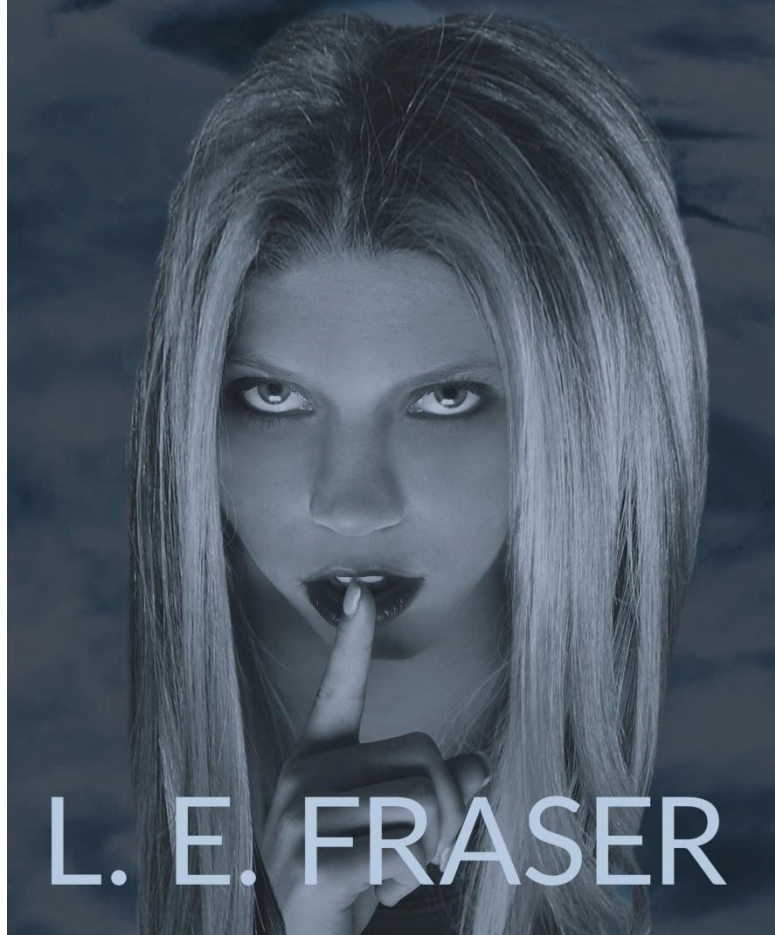


SIMONSAYS

PERDITION GAMES



L. E. FRASER

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*Where will you be when the sun sets in the sky,
when the children's games are done and all their laughter dies?
When the Pacific Loon finally takes to flight,
which saviour will you bribe to stand guard throughout the night?*

*The emaciated wolves bay at your door.
Have you travelled far from Babylon, my virgin whore?
Hear their heartbeats through the silence of the woods.
They howl for you, my child, and they wait where you once stood.*

L.E. Fraser

PROLOGUE

SYLVIA SHOVED THE hem of her sackcloth robe into the twine around her waist. Her heart was racing, and, every time she tried to breathe, there was a stabbing pain in her chest. She ran.

Thorns sliced open the vulnerable skin of her arms, and she swiped her right hand against the sharp twigs to try to protect her face. Blood dripped from the end of the middle finger on her left hand where the detached nail hung to the bed by a string of bloody tissue. Still, she ran.

Without warning, a piercing pain shot through her chest. Her stomach convulsed and bloody vomit spewed from between her cracked lips. She stumbled and choked on the blood that ran down her throat. She stopped running.

From directly behind her, she heard a pitiful whimper and a soft swishing sound, like air escaping from a balloon. The noise of breaking branches was intrusive in the dark forest. She froze and

waited in fear, expecting to hear the gleeful shouts of their pursuers.

After a moment of absolute silence, she whispered through the darkness, "Get up, Mandy, we have to keep moving."

"I can't."

She leaned down and felt around the rough ground until she hit flesh. She ran her fingers along the girl's forearm, grasped Mandy's thin wrist and pulled hard. The body barely shifted. "We can't stay here."

"I can't run any further."

Mandy was making little meowing sounds that broke Sylvia's heart. If they rested, he'd catch them. They couldn't give up. They were too close to freedom. She took a deep breath. "The road is at the top of the escarpment, we can make it."

"I can't," Mandy repeated through her tears.

Sylvia sat down hard, and her knee smashed against a boulder. Agony shot across her kneecap, and a spasm seized her calf muscle, forcing her to bite on her tongue to keep from crying out in pain. Shuddering tremors ran down her legs. She curled into a fetal position on the ground beside Mandy and wept in pain and frustration.

She was twenty-eight and had volunteered to be Mandy's mentor when the sixteen-year-old had arrived at the sanctuary six months earlier. When she made the decision to try to escape, she took her protégé with her. Now, the responsibility weighed heavily on her shoulders.

They'd left just before ten o'clock at night, and she'd struck the sentry with a plank stolen from the lumberyard. Fear had weakened her grip and coated her hands in sweat. The club slipped at the point of impact, and her blow had barely slowed the man's attack. He'd thrown her to the ground, hurled aside her weapon, and savagely kicked her. He would have killed her, but Mandy had grabbed the makeshift club and bludgeoned the man. Together, the women had dragged him to the side of the shed, but Sylvia couldn't commit murder. That was her first mistake. They would

discover him. Mussani would know what she'd done, and there would be no mercy if he caught them.

"Go on without me," Mandy whispered.

She dug deep to find the strength to go on and slowly sat up, groaning in pain. "We stay together. It's our only chance. Get up." The desperate words echoed loudly through the forest, and she pressed together her split lips. She could see Mandy's eyes shining with fear.

They waited in tense silence and then Sylvia whispered, "He's coming. He's close now. I feel him. We can't stay here."

"I'm so scared." Mandy grasped her hand. "Why did we do this? We shouldn't have done this." Hysteria laced her voice and she was gasping for breath.

"We're going to be okay," Sylvia promised. "The road is at the top of the escarpment." She wiped the back of her hand across her mouth, and it was sticky with bloody mucus. She was thankful that the darkness camouflaged her injuries. She was not okay and knew she didn't have much time left.

She removed the tie to her robe and shivered when cold air rippled against her naked flesh. She made a slipknot at each end of the rope, gliding one circle over her injured hand. The rough hemp caught the torn nail and ripped it free from her finger. The intensity of the pain made her cry out.

"Sylvia?" Mandy whimpered, with a pitiful hitch in her young voice.

Fumbling to find Mandy's hand, Sylvia secured the other slipknot around her wrist and squeezed the girl's hand. Now the rope connected them for better or for worse. As the clouds parted and the half moon looked down on them, they ran.

JB WATCHED MUSSANI light a cigarette, and the misshapen flame from the lighter bobbed in the wind. The moonlight turned his dark eyes into mirrors that reflected the cigarette ember. A reddish orange dot glowed in the middle of the pools of darkness

in his face. JB turned away, alarmed by what he glimpsed in the disembodied eyes.

“Whatcha wanna do?”

Mussani took a deep drag from the cigarette, and the red ember shone again in his eyes. JB shuddered and dropped his gaze to the ground.

Father Mussani nonchalantly leaned against the front grill of the Jeep. His tone was calm and melodic when he said, “We wait.”

Toeing the gravel at the side of the road, JB tried to emulate his companion’s casual stance but his brow broke out in perspiration, and the pits of his chambray work shirt were sticky with sweat. Unable to endure the darkness and silence, he asked, “What if th-th-they don’t c-c-come this way?”

Mussani flicked the burning cigarette into the woods. “They’ll come.”

“Could head s-s-south,” JB suggested.

“To the lake?”

He felt his cheeks flush with embarrassment. “C-c-could have a b-b-boat,” he stuttered, ashamed of the difficulty he had in spitting out the four miserable words.

Father Mussani ignored the stuttering, and gratitude washed over JB. Father never commented on the speech impediment or suggested the stutter meant he was stupid.

Mussani pulled a flask from the inside pocket of his ceremonial robe, unscrewed the top, and put the bottle to his lips. The smell of whisky tainted the wind. He didn’t offer the flask, and JB didn’t expect him to.

The road was north, the lake was south, the valley was east, and the woods were west. The sanctuary farmland ran between, with its buildings along the east border beside the valley. As usual, Mussani was right. The sisters would walk north to civilization, but they’d have to travel through the acres of woods that hugged the road. There were no paths through the thick brush and mature trees, and they’d need to climb a steep escarpment to reach the road. JB didn’t think they could negotiate the trek without light. It

had been raining for a week, and the forest ground was slick and treacherous. At least one of the sisters had a serious injury. A shiver of shame scurried along JB's spine.

"W-w-what should we do when they g-g-get here?" he asked.

"She has lost the vision. If possible, she will transcend. That's the only way to achieve self-realization."

"She's my friend." JB pulled at the crotch of his pants, a nervous habit his father had beat him for when he was a kid. He'd tried to stop but he couldn't. One of the reasons he'd joined Bueton Sanctuary was because people didn't laugh at him over his bad habit, his stutter, or the birthmark that scarred his right temple.

"She's a sister and has broken the oath. Are you questioning the Creed?" Mussani asked.

The clouds broke apart, and the silver crest of the half moon winked. For just a moment, the moonlight illuminated Mussani's face. What JB saw in those dark eyes made him look to the ground and exhale a single puff of fear.

With his head lowered submissively and his hands clasped tightly against his chest, he said, "I'd never disobey the Creed." Although shamed by his quivering voice, he was proud that his passion had empowered him to speak the words without stumbling over the first syllable. Feeling doubt and confusion, JB gazed up at the heavens to hunt for a star to wish upon, but there were none.

SYLVIA HAD MANAGED to lead Mandy north along the irrigation tracks, so crossing the acres of fields was easy. The orchard had been tricky. When they hit the woods that crested the land, they were both confused about what direction they were going. If they fell off course, and Mussani sent out the dogs, the animals would tear them apart. The road was their only hope.

Mandy had stopped crying, a small mercy for which Sylvia was grateful. The trouble she was having breathing, the unsecured robe, and the freezing temperature had forced her to slow to a

shuffling trudge, but the gentle tug on the rope indicated that Mandy was still moving behind her.

As she towed the terrified adolescent, Sylvia accepted she'd made a terrible mistake. What she was putting the girl through was worse than the initiation ceremony would have been. Her decision to take Mandy and run, without a plan to ensure they escaped, was stupid. If he caught them, he'd kill her and, although he probably wouldn't kill his pet, Mandy would pay a high price. There was no turning back. She had to get the girl to safety.

The half moon's light in the cloudy sky was now stingy, and the frigid wind was merciless. Their feet were bare, and the escarpment was becoming harder to climb. In places, they had to crawl in single file. At a spot where they could walk upright, she shoved aside jagged branches and held her arms behind her to try to keep the sharp twigs from slapping Mandy's face. Each time she stumbled, Mandy grasped the loose fabric of her open robe and pushed on her back to steady her. Under the indifferent eye of the moon, they slowly ascended the steep hill.

She turned to glance over her shoulder, slipped in a puddle of mud, and lost her balance. She grasped at the trees in an effort not to fall back down the hill. With a startled cry, Mandy's hands pawed and pushed at her back to try to balance her. Sylvia swayed for a moment and then pitched backwards, rolling over Mandy and sliding downhill. Dragged by the tethering rope, Mandy tumbled after her and crushed Sylvia's face into the moist, decaying leaves.

A rainbow of light exploded in front of Sylvia's closed eyes. She could feel the warmth of her blood streaming down her chin, and her mouth filled with the coppery taste. Every time she tried to breathe, there was a crackling sound in her chest. She felt like she was drowning, and the night air tasted metallic. She was certain one of her broken ribs had punctured her lung. If she died in the woods, Mandy wouldn't make it out. They had to get to the road. She fought against the pain and focused on Mandy's hysterical yelps.

“Get off,” she whispered, forcing the two words from her bruised lips.

The girl pathetically whimpered, and her breath was hot and wet against Sylvia’s neck.

“Get off,” she grunted.

Mandy rolled over and the tethering rope stretched taut across Sylvia’s back. They lay together on the cold ground. Above them, the moon slithered beneath a cloud. The darkness was a black velvet blindfold. In that moment, Sylvia knew God had finally turned His back. He was showing them their destiny, and it was hell.

JB TRIED TO keep track of time by the number of cigarettes Father Mussani smoked. Ten minutes was the average time to smoke one, and Father had puffed on five. He figured there were about thirty minutes between butts, so that meant they had waited at the side of the road for nearly three hours.

JB wished he had the sense to leave. He had nowhere to go. He wished he had the courage to save Sylvia. He knew he did not. He sensed Mussani coming into his space and took a small, involuntary step back.

“Problem, JB?” The voice came from his immediate right.

“I was wondering b-b-bout the ceremony.”

“Why?”

He struggled to stay immobile, hoping Mussani couldn’t smell his fear. “H-h-how can she be initiated?”

“She’ll be initiated here.”

“What about the w-w-witnesses?”

“Two, Brother, we only need two,” remarked Mussani.

JB asked the question that had nagged at him ever since Mussani’s second cigarette. “Who will g-g-guide Sylvia?”

Father didn’t answer. His silence spoke volumes to JB.

“I c-c-can’t. Sh-sh-she’s my friend.”

Several moments elapsed before Mussani spoke in a slow, even pitch. "You've been initiated, Brother, and cleansed to guide the metamorphosing of the worthy. Sister Sylvia is a traitor."

JB remained still and silent at the side of his Messiah.

"Are you questioning the Creed and the ordinances, which you swore had saved your miserable soul? Don't you believe that the doctrines of our existence are absolute loyalty, confidentiality, and—"

"And obedience," JB interrupted, anxious to redeem himself in the eyes of his mentor. He felt sweat trickle to the loose waist of his sackcloth pants.

"And obedience," Mussani agreed. His voice filled with enthusiasm, "Look, Brother, a shooting star!"

"SYLVIA, LOOK A shooting star!" Mandy's voice sounded so young and innocent. "Wishes come true on shooting stars. Make a wish, quick before the tail fades."

Sylvia tried to focus on the star blurring and flashing before her eyes. She wished for Mandy to make it to safety. Her eyes rolled, and she opened her mouth to let the bloody saliva run from the corner of her swollen lips. She placed her palms on the ground and pushed her broken body to its knees. Agony exploded in her chest, forcing her to bite hard on her lip to keep from screaming. She tucked one foot underneath her and stood.

"Come on, Mandy. Road, over the hill."

"Did you make a wish?" Mandy asked as she stood up and followed along behind.

"I made a wish," Sylvia agreed and closed her eyes against the tears.

FROM THE DARKNESS, JB heard them. He knew they were very close, but he couldn't see them. Sister Sylvia was advising Mandy

to stay in the ditch, and her voice was thick and wet sounding. He heard her pain, and it made the hair rise on his neck.

Mussani ignored them and continued to lean against the front bumper of the Jeep. He was merely waiting, like a lion carefully stalking its prey. After several motionless moments, he reached into the Jeep and switched on the headlights.

In response, JB heard Mandy cry out, "Sylvia, I see a car!"

They watched in silence as she crawled up the ditch, standing at the top to wave her arms. A frayed piece of braided hemp circled her right wrist.

Mussani slid through the darkness to the girl. "Find the other one."

JB reluctantly jumped into the ditch, walking ten metres before his boot hit something solid. He carefully slung Sylvia across his shoulder and trudged up the steep slope to the road where Mussani waited.

"Move her by the tree and wake her."

JB lowered his friend to the ground, and, from the corner of his eye, he saw Mussani take Mandy's hand. She blinked and shaded her eyes from the glare of the car's lights but stood silent and still. Her eyes widened with horror when she looked from Mussani to Sylvia, who was now visible in the harsh light.

JB propped Sylvia against the thick trunk of an elm tree and groped for her hand. She tensed at his touch but didn't open her eyes. He pinched her arm and wept.

His pinch drew her back to consciousness, and she struggled to stand before giving up and slumping weakly against the tree trunk.

He studied her in the harsh light from the Jeep. Her lower teeth and gums were visible through a gaping tear in her lip. Pink foam coated her lips and dark blood stained her chin. It had flowed down her neck to pool in the hollows of her collarbones. Her left eye was black and swollen closed. Blood covered the hand he held, and one of her fingernails was missing.

Her head slowly turned toward him, and recognition flickered in her eyes. They'd been friends and lovers, and he could tell she believed he'd betrayed her.

JB grasped her hand hard and tears dripped down his cheeks. "I d-d-didn't t-t-tell. He knew."

"It wasn't her fault," she whispered. "Swear you'll protect her." She gasped for breath. "Swear you'll get her home to her sister."

He turned away from her and stared at the dismal scene in front of the Jeep. Mandy was sprawled on her back against the gravel, with her robe around her neck in concertina folds. Her young, lustrous skin was translucent in the cruel white light from the Jeep. Mussani knelt before the girl, anointing her trembling flesh with the initiation oil, pinching her nipples and forcing her legs apart. He grabbed her hips, thrusting himself inside her. Mandy's screams cut JB's heart. He covered his ears to block out the terrifying cries. After a few minutes, Mussani violently turned her to her stomach, grabbed her around the waist and pushed himself inside her from behind, pressing her naked body against the sharp stones on the road. She was no longer screaming, and JB prayed she was unconscious. He dropped his hands from his ears and held tightly to Sylvia's hand, averting his eyes from the brutality he'd vowed to witness.

Sylvia raised her head to the heavens. "Lord, we are still your children. Why have you abandoned us?" The light faded from her eyes. Her broken body drooped to the ground.

A bolt of lightning lit the sky, and a single star, lonely in solitude, twinkled in the darkness. JB watched the star blink once and twice, and then it vanished like an angel's tear.

When Mussani completed the initiation ceremony, JB stood and went to the Jeep. He felt sick to his stomach, and his skin was crawling with goosebumps. Mussani tightened the gold, braided rope around his thick waist, lit a cigarette, and smiled.

"What about h-h-h-her?" JB nodded toward the dead woman sprawled at the base of the giant elm. He swallowed the sour

saliva gathering in his mouth and wiped the back of his hand against the clammy sweat on his forehead.

Mussani unscrewed his flask of whisky. He took a long drink and shrugged.

JB swallowed hard and let grief wash over him. Sylvia had never teased or rejected him. For the first time since joining the life at Bueton, he felt doubt.

As if aware of his disloyal thoughts, Mussani laid his arm across his shoulders. They stood together in the artificial light from the Jeep's headlights.

"It's sad," Mussani said, and his expression showed deep sympathy. "Her death was an accident, Brother. The woods are dangerous and off limits."

"There w-w-was blood on her l-l-lips."

"Sylvia was a traitor. Brother, hold tight to your faith and remember that not everyone is worthy of rising to the next level."

Mussani flicked the cigarette toward the Jeep, and the smoldering filter fell on Mandy's grubby robe. She crawled across the road toward her Messiah, guttural whimpers tearing from her throat. She reached for him.

He grasped her hand and pulled her to her feet. "My poor child, look at how betrayed you were by Sister Sylvia. Come, it's time for you to go home." He was smiling, but JB saw no kindness in the expression.

JB turned his back and went around the front of the Jeep to the passenger door. "I swear," he whispered to the wind.

With a final glance at his lover's dead body slouching against the giant elm tree, JB climbed into the Jeep and closed his eyes.

CHAPTER ONE

Estelle

ESTELLE GAZED OUT the large kitchen window over the sink. She didn't care about the maple, oak and birch trees dressed in their fall finery. The sun skipped across the smooth surface of the pond, and the frost painted the grass in the fields with shimmering patterns of light, but it didn't move her. She wasn't grateful for nature's seasonal gifts. She'd grown up poor, with an abusive father who took pleasure in controlling his family. What Estelle cared about now was ownership. She knew money was power, and power meant obedience. That was exactly what she wanted, and she didn't care how reluctantly people offered the obedience.

She stood beside the dishwasher and, with a twitch of irritation, realized it was still making a weird noise. She'd asked Duncan to fix it, and he'd mumbled that their ranch hand could take care of it. The machine continued to clank and groan, like an old man shuffling to the washroom. She suspected Duncan broke it when he steamed trout in the dishwasher. Her foodie husband had arrived home from the city excited by the bizarre recipe he'd negotiated from the chef of a five-star restaurant, and now the bloody dishwasher wasn't working. The trout hadn't even tasted good. There had been a hint of detergent in every bite.

The dogs started barking, and she peered out the library window to see who was coming up the lane. Maybe it was Dean, and maybe he was planning to fix the dishwasher. She disliked Dean Crats because he made these peculiar remarks blanketed with subtext, which he'd drawl with a snide smirk.

Instead of Dean's truck, it was a delivery van, although the directive on the gate clearly stated that the stable office received all deliveries. Angry, Estelle stomped to the mudroom, snagged a jacket from the cedar closet, and stepped out the French doors.

The weather was unseasonably cool. Summer had arrived early, but the warm weather had departed fast. Winter was now nipping at October's tail, and the Farmer's Almanac warned that it would be a long season permeated with blizzards. The inclement weather made her unhappy because it was wreaking havoc with her renovation plans. She didn't care that the cold weather had destroyed most of the local crops. Her neighbours' financial worries weren't her concern. Estelle didn't believe in counting other people's money.

A cheerful male voice was drifting across the crisp air. Her uninvited guest was chatting to the dogs and addressing them by name, which meant he was someone local. She walked down the path that ran through the meticulous gardens and met the man at the wide driveway. Estelle rubbed the chill from her hands and waited for him to state his business.

"Hello there, Mrs. Reid, fine bright day today. How have you been? How's your family?" He strolled around his van to the back doors and extracted a wrapped box of flowers.

She didn't reply. She didn't like visitors, especially chatty visitors.

"It's a bit cool for the month. These are for you. The order came in from Italy."

He looked vaguely familiar, but she couldn't place him. His hands were calloused, and his fingernails were dirty. His face was weathered, and grey stubble decorated his jaw line. He had an accent that might be Scottish, but it was difficult to tell. The short,

thin man was dressed in a grubby pair of denim overalls and a plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up. She thought it was an unprofessional outfit for a deliveryman.

He passed her a large bouquet wrapped in festive paper and tied with maroon twine. "I think you're the first person around here who has ever received flowers from overseas."

She took the box. The wrapping was creative, and the bulk of the packaging and weight of the vase implied that it was an expensive arrangement. Her husband always bought her flowers from the city. She doubted that a florist working in Uthisca had any design skills, but she could smell roses on the cool wind so perhaps it wouldn't be too bad. If the order came from overseas, it was probably a birthday gift.

"I suspect it's from my daughter, Veronica. She and her family frequently travel in Italy," she said.

"How's your other daughter doing?"

Estelle looked up at the man. The box with the towering vase started to slip through her fingers. How could a simple question be so complicated? She wrapped the palm of her left hand more securely around the bottom of the box and glared at him.

He shuffled his feet against the pebbles. There was no judgment or malice in his face, only simple curiosity. The intensity of her stare, coupled with her refusal to answer his question, seemed to embarrass him. He dropped his eyes and turned away to shut the van doors.

"Okay then, you have yourself a good day," he mumbled.

It occurred to her that she should tip him. "Wait here," she said. "I'll be right back."

She turned around and marched back to the house. Once inside, she placed the vase on the quartz countertop of the shelving unit in the mudroom, closed her eyes, and focused on slowing her racing heart.

After they'd bought the ranch in the town of Uthisca, their youngest daughter had lived with them for nearly six months. It wasn't surprising that someone from town would remember her,

which was why Estelle drove an hour to an adjacent town to shop. She hadn't been in a Uthisca store in over two years.

Her chest felt tight, and she was having trouble catching her breath. The smell of scorched coffee made her stomach roll. She tried to concentrate on the sweet strains of an aria from Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* playing from the wireless speakers. How's your other daughter doing? The question kept bouncing around in her head, drowning out the opera like a ridiculous jingle you can't stop humming.

With a steadying breath, she grabbed a few coins from the dish on the table and went back to the driver, who was leaning against the bright Gerbera daisy logo on the side panel of the van.

He stepped forward to meet her and seemed about to say something. Then he glanced at the coins in her outreached hand, frowned, and looked back at her face.

"Thank you for delivering the flowers." She waved her hand at him, annoyed that he didn't just take the money and go.

Instead, he looked as if she'd slapped him across the face. "Neighbours don't take money 'round here for a simple kindness, Mrs. Reid." He glared at her.

Why would a tip offend the stupid man? He seemed angry when he climbed behind the wheel of the van and recklessly raced down the gravel lane to the main road. She watched the van disappear around a clump of trees. Etiquette dictated tipping for deliveries this far out in the country. She'd done nothing wrong.

Her hand shook when she tucked the coins into the pocket of her jacket, and the weakness infuriated her. She would call the store and complain. Clearly, they'd made the right decision by purchasing their flowers from the city. Nevertheless, she may as well open the arrangement and see what it looked like.

Back at the house, she stopped in the mudroom to pick up the box. She placed it on the marble countertop of the kitchen island and opened the wrapping to caress the pink roses, white tulips, and Cymbidium orchids. Orchids were her favourite, especially exotic orchids. Much to her surprise, it was a lovely arrangement.

Veronica had excellent taste, and the flowers would look spectacular in the living room on the side table.

She selected a Waterford crystal vase that would highlight the delicate orchids. After arranging the flowers, she tossed the florist's vase into the recycling bin and eagerly plucked the card from the forked stick. She read the card once, blinked and read it again. She eyed the flowers with suspicion. The card read, *Happy Birthday, Mother. Jasmine.*

Estelle retrieved the original vase from the recycling bin and shoved the flowers into it, jamming the forked stick into the arrangement, and crushing an orchid. She picked up the large vase, carried it into the sunroom, and plunked it onto the cluttered table. Water sloshed out and soaked the morning paper.

"So, we're expected to believe Jasmine is in Italy," she said to the dogs trotting at her heels.

More than likely, her daughter had contrived an elaborate plot to make it look like she was in Italy. Chewing on her lower lip, Estelle eyed the arrangement. She picked up the vase and went outside to the deck, depositing the delicate flowers on the outdoor table. She rubbed the chill from her arms and scurried back to the kitchen. She could still see the flowers. She closed the mahogany blinds to the deck and went into the living room.

She hadn't spoken to her daughter in years and tried very hard never to think about her. Was Zach in Italy, too? She ran her fingers through her short hair, wandered back to the kitchen and sat on a barstool. Estelle made a point of never sending presents to Jasmine and wished her daughter would return the favour. She and Duncan had opened a trust fund for their grandson, Zach, and made a generous deposit for each occasion, but that was it. She cursed her daughter's obstinate nature. Why couldn't she leave well enough alone?

Duncan would ask if she'd phoned to thank Jasmine. If she said no, he would scamper to the damn computer and email her, regardless of the fact that he had no interest in a relationship. Every

time a gift arrived, Estelle lost control and lectured him about his hypocrisy, but he still ran to the computer.

Her morning was ruined, and she felt anxious and irritable. She pulled on a jacket and tugged on a pair of heavy-soled walking boots, a morning ritual that preceded the dogs' daily run through the fields. As always, the two bullmastiffs gathered around her with unconditional love and sharp barks of excitement. She tugged on their floppy brown ears, gave them each a generous pat, and ushered them outside. At the steps leading from the deck, she watched them take off in a gallop to the fields.

She turned and studied the flowers. There they sat in all their glory, mocking her. Carefully selecting her favourite flowers wasn't a thoughtful gesture. It was Jasmine's passive aggressive way of reminding her mother that she didn't care enough to send meaningful gifts herself. Oh yes, there was lots of subtext woven around those seemingly innocent blossoms.

Estelle tilted her head and studied the crooked table. She nudged the teak table leg with the toe of her boot. The heavy table didn't move. She grasped it and shoved. The arrangement tumbled off, and the glass vase smashed against the deck. She smiled slightly, collected a garbage bag from the mudroom, and returned to stuff the squished blossoms and shards of broken glass into the sack.

Whenever her mind drifted to Jasmine, Estelle thought of Amanda, and she didn't like thinking about her either. She looked across the rolling green fields and spied the dogs in the far south paddock. They were chasing something. Probably a rabbit. If she went to the mailbox, they wouldn't notice. She never took them to the mailbox because she worried they'd be hit by a car. North Road rarely had traffic, but she worried just the same. If they decided to have an adventure and took off down the road, she wouldn't be able to control them.

She hurried down the lane to the mailbox with the jaunty red flag pointing up at the bright blue sky. There were several greeting cards, but there was nothing from her youngest daughter.

“Well, isn’t that nice. Not even a card for her mother on her birthday,” Estelle muttered.

Amanda had left home two years earlier. At first, Estelle and Duncan had assumed it was adolescent defiance, and they’d waited for her to come home. Five weeks after her disappearance – two weeks after her sixteenth birthday – Duncan involved the police. During her interview, Estelle told the Inspector that Amanda was with her sister. It was important to her that no one gossiped about her daughter running away because that would imply there was something negative in her home.

The truth was that a month before she disappeared, Amanda had grown obsessed with non-traditional religious doctrines. The fanatic sermonizing hinted at a mental health issue, and it bewildered and scared them. They did their best to ignore the behaviour, assuming Amanda’s extremist attitude was because of their recent move to Uthisca from Toronto. They figured she’d return to her quiet personality once she settled into their new home and made friends at school.

Instead, Amanda had refused to decorate her new room, claiming every stick of furniture was wasteful and excessive. She systematically drove away anyone who tried to connect with her, claiming they were materialistic sinners. Not a single teenager graced the doors of their new home, which left her unhappy parents the sole audience for her to regale with unorthodox views on communal love and peculiar ideologies of collective consciousness.

Duncan found a boarding school that would accept Amanda mid-semester, but she disappeared the night before she was to leave. They believed she was with her sister, and Jasmine was lying to them. They’d agreed that the best plan was to move on with a stiff upper lip, until Amanda came to her senses. That was two years ago. They were still waiting.

Estelle dug into the deep pocket of her jacket and extracted a small white business card for a Toronto private investigator.

When Inspector Hash had told her they were closing Amanda's case, he'd offered Sam McNamara's card.

She gnawed on the corner of her thumb and wondered if she really wanted to find Amanda. In a very dark place, she'd felt relieved when her religiously obsessed daughter had left home.

Picking at the white card, she walked around the house to the fields that lay beyond. In the south paddock, she could see the herd of wild horses. They seemed skittish, and she shaded her eyes against the sun's glare and hunted for her dogs. They were lying on the deck, waiting for her return. The dogs had killed the rabbit, or it had won the game and escaped. Estelle whistled for them and spun the small card. Fine, she decided, she would hire Sam McNamara to locate her wayward daughter.

It occurred to her that Amanda might not want to come home, but it didn't matter. Estelle would get what she wanted. After all, money was power, and power meant obedience.

CHAPTER TWO

Betty

“AND SHE OFFERED me a tip, a handful of bloody coins! She stood there waving her manicured paw at me as if I were a pimple-faced teenager!” Harry repeated for the twentieth time since the family had started dinner. “She didn’t even recognize me, and I’ve been over talking to her husband a dozen times over the past two years. We’re the only neighbours that stupid woman has!”

Margaret, their eighteen-year-old daughter, giggled and reached over to hug her father’s slouching shoulders. “Oh, Daddy, forget about it, she probably doesn’t know Mom owns the shop.”

“It’s called Welsh Florist, Margaret! Our name is plastered all over the van,” he argued. “She’s a snot. You can see her snobbish attitude in the way she carries herself.” He got to his feet and began prancing across the kitchen floor. “See what I mean, like she’s the Queen of England.”

The kids laughed and Betty smiled at her husband.

“And,” he said, while sitting back at the table, “her voice is peppered with contempt, like it’s a real nuisance to have to speak with the peasants. She’s too skinny for a woman her age. She has to be pushing sixty. Everything about that,” he stopped and looked at

the kids, “old witch suggests she’s never done an honest day’s labour in her life.”

“Alright, Harry, that’s enough,” Betty said. She’d have liked to get through one family dinner without someone complaining about something.

“I hate that woman. I don’t like a single thing about her,” Harry complained.

“You don’t even know her,” Betty calmly replied and stood up to clear the table.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“You can’t hate someone you barely know,” she argued. She could easily imagine the look on her proud husband’s face when a neighbour handed him a couple of toonies. She stifled a giggle. He was right – the woman was a bitch with more money than common sense.

“You don’t need to know someone well to hate her guts,” he grumbled.

“Don’t be so immature,” Betty gently scolded.

Harry scowled at her, and she kissed the top of his head and picked up his plate and utensils.

Their sixteen-year-old son, Bart, grabbed the last roll, just before she removed the basket from the table. “Did you see the horses, Dad?” he asked, stuffing the bread into his mouth.

Before Harry could answer, twelve-year-old Hope jumped in. “I never get to see them from the road.” From behind her grubby glasses, her eyes shone with innocent excitement.

“The stable is nicer than our house. I’m surprised *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* hasn’t been around to do a segment,” Harry grumbled.

Betty gave him a hard stare, poured him a cup of coffee, and placed a thick slab of chocolate layer cake on his plate.

He glared at her. “Betty, you don’t like that woman either, so don’t be so judgmental.” He suddenly grinned. “Hey, why don’t you tell the kids why you never went over to ask for your precious pie plate? Little bit of pride there?”

Two years ago, she'd taken a homemade apple pie over to welcome the Reid family to Uthisca. She'd dropped it off without Estelle offering a word of thanks or an invitation for a cup of tea. Mrs. Reid hadn't even bothered to return the pie plate. It was hand-painted ceramic. Her mother had given it to her when she got married. For twenty years, it had perched in a place of honour in their old china cabinet. It wasn't expensive, but she shouldn't have to go over and ask for it back.

Harry chuckled at her and winked. She frowned and handed her youngest son, Willy, his dessert. Before she let go of the plate, the fourteen-year-old had his fork up and was digging into the layer cake.

Hope delicately picked at her dessert, but didn't eat it. She also hadn't eaten any of her dinner. Betty was very aware of her daughter's skill at moving food around on the plate to make it appear that she'd eaten. Her youngest child was painfully thin, and Betty constantly worried about her health.

"Think they'd let me ride the horses?" Hope asked.

Bart and Will both laughed and sprayed a rain shower of chocolate crumbs from their mouths.

"That's disgusting!" Margaret squawked. "You're pigs. Cover your mouths."

The boys oinked at their sister and shoved their faces into their cake.

Margaret crinkled her nose in disgust. "I doubt Mrs. Reid will let you ride her horses," she told her sister. "But hey, the Wilder family has a mare, and Richard told me I could bring you over to ride any time you'd like."

Hope didn't look impressed. "You just want to go 'cause you think Richard's dreamy. That mare is a hundred years old."

Margaret giggled. "Well, Richard is pretty good-looking."

"I heard the Reids are going to breed and show Arabian horses," Willy said. "Dean told me they were bringing in more this spring." He glanced wistfully at his empty plate and then stared at the rest of the cake on the kitchen countertop.

Betty ignored him. He'd already had two plates of chicken, six rolls, four glasses of milk, and a huge piece of cake.

"Why in God's name do they want Arabians in this climate?" Harry muttered.

Margaret opened her mouth to reply, but Harry kept talking. "Margaret, don't bother trying to educate me again on what's trendy. It's not vogue to have useless horses you don't know how to take care of."

Margaret smiled. "Wow, Dad used the word vogue in a sentence. I must be getting somewhere. Now, if I can just get him into designer overalls."

"Harry," Betty said, "you don't know if they can take care of the horses, and they have Dean Crats."

"With the way that uppity woman has him acting like her personal contractor, I'm surprised he has any time for the horses," Harry retorted.

"Well, they can't do construction in the winter." Margaret got up and began to clear the table. "She'll probably hire someone to do the stable work and leave Dean to train the horses. They have an arena attached to the stable."

Betty figured she was right. Mrs. Reid would pay someone to help with the animals. The seed of an idea took root.

"Saw Dean Crats at the Co-op yesterday," Bart said.

Betty stopped pondering her idea and looked up. "What were you doing at the Co-op?" Her son liked to skip school. You had to listen carefully because it was always a possibility that the adventure had taken place when he should have been in math class.

He rolled his eyes. "It was after school, Mom. Dean says they're building a meditation room in the building they attached to the main house."

His family stared at him. A meditation room in Uthisca?

"Honest!" Bart exclaimed after a few seconds of silence.

"Who knows, maybe if she takes up yoga she'll be nicer. I agree with Dad. I think she's a—"

"Margaret! Don't you finish that sentence," Betty warned.

Margaret swept her long chestnut hair behind her ears and examined her purple fingernails.

Betty thought her daughter's polish colour made her nails look like she'd slammed all ten fingertips in a car door. She didn't criticize because motherhood was all about picking your battles. However, she was sick of talking about the Reids. It was time to nudge the conversation in a different direction.

She picked up a thick book from the table beside her eldest daughter. "Is this for school?"

"Yeah, in Advanced English Lit. It's the fiction novel that won the Governor General's Literary Award."

Her daughter sat back at the table, and Betty read the back cover. "I've heard about it. Is it any good?"

"I guess. It's not really my style," she answered.

"What's it about?" Harry eyed the book suspiciously.

Betty knew he was hoping it wasn't a deranged piece of pornography camouflaged as literature to confuse gullible parents. He constantly complained there were no moral boundaries in society any longer. Yesterday, he'd arrived home from town ranting about how two teenagers were practically having sex on the bench outside the Co-op.

"Harry, stop worrying, it's not erotic literature."

He nodded but didn't look convinced. "What's it about?" he asked his daughter again.

"We're discussing how the sandbar is the metaphor because it illustrates Jessica's life. She's the main character, and it's her life story," Margaret explained.

Bart, Willy, and Hope clamoured to their feet. "Can we be excused?" they asked in unison.

"Go ahead," Harry said. "Chores, Bart and Will, and homework, Hope," he recited.

"Willy-boy, I'll give you five bucks if you take out the garbage and feed the hogs," Bart offered.

Betty was immediately suspicious.

Will's eyes narrowed. "Why? Watcha gonna do?"

“None of your business, I don’t have to answer to you,” Bart retorted.

“You do have to answer to me,” Harry said sternly. “Where are you going? Who are you going with and what are you going to be doing?”

“Gary got a new video game. Thought I’d go check it out.”

“Do your own chores, and curfew is ten o’clock. Ask Gary’s dad to drive you home or call. I don’t want you walking along the road at night,” Harry said.

“Thought maybe I could take the truck,” Bart mumbled.

Betty glanced at Harry and shrugged. Three months earlier, Bart had earned his licence. She didn’t know how to deal with the scary situation of her teenage son driving, especially at night.

She wasn’t surprised when Harry dug the keys from the pocket of his work pants and threw them to Bart.

“Thanks, Dad, I promise I’ll go straight there and come straight home.”

Harry nodded. “You change your plans, give us a call.”

“And, Bart, remember it only—”

“I know, Mom! It only takes a second to make a decision you’ll regret the rest of your life, and there isn’t a do-over,” he quoted sarcastically.

“Fine,” she said. “There’s to be no music while you’re driving and keep your eyes on the road. If you break our trust, we’ll remove you from our insurance and you can dig your bike out of the shed.”

“Yes, ma’am, I know the rules.” He gave his father a hug. “Thanks for the truck, Dad.”

After Bart ran out to do chores with Willy on his heels and Hope had reluctantly dragged her backpack up to her room, Margaret continued where she’d left off. “In Jazz Belrose’s book, the sandbar represents Jessica’s life because it’s only seen at times.”

“So, she doesn’t feel that people see her?” Betty asked.

“Well, she thinks they see her some of the time — like, you don’t always see a sandbar, but it’s still there,” Margaret explained.

“Don’t know much about sandbars,” Harry admitted. “I’ve never even seen one.” He picked up the book and studied it while Betty poured them all fresh coffee. “Why did she call it *Dear Mary Magdalene*?”

“My teacher says the book has to do with the Gnostic Gospels and Mary Magdalene’s relationship with Christ.”

“It sounds boring,” Harry muttered.

Betty sat at the kitchen table and shoved the rest of the dishes to the side. “What are you doing the essay on?” She used to love essay writing in university. Although she’d majored in biological science, she’d taken as many elective literature classes as she could.

“My essay thesis is on Jessica Cross’s belief that Mary Magdalene created the Order of the Divine Feminine, a secret society.”

Harry continued to look bewildered and peeked at his watch.

Margaret read from her notes. “The book discusses the hypocrisy of religion. It’s about how bad people use religion as an excuse to do what they want and how people follow a leader.”

“If you believe in God, you’re stupid?” There was a twang of annoyance in Harry’s voice.

“Well, sort of, I guess. It’s just a book. Do you want to read it, Daddy?”

He flipped through the pages. “Sure.” He didn’t sound too excited.

“I have homework, and I’ll give Hope a hand with hers.”

After Margaret left, Betty kissed her husband. “You’re a very nice man, Harry.”

“Well, I got chores.”

“It’s Thursday,” Betty said with a seductive smile.

“So it is, Betty-girl. Got any of them sexy, smelly candles I’ve been hearing ‘bout, or should I drive over and ask Mrs. Reid to borrow a few? Never know, maybe she’ll offer me a tip.”

Hope

HOPE sat at the low stool in front of their white dressing table. She'd positioned the three narrow mirrors so she could see the front of her face and the sides of her head. She studied her reflection with a sigh. It was as depressing as always.

"You have homework." Margaret came into the bedroom, took the hairbrush from Hope's hand, and started brushing her hair for her.

Hope just sat there, hating her limp brown strands and the fresh crop of blackheads on her forehead, which was too wide. The ones on her jaw — too square — had turned to whiteheads. Mom had scrimped on groceries to buy the facial wash and astringent the pharmacist recommended, but he'd warned them that things would get worse before they improved. At least he'd been honest.

"Why am I so ugly?" She held her sister's eyes in the mirror, daring her to contradict her.

"I don't know," Margaret said slowly, "but I think it'll change when you get older."

Hope sighed. That's what they always said. Her mom said she was beautiful, which was just plain stupid. Margaret told her it was a stage. Her brothers told her boys liked nice girls better than hot-ties. That one was so dumb it made her laugh.

"Oh, I just remembered. I bought something for you today." Margaret rummaged through her backpack and handed her a small white bag.

Hope peered inside. The bag contained six silver butterfly barrettes. "They're so pretty." She pulled them out and examined one. "Look, their eyes are little blue jewels."

Margaret smiled. "Here, I'll help you put them in."

Her sister grasped a ribbon of hair, twisted the lock, and attached the clip. She tucked in the end, secured the barrette, and moved on with determination.

They looked terrible, but Hope made a huge effort to smile. “They look very pretty. They’d look nice with your blue dress. You’re wearing it to the New Year’s Eve dance, right?”

Margaret blushed. “Well, yeah. I’ll borrow them, if that’s okay.”

She knew Margaret had been saving her babysitting money for something. Probably the hair clips because they went with her dress. Hope sighed and considered giving them back. They were probably a pity gift her sister hadn’t intended to give. Mom always said that giving a gift was a better feeling than buying yourself something, so she hugged her sister. “Thanks, I love them and you can borrow them any time you want. You don’t have to ask or anything.”

“Isn’t your book report on *Little Women* due next week?” Margaret asked.

“I haven’t finished.” She rolled her eyes. “I guess I didn’t read it right ‘cause I can’t answer the questions.”

“It’s a hard book. I can explain it to you.” Margaret picked up the novel and lay on her single bed. Hope climbed onto the bed beside her.

“There were four sisters. Meg, she was the eldest, Jo, she was a bit of a character, Beth, she was very delicate, and Amy. Amy is twelve when the book starts, just like you.”

The one part of the book Hope did remember was the line that described Amy as a regular snow-maiden – pretty Amy with her curly golden hair and blue eyes. “She was pretty. She wasn’t anything like me,” Hope said.

Margaret hugged her. “Well, of course she wasn’t like you. Amy is vain and likes to throw temper tantrums.”

Betty

BETTY ADJUSTED THE pillow and rolled over. A minute later she rolled to the other side, removed the pillow, and rolled onto her back.

“What’s wrong?”

She sighed deeply. “Nothing, guess I’m not tired. Maybe I’ll go down and have a nice cuppa.”

Harry paused for a heartbeat. “Was the... ah... the love okay? If not, well maybe I could...”

She laughed and hugged her husband. “The loving was just fine. It always is!” She kissed him and slid out of bed and into her housecoat.

Harry sat up. “Bart’s home. I heard him come in a while ago.”

She stuffed her arms into the old housecoat and sighed. “I know, go back to sleep. All I need is a bit of quiet and a cup of tea.”

Betty tiptoed down the hall and opened the girls’ bedroom door. Hope had climbed into Margaret’s bed, and the girls were spooning. She adjusted the covers, kissed her precious baby girls, and went to the boys’ room.

Bart was snoring. She stood over the bed and sniffed his hair. She could detect a faint whiff of cigarette smoke, but it wasn’t strong enough to suggest Bart had been the one smoking. It also wasn’t skunky enough to hint at something other than tobacco smoke. She crossed the room and tried to find Will under the cocoon of blankets. He was clutching a stuffed bear. It embarrassed him that he still slept with the toy, but Betty thought it was sweet and gave the bear’s nose a pat.

In the kitchen, she plugged in the kettle, took a mug from the cupboard and a tea bag from the jar, and looked out the window over the kitchen sink. From the angle of the window, she could see lights from the Reid stable. When the Reids had first moved in, Betty had been concerned when she spied lights late at night. Now, she understood that Mrs. Reid left the lights on timers.

The stable she had ridden at as a child had an Arabian. If Hope could learn to ride a magnificent horse like that, it would do wonders for her self-esteem. If it had been anyone other than Mrs. Reid, Betty would have been willing to swallow her pride to ask if her daughter could exercise the horses.

But it wasn't anyone else, and she didn't want to ask snobbish Estelle for a favour. Then again, maybe Hope could do chores in exchange for the privilege of riding the horses.

Maybe, Betty thought, *I could take over fresh baking and make the offer.* She had a dish she was planning to give to the church bazaar, so she could use that.

"Make a pot, Betty-girl." Her husband wrapped his rough hands around her waist, held her back against his chest, and kissed the side of her neck. She patted his hand and cried.

"There, there, nothing can be that bad," he soothed.

He held her for several minutes, and then he led her to the table, pulled out a chair, and eased her into the seat. He made the tea, brought out the milk and sugar and sat beside her.

Stirring his tea, he simply said, "Talk to me."

She smiled weakly and wrapped her cold hands around the cup. "It's Hope, that's all. Her teacher called yesterday to say she might not pass the semester, which means she'll fail the year."

Harry winced. "If she's held back a year, her problems at school are going to get a lot worse."

Betty looked down at her tea. "She doesn't have any friends."

"I know."

"Why are kids so cruel?" she sobbed. "Willy told me they call her 'Hideous Hope'. He says they pick on her all the time and I've read some of the things they say on Facebook. Do you think she's experiencing hard-core bullying?"

"I don't think they're physically beating on her, if that's what you mean," he said.

She laughed bitterly. "Verbal abuse and teasing is what damages kids deep down and forever, especially for a girl!"

Harry sighed. "I know. If you want my two cents, boys are easier because we can teach them how to box, and they can learn sports. There are ways to increase a boy's self-confidence through puberty. It's harder for girls because it seems to me it's all about looks. I don't get it."

Betty didn't agree that boys had an easier time during puberty and adolescence. When it came to self-confidence, all children agonized over their appearance.

"What about contact lenses?" she suggested.

Harry shook his head. "Dr. Kowalski said she can't wear them, remember?"

"Well, there's laser surgery, he said that was a choice." As soon as she uttered the words, she wished she hadn't. She knew how expensive it was. The words hung in the air like a veil of smoke.

"We have to think about Margaret's education."

"She's at the top of her class and valedictorian. Maybe she'll get a scholarship," she said.

"You know there aren't enough scholarships to go around."

"We could take out another loan," she suggested.

"And then a second to send Bart to university and a third when Willy's ready? Come on, Betty."

Feeling like she was grasping at straws, she said, "Naja, at the beauty parlour, thinks highlights could help to control the oil and add colour." When she saw her husband's face, she quickly added, "She said she'd do it herself, as a gift."

"Sounds like unnecessary charity."

"There's a dermatologist. Maybe the doctor could refer us to one in the city."

Harry was silent.

"It would be covered by OHIP, and it wouldn't cost us anything," she said.

"The trip into the city would cost us money, and we don't have medical insurance for prescriptions."

Betty felt a surge of anger wash over her. "For crying out loud, are you willing to neglect your daughter's health because of the dollars?"

Harry looked up with pain in his eyes. "I'm doing the best I can."

She lowered her head. The anger disappeared as fast as it came. She felt an overwhelming sense of emptiness. She loved Harry, but she hated the farm and the life it forced them to live.

Harry finished his tea and sighed. "Go ahead and take Naja up on her offer. If she wants to give Hope a gift, it isn't my place to say no." He paused before adding, "And... ask the doc for a referral in the city. We'll go as a family and visit the universities. Maybe the trip will make Bart try harder to get better grades."

Harry looked exhausted. Betty took the cups to the sink and stretched.

"Come on, let's go to bed." She wrapped an arm around his waist, and they walked through their dark home.

As they left the kitchen, Betty glanced behind her at the lights in the Reid stable. When the Reids moved in, they had a daughter Margaret's age living with them. A teacher had complained to Betty that the Reids had sent the child to private school, implying Uthisca Secondary wasn't good enough. To the best of Betty's knowledge, the girl had never returned.

Maybe the Reids didn't have everything after all. Betty couldn't imagine life without her precious children or fathom the loneliness of sleeping alone every night. Whatever her husband's faults, she wouldn't trade her life for a huge house without family to fill the rooms with love and laughter and the occasional tears. From the front window, Betty spied a single star brightly blink before a cloud hid it from sight. Goosebumps scampered down her arms and legs.

"You cold, Betty?"

"No, I just got a minute of the willies. Guess someone walked over my grave."

Harry scooped Margaret's book from the hall table. "That's an old wives' tale," he grumbled, studying the book.

"I'm an old wife." She plucked the book from his fingers. "I'm still not tired. Will it bug you if I leave the light on for a bit? I thought I'd start Margaret's book, if it's okay with you if I read it before you do." She knew he didn't have the time or the desire to read the long book. She would read it and explain the story to him so he could chat with Margaret about her essay.

He grinned sheepishly. “Sure, if you’d like to have yourself a little read that’ll be just fine.”

She tucked *Dear Mary Magdalene* under her arm and followed Harry upstairs to the bedroom. No, she decided with sudden certainty, money wasn’t everything.

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