearance in my life two days ago. The sleepless nights since her ‘surprise’ visit had given me endless time to think about her. No need to dwell on her now.

‘Where are you going?’ He peered at the screen. Since Eric delivered Amelia to my door that afternoon, he’d been remarkably silent about her. Maybe he saw her drive away two hours later. Maybe well-bred Southerners didn’t pry into family relationships unless asked.

Maybe he just assumed we had a normal relationship.

‘Over to Tapford. I have an appointment at eleven.’

‘With Aunt Pearl?’

I nodded. He pronounced ‘aunt’ like the bug. According to my brief phone chat with Pearl, she was Eric’s mother’s younger sister. She’d seemed to expect my call. I’d have to take a Greyhound bus three towns away to get back to Pearl’s town. I wrote down the details.

‘You can borrow one of our cars – no, I forget that you don’t drive.’

‘Pearl’s on this list. She’s the first one I’ve figured out where she lives.’

Eric sat on the edge of the desk. I shifted some of the papers I was sorting for the archive just in time before his hand descended to the surface. He picked up my list.

‘These three work at the mill.’ He sketched an M in pencil next to their names. He still hadn’t mentioned me calling his father a liar to his face. ‘This guy retired from the main office, oh, maybe five years ago.’ He added another mark to the list. ‘No clue about the rest, except the obvious ones of course. You’ll have to ask Dad.’

I could only assume the obvious ones meant all the people with Mathers as their surname. Him. His father. His soon-to-be-ex-wife.

‘I’ll take you,’ he said. ‘It’d be good to see Aunt Pearl. But you should get your permit – I could drive with you. In a year, you can drive yourself.’

In a year. My attention had to be on the baby. The birth, seven months away. Kenneth would be back and we could – would go somewhere and live.

‘Maybe forty-five minutes to get there. Let’s say I’ll come by at a quarter to ten. Be on the safe side.’

‘But don’t you have to work?’

His eyes shifted over my head to the bookcases. 'They're painting my office. I can take the time. I'd like to.'

He held his hand out to me to help me from the chair.

Could Eric actually be this lonely? Why did he volunteer to spend time with me?

'Are you sure? Why?' Let him say no, say that he had pressing business elsewhere.

'I'd like to see Aunt Pearl and Uncle John.' His skin felt hot against mine as he pulled me upright.

A forty-five minute car ride with the air on and the windows rolled tightly up. But better than hours on multiple buses, the cramped, smelly bathroom, rocking down the interstate. 'Can I ask you something personal? A favour?'

'Anything.' He didn't let go of my hand.

'Ordinarily, it's fine, but it's just with the, I'm more sensitive to it. Would you not wear cologne tomorrow?'

'You don't like it?'

'I'm allergic. To cologne, pollen, flowers. Especially roses.' He didn't flinch. Who else could have put the roses over the doors? 'Usually I take medicine, but with the baby . . .' Maybe if I told him I might be sick again.

'I won't wear it again.' His fingers tightened over mine as I pulled away.

My commute home had been condensed to four minutes. Eric's grip. The furriness of his knuckles. What would his finger be like with a yellow rose ring?

Eric seemed perfectly content listening to the radio as he drove to the interstate the next morning. The floor mat looked immaculate, the same pale blue as the rest of the car. I shifted my feet.

'New?' I asked. Eric nodded. 'Can I pay for it?' I could still see a fleck of white on the sidewall, smell a tiny hint of cleaner. But he hadn't worn his cologne.

'Stop it. We're not talking about it again, or else I'll . . . I don't know. I'll think of something. Wear my awful cologne again.' He glanced over at me, smiling.

'I promise,' I said. The real threat would be to stop being friendly to me.

'You're lucky to have a sister,' he said. 'You don't favour each other much.'

'Half sisters. Different fathers.'

'She's very . . . fixed. The hair, the . . . everything really.'

'She has her life completely figured out. And lots of time. She doesn't work.' Not unlike Gwen, actually. Curls rather than the straight hair of the statue.

'She doesn't like that you're prettier,' Eric said.

I laughed. 'She doesn't like me for a lot of reasons, but certainly not that. I have degrees, for one. Mostly because I dragged her back to New York when she ran away at

sixteen.’ Had Eric just called me pretty? Definitely a Southern gentleman thing, because nobody had ever said I was prettier than Amelia.

‘Aunt Pearl ran away. With Uncle John, to join the circus.’

And I had to interview her? Ask her questions about her sister? Listen to her justify her actions, the way Amelia did, when she deigned to speak to me?

‘Luanne? Should I pull over?’ Eric shifted into the slower lane.

‘I’m ok. What kind of car is this?’

He told me all about the make and model. When he moved into engine specifics, I tuned out.

‘It’s a long way from the circus to a cul-de-sac in this town. It’s a lot smaller than Peebles,’ Eric said as he closed the car door.

Three houses sat around the asphalt loop. Their intensely green front lawns sloped towards the pavement. The concept of this much space, for one family, or one couple in this case, seemed as mad as Eric’s pseudo-stately home.

We walked up the path to the single storey brick house. Five brick steps reached up to the porch, and a gently raked ramp stretched beside the steps.

‘By the way, Uncle John’s in a wheelchair,’ Eric whispered, just as the door opened.

John’s silver hair formed a thick pompadour. His grip on my hand felt firm. I watched as he wheeled himself off to show Eric the new dog out back. Eric made no move to help him. I’d seen Eric push Mr Mathers’ chair quite often, so John must not like help.

‘Excuse me,’ I said. Where did I go?

‘Pearl’s two doors down the hall,’ John called back. ‘Sorry.’

I walked down the hall. The floorboards creaked my presence. She had to have heard the bell, if not my approach.

Music came through the second door clearly. The Beach Boys. Amelia loved the Beach Boys. Our mother hadn’t; her father hadn’t, but she did.

I knocked quietly, and then banged my knuckles, twice, loudly.

The room had blazing overhead lights, plus enormous windows. I blinked at the onslaught. Outside the windows, I could see more ridiculously green grass. Did no one obey the hosepipe ban the news told me about each night? Eric and John crossed the expanse, Eric helping the wheelchair only to push it up onto the path.

‘He’s a good boy, my nephew.’ A large table took up much of the room, covered in white silk. Bolts of material lined walls of shelves. Sewing machines sat on small desks on both sides of the central table. The room felt warm, overheated with the bright light and the pounding music.

‘You must be Luanne.’ She turned down the music – a fraction – and walked over to shake my hand.

She wore a neatly belted shirtdress, black stockings and low heels. Her grey hair coiled into a smooth bun. Not at all like my idea of someone who was under 20 in 1960. She did, however, look quite like Mary's description of Kenneth's great aunt, Miss Katherine.

'You sew?' I asked. I had to brush up my interview technique.

'It's a knack I discovered when I joined John at the circus. Some people play piano by ear; I sew by sight. I can replicate most anything you see in stores, so I do a good trade in wedding dresses. When John first got hurt, I used to sew standing up to stay awake.' She flicked her gaze over my body. I really had to buy some proper maternity wear. 'Do you want some baby clothes made up?'

'My sister is going to mail me the stuff her kids have outgrown.' Designer all. No sew-by-sight for her. The baby would be far better dressed than me. Amelia had pointed out, helpfully, that her maternity clothes would be too small for me, so she hadn't bothered to bring them.

'Do you mind if I keep working? I'm behind schedule. Have a seat – there'd be good. Keeps you out of my way.' She pointed with scissors so big that they dwarfed her hand. She cut confidently across the silk expanse.

I sat down next to a machine that looked more like an industrial drill than anything else. I touched my finger to the cool, nubbed grey metal, noting the three spools of thread.

'It's an overedger. Cuts as it sews. Not for wedding dresses really. But it was on sale. Don't touch.'

I withdrew my finger. Our mother had never sewn, although Amelia had gone into a crocheting fit after she came back north. The influence of her true Southern lady mother-in-law.

'Walter said you needed to talk to me. But not about what.'

'It's sort of up to you. He wants an oral history of the Mathers family. Relationships, dreams, ambitions, fears, secrets.' He hadn't mentioned secrets.

'I'm not a Mathers.'

'Your sister was.' She didn't reply. I listened to the scissors and Beach Boys. The air felt heavy. A low hum came from the other sewing machine. I swivelled on the desk chair. 'It's a lovely house.'

'Good being all on one floor. With John's chair, I mean. Walter helped us to get it.'

'Hmm,' I said. Noncommittal sounds sometimes helped. At least they had with Siobhan and Mary.

'We didn't want him to, but he insisted. Elinor insisted.'

'Before she – passed away?'

'Before she was senselessly crushed to rubble by a condemned building?' She stopped snipping, and compared two pieces of fabric. 'What do you want to hear?'

I felt oddly dizzy. ‘That’s a beautiful quilt.’ The bright square hung on the wall, sheltered from direct sunlight by one of the shelves. The pieces must come from dozens of different sources.

‘It’s all from the Woodards, my family. You probably wouldn’t be interested, with your job. Elinor’s contributions are the bright red, lower left corner and grey in the middle. Red from teenage, grey from adulthood,’ Pearl said.

‘Mr Mathers wouldn’t be, I guess.’ Would he care about Mary and Siobhan’s stories?

‘He’s seen it. I made it with—’ She stopped abruptly.

‘With who?’

‘Not who. With love. You need that for quilting – far more than with regular stuff.’

‘Like wedding dresses?’

‘They aren’t for me or mine. I didn’t have children.’ She picked up two lengths of cloth and sat down at the sewing machine, her back to me. ‘This one is a bit better. It’s for one of John’s nieces.’

The rhythmic thud and thump of the sewing machine filled the room, pulsing in time with the headache that filled my sinuses. The lilies in the corner of the room – their obscene orange stamens oozing pollen. No wonder my head buzzed.

‘Could you tell me about yourself, ma’am?’ I wanted to ask if she’d throw out the lilies, but people so rarely understood allergies to what they considered beautiful flowers.

‘Don’t ma’am me. You’ll make me feel old. How much do you want? Childhood, two parents, pretty happy. Small town, Peebles, but perfectly pleasant. Parents died when I was almost seventeen. Elinor quit teacher college and came home to take care of me. I tried to stop her. I got a job working in the Miers Candy Shoppe, tried to drink a little, met some boys. Nothing serious, really, but Elinor went nuts.’

God, she talked fast. How was I going to remember all this? Shit, the recorder.

‘I guess I felt sort of second fiddle to her – she was prettier, better grades, you name it. More polite. Only Miss Katherine treated me differently. I was the special one to her. She taught me how to put on makeup, do my hair. Elinor was too busy. To be fair, she worked like a dog.’

‘Would you mind if I recorded this?’

‘Go ahead.’ The sewing machine clattered as I switched on the recorder. I hoped it picked up her voice, not just the music and the machine. And me sniffing into a tissue.

‘Elinor dragged me to church to reform me, and Walter noticed her. He was active in church in the give lots of money, sit on a church council way, not in a teach Sunday school or sing in the choir way. And that suited folks down to the ground – they were odd.’

I could well believe that. Particularly Mr Mathers.

‘What did you think of Mr Mathers?’

‘Creepy old man after my sister. But I was only seventeen.’

‘So you ran away?’ How could she leave her sister with someone creepy? How could she leave her sister at all?

‘John came into the shop. It was rainy, and he accidentally hit one of the candy jars with his umbrella when he came in. Luckily it didn’t break, but Miss Katherine was livid. I fell in love with him then and there. But I waited until the circus was a couple of stops away to leave Peebles. Elinor told me later she’d looked. There were only thirteen operating circuses in the whole United States then. But I was happy. It didn’t matter that she chose not to come after me.’

‘Did she tell you that at Eric’s wedding?’ If I hadn’t, would Amelia be just as angry?

‘I’d seen her several years before. She finally found the circus. In Georgia. It’d taken her nearly twenty years, but she found me.’

The sticky hot air wrapped around Pearl’s body like a hug, hovering in the lungs like a solid. And Pearl stood over a fryer full of oil, dribbling thin yellow dough in random shapes and spirals to make funnel cakes. Deep fat-fried crosses between modernist art and mad crocheted doilies, dusted with cheap powdered sugar. The size of a standard paper plate, 8 inches in diameter. If the grease hadn’t soaked through the waxed paper plate before the customer walked away from the stand, they weren’t made right.

Pearl hated this job. The smell of the grease, recycled for the duration of their stop, hung in her clothes, in her pores. Sweat collected in her hair, down her spine. Why had Poppy gotten sick? Pearl had argued, but she couldn’t weasel out of covering the shift.

A line of pimply teenagers formed. Pearl only dimly saw feathered hair and t-shirts. She focused on getting through the shift. The show would be starting soon, so the crowd should die down. Pearl dribbled and dusted until her arms ached. She made change, as ever, wondering about the sanitation of touching damp sweaty bills from a teenager’s pocket and then scooping food out of boiling oil.

Suddenly the next person in line was an adult with elegant, perfect hair in a sleek up do. A grey dress with monstrous shoulder pads. And the man standing next to her – he turned his head first and Pearl saw Walter. She almost toppled the oil. She did dunk a funnel cake, rather than hoicking it out with the metal tongs.

Why couldn’t she be in the air conditioned box office tonight? Smiling professionally, well dressed and not stinking of oil?

‘The person I asked said you’d be here. Said you’re Pearl Sharp now,’ Elinor said. The position of her head told Pearl that Elinor had analysed the situation and deemed it not sanitary. Elinor would touch nothing.

‘I am,’ Pearl said. ‘And I’m busy.’ Four bored teenagers lined up behind them. Pearl prayed for more to come, as Elinor and Walter moved aside. Hordes to clamour for the hated funnel cakes. Anything to postpone this – what? Conversation? Confrontation?

My own sister finally contacted me six years ago. A full ten years had passed since Amelia's departure on her eighteenth birthday, and she just appeared at my apartment door in New York one night. I'd had a bad day at work, and an even worse commute home, crammed into the subway. And the strap on my favourite bag had broken. I had settled on my sofa, watching TV and drinking wine, when the buzzer went.

Pearl served the four boys, and then no one else remained. The performance had started; music drifted over the deserted area. Some snacks would be offered inside, like at a ball game, but not funnel cakes. Pearl had nothing to do but wait on the next customer. Who just might be Elinor. Usually Pearl read a paperback she didn't mind getting oily. John would be stretching backstage with his family. What she would give to have him beside her, shoring her up with his strength. Holding her hand. The touch of his skin against hers would have comforted her.

Pearl wiggled the tongs through the oil, the dark brown glistening on the metal. Anything to look busy. She straightened the stack of paper plates, curved together by the dips crinkling around their edges. Lined up the two powder sugar shakers precisely. Maybe she should fill the left one up. At least two inches of empty space sat at the top.

Elinor approached the stall, Walter half a step behind. What had possessed Elinor to wear high heels to a circus? What part of packed fairground earth did she not understand? Had Elinor ever smelt this combination of animal manure, greasy food and bodies before?

'I thought you would have kept the old apartment. I wanted to show it to Stuart!' Amelia's voice had an odd Southern overlay that softened her vowels. The skirt of her little black dress stopped short well above her knees. I wouldn't have been able to fit one of my thighs in the waist of the dress. Stuart stayed silent. Amelia danced around the room, looking at books, touching picture frames and curtains.

'How did you find me?' I asked.

'Uncle Kramer. He said you'd be thrilled to see me.'

My father's brother. God knew why he stayed in touch when my father had disappeared only a couple days after my birth. Uncle Kramer always swore he didn't know where my father was, and that he wouldn't want to speak to him if he did turn up.

'It's so tiny! Very cute,' she added. 'We're going to take you to dinner. Just change into something nice.'

I knew full well my bathrobe only emphasised the width of my hips, more of a shelf than love handles.

'When did you become a blonde?' I asked. 'I've eaten.'

'Come for our company then,' Stuart said. His smile was pleasant enough, but he remained the teenage boy who had coaxed my underage sister over several state lines.

‘Why are you here?’ I asked.

‘I wanted to see you. And Dad died,’ Amelia said. She flopped onto the couch.

‘You – you heard from him?’ Amelia’s father, the only father I’d had. Sort of had.

‘He was sick. Died a few months later, so you’re my only real relation now, unless Mom turns up. Which I doubt. He mostly wanted money.’

His hugs when I would run into something, ‘going too fast,’ he called it. He’d left when Amelia was six and I was nine. Left when our mother started sleeping with someone else. I’d heard their last argument that night. He wanted to take Amelia with him. Not me. I didn’t get a mention. I crept back to the bed I shared with Amelia, cold in my core. The next morning he was gone, and Amelia still slept beside me.

He hadn’t contacted me. ‘What do you want?’

‘Come on.’ Dimples cut into her smooth cheeks. A kinder father; better, slimmer genes. ‘Dinner, first off. Then maybe a relationship?’ Stuart had tactfully disappeared into the bathroom – the one that was so tiny my knees touched the edge of the tub when I sat on the toilet. I doubted if Stuart, probably a foot taller than me, would find that cute.

‘You look well,’ Elinor said.

‘I look hot, but thank you.’

‘Do you normally do this?’ Elinor couldn’t keep the disgust out of her air conditioned voice.

‘I’m filling in. I’m head of costumes, but someone is sick. Had her wisdom teeth out.’

‘Oh, so you go to dentists?’ Walter asked.

‘No, we just work in pain.’ Why did they come here to insult her?

‘He didn’t mean, we just wondered if you had insurance.’

‘Could we take you and,’ Elinor paused.

‘John.’ How could she forget his name? Did she think Pearl was so feckless that she’d have moved on to another man – another acrobat perhaps? What if Pearl forgot Walter’s name? Pearl saw the floral wedding ring on Walter’s finger. He was the freak. Not her friends.

‘To dinner.’

‘We work late. And then John is tired.’

‘Breakfast?’

‘Rehearsals. Why are you here?’ Pearl kept her eyes on the oil. The heat dragged at her throat.

‘You could just talk to me. I can’t believe you’re angry at me – you’re the one who left.’

‘Which is why I have nothing to say. You said enough horrible, horrible things.’ Pearl could hear the petulance creeping in to her own voice. She had important points to make,

dammit. Elinor had been scathing about John. Just a circus boy. ‘And then you never even looked for me. Why are you here – do you need a kidney or something?’

‘That’s a dreadful thing to say. No.’

Pearl wished desperately she could leave, but she couldn’t just flounce off, leaving quantities of boiling oil and a stack of money. This was her home, her circus. ‘Unless you want to buy a funnel cake, I need to ask you to leave.’

‘Did you want me to come after you? You made your plans pretty clear in your note, and you look happy.’

‘Very happy.’ How to explain homesickness? How much the simple fact that Elinor just didn’t care enough to look for her had hurt? Pearl wouldn’t have come back, but she had wanted the chance. For Elinor to know – for Elinor to want to know – that Pearl had taken courses through correspondence to get a bachelor’s degree.

‘I am sorry, Pearl.’

‘Please leave.’ Pearl stared into the oil’s softly puckering surface. They walked away, and Pearl saw Walter take Elinor’s hand. Tenderly, it seemed.

She would have to explain this rush of anger to John, the way it filled her head. But for now, she stayed where she was, watching the empty area, listening to John’s family’s music swelling from the big tent. How many times had she heard ‘Wedding of the Winds’? She needed John beside her, not spinning through his routine.

Had Amelia even thought about me in the intervening years? All those unopened birthday cards with ‘return to sender’ in Amelia’s handwriting. The sketched outline of an Elvis head on her 24<sup>th</sup> convinced me to stop. I’d pushed her to the back of my mind, except for my slight flinch when something about Georgia appeared on the news, or when I saw missing posters with a picture of a teenage girl.

‘You said hateful things,’ Amelia said.

‘You were underage! I know you were angry, but can you imagine how you would have felt? If you had a kid, now, and they ran away?’

‘I have a kid actually. A little boy. But that’s the difference – I wasn’t your kid. I was your sister. Suddenly, legally, you were responsible for me, but only a few months before we’d been squabbling over stupid stuff like earrings and the last of the toothpaste.’

‘Do you think it was easy to get you to school, do my university stuff and keep a roof over our heads?’ I sat down on the sofa next to her. ‘What’s his name?’ I had a nephew I’d never seen, never even heard of.

‘Ryan. He’s two.’

Then John got hurt. He had been home from the hospital for two weeks. Home was a funny word for it. A spare room in his non-circus uncle’s house. But it was free and on the ground

floor, even if the wheelchair barely squeaked through the door frame to take John to the bathroom that was too far away. Pearl didn't feel she had the hang of caring for John yet. Brave as he was, Pearl knew she hurt him as she learned to lift him.

Pearl heard the doorbell late that evening, but she only prayed that the sound wouldn't wake John. She kept sewing. What if one of his cousin's friends had rung the bell for some foolish reason? John could be awake all night. He didn't stir, and she almost relaxed.

The silk slipped, and Pearl readjusted the craning neck of the desk lamp, trying not to sob. The tiny light illuminated only about four inches of the material. John needed darkness to sleep, and Pearl needed light to sew white thread into white satin. The hum of the sewing machine seemed to be ok for John to sleep through, thank God. Right now the one wedding dress she'd finished since the accident was the only income they'd had.

The touch on Pearl's shoulder only startled her a little. 'I'm not hungry, Aunt Barbara,' she whispered. 'Thanks.'

'Pearl.' Elinor's voice, low and soft. Then her arms enveloped Pearl.

Pearl couldn't raise the energy for her old anger. Tears came, the tears that hadn't fallen when Bill came to get her in the box office that hideous night. He hadn't had to say a word; Pearl had been out of her chair and running towards the tent as soon as she'd seen his face. In the tent, the hateful, careening faces of the crowd, desperate for a peek at the fallen acrobat. The new circus show – the injured man and his wife. The ambulance ride, the neon white lights and people working on John rapidly. The doctor's regretful expression that Pearl had translated into John's death. Her relief, and then the daily torture of watching his legs wither and helping him do the most basic tasks.

'How did you find me?' Pearl sniffed, and then pushed the satin away. If teardrops stained it, she couldn't afford to replace it.

'Miss Katherine called me this morning.'

'John fell. The wrong way. They are taught how to fall safely, but . . .'

 Pearl kept her voice low. The last thing John needed was to wake to hear another explanation of how he'd ended up in the wheelchair.

'Miss Katherine said he's paralysed.' Elinor sat down opposite her. Pearl nodded. 'What are you sewing?'

Pearl switched off the little sewing machine. In the circus, she'd had three industrial sewing machines and an assistant.

'Wedding dresses. We need.' Pearl stopped before she admitted how poor they were. In the first horrific rush of the accident, she hadn't even considered calling. But now they were living on John's family's charity, she knew that eventually she'd have to call on her own family. Thank God for Miss Katherine.

'I wish you had told me.' Elinor didn't sound at all reproachful.

‘Elinor, it’s hideous to say this, after all, after everything. Could you,’ she forced the words. ‘Help us?’

‘Of course.’ Elinor smiled, her teeth white in the thin light. ‘I wasn’t sure how to bring it up.’

Had her teeth always been that straight? Or had she had braces? Pearl couldn’t seem to remember anything.

‘I wouldn’t ask, but John’s family can’t keep us forever.’ The knocks and that one deep gouge on the woodwork the wheelchair had upset Aunt Barbara enough. They couldn’t stay here much longer.

‘Think of it as reciprocal. I’ll need help someday,’ Elinor said. Her hand gripped Pearl’s shoulder.

Just two days before my trip to interview Pearl, Amelia had arrived in Peebles. I opened the cottage door, my mouth automatically smiling at Eric. Until the blonde curls showed up, half blocked by his shoulder.

‘This lady was looking for you, Luanne,’ Eric said.

‘*This lady* is her sister,’ Amelia said. She stood on the step next to me. No hug of welcome.

‘Eric, Amelia Grant, Amelia, Eric Mathers.’ They shook hands, his palm nearly twice the size of her dainty one.

‘Nice to meet you,’ Eric said, but Amelia brushed past me into the cottage. Eric started walking back towards the house, his back straight like Stuart’s. But not like Stuart at all.

‘Eric,’ I called. He turned back at the edge of the clearing. Could I beg him to stay? To be a buffer between us?

‘Yes?’ He squinted at me, the sun shining full on his face. Glinting off his moustache. No only child could understand this sick fear in my stomach.

‘Thanks,’ I said. He waved, and I closed the door. Trapping myself with her.

Amelia had already installed herself on my sofa. The cottage sofa, not mine. The brown suit that said professional woman on a trip. The decorative scarf draped casually over the handbag at her feet. The handbag that matched the shoes. ‘He’s kinda cute. You must be sleeping with him.’

‘Eric?’

‘You’re living here. And he’s protective; he insisted . . .’

‘Do you honestly think so little of me? That I’d have sex for housing?’

‘Given your history. I mean, why’d you lose your job again? Some man?’

The smudges on the supposed Dr Benfield’s glasses, as he explained his sincere need to touch the texts, to browse. So I let him in the stacks, and he stole a bag full of irreplaceable etchings. More stupid than anything else I’d ever done. Even more than with Chris.

‘Eric’s my boss’s son. A friend.’

She waved her French manicure around the cottage. ‘So what do you do to get it?’

‘I’m constructing a history of this family. I get the cottage, insurance, pay.’

‘That’s ridiculous. Good pay, insurance and accommodation? Why are you worth that much?’

‘I have skills. Degrees. Multiple degrees!’ Amelia had a high school diploma only because I’d practically sat on top of her while she did her homework. ‘Why wouldn’t I be well paid?’ How did Amelia drag information out of me? She’d wheedled everything she’d ever wanted. All our lives.

‘Luanne, if you’re going to be angry, there’s no point in me being around.’

‘I didn’t invite you.’ I sounded ridiculously childish. ‘Are you staying over?’

‘I have a flight tonight.’

I offered water or milk. Not tea. Amelia offered to make the drinks, so I asked for tea. To see if she mentioned the ink shifting on the surface of the tea bag. The ink that never showed up in the cup of tea and never altered the flavour. But the words, shapes floated over the surface before I could pour the boiling water.

I stayed in the living room. She brought a cup of tea to me and water for her. She had put sugar in my tea, which I loathed, and hadn’t let it steep at all. Insipid, milk flavoured water.

‘Are you keeping the baby?’

‘Yes.’

‘No debate? What about adoption? I mean, not me, but there are lots of good families.’

I stomped across the room. ‘I wouldn’t give you my child. I don’t need to give you my child.’ And the nuclei of cells became mine. Not just Kenneth’s, not a baby I would have for when he came back. Mine. Whatever happened with Kenneth. A child who would depend on me. A child I’d see graduate from high school, from university. Postgraduate school.

‘That wasn’t what I meant,’ she said.

She meant she could rescue me. With her wealth, her big house in Atlanta. ‘I don’t know why you came.’

‘You called me. Obviously upset. Pregnant, and well, it sounds like abandoned. I fretted so much that Stu just told me to get a flight. Come to Atlanta. We’ll find you something.’ She sipped her water.

The machine dropped to a low hum as Pearl stopped sewing. I blew my nose, loud in the silence. The lilies still bothered me, but the similarities to my relationship with Amelia drained me far more.

‘Do you have any siblings, Luanne?’ Pearl asked.

‘One. Younger.’ I wouldn’t tell her. I couldn’t say the words aloud.

‘I don’t know if you can understand how hard it can be to ask someone, someone who should be close to you, someone who’s always done better, for help.’ Her voice sounded fierce with emotion.

I didn’t answer. Pearl had already upset herself enough; she didn’t need my stories.

‘Elinor was wonderful. Got me a load more sewing work. And we made it. John won’t walk again, but he’s healthy.’

Would I have been as eager to help Amelia, if her marriage had been problematic? Elinor sounded increasingly like a saint, the more I learned about her.

‘Did you ever find out what help Elinor wanted?’ I asked.

‘Not before she, before the arcade collapsed on her.’ Pearl stood up from the sewing machine. Her heels clicked on the wooden floor as she walked to the lilies. She touched a petal. I wanted to shout at her to stop, not to jar out more pollen. ‘I said some things about the Mathers today, but my brother-in-law is a good man.’ She faced me, arms crossed over the belt of her dress. ‘Not to be offensive, but I have a feeling you’re following instructions. You didn’t push me on my stories. Do you care about this job? It can’t just be a pay check, a marking of time. You need to commit to something. You need to run away with the circus.’

‘I did.’ How to explain about Kenneth?

‘I know about your young man. You ran away. You didn’t join anything.’

I tried to join something, but then he ran away from me. Didn’t that count for something?

‘I don’t know why my brother-in-law wants this, but you agreed to do it,’ Pearl continued. ‘You’d better commit. This isn’t an assembly line job where you’re only responsible for sticking eyes in dolls.’

A knock interrupted us, and John wheeled into the room. ‘Ladies, it’s well past lunch time. Eric wants to take us out to eat. Are you finished?’

Pearl crossed the room and kissed him, cradling his face in her capable hands. I could see how they would spend a lifetime together. Would Kenneth and I? Eric smiled at me from the doorway. I turned off my recorder, fighting the urge to cry.

After lunch, Eric helped John into the house. Pearl shook my hand again, but she didn’t try to offer any more advice. I climbed back into Eric’s car.

What help had Elinor wanted from Pearl? I had asked Amelia to store the boxes I had left scattered in friends’ apartments in New York, once I had them shipped.

Maybe Elinor wanted Pearl to be important in Eric’s life, to counterbalance the madness of the Mathers. Maybe to make Gwen’s wedding dress. Probably not that micro mini. Maybe Elinor had just wanted to make sure Pearl had some happiness.

The car purred smoothly down the interstate. I’d completely missed the route from the cul-de-sac. Thank God Eric didn’t seem to expect much conversation.

‘Your dad said women get these disks from the tree in the church,’ I said. ‘Dad’ – such a bizarre word to apply to Mr Mathers.

Eric gripped the wheel tightly.

‘And Gwen got one? What if you’d loved someone else?’

‘I had a crush on Gwen already. Mostly that happens. Dad said he was already half crazy about Mom. I don’t know about my grandfather – he didn’t say much about his wife. I never knew her.’

We stayed silent past four exits. I listened to the faint pulse of the radio. I should push Eric on the family stuff. But the car was an awfully small space to try.

‘What’s it like being pregnant?’ he asked.

He would have never seen it as an only child. I had clear memories of my mother cursing both the unborn Amelia and Amelia’s father during a hot summer.

‘Terrifying. It’s such an enormous responsibility. And I feel quite sick a lot.’

‘But isn’t it exciting too?’ He sounded happy just saying the words.

‘Sometimes. But I don’t know what’s happening. I have this job and then what? And I still don’t know where Kenneth is.’ My voice wobbled, and my chest felt tight.

‘Right. I can see that.’

The concern in his voice was almost more than I could bear.

‘He’ll turn up.’ His hand reached over the gearshift to pat my knee. ‘It’ll be ok.’

My leg shifted almost of its own accord, and his hand barely glanced over my jeans. Clumsy as he was, it was the only comfort I was likely to get today.

## Chapter 10

Eric discovered on the way back to Peebles that I had a craving for pancakes, so he took me that night to a local restaurant. That first time we went, I couldn't stop thinking about my headache or about having breakfast with Kenneth on the way south.

The second time we went, a week later, I promised myself to make more conversation. If Eric spent his time being nice to me, at least I could pay him proper attention.

'Your father is on my list.' Not my intended attempt at small talk. Eric poured a couple of sugar packets into his coffee and stirred.

'He'll be back soon. He's often away on business. Periodically. Who else have you interviewed?'

If only my glass of milk could be stronger. Caffeinated. Alcoholic. 'Siobhan, but that was just practice. You're on the list too. And Gwen.' Best not to think about the crap job I'd done with Pearl. Would she tell Mr Mathers?

He rubbed his thumb over fallen sugar grains on the tabletop, avoiding looking at me.

'Eric Mathers, I am shocked and amazed to see you at a restaurant!' The slim woman who stood next to our table had dark hair every bit as smooth as Gwen's.

'JoElla, I eat out all the time.' He stirred his coffee again. She didn't have to say that the oddness sprang from my presence. 'Luanne Richardson, JoElla Fitch,' Eric said. 'Luanne's doing research for the family. JoElla works in the Milbury office.'

'Another happy Mathers' employee? You haven't taken me for dinner, Eric.'

I smiled stiffly. Why did he bring me to a restaurant? Take so much time with me? She kept talking, although she might as well crawl across the table and tongue kiss him, for all her subtlety. Eric looked like a dad in his forties. Ordinary hair cut, ok, so he still had all his hair. A sports t-shirt and jeans. Did she want Eric's money or Eric?

Maybe my pregnancy made me safe. A combination of his loneliness and pity for me.

The waitress arrived bearing a tray. 'Excuse me, honey,' she said. JoElla only took one step back. The waitress put our plates down. Thumped down two pitchers of syrup. Sticky labels proclaimed them light and regular.

'Well, see you Monday.' Eric's tone more than hinted at dismissal.

JoElla waved manicured fingers. Eric picked up the regular pitcher as she wiggled her way to a table with three other women.

'What do you think about Al Taylor?' he asked.

'What?' How did we shift from JoElla to Al? 'I told you about his aunt's parrot. I personally find him off putting.' How much could I say without hurting Siobhan? 'Why?'

'Dad seems to think highly of him.'

Was Eric that bad at business? Or did the lack of a child really matter that much to Mr Mathers?

‘What do you need to know?’ Eric asked. ‘Dad didn’t say what he’s got you doing.’

‘Basically my job’s about the family. A record. So yeah, about – you. Your family. Your, um, marriage.’ How could I tell the son who seemed to be on course to interrupt the family line that his father believed that history could tell him what went wrong?’ ‘I really shouldn’t eat these this often.’ The stream of light syrup soaked into the porous flesh of the pancakes. I wouldn’t look at JoElla.

He crunched on a strip of bacon. ‘Gwen was – is I mean – lovely. She’s a very beautiful woman. To some.’

Obviously him. And Kenneth. I didn’t feel quite so hungry for the rest of my pancakes.

‘Did you know that Ken, um, liked her?’ Eric asked.

‘He told me.’ I made certain my tone didn’t betray my ridiculous jealousy of a practically twenty-year old crush. I hoped.

‘Have you checked with her about him? I had this feeling, irrational probably, well, definitely, that she would go to him, when she left me I mean. I’m sure it’s not true, but these things you imagine, you know.’

I knew all about imaginings. Kenneth pushed Gwen, slender, blonde, beautiful, on to the pew. Lifted her skirt.

I’d ask the detective to check with Gwen. I certainly couldn’t ask in my interview with her.

‘What is a master’s in library science exactly?’

I told him about my course and my work in New York. ‘Not that any of that prepared me for this job really.’ Probably not the best thing to say to your boss’s son. ‘Where did you go to college?’ I wanted to bite back the question. If he hadn’t gone . . . but surely further education fit into the Mathers’ lifestyle.

‘Carolina. I commuted. It’s important, and well I needed to be careful, they said. Grandfather said. I couldn’t just . . . it couldn’t be any girl I liked. There’s this tradition about how we marry.’

His slight flush suggested Eric had only ever slept with his wife. ‘This tradition’ probably counted as something I should push him on. How could he make friends, go to parties if he commuted?

‘You have a lot of freedom, Luanne,’ Eric said.

‘And it got me so much.’ Pregnant and 600 miles from home, en route to becoming a maybe single mother.

‘But you . . .’ he said.

‘Lived at home and tried to raise my sister during college. I could just get to it by the subway.’ Lost job, lost boyfriend.

‘When do you want to do it?’ Eric’s voice pierced the cacophony of voices whispering failure in my ears. I stared at him. ‘The interview? Tomorrow?’

I couldn't drift off in another interview. Certainly not in the ones I'd actually been assigned.

I met Eric in the study the next morning. He suggested we sit in the blue parlour, since the chairs were comfier. He pointed out the blue room's door opposite the study. The only time I'd seen it open, Mr Mathers and Eric had been talking about a Yankee. Me.

'Tea?' he asked. 'I'm going to get something.'

'Just water, please.' He headed towards the kitchen. The blue parlour equalled the study in size, but lacked the ease that came from the books. From familiarity. No reason existed to dislike this room.

'My great-grandmother really liked blue, apparently. Grandfather always insisted the doors and curtains stay closed – he didn't want what she'd chosen to fade.' Eric handed me a glass, cold with condensation. I took a big swallow, washing away the four generations of dust, dead skin flakes and allergens. A powdery sharpness filled my mouth, colliding with my teeth and clogging my throat.

'I found some lemonade mix,' he said.

My teeth ached. How could anyone drink this at all, much less in the morning? I saw a portrait over the fireplace through slightly watering eyes.

The woman's hair curled fiercely into a silver helmet. Eric's nose matched hers, but he didn't have her harsh lines running down to his mouth. Or if he did, the moustache obscured them. The woman's tense smile seemed to condense all the anger in her eyes, her tight posture. The short sleeves of her black dress slashed across her thick upper arms. She didn't have the pleasant crinkles around her eyes that Eric had.

'My great-grandmother. Grandfather loved that portrait.' Eric sat in a blue leather armchair. How could anyone love a portrait that showed their mother in what seemed to be full rage? I sat on the brocade sofa. I put the lemonade on a coaster. Eric drank his.

'So what can you tell me about your wedding day?'

'It rained before the service, but it cleared up for the pictures after. I gave Gwen her chair the next morning. It'd meant to be that night, but with Mom and all I just waited.'

'You gave her a wedding chair?' Eric carving furniture? Maybe a workshop hid in the trees near my cottage.

'A barber chair. I'll show you.'

'Maybe later?' I gripped my lemonade as an excuse, even forcing a tiny sip down my throat. 'What happened that day?'

'Mom was pretty upset about Gwen's dress, I know, but the ceremony was fine. Pictures. Then Aunt Pearl came back screaming, police, the rest and then it was over.'

Worse than a *Reader's Digest* version. 'What was the ceremony like?'

‘A ceremony, I guess. There are photos, in the boxes. Kenneth took them.’ He shifted to the edge of his seat, and I figured he was about to suggest we go find them.

‘What do you remember? I’m interested in your memories, your feelings, I guess.’ I had only glanced at a couple of pictures of Gwen, and put the other wedding photos in the correct box. Maybe I should go through them more carefully, look for the one of the three Mathers men that hung in Mr Mathers’ office. I probably would study Eric’s face more closely now.

‘Gwen’s boots. Pink, knee high. And that dress. She looked, well, sexy, but that’s not really the point of the day, is it? She looked like she was going out dancing.’

Looking sexy had at least something to do with getting married. ‘Did it make you question the day?’

‘Everybody had already arrived. Grandfather wanted to put a choir robe on her, but Dad made him be quiet. I’d forgotten about that.’ He rubbed his hand down the armrest of the leather chair. ‘Is that enough?’

‘A little more, please.’ My early interviews had been easy. Even Pearl.

‘Like what?’

Why he married a girl ten years younger than him who left him after sixteen years. How they handled the lack of a child. What he did to cope with his mother dying on his wedding day. ‘Al’s aunt was at your parents’ wedding. She said their vows were different?’

‘They mention the flower rings, that’s all.’ Eric looked at his bare finger.

‘I haven’t seen any rings in the archive. Photos, and your father’s, of course, but none just in the boxes.’

‘You won’t. They’re buried with us.’

‘Could I see . . .?’

‘The chair? Sure.’ He half stood.

‘The ring, actually.’ Had he kept his ring?

‘Um, not really. I’d rather not.’ He rubbed the arm of the chair again, more quickly. ‘Is this enough then?’ His perfect posture had sunk with the mention of the ring.

‘I have a couple more questions.’ An understatement. ‘About your mother.’

‘It was the way she died that surprised us all. I mean, the Mathers women often die around their son’s wedding days.’

‘Often?’ Mary said Walter’s mother died of a heart attack.

‘They tend to – it’s just one of those things. But Mom – it was terrible. Crushed to death. God, the way she must have felt when the ceiling shifted. She wouldn’t have been able to run fast enough.’

Like an action movie escape scene, the chunks of roof falling in time to the throbbing music. Until I filled in the sixty year old heroine. She wouldn’t have had a chance of making it out. The crushing weight on her frail body. No trace of the purple wedding suit she wore in the photos. It was Eric’s mother, not a movie. ‘What happened?’

‘The arcade had been condemned. The county hadn’t decided between tearing it down and reconstructing it. Then it collapsed.’ He was silent for a long time. ‘Do you want to go to dinner tonight? There’s a fish place that’s supposed to be good. I know you can’t eat certain kinds, but we could try it.’ Eric stood up. ‘Can we finish later? I need to, um, go.’

What about his mother being crushed to death led him to thinking about fish for dinner?

He waited for me to stand before taking my barely touched glass and his empty one through to the kitchen. I heard his car speed down the driveway a few minutes later.

I poured away my lemonade and put both glasses in the dishwasher. I always expected bad things. Even if they weren’t possible or probable. I’d see a pair of nail scissors and imagine, if they slipped high and got through my glasses, how they would stick deep in the white gelatinous portion of my eye. Maybe it was my fear that I would do this to myself.

So how could Eric keep going after Elinor’s death? After sixteen years of marriage with no baby? And a divorce? Letting the nail scissors past the barrier and into the eye?

Eric knocked on the cottage door at almost seven that evening.

‘Have you eaten yet?’ he asked.

I shook my head. I had waited to see if he returned.

‘Come over to the house? I couldn’t face going out, so I picked up some food.’

We’d eaten together enough that he knew what I felt I should eat and what I liked to eat. Tonight he’d gone for ‘should’, with salads for both of us. We sat in the beige and green living room watching TV. The portrait’s gaze had seemed to linger on me as I worked in the study, despite the impossibly wrong angles. I had even gotten up to close the parlour door.

‘Have you looked around the house?’

‘Only down here.’ The TV screen flickered to black. Maybe I should have prowled around, searched for signs of Kenneth. But Mr Mathers scared me.

‘Come on.’ I followed him out to the entry way. ‘Dad has rooms back there.’ He waved towards the kitchen. Beyond the study then. He bounded up the staircase which curved beautifully. Mahogany? I’d seen Kelly, the cleaning lady, polishing it earlier that day.

‘I’ve never been in a house this big.’

‘We rattle around a little.’ We reached the landing. A long drop down to the granite floor. Only a thin half railing closed us in. He opened a plain door. ‘That was Gwen’s. For a while.’ The room, barely visible in the light from the hallway, had been stripped of everything but the bed. Eric opened the door next to it. Carvings swirled in the corners of the white door. I didn’t want to know if the shapes represented anything or if they just looked pretty. ‘This is the main bedroom.’ He clicked on the light and I followed him in. The pink carpet pile sucked at my shoes. The clothes he’d been wearing that morning lay scattered across the dark purple bedspread. Gwen might have picked the colours, but he’d left the covers rucked up. He tossed the covers up towards the head of the bed.

‘Your room,’ I said. Why did it bother me to see his bed?

‘There’s been a Mathers here for over a hundred years. The frame, I mean. Obviously we get new mattresses.’ Tree branches, complete with bark, curved around the mattress and reached upwards to the ceiling. Wooden roses bloomed at the top of each of the four posters. Like Penelope. Except no tree could grow up two stories to form a bedstead.

Picture frames rested on every flat surface. In each, a young woman smiled in a wedding gown. All the Mathers women.

At the far side of the vast room, a thin shape half hid a table. I walked closer. A proper old-fashioned barber chair. The seat was a deep mustard yellow.

‘I gave it to Gwen. She used to shave all three of us. Anyway, my room. After I got married, Dad moved to the grandfather wing.’

A straightedge razor sliding over the throats of Eric and Mr Mathers. I had no proof that she used those. The table, half hidden behind the headrest of the barber chair, held a five by seven framed picture of Gwen. Her large, bouffant bangs showed; her mini dress did not. Could I sleep in a room with a picture of an ex-boyfriend – never mind an ex-spouse?

‘Eric, I didn’t mean to, well, earlier. To upset you.’

His smile stayed tight, and he gestured for me to precede him out. He turned down a semi-darkened hallway. Portraits and photographs of children lined the walls. As many time periods as the brides in the bedroom. In Eric’s photo, the last one, he had braces.

‘Nobody lives up here now.’ He opened rooms at random, as if his agitation of the morning hadn’t worn off. Blankets sheathed the furniture.

‘Why isn’t it the grandparents’ wing?’ I asked.

‘This was my grandfather’s room. Till he got too old to climb the stairs.’ He opened a door. I glanced in. A spicy fragrance, even now. A brush on the dressing table. I didn’t look at the bed; I didn’t want to know if it still had sheets, strands of Graham’s hair on the pillowcase. The Southern Manderley, Eric closed the door and walked on, past a few more doors.

He opened another door, one with a painted name plate. His name. A small room for this house. Cartoon cowboys, football players and pilots adorned the blue wallpaper. Plane mobiles danced from the ceiling. A few trophies, a few certificates, but not many. Third, fourth places. The *Boxcar Children* books on the shelves, and others, their spines too bent to read clearly.

‘Would have been redecorated for our son of course, but there you go.’

‘You’re way at the end. What happened if you needed something in the night?’ I asked.

‘Grandfather came.’

I had vague memories of my grandfather – more centred by photos of him holding me as an infant than any real memories. He looked warm, comforting. Real. Eric’s grandfather had sounded distinctly unpleasant in Mary’s sto- account. He would have scared me more than nightmares.

Eric closed his childhood door. He led me up another flight of stairs. I felt dizzy.

‘This is mostly closed.’

And what I’d seen hadn’t been? He opened a room near the stairs. A squishy leather sofa. A computer, a TV. Paperbacks. Some type of sporting calendar on the wall. It was the most functional and comfortable room I’d seen in the entire house.

‘I used this as sort of an in between room. Between the cowboys and getting married. Still do. And you didn’t upset me. I had a doctor’s appointment.’

I had listened to the recording that afternoon, and his usually even voice had quavered, something I’d missed in the blue room. I nodded. ‘Everything ok?’

‘Slightly elevated blood pressure. They’re just watching it for now.’ His eyes glowed with a loneliness I recognised. When no one enquires after your health or asks what you did that day. From the window, I could see the tip of my cottage’s roof. The light that stayed on most nights came from this room.

A paperback lay facedown on the sofa. ‘You’re reading Chandler,’ I said.

‘Rereading.’

I refrained from rescuing the book, saving its already cracked spine. ‘I like Chandler. And detective fiction.’

He smiled, as I hoped. I never wanted to hurt his feelings, and now I had to worry about raising his blood pressure.

‘I didn’t mean to drag you all around. There’s an elevator we can take down.’ He led me to a silver door and pushed the button. ‘We had it put in after Grandfather fell. Have you always lived in New York?’ he asked.

‘I almost moved to Ohio once.’

‘Why would anyone want to – sorry.’

The same could be said about North Carolina. ‘For a job. I applied, anyway. Librarian at a university. I didn’t go to the interview.’ Maybe Eric asked why, but I could only see Chris’s angry face, so unlike the eight weeks we’d spent together in my apartment. His icy blue eyes.

Dr Chris Slade came to our library on his sabbatical. He flirted indiscriminately, but he asked me out for drinks, for dinner. After what I deemed a respectable time, far more than with Kenneth, he moved into my apartment. He’d flown off for a short burst of research at the Bodleian when I saw the job advertised at his home university. Ok, so it was a pay cut, but life in Ohio would be cheaper, living as a couple. I just made the closing date.

His flight arrived in during my working day. I dressed up, even down to my most uncomfortable high heels, to look pretty, in case he came in. But he didn’t. I went home, breathless with anticipation to tell him about the job, my plans for our future together.

‘What the fuck is this?’ He hurled something at me, and it bounced off my shoulder. I wobbled on my heels as I leaned down to pick it up. I smoothed the crumpled paper. The green university logo, pleased to offer you an interview, blurred before my eyes.

‘You opened my mail?’ His crashing anger seemed remote, his raised voice ridiculous.

‘What made you think this was acceptable? What would I say to my dean, my wife, my kids?’

The creases in the paper dug into my palm. The ripped envelope lay on my unmade bed. He’d obviously taken a nap rather than rush to see me.

Wife.

His fingers felt warm on my shoulders. He smelled like sleep.

‘This is now, this is sexy, but there is no after. You’re very naive, Luanne. It’s one of the things I love about you.’

I pushed away his hands. I grabbed his closest suitcase, half open, and tossed it to the door, his clothes spilling across my floorboards. ‘Give me your key.’

‘But I’m in New York for another two months. We can . . .’

‘Get out.’

The elevator thudded, jarring me. I stepped into an unknown hallway at the back of the house. Near Mr Mathers’ silent rooms.

‘He – you didn’t know,’ Eric said.

I had said it out loud. It hadn’t just been in my head. God. I stared at the thick carpet. I didn’t want to see the pity I could hear in his voice. Chris still came back to the library, almost every summer. Always asked for my help. He said my determination and my drive to find answers made me the best at the library. I knew he just wanted to keep hurting me.

‘That’s terrible.’

Eric had been – was – a married man. But I honestly couldn’t imagine him cheating on his wife. Besides, everyone said she was beautiful and sexy. And she had left him. ‘I do have friends. Happiness. I’ve given you a terrible impression of my life.’

‘Luanne, if you knew . . .’ He shoved his hands in his pockets, a pause as definite as when he’d slammed Pete’s chair under the desk. ‘Wanna play cards? It helps me sleep.’

‘I’m pretty bad at games, but yeah.’ We headed towards the living room.

‘When I was little, I used to try to get girls on the playground to act out a wedding – I’d have a dandelion ring and they thought I was pretty weird. I felt happier at home.’

He was trying to make me feel better.

‘What was your childhood like? Your sister?’

And he chose the worst possible method. No wonder my interviewees sounded awkward. This hurt. My mother transitioning through lovers, Amelia’s father’s midnight departure. ‘My mom left when I was eighteen. I don’t know where she is. And I never knew my

father.’ Eric touched my arm. ‘He just left. He didn’t die or anything dramatic. I don’t think he wanted a kid.’ No connection to Kenneth, to my problems now. Eric dropped his hand, but the brief warmth remained.

‘I didn’t mean to pry.’

I smiled. ‘You’ll have to show me how to play.’ Eric talked easily over cards, and he proved to be a patient teacher. I slept far better that night than I’d expected.

## Chapter 11

Playing games together each night spilled into eating dinner. I began to fear I had fallen into routine, if not ritual. We moved onto canasta. Eric started talking about the time he spent with his grandfather as a child. Afternoons where they played games while eating Elinor's cookies. Cards, board games. Graham's mother had taught him how to play.

The night that Gwen left, Mr Mathers offered to play games with Eric. And it turned out that Graham had taught Walter too.

Each evening, as soon as I returned to the cottage, I wrote down notes and came up with more questions to raise the next night. The lack of a recorder seemed to help, for both of us. I learned a lot about Eric as a person. As the kid he had been. But very little of what he'd been like as a husband.

I lost game after game, as September drifted towards October. I tried to remember all the details that spilled out. Only once did Eric play games with his entire family. One night, when he'd had a nightmare, Elinor and Walter played spades against Eric and Graham. Despite the fact that Eric was seven, Graham looked at Eric sternly over the cards and said that he did not expect to lose. They lost the first hand, when Eric was learning, but after that they won them all. He and his grandfather seemed to have innate talent. Eric didn't play with his father again until the night Gwen left.

I knew I needed to ask questions. I had to work, not just learn to become proficient in two person games. Not just revel in having a friend.

'How did your grandfather die, Eric?' He shook the dice cup evenly. I had been learning backgammon, Eric's favourite. 'Did Gwen have something to do with it?' I could almost imagine it of the blonde woman in the mini wedding dress. Did the razor slip? Was it an accident? What did the police say?

'No. No! Grandfather fell down the stairs.'

In the upstairs bedroom, Gwen and Eric had just had sex, as dictated by the ovulation chart. Not very hopefully, but the idea, the premise remained, even after twelve years of marriage, 144 months of negative pregnancy tests. But Gwen was only 32, so they kept trying.

Eric heard a dragging sound outside.

'I saw! You think I'm too old, but I saw you. I saw what you did!' Graham's shouts sounded close to their room. A large crash interrupted his voice. Eric ran to the door, pulling on his bathrobe.

'Wait,' Gwen grabbed her clothes – all of them, jeans and everything.

Eric opened the door, not caring if Gwen was dressed or not. His throat froze as he stared down at his grandfather. Graham's cane stretched from under his right leg up to his left

armpit. His limbs lay unnaturally, his leg bent at an impossible angle. Eric ran down the steps, stumbling and sliding until he knelt by the body.

‘Call for help!’ he screamed. Gwen emerged, her hair a wild halo. She dashed down the hallway the other way. Eric started to shout at her, but remembered that they had no phone in their room. She’d have to go all the way down to Walter’s room.

Eric stroked his grandfather’s cheek, still warm. Alive. He briefly touched Graham’s neck, like they did on TV. A vein jumped under his fingertips, but slowly. Eric knew no CPR or anything life saving. What could he do? He gripped his grandfather’s hand, feeling the age spots and loosely wrinkled skin.

‘I saw her – the roses. The problem . . . shouldn’t . . . her fault,’ his grandfather whispered.

‘Ambulance on its way.’ Gwen’s voice cut over the faint whisper. ‘It’s on the other side of town though; it’ll be a few minutes.’

‘Did you say who we are?’ Eric demanded.

‘They can’t make it fly, even for a Mathers.’

‘Can’t you do something? You worked with old people.’ Eric clung to Graham’s hand, as if he could physically hold on to his life.

‘I think we shouldn’t move him.’ Gwen touched Eric’s shoulder.

‘She, she,’ mumbled Graham.

‘What is he saying?’ Gwen’s breath felt hot against Eric’s neck.

‘Something about fault.’ He brushed the thinning hair back from Graham’s forehead.

‘I’ll go downstairs to let them in.’ She stood up. ‘Why is he blaming me, even as . . .?’

‘Don’t say it. He’s strong, he’s not . . .’ Eric’s breath caught in a sob. Gwen kissed Eric’s head and went through the grandfather wing downstairs to the front door.

Graham didn’t say anything else, even when the paramedics folded a brace around his neck and shifted him to a stretcher. Eric followed them.

‘I’ll bring you clothes,’ Gwen said from the front walk.

‘Call Dad,’ Eric shouted. The ambulance doors closed, and Eric watched the people work on his grandfather’s body in a blur. Why hadn’t he realised how thin Graham had become – how papery his skin?

Eric paced the waiting room. People gave him a wide berth. Maybe it had something to do with his yellow bathrobe and bare feet. Gwen brought him shoes and a bag of clothes. When he emerged from the bathroom, she sat in a small alcove. Close to the main desk, but not out in the open. He sat beside her on the hard chairs.

Eric couldn’t seem to form a coherent string of thoughts. Would Grandfather be ok? Was that plant real or plastic? What would he do without his grandfather? Why had the couple

sitting next to them come to the hospital? Why had Grandfather come upstairs? Did they smell like sex? Would he get athlete's foot from walking barefoot around the hospital?

Gwen rose before Eric recognised his father's voice, asking about Graham at the nursing desk. Eric followed Gwen. He hugged Walter hard. His body felt thin too, under his suit. What would they do without Graham?

'What have they said?' Walter pulled away first.

'Several broken bones, but they seemed more worried about a head injury,' Eric said.

'What was he doing?' Walter asked.

'He said something about the roses – what he saw. Her fault.' The roses had been declining under Gwen's care, so Eric studiously avoided looking at her. He saw his father jerk with surprise. 'Do you know what that means?'

'No. No.' Walter patted Eric's hand. His affection came so rarely the sensation tingled. 'He'll be ok. Don't worry.'

A young policewoman walked over to them. Eric felt so certain she needed to talk to someone else – the young couple on the opposite end of the alcove, reading magazines – that when the policewoman stopped opposite them, he knew it must be a mistake.

'I'm sorry to disturb you, Mr Mathers. I'm Officer Morris. I need to ask you a few questions.'

'Now is not a good time,' Walter said.

'It's routine, just a couple of questions. We just need to rule out any elder abuse.'

'You must be joking. He rules our house,' Gwen said. She twisted her purse strap.

'Right. Mrs Mathers, are you saying . . .?'

'He is our patriarch,' Walter said smoothly. 'We all revolve around him. He is quite active, but he hasn't been up those stairs for more than ten years. I'd be happy to take you there, let you look around. You'll call me, Eric, when the doctor comes out?'

'It doesn't have to be right now. Is anyone in the house?'

'Gwen, what about the cleaning lady?' Walter asked.

'Kelly's on Wednesdays.'

'Then no, no one is in the house,' Walter said.

'We can go there later. Thank you,' the officer said.

A doctor approached, his face grim.

'What's happened?' Eric asked, standing up. He braced himself to hear the worst.

'Nothing yet. Mrs Mathers, Mr Mathers, I'm Tom Koch, director of the hospital. My absolute apologies for you sitting out here for so long. Would you like to come this way? We can make you a bit more comfortable while you wait. The doctors will know where to find you when there is news.'

Dr Koch led them into a quiet elevator and then along to a wood panelled room with a long table. The conference room, Eric assumed. His grandfather came here for board meetings

once a month. And now he was a patient. Eric breathed fast, trying to stop the sobs that wanted to keep coming.

‘He must have given a lot to be here,’ Gwen said.

‘Where?’ In the hospital? It had nothing to do with wealth. He saw Gwen standing in front of an oil portrait of Graham. The brush strokes hadn’t really gotten his grandfather’s kindness, only the fierce business side. Graham’s hair still had traces of red mixed with the silver. It must have been painted not long after Walter’s wedding, after Rosemary died. How Grandfather must have missed his wife, but it didn’t show in the painting.

‘We’ve always supported the health care of the Piedmont. That policewoman is outside the door,’ Walter said. ‘You didn’t see anything else? Hear anything?’

‘We came out and he was on the stairs. Maybe if you hadn’t wanted to dress.’

‘I wasn’t going out half dressed,’ Gwen said. ‘He’d said . . .’ She stopped.

Walter looked at her for a long moment.

‘Don’t tell the police that.’

‘Will they ask us more questions?’ Eric asked.

‘An old rich man dies? Even in this world, yes,’ Gwen said.

‘He isn’t dead. People keep saying that.’ Eric paced the length of the room. ‘He isn’t going to die.’ They waited. Someone brought them drinks and sandwiches, but Eric couldn’t touch them.

Hours later, a doctor came in. He avoided looking at the portrait that seemed to hover over them as he explained Graham was still unconscious and had serious injuries, but he would survive.

‘I can recommend some excellent private care homes. He’s going to require round the clock care for the rest of his life.’

‘He’ll come home with us. We’ll get nurses,’ Walter said.

‘It’s very difficult. You should consider the impact of having a member of your family like this.’

‘He’ll come home with us. When can he be released?’

Graham stayed in hospital for two weeks. Eric expected his old fierce grandfather to return, but he woke as someone dulled. He had already started dying, but his body took over two years to catch up. The house was fitted for wheelchairs. They even installed an elevator, although Graham never ventured upstairs again. Pretty nurses were hired who wore bright uniforms, but Graham didn’t seem to notice. Eric and Walter spent evenings trying to draw Graham into conversation, but nothing worked.

‘Maybe his brain just misfired in the fall,’ Eric said. ‘He knew I was important, but not who I was. He called everybody honey.’

‘Did you ever find out what he’d been upset about?’

‘As far as I could tell, Gwen and I hadn’t done anything that Grandfather considered wrong. I even searched Gwen’s things again to be sure, but it was just ovulation tests and normal stuff.’

‘Again? You searched her things?’ A shiver of disgust chilled me. Privacy surely was privacy – marriage didn’t change that. Did it? Like Chris reading my mail. That ripped envelope seemed far more real, more horrific, than his wife.

‘It, it was a thing. Earlier.’ He stood up from the game board. ‘See Grandfather said, his mother . . . it’s . . . God. Never mind.’ His long stride made the living room feel tiny. ‘Don’t you understand? I’ve failed at everything. No child, no wife, no real job. And now, you, I have to . . . I’m just a failure.’ He ran from the room, faster than I’d ever seen him move. I followed. He passed through the entryway and – I could hardly see through the door – either he fell – or he pushed against the statue in the hallway. Hard. He dashed up the stairs two at a time, going past the master bedroom. To the grandfather wing? The child’s room he’d shown me? His room upstairs?

The statue rocked slightly on its shapely thighs, and I steadied the cold marble. Her lips parted slightly, and her eyes had been left blank like those terrifying statues in museums. It suited her. I had yet to hear anyone praise her for her charm or wit or intelligence. All I heard about was beauty.

The statue’s arms rested on her hips, pushing forward her chest. Carved cloth draped elegantly over slim marble limbs. It disturbed me that her legs stopped mid-thigh, placing emphasis on the reproductive parts of her body.

Surely Eric had just bumped the statue. Even if it sat in the middle of a three-foot diameter table. Did he mean a systematic search? For what?

Should I go after Eric?

He looked in my wallet when I passed out at the mill. But I might have had one of those medical notification cards.

I didn’t even know where he’d gone. Or if I wanted to look for him.

I touched the curve of her wedding band. No engagement ring. A tickle brushed my fingertips as shapes twisted from underneath my hand, drifting slowly across the grain of the marble. The blue ink danced along the faint veins and infinitesimal pitting. Nothing clear, nothing that could be a message, but swirls ran up her arm, across her neck to her face. Down her breasts.

‘Stop!’ I closed my eyes tightly. I turned my back on the statue, walked firmly towards the side door and headed for the cottage.

## Chapter 12

I only ventured as far as the grounds on Saturday. I took a circuitous route through pine trees, apple trees, and trees that I couldn't name. Maybe Mr Mathers gave Kenneth permission to walk the estate. A rusted hunting trap snapping around his leg. I watched where I placed my feet.

At least Eric knew his way around enough to be safe. He understood the land, the area. He belonged. I ended my walk at the garage. Eric's car didn't gleam palely in its normal space.

He didn't appear on Sunday either. After pacing for much of the morning, I went to the house. I sorted timber papers dated not long after Mr Mathers had assumed control from Graham. The dullness suited me, calmed me. I learned that William pushed the family business more seriously towards timber sales, whereas his father and grandfather had farmed and sold only limited timber. The 150 years on their business cards might be considered a bit of a stretch. William wrote better than his son Graham. By evening, I knew a lot about how the Mathers and Son timber sales had expanded beyond North Carolina. No Eric. The house stayed silent.

Monday started with an email from my detective reporting no news about Kenneth. Gwen Mathers had denied any contact with 'the subject', he wrote. Surely he could use Kenneth's name.

I'd read countless land deeds, marriage, birth and death certificates. Some letters, but very little existed that was personal, except an occasional reference to the marriage of a son or the birth of a grandson in a business letter. In a small family, no letters about Jimmy's first tooth needed to be sent to a cousin. I could write up Eric's sto- account, but I didn't want to think about Eric. What he'd said, or where he'd disappeared to.

I left the computer and opened a photo box. I felt cold, but I had already been through these. I knew the contents. Except that I'd done them fast. The acid free box held daguerreotypes of Mathers men. They really did all wear floral wedding rings. I had half assumed the history had been made up. No images of the women, but all the wives' eyes peered out from lacy wedding veils in the bedroom upstairs.

The stiffly dressed man, his head held erect, his left hand resting on a chair back, rose ring turned towards the camera. The number of rose buds seemed to vary widely. If I were helping an academic, one of these men would adorn the cover of the resulting book. The researcher's 'thank Luanne Richardson for her help . . .' line would be buried in the acknowledgments.

A book cover wouldn't be next. This report would go nowhere except to Mr Mathers/ Possibly Eric. Maybe future generations – if Eric got a new wife – would read my work, but no one outside the family would see it. I heard only the very faint hum of the computer.

I moved ahead several photo boxes chronologically. Childhood pictures of Eric, Elinor with a curly perm wearing a green polka dot dress sprouting enormous shoulder pads. I'd liberated some of these from the box with the disk. The disc rested in a small, flat box by itself.

Eric, thin in a tuxedo. His prom? Did his grandfather dictate who he could take as a date? One of the girls who laughed at him for playing weddings in the playground? Eric in a pale blue graduation gown, in front of a columned building. Marble, like Gwen's statue. I put the picture down.

The next box held Eric and Gwen's wedding. Gwen smiled at the camera, her face far more alive than it looked in the statue. The micro mini dress clung to the curves of her body. Any speck of fat would have shown, and she had none. The picture from Mr Mathers' office. Three generations of Mathers men posing with . . . a yellow handbag? Gwen held it in other photos. A possession? Gwen as a vessel? Maybe it just appealed to Kenneth's sense of juxtaposition.

Buried beneath the wedding pictures, I found three black and white photos that I'd missed before. Gwen, her hair long and loose. She wore a pale coloured dress, so simply cut that it could just have easily been 1960 as 1990.

The first showed Gwen sitting in a wooden pew of the church. Her perfect profile – slim, delicate throat and straight nose. No glasses. Small drop earrings. Even the ridiculous bangs couldn't mar her beauty. Light pooled around her wrist. I could imagine the crimson from the stained glass that lit up Mary's pink dress years ago. That lit up the church when I'd been there. Tears filled my eyes. Did she share that too? She had everything.

The light crept up her arm, soft as kisses until it reached her shoulder, illuminating the hollow of her neck, her dainty earlobe. At what point did she notice? Was it when the glow fell full against her eyes in all defiance of physics and angles? When people behind her gasped as her pale hair burned red? When the minister stopped talking, as transfixed as everyone else?

Did she notice the glow or the warmth? The gentle, almost tangible stroke on her skin?

The next picture showed Gwen standing to face the tree. The leaves looked tender and fragile. Early spring. Tiny blossoms.

In the smallest corner of the photograph, the light also exposed the back of Eric's head and his white-knuckle grip on the pew.

What had Kenneth thought as he took these photos? Did he know what the disk said? The creamy flesh bearing the word 'marry'? Did Kenneth see love slipping away?

What did it mean that mine said 'wait'? Tears fell down my face now, but I felt none of the peace I'd experienced in the church.

The third photograph showed Gwen holding a disk, facing Eric in the side aisle. The tree now concentrated most of the radiance in the luminous flowers on the branches. I could imagine the minister congratulating the couple on their impending nuptials and wondering how quickly he could get on with the service.

Gwen still looked at the disk in her hand, not at Eric. She didn't look peaceful, or radiant. She looked . . . dull. Maybe shocked. No photograph showed the moment when the disk emerged. I hadn't seen my disk fall.

Why should I be jealous of an almost sixteen year old crush – especially as nothing had happened? Kenneth had certainly known other women between Gwen and me.

The next clump of photos showed lots of people in what appeared to be the dining room. I closed the box. Enough of Kenneth's photos of other people. I wanted dinner alone. To remember that Kenneth loved me, and that it had nothing to do with this family.

## Chapter 13

At my appointment, my doctor said my pregnancy continued to progress normally. The next visit, I could find out the gender, if I wanted. With so much uncertainty, I'd grab at any solid facts. I asked if changes in vision were normal. The symptoms she rattled off for preeclampsia I didn't have. How could I compare floating spots and blurriness to watching my own cursive unpick itself and loop across a page? She seemed so efficient and cheerful, and well, professional, as she checked my blood pressure. I couldn't bear to explain.

'Worries are normal for first time mothers, especially when you're alone. Try not to spend so much time sitting in front of a computer. And remember to get enough rest.' She patted my arm.

Nothing could be normal about pale surfaces, shapes and shifting land.

My stomach still felt chilled from the ultrasound gel. Five days since I'd seen Eric. He'd offered to give me a lift to this appointment. No reason why he should need to let me know. Kelly, the cleaner, said he'd called her. But his absence affected her work, not mine.

A Reverend Rust appeared on Mr Mathers' list. I walked to the church with the tree. God's house, complete with doorbell next to the closed and locked front door. Pastor Stephens answered the door after a few minutes, slightly out of breath.

'Sorry, it's a long way from the offices. Most people use that door during the week. Luanne, right? What can I do for you?'

'I'm sorry.' His panting hadn't slowed, his rotund stomach rising and falling sharply.

'You didn't know. Come in.' He locked the door behind me. My skin remembered the still coolness of the entryway. No light emerged from the closed sanctuary doors. He led me down the same stairwell Siobhan had taken. Paper plate vegetables and construction paper cornucopias dotted the walls in the hallway. He turned into an office. A young woman typed at an old computer with a box monitor.

'Bridget, our church secretary, Luanne Richardson,' the pastor said. The woman at the desk smiled. 'Bridget, John Field is home from the hospital, if you could change it in the bulletin. Would you like to come this way?' Pastor Stephens asked, ushering me through his office door. Dark wood bookshelves matched his desk. His pen mug bore the logo of a New Jersey university. 'Please, take a seat. What can I help with?'

He thought I'd come for counselling. Last time, I'd been crying, and now I was starting to be visibly pregnant. I pulled my jacket closed.

'I, um, wanted to talk to you about the tree. In the church.'

'In the Mathers pew? I figured you'd know more about the tree than me.'

He'd seen me get the disk. The kaleidoscope of colours bursting in the church and me emerging. Did everyone in town know? 'How does it work?' I asked. 'I mean, keep from hurting the building.'

‘When I came here, I got a survey team in just to be sure, and they did ground penetrating radar. Absolutely fine, no interference with the foundations. Straight to dirt, like the communion sink in the sacristy.’ He folded his hands on his desk. ‘Any word about your fiancé?’

I shook my head. Mr Mathers hadn’t been around for me to ask if his detective was any better than my useless one.

‘He’s in our prayers,’ Pastor Stephens said.

‘Thank you.’ Would the prayers of a minister help more? ‘I’m working for Mr Mathers, you know. Doing a history project. He asked me to interview a Reverend Rust. Do you know him?’

‘Pastor Rust was here in the sixties. I’m afraid he passed away a few years ago, but his widow is in a nearby nursing home.’ His fingers formed a steeple over his tummy. ‘Anything you need to or want to talk about? I’m here for the community, whether you’re a church member or not.’

I smiled and fiddled with my purse strap. The purse with my disk inside. I focused on the fat dictionary and thesaurus behind his head. ‘Who was the minister here in the early nineties? The last time a Mathers got married.’

‘How is Eric? We missed him on Sunday. Pastor Clarke was here until ‘95.’

Eric went to church weekly? ‘Could Bridget give me contact details? For Mrs Rust and the other pastor?’ Pastor Stephens must also know I’d moved to the cottage.

He offered to listen again, and I thanked him. Soon people – he – would ask about the pregnancy. I had to finish this job and get out of here. I wouldn’t do that if I kept adding names to the interview list.

Siobhan met me at the mall after school. She told me about the fight she’d had to break up in fourth period as we headed into a maternity wear store.

‘This isn’t encouraging me about the baby, you know,’ I said. Siobhan started flicking through racks of clothes. Huge photos of smiling, glossy haired pregnant women adorned the walls.

‘Yours’ll be different. It’ll suit your life.’

‘All my childless friends say that.’

‘Who else?’ She flicked through a rack of dresses.

‘Eric.’

‘Mathers?’ I just nodded. Why did my face flush? I picked out some ballooning dresses and a couple nightgowns. The doctor had already talked to me about maternity bras, so I added those to the pile.

‘You need stuff that will make you feel attractive,’ Siobhan insisted. She handed me jeans and a few pretty shirts and forced me into a changing room.

I skinned my own jeans off. The lights did not shine favourably on my growing stomach and dimpled thighs. Pale though, almost as pale as the marble statue. But completely lacking in its – her – beautiful lines and muscle tone. Whispers started deep in my head about why Kenneth left, so I dragged on the new jeans fast. The cotton front expanded, and I could breathe freely.

‘Just think about how pricey jeans are anyway,’ Siobhan called through the curtain. ‘And you have a job. Try on the tops too.’

I pulled a black shirt over my head. The neckline dipped low over my increasing cleavage. Lower than I usually wore, even not pregnant. My pay had arrived in my bank account at the end of each month. And with no rent going out, I suddenly had more. More to save, I told myself fiercely. Baby to pay for, no long term job. I opened the curtain.

‘Gorgeous. Get them both,’ Siobhan said. Forcing the button on my own jeans back together convinced me to make the purchases.

‘How much longer will the job take?’ Siobhan asked as the clerk rang up the items.

‘There are fifteen names and I’ve done two. Sort of.’ Eric hadn’t really finished. ‘But Katherine Miers is on there, and she’s dead. As is a minister, but I’m going to substitute his widow.’

‘Good. I want you to stick around.’

I handed the clerk my card. Necessity, I reminded myself. I had to give the baby room to grow.

Siobhan carried three of the four bags. So many people seemed to be convinced of my fragility. Except Kenneth. Siobhan stopped in front of a coffee shop. She must have said something about it, so I followed her in.

‘Decaf tea?’ Siobhan asked.

‘Steamed milk, please. I’m giving up on getting decent decaf.’

Siobhan paid, still chatting about the dirt fight. The smell of the coffee made me dizzy.

‘There’s that real tea place Joanna used to go to, in Milbury,’ Siobhan said. ‘I should have thought about that before. She always raved about loose leaf tea.’

The warmed milk coated the back of my throat, pooling uneasily in my stomach.

‘The minister who married Eric and Gwen works in Bellway – that’s nearby, isn’t it? If he could see me on a Saturday . . .’

‘I’ll drive you. Then we’ll try to get you some decaf tea with flavour.’

And without bags for ink to move across.

Mrs Rust could see me anytime, anytime at all. Except several days and times when she had her hair done, saw her grandchildren, played bridge or did crafts. Should a woman in her nineties really have so much more of a social life than me? Pastor Clarke agreed to meet with me on the following Saturday, just before lunch.

I picked up the phone three times before I managed the next task. Eventually my fingers pressed all the digits of Gwen's number. Not her fault that Kenneth loved her sixteen years ago. But I felt a quivering sickness in my abdomen. Just above his baby. The phone rang four times, and then a generic, female voiced machine asked me to leave a message.

I left my name and a potted explanation, reciting Mathers' number. It had been her home number for years; of course she'd know it.

The doctor told me not to sit for long periods of time, so I paced the edges of the study. I wasn't sure what she'd say about the quantities of dust I was inhaling. Would the baby come out smelling like old paper?

Eric's room upstairs had contained lots of books, books he obviously read, even if he did recklessly destroy the spines. These were just leather bound show. I picked up a small, narrow book with no name on the spine. A journal, half filled with thin handwriting.

The first page bore periwinkle blue ink.

Dear Gwen,

I hope you find these observations useful. I felt woefully unprepared when I started living here, and I don't want the same for you.

Best of luck to you.

Love,  
Elinor

The rest of the book had been written in pencil, varying in density throughout. Recipes – the preferred birthday cake for each generation of Mathers. Graham, a fruit cake, Walter, a burnt sugar pound cake and Eric, a heavy chocolate sheet cake.

She included directions for the tricks required for the oven. An expensive error, she admitted, advising Gwen not to be swayed by brands when getting a replacement.

The chocolate cake looked really good. She'd stuck in a photo of Eric – I checked the back – at his seventh birthday party. Graham and Elinor smiled beside Eric. No school friends.

Please learn from my mistakes. Let other children come to the house. Insist upon it, even if Graham objects. I didn't until Eric was too old to make friends, almost a teenager.

The role models your son will have will be the Mathers men. Make certain you provide another, gentler example. Your influence is dreadfully important. I hope Eric will be a good husband.

Remember that they need you. However vain they can be and proud of their name, they can't procreate alone.

The very small and dark writing oozed anger here. What Graham or Mr Mathers had said to inspire rage?

I don't know if you will love my son. I didn't love Walter when I married him. I needed someone. He was someone to hold onto. But I grew to have the most passionate love for him and with him. After the pressure of a child was gone. After Eric was old enough to stay with Graham without fear of destruction. We went on Walter's business trips together and discovered how much we cared away from the yellow house, away from that room. All those eyes.

Aim for this. I'd like to think that my son finds love.

Hard to imagine Mr Mathers having a passionate love for anything. Maybe he became gruff and creepy after she died.

The rest of the notebook was full of random recipes and gardening tips. Nothing else about the family legends. Nothing about rings. Or trees and disks.

Why had this ended up in a bookcase in here and not used by Gwen? If Gwen read it, she probably considered it boring. Elinor sounded as lonely as I felt. I turned to the last page she had written on, about halfway through the book.

The house is dying, wrapped in its traditions. I was able to stop a few. Try to break down more. It can help this family and definitely your marriage.

Why write it down? Gwen hadn't tried to break down any of the traditions, from what little Eric had said.

I opened the big Bible to the very straight family tree. One child per generation did not lead to much spreading. Eric and Gwen, leading up to Walter and Elinor, leading up to Graham

and Rosemary, leading up to William and June, the woman in the portrait in the blue room. The names continued.

Gwen must have been cold in her sleeveless mini dress at their wedding in April. His birthday fell on March 16th. His chocolate cake recipe made me feel hungry. I could make it for myself. Or for Eric, if he returned.

## Chapter 14

I walked to town the next day. The October sky had softened to a dark blue, not scorched by the sun like last month's. I took off my cotton jacket. Being a pedestrian formed part of my self-identity, so I kept walking, even when I got tired. Eventually I saw the little automotive robot. Once in town, I could get a bus to the nursing home.

I didn't want to worry about Eric. His office said he was away on business. Not strictly missing then. But away. I found the bus stop's sun-warmed wooden bench. Hearts had been carved into the surface, a far cry from the tagging I was accustomed to in New York.

The bus pulled up empty. The driver said a friendly hello and took my dollar fifty. I sat near the front seat. Fifteen minutes later, he stopped outside a green building, bright colours blazing from the windows.

'Stop's back there, but given your condition,' he said as I carefully stepped down. I hated that phrase. What condition did he mean? Boyfriendless? Single mother? Red-headed? Chubby?

The bright colours turned out to be various crafts, mostly in the shapes of jack o' lanterns and cats. A woman at the front desk directed me towards a room on the left. More orange construction paper pumpkins dotted the tables, but no seniors worked to complete them. A game show blared from a TV in the corner as a few old men dozed in front of it. To the left, a woman with beautiful white hair sat alone at a card table. She waved.

'Luanne?'

'How'd you know?' I sat at her square table. She played a game of complex solitaire, using a layout I'd only ever seen as a computer game.

'Bridget's my granddaughter-in-law. She said you were pregnant and had red hair. I can't believe the Mathers really want to know what I have to say. Call me Ann.'

'The list had . . .'

'Oh, my husband. George's been gone for twelve years. Shows how much the Mathers keep up, doesn't it?'

Ann marvelled, and perhaps regretted, she'd gotten pregnant again so soon. Her one year old Adam had chronic colic, and on top of no sleep, she felt sick all the time now. She didn't go to church the day that Elinor got the disk.

'Idolatry – that's what it is. Why do they think it's God's will?' George had made sure he closed the parsonage door before he started talking, but his voice was much too loud. Adam hadn't been asleep long, and she didn't need George stomping around shouting.

She poured him a glass of sweet tea. 'What happened?'

'I don't know how Graham and Rosemary do it, but I'm sure it's a plant.'

'What are you talking about?' Ann pulled out the tray of biscuits from the oven. 'I

couldn't do a big lunch – it's just soup again I'm afraid.'

'Elinor Woodard got a wooden thing. About the size of the paper fans the funeral homes give out, minus the stick handle. It seems to mean that she's going to marry Walter Mathers. That tree in their pew lit up like a Christmas tree, right in the middle of my sermon. Of course everybody stopped listening, so I had to wait. Couldn't they have timed it better?'

'How did they do it?' Ann put two bowls next to the stove.

'I don't know. Or care.' She handed napkins and silverware to George. With a set face, he began laying the table.

'Will he marry her? With Pearl running off? Doesn't reflect very well on the family, does it?' Ann asked.

'That's what Mrs Bryer said when she left. Nothing about the service, nice sermon, good to see you – everyone wanted to talk about Elinor.'

'Of course, Elinor didn't run off with the circus.' Elinor was a few years younger than Ann, and Ann remembered her from school. They had both been on the school newspaper staff. 'Was she ok?'

George pulled up Adam's high chair. 'I ought to rip that tree out. It's wrong.'

Ann stirred the soup. The tomato base made her feel queasy. 'Sit down dear. Rest a little,' she said. Sundays were George's hardest days.

'You rest. I'll stir.' George put an apron on over his clericals. 'If I even suggest it, Graham Mathers will have a fit.'

Ann sat at the table and rested her head in her hands, until the odour of tomatoes and onions seeped in from her fingers. George's frantic pacing made her feel worse.

'Just like when I wanted to change the church.'

'The state said it was too old a building to change anyway,' Ann said. She stared at the weave in the white tablecloth.

'Yes, but Graham refused to hear anything about it.' George sounded less angry now, just slightly sullen.

Adam started crying in his bedroom. Ann rose and kissed George's cheek.

'There's nothing you can do. The Mathers operate unto themselves – sounds like they always have. You concentrate on the rest of the congregation.' She walked towards Adam's room. The further she got from the smell of the food the better she felt.

'What about Elinor?' George's voice followed her. 'She's part of the congregation too.'

Ann brought Adam to the table. George put on his bib and put him in the high chair while Ann scooped soup into the bowls.

'Rosemary came last,' George said, after he'd asked a blessing. 'She was literally shaking. She hugged me. She usually barely does a handshake.'

Rosemary Mathers' hair always appeared perfect, palely curved into an immaculate French twist. Ann had never seen her with it down or mussed, never seen her in an unironed

dress. Rosemary typically wore short white gloves. Ann hadn't known Rosemary when her son Walter had been only one year old, of course, but Ann always felt grubby and poorly put together around Rosemary. Just being in the same room could make Ann double check that she had put on matching shoes.

'Did she say anything or just tackle you?' Ann spooned some baby food from the new glass jar into Adam's mouth. He swallowed. God bless Gerber.

'A dignified sort of hug – a gentle folding of the arms.' He broke open a steaming biscuit. 'She mumbled something about a happy day, a glorious girl. Then she stared right at me and said, "This is God's will you know. We all have to accept it." Which made me think she didn't feel all that thrilled about Elinor after all.'

'I like Elinor. I mean, I don't know her well, but in school I liked her. Probably it's just the Pearl thing.'

'How can I lead a church when the Mathers believe in hokum and some minister let them bring it into the church?' George sighed, dragging his spoon through the soup. 'Mr Slater said I shouldn't worry; it'd be at least another thirty years before it happened again.'

'Mr Slater was the head usher, and he, oh my, wore the most extraordinary coloured suits. He had a pale purple one that he wore for communion,' Ann said, moving cards from the dealing stack to the piles.

'I'm confused,' I said. 'If the tree didn't give another disk for thirty years, then no one else got one?'

'Just the one son, isn't it? Not too many to get married.'

'So the rest of the congregation . . . ' The blood seemed to recede from my fingertips. How could my fingers feel so blurred?

'Lord, no. It's just for them. That's why George wanted to rip it out.'

'No one else? You're sure?'

'Do you want some water?' She started to rise, but I stood up.

'I'm fine.' My legs felt even emptier than my fingers. I wobbled back down into the chair.

'I'll get you a glass.' She hurried away on her walker. Why had I gotten a disk? Mr Mathers said that Kenneth had a connection to the family, but not how exactly. I stared at the smooth lines of cards. Maybe Eric could teach me this game too.

It meant Kenneth. Not anything else. Because otherwise – the disk would mean – it couldn't.

Mrs Rust brought water and a nurse, who kept explaining she did geriatrics, not maternity.

I sipped the water and listened to Mrs Rust's pregnancy advice. Exercise ok, but not in big bursts. I should have been walking all along. I would have been, if Eric hadn't been such a

willing chauffeur.

Eric. My games instructor and driver. A nice person. Person, not man. A friend. I tried calling Kenneth's cell phone outside the nursing home, but the same voicemail message played.

The disk meant him. My Kenneth.

I walked to a nearby restaurant, one I hadn't been to with Eric. Their chocolate cake arrived dry, verging on staleness. I wrote a few things on my to-do list – call Gwen again, go to meeting with the other minister. 'Make cake' had been inscribed above, with a list of ingredients crowded at the bottom of the sheet.

Not today. I took a taxi back to the cottage. The afternoon dribbled away as I followed a patch of sunlight around the living room, reading a hardback from the bookshelf. Not the detective novel Eric had loaned me, even though I'd already read half of it.

The letters stayed still. Normal, like the doctor said.

Two hours later, when I tried to make tea, the bag writhed with colour. I put it back in the box and had tap water instead.

## Chapter 15

Siobhan didn't ever seem to stay silent. My head ached as we drove to Bellway. This headache had settled after talking to Mrs Rust and hadn't budged. Siobhan gave me lifts freely because she was a nice friend. I needed friends right now. I made an effort to pull myself out of the black cloud tingeing the world.

'I've just heard some of the boys at school say that egging the Mathers' house is a Halloween challenge. I wouldn't think they'd go back as far as your cottage though. Eric could tell you.'

Except he wasn't there, although I didn't want to go into that. 'Why would they egg the house?'

'They're an odd family. And without any young Mathers, teenagers see them very remotely. Except for Eric's car, of course. They wouldn't hurt anybody – it's just a dare.'

Did every single thing in Peebles hinge on Eric not having a child? How did Mr Mathers – and Al – equate their heightened status with washing egg off the yellow bricks? Not that Mr Mathers would hold the hosepipe and spray the front of the house, manoeuvring his wheelchair over the gravel path. Would Eric? I'd lock the cottage door; maybe keep the lights in the front off.

'Do you remember Pastor Clarke?' I asked.

'He left as we started talking about marriage. Didn't do our marital counselling. I almost refused to get married at the church at all – it was so clearly the Taylor family church. They moved though, when Al's mother decided another Lutheran church had more fashionable members.' Siobhan merged off the interstate. 'It's awfully exciting, your job.'

Not when matched with the daily terror of pregnancy and no Kenneth. Sometimes I wondered if I had dreamed him, but the growing curve of my stomach convinced me I hadn't. I stared out the window. A homeless man held a cardboard sign.

'Luanne! Directions?'

How many times had she said my name?

The church loomed large and imposing, at least three times the size of the church in Peebles. Did it have a tree in the sanctuary? I found a small blue sign that said 'office' with an arrow and followed it around to the side of the church. I rang a bell, and an elderly man appeared at the door within seconds. Much better than Pastor Stephens running through the whole building.

Pastor Clarke's cropped hair was white. In the sunlight, a single hair, almost a foot long, floated above his ear. Did it come from his wife, a missed spot at the barber's or did it sprout from his ear? Was this what old age held? His handshake felt almost too tight, too energetic though. I stepped up into another linoleum hallway.

‘So you’re writing about the Mathers. How are they doing? How’s Eric?’

Missing. ‘He’s fine.’ At least I’d gone through the rigmarole of my job over the phone when I set up the interview.

‘And Gwen?’ Pastor Clarke asked.

‘I assumed you knew. They’re divorcing.’

‘Did they have children?’

‘No.’ We sat in his office. The room felt far brighter than Pastor Stephens’ – Pastor Clarke’s had high ceilings with light timber walls. It’d be easy to think holy, happy thoughts here.

‘I haven’t kept up with Peebles, I’m afraid. I transferred to the mountains, and I only came back to the Piedmont three months ago. I’m not sure how much I’ll be able to help you.’

By asking a few questions, or pushing, as Pearl had advised, eventually I got beyond Pastor Clarke’s blocking of the confidential aspects and a story emerged.

When Pastor Clarke started at the church, the previous pastor had mentioned the tree as being a bit odd, but nothing to worry about. The Mathers took care of all its needs, including picking up the shed leaves in autumn. He didn’t even have to water it.

Pastor Clarke didn’t think much about it until the day that Elinor told him about the disk. He assured me it had been outside at a church softball game, so nothing would fall into confidential terms.

The softball team played in a park about two miles from the church. Pastor Clarke had to stand outside and watch bad softball, plus he had to help haul equipment about half a mile from the parking lot in the summer heat.

He tried to look interested as scarlet-faced men and women jogged around the field. Give him a good college level team any day. And any sport other than softball.

Elinor waved. How could she look so fresh when the temperature had to nudge a hundred?

‘Pastor Clarke, could I talk to you?’ she called.

He walked towards her. She was a tireless church worker. Despite the fact that none of her family played, she often sold soft drinks at the games. How could she spend her time and energy willingly volunteering outdoors like this? The shouts and cheers thudded in his aching head.

‘Eric will be getting married soon.’ Elinor stood over the bright orange cooler filled with ice and cans.

‘Wonderful. Who’s the fortunate lady?’ Pastor Clarke had taken the extraordinary step of wearing shorts, but his face still oozed sweat. The condensation on the side of the plastic cooler looked remarkably appealing, considering that the plastic sat on dirt.

‘Oh, we don’t know yet. But he has to get married at thirty.’ Her voice was cheerful. ‘It’s about the tree. When it’s time, and the woman has been identified, the tree will tell her,’ Elinor said.

‘The tree? In the church?’ He had a hard time imagining a talking tree in his prosaic little brick church.

‘Not in words – it’s not a cartoon tree.’ She smiled. ‘The lady will be given a disk, about the size of a 45 record. A little smaller. It will just say “marry”.’

‘And you give her the disk?’

‘No, the tree does. It’s hard to understand, I know, but it is the Mathers’ way. I got a disk thirty-one years ago.’

‘Right.’ How could he tell the church’s biggest donor that she had lost her mind?

‘The Mathers have this special link. And the tree gives the signal. It’s why the tree is inside the church. My reason for explaining this is that it might happen during a service. It did for me.’

‘Do you have your disk?’ Pastor Clarke mopped his forehead with a tissue.

‘In a box somewhere.’

‘So the tree doesn’t – reabsorb it?’ He realised he was sweating even more than before. ‘Could I have a drink, please?’

She popped open a yellow can of soft drink and passed it to him. He drank deeply, although he hated the sharp sweet flavour that clogged his throat.

‘If it does happen, don’t worry. It will only take a minute or two, and then you can go back to the service. Or you can congratulate them. Then we’ll come in properly to make the arrangements. Hi, Rosa,’ Elinor said, taking fifty cents from Rosa and handed her a can.

Rosa gave him a sharp look before heading back to the stand. He hadn’t said anything to her.

‘Oh, hello Rosa. Good game, isn’t it?’ Pastor Clarke called.

‘We’re actually losing, Pastor Clarke,’ Elinor said as Rosa walked away. ‘Sorry to spring all this on you.’

‘No. No. Not a problem. Thanks for warning me.’ He left the game and drove off in the air conditioned coolness of his car.

‘So when it happened,’ Pastor Clarke said, ‘I congratulated them and we all sang the next hymn. “Onward Christian Soldiers”, I seem to remember.’

‘Did you see the disk?’ I asked.

‘Such thin wood it was almost translucent. They were convinced it was a sign from God. I’m not sure that Elinor or Walter didn’t fake it, but I didn’t let on. She was a wonderful woman. I did her memorial service. There wasn’t enough of her body to bury. Not under that

much rubble. The whole church was devastated. I never saw so many people going out to that house. All kinds of food and cards, and just grief. She was missed.’

Siobhan thankfully staying silent on the drive towards the tea house in Milbury. All the stories reinforced everything I’d heard. A few more details fell into place, but I doubted I’d discovered anything Mr Mathers didn’t already know.

We walked up a short set of concrete steps to an outdoor seating area. Inside, the small room smelled peaceful. I felt as safe as I had at the tree. That moment of stillness had been just mine, despite what I was learning.

I had expected tablecloths and doilies like a maiden aunt’s house, albeit one I didn’t have. But tall stools stood in front of a long bar that dominated the room. We sidled up, just as if we were about to order beer.

I explained my problem of tasteless decaf tea to the manager. He invited us to sit down while he showed us various teas. And he explained that decaf didn’t mean caffeine free at all – just less. I ignored my pale reflection in the large mirror behind the counter and instead admired with Siobhan the carved wooden cabinets that framed the mirror. Dozens of white tea canisters rested behind pink art deco glass doors.

I spent the next two hours sniffing leaves and tasting different varieties. Nothing here reminded me that Kenneth was missing or that I had a strange job. My three day headache lifted. I just breathed in the lovely aromas and the serenity of the place. All the teas I tried had far more flavour than my old caffeinated type. I left with a teapot, a filter basket and three types of green tea, several caffeine-free tisanes and a couple of decaf black teas. I felt happier than I had in weeks.

‘That would almost convince me to learn how to drive,’ I said, climbing into Siobhan’s front seat.

‘I’ll take you back. Besides, you’ve bought more than enough to keep you going.’ She pulled out of the parking lot.

Maybe she didn’t need that feeling of tranquillity as badly. How could I explain that tea was only part of it?

Her phone chirruped and she listened for a few minutes in silence, while still turning onto major roads and whizzing through lights. My composure ebbed. She threw the phone down before merging onto the interstate.

‘Voicemail. Al’s mother wants us there half an hour earlier – just to make a point, I guess. Who the hell eats dinner at five-thirty? I don’t think I’ll have time to drive you back to the cottage.’

Siobhan dropped me at the grocery store, and I stocked up on all my usual supplies. My belly had been flatter the last time I pushed a buggy around; now my arms had to extend that bit further to reach the handle. I turned into the baking aisle. I piled in all the ingredients Elinor had

listed for the cake, including the double portion of icing, as she directed. Just because the disk had signalled marriage in the past, nothing said that meanings couldn't change. *Wait*. And I could wait. Making a cake did not have anything to do with making a promise.

## Chapter 16

Two days later, I peeped through the window of the garage. Eric's car surprised me. I'd almost accepted that he wouldn't return. He didn't appear when I opened the side door, and I worked in the study all morning uninterrupted.

At lunch I went back to the cottage to make the cake. My cheese sandwich grew less appealing as chocolate smells wafted through the little space. The shadows or images or words seemed particularly active, even dancing over the white vase that Eric had put the roses in my first day. I'd stuck it on top of the corner bookcase, but it hadn't showed itself to be a playing surface before. If only the text, pictures, monochromatic swirls – whatever – would slow down enough for me to decipher them. Maybe I could get used to them. I closed my eyes.

I woke up when the timer buzzed. Elinor's handwriting, which stayed perfectly still, instructed me to make and pour the icing on before the cake cooled, and the thick layer set instantly.

Eric's car had disappeared from the garage. Logical explanation: he went to work like a normal person, not that I had moved from seeing squiggly things on flat surfaces to seeing imaginary baby blue sports cars. I replaced Elinor's book and went back to work.

'You should know,' Eric said, tapping on the study door. 'I searched Gwen's things. Grandfather suggested it, but I did it. Sorry about running off like that.'

'What?' Had he thought I'd been stewing about what he'd said, rather than his run past – at – the statue? 'Where have you been?' He wore an elegantly cut suit. The few times I'd seen him in one before his tie had been a bright slash of colour. Today everything but his white shirt looked sombre and dark. Like his father.

'Just let me know if you need any more interview time.' He headed towards the kitchen.

'Come over for dinner?' I called.

He didn't turn around, but he stopped.

'Please?'

We ate at a tiny table he'd pulled from underneath the sofa and folded together. The small square would have been better suited for a breakfast nook rather than a main meal. After bumping elbows for the third time, I realised Eric was left-handed. Did we need the formality of a table when we normally ate in front of the TV?

His compliments on the chicken could only go so far, especially when I credited Siobhan's expert advice in response to all praise. He told me about a basketball event he'd been to, but that could have only filled one evening of the ten he'd been away.

'I'm sorry,' he said finally. 'My behaviour was inexcusable.'

'I was pushy.' I could hear Pearl's admonishment. Had she meant her nephew?

‘But I shouldn’t have been so rude. Or shouted. In your condition . . .’

I only remembered his run at the statue. He twisted the frayed edges of his paper napkin through his fingers over and over. I picked up our empty plates, and Eric followed with our glasses.

The cake sat on the kitchen counter.

‘Is that . . .?’ His face squinched, and tears filled his eyes.

‘I know it isn’t your birthday, but . . .’ ‘I wanted to cheer you up’ seemed a difficult thing to say.

‘Thank you. No one’s been this nice to me since, well, I can’t remember.’

‘I thought you’d like it. And I’m ok at following a recipe, I hope.’

His left hand reached out, but then tapped the kitchen door. He put both hands in his pockets clumsily. Had he been about to touch me? I liked – I wanted the evening to be pleasant. ‘Tea?’ I asked. ‘Would you cut the cake?’ I filled the kettle at the sink.

He picked up the knife I’d left beside the pan. Maybe he didn’t share my fear of nail scissors. The air felt too sappy, as if sweetened by the cake. I cleared my throat. I didn’t want to think about the tree, the disk.

‘What type of people used to live here? In the cottage, I mean.’

‘Not a clue.’ He cut two pieces efficiently. ‘I think there’s a few other little buildings, further out on the land.’

‘Were they slave quarters?’ I asked. The burner ignited, and I put the kettle on the blue flame. ‘Not this one, I know, it’s cement. But . . .’

‘Why would you think that?’ he asked. The knife alone didn’t make his posture seem more aggressive.

‘Well, it’s the South. And you have a big house. I just . . . sorry.’

‘To be honest, I don’t know whether my family did or not. Those buildings I mentioned are more like huts, I think, for hunting or fishing or something. I know some about the last few generations, and the rings. But Grandfather never talked about the Civil War.’ He carried the knife to the sink. ‘It’s a thing that people, well, like you, assume sometimes, and I guess I should know.’

I scooped three teaspoons of tea into the pot’s filter basket. Yankees like me. Mr Mathers talking to Eric in the blue parlour, months ago. The kettle’s noise increased. Steam floated into my sinuses and felt wonderful.

‘Do you think the South is racist?’ he asked. He leaned against the counter, his long legs stretching across the small kitchen, too close to me. Dust clung to the knees of his jeans, from digging under the sofa.

‘I think Siobhan’s mother-in-law is. I don’t know in general. I don’t seem to see many black people. That guy at the mill.’

‘Pete Reynolds.’

‘What about your friends?’ The kettle whistled, and I poured the water over the tea, watching the leaves twist against the confines of the basket. The agony of the leaves. Saturating their dryness and reanimating them.

‘You have to have noticed. I don’t have tons,’ he said. He brushed at the dust on his knees and avoided looking at me.

‘Why don’t you move away? Do something different, something you like.’

‘I’m ok here. It’s just . . .’

‘You’re a Mathers.’ Playing, or trying to play wedding in the playground. Had he been alone all his life? ‘Didn’t – I mean – usually when someone like you.’ For God’s sake. ‘You’re nice and good-looking and well, rich. I’m amazed there haven’t been more women around here.’ My face flushed. ‘Like that woman at the pancake place.’

‘What woman?’ He even looked pink, or was it my vision?

‘JoElla something.’ Fitch. I remembered perfectly. ‘She flirted pretty hard.’

‘Really? I’m not good at . . . anyway, I’m not divorced yet.’ He pulled forks out of the drawer. Of course he knew where the silverware lived, where the table hid, the cottage and its kitchen were his. ‘Where’d you find the recipe?’

My tea timer beeped, and I lifted out the filter basket. What would happen if Eric wanted to marry someone? ‘Elinor left it for – she left it.’ He nodded. Gwen clearly hadn’t used the recipe. I poured the tea, and he carried our plates through to the little table.

‘I really appreciate this cake, Luanne.’

He always said my name so slowly, the second syllable dropping down. ‘Why do you have that statue still out?’ I asked. I couldn’t linger on what I’d said about him remarrying. I’d worry about that tonight in bed.

‘Gwen wanted lots of stuff when she left. But not that damn thing.’

‘Get rid of it,’ I suggested. ‘Let me guess, it has to stay on the land. Hide it. Some unused room. Or even bury it. Definitely on the land then.’

‘It was expensive. One of her wild ideas. And because I messed up.’

As the seventh anniversary approached, Eric couldn’t fathom that they still didn’t have a child. Nevertheless, something pleasant on the day might cheer Gwen up.

He heard wheels crunch over the gravel drive from his upstairs room. The window pane’s age made all images of the outside waver and distort, but he still could recognise the little red car that Gwen used.

He reached the kitchen just as Gwen came in through the hall. She carried two heavily laden grocery bags, the plastic straps dragging against her pale fingers. The logo showed she’d gone to the more expensive supermarket again, and Grandfather would complain. His message of preserving wealth through everyday economies never really resonated with Gwen.

He leaned forward to take the bags. She didn't release her grip. He tried to kiss her cheek, but his lips landed on the cool strands of her hair, not skin as she dipped her head.

She dropped the bags on the countertop.

'More stuff,' she said, turning around.

'Do you want help?' He followed her down the hallway. 'Did you get your hair cut?' Surely it swung higher across her back, just half covering her thin shoulder blades.

'Three days ago.' She slammed the door. Eric went back to the kitchen and peeked in the top bag. Several of her gossip magazines, more frozen food, including a lasagne he liked. Grandfather would fuss about Gwen not cooking again, but they'd survived that before.

She returned with three more bags.

'Is that all?' he asked. She nodded. 'Your hair looks nice.' She slung boxes in the freezer. 'Are you going to talk to me at all? Coffee? I'll put away the groceries.' He pulled a couple of frozen foods from her hands. She'd had another manicure. The polish never looked so perfect when she did it herself.

'I'll do the coffee.' She sounded grudging, not relaxed. She poured away the morning coffee and spooned out fresh grounds.

Maybe he'd failed to stand up for her sufficiently against his grandfather recently. He couldn't remember any incident in particular. Maybe she felt as disappointed as he did about the baby. The coffee bubbled through the filter. Maybe she knew, charting wise, it'd be time to have sex again soon. He guessed she felt as desperate as he did each time the chart said they needed to have sex, right then. He could never tell if it was just depression, or if she felt angry too. At them both? Just at him? He'd never managed the nerve to bring it up.

Gwen poured the coffee, and Eric carried their cups through to the blue room. He didn't see her grimace as he stepped back for her to open the door, since he had full hands. He didn't see how June's face dominated the room.

'Well, the anniversary is next Wednesday,' Eric said. 'What would you like to do?'

'To celebrate our wedding or your mother's death?' Gwen asked.

'Gwen!'

'I don't know how we split them.' She stirred sugar in her coffee. 'Could we go away?'

'You know a baby . . .'

'Has to be conceived here. In that bed. But we've slept every night of the last seven years in that bed and nothing. So why not a couple of days somewhere else?'

'It's . . .' he trailed off. Impossible? Insane? Too much trouble to fight?

'She has no intention of getting pregnant.' Graham's voice coldly preceded his hobbling form into the room, countering the silliness of the tennis balls jammed on the front legs of his walker. Better traction, he said. Walter refused to take him out of the house with it.

Graham held a pink box, crushing the sides against the dark grips of the walker.

‘I said she has no intention of getting pregnant.’ His volume rose, but Grandfather sounded frighteningly in control. He shook the box in the air. Eric recognised the box of tampons, just before Gwen plucked it from Graham’s hands.

‘Tampons don’t keep you from getting pregnant, old man.’

Graham looked shocked, either from Gwen’s tone or the brush of her fingers against his. She only ever touched Graham when shaving him.

‘You don’t need them if you’re pregnant though.’ He raised a triumphant finger and then clutched at his walker quickly. Remarkable that he’d answered her directly.

‘I’m prepared. Seven years does that to you,’ Gwen said, straightening the crumpled sides of the box.

‘Eric, she’s lying. I’m going to check her things.’

‘Things?’ Eric said, sure he had misheard through the rushing in his ears. When Gwen and Grandfather sniped but didn’t clash, life stayed easy. Mediating between his grandfather and his wife could be dangerous, but choosing between them always ended badly.

‘You can’t even get up the stairs, old man,’ Gwen spat. ‘I have nothing, anyway.’

‘You search her things then. All of them,’ Graham said.

Grandfather meant him. How could he choose?

‘Eric, I said search her things.’

Obedience won out, and Eric put down his coffee cup and left the blue room. He walked up the stairs, steadily, his feet showing a calmness and stamina his mind did not reflect. He had to do it, but . . . he couldn’t formulate a reason either way. Not clearly.

Gwen grabbed his arm, putting her body in front of his. He kept climbing, moving around her.

‘Why?’

‘He said . . .’ His loyalty seemed to burn a hole in his stomach. Eric opened their bedroom door. The tightly packed closet could hide little – her dresses trailed to the floor over her rows of shoes. His shirts, suits, ties. The boxes of his shoes slept under their bed. She wanted her own closet, but he enjoyed the times they got dressed together. Watching her draw on her skirt, usually to go to church. Did the search matter so much?

The chest of drawers. He dug through a tangled knot of pantyhose, his fingers smoothing the slick material. At the bottom, he found a stack of black and white photos. Gwen beamed from three, standing next to little old women with tightly curled hair. Eric could almost smell the chemicals, see their blue rinses, so vivid were the images. Definitely Kenneth’s work. In the next one, Gwen concentrated as she cut an old man’s hair. Her lips pursed tight, eyebrows low.

But that was the way she looked at him, every morning as she shaved him. No longer would that facial expression belong to their time together – it merely was her hairdressing look. Not an expression of her attention to him.

His resolve firmed, Eric looked at the last picture. Blurred, so it might have been taken by a senior citizen. Kenneth next to Gwen, his fingers pressed into the flesh of her arm. Gwen in a tight, sleeveless top. Both grinning like fools.

He threw the photos on the floor.

‘Do you really want to do this to our marriage, Eric?’ Gwen sat cross-legged in the middle of the crumpled bedspread. Eric occasionally made the bed, but Gwen never did.

Kenneth smiled up at Eric from the photo on the floor. Eric plunged his hands into the drawer of t-shirts and sweaters. Emerged with a fistful of letters, cards. Three from her mother, which he returned unread to the drawer. The same with a few from Becky, who he knew was her best friend from home. Four from Kenneth, a postcard only saying ‘How’s marriage?’, two Christmas cards and a long letter that seemed to have ‘miss you’ and ‘love’ written in it over and over. Two from someone named Jack – Christmas cards. The handwriting wavered, so he guessed Jack had been one of the seniors she worked with. He threw Kenneth’s letters on the floor as well. In the bedside drawer, he found a long expired birth control pack. From their wedding year, which only reawakened the anxiety he’d felt when he realised that she hadn’t been a virgin like him. The months when he wondered who she had been with. And if it had been Kenneth.

A white hardback book, complete with a little gold lock, emerged next. The cover bore faded gold cursive saying ‘My Diary’.

‘Please, I’ve had it since I was ten. Please don’t.’ Gwen now sobbed, sucking in air with a vague whistling noise. He flicked through the pages, only enough to see the childish round writing in pencil and coloured ink in the front progressing to blue ballpoint and her normal scrawl. He threw it on the bed and gathered the pictures, letters and pills. He didn’t go through the bathroom – he’d been through most of the stuff looking for band-aids last week. He’d seen the ovulation tests, the random bottles of makeup.

He tried to ignore her crying as he left the room. He felt sick. He’d never had to choose this blatantly before.

He went back to the blue room and hesitated before pushing the cracked door open. As a child, he firmly believed that Graham whispered to his mother’s portrait when alone in there. Eric heard nothing, so he walked in. Graham stared silently at the portrait.

‘That was fast.’ He flicked through the pictures. ‘Light a fire, Eric.’

Eric thought he might throw up, but he laid a small fire and found enough kindling to start it. Graham threw in the meagre haul. The letters burned quickly in the pale flames, but the photos curled and melted. The pill packet squirmed and shifted as smoke flowed into the room. The red light reflected up on the portrait. Eric watched the portrait’s face rather than his wife’s belongings burn. What had he done? The portrait’s smile scared him.

‘Your great-grandmother would be proud of you,’ Graham said. ‘Very proud,’ he repeated, as the smoke alarm started wailing. The alarm that the insurance company had insisted on hardwiring into the main electrical system, the alarm that couldn’t be switched off easily.

Eric opened windows, climbed on a chair to flap a magazine at the detector. He dashed upstairs and shouted through their bedroom door that it was ok, not a real fire. Gwen didn’t respond. Then he went back to fanning the detector. It stopped moments after Walter came home, but then Eric had to explain what happened and calm his grandfather by getting him a whisky. His planned apology to Gwen kept being delayed. The three men ate a frozen meal that had already started thawing in the forgotten grocery bags. Gwen didn’t appear, even when Eric tapped on the bedroom door.

Graham kept Eric talking, and Walter stayed with them. They raised points of business that Eric felt even less equipped than usual to answer coherently. He finally said goodnight to the men, forcing a note of cheer in his voice. He waited until his father had disappeared down the hall towards the grandfather wing to open the door to the darkened bedroom.

He slammed his arm into an open drawer – the one he hadn’t pushed in earlier. He stumbled into the bathroom and brushed his teeth. Gwen’s voice stopped him as he approached the bed.

‘No fucking way.’

Eric knew he could try to apologise. To talk to her. He could go sleep in another of the many rooms. But his father and grandfather would know. Would see his failure all the more acutely. He stretched out on the barber chair, uncomfortably twisting on his side. The smell of lather followed him into sleep.

Gwen stayed in bed for a week. She didn’t respond to his apologies. Not the verbal ones or the notes and flowers he left on the pillow. He didn’t understand when she ate, but she must have left the room when they all were out.

Walter asked his secretary to book a cleaning lady. Someone must have passed on the story that Gwen had been sick, because the cleaner poured boiling water over their dishes and broke three glasses and two bowls.

Without a word being said within the family, Gwen engaged the cleaning lady to come twice a month. For their anniversary, Eric hired a sculptor to do the statue she’d wanted as a newlywed. They didn’t have sex again until their eighth wedding anniversary. He grew a moustache; she started smoking.

‘You must just hate me,’ Eric said. He’d interrupted his story at least five times to apologise. He flipped his fork – tines pointing up, tines pointing down – into a streak of chocolate icing on his empty plate.

My own lurch of jealousy when Kenneth decided he just had to tell me about his former one true love. I'd felt it again, almost as acutely, when Eric had described the photo of Gwen and Kenneth together. I didn't even have the right that Eric had – he had known both Kenneth and Gwen, whereas my jealousy had a ridiculously expired time span. But I knew the way Kenneth's fingers had felt, touching my arm. Imagined them touching her arm. The arm I'd have to see when I interviewed her.

Eric and Gwen had been married, and Kenneth long gone. And her privacy had been violated.

'I had to – did – what my grandfather wanted. He meant – I can't explain.'

Eric had arranged this cottage so I wouldn't have to walk through tick-infested woods. He consistently asked about my health, found me the foods I even mentioned craving. His father seemed as emotionally absent as mine had been physically. His entire life had depended on the creation of an heir. I didn't like his actions, they made a tiny bit of me curl up in despair, but I could understand.

I had missed Eric. I didn't want him to disappear again.

'He wanted me to search other times, but I always lied. Never did it again. Well, until he fell. But it ruined our marriage. Then one day, she said Mrs Knox had had surgery. I should have known – Gwen loathes her mother. So I got that voicemail, and it was over.'

I envisioned the slim legs in heels walking to the car, bags already loaded in the trunk. The phone call. Eric telling his father.

'I'm really ashamed of what I did.'

'Eric.' I rested my hand on his, if only to stop the fork spinning faster and faster. Why couldn't Mr Mathers just accept that they hadn't been suited? 'Why does she hate her mother so much?'

'She left as soon as she graduated from high school. Took a Greyhound bus.'

Amelia had written in lipstick 'I'm eighteen. Gone South' on the bathroom mirror on the morning of her birthday. Never mind the present I'd bought her. Her words showed up in the steam from my shower for months, despite how often I cleaned it.

'Her father died when she was pretty young,' Eric said. 'She blamed her mother and the pinball, but it was a heart attack.'

Driving. Driving must give Eric's left hand that slight tan, enough that my fingers looked pallid . . . on top of his. I jerked my hand away.

'We did have some good times. She was lovely when my mother died.' He turned the fork again, but slowly. Four small pinpoint spots repeated over and over in the smudge of icing. 'The cake is even better than I remember.'

'Take it back to the house with you. Please,' I added, perhaps a beat too late. In the kitchen, I unrolled aluminium foil. Another staple Eric had bought me. We tussled briefly over who should keep the cake, which ended with me cutting a few squares to keep. Maybe I had

gotten used to the solitude. A headache had started to grip my temples, and Eric's body curved on the sofa prevented me from sleeping.

'Eric, my head is pounding. I'm going to have to sleep,' I said finally.

His face creased. 'I apologise. Truly.' How often had he heard that as an excuse? I wouldn't think about that connection. About Amelia sitting on that sofa.

'Listen, I really have a headache. And I don't . . .' The narrow family tree. Gwen's mother. Her dead father. What about the other women's families? They weren't listed. Siblings? Cousins? Pearl hadn't been terribly helpful, but I blamed myself. I would get better at interviewing.

'What?' Eric asked.

It would let me postpone seeing Gwen. But a worthwhile area to investigate. Eric stood expectantly in front of me.

'I had an idea. Where I've forgotten to look.' My headache rushed in with excited intensity. 'I really have to go to sleep now.'

He picked up his cake from the kitchen. 'This means a lot.'

'I'm glad you're back.' I couldn't quite say I'd missed him aloud.

He smiled, the brilliance making my head throb.

I locked the door and scrawled 'brides' families' on a scrap of paper fast enough that I didn't have time to see if it squiggled.

## Chapter 17

The next morning the answering machine flashed at me when I walked in the study. I heard ‘This is Gwen . . .’ and pressed stop. Not now, not with a headache that still lingered, curving gently around the edges of my brain.

In the family Bible, no lines led off from the wives. No indication that they did anything except appear spontaneously in the Mathers’ family. Some included maiden names. Rosemary had been a Calhoun, Gwen a Knox.

Then I pulled wedding certificates. Walter and Elinor’s listed Woodard as her maiden name, but I already knew about Elinor’s surviving family. The witness on Rosemary Mathers’ wedding certificate had a different last name than her maiden name. Did that mean she didn’t have surviving family even then? No certificates existed before that one.

I spent the rest of the day looking through letters from the turn of the century to the early thirties, when Graham married. When I was about to just go home and eat chocolate cake, I found a stack of spiral bound books. *Our Congregation* and a year appeared on the front cover of each, over a photo of the outside of the Peebles church. I flicked to the ‘M’ pages. Eric and Gwen smiled in church clothes, his arm nestled around the shoulder of her floral dress. Compared to the surrounding families, the lack of a child seemed painfully obvious. Mr Mathers and Graham appeared in the two squares to the right.

I opened another. Eric alone, pre-Gwen. His face beamed out happily, moustache free. His lips looked nothing like his great-grandmother’s. Elinor, neatly coiffed, smiled next to Mr Mathers, who, bizarrely, appeared genuinely happy.

Five years ago, Graham appeared in the back with ‘those not available for pictures’. Presumably that book came out after his fall. I flicked through the rest of the pages. I could practically hear the horrible jokes the photographer made as he clicked away. The type of job Kenneth couldn’t get, not with a police conviction. Would he have made the crass jokes, called the women nicknames, teased the kids?

I picked up the most recent one, dated this year. Mr Mathers had moved to the ‘not available’ page, but he’d probably just been out of town. Eric’s face must have ached from his rigid grimace. No Gwen beside him. Maybe even a slight resemblance to June’s portrait in the blue room.

I checked quickly for families named Calhoun, but no luck.

‘You look fed up. You know it’s almost seven, right?’

How had I missed Eric coming into the room? And his car? He definitely had been at work – he still wore his suit. No tie. Did removing it mean a bad day, like it did for Al?

‘Which one are you looking at?’ he asked, his smile easy and open.

I threw down the most recent yearbook. He had to know how horribly raw he looked in it. I passed him the book with the picture of him in his late twenties. ‘It’s a good picture of you.

I've been trying to find out about the other wives. Rosemary or June, especially June. Some scrap. Even her maiden name. I don't know where she came from, if she had family, anything.'

'That's easy. Davies.' Eric shrugged out of his suit coat. 'And from Bellway. Grandfather talked a lot about her. He was a little weird about her, but then she died young. I understood it more after Mom died.'

How many hours of research? And Eric could just tell me? This was not how my work usually went – but then I had never worked on a project with living sources before.

'Come have dinner?' he asked.

Our meal and backgammon game seemed to reassure him that I didn't hate him, again. And we didn't have to talk about the church photo, the sculpture, or him remarrying. I had no trace of a headache when I went to bed that night.

The Bellway phone directory listed nine Davies. The first five had never heard of June. I left messages at two more. At the eighth, I reached a sweet, young sounding woman who I assumed was a teenage daughter until she said her husband's great-great-aunt had been named June.

'I don't know if it's who you mean – they have a story about her marrying somebody, oh, it started with something like N maybe. Somebody rich, I think.'

'Mathers?' Research wasn't meant to work like this. She promised to ask her husband and call me back.

Enough searching for one day. Mary answered Siobhan's phone. I had forgotten it was a school day. What kind of potential mother was I?

I helped Mary put up signs for the missing Walter all afternoon. We talked about parrots and moving away from home, and not at all about the Mathers.

## Chapter 18

Gwen had been polite on the phone, even as I spoke through gritted teeth. The roads the bus took carved through woodland and overgrown fields. Peebles became positively urban in comparison. She had told me which buses to take, which saved me a lot of time. I had to make my way to this interview alone. No lifts from Eric.

I stroked my stomach. My excitement from my doctor's appointment this morning still buzzed along my skin. A girl. I couldn't understand Mr Mathers' obsession with a grandson. A girl was much better. A daughter in floaty dresses, patent leather shoes with lacy socks. All the children's books I'd read to her.

The bus deposited me on a paved road, but I followed Gwen's directions to a dirt track. About five hundred yards to the farmhouse, she said. Heavy green vines snaked up the bare trunks of trees, like the thick leaves tattooed on Kenneth's arm. The sunshine from the nearly white sky didn't warm me. And I almost hadn't packed my winter coat. By November, we should have been established; my boxes shipped south. Not like this.

The woman who opened the door looked much the same as she had in the statue and photos. Long, blonde hair, perfectly straight, perfectly smooth. No white micro mini or drapery dress though; the neat trousers she wore looked quite professional. I felt even wider, shorter and curlier haired. And terribly aware that my coat wouldn't button below my sternum.

'Hi, I'm . . .' I extended my hand.

'Luanne Richardson. Come in.' A cigarette balanced between the two thin fingers that she didn't hold out to me. No nail polish. The house reeked.

'Could we talk outside? I'm trying to avoid cigarette smoke.' I refrained from touching my stomach.

'I hear it's Kenneth's.'

I nodded my frizzy head.

She stared at me. 'Wait here.'

Salmon paint peeled off the porch in long strips. The water tank beside the porch had rusted through its black enamel. Desiccated shrubs straggled along the ground.

She returned wearing a winter white long coat. It hung elegantly around her thin frame. In the instant before her sunglasses went on, I saw deep lines around her eyes. She was thirty-six, my age, but she looked older.

She drew on her cigarette. 'Ok outside, right?'

I would be pleasant, not point out she was harming herself, me and Kenneth's baby. I walked at least an arm's length away from her. How could Kenneth and Eric have loved this woman?

'Why are you here?' she asked. 'I mean, I'm getting paid to do this.'

‘Do you still farm?’ My cash would only cover the buses and emergency taxis.

‘Are you kidding? I never farmed.’ She threw her cigarette into the soft dirt, where it joined dozens of other butts. ‘I survive on alimony. And pinball boys.’

‘What?’ Three sparks flew from the lit tip before I squished it beneath my shoe. Even if it was just dirt around here.

‘My mother collected, competed in pinball. She’s bedridden now, so I’m selling the machines off. Wanna see?’

I followed her into a barn. Surely Eric had been joking about pinball. Grey cloth shrouded at least twenty-five hulks, taller than Gwen, much taller than me.

‘I’ve sold about thirty, if you can believe it.’ She kicked one of the machines. ‘I don’t give a damn about the Mathers. I escaped. That’s enough. I could have had Kenneth. I went for stability, and look what it got me? Back on the fucking farm. But you, you.’ She snorted. ‘How did he age?’

‘Well,’ I said. Would she have found his receding hair line endearing?

‘Did he talk about me?’

‘Only that he hadn’t thought about you in a long while.’ I needed to prove nothing about Kenneth. ‘I don’t know anything about you getting paid for this.’ She hadn’t asked about Eric. I would have wanted to know how he managed, knocking around in the big house alone.

‘Walter’s P.A. said I’d get 1000 bucks in my account if I met with you, told you the truth.’

Elinor’s tales of the Mather and Son formal parties captivated Gwen, reminding her exactly why she wanted to marry Eric. Champagne, even dancing sometimes. As a wife, her dress would signal the Mathers’ success. A closet of designer dresses in the house dated back to Rosemary, but Elinor guessed they’d all be too short on Gwen. Elinor hadn’t seen the wedding dress at that point.

The first party fell a month after their marriage. It had been scheduled before Elinor’s death, and no one suggested shifting it. The office building, seven o’clock. So Gwen took the car and drove into the next biggest town to the most exclusive mall and the most expensive store. And she put down her shiny new credit card with Mrs Gwendolyn Mathers stamped on the front. Six times the price of her prom dress. Three times the price of her wedding dress.

But she miscalculated, and the day of the party she started her period.

Eric always came last in the shaving rota, and she had gone to the bathroom as soon as she’d patted his cheeks dry.

Eric teared up when he saw the box of tampons on the counter. Possibly she should stop taking the birth control pills, but more importantly, would she have time to go buy a support slip so she didn’t appear bloated in the cream dress?

Eric kept talking about how lucky a wedding baby would have been, instead of leaving for work. Gwen cut him off, mid-moan.

‘It didn’t happen, and it’s sad. I’ll meet you at the party, ok?’ She mollified her words with a hug and then held his suit jacket pointedly.

‘Drinks are at seven.’ He kissed her and finally, finally left.

Gwen took off her robe and studied her stomach in the full-length mirror beside the creepy barber chair. Yes. Definitely. So that had to be added. Hair appointment at three – with one of her former classmates, now desperate for business while Gwen only had to work at being beautiful. A quick change of nail polish while they did her hair. Makeup she would do at home.

Since the wedding dress proved a disaster, Gwen had gone for a silk sheath, its surface studded with iridescent beads. A modest neckline countered the low dip over her spine. Surely her job as a spouse was to be attractive, to be desirable to their business partners, and to add to the total package of the Mathers and Son business and family?

The shoes matched perfectly, even down to the light sparkles on the toes. Not that the shoes would show under the dress. She practiced crossing her legs at a glamorous angle and wiggling her top foot suggestively.

She sounded like a little girl playing dress up, droning on about the hand sewn detailing. Eric’s tears got short shrift. I finally convinced Gwen that I had seen pictures of her dress. I begged her to get to the party.

Gwen ran a little late. It started when she realised she couldn’t drive in the heels. Could she drive in stocking feet? But there always seemed to be tiny stones and grit in a car floorboard. Should she call for a taxi? She really needed to take control of the house. Reorganise the kitchen. New cabinets. Maybe she would want to cook those meals Graham clearly expected if the kitchen looked more like her own space.

She slammed a cabinet door closed. Rows of spice jars – no phone books. She had already seen Graham go over the phone bill item by item. She didn’t want to have to justify a directory assistance charge. But to wiggle back into her pantyhose in the car in the light summer evening – she might be seen.

None of this was nerves. It simply would be a shame to ruin her expensive pantyhose. Slippers. She could wear her slippers, like women who had to commute to work wore tennis shoes.

Gwen padded down the stairs and out to the garage. Without her shoes.

After going back, she lost her carefully planned extra window of time. She pulled into the parking lot dead on seven. Over the steering wheel, she saw two couples heading into the building. The men wore dark suits and the women wore . . . shit. A knee-length, navy dress. A charcoal suit.

They were simply underdressed. They hadn't read the invitation properly.

Gwen felt with a cold certainty that she had not read the invitation at all.

A solid lump in her stomach pushed nausea up her oesophagus. She could wait, check out the other women. Go shopping. Drive away.

A light tap at the window kept her from starting the car. She rolled down the window two inches, her dress glowing with twice the brilliance it had at home.

'Gwen, right? I thought I recognised you from the wedding. I'm Camille, George's wife.'

Gwen smiled hesitantly.

'Aren't you coming in?'

What else could she do? The leather soles of her slippers scattered a few pieces of gravel on the asphalt. Gwen lifted her feet back into the car and slid off her tatty slippers. She pulled on the pumps. If she didn't, her dress would drag and she'd look even sillier.

'What a good idea! George is always shouting at me for driving in heels. That is such a gorgeous dress!' Camille said as Gwen closed the door. 'Are you going to a formal event? Oh, the window is still open.'

Gwen cranked the window up. Perfect. 'Yes,' she said.

'Yes, a formal event? How wonderful. George never takes me anywhere nice. Not that a Mathers' party isn't nice, of course!'

Had Walter planned this meeting? The girl couldn't be more than three years older than Gwen, tops. Everyone she remembered meeting at the wedding had been ancient.

'We've only been married for two years,' Camille continued. 'He had another wife, of course, and most of the old bitches don't talk to me. You're so lucky to be with Eric. Someone young.'

'He's ten years older than me.'

'George is forty years older than me. Oh! I forgot. I'm so sorry for your loss. Mrs Mathers was a real lady. She talked to me.' Gwen followed Camille towards the entrance.

'Do you like George?'

'Enough. Probably as much as you like Eric.' She laughed.

Gwen didn't know quite how she felt about Eric, especially after his tears that morning.

'Sorry, I'm so sorry. I just assumed.'

Gwen forced herself to laugh. 'Not a problem! How long do these things last?'

'Couple hours. Of course, you have to get to your thing.'

Only Camille's presence kept Gwen from running back to the car. The contrast between Camille's short – very short – skirt and her own long dress got sharper as they walked towards the building.

'I feel sick,' she muttered, as they walked down the hallway.

‘You aren’t pregnant already, are you? Look, there’s Olive – the woman with white hair.’

‘She needs a rinse,’ Gwen said. ‘It’d take out the yellowing.’

Camille giggled. ‘You should tell her. She’s sort of head wife. George’s first wife is her friend.’

They paused in the doorway. Gwen let Camille’s chatter wash over her, much like she let her clients talk while she concentrated on even coverage of hair dye. Maybe fifty people in the room. She and Camille were the youngest by far – no, Eric was talking to a man and what must be his teenage son. Pimply, and the Adam’s apple bobbing over the tie was too large for his head.

Every single person wore a suit, except some of the ladies wore dresses. Formless schoolteacher dresses with cardigans.

They would simply admire her beauty more. She hoped.

The main door opened out to a small platform, with steps leading down on either side to the ballroom floor. A discreet door at the rear was the only other route. Why hadn’t she come through that way?

Eric should have told her what to wear. If he paid more attention as a husband, he would have asked. He would have checked.

They had paused on the platform, in full view, so she turned to the stairs. She clung to the delicate railing as she teetered on the first step.

What a useless storyteller she was. Couldn’t remember a single thing about the room, except that the old office building had been in Peebles. Big, she said. Lots of light sparkling off her dress, but whether it came from huge arching windows or from chandeliers or fluorescent strips she didn’t know. Details emerged about people’s clothes, although she didn’t seem to remember anything about Eric’s suit.

But she didn’t seem to be as toughly assured as her photos had led me to believe.

‘Come on; let’s go mingle with the bitches.’ Camille pushed the centre of Gwen’s back.

Gwen had planned on dancing, not talking to people. People who would look down on the not-even-graduated almost beautician.

But that tree had picked her.

Eric threaded through the crowd towards her.

‘You’re late. And what – hello, Camille. Lovely to see you.’ He kissed Camille’s cheek before he kissed Gwen. ‘Camille, will you excuse us for a moment?’ He eased Gwen over towards a side wall. ‘What are you wearing?’

‘It’s that formal event we have after, remember?’ Gwen kept her smile rigid. ‘Why didn’t you tell me what to wear?’

‘God.’

‘Don’t I look pretty?’ Gwen closed her eyes, aware her long mascaraed lashes against her cheeks demonstrated her distress to her husband.

‘You’re always pretty. What made you think this was formal?’

‘Your mother talked about the beautiful dresses.’ His fingers closed tightly over hers. He still wouldn’t talk about Elinor, not really.

‘Only at Christmas. Don’t spend too much time with Camille. She isn’t liked very much. I suppose this morning wasn’t false?’

‘How?’ Her hug? Her cheeriness?

‘Like spotting. I’ve heard that can happen.’

‘No, it’s true.’ She straightened his tie. ‘I’m sorry.’ How could he still be going on about that? And when she felt like a social outcast? ‘Introduce me. If you don’t want Camille to do it.’ One grey, white or faded blonde set hairdo after another, a blur of faceless women. A heavy scent of hairspray underlay the old lady perfume and body heat in the room.

‘Well, the lady over there is Olive – she’s the wife of our biggest client. She’s essential.’

‘Won’t you introduce me?’ If they didn’t talk to Camille, would they talk to her?

‘You were met them at the wedding. I can’t do introduce you again.’

‘Sure you can. “Barbara, you remember my wife Gwen.” Then I hear their names again.’ How was she supposed to know to take notes at the wedding?

‘Olive, not Barbara. Barbara has grey hair.’ Graham motioned to Eric from the bar. ‘Sorry. You’ll be fine.’ He kissed her quickly and left.

She stood, literally glittering under the lights. Why had she bought this dress? But at least it covered her extravagant shoes.

Camille came over to her. ‘What did Eric say?’

Not to talk to you. ‘Oh, about my dress. And our plans for after. Will you introduce me?’

The last thing her friend Amber said, covering Gwen in one more cloud of hairspray, was that she should just listen – pretend she was behind the chair. Good early beautician patter – family, health, grandchildren/children. The stuff you used before you knew a town well enough to gossip.

People love to be listened to, Gwen repeated to herself, as she and Camille walked towards a glut of women.

‘Did you misunderstand the party, Gwen?’ Was that Barbara? How many grey-haired women? Six?

‘We’re going out afterwards.’ Gwen wouldn’t mumble.

‘And you couldn’t have changed here? When the entire building is yours?’ Definitely Olive this time. She smiled. They all did. Teeth barely concealed by insipid lipsticks.

‘Have you gotten around to see your little friends? At the home, wasn’t it? Now remind me, were you volunteering or was that your real job?’

Those women – even trapped in the nursing home – were more real than these.

‘What do you think about that new art exhibit in Milbury, Gwen?’ Not Olive. A bottle blonde.

‘I haven’t seen it.’ Nor would she, unless Eric made her.

‘Elinor was a great patron of the arts.’ Another blonde lady – her hair in a tight perm. ‘You must miss her. I’m sorry for your loss.’

‘I hate museums,’ Camille said suddenly.

‘Lauren is studying art history,’ Olive said. ‘She just loves it. Lauren’s my daughter, Gwen. About your age.’

‘And it prepares her for so many things,’ Barbara said.

‘Ladies,’ Camille’s husband interrupted. ‘This divide is unfair. You can’t deprive us of your company all night. Mrs Mathers, you look glorious.’

Gwen jumped. Mrs Mathers meant her. Thank God he came before they asked about her education. George took Gwen and Camille’s arms. ‘Let me introduce you to some of the gentlemen here.’

Here, Gwen found her element. The beautician’s questions worked wonderfully. All the male colleagues were happy to tell her about everything from golf to surgery to their tax returns.

‘Quite a girl you have here, Eric,’ one man said as he left. ‘Lovely and a good conversationalist.’

Gwen smiled as the elderly man pressed her hand. She had done well. Her smile felt real as they said goodbye to the last few couples. Eric walked Olive and her husband to the door. Gwen slid into a seat and pulled off her heels.

‘What were you thinking?’ Eric must have sprinted back down the hallway. ‘I told you not to stay with that woman and you spent all night with her and George.’

‘You abandoned me.’ Gwen rubbed her arch.

‘We don’t need you to flirt with businessmen. We need you to entertain their wives.’

‘I wasn’t flirting!’ Gwen dropped her shoe and immediately regretted it. What if the floor had marked the silk?

‘With Camille in tow, it sends the wrong message for a newlywed.’

Graham stomped towards them, cane clattering. ‘I understand you and Eric have another engagement?’ Gwen had seen this same anger-fuelled energy when he examined the phone bill.

‘I made that up,’ Gwen said. Surely it didn’t reflect well on a newlywed husband to only speak to his wife for three minutes all night long? She had been so proud. She’d worked so hard to overcome her dress. Her feet ached, and her lower back throbbed. Camille had poured out her soft drink and filled her glass with wine. A couple times.

‘Let’s go home,’ Walter said. He sounded rational, at least compared to Graham.

‘Unless she has other plans,’ Graham said.

‘Eric, drive your grandfather. I’ll ride with Gwen.’

Eric helped his grandfather to the staff parking lot. Gwen followed Walter in the opposite direction to the little car she drove. Not that she called it hers. Every step felt as though her spike heels dug into her very brain.

‘Do you want to drive?’ Walter asked.

‘Not in these shoes. And I had some wine.’ She sat, turning her legs in the ladylike way she’d read about in books. ‘I’m sorry, Walter.’

Walter started the car. ‘You look lovely.’

‘Thank you.’ She had wanted desperately the dress and the party to be a success. Craved the compliments – the ones that meant she had arrived as a wife. More than what she got from three strange men, plus George and Camille.

‘I could ask around. I think Harold has a daughter, about your age. She’s at college, but maybe she could come to the next party.’

A college student. She had considered college, until her high school guidance counsellor enlightened her. *Not on these grades or extracurricular activities – maybe a vocational college.* He suggested beauty school, based on her obvious interests, he said. Fat pig. But a friend her age. Someone to talk about even just movies.

But Walter might mean Olive’s art history daughter.

‘I’m a wife. I have to act and socialise like one,’ Gwen said. Mascara falling on the dress would be a disaster. She would not cry. At least she still had her beautician friends. Except that she had just paid Amber to do her hair. They used to practice on each other for free.

‘I think Eric mentioned this, but Camille really isn’t the best friend for you to make.’

‘I understand,’ Gwen said. She should hurry up and have a baby. At least it’d be something to play with.

Gwen’s loneliness rang uncomfortably with me. I wanted the baby because it was Kenneth’s. And because – because maybe the baby wouldn’t leave me the way everyone else did.

The big yellow house wasn’t exactly home yet to Gwen, but she could hide in their bedroom while the men discussed the evening. And no doubt, the embarrassment of a low class, silly girl. Not her embarrassment, clearly, but theirs.

Rather, Eric would listen as they discussed. Walter tried to get Eric to take on more responsibility, but Eric floated aimlessly along. Bought nice suits, played games, and wandered in at eleven.

‘You know, you could be as influential as Olive, if you try.’ Walter slowed the car as he approached the driveway.

‘How?’ Through the trees, every light in the house blazed, the incandescent bulbs as yellow as the brick. Walter braked at the bottom of the hill.

‘Did you leave them all on?’

‘No. I double checked before I left.’

Graham’s car turned in behind them and hooted sharply. Graham must have leant over to push on the horn. Eric would never beep at his father.

Walter drove slowly up the drive and stopped before getting to the garage.

Graham’s door opened before Walter had applied the park brake.

‘What has she done? Doesn’t she know how expensive electricity is?’ Graham said.

‘It wasn’t Gwen,’ Walter said. Eric stayed silent.

‘Even in the closed wings, for God’s sake,’ Graham said, ignoring Walter.

‘Who’s in there?’ Walter slammed his door. ‘No cars.’

‘Is it a burglary?’ Gwen asked. Not that it would matter – she had so little of value in the house it wouldn’t affect her. She wore the most expensive garment she owned.

Walter’s shiny shoes looked odd crossing the grass to the porch. He unlocked the front door.

‘I’m sure as hell not going to call out in my own house. Eric, help your grandfather.’

‘Shouldn’t we just call the police?’ Gwen asked. She didn’t want to disturb an intruder and die this early in her marriage.

‘Nonsense.’ Walter shoved the door open and stepped inside. Eric and Graham followed, redness erupting on Eric’s hand from Graham’s tight grasp. Gwen trailed behind. The skirt of her dress brushed over the cool floor, beads clattering. If Graham started to fall, she wasn’t going to risk breaking an ankle in heels to try and catch him. Not when he kept being so rude.

Graham wobbled up the last step as an old woman appeared in the entry room.

‘Welcome,’ she said with a shadowy smile. She pivoted neatly with her own cane, a lovely wooden one. Graham’s cane was metal and looked like hospital issue. Seamed stockings shone on the woman’s slim legs under her black dress. Good white hair – no sign of a blue rinse, although Gwen probably would have gone for a softer style than the tight bun.

‘Her?’ Graham spluttered, almost toppling over. Eric gripped him tightly.

Another ‘pronoun’ person. Graham referred to Elinor by name, but Gwen only merited a pronoun. He didn’t like this lady either.

‘Are you coming?’ the old woman called out.

The Mathers walked as a group to the dining room. A burst of light startled Gwen as they went through the door, but it almost knocked Graham out for good.

‘Sorry,’ Kenneth said, lowering his camera. ‘Her idea.’ He tilted his head at the old woman and waved his camera. ‘How’s marriage, Gwen?’

‘Marvellous,’ Gwen said, aware of the solid wall of Mathers men surrounding her. She hoped her voice sounded serene. Would it be noticed if she went to her room with ibuprofen and a heating pad? She also wanted to touch her hair, make sure it was still up, still attractive. She smiled instead. Kenneth snapped another photo. She knew when he developed it he would see her clenched fingers on her purse and recognise how much of an effort the smile was.

‘What are you doing in my home?’ Graham asked.

Photos covered every flat surface. All of the brides’ pictures from the master bedroom. Her room. June’s portrait hung over all, supplanting the painting that normally hung over the fireplace. Some landscape in oil done by a distant, not very talented Mathers. Gwen had never liked the portrait of June in the blue room, but in the high ceiling dining room it felt even more disturbing. The small portrait shouldn’t dominate the room like this.

How had Walter meant that she could be influential? Like Olive? Wouldn’t she have to age a hundred years first?

‘How dare you move Mother?’ Graham shouted. ‘What are *you* doing here?’

Graham’s face mirrored his mother’s. Bushy eyebrows, same tight mouths. The very thin lips she shaved around every morning. Thankfully, Eric’s lips didn’t. She couldn’t imagine lips that narrow touching her skin.

‘I’m just the photographer,’ Kenneth said.

‘Actually, Kenneth is more,’ the woman interrupted. ‘But I think he was addressing me. I’m Miss Katherine Miers, Gwen. Please, have a seat,’ she added gracefully.

‘This is my house. You will all have to leave,’ Walter snarled. Gwen had never seen him this angry. Even when Elinor died.

Eric’s aunt Pearl sat at the table. She no longer looked as tearful as she had in the wedding’s aftermath, but she didn’t look happy. She wore the grey silk scarf Gwen had given her from Elinor’s things. Walter had flipped when he couldn’t find it, but he seemed relieved when Gwen said she’d given it to Pearl. Beside Pearl sat a man in a wheelchair. His white t-shirt showed off the sleek muscles in his arms, even at his age. John, her circus husband.

‘You moved her,’ Graham repeated. ‘Mother is always in the blue parlour. It’s her favourite room. You touched her.’

Was that a quaver in Graham’s voice? He could feel something other than rage?

‘I was real careful, sir,’ Kenneth said. ‘I know how important pictures are. Won’t you sit down?’

Eric suddenly moved, helping his grandfather to the nearest chair. Trust Kenneth to notice Graham’s unsteadiness.

Gwen had made her choice. Even if Kenneth had made her forget Eric was in the room. He shouldn’t be kind to Graham anyway.

The doorbell rang. The last time those front door bells echoed through the house, it had been the police saying that Elinor had definitely died in the arcade.

‘Gwen, dear, will you get that?’ asked the old woman.

Gwen glanced at Walter.

‘Go ahead. But get rid of them. This gathering is ending.’

Gwen’s dress rattled back over the floor. Her mother, in a plaid flannel shirt, stood outside. She resisted slamming the door. Her mother would just lean on the bell.

‘God girl, are you working here? I got this invite.’ She peered in the door.

‘I live here, Mother.’ Gwen’s back straightened, even as her period ache increased.

‘Why else would I be dressed like this?’

‘I don’t know. You always liked to play dress up.’

‘When I was little.’ When dressing up meant wearing her father’s uniform coat, or one of the few dresses that her mother owned.

‘Gwen, have you sent them away?’ Eric voice blurred over her mother’s face.

‘Not yet.’ She tried to keep her voice steady. June had a portrait. They could surely spring for one of her in the entryway. Bypass this Gwen-as-worker thing right away. Maybe even a sculpture – and for once she’d wear the right length dress.

‘Mrs Knox, please come in,’ Kenneth said beside her. ‘You must meet your new son-in-law, Eric Mathers.’

Calling cards. Mrs Gwendolyn Mathers, to match her credit card.

‘You got married?’ her mother asked.

‘Last month. I have some great photos,’ Kenneth said. ‘I knew you’d want some, since you couldn’t attend. Gwen, aren’t you going to let your mother in?’

‘I couldn’t attend?’ her mother repeated.

‘It was . . .’ Sudden? Not open to mothers? Gwen floundered for ideas. A wisp of hair brushed her neck. She hoped it had fallen artistically.

‘Really lovely spread. Great celebration. Planned to the last detail,’ Kenneth added. He pulled at Gwen’s arm until she shifted enough for her mother to walk in.

Eric shook her mother’s hand.

‘Nice to meet you,’ Eric said.

‘What’s that funny thing on your finger?’ her mother demanded.

‘My wedding ring.’

She dropped his hand for Gwen’s. ‘My daughter gets gold – at least I hope this is gold with the size of this pile – and you get weird flowers? No engagement ring, I see.’

‘Mother,’ Gwen started. She hated the feel of her mother’s skin on hers. The calluses from the machines. No doubt oil under the fingernails. She pulled away before her mother’s touch could stain her dress.

‘It’s an important family tradition,’ Eric said. Gwen’s initial laughter about Walter’s ring quickly ended when she realised Eric would wear one.

‘Let’s go to the dining room,’ Kenneth said. Gwen followed Eric and Kenneth. Her beautiful dress seemed heavier and more stupid with every step. She felt about twelve, with a nice hair-do.

‘Dad, this is Gwen’s mother, um,’ Eric paused. Her husband didn’t know her own mother’s name. She had been happy with that situation. Why did her mother have to turn up tonight?

‘Betsy. Bets.’

‘Good evening, Mrs Knox,’ Walter said.

‘No, Bets, please. It’s what all the boys call me.’

Walter’s face froze.

‘My mother is a regional pinball champion.’ The things the women at the party were saying now to their husbands about her. What they’d add if they saw her mother.

‘One of the only women in a competitive field, I understand,’ the old woman said.

‘Welcome, Bets. I’m Miss Miers – I invited you. Please, have a seat.’

‘The evening is ending,’ Walter said again. He sounded weary.

‘I’m not late?’ Bets asked. ‘It took me a while to find the driveway, out there.’

‘Walter Mathers, unless you want the police to physically remove me, and remember I’m old enough for bones to break – think of the publicity. The stories I can tell, Walter. Here or to the media.’

‘Gwen, please get nine glasses.’ Walter took out a bottle of whisky out of a cabinet.

The glasses felt cool against her palms.

‘Not those, the tumblers,’ Graham said. ‘Eric, show her.’

Her quick turn hid the blush creeping up the neckline of the dress. She hoped.

‘Eight. Gwen isn’t old enough to drink,’ Kenneth said.

Eric showed Gwen the tumblers, and they both put the hi-ball glasses back. He patted her hand. She couldn’t tell if it was support over her mother’s awfulness or the stupidity of getting the wrong glasses. Surely in comparison to her mother, Camille couldn’t be that bad.

‘Why can’t I be friends with Camille?’ she whispered.

‘This isn’t a good time,’ Eric said. ‘Later, honey.’

At least he’d called her an endearment. They took the glasses to the table.

Walter poured splashes of the whisky, and then he sprawled in the chair at the head of the table, flanked by his sister-in-law and father. He even loosened his tie. Back to lord of the manor, with his sister-in-law on his right and his father on his left.

‘Are we finished with the niceties?’ Miss Miers asked as people collected their glasses. ‘Shall we sit?’

Everyone looked startled to hear her voice. Gwen had seen Walter have this effect at their wedding, even in the panic when Pearl came back saying Elinor had disappeared. People

listened to Walter. Perhaps Eric seemed less successful at the business because he lacked that impact.

Miss Miers moved toward the foot of the table. The chair seemed to shrink her. Or Walter's glare? Gwen sat next to Miss Miers, with Kenneth opposite. He beamed at Gwen, as if he hadn't been trying to mock her at every opportunity. She smiled back. Unwillingly.

Eric sat next to her. She could tell by his twitch he was uncomfortable sitting almost opposite Kenneth. He looked determinedly at John, Pearl's husband, in his wheelchair. Not that you could tell that anything was wrong with him – his shoulders were amazing, despite his poor hair cut.

Kenneth asked Bets to squeeze in next to him. Gwen hadn't even realised she still stood.

Kenneth's hands, capable and strong, reflected in the table's shiny surface. Gwen certainly hadn't polished it. She could look at those hands . . . but the plaid of Bets' shirt showed up too, right next to his long fingers. That flannel shirt had once been Gwen's father's. Bets had driven him to death. With her pinball purchases, stacks of quarters and stupid desire for a championship. The championship patch was sewn on her sleeve, just like a Girl Scout's badge. Bets had been devastated when Gwen dropped out of the Scouts just at the point where'd she have to go camping to advance from being a Brownie to a full Girl Scout.

' . . . unusual, to say the least. I want to tell you the story tonight of the Mathers, specifically when their eccentricities became dangerous.'

'Ridiculous,' Graham said. Gwen could just see Graham's hand resting on the table. The veins stuck out, pushing against shrivelled skin. She felt a tiny bit sorry for him.

'Dad, let it go,' Walter said. The amber liquid tilted as he gestured with his tumbler. 'Miss Miers seems to feel this is urgent. An urgent historical problem.'

'It is historical, but there is a real threat. A threat you already know about.'

Kenneth stood up and fiddled with a camera on a tripod across the room. He straightened a bride picture as he moved back to his seat. Her picture, Gwen realised. Eric had framed one of the ones from the waist up. One that hid her first disastrous dress.

'It's on a repetitive timer. Don't be scared when –' The flash exploded. Everyone, including Walter, jumped. Except John. 'That happens.'

'I've asked Kenneth to record the events tonight. Most Mathers women leave little trace, except for these photos. A hint perhaps in their sons' faces. That is all. While the men – they have portraits all over town. Maybe even the state.'

A hint? Miss Miers must be blind. Surely she could tell that Graham's face almost replicated his mother's. And that Eric's nose was identical.

Walter, Miss Miers and Graham bickered over almost every word. Nothing wrong with pictures around the state. It meant they were influential and generous with time and money.

Maybe evening classes could be the answer. Something to teach her to talk about art. And, well, to talk. She wondered if her tampon needed changing. If she stained the dress . . .

John slammed his hand on the table.

‘Will you get to the point? This is poor showmanship. If you have something to say, say it. Otherwise I’m going home.’

‘I am sorry, John,’ Miss Miers said. ‘To continue, uninterrupted. Some of us know the story of the Mathers’ unusual wedding rings. Gwen?’

Gwen felt as sick as she did in her cosmetology classes when called on to recite a chemical mix. ‘The first Mathers came to America with nothing except a rose cutting. Their first children died and crops failed. In desperation, the man,’ she couldn’t remember his name so tried to slide over it. ‘Sold his wedding ring. The farm prospered and the rose cutting bloomed. They made him a new wedding ring with roses and their living son’s baptismal lace.’ Hard to slip out of the room now. Not with people looking at her. Maybe she wasn’t up for evening classes after all.

‘Right. Thank you.’

‘And every generation, we have one son and one ring,’ Eric added stiffly. ‘What’s the issue?’

‘That’s why you have such weird jewellery. I thought my daughter had married into a flower cult.’

‘She did, in a way,’ Kenneth said.

In no way had Gwen joined a cult. Unless wealth was a cult, and Kenneth would never know about that. Why else had she chosen Eric over Kenneth?

‘Shush, Kenneth,’ Miss Miers said. ‘What is less well known is about the tree. The tree sits in the church, but it was not always so. The tree once grew outside the church. It gave an early Mathers’ woman a sign when it was time for her son to marry – late for that time period – at thirty. His wife-to-be found a wooden disk that bore the word “marry” and they did.’

‘And the family moved the tree into the church. And we care for it.’ Eric again sped up the story with his flat statements. How could anything sound mysterious or dangerous when he proclaimed it as fact?

‘But once the tree went wrong. The disk was dropped for a young, dark-haired girl named Josephine. Josephine and the Mathers’ boy William had already fallen in love. They waited only for the tree to approve their love with the disk.’

‘Hogwash. Gwen, what are you doing in this family?’ Bets asked.

Gwen’s dress, even with the beads, was slippery against the leather. She pushed the toes of her shoes into the carpet to stay in place, but she considered just sliding down under the table. No more eyes, no more pictures, no more looking pulled together and in control.

‘The disk was dropped, and another girl, a plump, blonde girl – not very pretty, but very clever – found it. Her name was June.’

‘Katherine Miers. Stop.’ The anger in Graham’s voice burned hotter than when he went over the phone bill.

‘William married her, but he mourned his whole life for Josephine.’

It sounded very romantic. Eric certainly wouldn’t mourn for her. Kenneth might just – if she smiled at him. She looked up, but Kenneth had left the table again to mess with his camera. She would have spent her life being secondary to his cameras. Eric had been the right choice.

‘And are you going to mention that Josephine was a servant in this very house – and your mother?’ Graham stood up, his hands pressing hard against the wood grain of the table.

‘Grandfather, sit down.’ Eric’s arm went around his waist.

‘It’s true. June graciously hired her when my grandparents fell on difficult times. It’s also true that Josephine had a child with William.’

Perhaps Miss Katherine had trouble saying ‘graciously’, the way Gwen had trouble saying ‘rural’.

‘That’s ridiculous. My father would never – with a servant!’ Eric eased Graham back into the seat. ‘It’s ridiculous, Eric. My father was a good man.’ She could just hear Graham whispering to Eric. Eric would mourn his grandfather, far more than he might mourn her if she left.

‘Is this your way of claiming to be a Mathers, Miss Miers?’ Walter asked.

‘No, I’m a Miers. I have no illusions about that. My parents married quietly – so quietly that no one noticed that my older brother Jack had red hair.’

‘So?’ Eric’s voice was sharp.

‘My older brother was a Mathers. And therefore so is Kenneth.’

The table exploded into shouts. Kenneth snapped several photos, seemingly oblivious. Bets looked puzzled, as did John.

‘So what if my great-grandfather did, which he didn’t, impregnate a maid. That’s three generations ago. You can’t expect money now,’ Eric said.

‘Eric,’ Walter said. Gwen assumed he didn’t want Eric to bring up the idea of money. She’d read enough romance novels to know the rich always deny bastard offspring.

‘It’s not about money. This is our family. Our heritage. And it was not polluted by that woman,’ Graham said. He banged the floor with his cane.

Miss Miers took a sip of whisky, the first she’d touched. ‘June knew she didn’t have William’s heart. So she set a plan in motion. A sacrificial plan to add to the rings. Mathers women, well, most women, died young then. She couldn’t bear for her son and his sons to have the happy, loving marriages that she had missed. And she couldn’t stand to stay married to William. So she added to the family legend. The mother dies on the son’s wedding day – to ensure the union is fruitful.’

Gwen felt sick. Elinor had to die? That was impossible. She had seen the Mathers men grieve for Elinor. They almost considered her to be a saint already. Her period made her feel icky. Not this stupid story.

‘And it has continued. Which is the answer you’ve been searching for, Pearl,’ Miss Miers said.

‘My sister died in an accident.’ Pearl spoke quietly.

‘Pearl, I told you . . .’ Miss Miers’ voice quavered, like the little old ladies at the nursing home.

‘It was an accident.’ Pearl’s eyes stayed firmly on the table.

‘Gwen, I expect Elinor explained this to you?’ Miss Miers asked.

‘She left me a book, but it just has recipes. Flower tips.’

‘Do you want to hurt us? It hasn’t even been a month, for God’s sake. You’re talking about my mother.’ When Eric spoke with emotion, Gwen thought perhaps she did love him. Not enough to die for him, of course, but that was just stupid.

‘My daughter has to die?’ Gwen’s mother asked.

‘Of course not, Mrs – Bets,’ Walter said. ‘Miss Miers is exaggerating. Women die – and my beloved Elinor did die on our children’s wedding day. But it was chance. I’m afraid we just cling to these rings, out of superstition, no less.’

‘You moved Mother,’ Graham’s voice had become shrill. ‘Said all these lies in front of her. My father would never love that woman. She was a servant.’ He wavered back to his feet.

‘Whoops, there he goes. Better call Irvin’s House,’ Bets said.

‘What?’ Eric looked confused.

‘Forget it,’ Gwen said. How could she explain to her husband of one month that the Irvin’s House was the most run down funeral home in her hometown? That suggesting that his grandfather might die of his frenzy fit her mother’s idea of a joke?

‘Miss Miers, I think it’s best that you and Kenneth leave now. Don’t worry, we’ll straighten up the mess you’ve kindly made and turn off the lights. Pearl, could I drive you and John home?’ Walter asked.

The camera flashed.

‘Mr Miers, would you stop that please? We’ve had quite enough for one evening.’ Walter stood over Kenneth until he removed all the cameras and the tripod. Gwen escaped to the bathroom and changed into jeans before Kenneth finished.

When she came back, Graham was shouting instructions at Eric about moving June’s portrait. Kenneth had disappeared. Graham sent Gwen on a half-hour hunt for cotton gloves before he relented and allowed Eric to shift the portrait with his bare hands.

Then he insisted on all the other photographs being carried, no more than two at a time, up to the master bedroom. He even came up the stairs to study the placements of each.

He pointed his cane at the cream dress, carefully spread across the bed.

‘That looks expensive.’

‘It was my gift to Gwen, Grandfather,’ Eric said, before Gwen could speak. Eric squared up two pictures on the dresser. ‘I paid for it.’

‘Don’t make a habit of it.’

Gwen went back down for the last picture – her own. Her mother still stood in the dining room, holding the frame.

‘You look pretty,’ Bets said.

‘Thanks. But it was the wrong dress. All my dresses are wrong. I didn’t have the education to live this life.’ Gwen took the picture.

‘You got here anyway. I’ll go; I embarrass you. I know that.’ Her hug shocked Gwen, the heat of her body, the worn texture of the flannel shirt. ‘Come home if you don’t feel safe.’

‘Do you want to stay the night, Mrs Knox?’ Eric had shed his suit jacket upstairs, and his blue dress shirt flattered his skin tone. She’d made the right choice.

‘Bets, please. I’ll head home.’ Eric and Gwen walked her to the door, and for the first time Gwen felt like part of a couple. Saying goodbye from the curve of her husband’s arm at their own front door. Maybe that was the answer, not a sculpture. Being with Eric.

‘Do you feel unsafe, Gwen?’ Eric asked after locking up.

‘I never felt safe at home.’ Gwen wanted to pull down her hair, take some medicine and wrap herself up in bed.

‘She didn’t hurt you?’

‘No. It’s poverty. No father. Game-crazed boys coming over all the time. Never knowing if there was going to be food, or a new pinball machine.’ More than a slight exaggeration, but her mother could not be invited back for Christmases. She handed him the picture frame. ‘Don’t worry.’

‘Did they ever talk to you about dying?’ I asked. Miss Katherine had made a huge leap between ‘often die’ to ‘must die’. But Mary said Rosemary died on Walter’s wedding day.

‘Just the kid.’ Gwen gazed up at the beams of the barn. ‘Anyway, they all mourned Elinor. Hard. Eric still does. Or did, when I saw him last.’

‘Mr Mathers told me Kenneth was part of the family, but not how.’ Had Mr Mathers suddenly decided to believe Miss Katherine? Why? Could the Davies explain – prove perhaps – if Miss Katherine’s story had been true? If Kenneth was a descendant, what did that mean in terms of the Mathers’ wives dying?

‘Did Kenneth ever get any money from them?’ Gwen asked.

‘Not that I could tell.’ His single backpack, the faded clothes. ‘What happened next?’

‘I didn’t see my mother again for nearly fifteen years. And within a year, I learned to avoid Eric.’ She lit a new cigarette. ‘So it’s a boy, I guess?’ She inhaled fiercely, and lines dug in around her mouth.

‘A girl.’

Gwen laughed. And laughed. A deep smoker’s laugh that ended in coughing. She even took off her dark glasses to wipe her eyes, allowing me to see the heavy concealer caked in her wrinkles. I didn’t understand, didn’t want to understand.

‘I wish I could be there when Walter finds out. Anyway, have my blessing. It’s no life, but there you go.’

The fields outside the window blurred into unrelieved brown. The bus thumped over a large pothole. No life? What did she call this? Selling pinball machines to spite her mother? Talking to a random woman, telling her intimate details, all for a thousand dollars?

Reducing each day to a series of small occupations. Sitting and watching sunlight shift slowly across the room. Going to the supermarket just to get out. Wandering the shelves to buy stuff she’d never cook.

Or in my case, to look at stuff I wouldn’t cook for one. I had done this, filling my off time in New York. And then I had met Kenneth.

W-A-I-T. I fumbled with the outline of the disk through the leather of my bag. Maybe Kenneth did descend from a Mathers, and that explained my disk. The dying clearly was ludicrous. I would wait, a little longer. And then I needed to make decisions. At least I had skills, degrees. With a good reference, I could go on with my life.

The taxi climbed the slope and stopped near the top of the Mathers’ drive. Eric emerged from the garage. He reached towards the pocket of his suit, but I paid and clambered out quickly.

‘Good day?’ Eric asked.

I nodded. I wouldn’t mention Gwen. Or death. Miss Miers exaggerated. I should check the family tree. After I’d had time to process Gwen’s unhappy stories from their early marriage, to compare them to Eric’s unhappy stories.

‘Luanne?’

I must have missed a question. ‘Yes?’

‘Is everything ok? I looked for you this morning.’

‘Interviewing. Sorry, I should have said.’ Should I have? I technically worked for his father.

‘Not really.’ He scuffed the gravel with his shoe. ‘Are you sure you’re all right?’

I smiled. ‘Good night.’ I had to get to the cottage before he could ask whom I had interviewed. Six yards closer. His footsteps retreated towards the house.

‘Oh, by the way!’

Light sparked on the yellow brick of the house, like Kenneth’s flash exploding in the dining room. Simply tiredness, after the hours on buses.

‘Thanksgiving, next week,’ he said as he jogged towards me in his suit and shiny shoes. Over level ground.

Thanksgiving meant little to me. Before all my friends married off, we’d have dinner together. Now it just came as day off midweek.

‘Dad’s still gone, so I wondered about us celebrating together? Not to cook or anything, but there’s a cafeteria that does a pretty good meal. I could pick it up and . . .’

Celebrating. I didn’t feel like celebrating anything. A tiny flutter wiggled across my stomach. Her. I closed my eyes. I didn’t want to tell Eric, to see his face pinch at the reminder that he hadn’t had a child.

‘Luanne? Are you sure you’re ok?’

‘Sorry. That’d be . . .’ The flutter stilled. ‘Fun. Thanks.’ Why did Gwen say she started to – no, *learned* to avoid Eric?

## Chapter 19

Siobhan drove me to see the Davies a few days later. We missed the turning onto their private road twice, despite the directions they'd given. Thick trees cleared almost immediately to a regular lawn. The headlights picked out the hump of a kid's plastic car parked on the grass. The Mathers' should be called a private road, not this. Even with the changes in gradation.

'I'm amazed they can have mail delivery right up to the house itself,' Siobhan said, pointing at the front porch. A small mailbox had been attached to the house. Only small flecks of the original brass colour emerged from the darkness. The porch lamps lit a small sign underneath that read 'June's Cottage', in ornate script. A swing creaked gently.

'They had that green plastic box on the road.' We walked towards the grey two-storey house. A young child peered out from behind the brittle blackened screen door.

'Hello. Are your parents at home?' I asked.

'I'm not supposed to say.'

'Jake, it's ok when we're home,' said the light, high voice I'd heard on the phone. The door opened. 'Sorry. Are you Luanne?' She didn't look as delicate as I expected – just a normal sized, mid-twenties woman. 'I'm Emily.'

'Yes. This is my friend, Siobhan.'

'Come in, please. It's fantastic you have someone to drive you. You're what, six, seven months?'

'Five.' Did I look that huge?

We walked into the living room. Framed embroideries hung on either side of the fireplace. The lavender painted walls felt shockingly pale against the dark patina of the floorboards.

'Jake, go tell Daddy the lady is here.'

Jake ran up the stairs, his sock feet pounding the pale carpet threaded under spools. Siobhan and I both declined drinks and sat on a cream sofa. The house smelled slightly of dog, increasing my admiration for the clean sofa cushions. The foot of a tiny action figure poked my back.

A man carried Jake on his shoulders down the stairs. Jake shrieked as they ducked to avoid the low ceiling in the hallway. My stomach lurched – who would do that for my daughter? Never mind the fact that the Davies were at least eight years younger than me.

'Darren, this is Luanne Richardson and her friend Siobhan,' Emily said.

Darren lowered Jake to the floor. 'Why don't you go run play with the dog?' Jake scrambled off the chair, his waffle weave pyjamas sliding up his calves. 'What can I do for you?'

'I'm researching the Mathers family,' I said for the millionth time. 'Your ancestor –'

‘June. She married one of them and moved over to Peebles. Did you notice the name of the house? She bought it for her parents – my great, great, great-grandparents, I think. Maybe I’m off a great. Used the Mathers money, I understand. We remember her. My grandfather said after she got married she didn’t come back to Bellway very often, but after she had her first son, she built this house for her parents. Then her brother inherited it.’ Darren handed me a couple sheets of thin, fragile paper, covered in spots of foxing. ‘She went to Peebles to visit her cousins. Wrote letters home. This one is quite funny, in retrospect. All about how pretty her youngest cousin Josephine is – June went out there to find a husband. And then June ended up marrying the richest man in town.’

I pitted the slanted writing against the angry face in the blue room. Could she have been a teenager, scared she wasn’t pretty enough?

‘It’s weird how these things stick in your mind – my grandfather had a trunk of stuff, and my sister Claire and I used to play in it. I wasn’t sure I could put my hands on it, but I found it upstairs after you called. Just this letter though, I’m afraid. I’m sure there was another one or two. Maybe Claire took them when she moved to California. I’ll ask her to look around.’

I had to have patience. They offered far more than I’d hoped. ‘That would be great. Do you remember the other letters?’

‘Something about how she got married – beating out her cousin Josephine, I think. Maybe something about a church – I don’t really remember. Like I said, Claire might.’

Darren’s supply of knowledge had been exhausted, despite my questions. I asked if I could sit at a table, so I could copy out the letter.

‘You can borrow it, if you want.’

How could people be so trusting? I’d shown no identification, no formal affiliation with a reputable academic institution. Just a phone call.

‘Technically, I’m related to the people who hired you, right? Maybe we should meet up.’ Darren’s smile came easily, far more than Eric’s would if they met. Eric’s stiff posture as he looked at Darren’s pretty wife and small male child. ‘I’ll mention it to them,’ I said. ‘I promise I’ll be really careful. Would it be ok to bring it back next week?’

Emily produced a manila envelope, and I placed the letter gently inside. She pointed to a faded embroidery next to the fireplace.

‘I think she did that one. The family has always insisted that we leave it up.’

I peered at the faded stitches. Very even. It was a floral garden scene – not very interesting, honestly, but JM was visible in the corner. I thanked them again and we left.

‘It had the roses on it,’ Siobhan said. ‘That embroidery was the Mathers’ gardens. It’s not easy to design your own pattern. Except maybe they did that more than. She could have hidden secrets in the stitching! Or in the frame!’

‘It’s not a cop show. No great secrets. They’re just rich.’ I seat belted myself into the passenger seat.

The next morning, I studied the letter. I had to look up ‘rats’, which turned out to mean padding for hair to make it look fuller when put up, as well as rodents. Difficult to imagine a younger, slimmer June. Maybe blonde before her hair turned silver. Too many red-headed Mathers to have had a lot of dominant brown or black hair genes in the family. Should I just type it and stick it in the report? Or should I write it up as I had all my other research? I forced myself to write a small summary of June’s letter to her mother.

June Davies visited her three cousins who lived in Peebles, the more prosperous town. They were that bit richer and higher in society than June’s parents. The cousins had prettier dresses, a nicer home, and better food. And Josephine, the youngest, was June’s exact age. And by far the most beautiful.

June had thin hair, which she padded out with rats, so it matched Josephine’s in size when she put it up, if not sheen. June usually tried to stand next to her older cousins, Victoria and Angelina, who weren’t as pretty either.

They went to a few sedate parties. Mostly the cousins read, played music and went to church. June had expected something more exciting from Peebles.

Once June talked them into going to the theatre. She revelled in the glamour of the red velvet seats, clutching her ticket in her hand. The actors and the music convinced her that she had to have more. More than the staid life of her cousins, or the dull life at home.

But it was a long six weeks, and she hadn’t met any potential husbands. She knew her mother would be disappointed.

Miss Katherine said Josephine had had William Mathers’ child, Kenneth’s however-many-greats grandfather Jack. Nothing at all about Josephine being June’s cousin. What had June actually looked like as a young woman? All those pictures of brides upstairs. I carefully put the letter back in the archival folder and went out to the hallway. No noise. No one else was home.

Dating June’s photo should be fairly easy, going by the fashions of the bridal gowns. Carved rose petals cascaded down from full blooms along the top of the bedroom door. Stems and thorns climbed up, spiralling around the metal handle. Thorns? How could one flower have such an impact on so many generations? Had it been that remarkable that it had grown after being transported across the Atlantic?

I pushed the door open, revealing his tumbled bed. I’d forgotten, stupidly, that Eric still lived in this room. That this whole house wasn’t a historic relic, but the living space of a friend. I hesitated. Did I really need to see June’s picture?

My shoes again sank into the carpet. Underwear, socks, sweatshirts and jeans lay in haphazard piles. I really didn’t need to know that he wore stripy cotton boxers. He had tossed a white dress shirt on the barber chair. Why did he leave the chair out in his bedroom?

A pair of silver cufflinks nestled in the curve of a black watchband on top of the chest of drawers. Where would Eric stash his wedding ring? Or Gwen's? Surely she had to return it to escape.

I came to look at the pictures. No other reason.

June's picture sat to the right of the watch. Her fair hair puffed out wide. But it didn't shine, and her face bore half a dozen spots, and not from the age of the image. Light years from the furious woman in the portrait downstairs, although that squared jaw showed even then. A satisfied smile curved her thin lips above a pale dress in the sepia image. What had I expected: words engraved in the frame saying, 'I stole William Mathers from Josephine; Miss Katherine Miers was right'? The picture taught me nothing, except perhaps confirming the fears about her beauty that she'd written to her mother. I replaced it precisely in the faint dust marks.

The yellow leather of the barber chair felt cold. No scent of soap followed my fingers. How long did it take to fade? Had Gwen shaved him right up until she left? I held the shirt up, the shoulders wider than Kenneth's, the good posture built into Eric's class and name. No size written in the collar. Did he get them made? I buried my face in it for the enjoyment of the crisp cotton. Sea Island, maybe. I didn't know what that meant, but Fleming dressed Bond in Sea Island cotton shirts. I inhaled. Not cologne – he hadn't worn it since we'd gone to see Pearl. Just the way Eric smelled. A tiny bit minty, maybe toiletries he used.

Heat tickled my skin. Not from the creaking furnace, which stayed silent. Nor from the plushness of the carpet. From the core of me, a licking of moisture, a flush of . . . desire. Tingles shot through my body, from the fabric against my fingertips straight down my spine.

The shirt fell to the floor.

It meant nothing. I could ignore any vibrations, because they certainly didn't spring from arousal. From a shirt! I grabbed a sleeve and flung it back on the chair, not even looking to see if it landed in the same position. I slammed the door behind me and clattered down the stairs.

I paced the study. Hormones changed in the second trimester. And I responded – to security. What I knew. The odours I was around daily. Since I couldn't remember exactly what Kenneth smelled like any more. I blinked away tears. I would keep working. It meant nothing.

I opened the archive file again. Nothing more than June's frustration at not being pretty or rich enough.

Sentences started formulating. Extrapolation. A mashing of the events from Gwen's report about Miss Katherine's story, and what I knew of the tree. I could guess what must, no, *might* have happened in the church. I should feel bad about this – basing my opinions of her on her unpleasant son Graham and the expression that a painter had captured, or even invented. But it would distract me from her great-grandson.

I wouldn't put it in the report. Don't insult the grandmother of your boss.

June got dressed for church on the last Sunday of her trip slowly. She would go home the next day and she'd have to tell her parents that she'd failed. She'd be shipped off to the next lot of cousins who could offer a way into society. Cousins who hopefully didn't have three attractive daughters.

Josephine wanted to go to church early. June hadn't really been listening, but she offered to go with her. At least it would keep her from looking at the things she needed to pack.

They walked in together, their button boots hitting the wooden floorboards, a dull even sound. They stood in the darkness.

'Why did you want to come early?' June asked.

'To pray,' Josephine said.

Then the tree began to light up. The red light, the warmth. The feeling of peace. But June sprinted towards the light, as soon as she saw Josephine drawn towards it. She heard the clatter of the disk, and grabbed it, wrestling it away from her cousin's grasp.

I had no proof for this. None. Maybe the light fell on June.

June didn't even know what the disk meant, but when she came out of the building, half-blinded by the bright sunshine, a woman of the church kissed her cheek and said welcome. The woman held a basket of yellow roses to put behind the altar for the church service.

And at that church service, June was announced to be the bride of William Mathers. She couldn't believe it – she would be married to the richest men in the state.

Josephine's eyes burned hot with jealousy now, but it didn't matter. The wedding plans got underway quickly, and within six weeks June had moved into the yellow house out in the country.

And she gave birth to Graham and had her portrait painted. I knew nothing else. The letter didn't back up Miss Katherine's story, nor did it tell me anything new. Marriage, an essential objective for a woman at the turn of the century. I'd wasted Siobhan's time and my own. I had to work faster, not go off on side trips. I had to make plans for leaving North Carolina.

I sorted papers for the rest of the afternoon, looking at each sheet only long enough to determine where to file it.

I heard Eric's car. My face flushed.

The light clunks of his shoes stopped just inside the study. I just needed to file this paper, and then I could escape.

'Luanne?'

'Yeah. Hi.' I forced myself to look up at him. He held his suit jacket. Wore a blue dress shirt, open necked. That faint crinkling of red chest hair I'd seen before.

I felt no response to him at all. No memory of the fabric, the scent of the shirt upstairs, the width of his shoulders. Just a surge of pregnancy hormones. Nothing to do with him specifically.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘I wasted yesterday evening. And a big part of today.’ I pushed the file folder towards him. ‘But I found one of your cousins. June’s family.’

‘Tell me about it over dinner? I’ll just go change.’

Eric’s feet steadily climbing the stairs. Opening his bedroom door, picking up the shirt, realising it had been moved. What if I’d left makeup traces on it?

I wore light make-up. And with the mess upstairs, Eric wouldn’t remember the position of one shirt.

The car ride, the restaurant, even the touch of his hand when he steadied me in the parking lot, left me entirely unmoved. Just a bizarre blip in the pregnancy.

## Chapter 20

The night before, over backgammon, Eric had reminded me of our Thanksgiving plans, but I went to the study as usual in the morning. He didn't appear. I kept working.

Late in the evening, a door closed somewhere on the ground floor. Eric must be home. I almost collided with Mr Mathers' wheelchair in the hall. No room to go forward, no room to go back. The hallway had never been broad, but surely I imagined that the walls curved in tighter around his body.

'You startled me.' I breathed slowly. Ripples spread across my stomach, like the stroke of a feather, as the baby moved. How long had Mr Mathers been gone? Since at least a couple of weeks before Eric disappeared. Not disappeared, went on a work trip.

'You really shouldn't be working today. Happy Thanksgiving.' The walls definitely contracted. I blinked, but they stayed bent inwards. 'The cake was a nice touch. You clearly worried about him while he was away.'

I nodded. No reason to lie to Mr Mathers. Him paying me, for one.

'Excellent,' he said.

'What?'

'The cake. Excellent.'

Why did the cream walls wrap even tighter around us? An embrace or squeezing me out? I searched for anything to say. 'I wanted to ask about your ring.' His hand rested on the wheelchair's arm. The ring bristled in the dim hallway, holding what – the last realised dream of family life? Happy memories of Elinor? Or memories of whomever – presumably his parents – had made it?

'Hey.' Eric's voice cut across the silence. 'When did you get back?'

'This morning.'

Mr Mathers had been in the house all day while I worked? I felt a tiny, irrational tremble down my spine. The house belonged to him.

Eric eased past me, and the hall snapped back to a normal width. He carried three plastic bags of takeout. 'I planned on two, but there's probably enough.'

'I'll go home,' I said. 'I mean, back to the cottage. Let you two catch up.' My stomach twisted at the smell of the food, in a way it hadn't for weeks.

'You can't eat alone on Thanksgiving!' Eric passed me a bag of food.

'If necessary, I'll eat something else. Please stay,' Mr Mathers said.

I agreed, if only to get out of the hallway. My feet and back ached, although I'd only stood for a few minutes.

I sipped water while Eric unpacked Styrofoam container after Styrofoam container from the bags. And he worried about having enough?

‘What do you normally do for Thanksgiving?’ he asked.

‘Usual, I guess.’ Usual for me, if not for a Southern family. Time alone.

He lifted out bread rolls wrapped in bakery paper. ‘Do you see your sister?’ His moustache had disappeared.

‘You shaved.’ How distracted had I been by Mr Mathers?

Eric stroked his upper lip, awkwardly. ‘I realised, I mean, I grew it to piss off Gwen, really. What do you think?’

‘Nice.’ He looked younger, more like the Eric in the church yearbook. Attractive.

I got out plates. So much seemed to relate to Eric and Gwen angering each other, deliberately or accidentally. Why did Mr Mathers need this project? They shouldn’t have gotten married in the first place.

Eric’s sleeves were rolled up halfway, the blue cotton crisp against his pale skin. The same black watchband encircled his right wrist. I watched muscles in his forearm move as he dished the food onto the plates.

‘Wonderful,’ Mr Mathers said, rolling into the room. He handed a bottle of wine to Eric. Eric had never drunk anything alcoholic around me. Maybe another Southern gentleman thing, since I couldn’t. I stood close enough to inhale the rich spiciness of bottled sunshine. Eric picked up two wine glasses and followed his father through to the dining room. My water glass felt slippery against my fingers.

The dining room of Gwen’s story, presumably of Kenneth’s photos. I’d avoided it so far. Eric brushed past me on his way back to the kitchen.

Crossing the threshold couldn’t hurt me.

Eric returned with two plates, piled high with food. He said ‘beep beep’ behind me, and I pushed myself forward.

The nondescript landscape Gwen had described hung over the table. The one I’d seen in the background of the photos of Eric’s various birthdays. Didn’t they ever move art around?

Mr Mathers rolled himself up to the head of the table, where no chair sat. Eric put a plate there and a fuller one immediately to the right. Mine. I moved reluctantly. Eric had a point – otherwise we’d look like pebbles, hurled from a vast height, scattered around the large table.

Eric returned with his and sat opposite me. Mr Mathers bent his head, and I stared at the thin bit in his cropped hair. The point where the strands themselves seemed weaker, like a soft dying gasp. I’d seen the patch before, but it seemed rude to inspect the hairline of a man in a wheelchair as you stood above.

Eric bent his head as well. A prayer. And Mr Mathers waited on me. I inclined my head. We lacked silverware and napkins. I should have done that. Mr Mathers had already begun praying.

‘ . . . for this food and its nourishment. We ask that you bless our family and this child and help this woman, Luanne Richardson, in her quest to help us. We thank you for the many many blessings you have bestowed upon our family. In Christ’s name, amen.’

‘Amen,’ Eric repeated. I’d never heard him ask a blessing before.

‘I’ll get the silverware,’ I said, trying to hop out of my chair. Sometimes I forgot how heavily my body moved.

I stood still in the kitchen. Did God need both my first and last name when I was in the room? This child? My child? Eric’s strained voice, dripping with controlled anger, just reached the kitchen.

‘Not necessary. Not ev—’ He stopped as soon as I stepped through the dining room door. His gaze skittered down to the meniscus of his wine. I passed silverware to them, rather than show myself up to be the graceless clod I was. The fine art of table setting had not been part of my education, just as formal attire hadn’t figured in Gwen’s. Eric’s jaw stayed tense, his lips thin. How long had it been since I’d come into a room and he hadn’t smiled?

‘I just told Eric you asked about the rings, so we’ll show you. Maybe Saturday? No, Friday would work better. Tomorrow,’ Mr Mathers said. He scooped corn onto his fork. I could have sworn he counted the number of chews before swallowing.

‘Show me?’

‘How the rings are made,’ Mr Mathers said. ‘That is what you wanted?’ He didn’t give me a chance to reply. ‘You should be flattered, really. I don’t believe anyone outside the family has ever seen it before.’

Had the rings sparked Eric’s anger? Why? I dipped my fork into the orange mound of yams. My teeth pinged at the sickly sweetness. And they’d been topped with pecans coated in caramelised sugar. I tried a mouthful of corn. The cream coated my throat. The table where Kenneth had sat, the table that Kenneth had photographed.

I chewed the turkey slowly. At least this was plain. All I wanted was to see a ring up close, perhaps touch a petal. See how sturdy the preserving made them. The table where things had been said about Kenneth’s parentage. My baby’s parentage, by extension.

Eric asked his father something about a market share. Calmly. I kept eating, obeying the chorus of voices in my head reminding me to eat for the baby’s sake. It’d taken me almost five months to do eight interviews. Eleven names to go, plus Mr Mathers, and he had just added to my task list. The second trimester supposedly meant more energy.

Except this was terrifyingly close to the beginning of the third trimester. Soon I’d have to think about the birth plans. The questions the doctor kept asking me. What would come after her birth.

I’d eaten only a third of my meal when the tight pressure in my throat overwhelmed any ability to manipulate my tongue and teeth. I couldn’t cry in front of them.

‘Excuse me. I think I’ll go home, to the cottage.’ I had to stop that slip. ‘Thanks for dinner again.’ My napkin crumpled in my hand. Soft cotton, like Eric’s shirt. I didn’t belong here.

Eric stood. Mr Mathers kept eating. Maybe he’d finish my turkey.

‘Do rest up, Luanne,’ Mr Mathers said. ‘The ring making is at night, and you’ll need to stay awake.’

In the kitchen, Eric spoke softly. ‘Don’t mind him. Finish your dinner, please.’

‘I’m just tired.’ Did he know I’d been to see Gwen? That I knew the dining room had been the place where Miss Katherine claimed Kenneth to be a Mathers? And what Mr Mathers’ acknowledgement that Kenneth had connections to the family might mean?

‘But there’s pie.’ His naked face implored me. How could he eat more sweet food after all the side dishes?

I saw something flicker over the fridge door, but it seemed almost friendly. Familiar. At least my delusions had consistency.

‘Let me walk you home.’ He touched my shoulder. All it’d take would be a half turn, a lean, and I could have the comfort of his arms enfolding me, helping me to hold up the awful weight of my own expectations and fears. I could let my tears fall onto his straight blue shoulder. Hear lies that everything would be fine and that I could be a better mother than mine had been. That making the rose rings meant nothing.

But his hand had already gone, back to his pocket in classic Eric mode.

I smiled. ‘Finish your dinner. Happy Thanksgiving.’

‘Luanne. What’s wrong?’

I kept my smile fixed.

‘Something is bothering you. More than just Dad.’

I could ask what had enraged him, but I didn’t want to know the answer. I stayed silent.

‘Ok. Fine.’ He rubbed his face, the curve between his thumb and forefinger sliding over the bare skin of his upper lip. ‘Good night.’

I closed the side door behind me and crossed the grass. The cottage looked as dark and empty as our apartment had the night Amelia left. As my apartment had looked every night since, except for the month with Chris. Those few days with Kenneth.

Once inside, I turned on every light.

## Chapter 21

Dark clouds scudded overhead on Friday morning. A fine mist clogged the air and settled in my hair as I crossed the grass. Inside the study, I polished the beads of water off my glasses.

‘Not shopping?’ Eric’s voice came from a blur in the doorway. I settled my frames on my face, and he came into focus. Somehow I’d figured Eric to be a sweats and t-shirt kind of guy, but the blue colour of his collared pyjama set I absolutely expected.

I felt nothing. ‘Couldn’t face the crowds.’ Did you get your boss’s son a Christmas present, even if he’s the person you see more than anyone else?

‘Take today off. Especially since you worked yesterday.’ The tie of his navy bathrobe dragged along the floor as he left the doorway. Soft clinks and then the aroma of coffee came from the kitchen.

I had an email from Darren Davies.

I found this picture of June in a box upstairs, so I scanned it in. It’s from my grandfather’s baptism. Also found some mice droppings, so I’m fixing to go out to buy some traps. I’m glad you asked – it would have been spring before I looked up there.

Best wishes,  
Darren

Spring. In spring, I’d have a baby. An external being reliant on me. What the hell was I doing? I called a taxi as I walked across the yard to the cottage in the rain.

Filling the day took me to the mall’s beauty shop. I leaned back in the chair at the sink, the sharp needles of water thrumming against my head. The girl snapped the water off, and she massaged shampoo into my hair. My scalp tingled. I had picked out a little dress in a children’s department, but the screaming kids running around frightened me into leaving it. I stared up at the indistinct squares on the ceiling.

She raised my head from the cool lip of the sink and scrubbed the base of my hairline. It’d been five months since anyone had touched me. Someone handing me papers or handshakes didn’t count. Neither did the hug I didn’t have last night.

Five months without Kenneth.

I’d be buying clothes alone for my daughter for a long time.

‘Oh, sorry, did I get some in your eyes?’ The girl leaned into my blurry vision with a towel, dabbing at my cheeks.

‘No, I’m fine.’ I rubbed my face. Did I really expect him to come back any more? The pinpricks of water beat against my crown.

Lamaze classes started in less than two months. Who would I take as my partner? Siobhan? I could hardly ask Eric.

The girl wrapped a towel around my head. I fumbled my glasses back on as I followed her, but quickly took them off as I sat in front of the lit mirror. No need to see the dark circles under my eyes.

A new woman pulled the towel away and ran her fingers through the length of my hair. Chills chased down my back.

‘Every time there’s a pregnant woman in my chair, I want to take prenatal vitamins.’ Her laugh came from the smudge in the mirror above my head. ‘And such a pretty colour. What do you want done?’

I walked out into the mall in a watermelon-scented cloud. Women dashed into stores with a frantic beat that my body echoed, but not for sales. I had forced myself to read all the sections in the baby books about stress – the ones that said having a fight with your husband or a quick lost-toddler-in-a-park scare wouldn’t hurt the baby. But where was the baby book written for the unintentional single mother-to-be worried about her long-term missing boyfriend? And what if I abandoned my fear, that tiny hope?

Siobhan called, and we agreed to meet for coffee. If I asked her if she believed Kenneth would come back, would she be honest? And would I want to hear her honesty?

‘How did you know you were pregnant?’ she asked as she sat down.

‘Eric told me.’ My voice rose. ‘Are you?’

‘Hush. There are students in here. It hasn’t been long enough to check. What do you mean, Eric told you?’

‘What about Al?’ We could raise our babies together. Except I wouldn’t be staying here.

Siobhan explained that Mary refused to celebrate Thanksgiving with Al and went to Jacob’s family in Virginia. Siobhan and Al had Wednesday night at home alone. How Siobhan cried and he apologised and they made up.

Would Al have sex with his tie still knotted firmly around his naked neck? Check the wave of his hair mid-thrust? ‘One apology?’ I asked.

‘Well, sort of. For Walter. The bird, I mean. His general shittiness, Al’s, I mean. And then yesterday, when his mother said something tacky to me, he stood up for me. Told her to leave me alone.’

‘What about you?’ Two days and she was ready to take pregnancy tests?

‘I apologised too. To Al, not her.’

What words could repair so much anger and resentment? What words could Kenneth offer me if he returned? ‘I’m sorry I left your life in chaos and missed five, almost six months of your pregnancy with our child – I had a very good reason which was X.’ He might come back only to accuse me of faking his paternity to tie him down. He clearly had problems with staying in one place, at least after Gwen’s marriage. I gritted my teeth. If he came back.

‘So, aren’t you excited for me?’ Siobhan asked.

‘Of course I am.’ I put a lilt in my voice. I could be far more excited for her than me.

Siobhan drove me out to the Mathers’ in the semi-darkness. Her car swooshed through deep puddles, although the rain had stopped.

‘You sure you won’t come for dinner?’ she asked.

‘You should have time alone with Al. And Mr Mathers is going to show me how to make the rings.’ I didn’t tell her about Thanksgiving dinner. I didn’t tell her about Eric’s room. I didn’t tell her lots of things.

‘With what?’ She turned onto Mathers Road. Still no sidewalks. ‘The roses aren’t blooming now.’

‘Maybe they’ll buy them. It isn’t a real ring, anyway.’ Hard to imagine Eric walking into the poisoned air of a florist shop and asking for yellow rose buds. Mr Mathers would arrange delivery. The florist carrying the box to the front door. Eric jarring it open.

‘See if you can find out what they use. I could sell preserved flowers like that. Wouldn’t want them in my house, mind, but some would.’

She hugged me in her potential-baby exuberance before I got out of the car. I squeezed her tightly.

Eric paced the porch, his breath puffing out in clouds. It didn’t feel cold compared to New York, but the air definitely warranted a coat that he didn’t wear.

He dashed down the steps as gravel spun under Siobhan’s reversing tires. As if I could run fast enough to avoid a man in his forties, even if the ground seemed to flatten under my feet.

‘Luanne. About tonight, it’s not, it’s, well . . . your hair looks nice.’

‘Thanks.’ Barely a half-inch had been cut off. ‘I’m sort of chilly.’

‘If you don’t feel up to tonight, we can change it. Is it really necessary?’

‘Your father thinks it is.’

‘My father.’ The words sounded as bitter as any I’d heard him utter. ‘You don’t need to touch anything. We’ve never had a pregnant woman near this. Dad says it will be fine, but I – you shouldn’t take any chances.’

I stared at the murky shape of the house, rather than at his earnest face. ‘Is it dangerous?’ Something flitted over the brick. The shadow of a bat, maybe. Not a human shape. Not in the wall.

‘I’m not really – it’s just better to be cautious,’ Eric said. ‘Come in for dinner?’ Another meal with Mr Mathers counting his chews. And I couldn’t flee this time.

After dinner, Mr Mathers disappeared. Eric smiled, but he stayed silent. When Mr Mathers returned to the dining room, a carved wooden box rested on his lap. Eric and I followed him past the study to the side door.

‘I’m really not very good with roses,’ I said. Last minute fears thundered through my head, my stomach. ‘The smell, sort of everything.’

‘You’re just watching,’ Eric said again. He held the door open. Mr Mathers rolled out before me.

‘It’s meant to be the front door. This is unorthodox,’ Mr Mathers said. But Eric couldn’t lift his father’s wheelchair down and up all those steps. ‘It’s meant to be the parents, guided by the grandfather.’

Eric had never done this before. My shoes skidded on the wet grass. He would have made a ring for his son, the missing heir. No wonder he had eaten almost nothing at dinner and had barely spoken. Did this really need to happen in November, at night? Eric’s back stayed straight as he pushed the chair. The pathway to my cottage tempted me, but we rolled on past the rose bushes. Heavy blooms hung on the grey stems. The roses didn’t look imaginary, no matter what Siobhan said. The cloying pollen smelled real too.

Eric stopped the wheelchair about ten yards beyond the roses. The land lifted to meet Mr Mathers’ hand. No, the rise had been there already. Like a little table.

Mr Mathers laid out a strip of dark lacy cloth and several small pots. No roses.

Eric squatted on the ground, fumbling with something. A scrape, and I smelt heat. A tiny flame illuminated a small pit surrounded by flat stones. The flickering tongue caught on scraps of timber with red hearts. Cedar. Not part of their fast-growing timber. Eric suspended a wide-mouthed pot over the pit, hooking it over a spit arrangement. It must have already been there; I hadn’t seen him carry it down.

‘Luanne, will you select the buds?’ Mr Mathers asked. The delivery of his words felt formal.

‘Um. Yes.’ I didn’t want to have to touch them. I should have brought gloves.

‘Mind if I came with you?’ Eric asked. ‘Dad’ll watch the fire.’

Mr Mathers seemed far more occupied with his tiny pots, but he wouldn’t burn down his own land.

Eric took my hand when I stumbled, and he didn’t relinquish it. His felt gritty, but warm against my cold fingers. His palm dwarfed mine. Slight ridges in his neat nails. Did that count as a caress? He grabbed my other hand.

‘You’re freezing.’

He felt nothing.

It hadn't taken this long to go from the rosebushes to the pit, and we had travelled at the speed of a wheelchair. Our breathing seemed too loud; our pace too slow. I had to snap out of this lethargy. The attraction that plucked at my nerve endings.

'You haven't done this before, have you?' His pace remained even. Did I ask to hurt him? To remind him of his lack of a child?

'My family has been doing this as long as we've been in America. Here we are.'

Thank God for the roses. I sneezed. Eric produced a folded handkerchief from his jean pocket. He lit a lantern with a flick of a lighter. Again, the lantern must have been waiting beside the bushes. Where did all this stuff come from? 'We're meant to avoid technology,' he said.

'A lighter?' I knelt next to the rose bushes.

His laugh came sharp and short. 'It is the 21<sup>st</sup> century.' He closed the lantern door and crouched beside me. 'Pick out the buds that will go on the bands. As many as you like, but remember it's a ring finger's worth.'

I used the handkerchief to avoid touching the pollen-poisoned tips directly. I selected two small buds, growing near but not exactly by each other. The paleness of the tips seemed full of promise.

'Right. Cut them near the base, but not so near they fall apart. We can always trim them.' He passed me a tiny pair of clippers, cold and surprisingly heavy. 'Silver,' he said. 'We're very ritualed up around here.'

So why were they doing the full whack as an exhibit for me? It would all go in a report that only they would see – and they knew what was about to happen.

'Can I practice first?' The blades shone. Probably could cut my skin as easily as a stem. I snipped, and petals tumbled into the cloth.

'Too close. A little bit further back.'

Eric's breath stroked my ear, but he had to hold the lantern for me to see. I tried again, and the rose head fell intact. My head felt clogged. Why watch the shadows on his face? I forced my attention onto the smelly, awful plant. My stomach jerked as I clipped the first bud. The second fell before Eric could ask about my gasp. I sat back on my heels and dropped the flowers. Her first kick. She was safe. Well. And possibly pissed off at my body's reaction to the flowers.

Eric put the lantern on the ground. He hesitated, and I pressed his free hand to me. She moved again, and a tiny curve protruded out from my normal bump. A foot? An elbow?

She stilled, and the smell of damp pollen returned. A crackle from the distant fire. The sky had cleared, but the thin moonlight didn't seem to reach us. Eric's hand still splayed across my belly. The lantern light glinted off the red hair on his wrist and his knuckles that tickled my palm. Even through my shirt, his skin radiated heat. What would he feel like against my bare

flesh? His fingers gliding over my face. Skimming my breasts, then lower, past the pregnancy, between my legs. His body sliding over mine. If I leaned . . .

‘Remarkable,’ he said. He commented on a scientific curiosity, not anything erotic.

He touched the pregnancy bump, my child with Kenneth.

I would not allow this to be a replay of being in his room. I could not be attracted to Eric Mathers.

The pollen. The oddness of the night. Pregnancy hormones. My hand felt hot against his, so I forced my fingers to fall to the cool grass. I sneezed again, and my head ached. Eric removed his touch from my stomach.

‘Eric?’ called Mr Mathers’ thin voice.

‘Coming,’ Eric shouted back. He took the flowers and the scissors. ‘I really do appreciate this,’ he said, helping me up. He didn’t touch me on the walk back, until he grabbed my shoulder about five feet from the pit.

‘Just stay here.’

I tried to smile. The entire night reeked of flowers. Pollen granules hit my teeth and coated my tongue. At least my headache swallowed any desire I felt.

Eric’s lantern lit the pots dotted across that small rise in the ground. The rise that had been there before. But if the driveway shifted, why not the lawn? Wooden and silver scoops rested on the open lids. Mr Mathers loomed in his chair behind the fire, red light playing over the sharp edges of his cheekbones.

Eric fetched the pots one by one to his father. Mr Mathers spoke as he spooned and sprinkled powders into the clay pot over the fire. The words, inaudible, had an even rhythm. The firelight glistened on a silver phial of liquid. Spring water, from further down on their land, Mr Mathers had said at dinner. Eric’s body and the spokes of Mr Mathers’ wheelchair cast long shadows.

Once all had been added, Mr Mathers rolled himself jerkily towards me as Eric stirred, clockwise then counter clockwise.

‘An incantation?’ I asked.

‘I was saying a prayer. Then some poetry,’ Mr Mathers said.

‘What’s in the pot?’

‘Glue. The flowers cover the smell. We pray for a good marriage. It almost always works.’

Eric switched directions precisely at the top of each stir.

‘Except for Gwen.’ And the bride this time? My disk in my purse, inside the Mathers’ house.

‘Will you string the roses?’ Mr Mathers handed me a threaded needle and the two buds. ‘This is just for dipping. The moulding to the ring base comes later.’

I forced the needle through the waxy stiffness of the stem, then through the slick petals of the buds. Liquid oozed between my fingers and down my palms. I pushed the needle through the other bud and handed the lot back to Mr Mathers.

‘Thank you. Is this how far apart they should be?’

I shrugged. My skin already burned. He wiggled the first closer to the second. He skirted the fire as he wheeled back towards Eric.

I sat on the wet grass, rubbing my hands against the weave of my jeans. Pale sickness clung to the base of my throat, quivered across my rib cage, as yellow as the buds.

The fire sputtered. Mr Mathers lifted the strand of thread from the pot. The surface of the buds glittered before they disappeared under the surface again. Eric twisted dark cloth. The scrap of lace Mr Mathers had first lain out. Mr Mathers dropped the hot strung roses – it looked like three - into a bed of white crystals on a thin platter. A sizzle, but from the plate, the crystals or the roses? Did the roses writhe as they hit the swirl of the boiling liquid? Inarticulate agony as their pores sealed, frozen in that moment of openness forever? I picked them. Kept them from fully blooming or withering.

Three? Had they strung the full bloom as well?

Eric stood over me. ‘That’s the first stage.’ He held up the lantern. ‘You’re awfully pale.’

‘What’s the cloth?’

‘Lace from my baptismal veil. Dyed black. Otherwise it’d get dirty with daily wear.’  
No one would wear this one, of course.

‘What happens next?’ I sounded professional, curious. Not sick.

‘The roses are dipped every half hour. All night. In the morning, the roses are attached to the veil and the whole thing is dipped. Then it dries out for a minimum of six weeks. Can be longer, depending on the wedding date. Usually,’ he added. ‘Are your hands all right?’ He knelt beside me.

I still scraped them over and over across my legs. Eric took my left hand, wrapped a bit of cloth around my ring finger.

I jerked away. ‘What?’

‘That’s a nasty rash.’ Small bumps cracked across my palms. My flesh suddenly itched.

‘Let me take you back. Get you cleaned up. Dad, Luanne needs to go home.’

I wavered to my feet, Eric catching at my coat sleeve. Mr Mathers waved in the background, but distances seemed variable as if the land rocked underfoot. I retched into the grass. For a brief, glorious moment, I smelled no roses, only acrid, honest bile.

Eric supported me across the lawn, his arm gentle around my waist. I felt nothing. I fumbled my poor, throbbing hand into my pocket for the cottage key, and he unlocked the door.

I went straight to the bathroom and gently rubbed soap over the weeping rash. Brushed my teeth. Took off all my clothes – covered in both wet grass and sick. My bathrobe hung on the back of the door. I had no interest in Eric touching me now.

The hallway snuggled around me, inviting me to bed, but I went into the living room. Eric stopped pacing. Ash marked the front of his sweatshirt. Fragments of letters and images drifted across the walls behind his head, not just on the papers on the coffee table. I didn't attempt to decipher them.

'Should I call your doctor?' he asked.

'Go back to your ring. I just need sleep.' The red dots ate at my freckled flesh. I missed Eric's approach, almost missed the faint scratch of stubble as his lips touched my cheek.

'Thanks for . . . thanks. Sleep well.'

He closed the door behind him. It opened again immediately.

'Don't forget to lock up.'

I went to bed. Would they finish the show ring without the intended audience? The Mathers and their little pots. It certainly didn't smell like glue. And the recessed pit. They'd altered the precious Mathers land for this. Shapes started dancing over the blue bedspread, brushing against the rash on my hands. My treacherous hands that had held Eric's to my body.

## Chapter 22

When I woke, the rash had spread. Past my knuckles, almost to the nails. All over the tender skin of my right palm. What had Eric put around my finger last night? I refused to consider the obvious answer.

My clothes still lay on the bathroom floor. I wanted to throw them away, but the jeans had been expensive. Even flinging them in the washing machine made my hands sting.

The water whooshing almost obscured his knock. I hadn't locked up after all. Eric wore the same smudged sweatshirt. The scent of flowers – and yes, a hint of glue – followed him in.

'I wanted to check on you.' He gently took one of my hands. 'Ouch.'

'I usually take medicine, but with the baby . . . Did you just finish?'

'Both done.'

'Both?' In the kitchen, I pulled out my gold foil packet of tea. Ink flickered away quickly over a can of soup in the cabinet. Could Eric see that?

'Both roses. Both.'

I didn't believe him. I filled the kettle and put it on the stove. The handle pushed against the angry heat on my hands. I left him to pour the water and went to shower.

Eric put my mug on the coffee table as I walked into the living room. I had rid myself of the odour when I washed my hair, but it lingered in the room. From him.

I paced from the bookcase to the far wall. Back again. 'Are you getting married?' Did I care? My fantasies from last night shrivelled in the sunlight. What would happen to my project if Eric got someone pregnant? To my health insurance?

'It's up to the tree, I guess.' Why did he look relieved?

'If it isn't the tree, it's your father. Your grandfather. When are you going to do something for you?' His mug landed hard on the table. Now I'd offended him, and he'd leave. Again.

Two of his long strides crossed the room. He stopped inches from me. 'I admire you.' I turned away from the smell, from his naked lip, from the possibility he might touch me.

'What the hell does that have to do with anything? I'm fat, alone, itchy and I lost my last job. I didn't tell you, but I was allowed to resign rather than getting fired. I got taken in by this man – not Kenneth – God, how stupid could I be to do it again?' I had been stupid with Kenneth. Not matter how often I lied to myself.

'I've known about that. All along.' He shoved his hands in his pockets. 'Dad called your library.'

The rash beat in rhythm with my heart. Could it penetrate to hurt the baby?

'Luanne, the only freedom I have is making bad business decisions. And even those get cleaned up by Dad.'

‘We don’t have much to look forward to, do we? Both of us.’ His voice echoed in my head. *Both.*

‘You have your baby.’

My legs wobbled, and I collapsed on the sofa.

‘Let’s call your doctor. Don’t scratch,’ he said as my fingers curled inward.

The on-call doctor said the eczema cream I had would be fine. She suggested wrapping my hands in gauze to prevent scratching. An efficient, normal woman with a clear-cut job.

‘There’s a first aid kit at the house,’ Eric said.

My prescription had been filled at my usual pharmacy in New York, before I’d lost my job, before I’d met Kenneth. My old address on the label. Back when my life was mine. We crossed the yard. I avoided looking in the direction of the roses.

I feared we’d go up to his bedroom, but Eric left me in the darkened living room. I didn’t want to touch the pale curtains with my rash. The smell of the roses preceded Eric into the room. If only he’d shower. Stop being nice to me. He clicked on a lamp and patted the sofa seat next to him.

We’d spent hours in this room, playing games. The shadows under his eyes looked almost black as I sat down. Reddish stubble shone on his cheeks.

I twisted the cap off the tube, but he took it from me. I figured he’d just wrap the gauze, but he smoothed cream over my right hand, slicking it over each bumpy red patch, between my fingers. My skin prickled at the coolness of the medicine, at the patience of his touch, but the eruptions on my flesh must be disgusting to him.

‘Eczema isn’t contagious,’ I said. He shook his head and switched to my left. I couldn’t relax; I couldn’t let this lull me. I had every right to feel agitated. I wouldn’t even have this rash without Mr Mathers.

He wound gauze neatly around my hand. ‘Will that work?’ I flexed my fingers. He pulled the last three turns off, tried again from a different angle. ‘That’s better.’ He snipped it, then taped the edges. He carefully wrapped my left hand. ‘Now. Don’t scratch.’ He flattened the little box.

The itches crawled over my hands, creeping under the fabric. ‘Thanks.’

‘Luanne, about last . . .’

‘I’m going to do some work.’ I pushed myself off the sofa. ‘Don’t forget to wash that off.’ And shower.

‘It’s Saturday.’

‘I have to finish this.’ My hands throbbed with urgency. My worries at the beauty shop seemed frail in comparison. ‘This job is temporary. I have to move on. For the baby.’

‘Right.’ He didn’t shift from the sofa. I could check my email. Dial a phone using a pencil, if necessary. Study the list, make appointments.

I avoided the sleekness of the statue's body. Except that a piece of paper lay on the table, next to Gwen's marble thigh. A letter. I'd never seen mail put there before. From a lawyer, addressed to Eric.

None of my business.

But Gwen's name seemed to leap off the page, so I pushed the letter flat. Divorce final. The letter bore Tuesday's date. It'd been done before Thanksgiving, before the rose ceremony last night.

What did Mr Mathers expect now? Didn't this mean my job was irrelevant? I passed through the kitchen, where images flicked fast over the refrigerator door.

Mr Mathers blocked the study door.

'Either you let me interview you now, or I quit.' I kept my voice even. Maybe he'd fire me.

'Is the baby all right?'

'I'm fine; she's fine. I want to know some answers.'

'He's fine,' Mr Mathers said.

'What was the purpose of last night? Why did you need to show me?'

'He's fine,' he repeated. The walls bent in towards him again, curving at crazy angles over his head. Not like the soothing embrace of my cottage.

'Eric's in the living room.'

'Not Eric. Your son.'

'Daughter. I've had the scan. No penis.'

'That's impossible. Mathers have boys.' Redness burned over the narrow cheekbones as his hands gripped his chair's arms.

'And my child is a Richardson. Or a Miers. Unless you agree with Miss Katherine about her mother's first child?'

'Did Eric tell you that?' His voice grated.

'Gwen.' I looked past him into the study. 'I can't write notes like this. My recorder's in there.'

Mr Mathers backed up his chair, and the walls exhaled to their normal shape. He touched my stomach again as I passed.

'Are you sure it's a girl?'

'No test is 100%, but yes.' My baby kicked hard at his hand, and I almost felt as though I'd directed her.

'I'll get refreshments. The blue room?'

Great. Another sojourn with the painting of June Mathers. 'Just water, please. Plain water,' I added. My teeth shuddered at the memory of the lemonade.

I fumbled the memory card from the recorder and checked it on the computer. I downloaded my interview with Gwen.

I'd almost forgotten about Darren's email. I printed his attachment while I waited on the memory card. The mouse skittered wildly under my wrapped hands. June, in a sepia photo. She sat in a group, holding a baby in a dress. His grandfather's baptism. The second page – oh, good for Darren. He'd scanned the back. A spidery hand had listed names and the date, 1938. The eight looked thin, perhaps a two? No, an eight. I placed it on top of the folder with June's letter.

I ejected the memory card and fiddled it into the recorder. I had to go face him.

I sat on the same overstuffed sofa as when I talked to Eric. My gauze had already turned a pale grey with dirt. Like their wedding bands.

Mr Mathers rolled in a few minutes later, bearing a tray. A glass of water for me, a pot of coffee for him. I rose to help.

'I'm entirely capable. And you aren't.' He poured his coffee into a china cup, frailer than the mugs Eric used.

I switched on the recorder. 'I've found nothing that suggests anything other than the fact that Eric and Gwen weren't suited,' I said. 'The oddness of your family, particularly your father, didn't help, but marriages fail. The divorce is through now. Did Eric tell you?' Eric hadn't told me.

Mr Mathers waved a hand dismissively.

'Tell me about Eric's wedding.'

'Elinor and I made his ring in advance, of course. She wasn't allergic to roses – she had a knack for them. Have you been this blunt with all your interviewees? Eric had a little panic attack in the sacristy. I had to sit him down, right next to the communion sink. It goes straight to dirt, like our tree. I reminded him that the tree had given Gwen to him. That she was the right choice. He'd calmed down, when my father burst in, ranting about Gwen's dress.'

'After that.' My voice came evenly.

'Well, I smoothed things over. Got Eric to the altar. Dad in the congregation. Elinor came down the aisle. She wore purple. My wife was a beautiful woman. Then Gwen – the gasps from the congregation. Either her boots or that dress.'

His face had grown soft, almost handsome, talking about Elinor.

'I had Eric's ring. And Gwen wore Elinor's. Well, not really Elinor's, it's been passed down for generations. Elinor slipped it off her finger for the last time, and she handed it to the minister. Then they had their vows . . .'

“I wed you with flowers?”

'You have done your research. The reception. Cake, nuts, meats. I can't remember. Eric seemed a little dazed. Happy though. A real grown up at last.'

'At thirty,' I said. By thirty, I'd considered myself to be an adult for at least ten years.

'Gwen was very beautiful – not like she is now – and Mathers have to be very strict about premarital sex, you see.'

Eric would have been excited about sex, but also about his father and his grandfather seeing him as an adult, at last. It showed how little Mr Mathers understood his son, how little he saw him as an adult at forty-six.

‘What happened to your wife?’

‘She and Pearl – you met Pearl – slipped out. I knew Elinor wanted to talk to Pearl, so I didn’t think much about it. There’d been a little rumbling, but Gwen wanted dancing, so there was loud music. Pearl ran in screaming and we all went out – the grass in the courtyard was wet and I nearly slipped, new shoes for the wedding. And then we gathered at the mouth of the arcade. Just a long column of rubble. White dust. A lot of the building had been marble. The whole row was condemned, and the city had never gotten round to doing anything. They couldn’t find enough of her body.’ He sipped coffee. ‘For a burial.’

‘You don’t tell that story with a lot of emotion.’ His casual sip disgusted me.

‘It was sixteen years ago.’

Even years later, would I be able to take a dispassionate sip when discussing Kenneth’s disappearance? I stood and crossed the room to the portrait.

‘Gwen told me about Miss Katherine’s accusations. That Mathers women die on their son’s wedding days.’ A tiny plaque on the frame bore the words *June Davies Mathers, 1882 – 1930*. I wouldn’t have had to search for her name – I could have walked across the hall. Mr Mathers would now no doubt mouth platitudes about coincidences.

‘They have. For generations. But they don’t have to any longer.’

‘I think Miss Katherine was right about June Mathers. William married the wrong woman, if you believe the tree business.’ Which I sort of did. Because it told me to wait.

Wait.

What did he mean people didn’t have to die anymore?

‘There’s no way to know that. Not now,’ Mr Mathers said. His cup clinked against the saucer.

The portrait plaque said 1930. She sat in Darren’s picture in 1938.

He rolled closer to me. ‘The tree ensures our prosperity. This is a country built on suffering, a state built on agonising choices, and we survived it all. God asks – asked – a specific sacrifice from the Mathers.’

Why didn’t he deny it? My rash beat against the wrappings as I clung to the mantelpiece.

‘You killed them,’ I said finally.

‘Harsh, ugly words. They died willingly for their sons. For their sons’ sons.’

‘I have a picture. From June’s great, great-nephew. Of June. In 1938.’

‘So?’ He looked so rational. I sounded sane. Could we be talking about women dying? Not dying – being killed?

‘The portrait says June died in 1930. The family Bible says she died in 1930.’

‘Then the photo is a mistake.’

‘How can you kill your wives?’

‘We don’t. They die. It happens. Naturally.’

‘Like a building collapsing on Elinor? It defies – well, everything.’ In a house where ink moved and people whisked across brick walls. The letters of June’s dates and name started to writhe against the brass plaque. ‘Just stop it!’ I plucked the portrait from the wall. I hurled it at the sofa, wanting to hurt it, to make the leer disappear, the text.

‘You can see it. Gwen never did. A mistake, I admit, for the tree. The house talks to us. The land. The land we bleed for, the land we guard. The disk is right. I knew. And I found the way to make you stay. To love him, to fill the gap.’

‘What gap?’ I inched towards the door.

‘You’re not stupid, Luanne Richardson.’ He spoke conversationally, as if reminding me to take an umbrella. ‘You must have guessed. You’re forgetting him, aren’t you? He’s blurry now. It’s been nearly six months without him, and only two weeks with him.’

Mr Mathers’ words lashed at me. I’d felt something last night with Eric. But Kenneth mattered as the father of my child, if nothing else.

‘You don’t care as much. You didn’t text him the baby’s sex. I bet you told Eric though, didn’t you?’ Mr Mathers’ voice purred along.

‘No, I thought it might upset him so I . . .’ Text. I didn’t text Kenneth. The white pattern in the carpet shuddered.

‘You’ll marry. Fill the gap. The line will continue.’

‘How do you know what I texted to him?’

‘I found a phone. Kenneth’s phone, I think. Just this morning. In the yard.’

The long months of sunshine and heat. The downpour yesterday. ‘It wouldn’t work. Not now.’ I placed my bandages on the arms of his wheelchair and leaned close. ‘Where is Kenneth?’

‘He agreed. At his great-aunt’s funeral. I saw him, so scrawny, so depressed. No job, no money, nothing. He agreed. The DNA test, the July date, if it all checked out.’

‘Where is he?’ I couldn’t bend forward any more. Pain spiked in my back, and the baby shifted.

‘Elinor didn’t die. Ridiculous, 19<sup>th</sup> century thinking. We had nearly sixteen glorious years, weekends, phone calls, everything. But they didn’t get pregnant. And I knew. Pearl called to tell me that Elinor had died, in her sleep. I hung up, and then Eric sort of slunk downstairs to tell me Gwen had left him. I had to stay with him – couldn’t go to her, my Elinor – not when I’d ruined his life.’

Chills enveloped my body, even dimming the rash’s burn. He’d gone into the wheelchair over Elinor. Not over Eric’s failure.

‘Kenneth had nothing, said nothing about you. But you and the baby were proof that God smiled on us again. Ok, you’re a Yankee and a bit sharp, and, well, as you are. It could work – will work. And you’ll marry him.’

‘Kenneth,’ I said. Did I even want to anymore? See him, yes.

‘Eric. Kenneth is dead, of course. But your child will be the Mathers’ heir.’ He gripped my belly, squeezing the baby. I clawed at his hands, but the gauze slipped off his skin harmlessly.

Arms encircled me, pulled me away. Guided me to a chair.

‘Dad, what the hell are you doing?’ Eric’s face, without the moustache, so open and sincere. He couldn’t know.

‘I explained the plan,’ Mr Mathers said.

‘It’s a stupid plan, Dad. I told you.’

Eric knew? I pushed myself out of the chair and rushed to the study. He didn’t stop me. He didn’t explain.

The pages on the desk burned a deep dark blue. No little whirls, no twisting loops – colour flooded the surfaces. Letters leapt from book spine to book spine, chasing the path of the cases.

I grabbed scissors off one of the blue pages and trotted outside, a lifetime of warnings keeping me from running. The blades getting past my glasses, piercing my flesh.

To the roses. Grey and cold, and bare of all roses, although I’d touched them last night. My scissors bit over and over. I stripped off whole branches, ignoring the thorns that plucked the fabric from my hands.

‘Luanne, what happened?’ Eric asked.

‘He killed Kenneth. To fix the gap – because your mother didn’t die.’ I stopped cutting long enough to look up at him. At his wet hair, his stubbled cheeks. ‘Tell me you didn’t know.’ A dry sob shook me. ‘That you didn’t help. That you didn’t . . .’

‘His plan was that I’d marry you. I know that you love Kenneth, that I have no chance, but – killed?’

The rosebush snapped as I broke another stem. Eric’s shadow no longer fell over me. I kept snipping as my hands cracked and bled. Did Kenneth bleed, here on the Mathers land?

‘Move.’ The voice came so discordantly I couldn’t recognise it as Eric’s, but his hand on my shoulder was gentle. I toppled backwards. Eric set a shovel at the base of the oldest rosebush. He forced the shovel again and again until he could pry the plant out of the ground.

Mr Mathers shouted as he wheeled across the yard.

Eric dropped the shovel. ‘Mom didn’t die? How could you let me mourn her?’ Mr Mathers grabbed Eric’s arm, but Eric shoved at his wheelchair. It rolled backwards unevenly towards the house. ‘You lied to me. To Luanne. To Grandfather.’

Eric dug up the two last bushes. They lay in a heap, roots broken and cracked. Gauze fluttered in the slight breeze. Daylight. Could this happen on a Saturday in November?

‘Eric, this is for you. For the family,’ Mr Mathers said.

Eric lifted me to my feet and led me towards the garage. Maybe I supported him too.

‘We’ll go to the tree.’ He pulled the seatbelt over my belly, snapped it into place. Dirt and tears smeared his face. ‘I’m sorry. God, I’m so sorry.’

He backed the car down the slope of the driveway, past Mr Mathers heading towards the house. Eric didn’t stop.

He drove relatively calmly, although he gripped the wheel as tightly as I held my stomach. My breath whistled. Too fast.

‘You got a disk,’ Eric said.

A ripple burned across my stomach. Different. Not like a thin comb lightly stroking over my skin.

‘I believe in the tree, Luanne. Not the roses, but I believe in it. I got a disk. A marry disk.’

‘It told you to marry Gwen.’

‘And we were happy for a little while. It wasn’t entirely a disaster, until I started listening to my grandfather.’ He stopped the car at a light. Blood dotted the enflamed skin of my hands. ‘I don’t want to destroy the tree, but I will. If you want me to.’

My body felt hollow. ‘I don’t feel right.’

Eric’s driving became manic. When I looked up, we were outside the Peebles hospital.

‘I’ll be ok. I just need to . . .’ Eric just opened my car door and helped me out. He sat me down on a metal chair and spoke fiercely to people at the desk.

Within minutes, a nurse led me behind a curtain, where a doctor did an ultrasound and touched my stomach with gentle hands. I had to calm down, she said. My blood pressure had skyrocketed. Not early labour. I didn’t even try to explain what I’d seen.

Dr Bradley smoothed more eczema cream on my rash with cool rubber-gloved fingers. She took my blood pressure again. The metal disk pressed against my arm felt so ordinary, her voice sounded so normal.

‘It’s dropping, but I’m going to keep you overnight to be sure.’ I wanted to ask if I’d have warranted observation without Eric’s insistence. A nurse wheeled me to a private room, which gave me my answer. She helped me change into a hospital gown.

‘Eric Mathers is outside,’ the nurse said. ‘He asked me to ask you if you’d be willing to see him. Real polite.’

I nodded. She rigged up a monitor to me and drew a blanket over me. Eric sidled in a few minutes later.

‘She needs to stay quiet,’ the nurse said before leaving the room again.

‘I’m sorry,’ Eric said, staring at the linoleum. ‘I didn’t know, honestly.’

I believed him. I wanted to believe him. His hair looked darker, still damp from his shower. How could I have left him in the living room such a short time ago?

‘Um, the tree.’

‘Forget it. Pastor Stephens wouldn’t be thrilled if we turned up with axes.’ I waved my finger attached to the monitor.

Eric smiled. ‘I can’t believe you can joke about it.’ He shuffled his feet. ‘I’ll go call Siobhan for you. I am sorry.’

What would he do? Confront his father? Begin the process of mourning his mother all over again? He walked to the door.

‘Will you stay with me? For a while?’ I didn’t want ink to shift or walls to curve in on me alone. He sat in the chair by the bed. I closed my eyes, but each time I checked, he stayed there. Looking at his lap, his hands, the green floor. Anywhere but at me.

I imagined Kenneth at his aunt’s funeral. Again. Standing by the graveside, rain spattering his forehead. Mr Mathers wheeling up to him.

‘You have our sympathies.’ Mr Mathers’ teeth would catch on sympathies, since he would be incapable of the emotion. ‘You don’t look well. You may have heard that Eric and Gwen have separated.’

Would he feel a flicker of joy at the words? ‘Is she ok?’

Mr Mathers wouldn’t answer. Gwen’s well-being would be irrelevant. ‘We find ourselves short an heir. Have you had any children?’

Kenneth’s laugh bubbled harshly from some place dark. Miss Katherine seemed to laugh with him from her casket.

‘You believe my aunt?’

‘I am willing to accept it is a possibility. If you have, bring him – them? – to me. If a DNA comparison confirms your aunt’s theory, your child will inherit generously. You will have maintenance until your death. Shall we say July?’

‘What will I have to do?’

‘Live in Peebles. Raise your child as a Mathers. Get paid to live comfortably.’

‘What about Eric?’

‘Eric will also inherit. You won’t need to see him. And you can’t see Gwen at all. If you do, it’s off.’

And Kenneth found me. Did he just search for a redhead, with our introduction coming via Amelia’s hair salon? Or was it my ragged edges, my desperate need to be loved? How many condoms had he punctured or whipped off in those sixteen days?

Had he loved me at all?

Mr Mathers wouldn’t have expected a child in utero. And when Kenneth turned up, apparently childless, Mr Mathers killed him. Blow to the head, kitchen knife to the chest,

gunshot wound. Poison, more likely. Mixed in the apple juice Kenneth liked. Eric would have noticed blood.

Mr Mathers could be lying. Kenneth just drove onto the interstate and left me. He'd be in Oklahoma, Alaska by now. But he wasn't coming back.

I stroked my stomach. Eric slept, crumpled in the chair.

I believed him, if nothing else.

## Chapter 23

After the doctor cleared me to leave the hospital, I insisted Eric drive me to the house. On the way, I told him about June and her death date.

‘Miss Katherine said that the women dying was made up. But how could people – my grandparents – believe it?’

‘We all tell ourselves stories. Why did I believe Kenneth would come back and be a father?’ I stared at the seat belt stretched over my round stomach.

‘But if he died . . .’

‘Eric, you told me months ago not to trust him.’ His knuckles went white against the steering wheel. ‘Anyway, with the tree and the roses, I can understand why they believed. They seem . . . are . . . real?’

‘It was just a myth to me. Until Mom died. Seemed to die.’

He parked in the drive. Gwen had described Mr Mathers crossing the lawn to the lit house for Miss Katherine’s revelations. Lights didn’t strew the house’s facade like jewels today – every room lay in darkness.

The front door stuck as usual. Eric helped me down the deep step, and we climbed up the three stairs together. The day I’d met him here and decided he was nothing like Kenneth. Had I spotted a brief resemblance between cousins or just suffered an early pregnancy delusion?

The kitchen looked entirely normal. No dirty dishes, no smell of food. In the study, text lay still and quiet.

I took Eric’s hand in the doorway of the blue room. The portrait had been rehung, undamaged.

‘My recorder,’ I said. Proof that I had heard right, that Mr Mathers had killed Kenneth. ‘I left it on.’ It had disappeared. In its place sat Kenneth’s favourite camera. The eye he’d viewed me through, photographed me through. What would the film show? His death? His body? Mine? My weaknesses, my fears, my naked flesh? I opened the back and ripped out the film, exposing it to the sunlight filtering through the curtains.

‘What are you doing?’

‘I don’t want to know.’ I didn’t want anyone – and certainly not Eric – to see me like that, exposed and open, in the process of being hurt. ‘Not if Mr Mathers wanted me to see them.’

Two small objects sat on the mantelpiece, under the rehung portrait. Yellow and black. I didn’t want to see a ring up close anymore. ‘Why are there two?’

‘He wanted – he said you’d wear one too. I was just humouring him. It’s stupid. Look, I’m going to check the rest of the house.’

I retreated into the study, which still felt comfortably mine. I touched pieces of paper, the evidence of my research. What if I hadn't found the Davies? Would Mr Mathers ever have told me?

Eric appeared in the doorway, but he didn't smile like he had so many times before. 'Nothing.' We left through the side door.

The rosebushes flourished. Three buds grew palely on each plant. The dirt around them showed slight signs of disturbance, but otherwise gave no indication that they had been uprooted.

'He couldn't do this alone,' Eric said. The shovel leaned against the house. He picked it up. The earth refused to yield. 'It was easier yesterday.'

'You were angrier.' We'd avoided talking about almost everything.

'I'm just as angry.' He forced the spade, his words spitting out harshly. 'He took away my mother. Why the hell did she agree? Why not ignore it publicly? Grandfather was frail already.' Eric tossed his jacket on the ground and stomped on the edge of the spade, cracking roots that had already been broken. Suddenly the first bush could be tilted out. The next two went faster.

Eric went inside and returned with June's portrait. He threw it on top of the bushes. Thorns scraped at its edges. He took the rings out of his shirt pocket and tossed them on top of the portrait.

'Eric, it's . . .' My librarian's brain protested. Even though I wanted to rip the canvas to shreds, it remained an artefact.

The strike of the kitchen match echoed. Eric held the flaming stick over the portrait.

'Are you sure?' I asked.

He dropped the match. It landed on the painted surface, spluttered and went out. Eric squatted and lit more matches, carefully igniting the branches. The uneasy squeaks and pops sounded more like pain than flames.

The branches writhed, their wood a pale grey-green against the stained frame. Did the roses blame June for taking the disk instead of Josephine? Could I be sure of anything? Any story?

'Crap,' Eric said.

He regretted it. Would he snatch out the flames?

'Oil paint.' Eric pushed me away from the fire. June's nose melted. 'I didn't think about the fumes.'

Her eye seemed to rotate. Impossible. Flat paint on a flat canvas.

'Luanne.' Eric cupped my face, his hands warm against my cold cheeks. 'Go wait in the cottage. It's just a picture.'

I shook my head.

‘Please. I don’t want to hurt you or the baby because I was stupid.’

The smoke curved around us, heavy and malicious. Eric looked smaller. Older. What did it cost him to destroy what his grandfather loved, what his family revered? And he did it for the truth? For Elinor? For me?

He took a step towards the fire. ‘I’ll look after this.’

My fingers closed over the crisp fabric of his shirtsleeve and tugged him back. Our foreheads bumped as I touched my lips to his. He jerked away. I tried to form an offhanded smile, but my cheeks felt lax.

I said his name, my voice scarcely audible over the fire. We kissed, tingles shimmering down my arms, my spine. The width of his shoulders under my palms far exceeded my imaginings. The imprinted texture of his tongue.

I heard a dull roaring, but I attributed it to the kiss, blood flow, if anything. His lips skidded away from mine at the horrendous crack that echoed deep in our ears. We turned just in time to see the portrait split diagonally, tiny rivulets running across her stout arms, the fabric of her dress.

Darkness skimmed fast over the lawn towards the house.

The land underfoot rocked. Threads of shadow twisted up from the grass tips that brushed the base of the house and spiralled across the pale mortar. The thin strips hit the yellow bricks and exploded into full colour. A kaleidoscope of images spun and shook: Eric’s face, with the moustache, then Graham, Rosemary, Elinor, Walter and older faces from the photographs and daguerreotypes. My own.

June, as a slim young bride, skittered alone over the brick. Could she see the burning portrait from the wall?

I wanted to look for a projector, a rational source, but the lights poured up from the land. The storm of colours condensed into a pulsating mass of bruised violet. In the wall of the house? On the wall of the house? The world seemed distant and dim. To think I’d complained about the ink.

‘Luanne,’ Eric said, his arms going around me.

The wild humming lessened and the colour muted to lilac. It didn’t make me less frightened. Eric and I clung together, his warmth real and solid.

The pictures swirled and whirled, split into pairs and slid off the wall into the air. Gwen and Kenneth, Walter and Elinor, older couples. William? A dark-haired woman, not June. Maybe Josephine? Eric and me.

Every brick iridesced. I shut my eyes against the wash of colour, and when I reopened them, three stories of yellow brick all bore a pale lemony purple word. Mathers. The words grew brighter and brighter . . .

And then it ended. The brick looked like brick. The land stayed still beneath our feet.

A bird whistled – the low call and piercing response. ‘What is that?’

‘A bobwhite.’ His arms stayed around my waist.

‘Your father,’ I started. He flinched, but I kept going. ‘He said I could see it, Gwen hadn’t. Did you see . . . did . . .’

‘Yes. Before I married, I saw words moving. Images. Then it stopped.’

‘I’ve seen it since I arrived. Never clearly.’ The baby shifted, and I dropped my hands from his shoulders. ‘I want to go to the cottage.’ The cloying scent of roses stopped me. One of the three bushes grew, flowered in its old place. Full blooms, no buds. The one that Siobhan had said was the oldest. The other two had not reappeared.

Bits of the portrait lay scattered around the plant’s base. The broken chunks of frame bore deep gouges. No scrap of June’s face remained.

‘Do I dig it up again?’ Eric asked.

The roses shivered, maybe from the wind that blew around us. ‘I don’t think it wants to hurt us.’

The trajectory we followed mimicked the one from the night of the rose ceremony, Eric half hauling me across the grass. Today, we walked together. Eric’s hand felt just as large, just as furred as it had that night. Just as charged, but a charge I could feel comfortable with. The cottage door stood open, so I rushed ahead without answering.

‘Luanne, wait.’

I feared Mr Mathers would be inside, but no part of me anticipated seeing Kenneth.

A grey bun showed over the armchair’s back. Eric collided into my back as I stopped in the doorway. Pearl stood.

‘I hoped you’d come,’ she said.

‘Who did that?’ Eric asked.

‘What are you talking about, dear?’ Pearl asked. She meant it – she looked too confused, too convinced her nephew might be mad. Had she really heard nothing?

‘Not who, what,’ I said. ‘The land, not a person.’

Pearl examined us, anxiety clear on her face. ‘Walter said I should wait for you to come out here.’

A small urn sat on the low coffee table, on top of the maternity magazines Eric had bought me. A note rested beside it, in a handwriting I recognised from the archive. Mr Mathers’.

‘Kenneth,’ I said. My child’s father, reduced to ash in a black urn. How had Mr Mathers managed it?

‘I read the note, I’m afraid. It was open.’ Pearl stood, her perfectly smooth hair shining under the light. ‘I’m so sorry. I knew about Elinor, I helped, I’m ashamed to say, but I had no idea –’

‘Where is my mother?’ Eric asked.

‘I kept an urn, like this. For your father. He collected it yesterday, and asked me to tell you the truth.’

‘When did she die?’ His calmness didn’t match the tremor I felt in his body.

‘November 16<sup>th</sup>, last year.’

‘The day Gwen left me,’ Eric said. ‘But you were so upset at the wedding.’

‘They told me a week later. Elinor had been here in the cottage, all this time. Walter bought the house next to ours, and she lived there. No one knew her in Tapford, see. She could watch you from the windows, when you visited.’

Did Kenneth’s remains really fill the container? Had he been inside the house the night I rang the bell for half an hour straight?

‘It hurt her, dreadfully, but they really thought it was the only way. That your grandfather would, if he knew – though he found out anyway. Walter smuggled her in to work on the roses the day Graham fell. Walter believes that Graham saw her. But the roses were dying under Gwen’s care.’

The roses that regrew from fire, from broken roots. Eric’s arm steadied me as we went into the cottage. I sat on sofa, as far away from the urn as I could. Mr Mathers’ note lay on the table. The letters stayed perfectly still, but I looked away before I could process the upside down words.

‘How could you keep it from me?’ Had Eric ever shouted at his aunt before?

‘Elinor wanted me to.’

My child’s father’s ashes. But the images on the house hadn’t put us together at all. Walter and Elinor, me and Eric, Kenneth and Gwen. Had she married the wrong cousin?

‘Where is my father?’ Eric asked.

‘Walter says in his letter that Kenneth, um, volunteered,’ Pearl said. ‘That it was a willing sacrifice. Something about the land. Sounds like nonsense to me, but Walter believed. Elinor too, although she wouldn’t have, she couldn’t.’

‘Have killed Kenneth,’ I said. She had already died by then, anyway. I leaned forward and touched the side of the urn. Cold ceramic. I didn’t want to hear Walter Mathers’ versions or excuses. The deep layering of the family stories.

‘He collected Elinor’s remains and left,’ Pearl said. ‘Said he’d go away and be with her. He looked awful.’ She pushed the open paper towards Eric. ‘He says here he’s going to die.’ She stood, her dress flaring out neatly. ‘I need to get back to John.’ She kissed Eric’s cheek, and he recoiled. Slightly, but we both saw it. ‘I am sorry, Eric. We owed so much to Elinor. And Walter. I hope you can forgive me.’ She closed the cottage door behind her.

Eric didn’t sit beside me. ‘Come on, pack.’ He tugged at my hand.

‘He’s not here.’

‘I’m not staying.’

‘Where will you go?’ I’d suggested he leave, just yesterday morning in this room. Why did it bother me now?

‘A hotel. Just pack.’ Eric found my suitcases and urged me to leave my maternity jeans, still wet in the tub of the washing machine. I waited in the car while he went in the house. I didn’t want to see his room, the brides’ pictures or the tree branches wrapped around the Mathers’ mattress. He flung a bag in the trunk, and then turned the car around and sped down the sloping driveway.

Our first meeting when I called his father a liar and vomited in this car. All his smiles in between. The meals, our games. His disappearance. My fantasies beside the rose bushes. The kiss we’d just shared.

He braked the car at the bottom of the driveway, quickly looking for traffic.

‘Wait,’ I said.

Eric slid the car into park. I rested my hand on top of his.

‘Why have you been so nice to me? All this time?’ His eyes shifted away from mine. He used to only do that when he talked about Gwen.

‘He told me to – to convince you. He’d call to check, but then . . .’ He stared at our hands on the gearshift.

It had only been to fill the gap, as Mr Mathers said. If I’d been a designer rather than a researcher, I would have been hired to redo the house. My job had ended, and I’d move on. I’d been another family duty for Eric, and a divorced middle-aged man had no reason to turn down a kiss. The turn signal ticked. I pulled my hand into my lap.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said.

‘I’m just sorry you had to waste your time.’

‘Luanne.’ He turned the car off and twisted in his seat to face me. ‘I wanted to spend time with you almost from the beginning. For you. No matter what he said. When I told you about Gwen, I realised I wasn’t worried about how I’d disappointed him, for the first time in ages. It was about how I’d disappointed you.’

I stared down at the white fleck on the sidewall. He’d followed his father’s instructions all his life. Would this be a continuation of the same? Both of us listening to Mr Mathers’ plans?

Eric brushed his thumb over my rashy palm. ‘I’m trying to say I’ve loved you for months. If you’d even want me, after all you’ve heard.’

‘I . . .’ Who should I believe? Him? The land? Mr Mathers? His shoulders hunched beside me. Kenneth, whether or not he was in the urn I’d left in the cottage, never would have cared the way Eric did. He never would have comforted me. I would have missed this high flutter in my stomach from the barest skim of Eric’s skin against mine. ‘Can we figure out a way to stay together?’

He kissed me. The grading of the land eased towards flatness beneath us.

On the way to a hotel, we stopped at a restaurant. How could everything be so normal after what we'd seen? Luridly painted cows adorned the entryway's walls. People chatted and laughed. Thought of us as employer and employee.

A waitress led us to a booth. Eric lightly stroked just my finger, and I tingled.

'I need to explain something. The morning you came to Peebles, my father sent me to Atlanta on a pointless business trip. For no rational reason at all, I found myself turning into the church parking lot. It wasn't even on my way. Inside, I got a disk. A marry disk. At the time, I didn't . . .'

'Luanne!' Siobhan's arms went around me fiercely before I even registered her approach. Eric withdrew his touch. 'What are you doing here? Why didn't you answer your phone? Somebody at church said they'd seen you at the hospital.' I patted her arm.

Al took two menus from a passing waitress. 'I think we're joining them. There's room, right?

Before Siobhan could drop down beside me, I said, 'Eric, sit here. Since you're left handed.' He couldn't sit next to Al, not today.

Eric slid into the booth beside me. He clenched my hand under the cover of the table as Al and Siobhan settled themselves on the opposite side.

'Why didn't you call me?' Siobhan demanded.

'My blood pressure spiked. The baby's fine; I'm fine. Just for observation. Eric stayed with me.'

'They said she needs to rest. Stay calm,' Eric said.

Al passed Eric the silverware from their side of the table, still pristinely rolled in its napkin. 'I'll get fresh. So what happened?' He unfolded his menu.

'I found out about Kenneth. He's dead.'

'Oh, honey.' Siobhan grabbed my arm. 'How – sorry, that's not resting.'

I would tell her, but not here. The story didn't fit a sunny Sunday afternoon in a chain steakhouse. 'Mr Mathers' detective. They don't know how yet.'

Siobhan stroked my rashy skin, murmured condolences. She'd been the only person who didn't tell me my hopes about Kenneth had been ridiculously misplaced. Who listened to my foolish concept of his proposal and didn't laugh. 'You've been a wonderful friend, Siobhan.'

'Are you leaving Peebles?'

I shook my head. Tears rose to my eyes, but more for my own stupidity than anything else. So quick to see love in sex, in his flattering voice. Eric pressed a tissue in my hand, the folds warm from his pocket. Siobhan's eyes flicked from his face to mine sharply, but the waitress came to take our orders before she could question me.

'Where is Mr Mathers?' Al asked when the waitress left.

‘He’s not very well,’ Eric said. No doubt he wasn’t, if he’d crawled off to die. How quickly we found our stories for the public.

‘And you’re here with Luanne?’ Al’s disdain came through clearly.

‘He insisted Eric make sure I was ok. Eating, and all,’ I said.

‘Very selfless of him. As is his wont.’

His wont was killing Kenneth. I could hear Al saying, ‘We’re doomed’ about Eric taking over Mathers and Son. See in Al’s face that my well-being ranked far below Mr Mathers’. Know what he thought of Eric, frivolously eating rather than nursing. I leaned back against the booth’s leather and kicked Al in the shin as hard as I could.

‘Ow. Shit. Luanne, that hurt.’

Eric smoothly turned his laugh into a cough. His fingers slipped onto my knee.

‘We’re packed in here a little. I’m sorry.’

‘You certainly seem healthy enough. Are you sure Mr Mathers is ok?’

‘Al, she’s had a shock. Let’s talk about something else,’ Siobhan said.

‘I’ve decided to run for office.’ Al’s fingers rose to his tie. ‘City council, in the autumn.’

‘Won’t that be hard with a new baby?’ I asked.

‘Siobhan.’ Al’s voice sounded stiff.

‘We don’t know for sure yet. And we wouldn’t tell people this early anyway.’

Did Eric count as people? Or maybe I did, to Al.

‘I hope your family will support me,’ Al said to Eric. Eric’s stubble caught the light as he smiled. Hard to imagine him voting for Al, much less stumping for him.

The meal dragged on. I wanted to talk to Eric, to curl against him, to rest my aching head. Not make chit chat with Al.

‘You’re practically falling asleep at the table, both of you,’ Siobhan said. ‘Luanne, come home with us. You don’t need to be alone at the cottage.’

‘Eric’s taking me to a hotel,’ I said.

‘And leaving you? That’s worse,’ Al said. ‘Unless . . .’

Eric’s arm curved around my back. ‘We’re going together. And I don’t care about my father, and we aren’t discussing it. Let’s get the bill.’

‘I knew it,’ Siobhan said. ‘Mary said I was crazy, but I knew you’d stay. This is wonderful! Are you getting married?’

‘No,’ Eric and I said together. We hadn’t discussed it at all, but marriage after his father would be impossible.

‘You really should,’ Al said. ‘The way it looks, with the baby and all, people will assume that – well, that you got your job because you were pregnant.’

Al couldn’t fathom the absolute truth of his statement. But it meant that I could be here, with Eric. And Siobhan. Surrounded by people for the first time in my life.

Two weeks later, a courier delivered two urns and death certificates for Kenneth and Mr Mathers to the Milbury office. Kenneth's funeral was private; Mr Mathers' very public. Eric sat stiffly through the radiant eulogies, the stories that recounted Mr Mathers' generosity and goodness. No one saw that two urns – Mr Mathers' and Elinor's – went into the grave. Gwen came to both funerals, but she didn't speak to Eric or me.

I completed my work in the archive. In the study of the yellow house, contractions started squeezing my body as I finished. The walls curved protectively around me until Eric arrived to take me to the hospital. The drive stayed flat under his tyres.

I wrote the stories from my interviews, as well as the story of my search. At first I told myself it'd go with the archive, but I put in far too much detail for public access. Then I wrote it for Dana, but I commented too freely on her father. I wouldn't have wanted to read such honesty about mine. Then Eric became my intended audience, to find his past, to see how our friendship had turned into my love for him. But I hesitated, just a little, before offering it to him to read. And in that moment, I knew that I wrote it for me. To finish the stories and to articulate my place in the Mathers family.

Now I work in the county's archive, and I've kept writing. The scorched blue sky feels familiar to me now, in my third North Carolina summer. Dana's first words dripped a Southern accent as thick as Amelia's children's. Daddy sounds almost like Deddy when she calls Eric.

'Siobhan told me the good news about your upcoming wedding.' Al straightens the knot in his tie. 'You don't look cheerful, Eric. Did Luanne have to persuade you?'

Siobhan pulls her son Tod's little sailor suit into place. She mouths 'sorry' at me.

'Mutual decision,' Eric says. For once his fingers feel cold against mine. He doesn't say that he wanted to cancel the wedding this morning. I found myself in another bathroom, staring at another unexpected pregnancy test. But this time Eric held me. No my solitary pacing. And I could blend our faces, his green eyes, my brown, together in the mirror.

After we decided to marry, I asked if he wanted to read the stories. He had finished just this month. And now we're pregnant. He voiced it first, but I thought it too – did the stories have the power to fail birth control?

We comfort ourselves that our changes will be enough to disrupt the Mathers' myths. Today, Al, as city councillor, opens the Mathers' house as the Peebles History Centre. The land stays ours; the building belongs to Peebles.

'This town looks to you, Eric. Still.' Al touches the lapel of his suit, clearly comparing it to Eric's.

Eric jogs after Dana as she toddles towards the rose bush. He scoops her up, her patent leather shoes twinkling in the sunshine as he lifts her high. Her delighted laughter peals off the side of the house and shakes the rose petals.

Al strolls towards another city councillor. I know what he really wants to say – the town looks to Eric still, despite the way his choices transformed Peebles by selling Mathers and Son. Mathers, the artistry wood company, will never compete in scale. But the land seems happier. More settled.

‘Why won’t you have even a single rose at the ceremony?’ Siobhan asks. She waves towards the house. ‘They’re beautiful. The wedding sounds really small.’

‘Low-key. And they’ve got too much of a history for Eric’s family.’ I’d explained some, but not all, to Siobhan. Eric plops Dana down on a blanket next to Tod.

‘I’m not suggesting the rings. Besides, it can’t go back that far, yellow roses that were easy enough to grow outside didn’t reach here until the 19<sup>th</sup> century.’

‘I was always told they came with the first Mathers to America.’ Eric watches Dana’s sturdy body lead Tod across the grass. ‘In 1790 something, from Europe.’

‘Europe, yes. That long ago, not possible.’

Siobhan hadn’t seen the rose regrow from broken roots, from fire. That rosebush could do anything it wanted. The dogwood tree from the church frightens me less than the roses, with the soft pink edging the petals of its flowers. We replanted it next to the rosebush not long after Dana was born, right after Eric adopted her.

‘Siobhan, Tod’s going to get dirty,’ Al calls from across the grass. He points at Tod, scraping at the bark of a persimmon tree while Dana watches. Siobhan runs towards them.

‘Al’s speech is bound to be awful,’ Eric says.

I nod. ‘Dana’s dress will wash.’ Even the floaty dresses of my imaginings.

Eric wraps his arms around me, his hands cradling my stomach. ‘I am happy about this, you know.’ His kiss tickles my neck.

A faint flush bleeds across the dogwood’s branches. Red tinges the leaves and envelops the flower petals. Eric’s embrace tightens. Rosiness trickles down the trunk. Does that low hum come from the people talking or the yellow bricks shimmering faintly?

‘Luanne, we’re about to start.’ Siobhan’s voice, distant. I don’t move. The crimson light plays over my body, its touch warm on our hands, our baby.

‘Mr Mathers?’ someone calls. Dana bumps against my leg, and the light pools on her strawberry blonde ponytail, tufted like a tiny palm tree.

‘Pretty,’ she says. Her fingers reach upwards, trying to catch the dancing patterns on my abdomen. The light fades gently to the warmth of sunshine and Eric’s skin against mine.

Dana tugs at my dress. Maybe she says something else, but my head buzzes. I bend down to pick her up.

Eric hugs us both tightly. Dana giggles, plucking at his hair.

## Paradidomi: Magical Realism and the American South

Paradidomi is comprised of a novel and this critical reflection. The novel component, entitled *The Mathers' Land*, draws on traditions of magical realism, storytelling, memory and metafiction. The framing narrative of the novel follows Luanne Richardson, a librarian who has moved South with her new boyfriend, Kenneth Miers. As soon as they arrive in Peebles, North Carolina, Kenneth disappears. Luanne only knows that he last visited a particular house that belongs to the Mathers, the richest family in Peebles. Luanne forces an encounter with the head of the family, Walter Mathers. Despite her initially confrontational contact, Walter Mathers offers Luanne a job to construct a history of his family through interviews and records. He hopes the history will provide an answer to why his only son Eric has not produced an heir.

Luanne's research draws her into a claustrophobic society where no one seems to notice the frequent deaths of the wives of the Mathers family or their odd attachment to roses and a dogwood tree, as elements of magical realism occur in the frame story. The interviews Luanne conducts appear on the pages of the novel as fully developed stories, which draw on themes of tradition, loss and family attachment. These themes are explored through perceptions of memory and storytelling, until Luanne finds a solution to Kenneth's disappearance and the Mathers family's history.

This reflection considers both what methods and writings made it to the thesis as well as what methods and writings did not. I begin with my shifting allegiance in modes of construction, from the use of Oulipian and metafictional techniques to the use of magical realism. I trace the most significant decisions I have made in the construction of the novel. The major influences from specific writers are addressed in terms of structure, magical realism and Southernness. My PhD ultimately responds structurally to three main authors: Harry Mathews, Joseph McElroy, and Mischa Berlinski. In terms of themes and critical approaches, four North Carolina authors have been influential: Sharyn McCrumb, Randall Kenan, Steven Sherrill, and particularly Doris Betts. I finally address the question of what it means to be an expatriate 'Southern' writer.

In my early PhD reading, I focussed on Oulipian and metafictional writers, such as Harry Mathews, Raymond Queneau, Italo Calvino, Joseph McElroy and Jane Rule, and I gained a strong interest in narrative construction. Reading these writers alongside fantasy and magical realism writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Doris Lessing, C.S. Lewis, Thomas Mann, Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter, Robin McKinley and José Saramago, as well as short story writers such as Alice Munro, pushed me towards a focus on the use of myth and storytelling traditions. I also read many Southern writers, including Anne Tyler, Harper Lee, Flannery O'Connor, Bobbie Ann Mason and Allan Gurganus, and their use of varying degrees of 'realism' about the South influenced the way I constructed my fictional town of Peebles, North Carolina.

In 2001, I moved to the United Kingdom from Kannapolis, North Carolina, a small town in the American South. I have been back to the South for visits, but I consider my permanent residence to be in the UK, which is why I embarked on my PhD in this country, rather than in the US. Despite the fact that the novel takes place in the South, I did not initially consider Southernness to be a particularly important part of my PhD. I always intended the novel to be set in the South, as I write, in part, about what I have experienced. Doris Betts, a North Carolina writer, in discussing whether or not she was ‘A Southern Writer’ (capitals hers), points out that she could not ‘imagine my people set down in Indiana...because Indiana is only a word for me; I don’t have any . . . hills, or temperatures to go with the idea’.<sup>1</sup> As my PhD progressed, however, it became more apparent that I would need to address the Southernness in my novel.

I studied Creative Writing at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill as part of my bachelor’s degree. Doris Betts taught my first Creative Writing class, and she has had a great influence on my writing – not merely because of her teaching but through her own writing. Doris Betts has won multiple awards, including a Guggenheim fellowship, the North Carolina Medal, the American Academy of Arts and Letters Medal of Merit, and an Academy Award for an adaptation of her short story ‘The Ugliest Pilgrim’.<sup>2</sup> She has written many novels and short stories, but the two novels I explore in this essay are *The Sharp Teeth of Love* and *Heading West*.

In my final year at the University of North Carolina, I started a novel for my BA thesis. The novel was linear, and in many ways, a traditional Southern narrative. The main character, a mid-thirties married woman, tried to leave her husband, his domineering family and the family run business, Pebworth Plumbing. She worked for a company that only sold sensible bras – Bras: Our Only Business was their slogan, leading to many jokes and to the novel’s title, *Life with Support*. With the beginning of my novel, I won the Max Steele Fiction Prize from the Creative Writing department, was shortlisted for the Dana Novel Award and was awarded highest honours for my thesis, but I did not leave university with a complete novel. The novel lingered as I worked in office jobs in North Carolina. When I came to the UK in 2001 to start my master’s degree, I planned to finish *Life with Support* for my thesis.

I found myself feeling limited by the traditional narrative, the linearity and the normalcy of the characters. I found myself liking the characters too much – so much so that I wanted to protect them, to keep them from making bad decisions – otherwise known as taking away plot. I could never decide if I was writing a humorous, light-hearted novel, or if I was writing an emotional exploration of the breakdown of a marriage. The problems with finishing my original novel had not been pressures of a working life, but a result of problems internal to

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<sup>1</sup> George Wolfe, ‘The Unique Voice: Doris Betts’, *Kite-Flying and Other Irrational Acts: Conversations with Twelve Southern Writers*, ed. John Carr (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972) 152.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Evans, *Doris Betts* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1997) xiii-xvi.

the novel's structure and themes. Once out of the South, I also began to realise that the novel I wrote could have been my life, if I had stayed in North Carolina.

Halfway through my MA, I gave up on my early novel, after working on it for five years. It felt like a death. My MA thesis was a collection of poetry, short prose and an essay about ending the novel. I determined that my next novel would be different – no more linearity for me. I wanted to find a new way to tell stories, a method that would subvert the traditional Southern narrative that I could have written or lived. I felt pushed towards new directions.

A series of images and a word became the basis for the content and themes of my PhD project. The images were of a bride wearing a white minidress and pink knee boots, a sister searching through the rubble of a collapsed arcade, floral wedding bands on three generations of men, and a tree inside a church that dispensed wooden disks. The four images all came from my dreams. I had literally and metaphorically boxed and put away *Life with Support*, as well as writing my new, unplanned MA thesis and trying to draft a PhD proposal. I had returned to North Carolina, in the midst of a turbulent time with my family.

When I woke up from a dream that included someone shouting 'Get it, get it?' (the wedding photographer, taking a picture of the groom, his father and his grandfather in which all three generations wore matching floral wedding rings and clutched the bride's yellow straw purse), I felt I should pay attention, despite the fact I generally did not note dreams. The second dream had a woman in a church receiving something off a living tree that looked like a wooden Tinker Toy. I refined this down to the wooden disks in the novel, such as the one Luanne receives that says wait and the ones that the wives receive that say marry.

Not long after I started my novel, I met novelist Tracy Chevalier. When discussing what I was working on, she warned me that dreams were dangerous inspirations, because dreams rarely seemed as interesting to other people. Her first novel, *The Virgin Blue*, used a character's dreams as a plot device and she suggested she would not write that novel the same way today. Bert O. States has explored dreams as texts, and he raises a similar point, that it '... is precisely why dream reports are so boring to other people: they do not arouse or fulfil a reliable set of anticipations' as those set up in fiction.<sup>3</sup> I do not normally fall asleep planning to gain ideas for novels based on what I dream. However, in an earlier book, States highlights the connection between dreaming and play, pointing out that in dreaming, 'it is the brain doing what it does best without the impediment of actuality'.<sup>4</sup> As a fiction writer, I felt that my brain had done this – produced images that resonated outside of the context of the sleeping dream when I had been struggling for ideas. These images - the collapsing arcade and the sister's terror, the bride in the minidress, and the ominous feeling that the men holding a purse deliberately limited the woman to a possession or a vessel – provided a starting point and became the basis of the Mathers

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<sup>3</sup> Bert O. States, *Dreaming and Storytelling* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) 75.

<sup>4</sup> Bert O. States, *The Rhetoric of Dreams* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988) 128.

family. I felt I could find a tentative way through the traditional paths of dreams and the resonance of language.

Mindful of Chevalier's warnings, I struggled to determine what authority I should give this inspiration. I did not want to feel compelled to stay faithful to the dream, but rather I wanted to be able to draw from it as I would a stand alone text or image. I deliberately altered elements. The early versions of my novel included two additional characters, both of whom appeared in the initial dream. The first was a guest, a person who attended the wedding but did not know the family, and the second was Anna Akhmatova. In my dream, the sister called out for Akhmatova as she ran from the collapsed arcade, but I could not find a useful link for the Russian poet. Both the guest and Akhmatova were dropped as characters.

The same spring, I rediscovered a word I had written on an index card as a BA student. The word 'paradidomi' (along with the comment 'could be useful someday') came from a religion class I took to fulfil a general requirement as part of my American undergraduate degree. Paradidomi is a Greek word with seven different definitions, including:

1. to give into the hands (of another)
2. to give over into (one's) power or use
  - a. to deliver to one something to keep, use, take care of, manage
  - b. to deliver up one to custody, to be judged, condemned, punished, scourged, tormented, put to death
  - c. give oneself up to slavery
  - d. to deliver up treacherously
    1. by betrayal to cause one to be taken
    2. to deliver one to be taught, moulded
3. to commit, to commend
4. to deliver verbally
  - a. commands, rites
  - b. to deliver by narrating, to report
5. to permit, to allow
  - a. when the fruit will allow that is when its ripeness permits
  - b. gives itself up, presents itself
6. give oneself over to debauchery<sup>5</sup>

I reinvestigated the word, and I found that the contrasts of betrayal, education, slavery and ripening suited a family novel. The images and the word seemed to mesh well together.

### Structure

I had my ideas for the PhD project, but I now needed to find a form for the novel. My readings near the end of my MA had encompassed many Oulipian writers' works, particularly

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<sup>5</sup> Thayer and Smith, 'Greek Lexicon entry for Paradidomi', *The New Testament Greek Lexicon*, 18 June 2008 <<http://www.studylight.org/lex/grk/view.cgi?number=3860>>.

those of Raymond Queneau and Harry Mathews. The Ouvroir de littérature potentielle (Oulipo), founded in 1960, explores ‘what becomes possible when writing is subjected to arbitrary and restrictive procedures’.<sup>6</sup> Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as ‘fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality’.<sup>7</sup> I was drawn to metafictional and Oulipian restraint, as these constructivist narrative strategies seemed to offer exciting new ways to be not just inventive in telling stories but inventive in *how* I told those stories. I felt that the techniques could keep me from being trapped by a linear story that felt too much like a life I might have lived if I had stayed in North Carolina. I wanted to question Waugh’s boundary between fiction and reality through my writing, not just narrate the reality of North Carolinian life.

Mathews used Oulipian methods in writing his 1987 novel *Cigarettes*. The novel is nonlinear and structured around the pairing of two characters in each chapter. The character names form the titles of the chapters, and the novel explores the relationships between a group of linked families and friends in the Hamptons. Mathews has called *Cigarettes* his only purely Oulipian novel, although he will not reveal the constraints used.<sup>8</sup> The novel shows the formulations of relationships and their fundamental mutability to be a creative act, which is mimicked by the creation of paintings, critical theory theses and pornographic poetry by the characters. The frequent use of art and paintings in the text serves a metafictional role in the novel, as Waugh suggests that other creative acts can ‘replace overt references to novelists writing novels’.<sup>9</sup> An unnamed narrator, who is seemingly omniscient, relates the stories to the reader. Only in the final chapter does the reader become aware that the narrator is Lewis, one of the characters.<sup>10</sup> During the novel, Lewis is encased in concrete and rendered speechless by his artist lover. His lover freezes him to hurl verbal abuse at him, as both an artwork and as a sexual act, but the lover dies before Lewis can be freed. Lewis must make miniscule movements to build momentum to topple himself and shatter his prison.<sup>11</sup> By the end of the novel, Lewis reveals that he has narrated all – breaking his own silence. The silencing of the narrator within the text of the story emphasises the orality of the act of telling a story, and the physical movements of Lewis echo in the narrator’s effort in the creation of the text.

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<sup>6</sup> Harry Mathews, ‘Translation and the Oulipo: The Case of the Persevering Maltese’, *The Way Home: Selected Longer Prose* (1989. London: Atlas Press, 1999) 94.

<sup>7</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1984) 2.

<sup>8</sup> Harry Mathews and Alistair Brotchie, comp., *Oulipo Compendium* (London: Atlas Press, 1998) 126.

<sup>9</sup> Waugh 118.

<sup>10</sup> Harry Mathews, *Cigarettes* (1987. New York: Collier Books, 1988) 291.

<sup>11</sup> Mathews, *Cigarettes* 150-154.

In discussing *Cigarettes*, Mathews states that he wanted to write the story of a friendship between middle-aged women through the use of an elaborate scheme, which he populated with characters and situations that

. . . belonged to the world I had grown up in. I had never been able to face writing about it before, even though I'd wanted to make it my subject from the moment I turned to fiction . . . For Perec and me, writing under constraint proved not to be a limitation but a liberation.<sup>12</sup>

I felt that the use of metafictional techniques or constructivist structures would allow me to push my writing beyond a traditional narrative. Early on I had decided that the creative portion of my PhD proposal would have twelve primary characters, with the narrative conceit of all twelve gathering to play a game that involved telling stories. Each of their stories would elucidate a different polysemous word – and be told in a completely different genre – and have a completely distinct narrative voice. All twelve stories would reveal a greater whole narrative, which would be linked by a host character who presided over the game. The host character would provide an overarching narrative bridge, serving to orient the reader as well as to compel the characters to tell their stories.

This original structure idea would have followed in some ways the basic themes of *The Canterbury Tales* and Rana Dasgupta's *Tokyo Cancelled* (where the storytellers are trapped by snow in a Tokyo airport), telling stories to pass the time. My novel would have differed in that all the characters telling stories already knew each other in some form, and so the stories they told were designed to force the revelation of secrets, rather than to pass the time. I decided the frame story would be based in the wedding party of the Mathers family, but the stories told would not necessarily relate to the family's rituals. The exploration of polysemous words would follow the initial ideas evolved from the word paradigm.

The novel initially had clear distinctions between the stories told by the characters and the space where the stories were told in a 'still room'. The phrase echoed the stillness of the space where the game is played, as well as drawing on the meaning of the word, which refers to a room in a house where 'a still was kept for distillation of perfumes and cordials'.<sup>13</sup> The space became where stories are distilled. The host described the surroundings, including yellow roses. The game space was filled in with more detail with each new story. Three stories into the game/novel, the page appeared as:

Still room.

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<sup>12</sup> Mathews, 'Translation' 110.

<sup>13</sup> 'Still room', *New Oxford English Dictionary*, 2001 ed.

Four corners, four vases. Yellow petals almost brush crimson walls.

Twelve straight chairs placed precisely over the boards of the wooden floor, circling the central table.

Twelve yellow flowers rest on the white tablecloth.

Paradidomi.

*Come to the table for all is prepared.*

*The feast of \_\_\_ begins.*

A single footfall reverberates. The petals quiver.

When stillness resumes, ten people sit in the chairs. The precise arrangement of chair legs to wooden floorboards has not been altered.

Two chairs remain empty.

A female voice speaks.

*Only one voice can speak at any given time. The rules will become clear as we progress.*

*You are the sleepers. I am your host.*

*Welcome.*

Between these explorations of the space, a poem populated itself on the following page, which grew from a Dadaist treatment of elements of flight within Apollinaire's poem 'Zone'. North Carolina witnessed the first airplane flight in 1903, so the imagery related to the setting of the novel.<sup>14</sup> Religious elements appeared strongly, drawing on historical and modern Lutheran

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<sup>14</sup> United States, Department of the Interior, National Parks Service, 'Wright Brothers National Memorial, North Carolina', 9 June 2009. 10 June 2009 <<http://www.nps.gov/wrbr/>>.

wedding and Eucharist services. I applied Oulipian and other metafictional restraints to the stories the storytellers narrated. Pearl, Elinor's sister, told her story following Joe Brainard's 'I Remember' construction, which suited a nonlinear recital of her history with the circus after she ran away from Peebles. For the wedding of Eric and Gwen, Eric's father (at that time a completely different character to the Walter Mathers who appears in the novel in the thesis) narrated an epithalamium, following Oulipian rules, in which the 'marriage song' is written using only the letters of the names of the bride and groom.<sup>15</sup> As Eric and Gwendolyn Mathers did not contain a 'u', the poem relied overly much on 'thy', which created an arcane feel. I felt that changing the characters' names would be cheating, in this instance. The Oulipian structure of the epithalamium had appeared at first to be ideal – the form matching the marital content of the story, but that same form kept me from telling the story as I envisioned it. In a realist narrative, I could have explained the family's marital traditions, but with using only certain letters, the story necessarily became truncated.

Other versions of the constructivist methods I considered included narrating the stories through only certain hours or through an exploration of a home rural landscape, interspersing it with the shape of a city (i.e. transport timetables, street maps, etc). I created these planned structures, and while they certainly kept me from narrating a story set in North Carolina in a traditional way, I also felt as though the structures kept me from writing anything at all. The family history devised from the opening four images became more complex and fully realised, but the history did not map well against the metafictional structure. I felt completely stymied. I read a lot, but I wrote little. The structural scaffolding around my novel had become so complicated that finding access to write even small passages seemed impossible. Meanwhile, with the exception of poetry and essays, I had not completed a piece of creative writing – not entirely – since 1997.

My supervisor, Professor Peter Middleton, suggested the complicated, Oulipian structure be saved for the project after my PhD, which would draw upon a different story. The completion of the PhD would rely on the story of the Mathers, and use one narrator for the entire novel.

The end of *Life with Support* felt like a death; removing the metafictional frame from around the PhD novel felt like freedom. In Oulipian methods, I did not find the liberation that Mathews did to write about his past. Alison James posits that in Oulipian writing there are three stages:

First the invention and/or definition of the constraint; second, the exploration of the possibilities that it creates; finally a process of ordering, selection and elimination based on these possibilities and leading to the actualization of the final text. Of the phases, it is only the second that may temporarily suspend authorial intention

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<sup>15</sup> Mathews and Brotchie 143.

and control. The constraint serves to generate poetic and narrative material that is then shaped by the writer.<sup>16</sup>

Where did my attempts fail – in stage two or stage three? James’s assertion that only in stage two is authorial control limited did not seem to apply to my writing. I felt that while my inventions around the family raced ahead, the forms I selected did not enable me to tell the stories. Did it relate to the Southern nature of the novel? Storytelling is often considered a major part of Southern culture – what Louis D. Rubin Jr. calls a ‘storytelling bent’<sup>17</sup> – so perhaps the realist storytelling elements of my culture could not fit into the constructivist restraints. As James emphasises, the Oulipo ‘foregrounds and accentuates the arbitrary dimension of constraint’,<sup>18</sup> yet Jacques Roubaud also stresses that by the ‘laws’ of the Oulipo, ‘[a] text written according to a constraint describes the constraint’.<sup>19</sup> Marjorie Perloff points to George Perec’s *La Disparition* as an example of this, where ‘the book deals with disappearances and loss, with oblique reference to the disappearance of Perec’s family as a result of the Holocaust’.<sup>20</sup> I found in my novel that the constructivist methods I chose did not add anything specific or meaningful to either the theme or structure. The method I eventually settled on of storytelling and memory allowed me to explore the imprecise slipperiness of language.

I tried a variety of options after discarding the constructivist structure. I determined that my new structure would be a collection of linked short stories about the Mathers family. Each would still have a different narrator but not the genre based differences of the original plan. I used an exercise I have given Creative Writing students, which uses repetition of randomly selected words as a guide for freewriting, as a form of arbitrary constraint.<sup>21</sup> One of my words was plug, and from this, I wrote of a woman with gaps in her life, and a ‘canary [that] plugged a hole in the cat’s stomach’. I developed Siobhan, a character whose husband caused the death of a bird she had been entrusted with by a dying friend. The story focused on Siobhan’s grief and her bonding with Luanne, who appeared as a secondary character, new to town. The story culminated in them getting tattoos together – Siobhan a bird in flight and Luanne an open book. Luanne, although not fully developed as a character, had lost her boyfriend and worked in a city

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<sup>16</sup> Alison James, *Constraining Chance: George Perec and the Oulipo* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009) 130.

<sup>17</sup> Louis D. Rubin Jr., ‘Changing, Enduring, Forever Still the South’, *The Prevailing South: Life and Politics in a Changing Culture*, ed. Dudley Clendinen (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1988) 226.

<sup>18</sup> James 114.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Roubaud, ‘Introduction: The Oulipo and Combinatorial Art’ in *Oulipo Compendium*, comp. Harry Mathews and Alistair Brotchie (London: Atlas Press, 1998) 42.

<sup>20</sup> Marjorie Perloff, ‘The Oulipo Factor: The Procedural Poetics of Christian Bök and Caroline Bergvall’, *Jacket* 23 (August 2003), 10 June 2009 <<http://jacketmagazine.com/23/perlof-oulip.html>>.

<sup>21</sup> Katharine Haake, ‘Piecemeal Fictions’, *Metro: Journeys in Writing Creatively*, ed. Hans Ostrom, Wendy Bishop, and Katharine Haake (New York: Longman, 2001) 93-94.

archive. At this stage, the boyfriend's disappearance had a fantastical element, as he had been taken to an alternate realm to act as a human archivist. The magical realism element began to appear in this version, as Luanne would see his initials both appear and disappear on pages in the archive. However, Siobhan was the narrator, so the reader only heard about these events from Luanne's dialogue. The magical realism elements did not fully integrate into the narrative.

Luanne's arrival in Peebles presented a possible link to the Mathers family stories when her missing boyfriend became Kenneth, the photographer from the wedding of Gwen and Eric. Siobhan, while important in the creation of Luanne, no longer seemed significant to the telling of the stories. I decided to focus on Luanne as a primary character. However, because I initially saw Luanne only as a secondary character, I had the ability to view her as the conduit for the stories rather than a character I needed to protect, which had been the problem with my previous novel, *Life with Support*.

I decided that Luanne now would narrate all the stories but this necessitated a plot for Luanne – why would she tell these stories? Initially, Mr Mathers offered her an archive job at their first meeting at the coffee shop, and he added the interviews when she proved to be pregnant. This plot iteration would have meant that Luanne spent most of the novel passively waiting for the return of her lover, while not actively doing anything, except following Mr Mathers' directions. In this version, showing Luanne as a woman of intelligence and sophistication, yet also as a woman who felt completely lacking when dealing with men or human relationships of any kind, proved a challenge. I changed the opening scene at the coffee shop to maintain the intensity of emotion she expresses in the open letter. Her verbal argument with Mr Mathers propelled her to the encounter with Eric at the mill, which establishes the dichotomy of Eric as both a member of the Mathers family *and* a friendly person. The scene at the mill, where Luanne confuses Eric with Kenneth, allowed me to plant the idea that she views all men as 'not-Kenneth' in the reader's mind, while forming a link between the two primary male characters.

I initially had written a scene with Kenneth and Luanne arriving together in Peebles, but I realised that having them appear on the page together would offer too definite of a judgement on their relationship. With Luanne as the narrator, it seemed important to maintain her faith in Kenneth throughout the novel, so that her realisation that he was not perhaps all she expected is slow. Luanne and Kenneth's connection had to stay as mythic for the reader as the stories of the Mathers that Luanne records. The only proof that the reader has that Kenneth exists is Luanne's pregnancy and the missing rental car.

I wrote short stories that focused primarily on the stories that the interviewees told, while touching briefly on Luanne's framing narrative. However, the story of Luanne's life in the South increasingly began to interest me more. As I wrote the stories and further developed the plot necessary for her to do her job, I found myself wanting to know what happened between times. Through discussion with my supervisor and advisors, I decided to move the project back

towards a novel, rather than discrete stories. This would allow me to explore Luanne's life in the South as a narrative bridge throughout all the history and mysteries of the Mathers family. Versions of the original stories I had written became the stories Luanne records in the novel's chapters. While the frame story of Luanne's experiences in the South is a linear narrative, the storytelling and memory aspects of her interviews encompasses the nonlinear structure and metafictional elements I planned from the beginning. Luanne's interviewees take on the role of storytellers who relate the magical themes of the story. The storytelling element of the fairy tale is essential to the structure of the novel, as the Mathers family legends have strong links to fairy tales, particularly Beauty and the Beast (with the importance of roses) and elements of *The Golden Bough* rituals, with the female dying rather than the male. Kevin Paul Smith distinguishes the term storyteller as a 'character who is personified within a text, and who orally narrates his or her stories to a narratee, who also appears as a character within a text'<sup>22</sup> who also 'intertextually alludes to or incorporates fairy tale intertexts'.<sup>23</sup>

The final structure of my novel responds to two primary works of fiction, *Fieldwork* by Mischa Berlinski and *The Smuggler's Bible* by Joseph McElroy. Both novels share the theme of storytelling, although the storytelling is approached in different ways. *Fieldwork* draws upon a traditional storytelling form. In the novel, Berlinski explores the history of Martiya van der Leun, an American anthropologist. The main character, also called Mischa Berlinski, traces Martiya's life and how it intersects with a Thai hill tribe and the American missionary family, the Walkers. As a structural device, Mischa repeatedly interviews Walker family members. Their opening conversations are reported in scene form with back and forth dialogue. The narrative shifts as the family member begins to tell their story. A blank page appears, then, for example, 'The Story the Walkers Told of Themselves'<sup>24</sup> is centred on an otherwise blank page. The narrative appears on the following page, fully formed as a complete story with setting, imagined dialogue, sensory details and a narrative arc. This method makes it very clear that Mischa is reimagining the story as a narrative creation.

I have not used the page to indicate a story division as Berlinski has done in *Fieldwork*. The technique seemed to place too clear a boundary between the story as an oral history interview and the full story as Luanne envisions it. The technique in *Fieldwork* is also linked to the use of time in the narrative. In my work, Luanne is interpreting the story as it is told to her – just as the reader is developing images from Luanne's story as it unfolds on the page. *Fieldwork* is written with a retrospective point of view. Mischa often condenses stories by explaining that

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<sup>22</sup> Kevin Paul Smith, *The Postmodern Fairy Tale: Folkloric Intertexts in Contemporary Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) 89.

<sup>23</sup> Smith 92.

<sup>24</sup> Mischa Berlinski, *Fieldwork* (New York: Picador, 2007) 83.

he did not know a fact at this point, but that he will tell the reader what he learned later for easier comprehension.

Luanne is hired to not only research the Mathers family but also to assemble their stories in a history. As she is frightened of the task, she interviews her new friend Siobhan for practice, even though Siobhan does not appear on the list of interviewees. The reader follows her attempts to tell Siobhan's story of married life, as Luanne realises that reportage of a back and forth interview will not work. The chapters show the reader Luanne's experiments with telling stories, before she settles on the slide into the interviewee's past, envisioning it with full scenic detail. Barbara Godard indicates that the search for a woman's writing voice is a process in which the narrator must 'sound out the word to see it with the ear, to hear it with the eye'.<sup>25</sup> Luanne looks for guidance from Mr Mathers on the form he requires, but he says he wants only something he can read in chapter six. She responds mentally with 'What did he think I'd do – sing it?', setting out both resistance to his male dominance but also unease at her own style.

Throughout the following chapters, Luanne interviews people relating to the history of the family, and she continues to form their narratives into full stories that appear on the page as she imagines that they happened, not as they are told in a direct interview form. Luanne tells Siobhan that it is the interviewing that disturbs her, not the writing. She is first introduced to the reader by her writing, through the open letter to Mr Mathers she publishes in the local paper. The letter is an entreaty, but the public positioning makes it an act of defiance against what Luanne has been told by the police and her detective. At the beginning of the novel, she works as a librarian and does not write; however, she has written in her past and mentions a writing professor at university. Although she does not identify herself as a writer, it is the activity she primarily engages in throughout the novel, to the point that when she reads June's letters in chapter nineteen '[S]entences start[ed] formulating...' The writing Luanne does throughout the novel serves a metafictional role, as her writing 'replace[s] overt references to novelists writing novels'.<sup>26</sup>

In McElroy's *A Smuggler's Bible*, David Brooke must assemble eight stories into a larger whole during a sea voyage to England. The stories are of David's friends, family and friends of friends. All of the stories are told purportedly from the other characters' points of view, and the stories always involve some aspect of them narrating David's persona and their perceptions of him. As David is the presumptive narrator of the whole work, the novel forms a loop of his own self-perception. On the ship, another presence hovers, appearing as a first person voice above David, controlling him. The first person voice acknowledges the 'Creator'

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<sup>25</sup> Barbara Godard, 'Heirs of the Living Body: Alice Munro and the Question of a Female Aesthetic', *The Art of Alice Munro: Saying the Unsayable*, ed. Judith Miller (Waterloo: University of Waterloo Press, 1984) 43.

<sup>26</sup> Waugh 118.

hovering above them both.<sup>27</sup> The invocation of the author controlling all reveals the metafictional nature of the novel. McElroy has called *A Smuggler's Bible* 'a first novel of incomplete stories trying to gather and fall apart at the same time, about being on the edge of betrayal—which I suppose is a subject in all stories'.<sup>28</sup> Patricia Waugh highlights how the novel breaks down when David breaks down, as 'neither Brooke nor the novel can absorb and organize the numerous and contradictory codes and registers of language with which they are both confronted and constructed'.<sup>29</sup>

While *The Mathers' Land* draws on fewer registers of language than *A Smuggler's Bible*, the piecemeal nature of the stories in *A Smuggler's Bible* and the echoes and recurrences in those tales resound within my own novel. Luanne's character acts as a filter, in some ways like David, drawing together the disparate threads formed by different voices and versions of narratives, through the stories that she collects and constructs from her research and interviews. However, Luanne is able to draw the pieces together, as she discovers the truth about the Mathers family, unlike David, who comes to no satisfactory conclusion at the end of McElroy's novel. Luanne finds at least a version or interpretation of the truth, and the elements draw into a cohesive whole.

In *A Smuggler's Bible*, Ellen, David's wife, says that David "...wrote those memories – even though they really aren't exactly memories – because you *wanted* to. Not for someone else!"<sup>30</sup> Luanne writes as part of her job, ostensibly for Mr Mathers. Does Luanne want to write them, as Ellen suggests to David? Is her move towards being a writer complete? The reports that Luanne writes lose their originally intended audience, since Mr Mathers never reads them, although Eric eventually does read them. It is through the act of recording and interpreting that she is able to solve the mystery of the Mathers' history and the presumed fate of Kenneth. At the end of the novel, Luanne questions whether the stories that Mr Mathers tells, particularly of Kenneth's death, are true. However, does the ink flow and letters and images that spill onto the house suggest that these stories already exist in the Mathers' land? Do they need to be written and read or is it enough that they have been heard orally?

### Magical Realism

When I decided to forego my constructivist structure, Peter Middleton suggested I write a wholly fantasy version of my narrative as an exercise. The resulting story focused on another,

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<sup>27</sup> Joseph McElroy, *A Smuggler's Bible* (Woodstock: The Overlook Press, 2003) 3.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph McElroy, 'Socrates on the Beach: Thought and Thing', *Revue française d'études américaines*, 93 (September 2002): 17, 23 June 2008  
<[http://www.cairn.info/load\\_pdf.php?ID\\_ARTICLE=RFEA\\_093\\_0007](http://www.cairn.info/load_pdf.php?ID_ARTICLE=RFEA_093_0007)>.

<sup>29</sup> Waugh 39.

<sup>30</sup> McElroy, *Smuggler's* 393.

observatory realm, where hosts, shaped like books, had a duty to record human activity. The idea of realms was influenced by my reading, including Doris Lessing's *The Marriages between Zones Three, Four and Five: (as narrated by the chroniclers of Zone Three)* and Ursula K. Le Guin's *Changing Planes*. In my fantasy story, the hosts' observations were recorded into monuments in their realm, which could take the form of statues, installations, buildings, or lights and words that could be projected onto existing monuments, as physical manifestations of a sense of storytelling. The hosts would take on an extension of my role as author, creating the visible narratives for readers. The monuments were maintained by an archivist, who was a human brought to the hosts' world for a period of three years. In his absence from his normal reality, cards and flowers would appear for family members on holidays and birthdays, but his family simply would be told he was 'travelling'.

The hosts themselves were forbidden to communicate directly with any humans other than the archivist. One host transgressed this rule and began to observe and interact with a human family, the Mathers. The initial idea was that the host instigated the faith in the tree that gives disks and the yellow rose rings; however, this fantasy version did not work very well with the Mathers family history. I realised I did not want such clear-cut explanations as the host story would provide for the Mathers' belief in the tree and rings. I tried to place the host story in the novel by having Pearl tell their story when Luanne interviewed her. This also did not sit well with the finished novel, as Pearl talking about monuments that represented her childhood simply made her sound crazed. The parallels between the pairs of sisters, Elinor and Pearl and Luanne and Amelia, added more dramatic tension. The ideas of the host story appear in a much-abbreviated form in Luanne's dream on her first night in the cottage on the Mathers' land.

Although the original fantasy story did not entirely work with my planned project, it did suggest that elements of fantasy might work well within the novel. I decided that magical realism would work well within the planned structure and family history, while simultaneously allowing my writing to escape the purely realist, linear Southern novel I had attempted before. While I did not feel that the constructivist methods I planned allowed me to fully tell my stories, magical realism gave me a way to play with Waugh's distinction between fiction and reality. I could use magical realism to disrupt the narrative and to explore the darker side of the Southern family, by drawing on Amaryll Beatrice Chanady's definition of magical realism as being characterised by 'two conflicting, but autonomously coherent, perspectives, one based on an "enlightened" and rational view of reality, and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality'.<sup>31</sup> Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora emphasise that magical realism is a 'mode suited to exploring – and transgressing – boundaries, whether the boundaries

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<sup>31</sup> Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antimony* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1985) 21-22.

are ontological, political, geographical or generic'.<sup>32</sup> Magical realism allows me to push at the boundaries of my Southern narrative.

While magical realism is often associated with Latin American writers, Lois Parkinson Zamora finds many historical links between the American South and Latin America, including a late onset of modernity ripping into agrarian societies, strong ties to their disrupted pasts, and firm belief in a Biblical tradition that contributed to both regions turning to magical realism.<sup>33</sup> The loss of the Civil War and the shame of slavery, of being 'fallible'<sup>34</sup> perhaps aged the South before the rest of the United States, who would not know defeat in war until Vietnam. Carlos Fuentes describes this previous lack of national failure as leading to

standardize[d] American art forms. That's why I think that the most original American writing has come from the South, where there had been a real sense of regional tragedy and where there was a need to examine things that had been taken for granted.<sup>35</sup>

Zamora further highlights that in the South 'there still exists a dialectic of innocence and guilt', an awareness of 'evil as present and active in history.'<sup>36</sup> Ihab Hassan ties this to the fact that Southern Protestantism and folk spirit have not 'succumbed entirely to a business ethic or urban impersonality'.<sup>37</sup>

The extremes between folk spirit and urban life can also be seen in elements of Southern Gothic, which explores how people of extremes are positioned in society. Fred Hobson argues that Southern writers have been 'labelled practitioners of Southern Gothic, portraying a haunted, backward South and populating their fictional worlds with a multitude of lonely, driven figures',<sup>38</sup> while Gleeson-White considers that Southern Gothic often 'conjure[s] up the strange worlds of freakish outsiders placed in lovelorn barren landscapes, penetrating

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<sup>32</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, 'Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(ie)s', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) 5.

<sup>33</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora, *Writing the Apocalypse: Historical Vision in Contemporary US and Latin American Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 121-124.

<sup>34</sup> Doris Betts, 'Southern Writers and the Bible', *The Bookmark* 53 (1985): 5.

<sup>35</sup> Carlos Fuentes, interview with Christopher Sharp, *W, a supplement to Women's Wear Daily*, 29 October 1976, 9, qtd in Zamora, *Writing* 33.

<sup>36</sup> Zamora, *Writing* 123.

<sup>37</sup> Ihab Hassan, *Radical Innocence: The Contemporary American Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961) 79.

<sup>38</sup> Fred Hobson, "'To Talk, to tell": Southern Literature in the Twentieth Century', *The American South in the Twentieth Century* ed. Craig S. Pasco, Karen Trahan Leathem and Andy Ambrose (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005) 165.

heat, and closed spaces, with themes of . . . sexual deviance and bloody violence'.<sup>39</sup> Boo Radley exists on the borders of society in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and similarly the Misfit in Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' and Hulga in 'Good Country People' are considered to be outside of normal society. Doris Betts's story 'The Ugliest Pilgrim' puts the character of Violet on a bus trip to see a TV evangelist because she is convinced that the faith healer can mend her face, split and scarred by an axe. Because of her extreme disfigurement, the white Violet is as marginalised as the black soldier on the bus with her in the early 1960s setting.<sup>40</sup>

But which are the characters in Southern Gothic – lonely and driven or freakish outsiders? Are they grotesque? The grotesque is defined as 'characterized by bizarre distortions, especially in the exaggerated or abnormal depiction of human features . . . involv[ing] freakish caricatures of people's appearance and behaviour'.<sup>41</sup> This 'freakish outsider' character often provides the saving grace of a Southern narrative and can perhaps be located in the real world distinction between the South and the rest of the United States. Sheldon Hackney contends that 'to be Southern is to be created in the conversation between the American identity and dissenting critiques of the American identity. To be Southern . . . is to be profoundly contradictory'.<sup>42</sup> To be contradictory may have a freakish aspect to an outsider, but are these perceptions necessarily true? Similarities have often been highlighted between Doris Betts' work and O'Connor's, but Betts states that these perceived similarities come from the 'tensions between the claim and fact. I don't think of my stories as Gothic. I think they are about real life'. She explains that some of her undergraduate students were mocking a 'redneck' sheriff that had stopped their car, and in listening, Betts realised the sheriff was in fact her cousin, highlighting this split between the extreme of the parodied redneck sheriff and her own real life.<sup>43</sup> In my novel, I think Hobson's 'lonely, driven figures'<sup>44</sup> far more defines the Mathers than 'freakish outsiders'.<sup>45</sup> The Mathers are such respectable pillars of the community that their

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<sup>39</sup> Sarah Gleeson-White, 'Revisiting the Southern Grotesque: Mikhail Bakhtin and the Case of Carson McCullers' in *Southern Literary Journal*, 33: 2 (2001): 108, 24 June 2008  
<[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/southern\\_literary\\_journal/v033/33.2gleeson-white.pdf](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/southern_literary_journal/v033/33.2gleeson-white.pdf)>.

<sup>40</sup> Doris Betts, 'The Ugliest Pilgrim', *The Signet Classic Book of Southern Short Stories*, ed. Dorothy Abbot and Susan Koppelman (New York: Signet Classic, 1991) 496-518.

<sup>41</sup> Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 260.

<sup>42</sup> Sheldon Hackney, *Magnolias without Moonlight: The American South from Regional Confederacy to National Integration* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2005) 105.

<sup>43</sup> Fred Brown and Jeanne McDonald, *Growing Up Southern: How the South Shapes Its Writers* (Greenville: Blue Ridge Publishing, 1997) 100.

<sup>44</sup> Hobson 165.

<sup>45</sup> Gleeson-White, 'Revisiting' 108.

oddities are overlooked or taken for granted, despite the fact that the town knows that a tree chooses a bride for the richest family's son by glowing and giving her a wooden disk during a church service.

Several North Carolina writers have used varying degrees of magical realism in their work. Trudier Harris considers North Carolina an ideal setting for a story with magical realism elements, as North Carolina

is perhaps the upper South counterpart to New Orleans for its belief in . . . encounters with extranatural phenomenon . . . it provides an ease of presentation and acceptability that might have been considerably more difficult for a writer trying to convince an audience of recurring extranatural events in Chicago.<sup>46</sup>

The traditions of folklore and storytelling in the South are also deeply imbued with Christianity, as Susan Ketchin points out, 'most significant to the development of the Southerner's imagination, whether he attended church or not, was that Bible stories were woven into everyday experience, told as part of daily life, weekdays and Sundays'.<sup>47</sup>

Sharyn McCrumb, a best-selling author whose awards include the Chaffin Award for Southern Literature, combines NASCAR (National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing), sainthood and a take on *The Canterbury Tales* in her 2005 novel *St. Dale*. The novel follows a group of pilgrims on the Dale Earnhardt Memorial Pilgrimage. Dale Earnhardt was a real world race car driver, born in my hometown of Kannapolis, NC, who died in a race in 2001. McCrumb draws heavily on the elements of Christianity inherent in the deification of heroes. A minister, Bill Knight (emphasising the Chaucerian connection), muses on the similarities of pilgrims circling holy wells, 'the requisite number of times', linking this with the laps of a NASCAR race.<sup>48</sup> The novel is punctuated with visits from a ghostly or spirit form of Dale Earnhardt. In the opening chapter, 'an educated woman with a career and social position to think of' is on a deserted section of road in North Carolina, on the way home from Damascus (not *to* Damascus, and this Damascus is in Virginia), when her car breaks down. Dale Earnhardt, in physical form, taps on her window, repairs her car and gives her directions. He even offers to race her, and he smiles when she tells him they renamed the highway to match his racing number three, a real world recognition of his importance.<sup>49</sup> Later, Dale Earnhardt appears again, telling the tour leader, Harley, "'But, hey, blessed are they who don't believe and yet still

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<sup>46</sup> Trudier Harris, *The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller's Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor and Randall Kenan*. Mercer University Lamar Memorial Lectures 39, (Athens: University of Georgia Press) 114-115.

<sup>47</sup> Susan Ketchin, *The Christ-Haunted Landscape: Faith and Doubt in Southern Fiction*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) xii.

<sup>48</sup> Sharyn McCrumb, *St. Dale* (2005; New York: Kensington Books, 2006) 303.

<sup>49</sup> McCrumb 11.

see”<sup>50</sup> Harley confuses the physical presence of Earnhardt with an Earnhardt impersonator, so Harley sees, but doesn’t believe in the spirit. Harley later learns that at the time of the conversation, the impersonator had been inside the hospital. These visitations from Dale Earnhardt underpin the development of the characters throughout the pilgrimage, most of who have relied on Dale Earnhardt, his fame and his victories through dark times in their lives, both before and after his death.

Doris Betts involves elements of otherworldliness in her 1998 novel *The Sharp Teeth of Love*. A female character heads west from North Carolina – a woman who calls herself Luna and who fears another lapse into what her family term her ‘madness’, mental instability arising from her anorexia. Her fear of slipping back into ‘madness’ is crucial to the novel. While befriending a damaged boy and a deaf man, Luna also engages on her journey with the ghost of Tamsen Donner from the Donner party. The novel is set against the events of the siege of the David Koresh cult in Waco, Texas, and Luna contrasts the media coverage with what she learns about the Donner party settlers who became trapped in the High Sierra Mountains and ended up cannibalizing each other to survive. The first visitation – as a dream – involves Luna talking to Tamsen in an entirely realistic (and real world) Varsity movie theatre on Franklin Street in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.<sup>51</sup> Luna’s continued sightings of Tamsen throughout the novel are met with varying responses, both fitting Chanady’s definition – Sam, the young abused boy, believes the sightings to be true, Paul, the deaf seminarian, believes them to be delusions. In the last visitation, Luna tries to provoke Tamsen into explaining why Tamsen stayed with her dying husband rather than escaping, when Tamsen must have known she would die and be consumed. Luna says she is after a ‘dispossession, some amateur *Ritual Romanum* that would enable her to go off to Wisconsin with no fear that Tamsen would come through those snows to haunt her new house’<sup>52</sup>, therefore showing her acceptance of the ‘supernatural as part of everyday reality’.<sup>53</sup> While waiting for Tamsen to appear, Luna plays with images she could illustrate for children’s books in Wisconsin. Tamsen’s voice interrupts Luna, saying ‘We saw mirages in the Salt Lake Desert’.<sup>54</sup> Having a spirit announce her own mirages blurs the line between what is real and what is not.

Randall Kenan’s short story collection *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* was nominated for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award for Fiction and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. The collection opens with the ‘Clarence *and* the Dead (And What Do

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<sup>50</sup> McCrumb 369.

<sup>51</sup> Doris Betts, *The Sharp Teeth of Love* (New York: Random House, 1998) 110-111.

<sup>52</sup> Betts, *Teeth* 313-314.

<sup>53</sup> Chanady 22.

<sup>54</sup> Betts, *Teeth* 310.

They Tell You Clarence? *And the Dead Speak to Clarence*)'. Clarence, a clairvoyant three-year-old is able to predict the future and speak to the dead, a power perhaps given to him by a talking hog.<sup>55</sup> The magical realism elements in this story are physically embodied, as well as appearing as spirits. Kenan's collection of stories is set in a fictitious North Carolina town called Tims Creek, a community that is built solidly around the local church. The townspeople either condemn or seek advice from the clairvoyant toddler, while the talking pig is allowed to attend church and at one point wrestles with an apparent evil spirit.<sup>56</sup> The town's outrage develops not over Clarence's abilities, but over Clarence talking to a distraught man in the voice of the man's dead bride. The man begins trying to spend all of his time with Clarence, even cleaning up as if courting the young boy and slipping into his bed at night.<sup>57</sup> The hint of homosexuality is abhorred, but not Clarence's abilities.

Steven Sherrill, who is a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship for Fiction in 2002, combines magical realism with a North Carolina trailer park in *The Minotaur Takes a Cigarette Break*. While the novel draws on the mythic, the reality of the South is clearly expressed through the relationships, the violence and the living conditions. The Minotaur, reduced even in his name to a single initial 'M', lives in the trailer park (a place usually defined as lower class) and works as a line cook in the restaurant Grub's Rib. M encounters other mythical, yet real world characters – for example, Medusa is kept in a box in a fair ground 'Oddities of the Natural World' exhibit, and the only way she destroys a man is by scaring him so much he runs into a guy wire with his neck which paralyses him.<sup>58</sup> The violence inherent in the Minotaur is clear when he accidentally gores his co-worker with his horn, although it is a 'clean puncture', according to the hospital.<sup>59</sup> However, violence also comes from humans in the novel. The Minotaur watches a bullfight on television. The Minotaur feels the pain of the bull, but the pain of the human as well, aware that both species, and he as a combination, are capable of committing such violence.<sup>60</sup>

Faith emerges as a key element in Sherrill's novel, matching Ketchin's identification of Christianity as key in Southern writing. The Minotaur finds a card for the Sacred Heart Auto League (a real world organisation). The card depicts Christ hovering over a highway. Signatories promise to drive carefully and prayerfully, and the Minotaur signs it after stealing

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<sup>55</sup> Randall Kenan, *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* (San Diego: Harvest Books, 1992) 1.

<sup>56</sup> Kenan 12-13.

<sup>57</sup> Kenan 19.

<sup>58</sup> Steven Sherrill, *The Minotaur Takes a Cigarette Break*. (2000; Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2004) 220-224.

<sup>59</sup> Sherrill 156.

<sup>60</sup> Sherrill 164-168.

money from the girl he loves, raising issues of how a mythical creature can interact with Christian faith and issues of Christian morality. Through the Minotaur's half man, half bull state, Sherrill uses his character to explore the nature of humanity. The Minotaur thinks that '[f]or him, the hardest part of functioning in society is going to a new place, encountering new people and situations, and the Minotaur suspects that this would be true even if he didn't have the head of a bull'.<sup>61</sup> Would Sherrill be able to draw such a clear statement without the humour and pathos of the mythical Minotaur as a realistic character?

The Mathers family have based the entirety of their existence on a myth invented by June Mathers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – the regulation that the wives must die to ensure the fruitfulness of the next marriage. Their sacrifice is complete when their lives are lost. James George Frazer outlines many sacrifices in *The Golden Bough*, but the majority of deaths of women are limited to young 'pretty' virgins, such as in the Maize Goddess ritual<sup>62</sup> or in a culture that marries a young girl to a stone before sacrificing her.<sup>63</sup> Deaths at a mature age are generally men, who die to ensure the fruitfulness of the land or the continuation of good fortune.<sup>64</sup> The role of older women comes into focus in *The Golden Bough* when Frazer explores the corn harvest, where at times some corn is left uncut because of the fear of 'having the "famine of the farm"', in the shape of an imaginary old woman to feed till the next harvest'.<sup>65</sup> Ursula K. le Guin raises the issue of a post-menopausal woman, who has the ability to progress from a woman to a crone. According to le Guin, an old woman can 'do, say and think [things] that the Woman cannot do, say or think'<sup>66</sup>, but to reach that status, the old woman 'must bear herself, her third self, her old age, with travail and alone'.<sup>67</sup> The Mathers women do not have the opportunity to achieve this maturity. After marriage, childbirth, and child rearing, her contributions are considered complete – she becomes the old woman who merely consumes food over the long winter. The Mathers women are thus discarded. Their potential contributions beyond their usefulness outside of female fertility are not considered to be important, which matches a historic treatment of older women, albeit in an extreme manner.

Walter Mathers plans to utilise Luanne in a similar way. In chapter seven, Luanne dreams that she must inscribe the Mathers' stories into her skin,

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<sup>61</sup> Sherrill 234.

<sup>62</sup> James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1923) 589.

<sup>63</sup> Frazer 144.

<sup>64</sup> Frazer 264-283.

<sup>65</sup> Frazer 403.

<sup>66</sup> Ursula K le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1989) 4.

<sup>67</sup> Le Guin, *Dancing* 5.

Lines crossed my pages. How could I be filled with lined paper?  
Seeing no alternative, the black string began to write to my  
dictation, scoring the words onto the lines and into my internal  
organs. It only tickled on the lines, but the organs made me cry.  
Cry such that I could hardly see what the blue leather book did.  
Soon the lines ran out, and the string carved deeper and deeper  
into me. Remember. Remember.

Drawing on my previous story of the host's world, Luanne here mirrors the recording role of the host, even though Luanne must interact to be able to record. The dream seemed to be the best place to raise the themes and ideas of the early story. Wendy Faris contends that the

linguistic magic that is enacted on bodies in some of these magical realist fictions in which flesh is literally inscribed with or transformed by an idea (in many instances being literally marked by history . . . ) may partially undermine the distinction between mind and body, idea and corporality.<sup>68</sup>

While Luanne's dream is not a literal inscription on her flesh, Walter plans to use both her body and her unborn child, so the dream illustrates the use of Luanne's body as a text. Her pregnancy is the direct cause for her job as a recorder, which emphasises that the changes in her body correspond to the changes in the house and family. The 'distinction between . . . idea and corporality' emphasises the disparity between the reality of the Mathers' life and the unreality inherent with their beliefs, moving text and articulate land.

Luanne is a character who is in a state of flux; she has lost her job, her boyfriend is missing, and she faces single motherhood. As she is under increased pressure, her responses to situations are more intense. When elements of magical realism appear in the story, such as ink seeming to flow over any plain surface in her cottage, she worries it is a result of her mental state or a symptom of pregnancy rather than an element of the Mathers' property. Her worries about asking the doctor about a possible link between eyesight and pregnancy indicate how fragile she feels. The use of the magical realism elements such as the ink flow works to destabilise the narrative, where 'magical realist apparitions also unsettle modernity's (and the novel's) basis in progressive, linear history'.<sup>69</sup> Ink appearing in Luanne's cottage, even on the blank paper as she writes her interpretations of the stories, emphasises that her job of collecting stories is grounded on false principles. The use of ink flow on surfaces also mirrors the communication from inanimate sources, such as the tree in the church. Wendy Faris has coined the term 'defocalisation' for magical realism texts, emphasising that a magical realism narrative 'seems to come from two radically different perspectives at once . . . the not empirically

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<sup>68</sup> Wendy B. Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004) 190.

<sup>69</sup> Zamora, Lois Parkinson, *The Usable Past: The Imagination of History in Recent Fiction of the Americas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 77.

verifiable, and verifiable . . . ones that are realism's characteristic domain'.<sup>70</sup> The combination of magical events and realistic events in the same narrative creates the dichotomy inherent in a magical realist text and, in my novel, allows me to address the question of the origin of the stories – do they originate in the fibres of the land or from the stories Luanne hears?

The total acceptance of the Mathers' way of life, particularly the magical roses, tree and articulate land, is crucial to defining the work as magical realism, as in the case of Kenan and Sherrill's works, where the magical elements cannot be explained away. The faith in the Mathers family forms the link back to paradidomi, with the various betrayals and rites and rituals associated with the word. It is the rites and rituals that allow the myth to take hold; the Mathers believe that they are special and hold as proof their two horticultural symbols, the rose rings and the message-bearing tree. The conviction of the faith the family maintains through these external objects acts as an extension of their faith in the strength of their own family, their traditions and their pride of place in their community.

The magical realism elements also emphasise that, for this family, the oddness of the tree and the roses are tied up in their Christianity. Ihab Hassan emphasises that 'when theology runs wild, as it often does in the South, worship and heresy become indistinguishable'.<sup>71</sup> The Mathers see nothing disparate in their extra-religious elements – their faiths in Christianity and their particular religious customs are indistinguishable. The flower rings are incorporated into the wording of the wedding vows they exchange, and the dogwood tree grows inside the church. It is important that the tree goes straight to the dirt inside the church, which is compared to the communion sink in the sacristy, where a Protestant church can dispose of leftover communion wine, straight to the soil. The Mathers base their expectation of their exalted status on their faith in their personal history with the tree. The tree is inside the church, because an early Mathers' bride received a disk telling her to marry. Elinor explains that 'When it's time, and the woman has been identified, the tree will tell her,' to Pastor Clarke in chapter fifteen. The Mathers' faith in the tree is absolute, so for Luanne and Eric to move the tree from the church to the Mathers' house at the end of the novel is a transgression against that faith.

Siobhan tells Luanne the Christian myth of the dogwood tree in the novel – that the dogwood tree was used to make the cross for the crucifixion. The dogwood regretted its use as a cross, so Jesus made the tree no longer grow straight and tall, and therefore it was no longer suitable for making crosses.<sup>72</sup> The dogwood tree is the state flower of North Carolina, although

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<sup>70</sup> Faris 43.

<sup>71</sup> Hassan 80.

<sup>72</sup> Howard W. Clarke, *The Gospel of Matthew and Its Readers: A Historical Introduction to the First Gospel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003) 236.

not the state tree, which is important as the Mathers make their money from timber.<sup>73</sup> The use of the timber mill was incorporated to emphasise their faith in the dogwood tree. Fast growth timber, which Walter Mathers uses, destroys natural woodland and damages the local ecosystem, as well as lowering the socioeconomic status of rural inhabitants.<sup>74</sup> The push towards fast growth timber by Mr Mathers adds to the sense of destruction he wreaks on the land – Mr Mathers has no problem with the destruction of vast swathes of trees for profit. He is only concerned with the preservation of his own special tree and customs.

The first Mathers in America sold his wedding ring to pay for farming supplies, and his wife made a replacement ring from their son's baptismal veil and a rosebud, as Gwen explains in the chapter eighteen, a history that far predates June Mathers. The tree dispenses thin disks, described as both roughly the size of a 45 record and a funeral home fan, which identifies the new bride. In chapter one, Luanne receives one that says wait, as she experiences 'Light pour[ing] from its branches, from each leaf, life pulsing in its veins. The tree expanded with a small, intimate sigh. Its breath whistled past my ear, almost hitting the same low pitch as the bird's answering note'. Eric receives one that says marry, and he is the first Mathers male to receive one, although the reader does not see this. Luanne's instinct by the end of the novel is to destroy both the roses and the tree, but the roses regrow from being dug up, twice, and being burned. While Luanne and Eric feel they should be frightened of the tree, it instead provides a feeling of peace and security, which is lacking overall in the novel. Luanne and Eric do not destroy the tree and the surviving rose bush, as these magical realism elements exist independently of the death of the Mathers wives. Once separated from the requirement of female death, the magical realist elements that come from the land survive on for future generations.

Jeanne Delbaere-Garant focuses on the importance of place and character in magical realism texts, where '[t]he interpenetration of the magic and the real is no longer metaphorical but literal; the landscape is no longer passive but active'.<sup>75</sup> The roses in the novel engage actively with the characters. Luanne's allergies are aggravated by the profusion of roses in the novel, both magical and real. She encounters fresh roses in her cottage, steps on them on her doorstep (comparing herself to Cinderella's stepsisters), and finds dried roses over her doorframes. These all provoke her physically, similarly to the way the lilies in Pearl's sewing

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<sup>73</sup> North Carolina, Department of Cultural Resources, Office of Archives and History, *State Flower Dogwood* (Raleigh: North Carolina Museum of History, 2005). 30 March 2009 <<http://www.ncmuseumofhistory.org/collateral/articles/Dogwood.pdf>>.

<sup>74</sup> Neil Carman, et al., 'Ecological and Social Impacts of Fast Growing Timber Plantations and Genetically Engineered Trees', IUFRO Conference, Charleston, SC, 11 October 2006, 30 March 2009 <<http://www.foresthethics.org/downloads/GTreereport.pdf>>.

<sup>75</sup> Jeanne Delbaere-Garant, 'Psychic Realism, Mythic Realism, Grotesque Realism: Variations on Magical Realism in Contemporary Literature in English' in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) 252.

room affect her, when the pollen blurs the lines between her own narrative and Pearl's. As a long time allergy sufferer, I felt that low-level ongoing physical discomfort of eczema and hay fever lacked adequate representation in fiction. Moreover, Luanne's response puts her in physical opposition to the Mathers' roses.

Walter Mathers views Luanne's difficulty with flowers as further proof that she is undesirable, just as the decline of the roses under Gwen's care indicates the failure of the marriage (whomever the fault may lie with). Graham blames a 'she' when he falls, combining the pronoun with the roses. His accusation lands on Gwen, although Graham is actually speaking of Elinor, who he saw tending the roses, years after she was meant to have died. Walter's desperation to fill the gap with an heir makes Luanne the least worst option, with or without her possessing an affinity for roses.

The three rose bushes that Siobhan tends are crucial to the family. The yellow rose rings provide visible proof of their uniqueness, which sets them apart from the rest of the town, as is seen through Eric's ill-fated attempts to play wedding in primary school, using a dandelion as a wedding ring. The rose ceremony that Walter plans is designed to fully incorporate Luanne into the family. She selects the roses that will form rings for both her and Eric, although without her knowledge.

Luanne's most extreme reaction to the roses comes in this ring making ceremony in chapter twenty-one, when she responds to the roses that cannot naturally be blooming in late November. Luanne is attacked on multiple fronts – the scent of the roses (which allows her to dismiss her attraction to Eric), Eric's fear of the effects of the ring making solution, and the touch of the roses themselves. Walter prompts her to pierce the roses to position them onto thread for dipping. The liquid oozes out and enflames her skin, until the 'red dots ate at my freckled flesh'.

Is Luanne physically responding to actual pollen or to the planned life Walter has mapped out? Is it a physical response to the creation of a ring for a female bride rather than a ring for a male groom? The magical realism element here 'dramatise[s] the process of knowing (and not knowing); the reader is obliged to wonder how we are to locate the 'real' in magical realism'.<sup>76</sup> In Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, Pedro and Pablo Vicario respond with physical illness to the physical violence they commit. Pedro is "'awake for eleven months'" and his brother Pablo has pestilential diarrhoea. Only intervention by a centenarian matriarch is able to stop their physical illness, showing the intersection between a physical response and a magical realist cause.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Zamora, *Usable* 21.

<sup>77</sup> Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (1982: New York: Ballantine Books, 1992) 92-4.

In *The Hero and the Crown*, a fantasy novel, Robin McKinley uses skin – both shade and sensitivity – to set the character of Aerin apart as an outsider. Aerin has pale skin and red hair in a society of dark skinned, dark haired people. She reacts physically to a surka plant, which as a royal, she should be able to touch. Both of these set her apart in the royal court, as well as marking her out as the one person who can be the titular hero. In the climax of the novel, Aerin must go into a battle alone, but she breaks out in a rash from holding a surka leaf. The rash, like her appearance, has another function – the rash is entirely self-contained and ‘lightened the evil a little’.<sup>78</sup> The rash makes her irritable, which in turn provokes her to enter into the challenge ahead.

Luanne’s rash focuses her attention, and she realises she must complete the task to move on with her life. As a result of the contact with the roses, magical or real, Eric wraps Luanne’s hands in gauze, restricting her movements and abilities in chapter twenty-two. Many reasons exist for her to slow down at this point and accept a hiatus – her hands, the holiday weekend, Eric’s casual conversation – but she insists on still working, on finishing her project. The rose ceremony has disturbed her, even more than Mr Mathers’ return. The gauze on Luanne’s hands prevents her from touching or clawing at Mr Mathers’ hands, and its flimsy protection is ripped away as she attacks the rose bushes. The physical pain drives the emotional pain of learning an account of Kenneth’s death, whether a true account or not.

Luanne’s physical responses heighten the reader’s awareness of her appearance. Luanne herself worries about the appearance of the eczema, telling Eric it is not contagious. Luanne’s discomfort with her physical appearance has been clear from chapter one, when she wonders what Mr Mathers thinks of her frizzy hair and worn sandals. She imagines Eric ‘hoisting my weight into his arms’ in chapter three when he carries her after her faint. She compares herself to her (thinner) sister, but she also compares herself to the statue of Gwen, her perceived rival in both Kenneth and Eric’s affections. In chapter thirteen, she describes herself in the changing room as ‘[p]ale though, almost as pale as the marble statue’, but only in shading is she similar to the representation of Gwen. The statue ties in with traditional views of Southern women, as historian Anne Goodwyn Jones explains,

the body of the privileged white woman was revered as a marble statue, a Grecian urn, a human body that by nature resembled the finest productions of masculine art . . . as such, it had nothing inside, no desires or will: its identity was constituted by absence, hollowness waiting to be filled.<sup>79</sup>

Luanne finds the statue itself to be lacking in personality in chapter eleven, but she thinks that must be correct, as ‘[a]ll I heard about was beauty’ when people talked of Gwen. Gwen reveals

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<sup>78</sup> Robin McKinley, *The Hero and the Crown* (1984; New York: Berkley Books, 1987) 168.

<sup>79</sup> Anne Goodwyn Jones, ‘The Work of Gender in the Southern Renaissance’, *Southern Writers and their Worlds*, ed. Christopher Morris and Steven G. Reinhardt (Arlington: Texas A&M UP, 1996) 49.

in her story in chapter eighteen that while she did not feel comfortable socially at the beginning of her marriage, she did feel confident in her beauty.

Does Luanne's lack of traditional physical beauty enable her to change the Mathers family? Charlotte Wright argues that the beautiful female character can become locked into expected roles, whereas the 'ugly' female character is 'able to overcome generations of self-limiting female socialization to become a self-determining individual, more outspoken, less dependent, more powerful, and more heroic than her beautiful counterpart'.<sup>80</sup> Can Luanne accomplish something that Gwen cannot? Elinor writes to Gwen, asking her to change as much as she can in the family in chapter thirteen, but it is Luanne who manages to conceive a child and to throw off the fictitious rule of the wife dying.

Wright further notes that sometimes the juxtaposition of beauty and ugliness comes from a beautiful male paired with an ugly woman.<sup>81</sup> A stereotypical beautiful hero did not seem appropriate for this novel either, so it seemed important that neither Eric nor Kenneth meet the idealised standard for male beauty either – Eric has a paunch, and Kenneth's hunch is a primary descriptor from Mary and Luanne. However, Eric does notice immediately that Luanne has had a haircut in chapter twenty-one, whereas it previously took several days for him to notice Gwen's haircut, which emphasises his stronger feelings for Luanne. Gleeson-White, in discussing Eudora Welty's 'Petrified Man', highlights the importance of the beauty salon, where 'conceptions of beauty are the foundations of southern identity itself'.<sup>82</sup> The physical contact of having her hair washed by someone pushes Luanne to realise that Kenneth will not return. The beauty salon is also central to Gwen's character, as she trained prior to marriage as a beautician. The barber chair that Eric gives her as a wedding present ensures her subservient role in the Mathers house, in essence bringing the salon or barber shop into to family home. The chair highlights the importance of appearances in their relationship, to the point that in chapter eighteen Gwen says 'Surely her job as a spouse was to be attractive, desirable to their business partners – adding to the total package of the Mathers and Son business and family?'

### The American South

The positioning of the South in the United States and my position as an expatriate have deeply influenced the novel. The South has a complicated history as a region, and it emerges both in popular culture and my everyday encounters living abroad. When my husband and I told

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<sup>80</sup> Charlotte M Wright, *Plain and Ugly Janes: The Rise of the Ugly Woman in Contemporary American Fiction* (New York: Garland, 2000) 123.

<sup>81</sup> Wright 54.

<sup>82</sup> Sarah Gleeson-White, 'A Peculiarly Southern Form of Ugliness: Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor' in *Southern Literary Journal* 36.1 (Fall 2003): 50.

his parents we were engaged, my father-in-law immediately said ‘I already have a French peasant for a daughter-in-law and now I’ll have a Southern redneck as another.’ My husband had to explain that I might find that phrase offensive (as might my sister-in-law). The South itself is a distinctive region within in the United States, if only, as Larry J. Griffin argues, because of the fact that the South’s political and social history has ‘provoke[d] repeated changes in the nation’s laws governing citizenship rights’.<sup>83</sup>

When I first moved to London, I was quite active in Democrats Abroad, a part of the Democratic National Party. I have stopped attending events, in part because during informal ‘chat’ gatherings, the members from elsewhere in the United States repeatedly used fake Southern accents to portray what they considered stupid, backward Republicans, perhaps confirming a perception that a 1990 General Social Survey highlighted, where Northerners asserted that they believed that white Southerners were ‘significantly more likely to live off welfare...to be more violent, less intelligent, less patriotic, and less hard-working’ than generic Americans.<sup>84</sup> John Shelton Reed, in his 1971 study of regionalism in North Carolina, determined that Southerners who termed themselves as Southerners would need ‘to believe the South distinctive, otherwise they could not use the region to set themselves apart from other Americans, but distinctive in a positive way’, which would necessarily be removed from the popular view of racists and rednecks.<sup>85</sup> Extrapolating on Reed’s research, Griffin drew on data from six Southern Focus polls conducted from 1991 to 2001. Eighty-eight percent of African Americans and ninety-one percent of whites identify themselves as Southerners, which included positively stereotyping the region of the South and stating they believe it to be superior as a region.<sup>86</sup>

The South I have experienced is not the conservative, backward region commonly portrayed in popular culture. Although I live outside of the South, my writing looks back at the South I left, but from an outsider’s point of view. As Luanne observes the Mathers and becomes completely enveloped in their world through investigating their pasts, she is the character who evolves through the stories. Luanne’s strength as a narrator comes from her status as an outsider to the Mathers family, the town of Peebles, and, most importantly, the American South. Luanne’s status as an outsider is confirmed by her regional origin. Luanne is from New York, and so she comes to Peebles, North Carolina as a ‘Yankee’. While the modern South absorbs people from all over, within the last thirty years, growing industry and banking have brought many people from the northern United States to the South. Just as people outside the South have

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<sup>83</sup> Larry J. Griffin, ‘The American South and the Self,’ *Southern Cultures*, 12.3 (Fall 2006): 7.

<sup>84</sup> Griffin 17.

<sup>85</sup> Griffin 10.

<sup>86</sup> Griffin 18.

strongly held views of the area, people within the South have just as strongly held views of the outsiders. This 20<sup>th</sup> century integration of the ‘Yankee’ still has some holdovers, with the ‘pushiness’ of Yankees being discussed quietly by older people in the South. Richard Gray refers to the fact that ‘those who call themselves Southern have this in common . . . that their Southernness is defined against a national “other”’.<sup>87</sup>

Luanne’s regional origin works to counterbalance Eric’s role as a solidly Southern, devoted and obedient member of the family. The contrast between their lives is an element that draws Eric to her – she is allowed to make her own decisions and mistakes, rather than being tied to the land and family. Luanne, who has had a chaotic family life, sees the appeal of Eric having a family that constantly backs him up. Luanne’s understanding of the South comes from popular culture – she believes that people will talk slowly and is surprised to find mixed race people when she first arrives. I gave Luanne this limited understanding as an extension of her regional origin outside of the South, as in my experience, outsiders to the South often expect Southerners to be like those from television and cinema, which usually are not positive depictions. By letting her draw on a limited knowledge, it enabled me to let her develop a stronger understanding of the South and its complex social interactions through the progression of the novel.

The South becomes almost a character in the novel, particularly the Southern summer, where pollen coats puddles (if and where puddles exist in long droughts), asphalt oozes and everyone runs from air conditioned box to air conditioned box. Luanne, a city dweller, fears the countryside and loses her equilibrium along with her lover. Trees, shorter than skyscrapers, seem massive to her. Ticks make a journey to work a hazard. The sun even seems more damaging without the shadow of buildings. The construction of the Southern space is crucial to the story, as Luanne cannot drive. The absence of the rental car and her lack of a license replicates her awkwardness in the environment, where spaces are too big and too hot to traverse comfortably on foot.

Southern writing has been defined as being about ‘family piety, southern Protestantism, regional loyalty and attachment to the land’.<sup>88</sup> The Mathers’ attachment to the land drives the novel, and they adapt their land for their marriage rituals, such as the fire pit for the rose ring ceremony, the rose bushes themselves and the dogwood tree in the church. Eric, by the end of the novel, has changed business practices to stop exploiting the land, which seems to form at least part of the issues raised by the land in the light and shifting words that appear on the surface of Mathers’ house, where the colours reflect not only bruising but also the colours of pollen in chapter twenty-three. Wendy Faris points to ‘wildness’ which is important in female

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<sup>87</sup> Richard Gray, *Southern Aberrations: Writers of the American South and the Problems of Regionalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000) 498.

<sup>88</sup> Gary Davenport, ‘The Fugitive Hero in New Southern Fiction’, rev. of *Heading West*, by Doris Betts, *Sewanee Review* 91: 3 (Summer 1983) 440.

magical realism texts, where domestic spaces ‘do not isolate their magic but instead provide focal points for its dispersal’.<sup>89</sup> The magical realist elements originating in the Mathers’ land – the tree and the roses – do not offer similar dangers to those of the human made elements of the myth – June’s addition that wives must die. Faris explores the way that in magical realism texts, ‘a fictional house often metafictionally figures as well as metaphorically contain[ing] the narrative’,<sup>90</sup> which can be seen in Michèle Roberts’s novel *Daughters of the House*. The description in the opening chapter, ‘[w]hat bounded the house was skin. A wall of gristle a soldier could tear open with his bare hands’, emphasises the importance of the domestic space to the novel and the claustrophobic nature of the secrets in the house.<sup>91</sup> The indoor domestic space of the Mathers’ house is not particularly malevolent in the novel, except when Mr Mathers is in the house. When he confronts Luanne in the hallway outside the study, the physical space of the corridor contracts around them, which Luanne questions as either ‘[a]n embrace or squeezing me out?’ in chapter twenty. The house has been subverted by the machinations of the last few generations of Mathers away from its intended purpose of caring for the family. The Mathers house changes and holds the narrative, functioning metafictionally through the words and images playing on the house’s walls and seeming to narrate a version of truth of the stories that Luanne has recorded.

Louis D. Rubin, Jr. points out that literary traits of Southern writers include ‘a distinctive awareness of the past, a firm identification with a place, a preoccupation with one’s membership in a community, a storytelling bent (as compared with a concern for problems), a strong sense of family and an unusually vivid consciousness of caste and class, especially involving race’.<sup>92</sup> My novel initially lacked African American characters, which reflected the racial composition I observed in my limited adult life in North Carolina. Siobhan became a mixed race character, which added to the friction with Al and his family.

The characters of Gwen and Siobhan highlight Rubin’s focus not just on race, but also on class. Gwen’s mother is a pinball champion and subverts normal feminine expectations, which mortifies Gwen. Gwen feels she lacks the education and the social standing to fit in with the Mathers and their friends (which echoes June’s uncomfortable relationships with the Mathers family and her cousin in Luanne’s imaginings). Gwen seeks ways to disown her family of origin and to blend with the Mathers, which leads to the commissioning of the statue. Gwen feels that if she can appear to be of the correct class, she will be able to overcome her past.

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<sup>89</sup> Faris 182.

<sup>90</sup> Faris 181.

<sup>91</sup> Michèle Roberts, *Daughters of the House* (1992; New York: Picador USA, 2001) 1.

<sup>92</sup> Rubin 226.

In chapter seven, Siobhan tells Luanne of her mother-in-law openly dismissing her because of Siobhan's hometown, the tacky resort town of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, while remaining silent on the issue of race,

[t]he way Mrs Taylor had looked at Siobhan when Al told her that Siobhan's parents ran a motel. And in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, the summer haven of people that the Taylors just didn't associate with. At least, that was how Siobhan interpreted Mrs Taylor's look.

The same family, the Taylors, disapprove of Mary living with a Jewish man without marriage, again blurring the racial and class issue. Scott Romine clarifies the distinctions between different 'real Souths', where it 'often turns out to be the one I desire, and the practice is not infrequently coercive: a matter of getting *you* to accept my South, my heritage, my culture and so forth as *authentic*'.<sup>93</sup> The exploration of the different layers and strata of the South, both of class and origin, is far more a major aspect of *my* South, rather than the perhaps more traditionally racial focus of much Southern writing.

The importance of faith in the family, or its lack, is a recurring theme in much Southern literature, and this faith resounds in my novel. Luanne lacks faith in a family unit. She has had a history of disruption and loss, and sporadic contact with her sister, the one relative she stays in touch with, does not help her feel more emotionally stable. Eric has strong faith in his family, but it is misplaced. He follows his father's orders and complains about his father's business decisions, but he lacks the impetus to change his life. His father tells Eric that he must clean up Eric's bad business decisions, but again, like uncertainty around the death of Kenneth, the reader is left uncertain if Eric's decisions are 'bad' or merely counter to Walter's wishes. Eric tells Luanne that Walter thinks 'highly' of Al Taylor, based on his business skills. His father's disapproval of Eric, in Eric's opinion, is clear, albeit in a roundabout way of speaking. For Walter to think highly of someone else's son is to think less of his own.

Luanne's own retrieval of history focuses on discovering her independence and her own voice, rather than contacting her missing father when Mr Mathers provides her with his details. Her identity is linked more to the disappearance of people she has known, such as Amelia, her mother and Kenneth, rather than the father who never appeared. In chapter four, Mr Mathers does not seem to consider looking for Luanne's missing mother. Despite his devotion to his wife Elinor, the male line and continuation of the family remain crucially important to him.

#### Southern Writers

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<sup>93</sup> Scott Romine, *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008) 14. Italics author's own.

In reading about Southern writers, a question I ran into again and again was what makes a writer ‘Southern’. Doris Betts has answered the question many different ways, but one that spoke to me in particular was

One hates those terms . . . It becomes the stereotyping like that on the *Dukes of Hazard*. Sometimes, because Southerners have a sense of humor, our temptation is to play to that, but other times the temptation is to rebel violently. So the term produces a general falsification of writers from the South.<sup>94</sup>

She contends that the issue with being defined as a Southern writer, and particularly a woman Southern writer, is that the ‘category becomes the de facto minor league of letters in some people’s minds’.<sup>95</sup> Romine raises the paradoxes of Southern literature, where ‘the effect of geographical isolation [is] transformed into a cultural export’.<sup>96</sup> In *St. Dale*, Sharyn McCrumb has a wealthy woman, Sarah Nash, address this commoditization of Southern culture, saying “‘I just think it would be a shame if you went away not understanding what you saw’”, when explaining to a character from New York the value of his father’s collection of Pisgah Forest pottery and Stickley furniture – items which are valuable precisely because “‘each piece is the work of just one man instead of a mass-produced factory item’”.<sup>97</sup> Romine argues that the ‘cultural marketplace has established a brand niche for southern literature, whatever its content’.<sup>98</sup> Do the brand niche, stereotyping and minor league of letters keep all Southern writers – particularly women – from reaching their potential?

McCrumb’s novel *St. Dale* is a complex blend of NASCAR and *The Canterbury Tales*, with an ensemble cast of characters, all sharing equal page time. Yet the cover of the 2006 paperback edition bears an idyllic country scene, which looks very little like the American South of race car driving. The blurb on the back of the novel implies that the story is from the point of view of Judge Bekasu Holifield (a character who does not wish to be on the tour), despite the fact that the novel is not told from her point of view. Furthermore, the use of her full name – ‘Judge’ indicates a narrator of high education and status, ‘Bekasu’ indicates a ‘good’ Southern nickname of a formal name Rebekah Sue (thus perhaps countering the elevated social status of a judge), and the ‘Holifield’ surname implies a prestigious Southern family. The blurb and cover image pushes this novel towards women’s fiction. The novel ends with a likely one

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<sup>94</sup> William J. Walsh, *Speak So I Shall Know Thee: Interviews with Southern Writers* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 1990) 41.

<sup>95</sup> Walsh 41.

<sup>96</sup> Romine 231.

<sup>97</sup> McCrumb 122-123.

<sup>98</sup> Romine 232.

night stand between Bekasi and the tour guide Harley, with a very vague possibility of something longer term – which does not seem like a traditional ‘women’s fiction’ ending.

In Doris Betts’ novel *Heading West*, the character Nancy is kidnapped and driven from North Carolina to the Grand Canyon. The novel takes her on an exploration of the darkness of humanity – in her kidnapper and in herself. Halfway through the novel, she confronts the kidnapper in the canyon and he dies. The rest of the novel is her journey out of the darkness, which culminates in her planning to marry a man, who is similarly emotionally damaged, that she meets after the experience in the canyon.

The novel explores Nancy’s sexual past and partners – her minister, a banker, a high school football coach – all secret affairs in her hometown. In the west, she and Hunt agree to marry, but only with full acknowledgement that neither is their idealised mate. Nancy even has awareness of his desire for power through sex.<sup>99</sup> At home, Nancy’s aging mother is convinced Nancy has lost her virginity out west, and tells Nancy not to tell her sister, as “‘Married women tell husbands and men tell other men’”.<sup>100</sup> Mama then continues with advice that husbands don’t usually make women happy, although Nancy asks her to “‘Say if you must, ‘Mine didn’t,’ then stop’”.<sup>101</sup>

Critics praised the first half but strongly criticised the second half with Nancy’s emergence out of the darkness and particularly her planned marriage. Jonathan Yardley, in *The Washington Post Book World*, described the first two hundred fifteen pages as ‘brilliant’ and a quote from his review appears on the back of the paperback edition. He went on to describe the remaining pages of the novel ‘in which the same woman is nursed back to health, falls in love, and returns home to accomplish her final liberations’ as reducing the entire novel to ‘superior women’s fiction’.<sup>102</sup> Betts identified that Yardley ‘would have preferred . . . that Nancy went down in the canyon where she had an experience of existentialist despair and the novel left her there.’<sup>103</sup> Betts wrote to Yardley, saying “‘I haven’t learned how to do that well enough yet’”.<sup>104</sup> She contends that ‘I don’t believe it’s that reductive if it’s well-written . . . If it feels like *Cosmo* or *Redbook*, then I haven’t done it yet; I’ve copped out. But I want to learn how to write that reality well, because I’m tired of despair.’<sup>105</sup> She argues against his argument, saying ‘novels by

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<sup>99</sup> Doris Betts, *Heading West* (1981; New York: Scribner, 1995) 305.

<sup>100</sup> Betts, *West* 348.

<sup>101</sup> Betts, *West* 360.

<sup>102</sup> Jonathan Yardley, ‘The Librarian and the Highwayman’, Rev. of *Heading West*, by Doris Betts, *Washington Post Book World*, 21 November 1981. 3, qtd. in Evans 81.

<sup>103</sup> Ketchin 253.

<sup>104</sup> Ketchin 253.

<sup>105</sup> Ketchin 253.

women do have more closure...if not to solve the problem, then at least to solve the nature of the person who has to live with it'.<sup>106</sup>

I would argue that the marriage in *Heading West* is not a fairy tale princess or *Cosmo* ending, but represents an open awareness of the difficulties and joys of engaging with others as partners. *Heading West* ends with Nancy going to the airport to meet her fiancé, who has come South to see her and meet her family. Nancy moves aside a statue of alabaster monkeys on the mantelpiece,

who could neither see nor speak nor hear evil, in order to have a fuller view of the last monkey – herself – who could do evil and know it. But her chin was up, her mouth had lifted; all the old bruises had been absorbed from within.<sup>107</sup>

Betts allows Nancy to find cheerfulness, rather than happiness, and to accept herself, rather than fitting into an idealised concept of marital joy. The novel ends not with her reunion with Hunt, but with her recognition of herself.

I struggled with the ending of my novel. Luanne and Eric seemed entirely suited to end up together – both equally awkward around other humans, but particularly around people of the opposite gender. They spend far more time together than any other characters. However, their relationship still created emotional and narrative problems. I found it necessary to increase both the sexual and emotional charge between them, by adding his disappearance and her physical reactions to him. It also meant enhancing Eric's character, who had been a pleasant enough nonentity before. To complicate his character, I added elements of his humour and his kindness and attention towards Luanne, as well as his preferred form of land management. A key addition was his run 'at' the statue of Gwen, which along with Eric pushing his father away as Eric digs up the roses, is the closest Eric comes to physical violence. The emotional and physical lashing out shows Eric's sense of being trapped within his family and their traditions. It is through his relationship with Luanne that he is able to emerge from this fossilised existence.

Marriage, after the decayed relationships in Luanne's past and the insistence on the marriage from Mr Mathers, still seemed a big step for Eric and Luanne, particularly within a Southern novel. When I married, the women of my family honestly believed I would cut my hair and get a curly permanent – because married women looked different than unmarried women. These expectations within middle class Southern society dismay me, and I found it worrying to marry Luanne off at the end of the novel. Kathryn Lee Seidel points out that in the 'myth of Southern womanhood, marriage having been successfully accomplished, the young woman is supposed to revert immediately to Victorian domesticity, which prizes purity, religion

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<sup>106</sup> Ketchin 252.

<sup>107</sup> Betts, *West* 368.

and the domestic arts'.<sup>108</sup> She concludes that while contemporary Southern women writers have a 'suspicion of the myth of Southern womanhood...the major components of the myth persist'.<sup>109</sup> This kneejerk response and Southern stereotypes of the married woman did raise concerns, so I ended the novel with a delayed marriage, after Luanne and Eric live together out of wedlock, which is still viewed somewhat suspiciously in the South. I do not feel that a relatively content ending puts the writing into 'women's fiction'.<sup>110</sup>

Before my PhD, I had not questioned whether or not I defined myself as a Southern writer. I live in a land where a day that reaches 80 degrees Fahrenheit is termed a 'scorcher'. Asphalt overlays cobblestones, and my shoe heels never sink into this asphalt on hot days – and writing about blistering heat in the South can feel like an immense challenge. I have written this novel entirely living away from the South. The Mathers name was developed sitting in the sun on a campus quad in Australia. The fast growth timber idea came from a conversation with a bed and breakfast owner in Victoria, Australia. The novel was written primarily in Kentish Town in London, but the setting is my hometown.

I have never lived anywhere in the United States except for small towns in North Carolina. I mapped my experiences as a Londoner onto Luanne's as a New Yorker to articulate the South I know. I write my novel for a British university, and my mother comments on how odd it is to read 'Southernisms' with British spellings. My writing stays linked to the South, even if I have physically left. Bobbie Ann Mason raises the issue of an 'exile mentality' that she discovered while she was in New York City and away from the South, where 'by identifying herself as an exile, Mason at once see herself as placeless and linked to a place through a subconscious attachment that recreates in her mind images from childhood'.<sup>111</sup> Luanne's walk to the Mathers' house is out the road towards my parents' house (once Highway 136, now Highway 3 – renamed in memory of Dale Earnhardt), although I have never traversed it any other way than in a car in the 20 years they have lived there. Yet I can recognise that I write an imagined South, one that has changed in the eight years I have lived abroad. The road has changed; the town has changed.

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<sup>108</sup> Kathryn Lee Seidel, 'Myths of Southern Womanhood' in *The History of Southern Women's Literature*, ed. Carolyn Perry and Mary Louise Weaks (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002) 431.

<sup>109</sup> Seidel 432.

<sup>110</sup> Yardley 81.

<sup>111</sup> Mary Louise Weaks and Carolyn Perry, 'Afterward: The Future of Southern Women's Writing', *The History of Southern Women's Literature*, ed. Carolyn Perry and Mary Louise Weaks (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002) 614.

Flannery O'Connor said 'I have Boston cousins and when they come South they discuss problems, they don't tell stories. We tell stories'<sup>112</sup>, while Doris Betts believes that 'gossip is at the source of a lot of storytelling in the South . . . some stories that are going to get told over and over again, and you remember those. But to gossip you have to have a community that is somehow interconnected'.<sup>113</sup> I went home early in 2009 for my grandmother's funeral, it was the first time in those eight years I had been in the United States outside of Christmas or university summer breaks. Simultaneously, I was finishing my PhD and trying to write this document about my process of writing a novel. It drew my attention to the level of storytelling in my family. My grandparents' friends had achieved an almost mythic status in my eyes as a child – one I found to be still intact actually meeting them. Mamaw always talked to Midge on the phone for over an hour – Midge must be fascinating. Bruce Clanton, insurance man and friend, was capable of solving anything (although as a further note, I knew of Midge only by her nickname and no surname; Bruce Clanton as both first and surname). I had not made the link to adulthood in relation to these unseen figures in quite the same way as I had for the rest of my life. The reality and unreality of the legends and stories in a family such as the Mathers seemed entirely possible. The community I saw at the funeral only emphasised the Southern community I had built in my novel.

I now teach creative writing, and I find I assign predominantly American writers, including Doris Betts. My first year students recently read Faulkner's 'Barn Burning' in my class, and they all assumed that the war the characters mentioned was World War II, not the Civil War. The South sometimes seems quite distant from me, even when my students ask me to 'do' the accents from Zora Neale Hurston's 'Sweat'. The South is homogenous to them – there could be no distinction between a Floridian and a North Carolinian accent. My own accent fades, unless I talk on the phone to my family. Here and by others, I am defined as American; in America and by Americans, I am defined as Southern.

I am able to write about the South by blurring the lines, by bringing in magical realism elements, by looking at it with a stranger's eyes. The physical distance that separates me enables me to examine the complex strata of Southern interactions and social mores. This is not a novel I could have written at University of North Carolina, perhaps not a novel I could have written at all in North Carolina. My very distance enables me to play with my own definitions of the South and its world. Even if Luanne's reports are not read by her intended audience, through the writing I have at least partially fulfilled the definition of paradidomi: to narrate, to report, to deliver commands and rites and to give this narrative into the hands of another, while allowing myself to choose which aspects of the occasional violence and darkness of both the South and paradidomi's definitions suits my role as a writer, a Southern writer.

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<sup>112</sup> Flannery O'Connor, 'Recent Southern Fiction: A Panel Discussion', *Conversations with Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Rosemary M Magee (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987) 71.

<sup>113</sup> Brown and McDonald 99.

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