

The Story of Michelle Brown Vandivere

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this book to Mrs. Susan Campbell from Cass High School. If she hadn't motivated me and inspired me, then I would have never finished the first chapter. Thank you Mrs. Campbell, and I love you so much. I would also like to dedicate this book to Bob Burns. Thank you for your encouragement, and for helping me realize that dreams do come true.

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PROLOGUE

She sits there with her salvation in the palm of her hand, with only one chance for redemption in the chamber. She was unsure of how she could go on. So much had happened in only a few short months of her life. She had endured more torture than anyone could endure in a lifetime. All of the pain, and emotional trauma had taken its toll on her. She was physically and mentally drained. She just wanted this to be over. She wanted these events of her life to cease, and if it required a life then so be it. She felt as though her soul had died, and her body ached and begged to join it.

An eternity in hell would be more appealing than one more second in the life she was now living. She was drained, exhausted, and felt indescribably lost. She thought back to a time in her life when it was simple, when she was simple. She was a small town girl with small town dreams. Normal. She once was normal. Now, she was cursed to a life of solitude, with only her own company to keep. It would be better to be dead. She felt dead already. Her head pounded with pain. She barely had the strength to think. She was so weak.

What was she waiting for? She wondered why she was wasting time reminiscing. Perhaps she was searching herself for a reason to change her mind. She could not find a logical one. It had to be done. She had no other choice. She had to rid herself of the curse that was her birthright. She had to find an end to the torture that plagued her, and all of the people she loved. They too had been through enough. They too had suffered. This had to end. She had to rid the world of this terror. A person that carried such a plague should not live.

The time had come. She had to finish what she started. She knew that it would not end unless she stopped her procrastination. She looked at her left hand. There it lay. The shining metal in her hand was the freedom she longed for. Inside the revolver was her one chance at salvation. She grasped the revolver tightly. She placed her index finger on the trigger, and closed her eyes. She had to find the courage to pull it. She inhaled a deep empowering breath. Without exhaling, she squeezed the trigger.

CHAPTER ONE

Michelle Brown sat behind the counter, tapping her pen on the imitation marble. Her curly brunette locks were pulled back in a simple ponytail. Of course, this was the common hairstyle for southern workingwomen. It was simple and easy to do. It made the workday somewhat easier. She stared out of the casement windows that she had decorated with a simple drapery and valance. Her mother had made them. They were old and faded from the sun but she didn't mind. They made her feel as though her mother was still there. She had been gone three years now, and Michelle had only recently found herself accustomed to it. She had just stopped crying herself to sleep at night.

She watched the street with hope in her emerald eyes. She prayed silently that someone would come in. However, it seemed that each person that passed by ignored the sign on the door that read, "Free Pie with Coffee". Perhaps they hadn't even looked in her direction. The only customer she had served that day was old Mr. Singleton that ran the local hardware store. He came in every morning. Michelle started to think that he only did it because he had been friends with her father for years too numerous to count. Maybe he felt like he would disappoint him if he didn't do all he could to help keep Michelle's Diner on its feet.

It would take more than his \$1.35 cup of coffee to do so. Michelle's Diner had been enduring a financial crisis for well over six months now. That was no surprise. The diner was suffering the same fate as many small businesses for miles around. The economic down fall from the rising cost of the war against terrorism had taken its toll on many businesses, small and large corporations alike. Unfortunately, Michelle was no exception to the curse.

She remembered her grand opening three years earlier. The diner had been a graduation present from her parents. When she graduated with a 4.0 GPA from North Metro Technical College in Acworth, her parents couldn't have been more proud. She should have known they were up to something. Her father went on and on about her major. She remembered him telling her repeatedly that since she was getting an associate degree in business management, she should use it. Much to her surprise, on graduation day, they presented her with a key that hung from a key chain that had a cheeseburger. She laughed at the unusual ornament. "What is this dad?" she had asked him while attempting to contain her laughter. That is when he pointed across the street to a building. Michelle was in shock when she read the sign. Michelle's Diner was printed in bold black letters across a purple background.

No doubt, the diner hit it off. It was the only hot spot in the small town of Adairsville, Georgia. Everyone from gossiping old women having coffee, to the testosterone driven teenage boys hoping that the \$1.50 slice of pie would get them laid. Granted, the town wasn't full of virgins, but Christian morals and values were still taught to and observed by some of the teenage girls. Stories of hell's fire and brimstone, in most cases, guaranteed that they would at least wait until they were adults. That was the idea of these good southern women with good southern values.

Now, in only eight short months, the thriving business of Michelle Brown had spiraled toward bankruptcy. She had taken out two mortgages, on the property, as well as two business loans in an attempt to save her diner. She felt like her diner failing was like saying her parents had failed in their attempt to establish her. She knew that they would be disappointed, but would love her regardless. She didn't want to lose her diner. That had been a gift from her parents, and the fact that Sheila and Jacob Brown were no longer living, didn't help matters much. She felt that even though they were gone, she had to make them proud. She felt as though she had something to prove. She needed to

prove to them that she would be okay, that she could take care of herself. If the diner was forced to shut down, or god forbid, went into foreclosure, she would never be able to forgive herself.

She was suddenly grateful that they weren't alive to see this. They had both been killed in a car accident only three months after her diner had opened. They were traveling home from an anniversary party. It was late, and Adairsville had acquired an unusual amount of rainfall that week. For a town where drought and water bans were common, the massive seven inches of precipitation in three days was a blessing. The farmers had been extremely grateful.

The call from Floyd Medical Center had come in at around Five a.m. Michelle and her brother Tom were sleeping, and hadn't realized that their parents hadn't arrived home yet. Michelle listened as the nurse informed her that her father had lost control of their Honda accord, and went off the side of highway 293, head on into a tree. She then informed her that they were both pronounced dead at the scene. Apparently, the car had burst into flames, and they burned to death.

Michelle and Tom hadn't seen the point of coffins for their parents. The heat from the inferno had been so intense that there was nothing left of their bodies. They set up with two urns on an altar, and a photograph of the two of them together. They honored the memory of Jacob and Sheila Brown with a ceremony that was more of a memorial service than a funeral. They didn't even schedule a viewing considering there was nothing to view. The urns had been empty.

Michelle heard the sound of her doorbell ringing. She had installed it to notify her that a customer had come in the diner had she not been where she could see. She pulled herself away from the depressing thoughts of her parents. She looked up to find a man, about forty or so, with thinning hair, and soda bottle glasses make his way over to the counter where she was sitting. She could feel her heart begin to race. She just knew that this was someone looking for money. Considering she had two mortgages and two business loans. That was the only explanation that she could fathom. She concluded that she was in no

mood to deal with this stress today, and decided she had to get rid of him and fast. Since she had never seen this man before, it shouldn't be that hard to avoid a long financial discussion.

"Excuse me miss, but I am looking for a Michelle Brown. Would you happen to know where I could find her?"

She could feel the pace of her heart increase even more at this point. At least she had an escape plan. She sat up straight, and gathered her composure to lie like hell to him.

"I'm sorry, but Michelle isn't in right now. May I take a message?"

Michelle waited anxiously to see if he had fallen for the trick. The man looked down at a piece of paper he held in his hand, then back at her. It was obvious to her that she must have liar written across her forehead. The look on his face confirmed her suspicion.

"Ms. Brown, my name is Charlie Dutton, and I am here to discuss the legal situation at hand," he said.

This was it. She was being sued. She knew that this day would eventually come considering the numerous past due debts she had, but she had hoped it would be a little later than this. She wasn't ready to admit defeat. After all, she had the pride level of a man. She would fight to the death to save her diner. She had promised that to her father when she visited his grave recently. That was just what she was going to do. She would fight like hell to save her diner, and all that her parents had worked so hard to give her.

She watched as the chubby little man opened his briefcase and removed a legal sized envelope. She then felt her fear turn to anger.

"Look, I have already told those money grubbing sons of bitches that I would pay them once business picks up. I just need a little more time. I just spoke with the bank yesterday," she stated.

The balding executive peered at her over the rim of his soda bottle glasses again. The look on his face informed Michelle that he was becoming agitated, but she didn't care. It was obvious that they didn't care about her, so she saw no logical explanation why she should care about them.

“I am not here to discuss your financial crisis Ms. Brown. I have no affiliation with any of your lien holders,” he informed her.

She suddenly felt ashamed and embarrassed for her actions, and her rudeness. “I am so sorry. Things are crazy here right now. My diner is in trouble, so naturally, I thought you were here for my debts.”

Michelle hoped that her apology would be accepted, and her actions understood by Mr. Dutton. She should have waited to hear what he had to say before chewing him up and spitting him out.

“That is okay Ms. Brown, I completely understand. Times are tough for a lot of businesses here.” he replied.

She wasn't sure if that was his way of accepting her apology, but she decided to interpret it that way. At least her dignity would remain in tact.

Michelle cleared her throat before returning to the conversation. “So, what can I do for you Mr. Dutton?” she asked flashing her now angelic smile.

Mr. Dutton pushed his glasses back up on his nose in the proper location before responding. “I need to acquire your signature on some legal documents regarding your inheritance. Please take the papers to read before signing.”

Once again, Michelle found herself puzzled. She had already handled the issues of her inheritance three years ago. Granted, she shared ownership of the estate that belonged to her parents with her brother Tom. Surely, he wasn't turning the entire estate over to her. Tom wasn't the giving type. If he were trying to sell it to her, she could understand that. That would be more of his style. Even if that were the case, Tom wouldn't need a lawyer; he was one. He would have also come by his self. He wouldn't have sent an intermediary. Tom despised an intermediary with a passion.

She quickly came to the realization that wasn't why this man was here. It didn't make any sense that the reason for his visit was an inheritance. She thought of anyone else that could have possibly passed away, and left something to her. The only relative that she had

besides Tom was her aunt Linda. Linda was a single woman who had never married, and had no children. She came to visit on major holidays such as Christmas and Thanksgiving, but that was the only time they ever saw her mother's sister. Michelle thought for a moment, and didn't remember hearing anything about her being ill. She pondered for a moment on the possibility that she too had died in a tragic accident. Suddenly, the information offered to her from this attorney made sense. He was here to notify her that her aunt had passed, and left her in control of her estate.

"Oh, I see. You are here about Aunt Linda's estate. Tell me how she passed?" she asked Mr. Dutton, feeling confident that she had guessed correctly.

He glanced down at the paper work again. "Ms. Brown, I do not see a Tom or a Linda on this paperwork. You must be mistaken. This estate belongs to your biological grandfather, Mr. Charles T. Vandivere."

Michelle sat in total shock at what she had heard. There had to be a typo in the paperwork or something, because she knew she wasn't adopted. She had read her birth certificate several times in her life, and it clearly stated that she was indeed the daughter of Jacob and Sheila Brown. After concluding that Mr. Dutton had the wrong person, she decided that the Christian thing to do would be to inform him of the error.

"I'm sorry Mr. Dutton, but you have the wrong person. Jacob and Sheila Brown are my biological parents. I believe that you have been misinformed." Michelle was pleased with herself. She felt that she had done the right thing by informing him of the error.

Mr. Dutton studied the documents carefully before responding to her. "No ma'am. You are the beneficiary on every document here. It states that you were put up for adoption at birth, and were adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Brown only two days later. Your birth mother was listed as Claire Vandivere."

Mr. Dutton directed his attention back to Michelle. He could tell by

the look on her face that she was in a state of shock. He quickly realized that Michelle Brown had not been aware of the adoption. Deep down, he wished he would have known that. He assumed that her biological grandfather had informed her of her origin. Now he wished he had taken a different approach.

“I’m sorry, I thought you knew.”

Michelle sat there at her high counter. She stared across the back line at a photograph of her parents. She pleaded with them in her mind that this man was wrong. She prayed with all of her heart and soul that he was wrong. None of this made any sense to her. This morning, her life was normal. Granted, normal was not in great condition now, but at least it was familiar, and comfortable. She suddenly paid no mind to the mounting debts that sat in the form of unopened envelopes on her desk at her house.

Now, her debts were the least of her concerns. She now had to cope with the news that after twenty-seven years, she wasn’t a real Brown. She suddenly began to feel like a puppy in a pet store. She could picture herself sitting there in the window among other puppies of different breeds as people walked by deciding which one they wanted for their own. She pictured her mother and father standing over the glass box saying to the store clerk “We want her.”

She wasn’t sure how to handle this new fact about her life. She didn’t know if she should feel anger towards her parents for a life long lie, or be grateful to them for saving her from a fate that she knew nothing about. One thing was certain. She would handle this in a mature fashion. Michelle had never been the type for emotional pity parties, and nervous breakdowns. She could hear the voice of her father telling her to be strong. Despite the nearly overpowering urge to cry, she took a deep breath.

“Leave the papers with me Mr. Dutton. I will read over them, and have my attorney do the same.”

She was impressed by her ability to compose herself. Mr. Dutton placed the legal size envelope on the counter top.

“I need you to sign this document Ms. Brown. It states that you received the information on the estate, as well as the copy of Mr. Vandivere’s last will and testament.” He placed the paper on the counter in front of her with a pen. Michelle retrieved the pen, and quickly scratched her signature on the dotted line.

“Thank you. Give me a call when you have made your decision.” With that, he placed his business card on the counter then turned and exited the diner.

Michelle found it impossible to compose herself any longer. She quickly went around the counter, and made her way to the door to the diner. She locked the door, flipped the open sign around, and sat down in the floor. She began to sob uncontrollably. She couldn’t comprehend the reason that her parents had never informed her of the truth. She felt betrayed in a sense, but the love that she felt toward her parents was stronger than any childish conclusion that she might come to. Never the less, she was hurting, and her mother had always told her that in some situations, the only thing to do at the time is to cry. Therefore, she did. She could feel the heat on her once flawless face as the tears continued to flow from her eyes.

She cried out repeatedly, asking why. She needed desperately to understand. She needed to understand why her life was overwhelmed with secrets and lies. Why hadn’t they just told her that she was adopted? She remembered hearing that some adoptive parents had taught their children at very young ages about what adoption meant. She certainly would have been able to cope with the fact easier. Now, here she was, twenty-seven years old and feeling as though her life was over. If she had been asked to describe what she was feeling, she couldn’t think of an analogy or metaphor that could compare.

She wasn’t aware of anything in life that felt this bad. She searched deep within her soul for the strength to overcome this obstacle in her life. She first had to stop crying. She had cried so many tears that she was surprised that she hadn’t dehydrated yet.

After what seemed like an eternity on the black and white

checkered floor, Michelle finally felt that she could stop the tears. She wiped the tears from her eyes, and stood up. “Get a grip Michelle. Your life isn’t over. It’s just changing, that’s all,” she said to herself in reassurance. She unlocked the door to the diner, and flipped the open sign back around. She knew that despite her newly discovered origin, she still had a business to run. No matter how far in the gutter Michelle’s Diner was now, she still had to try to save the business that her parents had worked so hard to give her. She walked back behind the counter and started brewing a fresh pot of coffee.

For the duration of the day, Michelle tried very hard not to think about the papers that still rested on the counter. She knew that she needed to read them, but she wasn’t ready to face reality, not yet. She did however need to put them in a secure place. She turned back to the counter top to retrieve the envelope. As she reached out to pick it up, she noticed another envelope lying beside it. Her curiosity began to run wild, but she didn’t give in to the temptation of opening that one either. She instead, put both envelopes in her purse. She decided that she would think no more of the matter until she arrived home later that evening. There was one thing that couldn’t wait regarding the documents. She had to call Tom. She wasn’t sure if he would be in court today or not, but decided to try. She walked over to the other end of the counter, picked up the phone, and dialed the number to Tom’s law firm in Rome, Georgia.

CHAPTER TWO

Thomas Brown had had an exhausting day. The trial that he had predicted to last a mere three or four days had now moved into its second week. He was still unaware of how an auto accident claim with so much evidence in favor of his client was dragging on the way it was. It didn't make any sense. Somehow, the plaintiff's attorney continued to discover reasons to post pone or have a continuance granted. He had never seen an attorney make such a mockery of the judicial system. When Tom had agreed to take the case, and received all of the evidence pertaining to it, he had deemed it open and shut. He thought that the attorney representing the plaintiff was merely stalling to try to have the case thrown out. However, he underestimated Thomas Brown. He was a ruthless attorney, the type that in criminal cases, the prosecution hated to see his name as defending council. In most cases, Tom was able to find a reason to have the charges dropped. He was just that good.

As Tom pulled into the parking lot of his law firm, he was delighted that his workday would soon be over. He normally went over case files at home after hours, but he decided earlier on in the day that he would take a well-deserved break this evening. He had it all planned. He would go to his favorite restaurant in Rome, and then to The Hot Spot in Cartersville. With any luck, he could meet a woman who had too much to drink, and be able to relieve his tension, using her as a tool. The thought brought a smile to the face of the thirty-three year old bachelor, as he locked the doors of his Lexus, and entered the building.

“Good evening Mr. Brown how was court today?”

The voice came from his secretary, Angela. She was a beautiful

sight first thing in the mornings, and the brief encounters that he shared with her seemed to make his day go by better.

“It was as well as could be expected Angela. Thank you. Do you have any messages for me?” he asked as he picked up the newspaper from the corner of her desk. Angela looked down, thumbing through the stack of pink while you were out slips.

“There’s a lot of them here, but there’s one I thought you might want as soon as you got in.”, she informed. Tom suddenly felt that his afternoon of rest and relaxation seemed to ruin from a mountain of phone calls that he would have to make tonight. That would be his luck. Sometimes he hated his job.

“Can they wait until Tomorrow?” he asked. He was hoping to hear the answer that he wanted to hear.

“Yes, except for one call. Your sister called and said that it was urgent that you return her call as soon as possible. She said that she needed some legal advice.”

Tom released an exhale that could have been mistaken for a big rig releasing the break pressure of his air brakes.

“I get so tired of dealing with her business problems. You would think that she would close down that damn diner and be done with it,” he commented before walking through the door to his office, closing it behind him.

Tom dropped his briefcase in one of the Lawson armchairs that accented his modern eclectic chromatic design. He removed his jacket, and hung it on the coat rack before taking a seat at his desk.

“I told her that I was not making anymore calls to the bank on her behalf,” he complained aloud to himself.

He suddenly felt as though his necktie was choking him. He reached up to loosen the knot. Once he was confident that he had eliminated as many aggravations as possible, he picked up the phone and dialed the number to her diner. He waited some what patiently as the phone rang. Finally, she answered the phone on the fourth ring.

“Michelle’s Diner.” he heard her say.

“Hey, what’s going on Michelle? Did you get served papers or something?” He heard Michelle scuff from the other end of the line.

“Yes, but not the type that says that the bank is suing me,” she informed.

Tom felt somewhat relieved to hear that. He didn’t think that he could have endured another long drawn out conversation with the bank president to convince him to extend her deadline.

“Okay, so what did they say?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I haven’t read them yet.”

Tom sat back in his chair, and ran his fingers through his hair.

“Michelle, if you didn’t open them, then how do you know what they are about?” he asked.

“The attorney that delivered them told me what they were about. Imagine my shock when he told me that I had inherited my biological grandfather’s estate.”

Tom’s mouth dropped. Did he hear her correctly? Did she actually say her biological grandfather? Of all of the things that she could have told him, Tom had not been prepared to hear that. He was in a state of shock that caused him to question if he would need to seek medical attention later. He didn’t know how to respond to the words that had come from his little sister. He didn’t know what to say. His instinct told him that he should try to comfort her, but she sounded fine. She didn’t have the first hint of sorrow in her voice. Then again, knowing his sister the way he did, she would probably sound just as calm if she was to win the lottery. Tom realized that he would have to reschedule his night out on the town to deal with a dilemma that Michelle was having. “I’ll be there after I leave work,” he stated before replacing the receiver.

What the hell was going on? First, his four-day case turns into a two-week case, and now his sister had inherited an estate that she didn’t even know existed, from a person that she didn’t know existed. This didn’t make any sense. Why would they leave it to a girl that never knew them? That didn’t seem like a responsible decision from his perspective. He was an attorney, and he dealt with issues like this on

a daily basis. He had never seen or read about a case where a biological descendant unknown to the deceased, received the family estate. Usually, it went to a spouse, or children. He had even seen cases where a sibling, aunt, or uncle had gained control, but never a person adopted out of a family. The pieces of this puzzle didn't match up. There was something strange going on, and it involved his only sister. He was damned and determined to find the underlying cause of it.

Michelle sat on her loveseat in her living room, channel surfing in an attempt to pass the time. She tried anything to keep her mind off the papers that sat on her kitchen table awaiting Tom's arrival. She had called Valerie earlier, and asked her to come to her house. She wanted to have someone there that could display some compassion for her situation. She knew that if she relied on Tom for it, she would be a grandmother before she got it. Michelle and Valerie had been friends for years. They went as far back as elementary school. Ever since the first day they met on the playground, they had been inseparable. Naturally, when Michelle called to request that she be there, Valerie didn't hesitate to agree.

Michelle heard a knock on the door. She removed the blanket that she had covering her legs, and made her way to the front door. She pulled back the curtain that covered the window on the front door. It was Valerie. Michelle smiled, thankful that she had arrived before Tom did. She unlocked the door, and opened it to allow entry for her friend. "Hey Michelle, sorry I'm late. I was caught up at my last clients' house. I tell you, when you give an estimate for a total home makeover, they try to find a way to make it cheaper."

Valerie was an interior decorator. She had attended North Metro Technical College with Michelle, and majored in business management. Since NMTC didn't have an interior decorating program, Valerie had decided to complete the degree program via correspondence. She had actually completed the interior decorating courses before the business management, but decided to finish her

courses at NMTC as well. By the time she had finished her correspondence courses, she decided that two degrees would guarantee employment for her no matter what would happen in the economic future. She said that it was better to be safe than sorry. She had been right. Three years later, Valerie Miller had a very successful interior design firm based in Atlanta.

“So, what is this big shock that you got at work today? Did you win the lottery or something?”

Michelle smiled at her. She wished that could have been the case. It certainly would have been a better situation. At least she would have known what her future held, instead of the great enigma that she was living at this moment in her life.

“Not quite. You are not going to believe it when I tell you.”

Michelle really didn't know how to break the news to her best friend, but she was sure that blurting it out wasn't the correct way to operate.

“Well, are you going to tell me, or are you going to keep me in suspense?” she asked. Valerie hated secrets, and was the perfect example of curiosity killed the cat. When she was curious, she seemed as though she would die from the suspense.

Michelle took a deep breath, but exhaled it quickly. She knew not to leave her hanging in the wind.

“I am not Michelle Brown,” she stated.

Valerie shot her a puzzled look. What did she mean she wasn't Michelle Brown? She had known Michelle nearly her entire life. She had gone to school with her, attended numerous sleepovers at Michelle's house, and been a part of every event, big or small, in Michelle's life. Now, to hear her say that she wasn't who she was gave Valerie the creeps.

“What do you mean?” Valerie asked.

Michelle smiled. She loved to play games with Valerie. The fact that she could turn her real life situation into a game made the situation easy to deal with for the time being.

She decided that it wasn't a good idea to play games with Valerie. She could tell that her friend had been concerned about her, and was eager to help. Michelle realized that she couldn't help if she didn't know what the issue was.

"I was adopted."

Michelle just blurted out the big secret that she had kept from her all day. Granted, the blurring thing was against her better judgment, she didn't really know what else to say. Then, she saw the reaction that she had predicted. A look of pure and total surprise came over Valerie's face.

"You were what?" she asked Michelle.

She couldn't believe what she had heard. Her first thought was that Michelle was playing another game with her. She expected to hear her speak up and tell her the real surprise, but that wasn't the case. She analyzed the look on Michelle's face. After twenty-two years of friendship, Valerie was able to tell by the look on her face if she was lying, joking, or if she was serious.

Valerie had to sit down. She pulled a chair out from under the kitchen table, and did just that. She remained silent for several moments, trying to decide how to react to the news. Her first thought was how her friend was handling the news herself. She then decided to ask.

"What are you feeling right now? God, I can only imagine what you must be thinking." Michelle retrieved a chair, and joined Valerie at the table.

"I don't really know how I feel right now. I'm not sure I even believe it. I just don't know."

That was the only answer that she could give to Valerie's question. Her response was indeed the truth. She harbored so many mixed emotions about this entire situation that she didn't know which was the right feeling to have. She wanted to understand, but she couldn't, not yet.

Michelle decided to tell Valerie the whole story. She informed her

about Mr. Dutton, the attorney representing the estate visiting her at the diner. She told her about how she thought that the bank was suing her for her past due bills, and how she had jumped down the poor man's throat. Valerie listened attentively to Michelle as she continued to give her the details of the day. She was careful not to interrupt. She wanted to hear everything. She was caught up in the story. It was better than any story on daytime soap operas. The similarities of Michelle's story to the ones on TV were unbelievable. The fact that they were now living their own real life soap opera was even more unbelievable.

Valerie made sure that she remained quiet to allow Michelle to finish her story. When she had, Valerie began to process mentally all of the information that she had been given. One detail caught her attention. The envelopes that she had received from Mr. Dutton entered into her mind. Michelle had said that one of them contained all of the information about the estate, but she wasn't sure what was in the other. The fact that the information in the legal envelope hadn't been read by Michelle concerned her. Valerie knew that if it were she in this situation, she wouldn't be waiting for an attorney to arrive; she would have opened it to see what the estate held. She would want to know if it was only a house, money, or a funeral bill because they were too poor to pay it. Valerie had asked her to open it, but Michelle was insistent about waiting for Tom to arrive.

Michelle and Valerie sat at the kitchen table, sipping coffee when a knock came from the front door of her house.

"That must be Tom," she said before getting up and making her way to the door. She once again peered out the window of the door. It was Tom. Michelle once again unlocked the door and opened it. She stepped aside to allow Tom to enter.

"So where are these papers you were talking about?" Talk about not wasting time.

"They are in the kitchen." she responded.

Tom walked right past her, and made his way to the kitchen. When

he entered the room, he wasn't surprised to see Valerie sitting there. He knew that she would have called her. Thank goodness, he didn't have a problem with her. He actually liked his sister's well-established best friend, but he would never voice the fact. He knew that he would never hear the end of it if he actually had a romantic relationship with her; Michelle would accuse him of trying to sabotage their friendship. Granted, Tom and his sister weren't very close to begin with.

Tom sat down at the kitchen table, and picked up the envelope that contained the estate papers. He opened it and began reading. Michelle entered the room, and joined Tom and Valerie at the table. She watched silently as Tom read the papers. She was watching closely when she noticed that his eyes opened wider than she had ever thought humanly possible. She could feel the anxiety growing inside of her at the look on his face. What had he read that was so shocking? What ever it was, it caused him to nearly choke on his own saliva.

"Tom, what's wrong?" she asked.

He put down the papers, and rested his head in his hands.

"I can't believe this. I haven't seen numbers like this in my whole life."

He reached down, and pushed the papers over to Michelle. Apparently, he picked the wrong time to do so. Michelle turned up her coffee cup, allowing the liquid to fill her mouth when she saw the numbers that had caused Tom to go into shock. Upon reading the amount of the savings account of Charles Vandivere, she spat her coffee across the kitchen table.

Charles Vandivere was a very wealthy man. His estate was valued at 8.9 million dollars. His accounts were worth even more. Between savings accounts, stocks and bonds, they were valued at 26.4 million dollars. Michelle couldn't believe it. When she woke up this morning, her bank account was standing at a negative forty-eight dollar balance. Now, she would have more money than she could spend in her lifetime. Earlier that day, she was stressing over ways to save her diner. Now, thanks to her biological grandfather, her task no longer seemed impossible.

“What are you going to do Michelle?” Valerie asked.

She didn’t respond to her friends’ question right away. She was still contemplating her decision. Michelle was mentally weighing the pros and cons of her situation.

“I don’t think you need to make a decision right away. You need to read the rest of the paperwork first. You don’t want to sign this yet.” Tom informed her.

Granted, he didn’t see a problem so far, but he wasn’t about to let his sister be sucked into some cruel scheme by a clever con artist.

“I guess I need to check into this, and see if there is any truth in this adoption thing. That should clarify a lot of this mess,” she concluded.

That seemed like the logical thing to do. She decided that she would contact the adoption agency in an attempt to verify that she was in fact adopted. She had a copy of the papers, but they could easily be forged. In this day and age, it wasn’t a difficult task. With the advanced level of technology that was available, a person could easily forge documents.

Tom kept silent after hearing the plans for her first step. He did agree with her that it was worth checking into to verify that the adoption documentation was legitimate. However, there was no reason for her to do it to obtain verification that she was in deed adopted. Tom could verify that himself. Tom was five years older than his sister was. He can remember the day that his parents brought her home from the hospital. He thought back to that day. Sheila Brown had been devastated when she lost her second child in the third trimester of her pregnancy. She was nearing her ninth month, when she had her accident. One evening, Sheila was finishing her housework. She was carrying a laundry basket from the upstairs bedroom to the basement. As she descended the stairs, she slipped on one of Tom’s toy trucks that he had left on the stairs. She lost her balance, and fell to the bottom of the staircase.

She lost the baby. Tom was only five years old, but he wasn’t too young to feel responsible for killing his baby sister. Sheila wouldn’t

allow him to believe it was his fault. She tried to comfort her son, explaining to him that sometimes God needs a person more than the family. Eventually, Tom began to feel better. He was thankful that his mother had a kind heart.

The day they told him that he would be getting a baby sister regardless of the accident, made him the happiest little boy in the world. He remembered praying that God would bring his mother a baby girl so she wouldn't have to be so sad all the time. When he learned that God had answered his prayers, he was so happy. He met the woman that was going to give them her baby. He remembered that she was a sweet young woman. Even though she was pregnant, she still had the face of a child herself.

“You do need to verify that the documents are real, but I can tell you that you are adopted Michelle. I knew the whole time. Mama made me promise that I would never tell you.”

Tom could feel his heart sink as he verified the secret that had been kept from his sister for twenty-seven years. Michelle received yet another shock for the day. Tom knew. She didn't know how to react to the news. She should have expected as much considering the age difference between them.

She once again found herself asking why. She wondered why her seemingly normal life possessed so many secrets. She never thought that there would be so many skeletons in her closet. Most secrets are known to the possessor. In the case of Michelle Elizabeth Brown, her closet was full of secrets that she never knew existed. Now she was faced with the biggest decision that she would ever make in her life. Would she accept the gift from a grandfather that she never knew, or continue her life the way it was? She was certain that her life would never be the same again.

CHAPTER THREE

She sat alone crying in her bedroom. The shame and disgrace that she felt deep inside was unbearable. She wondered how he would react. What would he do? She cowered at the thought of telling her father that she had dishonored their family. The wrath of Charles Vandivere was one that she didn't want to experience. She had seen it first hand in the mere sixteen years of her life. He had never gotten angry with her. He had catered to her every want and need. Surely, she would be the exception to his raging temper. After all, she was his daughter, and that fact she thought would grant her some immunity to her father's consequences.

"Ms. Claire, why are you crying my child?"

The sound of her house cleaner's voice offered her a small level of comfort. Claire was thankful to hear her voice. She rose from her seat, and flew into the safety of Sara's arms. She longed for the security that had always been there in her embrace. Sara had been hired by her parents sixteen years ago to be her nanny. Over time, the old black woman had become more of a mother to her than a nanny. She confided in her more than she did her own mother. Sara was aware of every feeling and secret that Claire Vandivere possessed.

"Oh nana, it's awful. I'm awful. I've done something I shouldn't have done." Sara tilted her chin, so that she could look into the emeralds that currently released the tears onto her flawless complexion. She couldn't bare the sight of her little girl so distraught. It broke her heart into a thousand little pieces. Sara loved Claire Vandivere. She was the only Vandivere that showed her the slightest amount of compassion and respect. She loved her as if she was her own daughter. Sara had never had any children, Claire was the closest thing to a daughter she had.

“Now, now then child, calm down. What have you done that you believe is so wrong?” Claire could hear the concern in her voice; however, she was reluctant to tell her. Although she was concerned of the reaction that she would receive from her parents, Sara’s reaction troubled her the most. Claire pulled away from her nanny. She walked back over to the vanity where she had been sitting when Sara entered her room.

“I’m pregnant Nana. I have disgraced my entire family. My father will be so disappointed in me for what I have done. I am cursed.”

With those words, Claire began to cry uncontrollably. She feared the reaction that would soon come from the woman who had raised her for sixteen years.

Sara approached the fragile young woman that sat before her in tears. She knelt down on the floor in front of her.

“Now you listen to me child. You are not cursed. You are blessed. Can’t you see that? A baby is a gift from God the father. You are blessed. Do you hear me?”

Claire looked into the loving gaze of her house cleaner. It wasn’t the response she had expected. She expected to hear how disappointed she was in her. She never thought that she would condone such behavior that the church had condemned since the beginning of time. Her father certainly didn’t agree with the act.

“What am I going to do Sara? I can’t tell mother and father. You know my father, he’ll kill me.”

Sara suddenly felt her soul engulfed in fear for the young girl. She knew deep in her heart that she was right. She knew old man Vandivere. He was a ruthless tyrant, and Elaine Vandivere was so afraid of her husband, that she wouldn’t dare speak against him at all. She would sit by and watch as Charles Vandivere beat their daughter to death, and simply turn up another glass of brandy. That was the way that Elaine Vandivere had found to cope with her husband. She lost herself and all feelings in a whiskey bottle.

Sara knew what Claire had to do.

“Run away child. Meet with Alexander and run away. Get as far away from that bastard as you can. Never let him find you.”

Claire felt better after hearing the suggestion, and she knew that Sara was right. She would leave out in the middle of the night, meet with Alexander, and run as far as they could possibly run. Claire had received a weekly allowance for good grades in school, and she had saved every penny for the past three years. Alexander had also put back a decent sum of cash from his job as a part time farm hand for old Mr. Rogers down the street. If they combined their earnings, it should be enough to put a considerable amount of distance between them, and the spawn of Satan. Besides, Alexander had a car also. That would make the journey even easier.

She then began to think that the journey wouldn't be a simple as she thought. Charles Vandivere was a very wealthy man, with friends in high places. He would have no problem hiring someone to find them. Even though the height of the cotton era had ended over a hundred years ago, he still made his fortune with the product. Deep within the wood line of the Vandivere estate, Charles Vandivere still practiced the illegal act of owning slaves. Many of them had tried to run, but Charles was a good shot, and an expert at making the bodies disappear. Even if one of them were lucky enough to escape him, his friends in high places would ensure his freedom.

The Vandivere Estate was located in a very secluded wilderness, much like Godfrey Barnsley's Woodlands that was built in the mid to late 1800's. Now, it was difficult to find property in that great of a multitude. Somehow, Charles Vandivere had succeeded in his quest, and managed to purchase several lots that were being foreclosed on in Valdosta, Georgia. With his larger than life bank accounts, and his affiliation with numerous political officials, Charles Vandivere had established his pre-civil war plantation.

“What the hell have you done?”

The voice of Charles Vandivere boomed through the entryway of Claire's bedroom like thunder from a storm. Claire was suddenly

overcome with fear. She couldn't move or speak, no matter how hard she tried. He plowed across the room, and over to Sara.

"Is this what you call discipline? Teaching my daughter to be a whore."

The anger and rage in his voice was intense. Claire didn't know what her father was going to do, but she knew that it wouldn't be good. She began to anticipate the worst possible outcome in her mind. She began to shake as if she were convulsing during a seizure. She was so overcome with fear that she did the unthinkable.

"Father, this isn't Sara's fault. She didn't do anything wrong. She didn't know."

That was the first time in her life that she spoke up to her father during one of his rants. That was something that she was taught not to do. Not only had she put her opinion in, she had also contradicted him, which caused his anger to rage full force.

"I'll fix you. You'll wish you had never gone against me you nigger bitch." With those words, Charles Vandivere left his daughter's room.

"Sara, run! He's going to kill you, run. Please Sara. Go." Claire pleaded with her nanny. She knew what her father had in mind for her, and she didn't want the woman who had been her mother to die. She began to cry again as she begged Sara to run away. "I can't leave you Ms. Claire. I won't leave you here alone to face this man."

Sara was afraid for Claire. She knew first hand what Charles was capable of doing. "Please go Sara. I'll be fine. Don't worry about me. I'll leave, I promise. Just go."

Claire had finally managed to convince her. Sara scrambled to her feet, and took off running through the house. Claire felt a quick moment of relief. However, that didn't last long, when she watched in terror as her father followed close behind her with his revolver in hand. She jumped up from her vanity chair, and raced to the window. She saw Sara, running as fast as she could toward the woods.

"Run Sara! Run!"

She screamed the order as loud as she could. She watched as her

father quickly shortened the distance between them with every stride of his long legs. Claire couldn't bear to watch. She turned her head away from the window, and closed her eyes.

She heard the first shot as it echoed across the open plantation. She felt the tears as they fell from her eyes, staining her cheeks as the warm salty liquid ran down. She sat down on the floor in front of the window, not once opening her eyes. She heard the second shot. It sounded farther away this time. Consumed with fear for the life of her house cleaner, Claire began to pray.

"God please save her. Don't let my father kill Sara. Please help her God please."

She couldn't remember a time in her life when she had prayed so hard for anything. She thought that if God were truly as merciful as the bible taught, he would spare Sara from the fate that her father had in mind.

The third shot, was the final shot. Claire listened, so engulfed in fear that she couldn't find the strength within herself to move. Every moment that passed without the sound of the fourth shot, offered her both fear and hope. She hoped, and prayed that Sara had managed to out run her father. She hoped for the best, continuing to pray to the highest God for her salvation. Claire finally opened her eyes. She saw her mother standing before her.

"He killed her didn't he?" she asked.

Deep inside, she already knew the answer. Her mother didn't respond. She only stood in front of Claire, staring as though her body was in this world, and her mind was not. "Mother, did he kill her?" Claire asked.

Her voice sounded stern like her father's voice.

"Yes Claire. He killed her. Sara is gone."

When she heard the confirmation of her mother, Claire began to cry rivers of tears.

Her heart was broken. Sara was dead, and Claire couldn't remember a time in her life when she had felt so lost, so alone. Now,

she didn't know what to do. She wanted to take Sara with her when she left tonight. She didn't know anything about raising a child, and wanted so much for Sara to be involved in the next chapter of her life. She knew that now that would never happen. She would have to figure this out herself. At least she would have Alexander to help her. She knew that he wouldn't leave her to do this all by herself. Men have been known to abandon their children as well as pregnant girlfriends, but Alexander wasn't the type to do such a thing. She knew that when she informed him of her condition, he would do the right thing, and stand behind her every step of the way. She had faith in him, and the love that they had shared for the past two years.

Claire first met Alexander when he came to a social function being held at her house. Her parents were celebrating their twentieth anniversary. Alexander arrived with his parents, John and Susan. John had been a friend of her father's for too many years to count. She remembered them discussing a new business plan to expand Charles's business accounts. She hadn't seen Alexander enter the ballroom with his parents. She learned later that he was parking the family car since the servants were all busy.

When she saw the young man enter the party, it was love at first sight. His five foot ten inch muscular build and farmer's tan was breathtaking. She loved the way his brunette hair rested just below the earlobes. His best feature was his crystal blue eyes that shimmered in the dim lighting. He didn't have the appearance of a wealthy teenage boy. He looked more like a man of manual labor. He looked more as if he belonged in the fields than behind a desk. She hadn't realized that she was staring. It seemed as though she was hypnotized by attractiveness. She watched, as he made his way through the crowd in her direction. She suddenly felt like Juliet being approached by Romeo. She couldn't hear the music that played, or the noise of the numerous conversations that were being held as the guests mingled.

"Hi, I'm Alexander Chamberlain," he said introducing himself.

Her beauty took him away to a place that he had never known

existed in his mind; a place where the only two people in the world were Claire Vandivere and him. Claire Vandivere was the perfect description of an angel. She had golden blond hair, and sparking green eyes. Her complexion was flawless. She didn't have so much as a freckle on her face. When he saw her smile, it seemed as though the world stood still, and they were the only ones in it.

"I'm Claire Vandivere," she replied.

She tried to force the smile on her face to fade, but it wouldn't yield to her command.

"Would you like to dance Ms. Vandivere?" he asked.

She nodded, and took his hand. He led her through the crowd, to the dance floor. He held on to her hand, and placed his arm firmly around her waist. His touch made her tremble. She could feel butterflies in her stomach as he led her around the dance floor in the most romantic waltz she had ever experienced.

"Am I holding you too tight?" he asked.

She smiled at him, as she felt her cheeks turn red.

"No, this is fine."

He smiled at her to indicate that he was pleased with her answer.

They spent the rest of the evening dancing the night away. Claire felt like a princess, as her prince charming continued to sweep her off her feet. She felt as though she was living in a fairy tale. The night couldn't have been more perfect. When they grew tired of dancing, Alexander led her out onto the back balcony that over looked the Vandivere ponds. The air was chilly on her shoulders, and she felt herself shiver.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

"A little. When the wind blows across the ponds, it makes the air a little chilly," she replied.

He kept his grip on her hand as he moved behind her, and wrapped his arms around her. She felt a flame ignite inside of her, sending her feelings that she had never felt before. She didn't want the night to end. She wanted to stay in that moment with him forever.

From that day on, Claire and Alexander were inseparable. They spent every free moment they had together. The fact that Charles Vandivere was pleased with his daughter's choice, made their relationship easier. Like Claire, Alexander also came from a wealthy family. Charles knew that if the two of them were to marry, the money that his son in law would inherit could build his empire and offer his businesses unlimited stability. Therefore, he was in full support of his daughter's newfound love. He had even taken Alexander under his wing, and taught him the ropes of cotton manufacturing. He was pleased with the level of intelligence that Alexander possessed. Alexander didn't mind the time he spent with Charles Vandivere, it allowed him more opportunities to see Claire.

She remembered the night of the hurricane. Alexander had been at her plantation for one of his educational lessons with her father. When the news of the terrible weather came on the television, Claire was frightened. Her father had gathered all of the occupants, and led them to the storm shelter. She listened in horror as the hurricane raged through the plantation. She could only imagine the destruction that her beautiful home was enduring at that moment. She shed tears for her home, expecting the worst possible outcome.

"Don't cry Claire. Everything will be fine." he assured her.

His words brought her comfort, and she wasn't as afraid as she had been.

When it was over, the residence of the Vandivere estate emerged from the storm shelter to assess the damage. Most of the damage was to the landscape, but the house was still standing untouched. Claire was relieved to see it. She knew then that the loving reassurance of her boyfriend was true. She embraced him as a gesture of gratitude. However, the storm had blocked the mile long driveway in its entirety.

"Well Alexander, looks like you'll have to stay in the guest room tonight until we can clean up this mess tomorrow." Charles informed him.

Alexander didn't mind at all. He was happy to stay over night to help his mentor clean his property, and spend the extra time with Claire.

That night, when the entire house was silent, Alexander woke up. He looked around a moment to remember where he was. Then he realized he was in the guest bedroom on the Vandivere Estate. He was thirsty. He decided to go downstairs to the kitchen to get a glass of water. He often did that in the middle of the night. He lit a candle, and left the guest room. He made his way into the kitchen, and retrieved a glass from the cabinet. He went to the sink, and filled the glass as full of water as he could get it. He turned off the water, and turned up the glass of water. The liquid filling his mouth was cool and refreshing. Before he realized it, he had consumed the contents of the glass without stopping.

Once his thirst was quenched, he retrieved the candle, and made his way back upstairs to the guest room. As he reached the top of the stairs, he heard a noise coming from Claire's bedroom. He stopped for a moment and listened. It sounded like she was crying. Concerned for her well being, he disobeyed Charles Vandivere's orders, and went in to check on her. He opened the door to her bedroom, and entered.

As he looked in the direction of her bed, he saw that she was sleeping restlessly. He concluded that she was having a nightmare, and decided to wake her. He walked over to her bed, and placed the candle on her bedside table. He sat down on the edge of the bed, and placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Claire, wake up. You're having a bad dream sweetheart," he said as he shook her lightly. She took a deep breath, and sat straight up in bed as she woke up. She turned to see who had waked her from her nightmare. She was relieved to see that it was Alexander. She reached out, and embraced him tightly.

"Are you alright?" he asked. She could hear the concern in his voice.

She didn't answer at first. Instead, she sat there holding him in her

arms, absorbing the comfort that she always felt in his arms. She was enjoying having him there to comfort her.

“I’m fine. It was just a bad dream,” she stated.

She pulled away from him, but kept hold of his hand.

“What are you doing up this late?” she asked.

He smiled at her then replied, “I was thirsty, so I went downstairs to the kitchen. I was on my way back to bed when I heard you crying. I was worried about you,” he said as he brushed a strand of her golden hair behind her ear.

The concern that he felt warmed her heart. She was amazed by all of the ways that he proved his love for her. She felt as though she had been blessed by God to have such a wonderful man. She couldn’t wait to marry him. They had been together for two years now, and her father had agreed that they could announce their engagement, but that Claire wouldn’t be allowed to marry until she turned eighteen. The young couple had agreed to her father’s terms. They didn’t mind waiting another two years to marry. They were content to simply have the world know that they were committed to each other.

“I need to get back to bed. Will you be alright?”

Alexander felt it was necessary to make sure that she would be okay if he returned to the guest room.

“Will you stay with me a little while longer, just until I fall asleep?” she requested. Alexander smiled at her.

“Of course I will.” he responded.

Claire lay back down, and pulled the covers over her. Alexander lay down beside her, and wrapped his arms around his love. He began to stroke her hair in an attempt to help her fall asleep. With each stroke of her hair, Claire could feel the fire inside of her body ignite. She trembled slightly, hoping that Alexander hadn’t noticed. He had. He leaned over, and kissed her cheek gently to assure her that she was safe.

She couldn’t resist the urge. She turned over to face him. She looked into his crystal blue eyes. She leaned in, and kissed him. The

passion of the kiss burned him deep inside, just as every kiss they had shared. He placed his hand behind her head, and held her there to prolong the kiss. She felt him tremble.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

He pulled away from her, still holding her head in his hand.

“I love you so much Claire.”

He meant it with every ounce of his being. He loved her and he wanted her.

“I love you too.” she responded, and leaned in for a second kiss.

When she tried to pull away, he held her even tighter. She didn’t apply more effort in her attempt to pull away. She didn’t want the kiss to stop anymore than he did.

Claire knew where this was leading. She was afraid because she had never done this before. She was afraid and nervous, but she didn’t care. She was so consumed by ecstasy that she and Alexander were all that existed. She met his force as Alexander’s kiss intensified. She was using her body, her kiss to let him know that she wanted him just as much. He read the signs that she was giving him correctly. It was at that moment that he shifted her onto her back, and placed his body on top of hers. He allowed his hands to travel her body, exploring every inch of her. Claire indulged in every touch from him. Her heart began to race when she felt his hands venture underneath her nightgown. He moved her knees apart as he removed her lower under garment. She trembled when she felt his hands on her inner thigh. He stopped kissing her, and gazed into her eyes.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asked her.

She reached up, and ran her fingers through his hair. Her touch aroused him even more. “Make love to me Alex,” she whispered.

He leaned down, and kissed her again. As he pressed his body onto hers, she felt him enter her. Claire suddenly became intoxicated by the pleasure that he was giving her, and she begged him not to stop.

That was the night that she conceived the baby. It was her first time, and the only time at this point. The night of passion that she had

cherished was now the cause of Sara's death. Her father had killed her because he believed that she convinced her to sleep with Alexander. Now the memory of the night that they proved their love for each other was forever tainted by her father's actions. She heard his footsteps coming up the stairs. The force of his footsteps seemed to cause an earthquake within the walls of the Vandivere Mansion. She began to shiver with fear. With each of his footsteps that put him closer to her bedroom, she received another cold chill.

What would he do to her? Did he intend to kill her just as he had killed Sara? She looked up to her doorway to see her father entering her room. She began to tremble. She was relieved to see that he had put the gun away. Although the absence of the gun didn't ease all of her fears, it did give her hope that he wasn't going to shoot her like a common rabid dog.

"You little slut. You have disgraced this entire family. What do you have to say for yourself?" he demanded.

Claire remained silent for a moment to gather her thoughts. She knew that she didn't need to push anymore of his buttons.

"I'm sorry daddy." she managed to say through her tears.

She wasn't sure of what to expect next.

"Don't apologize to me now. You are ruined. Our family is ruined you little harlot. Damn you and your bastard child. You are nothing to me now. You'll pay for this." With that, he left her bedroom. His words cut through her like a knife. She cried uncontrollably.

CHAPTER FOUR

Late that night, Claire sat up until everyone in the house was asleep. An hour had passed since she heard her father's final complaints about her. She didn't like the conversation that she had overheard between him and her mother. They had been discussing sending her away to a convent school for pregnant teenagers. After the baby was born, it would be put up for adoption. Elaine had asked him why they couldn't simply have Claire and Alexander get married. He had told her that everyone would know that the only reason they had moved their wedding up was to cover up the bastard child that she was carrying. He told his wife that he could never accept a child that was conceived out of wedlock.

That was the end of the discussion. Elaine never argued with Charles. His word was solid, and there was no chance of changing his mind once it was made. Claire knew then, that she had to do as she had planned. She had called Alexander earlier. Her father had actually asked her to. He gave her strict instructions to come to the house at 2:00 p.m. He had even stayed in the room with her to make sure that she told him everything he told her too. After he was sure that Alexander had gotten the message, he left her alone in the room to continue talking to him. That was when she took it upon herself to let him know about her plan, and her father's as well.

Alexander was repulsed by what Charles Vandivere expected them to do with the baby. He wouldn't hear of it. The baby that Claire was carrying belonged to them, not Charles. They would be the ones to decide the outcome. Alexander agreed with Claire's plan to run away. They decided that they would meet in their secret place. There,

Alexander would pick her up, and they would drive as far as they could drive. By the time, he realized that they were gone; they would be so far away that he would never find them.

It was time. Claire picked up her shoulder bag, and placed it on her shoulder. She walked over to her bedside table, and opened the drawer. She removed her journal, and closed the drawer. She placed her journal inside of her shoulder bag, and headed for the door. She crept down the stairs to the front door. She stopped and took one last look around the place that she once called home. It didn't feel like home anymore. Now, it felt like a prison. She could choke just from breathing the air. She knew at that moment that she could never look at the house the same way again. There was too much evil that lurked within its walls. She turned the knob on the door, opened it, and left.

Claire had never liked the dark. She knew that in order to protect her unborn baby, she had to face her fear. She ignored the dark, and the sounds of the night. She kept walking, taking heed to not look back. She kept her eyes in front of her. It was only a half a mile walk from the house to the clearing in the woods by the pond. Alexander had promised her that he would be there waiting for her. She believed him. He had always kept his promises to her. She knew that he would keep this one. He was adamant that his child would be kept safe at all costs.

"Claire! Get back here girl! Don't make me come after you!" The voice of her father pierced through the darkness.

She felt the fear swell inside of her again. She began to run. She ran as fast as she could. She had to reach the clearing. She knew that if she could only reach Alexander, she would be safe. She kept running.

"Claire!"

She could tell by the sound of his voice that he was getting closer. She picked up her speed. She had to reach deep inside of herself to find the strength to run. Her stomach cramped. The running wasn't comfortable to her in her condition. She couldn't stop though. She had to push herself to the limit.

She knew that she was near the clearing. She could smell the scent of the fresh water and flowers in the air. She was almost there. She ran even faster.

“Claire! Get back here girl! I’ll kill you, all three of you!”

The threat terrified her, and after what she had seen in her house earlier that day, she didn’t doubt that if he caught them, he would do just that. She was getting tired, but she was so close. She could see the outline of Alexander’s car. Next, she did the only thing that she knew to do.

“Alexander! Help me please! He’s coming!” She called out to him.

The sound of her voice calling for help terrified him. Alexander jumped out of his car and ran in the direction of her voice. He had to get to her fast. He knew that if that bastard got his hands on her, he would kill her. He couldn’t let that happen. He was afraid, afraid that Claire or the baby would be hurt if she were running away from him. He saw her shadow running through the darkness. He could also see Charles right on her heels. He quickly looked around him for anything that he could use as a weapon. He found a broken tree limb lying on the ground beside a pine tree. He picked it up, and hid behind a tree. He waited until Claire ran past him.

“Claire, get in and start the car!” he called out to her.

He waited for Charles to come by. He listened for his footsteps to get closer. He quickly glanced over to make sure that Claire was in the car. She was, and had already started the engine. He turned his attention back to the sound of her father plowing in their direction. He had to get just a little closer. Now was his chance. He pulled his arm as far back as he could. He looked as though he was about to hit a homerun in a baseball game. He held it for a moment, and then he released. Alexander hit Charles Vandivere as hard as he could. He had knocked him out cold with one hit. He threw the tree limb down, and ran over to the car. He jumped into the driver’s seat, and turned to Claire.

“Baby, are you okay?” he asked.

He knew that they needed to be driving away, but he had to be sure that she was okay. “Yeah, I’m fine. Let’s go okay?” she replied.

She was ready to put as much distance between them and her father as possible. Alexander shifted his car into drive, and took off, heading out of Valdosta, Georgia forever.

They drove throughout the night. Alexander was tired, but he knew that if he was going to keep Claire and his unborn baby safe, he had to keep going. He couldn’t stop yet. They weren’t far enough away from Valdosta. They were only a hundred miles out, and he knew that that wasn’t enough. Despite his increasing level of exhaustion, he continued to drive. As he continued north on interstate 75, he turned to look at Claire. She was sound asleep. He smiled at her because he knew that for now she was safe. He removed one hand from the steering wheel, and gently touched her hair. He then placed his hand on her stomach.

“I’ll protect you, both of you. You will be okay; I promise you that on my life.” Alexander removed his hand from her stomach, and placed it back on the steering wheel.

Claire woke up the next morning. She was lying in the front seat of the car alone. She immediately began to panic.

“Alexander?” she said.

Her voice trembled with fear. He didn’t answer.

“Alexander, where are you? Alexander?”

He heard her frantically calling for him. He jumped up from the back seat, thinking that Charles had found them already.

“Claire, its okay I’m right here.” he said, reaching out to hold her.

She quickly climbed into the back seat, and cuddled up as close to him as she could get. “You are okay baby. You’re safe. I’ve got you. You don’t have to be scared,” he told her. She exhaled a sigh of relief.

She then looked around, analyzing her surroundings.

“Where are we?” she asked.

She saw that they were boxed in by motor homes.

“We are at a camp ground. I was going to go to a hotel, but you were sleeping so well that I didn’t want to wake you.”

She loosened her grip on him.

“So how far away from Valdosta are we?” she asked him.

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and tried to remember what the sign had read on the exit.

“I think we are in Cartersville. We traveled a good distance last night.”

Claire was relieved to hear it. That was exactly what she wanted to hear. The farther away from Valdosta, they were the better.

“Where to next?” she questioned.

It seemed as though Alexander had preplanned the trip, so she believed he had the answer. “Well, first, we are going to find a place to eat. We’ve got to feed the baby,” he said with a smile.

Alexander had finally been able to enjoy the thought of being a father. He hated that it hadn’t happened after they were married, and that they had to go through such an ordeal to keep it. Still, he knew that what’s done is done, and there was nothing he could do to change it. Now, he had to provide a home for Claire and their child. He had to make sure that they were taken care of, and that they were safe. He possessed a deep love for Claire Vandivere, one that he could never describe with words. He promised her that they would be okay, and he loved her enough to keep that promise.

“Are you ready to eat?” he asked her.

Claire smiled at him, and for the first time since they left Valdosta, he saw the radiance in her smile that he saw the first time he saw her.

“I’m starving,” she replied.

She wasn’t lying. All of the commotion from the night before had drained all of the nourishment from her body. She desperately needed to eat. When she thought about it, she didn’t remember eating anything yesterday. Between the discovery of her pregnancy, Sara’s murder, and the narrow escape with her father last night, Claire hadn’t had much of an appetite.

Alexander crawled over the seat, and took his place on the driver's seat. Claire followed close behind him. He fumbled through his keys until he located the correct one. He inserted the key into the ignition, and turned the switch.

"Are you ready?" he asked with a smile.

"You bet." she replied.

Alexander shifted the car into drive, and pulled out into the roadway. He remembered seeing a restaurant sign about a mile down the road. Considering he didn't know the area, he had to travel in the direction he had already traveled. He saw the sign for the local Waffle House. He pulled into the parking lot, and parked the car.

"Let's go." he instructed.

He opened the driver's side door, and exited the vehicle. He walked around to the passenger side, and opened the door for Claire. He took her hand and helped her out of the car.

"Thank you," she said as she stood up and moved aside.

"Isn't this the treatment that a princess is supposed to have?" he asked her.

"I believe so, yes." she replied.

"Well then, you are my princess. I have to treat you like one," he said to her with a smile on his face.

Once inside, they didn't waste anytime reading the menu and deciding on what to have for breakfast. Claire chose the All-Star Breakfast, complete with eggs, bacon, grits, toast, and a waffle. Alexander was shocked to see the amount of food she had ordered. He knew that she had to be hungry, but he didn't anticipate that she would be that hungry. He didn't want to make her feel bad about her order, so he ordered the same breakfast. He was even more shocked when the food arrived, and Claire was able to consume the entire meal. Alexander had also been able to do the same. He was surprised that he had finished every morsel. He quickly concluded that he was hungrier than he thought. It turned out that his stomach was bigger than his eyes.

Once they finished their meal, each of them ordered a cup of coffee. They sat there sipping the black gold and let their food digest a little before hitting the open road. Alexander had bought a map at a convenient store when he stopped for gas about two hundred and fifty miles outside of Valdosta. He removed the map of Georgia from his pocket, and opened it up.

“Let’s see if we can find a nice small town to settle down in,” he suggested as he examined the map. Claire seemed surprised at the comment.

“You don’t want to leave the state?” she asked him.

She thought that the plan was to get as far away from Valdosta as possible. It was apparent now that her idea of far away differed from Alexander’s idea of the term. “Claire, we are nearly as far north as you can get. That’s like six hundred miles away from Valdosta. I think we could at least try to settle somewhere for a while. We will just have to be careful.”

Claire didn’t respond. She didn’t like the idea of staying in the same state as her father, but Alexander did have a point. She looked out of the window, and analyzed her surroundings. She concluded that they were in fact in the middle of nowhere. It would be difficult for him to find them here. She looked down at the map, and saw all of the small towns to the west of them. It shouldn’t be too difficult to find somewhere to live there. “Okay. If you say that we will be okay, then I trust you. I know that you wouldn’t let anything happen to me or the baby,” she said, reassuring him that she did indeed have faith in him.

He was pleased to hear her say that. It was important for him to know that she trusted him with her life, and the life of their child. He would never allow any harm to come to them. They were his family, and Claire was the love of his life. He would die to protect her, and he meant that. He would die before Charles Vandivere had a chance to get his hands on her or the baby. Alexander had to do the right thing by her. He loved her too much not to.

Alexander had a thought. If he was going to do the right thing, he

needed to marry Claire. That is exactly what he was going to do. He would marry her, and replace that horrid name she held with his own.

“So where to now?” she asked.

The sound of her voice pulled him back from his thoughts.

“Well, I think the first thing we need to do is find a chapel.” he said, waiting anxiously for a response.

Claire was shocked. She realized that they were in fact engaged, but she didn’t contemplate the idea of them getting married right away.

“Do you want to?” he asked ever so casually.

“Yes.” she replied with a huge smile on her face.

She had been thrilled when he had proposed to her a couple of months back, but she felt more happiness knowing that they could very well be a few hours from actually doing it. She could picture her father with smoke coming out of his ears at the thought of them getting married two years ahead of schedule. He more than likely didn’t want it to happen at all now that Alexander had caused him to turn a back flip.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked Claire as he rose from his seat.

“Yeah, let’s go.” she replied as she stood up beside him.

They walked up to the register to pay the check. As Alexander was counting the cash out to pay for the meal, the server that had waited on them approached.

“Hi. I couldn’t help but to over hear your conversation. If you are looking for a wedding chapel, you could head up to Ring Gold.”

Alexander and Claire exchanged a look.

“Thank you. Which direction is it in?” he asked.

The server smiled, pleased that she hadn’t offended them by eaves dropping.

“Just head north on the interstate. You can’t miss it.” she informed them.

Alexander handed her a twenty to pay the check and instructed her to keep the change. As he and Claire walked toward the exit, he dropped a ten-dollar bill on the table.

CHAPTER FIVE

The sound of shuffling papers began to irritate Tom. He had been sitting at the kitchen table in Michelle's home for hours now. She kept searching for a flaw. There had to be one somewhere. She had come to the conclusion that there was no way that this could be happening. She thought that it had to be some type of a cruel dream brought on by the mounting financial difficulties she was having. If indeed this was a dream, she wasn't sure that she wanted to wake up. On one hand, her life would be changed forever, and she could pay off all of her past due debts, but on the other hand, if she did wake up, then she would be no better off financially, but she would still know who she was. She wouldn't be a stranger to herself anymore. She had to be dreaming. Getting an inheritance of this size couldn't be as simple as it appeared. Her father used to tell her, "if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is."

"Michelle, what are you looking for exactly? You have read every page of those documents at least twice."

Truth be told, she wasn't quite sure what she was looking for. She knew that she wasn't searching for confirmation of her adoption, because Tom had already given her that. She thought that the idea of being a millionaire in forty-eight hours was beginning to appeal to her, and she wanted to make sure that it wasn't some kind of a hoax. She liked the idea of being out of debt. She had forgotten what it felt like to be debt free.

"I just want this to be real, sort of," she replied.

Tom suddenly had a puzzled look on his face.

"What exactly is that supposed to mean?" he asked.

Michelle could tell by the sound of his voice that he was offended at her response.

Michelle suddenly felt insulted. What did he think she had meant? If he actually thought that she was saying in a round about way that she hoped it was true because she didn't want to be a Brown anymore, then he was damn wrong. She loved being a member of the Brown family. She loved her parents, and now she was more grateful to them than ever. They had loved her enough to give her a good home, filled with love and compassion. She was even grateful that they had given her a big brother, even though he was an asshole most of the time. She still loved Tom regardless of the fact. All that she meant by her comment was that she wanted the documents to be true because there was so much that she could find to do with that much money. Her main concern was paying back the loans so she didn't lose her diner. That was the most important thing to her right now. If she felt anger toward her adoptive parents, she certainly wouldn't be concerned with saving the business that they had given her with high expectations, and lots of love.

She didn't waste anytime relaying that information to her brother. She told him how insulted she was, and explained to him in detail that she only said that because of her financial situation. When she had finished her unnecessary explanation, she watched as her brother hung his head in shame.

"I'm sorry Shelly. I didn't mean to jump to conclusions. I just assumed you would be angry at mama and daddy for keeping this from you," he explained.

Tom had called her Shelly throughout their childhood. That was the nickname that their father had given her. Tom Brown wasn't known to be a compassionate person, but he did love his sister very much. He was also on the defensive about this entire situation because he felt that someone was out to hurt his sister.

"Well Tom, you know what daddy used to say, "don't assume anything. It makes an ass out of you and me."

Tom smiled when he heard his sister quote their father. He also took it as a validation that his sister had given him a truthful explanation.

The sound of the grandfather clock's chime broke the silence that had lingered in for the past few minutes. Michelle turned and looked at the clock.

"It's midnight. I guess I need to get to bed. Five a.m. comes awfully early," she told her brother.

Considering she did open the diner at six-thirty, she did need to try to get some sleep. Tom looked over at the clock. "Yeah, I need to get home. I have court bright and early in the morning," he said.

Michelle stood up from her chair, and followed him to the door.

"Hey Tom. What would you do?" she asked.

There was no need for her to specify what she was talking about, because he knew. He remained silent for a moment. He didn't really know what to tell her. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong, but he didn't want to crush his kid sister's dreams either. Finally, he took a deep breath and said, "mama would say follow your heart. Me, I say do what you think is right. You are the only one who knows what that is. It's your life Shelly."

With that, Tom opened the door, and left Michelle to ponder his advice.

Michelle tossed and turned in her bed. She tried to sleep, but found it impossible. She couldn't keep her mind off the multi-million dollar estate that was waiting for her. She thought about what Tom had said. She realized that he was right. Everyone could give her advice until each of them was blue in the face, but the decision was all hers.

She then thought back to the envelope, the small white one that was separate from the other papers. She wondered what was in it. She tried to debate with herself if she could handle any more surprises without sleep.

"What the hell." she said to herself as she tossed the covers back, and got out of bed.

She made her way down stairs, and into the kitchen. She moved slowly so she wouldn't risk waking Valerie. Valerie had crashed out on the couch at around ten o'clock. That drive from Atlanta to Adairsville was a difficult one, especially in rush hour. Michelle crept into the kitchen, and took a seat at the table. She picked up the envelope, but didn't open it right away. She felt it was necessary to brace herself considering she didn't know what her life had in store for her next. She retrieved the letter opener from the stack of unpaid bills that rested on her table. She broke open the seal, and dumped the contents on to the table. There in front of her lay a key, one thousand dollars in cash, and a letter.

My darling granddaughter,

I wish I knew how to begin to express the pain I have felt all of these years. I'm sorry that I wasn't given the privilege to know you. My daughter Claire ran away, and gave you up for adoption without my knowledge. We only knew of your existence because the hospital contacted us to say that Claire had passed away during childbirth. We wanted so much to keep you ourselves, but there was no time to stop the adoption. I have carried with me all these years a certain regret that your grandmother and I were never a part of your life. That is why I have left everything to you my dear. I know that I can never erase the pain that you must be feeling now, but at least it may help to make your life a little easier. My only request to you is this: please find it in your heart to forgive me for not being there, and for informing you of your true heritage.

Your loving grandfather,
Charles T. Vandivere

She couldn't understand why the words of a man she never knew made her cry so much. It was obvious that her biological grandparents loved her. More importantly, they had also wanted her. The information did make the adjustment a little easier. Michelle had heard so many stories about children who were given away because no one

wanted them. It was truly a relief to know that she wasn't one of them. She had indeed been loved and wanted. However, there was someone who didn't want her, Claire.

At least it wasn't a total loss. She was a millionaire now. Her birth family had made sure that she was secure for life. It truly was a loving and heart warming gesture to say the least. Her grandfather had made it a point that she would be taken care of, and for that, she would be forever grateful.

Michelle could feel all of the confusion and frustrations melt away. She turned to the picture of her mother and father on the wall. "Thank you." was all that she could manage to say. They had taken her in, and loved her as their own, never once treating her different from Tom, but equal in all things. The fact that she had been so equal to her brother, made it easy to conceal the truth. She could no longer feel any anger towards anyone. She was a Brown. Not by blood, but by love. That meant more to her than anything else in this world. She suddenly realized just how lucky she was to have the life that she had. She did belong to someone, she belonged to many, and there was no way that she could feel anything but gratitude to the many people that had loved her so dearly.

She knew what she had to do. She retrieved a pen from her desk, and located the documents to sign. Without hesitation, she signed the documents. She noticed that at the bottom of the last page, there was a section labeled, "Special requests regarding this claim." In the blank space provided, Michelle composed the following statement: due to my newly discovered identity, I am requesting that the court grant me a legal name change. I would like all documentation to read," Michelle Elizabeth Brown-Vandivere."

Granted, it was nowhere near a forty million dollar decision, but it was a good start in her opinion. Michelle felt that by accepting the last name of her biological family, and adding it to her existing name, she could honor both of her families. She loved her parents, and would never toss the name that they had given her aside. However, she also

wanted to be a part of the family that had given her life. She felt that taking the Vandivere name was a good step forward.

“Now, I can finally save the diner.” she told Valerie the next morning over breakfast.

She had waited so long to be able to say those words. The fact that her life long friend was there to hear them made it even better. Valerie smiled at her friend.

“So you signed the papers then?” she asked for reassurance.

She could tell by her actions that she had indeed signed the papers. Michelle smiled at her. “Yeah, I signed them. It seemed like the right thing to do.”

Valerie could understand her reasoning. After all, anyone that inherited a forty million dollar estate would have to be out of his or her mind to not take it.

CHAPTER SIX

“So what are you going to do next?” Valerie asked.

Michelle had the answer to that question. She had thought about it all night. Her grandfather owned a cotton plantation in Valdosta, and it needed to be managed. He had put years of hard work into his business, and Michelle couldn't stand idly by and watch it go under. She had decided that she would move to Valdosta and keep Vandivere plantation going.

“I decided that I would move into the Vandivere Mansion, and get the plantation back on tract.”

Valerie pondered the information for a few moments. She wondered if Michelle was aware of the flaw in her plans. If she was going to save the diner, and get it back on its feet, who would run it? It would be impossible for Michelle to be in two places at once.

“That sounds great Michelle, but who is going to run the diner if you are in Valdosta?” she asked.

As Michelle's best friend, Valerie felt it was her duty to inform her of the flaw with her plan. Michelle thought for a moment. She didn't think about leaving someone in charge while she was away. Who could she get to do the job? She wrecked her brain trying to think of the perfect person to recruit. Then, the answer hit her in the face like a brick wall. “I know, I'll get Carla Silvers to run the diner,” she said.

Carla was an excellent choice. She had a high school diploma, and a business management degree. She had recently graduated, and she had also worked for Michelle since the diner first opened its doors. Michelle remembered the day that she had to give Carla a layoff slip. Michelle's diner was quickly going under at that point. She decided

that she needed to run the diner by herself in order to cut the payroll cost. Carla was the last one to receive a layoff. Michelle hated to do it. Carla was an excellent employee. She was always on time, and very dependable. Michelle had spoken with her recently, and learned that she was working in a restaurant, but that her degree was sitting on a shelf collecting dust. Michelle knew that she would be happy to come back to work for her, and considering her newly acquired wealth, she could give her a very generous sign on bonus.

It was settled. Michelle would leave the fate of her diner in Carla's hands. She was more than qualified. She would have left Valerie in charge, but she needed her to travel to Valdosta with her and give the Vandivere mansion a complete make over. Of course, Michelle hadn't informed her of the plan yet. Michelle knew that if she gave Valerie the job, it would help her firm tremendously.

"I think Carla would be great, but I just thought that, well."

Valerie couldn't finish her statement. She didn't want Michelle to think that she was jealous of her decision. She was a little shocked that she didn't ask her. Granted she knew that she had her own business to run, and it required her to spend most of her time pursuing new accounts. That was probably the reason that Michelle didn't ask her.

"Valerie, I think that you would do a terrific job with my diner, but I need you to do something else." Michelle informed.

Valerie looked up at her.

"What do you need me to do that is more important than your diner?" she asked.

Michelle cast her devious grin.

"Well, I thought it would be a good idea if you came with me to Valdosta. I believe that the mansion could use a touch of Michelle in it.", she stated.

Valerie was suddenly overcome with joy. That was why she hadn't offered her control of the diner. She needed her to use her design expertise to fix the mansion. That was so much better. A job

like that would cause her business to skyrocket. She jumped out of her seat and wrapped her arms around Michelle.

“Thank you so much. Do you know what this will do for my design firm?”

Valerie was overcome with joy. She no longer felt bad about Michelle’s decision.

“Before we can go to Valdosta, we need to re design the diner. I want a totally new design, and I want to expand the building to add new attractions.”

Michelle’s brain was working overtime. She had so many plans for the diner. She wanted to blend the diner with a coffee shop, and a lounge area. She wanted to build a miniature stage so that she could start a karaoke night. She would turn Michelle’s Diner into the hottest hang out in Bartow County.

“Well then, it looks like I need to call the firm and have my secretary turn all of my projects in Atlanta over to the new designer that she had hired.” Valerie stated.

She needed to stay in Adairsville to begin the work on the diner.

“Let’s get to work.” Michelle instructed.

Valerie smiled with excitement.

“Let’s do it.” she replied.

Valerie had spent the entire day sitting in the corner of Michelle’s Diner, drawing the designs for the renovation. She liked to work in the actual space that she would be servicing. It allowed her creative juices to flow, and she was able to cut her work time in half most of the time. She had returned to her house earlier that day to retrieve her materials. She arrived back at the diner armed with all of the necessary tools to begin the planning.

First, she began by taking the measurements of the diner. Considering she was redesigning the entire building, as well as adding on footage, she had to measure the perimeter of the entire building. Once she had measured the perimeter, she began measuring out the location of every window, doorway, and electrical

outlet. She documented the locations on her note pad, and then proceeded to document the location of every HVAC.

After all of her measurements were taken, she began constructing the actual furniture plan of the diner. This would give her a professional outline of the arrangement of the current space. Not only did the furniture plan give her a visual of the current setup, it also allowed her to have a visual of rearrangement possibilities. She could now play with the arrangement of the furnishings that were in the building, and place new furnishings without moving them around a hundred times to find an accurate location.

Valerie knew that she wasn't trained in the actual architecture of buildings, so she took out her address book. She needed to employ the assistants of an allied professional, skilled in architecture and construction to assist in drawing the plans for the add-ons. She skimmed through the list of contractors. She had to find the best contractor she knew. This wasn't just any normal account. This account belonged to her best friend, and she had to make her diner perfect. Finally, she found the perfect contractor for the job, Harris Construction. They were the best contracting crew in four counties. Of course, they were almost impossible to get, but considering Valerie knew the owner personally, she was confident that he would stretch the agenda. She called to schedule an appointment to obtain the estimation.

Before she knew it, she had completed the programming phase of the design process. Everything was moving along smoothly. She then pulled Michelle aside to discuss new furnishings, fabrics, as well as a color scheme. Judging by the answers that Michelle provided during the programming phase, Valerie had created a modern eclectic design that consisted of a contemporary style combined with modern furnishings, as well as luxurious, and elaborate drapery styles. Michelle and Valerie sat down together, and explored the fan deck that she received from Sherwin-Williams paint store in Rome. It didn't take long at all for the two of them to decide on colors that were sure

to become the peak of interior decorating. They selected metallic silver for the walls to create a faux sheet metal effect, which they would use as the base. Then, they decided on valiant violet and inkwell black as accent colors. The idea was to create a marble effect on the faux metal walls to provide definition to the interior. They would also incorporate the colors into the fabrics of the design. In order for the silver to carry over into the furnishings, Valerie designed a very elegant monogram to apply to the fabrics via the appliqué technique.

Valerie had continued the designing process into the night. She spent several hours constructing a pre-presentation board that consisted of several styles of furnishings such as tables, chairs, and bar stools. The next morning, she sat down with Michelle once again to select the actual furnishings. After a few hours of brain busting consideration, they decided to use a 1960's style of stacking chairs that had been designed by Vernor Panton for the counter seats. For the actual dining area, they decided to use the typical circular tables, but they would spruce up the look with contemporary tulip chairs. Finally, for the lounge area, they selected a 1950's modern style Barcelona chair, designed by Miles Van der Robe as well as two-royale lounge chairs.

Accenting a space was Valerie's favorite part of decorating. She believed that it was the accessories and accents that made the design, not the focal point. She selected four tier tables to place in the four corners of the dining/ lounge area. She had informed Michelle that the tables, combined with a lovely candle and floral decoration would enhance the level of relaxation that the space would provide. Michelle agreed with her naturally. Valerie was the professional. She would have allowed Valerie to create the design without any input or suggestion from her, but she was still appreciative at the thought.

Everything was right on schedule. The construction of the additional space was underway, and all of the furniture had been ordered, complete with the upholstered seats with the silver monogram on each one. The draperies and tablecloths had also been

ordered, and were scheduled to arrive any day. In addition to the seat covers, drapes, and tablecloths, Michelle had also special ordered an area rug with the monogram printed on it for the lounge area. She also sent the monogram to a restaurant supply company to have her to-go supplies customized.

The diner was quickly becoming a legitimate business again. The news of the renovations had been printed in every local newspaper, and Michelle planned to advertise her new business on TV as well. Everywhere she went, people asked her when she would once again be open for business. It was evident that the town of Adairsville was anticipating the grand opening of the new Michelle's. She had decided to change the name of her business. Considering she had changed her service from a diner to a full-fledged lounge, and hang out, she felt it was the appropriate thing to do. Both Valerie and Tom agreed with her.

Tom had been supportive of Michelle during the swift and massive changes in her life and business. He had spent every free moment outside of his job, assisting with the legal end of the transformation. He had a guilty streak up his spine for all of his heartless actions toward his sister, but he would never voice the fact. His parents had always told them that actions speak louder than words. Tom voluntarily omitted the second half to the statement, which was admitting your faults. Never the less, he was putting forth an effort, and in his eyes, that was better than doing nothing at all. Just as Michelle's life was changing, so was his. His relationship with his sister wasn't the same anymore. Even though she didn't show any signs of it, she was vulnerable right now. She had discovered the family secret, and although she was the secret, she appeared to be handling it well. She was a strong individual, and deep down, Tom envied her strength. However, he knew that she would reach her breaking point. She may indeed harbor tremendous amounts of strength, but she wasn't super human.

He knew that he needed to be there for her when her dream of

wealth became a nightmare. He knew that she would need him to be her strength, because the strength that she possessed would be drained by the wealth and responsibility that she was taking on. He knew that one morning she would wake up in the Vandivere mansion, and her life would once again be changed. Tom wasn't in anyway psychic. He didn't possess a single ounce of a sixth sense, but he knew when something was going to go wrong with a member of his family. He had known that it wasn't a good idea for his parents to attend the anniversary party the night that they crashed, and their kids lost both of their parents in one night.

Not only was the lounge doing well now, but also Michelle was adjusting to the rich life rather well. In only a few short weeks, the renovations were complete on the lounge, and it was up and running strong. She had gone from zero gross sales to well over seventeen hundred. Tom had given her the idea to have a small book selection available for both purchase, and rental. Michelle had loved the idea, and used it. It proved to be a success almost immediately. She installed three five-foot tall bookshelves in the lounge area, and also a computer system to track the books both sold and borrowed. Adairsville now had its own miniature library in the lounge.

Michelle's new birth certificate and social security card arrived in the mail, along with every major credit card available. She was beginning to feel like royalty. She went on outrageous shopping sprees, electronic upgrades on everything from her cell phone to the new custom 56" plasma flat screen television that she had had her eyes on forever. She purchased all new appliances for her house in Adairsville. Her favorite luxury however, was the fully restored 1977 Pontiac trans-am in her driveway. It had been her dream car for as long as she could remember. She recalled telling her father that one day she would get rich and drive one. If he were here now, he say, "I'll be damned girl, you did it."

She was now only three days away from her big move. She was so excited to see the house. About a week earlier, she phoned the

THE STORY OF MICHELLE BROWN VANDIVERE

caretakers, and requested pictures of her new home. When they had finally arrived, she could have died from the tremendous beauty and luxury that the Victorian style mansion held. She was then thrilled that she had actually made the arrangements for Valerie to make the drive with her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Her life was truly perfect now. She had everything that she had ever wanted. She had completely brought her business up higher than it had ever been, she was filthy rich, and she was moving into a mansion out in the country in beautiful South Georgia. She thought that nothing in the world could possibly ruin this moment of reflection for her. “Michelle!”

The sound of her brother’s angered yell echoing through her house was startling. She fled down the stairs to find him. She hoped nothing was wrong. She reached the foot of the stairs to find her brother standing there before her. She couldn’t remember the last time she had seen so much anger in his eyes.

“Tom, what’s wrong? You scared me to death,” she scolded.

Tom remained silent for a moment. He was trying desperately to control himself, but he was appalled at what she had done.

“Tom, answer me. What the hell is wrong with you?”

It was at this point that Michelle met her brother’s anger with her own. It was apparent that he was angry with her, so she immediately went into defensive mode.

“You changed your name Michelle.”

She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Is that what had him so worked up? That is what he was angry about? It didn’t make any sense. She hadn’t changed her name, she simply added Vandivere to her last name as a hyphenate.

“Is that what your problem is? You are all pissed off about a name that was added to mine. Damn it Tom, it’s not like I dropped Brown from my name all together.”

She was infuriated at this point. What business was it of his that she had added a name? It wasn't as if Tom was the sentimental type to begin with.

“It's a disgrace Michelle, and very disrespectful to my parents.”

The statement that emerged from his mouth hit her like a mad truck. What the hell did he mean by, “his parents”? The last time she checked they were her parents too. Was he attempting to insinuate that they were no longer her parents just because she added the Vandivere name, and had claimed it as her own? She wouldn't stand for it.

Michelle could feel the intensity in every breath that she took. Her anger was growing with each passing second that the man that was supposed to be her brother stood before her. She had hoped he wouldn't speak again. She knew that if she heard one more word come out of his mouth, she would snap.

“You know, I thought that you would show a little appreciation to the family that took you in, instead of caring more about the bastards that threw you away like yesterday's garbage.”

His words cut into her, right down to her soul, but she didn't shed a tear. How could he be so cold? He was far from compassionate, but she had never known him to be this cold.

She decided not to allow the conflict with her brother to intensify any further. If he wanted to see appreciation for their parents, then she would give it to him. She had purchased a monument to be placed in the Adairsville city park. That was the purpose of the social barbeque that was being held there this afternoon. She had planned to call Tom later, and ask him to come by the lounge to go over some paperwork, but now she didn't have to bother. She swallowed her pain, and looked into his eyes, trying to conceal the tears.

“Maybe you need to check your facts before you start shooting your mouth off.”, she informed him.

“Be at the park at 2:00 p.m.”, she told him, before walking past him, and out the front door.

Tom arrived at the park precisely at two o'clock. It looked like the entire town of Adairsville was there. He couldn't figure out what Michelle was up to now. As he looked around, he saw the massive amounts of food that rested on a long table in the center of the crowd. He then began to think that Michelle was feeding the town in an attempt to buy them off so that the new lounge would stay afloat. He continued to observe his surroundings. Everywhere he looked, people were eating and mingling. He glanced back at the table. There was every kind of southern country food you could think of. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. It was a scene that his mother and father would have been proud of. They had always said that they wanted the community to come together.

Tom glanced across the crowd and saw Michelle talking to the mayor, and two members of the town council. He had to find the underlying cause of this. She was probably discussing arrangements to invest in the mayor's campaign in the upcoming election. That would definitely establish her place. He began to question if she actually thought that feeding the entire town of Adairsville with a buffet of barbecue would prove him wrong. He made his way through the crowd. He had made up his mind that he was going to put his selfish sister in her place once and for all.

"Tom, glad you could make it," the mayor said, extending his hand.

"Your honor," he simply replied, shaking the mayor's hand.

"You're just in time for the dedication," he stated.

Tom was puzzled. What type of dedication was he in time for? He glanced at Michelle that cast him a sly grin. She knew what she was up to. She wouldn't want her brother to miss the dedication of the monument honoring the memory of their parents.

The Mayor took a step forward, to the podium that had been set up on a stage. Beside the stage, Tom noticed that there was something covered with a satin lavender cover. He realized that she was about to make him eat his words, and he cowered in her presence.

“Ladies and gentlemen, residence of Adairsville, may I have your attention please.” the mayor announced, with both arms extended upward.

The crowd fell silent.

“As you all know, on this day, three years ago, this town lost two of its most loved citizens. Jacob and Sheila Brown were dedicated servants, and great friends to this community. Therefore, it is with great pleasure that on this day, we honor their memory with this monument, donated by their children Tom and Michelle Brown.”

The mayor stepped off the stage, and removed the satin cover from the monument. It was a marble heart statue that held a picture of Jacob and Sheila. At the top, were two white doves holding a banner that had been engraved with the words.” *IN LOVING MEMORY*”.

Tom was paralyzed where he stood. Michelle had arranged this, and even included him without his knowledge. He suddenly felt guilty for the unnecessary confrontation at her house earlier. Obviously, he was the selfish one. He thought for sure that Michelle had changed her name out of anger and spite. He began to reflect on the past four weeks since the discovery. She hadn't shown any sign of anger. He began to realize just how stupid he was. He knew now that he owed her an apology. When he looked back in the direction that she had been standing, she wasn't there. He began to search frantically for her. He pushed his way through the crowd, ignoring the words of the people wishing him well. He made his way to the edge of the park, to find Michelle entering her Trans-am, and driving away.

Michelle drove toward Valerie's house. She needed to hear a friendly voice. She had been able to hold back the tears during the dedication, but now they poured like heavy rainfall. She didn't cry because of her parents, but because of the hurtful things, her brother had said to her. She couldn't hide the hurt anymore. She had been proud that she had made him eat his words, but the fact still remained that he had thought so badly of her. She had thought that he knew her better than that. Michelle had never been the deceitful, spiteful bitch

that Tom had concluded her to be now. The discovery of the adoption didn't make her love her parents any less. If anything, it made her both love and appreciate them more. She was grateful to them for loving her and taking care of her for so many years. That was the reason that she purchased the monument and displayed it in the park. The park had been their favorite place to go and relax on the weekends. They loved it there.

She could see Valerie's house up ahead. She was eager to get there, and talk to Valerie. She knew that she would have some words of advice, as well as comfort. She pulled into the parking area of her driveway, got out of the car, and walked up the walkway to the door. She wiped the tears from her eyes before ringing the doorbell. She waited patiently for Valerie to open the door. She was relieved to see her standing there. Valerie took one look at Michelle, and could tell that something was wrong with her. She didn't speak. Instead, she walked out of her door, and wrapped her arms around Michelle in a comforting embrace. Michelle began to sob uncontrollably on her shoulder. Valerie didn't say a word, she just let her cry.

Once Michelle had been able to regain control of herself, she and Valerie went inside. Valerie went into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. Michelle took a seat at the breakfast bar, and placed her head in her hands.

"So, do you want to tell me what happened?" Valerie asked as she filled the coffee pot with water.

Michelle sighed. She wasn't sure how to explain the confrontation that she and Tom had at her house earlier.

"Tom is an asshole." she simply replied.

She wasn't sure what else she should say. Valerie smiled.

"So what else is new? Tom is always an asshole." she replied.

"Yeah, but this morning, he managed to sink to a new low." Michelle informed.

"That's surprising. I didn't think that was possible. I was sure that Tom was the dean of the asshole university."

Valerie was right. Tom could indeed be the dean of Asshole University. He could also be one of the professors considering he graduated with honors. Valerie poured each of them a cup of black coffee, and walked over to the table where Michelle was sitting. “So what did Tom do that has you so upset?” she asked as she sipped her coffee. Michelle maintained her silence for a moment before answering her.

“He came to my house this morning raising mortal hell because I added Vandivere to my last name. He called me selfish, and said that it was a disgrace to my parents’ memory. Only, he said they were his parents.”

Valerie couldn’t believe what she was hearing. That was a new low for Tom. She couldn’t even believe that she had ever had a crush on him. She was feeling unbelievably close to him since he was being so helpful with the transformation of the diner. She was even considering asking him to dinner before she left, but not now.

“I can’t believe he did that.” Valerie stated.

“That’s not the worst of it. He also said that I didn’t appreciate what they did for me.” Michelle informed.

Valerie was stunned.

“What about the dedication? What did he have to say about that?” she asked.

“Nothing.” Michelle responded.

“I didn’t give him a chance to say anything after the unveiling of the monument, I just left. I was too upset and angry to stay.”

Truth be told, she was still hurt. She didn’t see herself getting past this anytime soon. She didn’t expect to stay angry with Tom, but the pain that his words had inflicted on her would last for a while.

“I wish it was Wednesday. Then we could be on our way to Valdosta, and far away from Tom. I need a break from him for a while.”

Michelle took another drink of her coffee. Valerie didn’t say anything. She understood what Michelle was saying. She didn’t blame

her for wanting to get away from Adairsville for a while. If the tables were turned, she would want to do the same thing. Valerie suddenly had an idea. There was no reason for them to wait until Wednesday to leave. They could leave whenever they were ready. Considering all that Michelle had been through with Tom today, it wouldn't be a bad idea to leave early. Valerie thought that the drive would do her good.

"Hey Michelle, what do you say we leave tonight?" she asked.

Michelle instantly perked up.

"That's a great idea Valerie. Besides, if we travel at night, we won't have to worry about fighting the traffic."

Michelle loved the idea of leaving early for Valdosta. She was anxious to see her new home. She had seen photographs of the estate, but she knew that it would be even more beautiful in person.

Michelle returned home. The talk with Valerie and the decision to leave early really helped. She didn't need to pack, because she had already done that. The main purpose for her returning home was to rest up before the trip. It was a long drive to Valdosta, so she knew that it was imperative to get some sleep. Michelle lay down in her ultra soft queen sized bed, and closed her eyes. The moment that her eyes closed, her brain started running ninety miles a minute. She found it impossible to sleep. She kicked the covers back, and sat on the edge of her bed. She ran her fingers through her hair, contemplating a way to relax enough to be able to fall asleep. She decided that a relaxing hot bubble bath would do the trick.

She got out of the bed, and made her way into the bathroom. She adjusted the water until it was the perfect temperature. Once she was confident that she wouldn't boil herself, she poured a cap full of bubble bath into the tub. She watched as the bubbles began to form, covering the water like cotton. She removed her clothing, and put her hair up in a clip. She walked over to the edge of the bathtub. She very slowly and carefully stepped into the hot water. She slowly submerged her body into the soothing hot liquid. She had the right idea in mind. The heat from the bath had already

begun to relax her. She sat up long enough to turn off the water, then reclined herself back in the tub.

Michelle closed her eyes, and indulged in the relaxation that the steaming bath offered her aching muscles. She inhaled deeply, allowing the steam to enter her lungs, and then exhaled slowly. She could feel herself drifting into a state of rest. She could feel every muscle in her body loosen, and relax. She couldn't figure out why she hadn't done this as soon as she came home. She didn't want to think about the day. It had been too stressful and exhausting. She didn't want to focus on that. She just wanted to focus on herself.

Before she knew it, she was drifting off into a deep sleep. She could feel herself slowly sinking into a dream world. She realized that something was different. This didn't feel like any normal dream. This dream felt real. She felt as though she was conscious. She could hear her thoughts. She could hear her own voice questioning the current events. She noticed a white glow all around her, one that resembled the light that people claim to see while having a near death experience. Michelle was curious, but wasn't afraid. She proceeded further into the light. She could see a house in the distance, which resembled a castle. As she drew closer to the structure, only to realize that it was the Vandivere estate.

She continued closer, farther into the light. She thought to herself that it might not be a good idea to venture any farther, but she couldn't resist the curiosity. She had to see if it was indeed the Vandivere estate that she was seeing. She made her way down a path that was lined with beautiful cedar trees. The path she walked on was dirt, yet smooth. She thought it to be very peculiar, but she proceeded on. As she drew closer to the structure, she could see that it was the Vandivere estate. She recognized it from the pictures that the caretakers had sent her. She smiled with joy at the sight of her new home. She was elated to be there. She knew deep in her subconscious that it was only a dream, and she wasn't really there, but she didn't seem to mind.

Suddenly, the bright light receded into pure darkness all around her. The wind began to blow with the force of a hurricane. Thunder crashed against the sky, causing her to jump with each explosion. Lightning flashed, but there wasn't even so much as an outline of anything around her. The joy that she felt was quickly being replaced with fear. She was now afraid of her location. She no longer knew where she was. Rain began to pour from the storm clouds that raged above her head. She tried to look beyond the fierce down pour, but to no avail.

Michelle struggled harder to see, straining her eyes until her head began to ache. She could see something in front of her, but couldn't make out what it was. Against her better judgment, she took a few steps forward. She could see the outline of what appeared to be a person.

"Hello?" she called out.

She heard no response. She moved forward a few more steps. The figure came slightly into focus. Michelle's heart raced with fear.

"Can I help you?" she asked the person.

As she drew closer, she could tell that what she saw wasn't a figure or an outline, it was a shadow. Inside that shadow, was a person taking form.

Michelle became consumed by pure revulsion, as the shadow formed visible limbs, as well as a torso and a head. She tried to speak again, but found that her words were trapped in the walls of her larynx. Her chest felt tight, and she was struggling for each breath that was granted to her. She wanted to run, but was unable to move any part of her fear stricken body. She didn't attempt to speak to the person, but tried to scream instead. She failed at that attempt of communication as well.

The shadow had now formed into a woman. She was an African American in her mid to late forties. She had a slender build, and was dressed in 1980's style clothing. A red substance that Michelle recognized as blood matted her hair. As she focused on the woman's

face, much to her horror, she could see that she was missing the upper left side of her face. Michelle then realized that this wasn't a person that stood before her. She was standing in the middle of a thunderstorm, face to face with a ghost. Upon this realization, her first natural instinct was to run, but she knew by now that it was pointless. Who ever this was, was holding her there she didn't know why, and she wasn't sure that she wanted to know. Finally, the apparition raised its head, and looked her dead in the eye. She stepped aside, and Michelle could see the Vandivere estate behind her. The woman pointed in its direction, and spoke.

"Don't go." were the instructions that she gave, before disappearing into the storm, and allowing Michelle to finally wake up from her nightmare.

Michelle ran frantically around her bathroom, trying to clean up the mess that she had made. When she woke up from her nightmare, she had flailed about so that she had splashed water all over the floor. The time was 11:45 p.m. and Valerie was scheduled to be there in fifteen minutes. Normally, Valerie could be expected to be late, but she had actually called Michelle to make sure she was ready to go. Apparently, Michelle wasn't the only one excited about the move to Valdosta. She had begun to wonder if Valerie was more excited than she was. She checked one last time to ensure that she had dried up every last puddle of water. Satisfied that she had completed her task, Michelle retrieved the sopping wet towels from the floor, and placed them in the clothesbasket.

Michelle made it down stairs just in time to hear Valerie knocking on the front door.

"Come in." she instructed as she moved through the house, turning lights off.

She didn't plan to be back in this house until after the fall cotton harvest, so she saw no point in running up an unnecessary electric bill. Valerie opened the front door, and entered the house.

"Hey girl, you all set?" she asked with a big smile on her face.

Michelle entered the living room.

“Yeah, I think I’m all ready to head out.” she replied.

“I don’t think I’m forgetting anything.” she concluded as she looked around the room one more time to make sure.

“Well, if you do, you can just replace it. After all, you are a millionaire now. Money is no object to you anymore.” Valerie said jokingly.

Valerie assisted Michelle in loading her luggage into the trunk of her 1977 Trans-Am. Once the last suitcase was in place, Michelle closed the trunk.

“Let’s hit the road.” Michelle stated, as she walked over to the driver’s side.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“You have to eat something Claire. It’s not good for the baby.” Alexander informed her.

The morning sickness had kicked in hot and heavy in her third month of pregnancy. She was miserable, but thankful that Alexander was there with her. He felt so much sympathy for her that he rubbed her feet every night when she arrived home from work. They had both gotten jobs at a local restaurant in Adairsville. Claire waited tables from open to close, and Alexander cooked the same hours.

Both Claire and Alexander had seen drastic changes in their lives since they left Valdosta. For two teenagers who were used to having everything handed to them, hard work was new to them. Never the less, they knew that if they were to survive, as well as provide a home for their baby, they would have to work as hard as they could. The money that they came to Adairsville with went fast. Between gas, motel rooms, and food, it hadn’t lasted long at all.

Now, they were staying with an old woman that lived in Adairsville. Her name was Emily Jackson. Mrs. Jackson was a widow, well into her sixties, that lived alone in the house that her husband had built for them forty-five years ago. They remembered Mrs. Jackson telling them that story over and over again. They met Mrs. Jackson late one night about a week prior. They were curled up together underneath a small throw blanket that did well to cover one person, let alone two. It was raining heavily, but they didn’t have anything but the eve of the church to shelter them. Mrs. Jackson had been feeling really lonely that night, and decided to drive to the

church cemetery to visit her husband Robert's grave. She was surprised to find them there, nearly asleep, and frozen to death from the cold rain.

Naturally, her heart went out to them. She wasn't the type to bring in strangers off the street, but she wasn't the type to let such young people freeze to death either. She approached the two of them, and woke them from a restless sleep. She offered them a bed for the night, and a hot meal. They were happy to receive the invitation. Mrs. Jackson was surprised to learn on the drive to her house, that Claire and Alexander were married, and they had a baby on the way. The information they offered made the old woman glad that she had brought them home with her. She felt sorry for the two.

When they arrived back at Mrs. Jackson's house, she reheated the left over meat loaf in the oven. She explained that she hadn't yet gotten in the habit of preparing food for only one person. It hadn't been that long ago, that Robert had passed, and she hadn't quite adjusted. Once Claire and Alexander had eaten their fill, Alexander got up to clear the table for Mrs. Jackson. He decided that since the woman was kind enough to bring them in out of the rain, and feed them, the least he could do in return was to clean the dishes. He definitely didn't expect Claire to do it. Between the pregnancy and the lack of food, she was extremely weak. When he placed the dishes in the sink, he noticed that the faucet was dripping a little. He offered to fix it for Mrs. Jackson, and she accepted the offer.

The next morning, Claire and Alexander woke up to the smell of smoky bacon frying, and buttermilk biscuits in the oven. They got out of bed, and made their way down the hallway into the kitchen. They offered to help her, but she wouldn't hear of it.

"You two have had a rough time. You just sit down there and have a glass of tea, and leave the cooking' to me."

They hadn't met anyone as kind as Mrs. Jackson since leaving Valdosta. They watched eagerly as she finished frying the last of the bacon, and scrambling the eggs.

Mrs. Jackson had prepared a feast for them. She had everything from bacon and sausage, to biscuits, gravy, scrambled eggs, and grits. Their mouths watered as the scent of the food trickled up their noses.

“Well now stop drooling, and go wash up. You don’t want to eat this stuff cold, do you?” Claire and Alexander did as they were told. They both got up from their seats at the kitchen table, and went to the sink. Mrs. Jackson was very strict about good hygiene. Her mother had taught her at a very young age that washing your hands before preparing or eating a meal was very important. Granted, Claire and Alexander were also taught the same lesson, they didn’t inform the old woman of the fact, they simply obeyed her orders.

Once their hands were clean and dry, they returned to the table, and sat down. “Now, let’s say the blessing over the food. It’s important to thank the good lord for all that he gives us.” Mrs. Jackson informed.

Most people would consider the statement an insinuation that they were not intelligent enough to know. However, Claire and Alexander didn’t take offense to the comment. They felt as though they were her children, and she was simply teaching them to be well functioning members of society. They all bowed their heads, and Mrs. Jackson said grace. Once she was finished, she instructed Claire to serve herself first.

“In your condition, you need to eat. Take as much as you want dear.”

Claire began to prepare her plate, passing each platter of food to her left to Mrs. Jackson.

One by one, they each ate their fill, until they couldn’t possibly take another bite. “That was wonderful Mrs. Jackson. I miss having breakfast like this.” Claire stated.

“Yes Mrs. Jackson, it was wonderful. Thank you so much.” Alexander agreed.

Mrs. Jackson offered a warm smile to the both of them.

“Well I’m glad you enjoyed it. Now, the next thing we have to do

is get you both a job. You are going to need a great deal of money to get ready for that baby to get here.”

Mrs. Jackson was right. They did need to get jobs, but they realized that it would be difficult to do without a home address or a phone number. They voiced their concerns to Mrs. Jackson, and asked her for any suggestions. The old woman smiled again before informing them that she wanted them to stay with her. She explained that she was very lonely without her husband, and she didn't have any children either. They agreed, and it was obvious that they had brought joy back into the life of this lonely old woman.

Alexander spent the first day at Mrs. Jackson's house, making repairs. He repaired the kitchen sink, just as he promised. He also repaired some weak spots in the floors, minor holes in the walls, and cleaned the yard out. Claire remained indoors, putting away their clothes, and what few belongings they had managed to bring. Among those items, was the locket that she had concealed a picture of Sara. Sara had given her the locket with her picture inside as a birthday gift. She had told Claire that she wanted her to have something to remember her by. She explained that she wouldn't live forever, and since she loved Claire as if she were her own daughter, she wanted to give her the gift. Claire clutched the locket in her hand, and cried. She missed Sara more than words could have ever expressed. Considering the way she had lost her, it seemed to make matters worse. In a way, she sometimes blamed herself. She knew that it wasn't her finger that had pulled the trigger, but she had told her the secret that she harbored.

The next day, Mrs. Jackson introduced them to John Taylor, the owner of the local restaurant. He had agreed to give them both a job. He was extremely shorthanded, and was thankful that Mrs. Jackson had brought her such devoted employees. Claire and Alexander Chamberlain worked very hard, and took great pride in their work. They kept the restaurant spotless, and food was coming out of the kitchen a lot faster with Alexander calling the shots. Alexander made

extra money on the side, being paid under the table for handy man work. There were times since moving in with Mrs. Jackson that Claire fell asleep without Alexander there, because he would be out repairing someone's sink or front porch steps.

He worked night and day. He and Claire put back every spare penny they could for the baby. They were buying diapers in every size, baby wipes, blankets, and other necessities. They wanted to make sure that she had everything she would need. Claire was certain that the baby was in fact a girl. She had even gone as far as to share her beliefs with Alexander. He was thrilled at the thought of having a daughter. He wanted the opportunity to show Claire how a daughter was supposed to be loved by her father. Claire had never known that kind of love. She had never known the safety and security that a daughter should feel. She never knew how much fun it could be to ride on her father's back, pretending he was a horse as he carried her around the living room.

Claire was now five months into her pregnancy, and her doctor had confirmed her belief that the baby was a girl. Claire had already chosen a name for their daughter. She decided that on her birthday, they would give her the name Michelle Elizabeth Chamberlin. Michelle was the name of Alexander's mother, and Elizabeth was Sara's middle name. Claire decided that the name was perfect. Their daughter's name was meaningful and special. Alexander's mother was a wonderful woman. She had sent them money a couple of times in the past for the baby, but had to stop. She was concerned about Charles Vandivere tracking them down to Adairsville, and killing them both. To ensure the safety of her son, as well as her new daughter-in-law and grandchild, she had terminated all communication with them.

Claire was in constant fear that one day her father would find them. She knew that for now, they were far away from him, but he was a rich and powerful man. He would eventually find them, and the consequence of that wasn't a pleasant thought. She knew that if he

ever found them, he would kill all of them including Michelle. The thought made her feel very uneasy. She had to protect her daughter from the plague known as Charles Vandivere, but she wasn't sure how. Alexander had said that if he found them, they would run away. He promised Claire that nothing would ever happen to their family, and she knew that he meant well. However, Charles Vandivere wasn't the type to give up. He would continue to pursue them until he finally succeeded with his objective to purify the family name. He would not rest until he found and killed each and every one of them. She shuttered at the thought of what her ruthless father would do to her little girl.

Life as a pregnant woman grew more difficult with each passing day. Claire had to cut down her hours at the restaurant. Her doctor had told her that if she continued to work the open to close hours, that she would deliver ahead of schedule, and that there would be a chance that Michelle would not survive. She couldn't have that happen. She was trying everyday to save her life by continuing to hide from her father. She definitely wouldn't lose her daughter because of her own carelessness. Claire had found other ways to occupy her time. Mrs. Jackson had been teaching her many useful home economics tasks. She had taught her how to sew, and eventually gotten her a part-time job with Mrs. Russell, the tailor. Mrs. Jackson also worked part-time with Mrs. Russell. She did it to earn extra money to pay bills that her social security check couldn't.

Mrs. Russell was also a blessing to both Claire and Alexander. She had her husband's old car that had been sitting in her garage. When the engine blew in Alexander's car, she had generously given them the car. Alexander had offered repeatedly to pay Mrs. Russell for the car, but she wouldn't hear of it. She refused to take their money. She had insisted that they keep the money, and spend it on the baby supplies. They eventually realized that it was pointless to continue trying to persuade the woman. She was old and stubborn, and set in her ways.

One day, Mrs. Russell sent Claire into town to pick up some

materials she needed to fill an order. She had just been hired to make the wedding dress and bride's house cleaner's dresses for the mayor's daughter. Since Mrs. Russell was busy cutting the pattern for the dresses, she had to send Claire. Claire didn't mind going shopping. She had taken a liking to sewing, and was planning to make a quilt for the baby. She saw the trip into Cartersville as a chance to pick up some fabric for her personal use as well. She enjoyed the time to herself as she drove toward Cartersville. She didn't even turn on the radio. Instead, she drove in silence, lost in thought as the distance between her and the fabric store shortened. She thought about her baby, and wondered what she would look like. She wondered if she would look more like her or Alexander. She wanted her to have his dark hair. She thought that Alexander's hair was beautiful, and she hoped that their daughter would inherit the trait.

She arrived at the fabric store. She turned off the engine, retrieved her purse, and got out of the car. She entered the fabric store without a care in her world. She was carefree, and enjoying the day. She was excited that she was finally going to pick out the fabric for her daughter's quilt. She wanted something beautiful. She was thinking something in pink and purple, trimmed in green. She forgot all about the fabrics that she was sent to purchase for Mrs. Russell. She went straight over to the pastel colored fabrics. She finally selected the material that she wanted; nice, cozy flannel material that would surely keep Michelle nice and warm in the winter. Once she had made her selection, she remembered the white and teal satin that she was sent to purchase. She quickly made her way back, and retrieved the fabrics for the wedding account. She paid for the items, and left the store.

Claire made her way through the parking lot with her bags of fabric in her arms. She approached the car, and removed her keys from her purse to unlock the car door. Suddenly, she was grabbed from behind, and a strong hand was placed over her mouth. She tried to scream, but her assailant had too tight of a grip over her lips. Her heart raced in pure unmistakable horror as she caught a scent in the air. She

recognized the smell of her father's overpowering after-shave. He had found her. She was terrified. She had tried so hard to avoid him finding her, and she had failed. This time, she didn't have Alexander to save her. She would have to try to save her own life, as well as the life of her unborn daughter.

"You listen to me. You can't hide from me forever. I told you that I would find you and I have. Now I can't kill you in broad daylight. There are too many witnesses here. Therefore, here's what you are going to do. You are going to walk nice and quiet like to my car, and get in without a struggle. Do you understand me?"

She shook her head to indicate that she understood what he had said. A tear fell from her eye onto his hand. She didn't know what he was planning to do with her. She knew that his intention was to kill her and her unborn child, but she didn't know what type of torture he had in mind for her. She was sure of one thing. He had found her, and he was going to kill her for tainting the Vandivere name with her sin.

"I am going to move my hand now. If you try to scream or run, I will kill you right here, right now."

With that, he removed his hand from her mouth. She wanted to scream to draw the attention of the crowd around her, but she knew that he meant every terrible word that he had spoken. She turned to walk with him back to his car.

"Excuse me sir? Could I have a moment with you?"

Claire turned to see a police officer walking toward them.

"Shit."

Charles was aware that the appearance of the police officer could put a huge dent in his plan. In fact, it could very well spoil the entire thing.

"Don't say a word. I promise you if you do, I will kill you nice and slow, after I rip that bastard out of your stomach."

Claire nodded to inform him that she understood his instructions.

"Yes sir officer. How can I help you this fine afternoon?" he asked with a fake smile of happiness on his face.

“Well, I was told by a customer in the jewelry store there that she saw you attack this young lady. I wanted to come out here and get your side of the story.”

Claire noticed that the officer kept his hand rested on his weapon. She was thankful that someone had seen what had happened, and reported it. Maybe she would have a chance to get away.

Charles Vandivere didn't waste any time constructing his false explanation for the officer.

“Well sir, this is my daughter, and she ran away from home about three months ago. I was looking for her, and finally found her here. She's only sixteen. I had to sneak up behind her to keep her from running off. I'm not getting any younger, and frankly I can't see myself catching her if she had taken off running.”

Claire had to admit, her father was one hell of a liar, but she realized that there were a few details that he had missed. How would he explain her delicate condition, and the wedding ring on her hand. The officer turned his attention to Claire.

“Is this man telling the truth little lady?”

Claire looked at the ground, and then at the officer. She couldn't confirm his story. If she lied to the officer, she would be throwing away what may very well be her only chance for escape. She didn't want to allow him to hear her contradict him either.

Claire had an idea come to mind that would allow her to signal the officer that she was truly in danger. She reached up with her left hand and pretended to scratch her nose. The officer looked at her hand, and saw the gold wedding ring on her finger. He knew then that she was in real danger.

“Sir, did you know that it is illegal to kidnap a person?”

Charles looked shocked at the statement the officer had made. He should have been asking Claire why she hadn't answered his question, not interrogating him.

“I'm not kidnapping anybody. This is my sixteen year old minor child and I am taking her home now step aside.”

Charles tried to walk past the officer, but he put up his arm to block his path.

“Then why is she wearing a wedding band?” the officer asked.

Claire could feel the fear in her heart slowly subside. Charles lifted her left hand and examined her finger. Sure enough, she had a gold wedding ring resting on her left hand. “So, you snuck off and married that low-life boy huh? That’s just great Claire. Now you’ve really gone and messed things up.”

The officer reached out to Claire.

“Come on ma’am. I’ll escort you to your car in a minute. Sir, I am arresting you for attempted kidnapping.”

Charles was shocked to hear the instructions from the officer. He was also quite angry. “How can you arrest me for kidnapping my own daughter?” he asked.

“Because your daughter is married now, and a legal adult. You can’t force her to go anywhere with you now, but I can force you sir right through the doors of the Bartow county jail.”

The officer cuffed Charles Vandivere, and put him in the back of his police car. He took a statement from Claire about the incident. She informed the officer that she was in fear for her life, and the life of her unborn daughter. She told him of her father’s threat, and that she knew that he would have killed her had the officer not come when he did. When she was finished giving her statement, the officer walked her to her car, and helped her put the bags of fabric into the back seat. He watched as Claire drove away, and then headed back to his car to drive the irate Charles Vandivere to jail.

CHAPTER NINE

When Claire arrived in Adairsville, she went straight to the restaurant to see Alexander. He was terrified when he saw her enter the building with her eyes full of tears. “What’s wrong Claire. Are you all right?” he asked her as he sheltered her in his arms. “It was daddy Alexander. He found me in Cartersville. He almost had me. I thought we were dead for sure.”

She was crying uncontrollably at this point. It was difficult for him to understand her words.

“What do you mean he almost had you? How did you get away from him?” he asked. Alexander could feel the anger growing inside of him. He couldn’t believe that that bastard had put his hands on his wife again.

“Come on, lets go home.” he said.

Alexander informed Mr. Taylor that he had an emergency come up, and needed to be with Claire.

When they arrived back at Mrs. Jackson’s house, Alexander helped Claire into the house. All of the stress that she had endured had caused her to cramp severely. He helped her into bed, and lay down beside her. He ran his fingers through her hair in an attempt to comfort her. He wanted her to tell him how she managed to escape her father, but he was more concerned with calming her. Alexander knew that if she didn’t calm down, she could go into premature labor and lose the baby.

Claire finally cried herself to sleep. Alexander remained in the bed with her. He was afraid to leave her. She had been so upset, he was still afraid for the safety of the baby. He was also afraid for her safety.

He knew that Claire was prone to nightmares, and he wanted to be there in the event that she had one. He continued to rub her head as she slept. He was still angry that she had gone into town alone. He should have been with her. He should have been there to protect her and keep her safe. He blamed himself for the torment that she had been forced to face. All Alexander could think of was he wished he had been there to kill the son of a bitch.

He thought back to the night that he and Claire left Valdosta. He thought about how he had knocked Charles Vandivere out cold with the tree limb. He wished he had killed him instead. At least if he had, he wouldn't have had the opportunity to get near Claire again. He saw the revolver that fell from his father-in-law's hand as he hit the ground. He wished that he had picked it up and put a bullet in his head. Alexander was now angry with Mrs. Russell for sending her into town alone in the first place. She knew that Claire had been experiencing some pregnancy complications, and didn't need to be alone.

He quickly pushed the thought from his mind. It wasn't Mrs. Russell's fault. They hadn't informed her of the circumstances that caused them to leave Valdosta to begin with. The only person who knew their secret was Mrs. Jackson, and she was in bed sick all day, so she wasn't there to stop Claire from going to Cartersville alone. He began to wonder where Charles was now. Claire hadn't been able to tell him about him being arrested for attempted kidnapping, and conspiracy to commit murder. He wasn't aware of the details that allowed her to return home to him. She was shaken up, but otherwise safe and sound.

Claire slept straight through until morning. She had had a restless, dreamless sleep. She was pleased to see that Alexander was still in bed with her. He had obviously decided to miss work in order to be there with her. She sat up in bed, and pushed her hair back out of her face. Her mind began to play the mental video of the events of the preceding day. She could feel the fear that she had experienced the day before, only it wasn't as strong. She knew that for now, she was

safe, and didn't have to worry about Charles Vandivere for a couple of days at least. The officer that had arrested him had been kind enough to inform her that he would have to serve a mandatory seventy-two hours before going before a judge. She was relieved to know that they had three days at least to contemplate their next move.

Claire's thoughts quickly receded as she noticed that Alexander was waking up. She looked down to see his eyes were already open.

"Good morning," she said smiling.

Alexander sat up in bed.

"Well it's good to see you are better. I was worried about you." he said as he leaned in and kissed her on the forehead.

"I feel a little better. It was a pretty scary day yesterday." she stated.

Alexander rubbed his eyes vigorously in an attempt to clear the sleep from them. He was relieved to see that she was better. She had been so upset the day before that he was terrified to sleep.

"So, what happened yesterday?" he asked, not positive that he wanted to know the answer.

Claire took a deep breath before telling him the horrific story about Charles trying to kidnap her, and the officer that saved her life. Alexander listened attentively to every detail, and was cautious not to interrupt her.

Alexander felt the concern for her and the baby slowly subside as he heard her explain that Charles had to remain behind bars for three days. His first thought was the same as Claire's. They needed to plan a strategy to avoid any future encounters with him. They agreed on one thing: they couldn't stay with Mrs. Jackson anymore. They knew that if they continued to stay there, they were putting her life in danger. Granted, the old woman would tell them that she didn't care about the danger that she would be in. Never the less, she was like family, and they couldn't bare the thought of endangering her life. She had been too kind to them for that. They were thankful for all that, she had done, and didn't want to leave, but they knew that they had to. Now only one

question remained. Which one of them would tell her that they were moving out in three short days, with nowhere to go? They decided that they would tell her over breakfast that morning, together.

Claire and Alexander made their way down the hallway toward the kitchen. Mrs. Jackson had already prepared breakfast. It was obvious from the mouth-watering aroma of food in the air. As they reached the living room, the phone rang. Mrs. Jackson turned the corner.

“Good morning you two. Breakfast is on the table. Go ahead and sit down.” she said before answering the phone.

Claire and Alexander made their way to the kitchen to wash up. They heard Mrs. Jackson answer the phone.

“Hello? Yes, she’s here, just a moment.”

Mrs. Jackson lowered the receiver, and called out to Claire.

“Claire, you have a phone call dear.”

Claire entered the living room and took the receiver from Mrs. Jackson.

“Hello?” she said.

“I didn’t find you by chance you damned fool. I know where you are, and I’m coming for you. I made bail today.”

Claire froze from fear right where she stood when she heard the voice of her father on the other end of the line. He hung up after informing her that he was coming. She dropped the phone in the floor. Alexander and Mrs. Jackson heard the crash and came rushing in. they saw Claire standing there with tears flowing from her eyes.

“Claire honey, what’s wrong.” Alexander asked.

He walked over and picked up the phone.

“Who is this?” he demanded.

“He hung up. Alexander, he’s coming.”

CHAPTER TEN

After the long drive from Adairsville to Valdosta, Michelle finally arrived at her new home, with Valerie close behind her. As she drove down the tree lined dirt driveway, she was amazed at how much beauty the land possessed. The grass was greener than any she had ever seen. Off in the distance, she could see that flowers were in full bloom. She saw that just behind the bed of petals, a beautiful pond was shimmering from the light of the blazing sun. The grounds themselves sent forth such a radiant glow, which Michelle believed she was as close to heaven as she would ever be.

She could see the grand Victorian style mansion up ahead. The photographs that the caretakers had mailed to her didn't do justice to the estate. It was more luxurious and elegant than any picture could have ever captured. As she pulled her car in front of the house, she marveled at its beauty. Her eyes surveyed the exterior of the architectural masterpiece. She began to think that if the exterior of the house gave any clue as to the beauty and elegance that lay within the walls, she might not need to redecorate.

Michelle shifted her car into park, and turned off the engine. She exited the vehicle, and continued to stare in awe at its beauty and size. She turned her attention to the second level of the house. She saw a set of French doors that led out onto a balcony that seemed to wrap around three quarters of the house. She closed the door to her transam, and made her way up the steps to the front door. She had forgotten about Valerie, and left her lagging behind. She located the key to the front door on her key chain, and inserted it into the lock. She was anxious to see what was inside.

“Hey wait up.” she heard Valerie call to her.

Valerie made her way up the steps to where Michelle was standing.

“Did you forget about me?” she asked.

Michelle smiled at her friend. She was suddenly grateful that she was here to share this moment with her.

“No, I’m just dying to go inside.” she responded.

With those words, she unlocked the door, and opened it wide.

Both Valerie and Michelle were breathless at the beauty that emerged before their very eyes. Gorgeous red velvet carpeting lined the floor at just the right width to allow the immaculate marble floors to show. The walls were covered in the most beautiful shade of green that the two women had ever seen. There were fine antique French furnishings as far as the eye could see. Expensive paintings, mirrors, and silver candleholders accented the space perfectly. Finally, the grand staircase. They too were lined with the red velvet carpeting over marble flooring, and the banister was solid brass that had been recently polished. As the radiant South Georgia sun beamed in through the front door, the banister shimmered and shined, as it invited the two women to venture into unseen territory.

Michelle had to find the room that held the French doors that led out to the balcony. She wanted so much to stand on it and look out on the family homestead. She wanted to feel the cool summer breeze blowing through her hair, across her face, and all around her.

“Shall we go up?” she asked Valerie with a smile.

“I don’t know. I’m afraid that I might get the floors dirty.” she replied.

Michelle laughed.

“Oh don’t worry about that. We’ll clean it later.”

With that, the two women ran up the luxurious staircase toward the second level. The two felt like little girls on Christmas morning, racing to see what treasures waited for them underneath the Christmas tree.

One by one, they examined each room in search of the one that held

the exit to the balcony. Each door that they opened, revealed something new, something wonderful. Valerie had never seen so many pieces of antique furnishings in her entire career. The closest she had ever come to an authentic Hepple White was her textbook pictures. Each room was draped in a luxurious contemporary design that she felt would be a shame to change. She was in a house that held design masterpieces that she tried so hard to create herself. Finally, they found the room they were looking for, the room with the double French doors. It was the master suite. Michelle had thought it was too big to be referred to as a bedroom. The room possessed more warmth and beauty with its rich autumn colors than either of them could have ever imagined.

Michelle saw the doors leading out onto the balcony. She crossed the room with such gracefulness, that it seemed as though she was born for this house, this new life. She opened the doors, and walked out onto the balcony. Just as she made it to the railing, a cool, refreshing, summer breeze pushed through the trees that lined the driveway, and sent her hair dancing to an enchanted ballad performed by mother nature herself. Thank goodness for father time. He made that moment in time freeze so that Michelle could soak up every ounce of bliss that was offered to her. Valerie walked out on the balcony and stood beside Michelle. Michelle's eyes were closed, and she didn't notice right away that her best friend was there with her.

"Thank you grandfather. Thank you." she said with the biggest smile she had ever had to grace her flawless face. The wind died down as she reached out and took Valerie's hand in her own.

"This is so beautiful." she informed her.

"Yeah, I think I'm going to like it here." she replied.

The loud slam of a door, brought Michelle out of the intoxication that she had been feeling. She nearly jumped out of her skin before turning around. As she turned her body, she saw a woman standing in the bedroom.

"I'm sorry I startled you. The wind added a little extra force to the

door.” she explained. Michelle offered the woman a smile to ensure her there was no harm done. After all, the woman that stood before her had a kind way about her.

“That’s alright. I needed to come down from cloud nine anyway.” she stated.

“You must be Caroline, the house keeper.” she said as she made her way over to greet her. Valerie followed close behind.

“I’m Michelle, and this is my best friend Valerie. She will be staying here as well. Adairsville is a long way from here, and I couldn’t survive here without her.” she informed.

It was obvious to both Caroline and Valerie that Michelle was having a difficult time containing her excitement. She was unbelievably happy, and felt the need to share her happiness and love with the two women who were in her company.

“Well it’s very nice to meet both of you. My husband wanted me to ask you if you needed some help unloading the cars.” she informed.

“Yes, thank him for me will you, or better yet, where is he? I would love to meet him.” Caroline smiled. She was pleased to see that the granddaughter of Charles Vandivere didn’t have the same poison running through her veins as he did.

“I believe he is in the gardens. He wanted to get the repairs finished on the lawn furniture before you arrived. We didn’t know that you were coming early, so he isn’t finished yet. Make sure you are careful if you sit on any of it.”

“Thank you. We will.” Valerie replied.

She personally liked the housekeeper. She was very polite, and seemed to be a kind and caring person. There was however, one detail that concerned Valerie. She didn’t appear to be comfortable in the house, and she thought that was somewhat peculiar.

The three women descended the staircase. Caroline met her husband David at the foot of the staircase.

“I was just coming to find you. David, I want you to meet Michelle and her friend Valerie.” she stated.

He stepped closer to Michelle, so that he could shake her hand.

“Nice to meet you ma’am.” he said.

“It’s nice to meet you too David. Caroline tells me that you are already hard at work for me.” she stated politely.

“Yes ma’am. Well, a lot of this stuff is old, so it needs some repairs here and there, but nothing major.” he informed.

“That’s good to know. The thought of walls falling on me really isn’t very appealing.” she said jokingly.

“No ma’am. Would you like me to unload the cars for you?” he asked.

“Yes thank you. The things in the trans-am will be going in the master suite, and the other will go into the lavender room.”

David worked hard to unload the cars. Michelle and Valerie were exploring the rest of the house, and Caroline was preparing dinner. He was finally relieved when he carried up the last suitcase. He had forgotten what it was like to unload women’s belongings when they relocate. Now that the last of the luggage was inside the house, David went into the kitchen to help his wife. As he entered the room, he could see that she had a disappointed look on her face. It was evident that she wasn’t happy about the arrival of their new boss.

“What’s wrong Caroline?” he asked as he walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her body. He thought at first that Caroline was happy that Michelle didn’t have an ounce of Charles Vandivere in her. He was certainly glad of it. They had survived old man Vandivere for so many years, that they both were skeptical about returning to the estate to once again work for the family.

“I thought you were happy that she was nothing like that bastard.” he commented. Caroline looked up at David.

“I’m going to warn you now David, don’t say a cross word toward Charles Vandivere around Michelle. She never knew him. She doesn’t know what type of man he really was. She had painted this picture in her mind of a kind and loving man, or he painted it for her.”

It was apparent to her that the wool had definitely been pulled over

the eyes of the last remaining Vandivere. Even from the grave, Charles Vandivere was still the master of deception, and he was working his magic on the one person that they had all hoped had indeed escaped. David realized then, that he and his wife had their work cut out for them. There would be a lot more to their job than the simple caretaker responsibilities.

Michelle and Valerie spent the first day at the estate wondering and then resting. The commute from Adairsville to Valdosta had been a long and tiring journey. It had been at least a ten-hour drive, even though she had no sleep, Valerie had traveled at night. Of course, it seemed as though it had taken longer than that considering how anxious they were to get there, and start their lives over.

Tom's little rant hadn't slowed her down. She felt that he in some way hoped that it would have, but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of changing her plans. Of course, Michelle probably would have stayed a few extra days or so in Adairsville, had he not pissed her off so bad. She hoped that he was moping around the house feeling guilty about his act of stupidity. She honestly hoped he felt like shit. She knew that it was wrong to take pleasure in someone else's pain, but she couldn't resist this time. She decided to make an exception for her brother.

Valerie and Michelle had napped for hours. They had turned out to be more tired than they had expected to be. When Valerie finally woke up, it was eight o'clock at night, and she was starving. She started to wake Michelle, but decided against it when she saw how peaceful she was sleeping. Valerie slowly crept out of bed, and exited the master suite. As she entered into the hallway, a delicious aroma filled the house. She inhaled deeply, not that it helped matters much. She realized that Caroline had prepared dinner for them. She inhaled the scent of the food, and allowed her nose to lead her to the source.

Valerie realized that her assumption was correct, and Caroline had prepared a delicious feast. She was about to enter the dining room, when she heard Caroline and David talking. She started to announce

her presence to them, but she heard a statement that instructed her otherwise.

“David we have to make Michelle understand that she can never be a Vandivere. She doesn’t know how to be, and frankly, she doesn’t need to know.”

“I agree with you dear. We have to be careful . She can’t learn the truth. If she finds out why we are here before the time is right, it could ruin everything.” he replied.

There was a moment of silence before Valerie heard Caroline speak again.

“You are right. She can’t find out.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Valerie was shocked. The conversation that she had overheard sent chills down her spine. She immediately feared for Michelle's safety. She had hoped that they would say exactly why they were there, so she had more information to give Michelle, but they never did. Her first impulse was to burst into the dining room and confront the scheming con artists, but she quickly decided against it. Instead, she decided that the best thing she could do was to inform Michelle about the conversation, and let her handle it. She then wondered what she would do if Michelle didn't believe her. She knew the answer to that question. She would watch and wait. She wouldn't give them an opportunity to hurt her, or rob her of the fortune she had recently inherited. Valerie turned around, and headed back up stairs to wake Michelle. She needed to know that her new employees were plotting something behind her back, and she needed to be ready for whatever diabolical scheme they had planned.

"That's crazy Valerie. The Bradshaw's are good and honest people. I ran a criminal background check and a credit check on them. They also came highly recommended by my grandfather's attorney."

Valerie was frustrated now. She had done the only thing any real friend would do in this type of situation. She warned her of the possible danger that lurked within the walls. However, Valerie expected as much from her. Michelle was a very trusting person. She would give a convict a job if she thought that she could help them change their ways, and leave the life of crime forever. Michelle was also a good judge of character. Valerie began to think that it could be possible that Caroline and David Bradshaw were simply protecting her, but she

would let her guard down. She would watch from the shadows, and the first time they tried to steal as much as a fork from Michelle, she would blow their entire cover once and for all.

Valerie and Michelle, made their way back down stairs to the dining room. Valerie was still starving, and Michelle had stated that she too was feeling the rumble in her stomach. As they entered the dining room, they were surprised to find Caroline and David standing up against the wall, with their hands behind their backs.

“Caroline, this looks wonderful. You have really out done yourself .”, Michelle said as she began preparing her plate. Valerie gave Caroline a suspicious look, which instantly made the woman feel uneasy.

“Yes, you have definitely surprised us.” she said with a sly grin on her face.

Michelle noticed that Caroline and David were both still standing in the same position against the wall. She looked at Valerie as if to ask her what they were doing.

“Aren’t you two hungry? I hope you didn’t think that we could eat all of this food by our selves.” Michelle stated.

Caroline responded, “It is customary in this house that the servants eat last.”

Michelle was stunned. She didn’t really know what to say. She knew that she would never have classified the Bradshaw’s as mere servants. She immediately felt it was necessary to inform them of the fact.

“You are not my servants, you are valued employees, and I would prefer it if you both would sit down to eat with us. I am no better than you. We are equals.”

David and Caroline didn’t argue with her. They were actually quite pleased that she felt that way. They both approached the table and took a seat.

“I must tell you Michelle, this is definitely different. The employees that worked in this house in the past always prepared their plates last,

and had to eat in the employee dinning room.”, Caroline said as she placed a serving of mashed potatoes on her plate.

Michelle was shocked to hear that. She couldn’t comprehend why anyone would have people working for them, living in their home, and not allow them to have dinner with the family. It didn’t make any sense to her. She concluded that that would have to change. She realized that the first thing to change would be the employee dining area. She would transform the room into a lounge area for the employees. It would be a place that they could go and relax or take a break on busy or hot days. It would be her gift to them for all of their hard work.

“Well, by the end of the week, the employee dinning area will no longer exist. You and David are welcome to eat every meal at this table with Valerie and me.” she instructed before she began to eat.

Later on that night, Valerie and Michelle sat in the master suite in their pajamas, giggling and acting like twelve-year-old girls. They were talking and laughing, enjoying their first night in the mansion.

“So, what are we going to do tomorrow?” Valerie asked.

Michelle smiled as she looked at her friend.

“I was thinking we could break in that new designer’s kit that I bought you.” she said, eagerly waiting for a response.

Valerie was puzzled. From what she had seen, the mansion didn’t need to be redecorated. Michelle had said herself that she thought the interior design was just like a castle. Being an interior decorator, Valerie was certain that it was nearly impossible to get any better. It would be like redecorating heaven.

“What could you have possibly found to redecorate?” she asked.

“The employee dinning area.” Michelle responded.

“So you are going to make them eat in there after all?” Valerie asked.

Michelle shot her a puzzling look.

“Absolutely not. I want to change it to serve a new purpose.” she informed.

“What purpose? This house has every kind of luxurious space you could imagine.”

Valerie didn't like where this conversation was leading. Michelle didn't have to tell her what she wanted to do with the employee dining area, she already knew. The thought of Michelle doing anything for those conniving, deceitful con artists made her stomach turn.

"I want to turn it into a lounge for the Bradshaws. I think they need a place where they can go and unwind. Kind of like their own living room, or lounge area."

Valerie knew it. Michelle was going to pamper these people that had something up their sleeve. (She wouldn't doubt it if they had pocketed a few pieces of silver at dinner.) They were certainly luring Michelle into a dark abyss of deceit, and Valerie couldn't bare the thought of it. She decided that she would confront them tomorrow.

Michelle was sleeping better than she had in months. The bed in her master suite was so comfortable, that as soon as she rested her head on, the feather pillows and closed her eyes, she was asleep. She drifted peacefully and slowly into her dream world. She could smell the sweet aroma of the flowers in bloom. She could feel the hot summer sun blazing down on her, and the summer breeze enveloped her in a moment of bliss. Once again, time stood still to allow her to become intoxicated by the luxury of the estate. She saw herself walking down the brick path that wended through the gardens. She picked a pink rose and placed it behind her ear. She was bare foot, and wearing a long white sundress that danced in the wind. Her dark brunette curls brushed against her shoulders with every breeze. She radiated pure untainted happiness as she glided gracefully through the gardens.

She approached a bench that was nestled between two yellow rose bushes. She extended her hand outward to pick one of the golden treasures. She carefully broke the stem free from the bush. She held the flower close to her body. She inhaled its sweet fragrance. The pedals were as soft as silk. She caressed her face with the rose. She felt a prick to her finger. A thorn from the flower punctured her index finger, and she watched as the crimson liquid slowly emerged into view. A drop of her blood fell from her finger to the brick walkway beneath her feet.

Suddenly, the sky grew dark, and the wind began to howl. Rain poured from the cloud-plagued sky. She realized she needed to get back inside. She dropped the rose to the ground and took off running in the direction of the house. As she neared the house, she could hear the sounds of a man yelling and a woman screaming. The door to the house flew open with a tremendous force. She saw the silhouette of a woman come running from the house. She stopped in her tracks to watch the events that were unfolding before her very eyes. She stood motionless, afraid to move even an inch. She wanted desperately to clear the rain from her eyes, but she didn't dare. She continued to watch as a man came running out of the house in pursuit of the woman that came out only moments before. Michelle couldn't move. She was paralyzed with fear as the cold rain continued to fall. she wanted to follow them, to see if she could help the woman. Michelle could feel the terror that was running through her veins.

Michelle fell to her knees, and covered her eyes with her hands. She didn't know what was going to happen to the woman, but she knew that her fate couldn't be good. She knew that she was dreaming, and prayed that she would soon wake up from this nightmare. She ached inside, down to the very core of her being for the horrid events of her dream to be over. She finally realized that no matter how hard she prayed, she would never be able to force herself to wake up. She knew that for some reason, she had to watch every horrifying second of her nightmare. She hesitated, but removed her hands from her eyes. She stared in horror at what lay there on the ground in front of her. She couldn't move or speak. All she could do was scream. The woman that she had seen fleeing for her life from the estate had lost her battle. She lay there now motionless with blood rushing from the wound in her head, or rather what was left of it.

Michelle woke up in a cold sweat. She had finally been able to open her eyes, and leave the nightmare in her mind. She sat straight up in bed, and pushed her sweat-drenched hair back away from her face. She was breathing heavily and her heart was racing. She placed her

hand over her heart as if she were reciting the pledge of allegiance, but it was an attempt to slow her heart rate to a normal rhythm. She realized that her mouth was suddenly dry. She was unbelievably thirsty. She got out of her bed, and made her way over to the small beverage stand in the far left corner of the master suite. She retrieved a few cubes of ice from the ice bucket, and placed them into a glass much like the ones rich entrepreneurs use to drink their brandy out of. Michelle filled the glass with water, and turned it up. She nearly consumed the entire content of the glass before stopping to take a break.

She refilled the glass with water, and turned to walk outside. She had hoped that some fresh air would help to calm her nerves. She made her way across the room to the double French doors that led out to the balcony. She unlocked the doors, and stepped out. She walked over to the railing and looked up at the sky. She was relieved to see that the skies of South Georgia were clear, and full of stars. It was definitely a change from the vicious storm clouds that had invaded her dreams twice now. Her mind drifted back to her dreams. She wondered why she was having dreams about strangers that she had never met, and further more, had nothing to do with her. It didn't make any sense. She thought that there could be a reason behind them, but she wasn't clear as to what the reason might be. When she took into consideration the violence that her nightmares held, she was at even more of a loss.

She turned her attention away from the stars, to the landscape that surrounded her new home. Then, something caught her attention. She paid close attention to the driveway lined with trees. She noticed the driveway itself wasn't paved, but dirt. She then realized how familiar it really was to her. She had seen it before she had ever left Adairsville. She had seen it in the dream that she'd had when she dozed off in the bathtub the night before. Her heart began to race again, and the feelings of dread that she had experienced while in her state of restless sleep came rushing back like a raging river in a flood. Michelle knew

that it wasn't simply a similarity, it was the actual place that she had seen the woman missing the left side of her head.

The woman. Her heart sank even more when she realized that the woman in her nightmare that had just scared her nearly to death, was in fact the same woman from the nightmare that she had had the night before. She focused hard, trying to bring the face of the man into a clear line of view in her mind. She couldn't. All she had seen of the man was a dark shadow that appeared to be evil and demonic. She shivered as she pictured the figure in her mind. She hadn't been able to see his face, but she had felt the anger and rage that surged from his form like electricity from a high voltage line. When she opened her eyes, she wasn't prepared to see what she saw beneath her on the lawn. It was a man, only he didn't appear to be real. She could see right through him. He was transparent, and had a dark aura that surrounded him. She wanted to blink, confident that her mind was simply playing tricks on her, but she couldn't. The only thing that she could do was stare at him as he stood there, staring right back at her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Life was like a fairy tale for Michelle at her new home. Aside from the nightmares, and the ghost that seemed to haunt the place, everything else appeared perfect. Caroline and David had already begun to feel like family to her, and this was only her second day at the estate. Despite Valerie's redundant allegations, both David and Caroline were kind and loving. They were both good at their job as well. Caroline had prepared breakfast that morning, and Michelle thought that she couldn't remember the last time she had eaten such wonderful food. It rather reminded her of her mother's cooking. She thought it was nice to have the feel of a mother again. Caroline gave that impression somehow. Michelle had meant to ask her if she had children, but something always prevented her from it.

Never the less, Caroline was faithful to her chores. The house looked wonderful. She polished all of the silver as well as the brass banister on the staircase everyday. Michelle told her that it wasn't necessary, but she didn't mind as long as Caroline gave her word that she would stop cleaning and relax every now and then.

Like Caroline, David was also a devoted worker. He was still hard at work with the repairs on the estate, as well as maintaining the gardens until Michelle could actually hire a gardener. Aside from being an accomplished handy man, he was also a talented mechanic as well. Earlier that day, Michelle and Valerie were going to go into town to go shopping, and the alternator went out on her Trans-Am. Thanks to David, it was ready to drive by two o'clock. He had explained to her that since the car was such a late model, it required nothing more than the turn of a wrench. Michelle took his word for it

considering she knew absolutely nothing about car engines and repairs.

She was truly thankful for her newfound friends. She enjoyed their company very much. In the two days that she was in Valdosta, she had already grown to love them. She had even begun showering them with gifts, which Valerie objected very strongly to. When the two women were out shopping, Michelle had spotted this beautiful winter coat. although winter was still a couple of months away, she still wanted to purchase the coat for Caroline. She had seen her old ragged one hanging in the coat closet at the estate when she was placing her own coat in it. She couldn't resist the temptation. Against the advice of her best friend, Michelle purchased the coat for Caroline. Michelle had also seen what poor condition David's tools were in when he repaired the engine in her car. She then decided to buy him every tool that she could possibly find. Again, Michelle wasn't the repairing type, so she didn't really know what she was buying, but she did it anyway. It was well worth it when she saw the joy on her employees' faces when she presented them with their gifts.

Of course, Michelle couldn't forget Valerie when she was gift shopping, but the gift that she had for her had to be delivered. Michelle realized that there were times when Valerie was working on a new interior design, she needed to be alone in order to focus on the project. Therefore, Michelle had ordered all new materials to transform the sunroom on the east wing of the house into her own private studio. She had everything from carpet sample displays, to color boards and wallpaper books delivered to the house. That was part of the shopping trip that she had planned. It was really a plot to get Valerie out of the house, so Caroline and David could set up the studio while they were shopping. When they returned home, Valerie was thrilled to see her studio, just as Michelle had predicted.

Michelle was so different from anyone that Caroline and David had ever known. She was loving and compassionate. She genuinely cared for all humanity, and her heart was as good as gold. Caroline and David were relieved. They had been afraid that she would be a repeat

of her grandfather, and they weren't so certain that they could survive that. They certainly couldn't have completed the mission that had brought them back to the Vandivere estate after so many years away. To them, the estate wasn't a house, it was a prison, and they were lucky enough to get away.

Even though Michelle wasn't the type of person to ridicule and criticize, they realized that they still had an obstacle in their path, and that was Valerie. They hadn't expected her to come with Michelle, and they definitely didn't expect that she would over hear their conversation the night before. Now, she was suspicious of them, and that would make their task even more difficult. They would now have to protect both girls, as well as stop one of them from standing in their way. They weren't sure how they were going to do that. Since Valerie had overheard their conversation, her guard was up, and any chance that they had of convincing Michelle to leave would be nearly impossible.

Caroline thought back to her dream that had begun to invade her sleep two months ago. The dream was about an old black woman telling her that she had to protect Michelle because she was in danger. She remembered that for the first time in their twenty-seven year marriage, David thought she was crazy. The old woman had told her that they had to go back to the estate and save Michelle because he was going to kill her. It took about a week or two, but Caroline had convinced David to return to Valdosta. When they arrived, they saw the headline in the paper that had made front page. "Vandivere Dies. Granddaughter To Inherit." Caroline felt her heart sink as she read the article that explained that the daughter of Claire Vandivere had finally been located, and she was said to inherit the estate, and all of the money in the accounts.

Caroline and David were pleased to see that so far, all was well, but Michelle had only been there for two days. Honestly, Caroline did begin to have doubts about the warnings that the old black woman had given her. She didn't understand how anyone could possibly want to hurt this woman. She was kind, and a good person in general. The

other detail that had Caroline confused, and caused her to doubt the warnings, was the man. The woman from her dream said that he was going to kill Michelle. She had first thought that it was Charles that would attempt her murder, but he was dead, and the only time a person can commit murder from the grave was in a well-written ghost story.

A scream came from the top of the stairs, followed by a loud crash. Caroline called out for David who had just gone out the back door. She raced up the stairs. Her heart rate could have easily matched her speed it was beating so fast. As she reached the top of the staircase, and turned the corner, she found Michelle picking her shaking body up from the floor. There beside her on the floor, lay a broken chandelier.

“What happened?” Caroline asked as she helped Michelle to her feet.

“I’m not really sure. The chandelier just came crashing down.” she replied as she dusted the drywall from her clothing.

“Michelle, are you alright?” Valerie asked as she reached the top of the stairs.

David was traveling close behind her.

“It looks like the gypsum board gave way.” David replied as he examined the shattered light fixture.

Valerie thought that Michelle’s accident seemed quite coincidental. She had heard the two discussing their plan, and now she was convinced that their plan was to kill Michelle. She thought that rigging a light fixture was a clever approach. Considering David was a very talented handy man, he could easily make it appear to be an accident. “Are you sure you are alright?” Valerie asked.

Michelle smiled at her and assured her that she was.

“There’s no reason to make a fuss over this. It’s an old house, and things like this happen.”

Michelle’s explanation didn’t help soothe Valerie. She was certain now that Caroline and David were trying to kill her best friend, and she had made up her mind that she would confront them tonight after Michelle went to bed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The doorbell rang.

“Well, it’s one surprise after another today.” David said as he descended the stairs.

First, a killer chandelier attacked Michelle, and now an unannounced visitor had arrived. David wondered what other surprises the Vandivere estate had in store for them, but he didn’t dare ask. He was somewhat of a superstitious man, and he believed the saying don’t ask what could go wrong next. Therefore, he kept his thoughts in his mind where they belonged.

“I’m looking for Michelle. Is she home?” Tom asked when David opened the door. After her actions at the park two days ago, he found it impossible to fight off the guilt that haunted him. Finally, his conscience got the better of him, and he drove all night to Valdosta.

“Yes she is home. Please come in.” David replied as he stepped to his left to allow Tom to enter. As he entered the estate, he could see why Michelle had been in such a hurry to get there. It was luxurious, and elegant. Tom followed David as he led the way to the living room. Once they reached the entryway, David gestured for Tom to go inside. “May I tell her who is waiting?” David asked.

“Would you please tell her that her brother is here to see her? Thank you.” he replied as he strolled around the living room admiring the expensive paintings that hung on the walls.

Tom was nervous. He tried not to fidget when he finally took a seat in one of the Queen Anne chairs. Michelle entered the living room. Judging by the look on her face, she was surprised to see him. She wasn’t sure for the reason behind his visit, but she had a good idea as

to what it pertained to. He was feeling guilty. That had always been Tom's weakness. He couldn't do anything wrong as a child and get away with it, because he would end up telling on himself eventually. How he ever succeeded in his career as a lawyer, Michelle would never know. Never the less, Michelle knew her brother all too well, and was able to predict his actions, as well as his reasons behind them.

"What are you doing here Tom?" she asked.

She thought that she at least she would give him a chance to explain, considering the reason that he was there.

"I wanted to see you. I needed to see you so that I could..."

"Apologize?" she said as she completed his sentence.

She had first decided to keep quiet, and allow him to speak, but she couldn't resist the temptation. She was gloating, and taking pleasure in his pain.

"I feel awful Michelle.", he said.

He continued his attempt at redemption. Michelle sat down across from him, and crossed her arms as if she were saying, "I'm waiting." She crossed her legs as she sat back in the matching Queen Anne chair. She had a smug look on her face.

"Good, you should feel awful. You were way out of line.", she stated.

Tom paced back and forth across the living room floor. He appeared to be gathering his thoughts.

"I see that you are still angry with me. I can't say that I blame you."

He finally sat back down in the chair across from her.

"No Tom, I'm not angry. I'm hurt. How could you accuse me of being bitter? You had no reason to do such a thing."

Michelle had to stop talking for a moment. Granted, her expression of feelings was helpful, it also caused her to become teary eyed.

"I love our parents, more now than ever. I never thought that was possible until all of this happened."

Tom looked up at his sister, and met her gaze.

“I know that you are not the type to become bitter and spiteful. I misjudged you without cause.”

Tom could feel some of the pain and humiliations begin to fade.

Michelle could feel the tears moisten her eyes even more at this point. She was relieved to hear that he really didn't think of her as spiteful, but that didn't excuse his actions. She needed to know why he would even entertain the notion.

“Why did you think that?”

She needed to know the reasoning behind his childish actions. If he knew her so well, then why had he reacted the way he did?

“Look Michelle, I've never been good at expressing my feelings, and saying it is even more difficult.”

Michelle stared at him in silence. It was obvious to Tom that she was waiting for him to finish his explanation. It wasn't a common occurrence for Tom Brown to admit his faults. She wanted to soak up every drop of this moment.

“I was just as upset as you were to see the truth come to light. You made our family whole when you came. Honestly, I never wanted you to know that you were adopted. I wanted it to stay secret.”

Michelle felt the tears that had been forming in her eyes, flow down her face. Of all the things that he could have said to her, Michelle hadn't expected to hear this. She began to realize that he wasn't as predictable as she had thought.

Tears began to flow from Tom's eyes as well. He could feel every ounce of self-control leave his body. He was becoming controlled by his emotions. He hadn't allowed his emotions to take over since the death of his parents. He tried to fight back the urge to break down, but he failed.

“I just didn't want to lose you Shelly. You are all I have left.”

With those words, Tom began to cry more than he ever had. Michelle rose from her seat, and embraced her brother in the most heartfelt hug they had shared in a long time. The embrace was tight, and the force caused the tears to flow from each of them. It was

definitely an emotional moment for the three bystanders that had accidentally walked in on the conversation. Valerie and Caroline both had to wipe away a tear from their eyes.

Caroline didn't want to interrupt them. It was obvious that this visit from Tom was exactly what they needed to move on. The discovery of Michelle's heritage had taken its toll on all who were involved. It was nice to see that they were finally putting their differences behind them. Of all of the occupants, it was Valerie who knew just how touchy the relationship between Tom and Michelle had been. It warmed her heart to see that the sibling squabbles were finally coming to an end. She was beginning to see Tom in a different light. She knew that deep down, Tom had to have a heart somewhere. As it appeared now, his heart was his sister.

"Michelle, I'm sorry to interrupt, but lunch is ready." Caroline tried to contain her tears as she spoke. She hadn't wanted to spoil the moment, but she felt that if they watched any longer, they might all break down and cry with them. Tom released his grip on his sister. He wiped the tears from his eyes, and smiled at her. Michelle did the same. They turned, and followed their audience into the dining room.

After everyone had eaten, and the kitchen was cleaned, Caroline and David returned to their room for some rest and relaxation time. Lord knows they needed it. After the scare with Michelle and the chandelier, then the tear manifesting, emotional moment with Tom, the day had become rather exhausting. Of all of the events of the day, it was the chandelier incident that still remained fresh in Caroline's mind.

"It's starting now David. The evil in this place is awake, and it's trying to kill Michelle."

David looked up from the book that he was attempting to read.

"Do you think so?" he asked.

Caroline walked over to the bed where her husband was sitting. She took a seat beside him before continuing.

“What other explanation is there? You inspected every inch of this house before she arrived, including the light fixtures.”

David realized that she had a point. He had taken every precaution to ensure Michelle’s safety. That was the purpose of them trying so hard to get the positions that they now held.

They knew Charles Vandivere, and they knew what he was capable of. They knew how ruthless the evil presence was that infected every inch of the estate. They knew that his soul itself was pure tainted evil. So evil, that Charles Vandivere caused Satan to be afraid to open the gates of hell to him. It wouldn’t surprise either of them if his soul just happened to be wondering the grounds of his beloved plantation, haunting every acre.

“We have to watch her more closely.”, Caroline stated as she continued the conversation.

“It is up to us to protect her. It has been our job since the day she was born. We can’t fail now.”

David moved closer to his wife. Her concern for the young woman they worked for was evident on her face. Like Caroline, David also was aware of the level of importance of their mission. Caroline hadn’t been the only person experiencing the dream of the old black woman. In fact, she appeared to him in an attempt to convince him of her existence. However, she didn’t appear in a dream. The first encounter he had with the apparition occurred while he was alone in their house in Powder Springs. The dreams came later. That was how he had known to inspect the light fixtures when they returned to Valdosta. The old black woman had instructed him to do so.

It had been three days since Tom had arrived in Valdosta. After the resolution of the tension between him and Michelle, he decided to stay for a while. Michelle had convinced him to take a much-needed vacation. She even made him feel useful by incorporating his help in the renovation process. She had also put him in charge of designing the new garden that she wanted on the east end of the house.

Michelle was making all kinds of changes to the estate, both inside

and out. She was thankful that she had Valerie there to assist her with the remodeling. She couldn't have hired a better decorator for the job. Granted, the estate was beautiful the way that it was when they arrived, Michelle still felt that it was necessary to change the look, and Caroline had agreed with her. Caroline had hoped that she would change the entire place, and bring the feeling of love and happiness within the walls. She was relieved to see that she was doing just that. She knew that Charles Vandivere would roll over in his grave if he could see what his granddaughter was doing to his beloved mansion, and the thought pleased her.

Valerie had spent many hours in her new studio, putting together designs for the house. Michelle had given her free rein over the design scheme, as long as she made it completely different. Valerie was thrilled. She had no problem incorporating the requests of her client into the design, but she loved to be allowed to let her creativity run wild. The fact that Michelle had created a studio, just made her job even easier. She didn't have to leave to pick up paint samples and carpet samples from numerous stores. That was the part of her job that annoyed her the most. She felt as though she spent more time driving than creating.

Valerie had noticed that many of the rooms in the mansion were dark, gloomy, and had no identifiable hue. It was really quite depressing when she thought about it. She was working on designs that would bring each room back to life. With the use of artificial lighting, and bright colors, she believed that she could bring new warmth to the estate. One that said the occupants were safe and the house was filled with love. Michelle was exactly what the Vandivere estate needed. Her compassion seemed to sign the very walls with each stroke of a paintbrush.

"Tell me about Claire." Michelle said.

She and Caroline were cleaning out the bedroom that her birth mother once occupied. Michelle had been anxious to ask about her mother. She wanted to know what she was like. She wanted to know

what type of person she was. What she wanted to know most of all was did she love her?

“What do you want to know about Claire?” Caroline responded.

She wanted to give Michelle the option to ask her specific questions. She also needed to find a way to avoid the brutally honest truth. She wanted to tell her Claire’s life story, every little detail.

Truth be told, Michelle had a wonderful mother. Claire was a sweet, loving and obedient person. She had a heart of gold, and the servants of the Vandivere estate fell in love with her.

“Tell me anything. Was she pretty?” Michelle asked.

She folded a dress that had belonged to Claire, and packed it in a box as she waited for Caroline to answer.

“She was beautiful. When people looked at Claire, they thought that they had seen a princess. As you know, money was no option to this family, so she always had the most beautiful clothes.”

Michelle knew that that was a fact. There was a stack of clothes on the bed that she had set aside to keep for herself. When she paid closer attention, she realized that she was keeping more clothes than she was donating. Michelle decided that she would go through them again. She had everything that she could have ever wanted, and really didn’t need all of her mother’s hand-me-downs.

“What kind of person was she?” Michelle asked.

Even though her mother had put her up for adoption, Michelle was still extremely eager to learn about the woman that she had never met, but felt so close to.

“Claire was kind and loving. She was a wonderful girl, full of ambition. She had big dreams for herself.”

“That must be where I get it from.” Michelle stated as she took a seat on her mother’s bed.

Caroline smiled at Michelle’s acknowledgement.

“I see a lot of Claire in you. You have her eyes you know?” she stated as she forced a tear into retreat.

Caroline realized that it was time to give Michelle her mother’s

most prized possession. She walked over to the bedside table and opened the top drawer. She pushed some papers back, and retrieved the remaining two contents. She placed the journals in Michelle's hands.

"Claire kept journals faithfully. There is one here I'm sure you will definitely want to read. She mailed it to me before she died."

Michelle looked down, and examined the key to her mother's mystery. She was sure that the journals would help her understand her mother better, and fill the void that she suddenly felt inside. As she looked at the second journal, she was stunned at what was embroidered on the cover. It was her name. She opened the cover, and there in her mother's handwriting were the words, "For Michelle".

Michelle spent three days reading Claire's journals. They were definitely interesting. She enjoyed the fact that Claire had actually written the entries in novel form. She described humor and happiness better than that of most poets. She enjoyed the funny stories about Claire playing with Sara, her nanny. Claire had begun writing in her journal at the age of eight. In the first two years of her life, the entries were mostly stories of sleepovers, birthday parties she attended, and of course, special moments with Sara. By the time she was eleven, Claire wrote a lot about being harassed by a girl named Emily Poe. She was plagued by the cruelty at school as well as the multiple social functions that were hosted by her parents.

Of all of the childhood acquaintances that Michelle had read about, her favorite was the sweet nanny Sara. Sara had cared for Claire as if she were her own mother. The more that Michelle read about her, the more that she grew to love her. She could understand why Claire had loved her so. She was more than a simple caregiver, she was her nurse when she was injured. Sara had treated every burn, scraped knee, or splinter that she had gotten. She cared for her when she was sick, and even taught her how to put her hair up in a ponytail by herself.

Of all of the valuable information that Michelle had received from reading her mother's childhood documents, one detail caught her

attention. Claire's feelings toward her father were surprising. She didn't paint the picture of a man that would have left his entire fortune to his only grandchild. Instead, she painted the picture of a ruthless, heartless tyrant that didn't care about anyone but himself. The entries began as complaints made by an eight-year-old little girl complaining that her daddy never spent any time with her. Eventually, in the 13th-16th years of her life, he mentally, emotionally, and sometimes physically abused her.

In the second journal, she was terrified to learn of all of the death threats, and close encounters Claire had had during her pregnancy. Charles Vandivere had hunted her down like a dog to rid the world of her sin. She wrote about all of the sleepless nights that she had endured for fear that he would find her again, and finally succeed with his mission. Her heart raced as she read one horrifying detail after another. The story that Michelle read about her grandfather that she determined to be the most disturbing, was the murder of Sara. Michelle had wondered what had happened to her. It seemed as though Claire had simply stopped writing about her one day. She actually shed a tear for Sara. It broke Michelle's heart to know that she didn't have any chance of locating this woman that her mother had held so very dear to her heart. She had toyed with the idea of attempting to meet some of the people that knew her family, but now she wasn't sure she wanted to. Sara was the one that she was looking forward to meeting the most, and now she knew that she never would have the chance.

Michelle found David exactly where she had thought she would. He was in the garden with Tom and James. James was the gardener that she had hired to design the new landscape for the estate. She knew that Tom and David were capable of performing the task themselves, but she felt like she was working them too hard. They had even been assisting the painters and carpet installers inside. Still, Michelle didn't feel guilty for hiring the handsome young man. He was twenty-eight, and definitely an eye pleaser. He had blond hair and sky

blue eyes. Since the gardener position was a live-in position, she had encountered him once or twice at night in the past week. She had noticed that his eyes seemed to shine in the darkness, and Michelle found the fact quite alluring.

“How’s it going guys?” Michelle said smiling.

The three men were studying the blue prints. When they heard her voice, she was greeted with smiles all around, including the smile from James; the one that captivated her.

“Hey Shelly. We are doing well. We are debating about how many of these green rose bushes we need to plant to get the effect that we are going for.”

Michelle walked over to examine their progress. She was pleased to see that the new garden addition was coming along quite nicely, but that wasn’t the purpose of her visit. “I’m sure between the three of you, it will work out.” she said offering a vote of confidence.

“David, can I speak to you inside for a moment?” she asked as she turned her attention in his direction.

“Is something wrong?” he responded. He was sure that it would be another plumbing problem. Leaking pipes had been a regular issue lately.

“No, I just wanted to ask you a few questions about this place is all.” Michelle could see by the look on his face that he was relieved, yet still puzzled.

David followed Michelle into the kitchen. He took a seat at the breakfast bar as Michelle opened the refrigerator and retrieved the pitcher of lemonade that Caroline had just prepared. She poured a glass for each of them, and took a seat across from David. “So what do you want to ask me?” he said as he lifted the glass and indulged in the refreshing liquid.

“I read Claire’s journals, and I learned something that was a little disturbing. Was Charles really as mean as she wrote he was?”

Michelle needed to know. If he was indeed as evil as the written documents of her mother insisted, she was concerned and felt she

needed to know. It was apparent by the look on his face that David wasn't prepared to discuss her grandfather, and frankly, he didn't want to. Charles Vandivere was a subject that David preferred to avoid at all costs. He didn't like the man when he was living, and he would be damned to hell before he would make him sound like a saint.

"Michelle, you aren't going to like what I'm about to tell you." he said before taking another drink of his lemonade. Michelle shifted in her seat as though she were attempting to get comfortable.

"Charles was worse than any words that Claire could have ever written. Honestly, I don't think there are any words that could describe just how evil he really was."

That wasn't what Michelle wanted to hear. She wanted to hear that the horrible stories that Claire had documented in her journal were actually the exaggerations of a typical teenage girl. Michelle didn't want to believe that she had that kind of blood running through her veins. She didn't want to believe that the man that she had labeled as the loving grandfather she had never known was actually a heartless killer stuck in civil war times.

She realized that it was true. She found her confirmation in David's eyes. He was sincere in his answer, and he had warned her. The thought of multiple murders on the property that she now owned disturbed her. She could feel all of the evil and pain that the Vandivere estate truly held. She realized now that it didn't come from the dark colors of the walls and furnishings, but from the souls of the people that had lived there. She had tried to count the people that he had murdered in cold blood, but she had given up the task on the third try. She decided that she didn't want to know the total. Her opinion of her grandfather had now been tainted by the truth of what he really was, and she saw no reason to make matters worse.

Michelle sat by the pond that Claire had written about. It was the one that she and Michelle's father had designated their special place. It was also the same pond where her father had sent her evil grandfather into a full back flip. Michelle no longer sympathized with

him about the incident. She realized now that it happened because her father was trying to protect her and her mother. She thought about her father. She wondered if he was alive. She had considered asking David if he knew anything about Alexander Chamberlin, but decided against it. She could tell that he was uncomfortable with the topic of Charles Vandivere, and she didn't want to over load him.

As she lay on the fresh green grass, she stared at the sky, watching the clouds. She allowed her thoughts to venture away from the disappointment that she was feeling toward her grandfather. She thought instead of James. She was growing to enjoy his company with each passing day. She considered every moment, even ones as simple as watching him from her balcony window, pure heaven. She wouldn't say that she was falling in love with him, but she was definitely interested. She wanted to get to know this man better. She wanted to know him for who he was, instead of just her gardener. She had told Valerie of her growing interest, and Valerie was against it. She told Michelle that it wasn't a good idea to become involved with an employee. Michelle knew this. She had obeyed the rule when she was working in her diner in Adairsville. However, something inside of her was telling her that this was different. Michelle closed her eyes so that she could picture his face. She could hear the wind blowing lightly. However, she became startled when she heard someone whisper her name. She didn't recognize the voice, but she could tell that the voice belonged to a man. She opened her eyes, and didn't see anyone around her. She got up from her spot, and headed back for the house. She wasn't in a mood to deal with the ghost of the estate.

The voices and dreams that Michelle had been experiencing since arriving at the mansion were beginning to concern her. She overlooked the occurrences at first, passing them off as stress or anxiety. She didn't believe at first that the estate was hunted, but the longer she was there, she began to second-guess her decision. She wanted to talk to someone about it, but didn't know who. She knew that Tom would laugh at her. He wasn't one to believe in the paranormal. Valerie

wasn't a believer either. She would recommend that Michelle see a shrink. She would probably make a joke about a history of schizophrenia in the Vandivere family. That was Valerie's sense of humor. She was an odd one. As for Caroline, David, and James, she didn't know them well enough to confide in them about something like ghosts. They would try to have her committed for sure. She would be better off to attempt to discuss her period with them. It would be just as embarrassing. Since she didn't know what to do, or who to talk to, she decided that she would keep her experiences to herself.

The activity continued. She was hearing voices call to her in the dead of night. Sometimes it was a male voice that she had decided belonged to her grandfather. Other times, the voice was clearly female, and Michelle believed it was the voice of Sara. Sara's voice didn't startle her as much as Charles'. She had known of Sara to be a kind and devoted person, so she felt that she was in no immediate danger. She wasn't as comfortable when Charles was near. She felt frightened when she knew that he was close to her. The mystery behind his decision to leave her the estate still confused her. So much good had come from his money, and the estate was certainly benefiting from it. She had tried so hard to honor his memory. She had painted herself a picture of a perfect grandfather, and that had been shattered between the words written by her mother and the confirmation from David. She began to question what she was honoring about him. She didn't feel that he had done anything to be honored for.

She wondered if it were possible that he was plagued by guilt before he died, and wanted to right his wrongs. She thought that it may be possible that he regretted all of the horror and pain that he had inflicted, and felt that he could redeem himself by giving to the one that he had originally hated. Michelle wanted to believe that there was good in him. She wanted to feel that he had loved her, but that was proving to be a challenge with her newly discovered information.

She lay back on her bed. She had her brain working over time trying

to make heads or tails of the situation. She closed her eyes, hoping that blocking the light would help alleviate the pain in her head. She felt herself drifting. She had begun to recognize this feeling as her warning that she was going to have an encounter with a spirit. She was used to Charles and Sara haunting her, but she wasn't prepared to see the new spirit that was eager to communicate with her. This was an elderly woman. Her hair was blonde, but streaked with silver. She was beautiful and dressed in elegant clothes. She had a sweet smile. Michelle wasn't frightened by her, just startled. The woman smiled at her as she made her way to the bed where she lay.

"Don't be afraid Michelle. I'm not here to harm you." she said.

Michelle cast her a confusing glare.

"Who are you?" she asked.

The woman reached out and brushed a strand of hair away from Michelle's face.

"You are going to find many dangers lurking within the walls of this place. Do not be afraid of what you find. Your mother is here to help you."

With those words, the woman in white faded away into the background.

She was gone, quicker than she had arrived. Michelle was in awe at the events that had occurred. She tried to speak. But the flowing river of tears streaming down her face impaired the ability. She had just sat face to face with the spirit of her mother. However, she cried for a different reason. She didn't cry simply because she had finally gotten the chance to see her, she cried because of how she looked. She wasn't a young and vibrant spirit of a seventeen year old. She was old and gray. That meant that she hadn't died in childbirth, she had died later on in her life. She could have met her and spent time with her had she only known about her. Had she only known the truth behind her past, she could have found her and talked to her, and had a relationship with her. She cried for the missed opportunity that she knew she could never get back.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Claire had finished putting away the remainder of their belongings that she just unpacked. She and Alexander were finally settled into their new home. After the incident with Charles, they knew that it wouldn't be safe to stay with Mrs. Jackson any longer. Mrs. Jackson had protested to the decision, but Claire and Alexander had made up their minds. They refused to endanger the life of the woman that had helped them in so many ways. She had put a roof over their heads, food on the table, and most importantly, given them the love and compassion of a mother. They were still children even though they were married and expecting their first child. Mrs. Jackson loved them as if they were her own. Aside from her brother in Kentucky, and Mrs. Russell, they were the only family she had left. They had finally helped her cope by agreeing not to leave Adairsville.

They wanted to make a home in Adairsville. They loved the people there, and it was so different from Valdosta. It was easily classified as a modern day Mayberry, and each building and home in the town had the feeling of home. They had made many friends, and because of the encounter that Claire had with her father, they had been forced to share the details about their past with all of them. When they first decided to reach out to the residence of the town for assistance in concealing their location, they had been reluctant to do so. Not only had they realized that the town was full of people who still believed in helping each other, it was also full of people that loved to gossip. They weren't sure if they were capable of keeping a secret, and if they were, they weren't sure that they would welcome the threat that followed them. Never the less, they had to try. They had to trust in their

newfound family and friends, and believe that they would stand behind them no matter what. Much to their satisfaction, each person they spoke to agreed to hide their location from anyone that came in search of them.

Mrs. Jackson was no exception. She too agreed to hide them. She hadn't saved them from death due to the cold just to have an evil man take them from her. She would protect them at all cost. She had proclaimed this statement from her own mouth, and Claire had believed her to be sincere. She agreed that she wouldn't stop by the house to visit them. They didn't tell her where they had moved to, simply because Charles knew that he could possibly track them through Mrs. Jackson. So when she wanted to see Claire and Alexander, she visited them at the restaurant where they worked. They had decided that it was the safest way. If they were in a public place, they knew that it would be difficult for Charles to cause any trouble without being noticed. Claire had also had a restraining order issued for him. Therefore, if he did indeed show up anywhere near the restaurant, the police station was dead ahead, and the city police would be there in thirty seconds.

Claire continued to work long hours in Mr. Taylor's restaurant. She was on her feet constantly, and suffered the consequences of that long before her shift had finally ended. Alexander tried to convince her to cut down on her hours. She was seven months into her pregnancy, and he didn't feel that the long periods she spent on her feet were helpful. He was afraid that if she continued to push herself beyond her limits, the result would be a miscarriage. Claire wouldn't hear of it. She didn't expect Alexander to do all of the work. She had told him that Michelle was equally her responsibility, and so were the bills that came in like clockwork. He quickly realized that he was fighting a losing battle with the issue, and decided to allow his wife to have her way.

One day, as Claire was working hard waiting tables, she was carrying a large order to a table. She had lost her balance of one of the plates that she had lined and stacked on her arms, and it went crashing

to the floor. She delivered the rest of the order, and apologized to the customer for the accident. After assuring them that it would be taken care of quickly, she went back to clean up the mess. She was surprised to find one of her other customers from a different table, working hard to clean the mess.

“Ma’am, I appreciate that, but I’ll be more than happy to get that.” Claire stated politely. She didn’t want to offend the woman, and she was grateful for her assistance. As the woman rose to her feet Claire could see that she was very much pregnant herself.

“Oh, when are you due?” she asked.

Claire loved meeting other pregnant women, and sharing stories about the changes that their bodies were going through.

“Eight months down, one left to go, and I can’t wait. This is the most miserable month there is.”

Claire admired the woman. She remembered seeing her in the restaurant before with her husband and son. She would know what she was talking about regarding the pregnancy thing, considering she had one child already. She obviously new from experience.

“I’ve got two months left, and I can’t wait for it to be over.” Claire responded.

She had been miserable lately, and it felt good to talk to someone that she knew was experiencing the same type of discomfort.

“Well just keep in mind that when you deliver, all of the pain and misery goes away instantly. When you look at that little piece of heaven, it is all worth it. I promise you that.”

The words spoken by the woman brought Claire a sense of comfort. She was glad to hear that it does in fact get better. She had been afraid of how painful her recovery from childbirth would be, but she wasn’t afraid anymore.

“I’m Sheila Brown.” the woman said, introducing herself.

“I’m Claire Chamberlin.” she replied.

“Well, why don’t you and your husband join my family for dinner tonight? We would love to have the company.”

Claire was thrilled to receive the invitation. She enjoyed making new friends, and meeting new people. Sheila certainly seemed like a good person, and her husband did too for that matter. She accepted the invitation, and Sheila jotted down the directions on a napkin before leaving.

The Browns and the Chamberlins became friends rather quickly. It seemed as though they were destined by fate to meet. Claire found comfort in her conversations with Sheila, and Alexander had taken to Jacob as well. They would sit on the front porch and have a beer together, and talk. They talked about cars, sports, and being married. They agreed that it was a difficult task to be married, but they didn't regret it at all. Alexander had used to think that the level his love for his wife reached was abnormal somehow. He didn't think it was possible to love so strong. Claire had changed that for him, and Jacob was glad to here about it.

Alexander also took the time on the porch, to discuss his situation regarding Charles with Jacob, and he had agreed that he wouldn't answer any questions about the Chamberlins to anyone that came snooping. He had told Alexander that he had done the right thing by running away with Claire to protect the baby. He told him that it made him more of a man to protect the ones he loved. He also had a way of assuring him that all would be fine in the end.

“God protects harder than you do. That is why that cop was there to stop him from taking Claire.”

That had been the response Jacob had given when Alexander informed him of the close call that Claire had had with her father. He agreed with Jacob. Someone had to be watching over his wife that day. If it hadn't been true, then she would not be there with him now. His only regret was that Claire's savior in her time of need wasn't him.

Claire was cleaning her living room. She had agreed to take the day off from work. Alexander had begged her to get some rest, and she didn't want him to worry about her anymore than he already did. She realized that there was no harm in taking a day every now and then,

and they were actually doing quite well financially. Therefore, she agreed that she would take her scheduled day off, and not pick up any shifts for anyone. It was nice to do something for herself for a change. She had been so consumed by her obsession to provide for her daughter, that she had even neglected her health. She hadn't taken her prenatal vitamins in a month or so. Every time she started to buy them, she realized that they needed something else more.

She had finished the quilt that she had made for the baby. She did a beautiful patchwork job with pink and lavender star shapes. She had trimmed it in a pretty pastel yellow satin lining, and even embroidered her daughter's name on the top in green. She was pleased with her finished work. It was definitely impressive. She couldn't wait to show it to Mrs., Jackson. She had received a message from Mrs. Jackson, asking her to come by the house later to help with something she had planned for the baby. Claire didn't like the idea of going to her house. They had decided that it would be safer if she avoided her house all together, but she couldn't see her bringing her entire sewing material collection to the restaurant either.

Claire arrived at the home of her new mother at a little past three o'clock. She knocked on the door, but no one answered. She tried to open the door, but it was locked. She retrieved her key from her purse. She placed it in the lock and opened the door. She entered the house, and began calling for Mrs. Jackson. Claire was surprised when she didn't respond. She had seen Mrs. Jackson's car out front when she arrived, so she knew that she wasn't running a quick errand. Besides, she would have called if something had come up last minute. She walked around looking for a note or something that could indicate where she may be. She finally found a note on the refrigerator with a magnet. She read it, and breathed a sigh of relieve when she learned that she was just next door at the Bennett's house.

Claire took a seat, and waited for Mrs. Jackson to come back home. She noticed a quilting magazine on the end table beside her. She retrieved the magazine, and began skimming through the pages. She

had taken an interest in quilting, and wanted to see if she could find any new ideas. She was pleased with the quilt that she had made for Michelle. She knew that Mrs. Jackson would be proud of her too. She had taught Claire so much about sewing, cooking, and how to be a good wife and mother. She looked around at the house that she had once called home. She missed living here with Mrs. Jackson. She missed those long talks they would have at night. When Claire couldn't sleep, Mrs. Jackson would make them each a cup of hot chocolate. They would sit there sipping the hot beverage, and gossiping. Those would always be memories that Claire would hold dear to her heart.

She began to think about her mother. She wanted to have happy memories about her mother. She didn't want the painful memories of her mother being abused by her father, and drinking every night to the point of a black out to try to ease the pain. She was a prisoner in her own home. She was treated as though she were nothing more than a sex slave to her husband. She never had any say in regards to financial decisions, or even the raising of their children. She was forced to sit idly by and watch Charles tear apart one life after another. She wanted so many times to take the children and leave, but she knew that resistance was futile. She wouldn't have made it outside the gate that surrounded the property. He would have shot her dead like a rabid dog. The children would have been no exception.

As Claire continued to skim through the pages of the magazine, she noticed an envelope had fallen out into her lap. She picked up the envelope with no intention to read its contents, but second-guessed her decision when she saw it was addressed to her. She tore into the side of the envelope, and removed the paper from inside. As she unfolded the handwritten document, her heart became heavy. She recognized the handwriting as that of her father. She read his terrifying words in tears. The threats were so drastic that no one could have imagined anyone being capable of such evil. She had learned that her restraining order was lifted, and all charges against him were dropped.

She realized that she would never be able to live a normal life. She

would have to be constantly on the run to avoid him finding her. He had even reported her perjury crime. She had to alter her birth date in order for her to marry Alexander. She knew that their marriage wasn't exactly legal, but she still felt married. She wouldn't dare let Mrs. Jackson find out how old she really was. She would feel so betrayed. Claire would never be able to forgive herself for deceiving her, and breaking her heart.

Never the less, Claire came to realize that she had no chance of raising her daughter herself. It would be too dangerous to attempt to live in hiding with a baby. Michelle would never know what it was like to have a home. Every time she would grow accustomed to a new place, she would have to be uprooted and relocated. She would never experience the joys of being a child. Claire didn't want her daughter to meet the same fate in childhood as she had. She realized what she had to do. She just had to tell Alexander they would have no choice but to give their daughter up for adoption. It would be the hardest thing that they would ever do, and Claire knew that. However, she felt that it wouldn't be safe for them to keep her, nor would it be fair.

Claire became upset due to her realization. Tears flowed from her eyes, and the pain in her stomach was almost too much to bare. The cramps she was having hurt worse than any pain she had ever felt. The appendicitis she had endured at the age of eleven hadn't hurt this bad. She knew that something was wrong. She wasn't supposed to hurt this bad. It just wasn't normal. She could feel her thighs become wet as blood began to run down them like red paint.

"Oh dear God. What's happening?" she said as she inspected her dress. When she realized that she was indeed bleeding, she feared the worst. She knew that she was about to miscarry the baby. She began making her way to the phone to call Alexander, but she didn't make it. The room began to spin, and her vision to blur. She placed her hand on her forehead as if trying to steady herself. The last thing that Claire remembered was everything going black.

Alexander sat by her side in the hospital, holding her hand. He was

in tears. They were able to stop the bleeding, and her labor, but they weren't sure how long Claire and the baby would make it. The doctor had informed him that he couldn't promise that they would recover. It was too soon to tell. Still Alexander prayed for the best outcome. He wasn't sure that he could live without Claire, or his daughter for that matter.

The doctor said that the premature labor was caused by elevated blood pressure. Apparently, it had been through the roof when she arrived by ambulance. He wondered what had happened that had caused her to get so upset. He knew that it couldn't have been the letter from Charles. He had found it on the floor beside her. No, he knew that it had to be something else. It had to be worse than death threats. Claire had survived more near death experiences than crazy motorcycle stunt men. He just couldn't understand it. He knew that it was pointless to try to figure out the enigma regarding her sudden illness, so he decided that he would push it into the back of his mind until Claire woke up. Right now, she was his only concern.

Alexander was relieved to see that she was coming around. He knew that his concern for her wouldn't go away until she could verify that she was alright.

"Claire? Honey, are you alright?" he asked as she opened her eyes.

She looked around the room as though she were trying to figure out just where she was. "Alex, what happened? Is the baby alright?" she asked him.

He smiled at her as he ran his fingers through her golden hair.

"She's fine. How are you?"

He desperately needed her to tell him she was fine.

"I'm tired. How long have I been asleep?"

Alexander grasped her hand firmly with his.

"You've been sleeping for about six hours now. I think it is more from the medication than anything."

Claire sat silently for a few moments. She needed to give her tired

mind a chance to process the information. She needed to examine her thoughts to see what her memory held about the day. She remembered going to visit Mrs. Jackson, and finding the letter from Charles. She then realized that was it. The letter is what had caused her to stress to the point of forcing her into premature labor. She remembered how bad she felt, and the blood that had stained her dress. That was all that she was able to remember. The letter stayed fresh in her mind. The threats that it contained were awful, and terrifying. It was the written word of Charles that had forced her to realize that she would have no choice but to give her baby up for adoption.

“Alex, I found a letter that my father had written to me. He mailed it to Mrs. Jackson’s house.” she stated.

Claire knew that there was no easy way to tell him what she had to tell him.

“I know. I found it lying beside you. I read it.” he replied.

Claire was both relieved and concerned that he knew about the letter. She was relieved that she didn’t have to attempt to go into details about what the letter had said. She didn’t remember what she had done with it anyway. She was concerned because she knew how short her husband’s temper was when he felt that she was in danger. She was afraid that he may be contemplating setting a trap for Charles and killing him. Granted, she knew that the world would be a better place without him, she just couldn’t bare the thought that her husband was a murderer. That was a detail that Claire didn’t believe she could live with.

Claire remained silent. She knew what had to come next in their conversation. She had to find a way to tell him that they had no choice but to give their daughter up. She didn’t know how to tell him. He was thrilled at the idea of having a daughter. He wanted so much to be a father, and have a family. She didn’t think that she would be able to convince him, and wasn’t sure of how he would react. She wanted the baby as much as he did, but she didn’t want her to grow up in a life of fear. She didn’t want to have to rearrange her daughter’s life

constantly. That wasn't the life she wanted for her daughter, and she knew that deep down inside, Alexander didn't want her to live that kind of life either.

Claire took a deep breath. As she tried to hold back the tears that so desperately needed to fall from her eyes, she realized they were inevitable when he asked her why she was crying. She decided not to hold it back anymore. She allowed herself to cry, and didn't attempt to adjust the force behind it. She was hysterical.

"We have to put Michelle up for adoption Alex. We have no choice."

As the words flew from her mouth, the tears fell from her eyes. Alexander was in shock. He tried to process the words that his wife had just spoken. How could she say that they would have to put her up for adoption? He couldn't bare the thought of anyone raising Michelle but them. He wouldn't hear of it. He believed that no one could ever love her or care for her like they could.

How could she ask him to do such a thing? How could she want to do such a thing? Alexander had too many questions flooding his mind at one time. He didn't know what he should ask first. He tried to keep his temper in check. God knows she didn't need to get anymore upset than she already was.

"Claire, what do you mean?" he asked.

He tried to conceal his own tears. He began to feel as though his daughter had died. He could feel his heart break into a million pieces at once with no sign of relief.

"We have to give her up for adoption. She will never be safe with us. She will never have a stable home. I can't force her to live a life on the run Alex. She deserves more than that."

Claire had to stop talking for a moment. She could feel her words getting caught in her throat, and she was beginning to choke on them.

Alexander realized that Claire was right. Michelle would never be able to have a normal life with them. He sat down on the bed beside Claire, and held her in his arms. She cried uncontrollably. He knew that

this wasn't something she wanted to do, but something she felt she had to do. Her heart was breaking into a thousand little pieces, and it was evident to Alexander as he watched the love of his life sobbing in his arms. He didn't know what to do for her. He didn't know how he could help her cope with the decision that they had to make.

"Claire, you have to calm down. She won't live to be placed anywhere if you don't. You can't handle this stress right now."

It seemed as though his words had gotten through to her. She began to calm down, and regain control of herself.

When he was confident that she would be fine, he decided to step outside to smoke a cigarette. He had recently picked up the habit. Considering all of the stress that he was under, he was surprised he hadn't started sooner. He excused himself, and left the room. He made his way down the hallway, and outside of the building. He retrieved his cigarettes from his jean pocket, removed one from the pack, and lit it. He inhaled the smoke deep into his lungs. He could feel his tension begin to subside. He replayed the events that had just occurred in Claire's hospital room. He tried desperately to find a different solution to the problem. He had to find some way to ensure that they would be able to keep their daughter. He had to find a way that would ensure her safety as well as her security. Claire wanted her to have a stable home, and be able to live a normal life.

Alexander remained lost in his ponderment to a degree that he hadn't noticed the familiar vehicle pull up in front of the hospital entrance. He finished his cigarette and made his way away from the smoking area, and to the entrance. There, he saw the black sedan that he recognized instantaneously. The bastard has found her again. Damn him! Alexander sped in the sliding automatic doors, and ran towards the elevator. Given the hour, he knew that there was no one working the information desk, therefore, Charles would have to search each floor. He knew that he still didn't have much time to reach the second floor, and retrieve Claire before Charles also arrived on the same level. He pressed the button to signal for the elevator. Every

second seemed like an eternity as he waited impatiently for the elevator. Finally, the bell rang that indicated that the elevator had reached its requested location. Alexander quickly boarded, and pressed the second floor button.

In what had felt like a lifetime, the elevator finally reached its destination. Alexander flew out of the doors, and down the hallway to room 223 where Claire would be. He burst through the door, and raced to her bedside.

“Claire, baby, you have to wake up now. We have to go home and fast.” he informed her as he began unhooking the machinery from her body.

She stirred.

“What is wrong Alex? You are acting like a mad man.”

“He’s here Claire. Your father is here. We have to leave now.”

Just as Alexander was about to lift his wife from her bed, he heard the voice of the tyrant down the hall. He considered peaking out the door to see if he was making his way to the room, but decided against the thought. He knew that every second he spent searching for Charles he was destined to find him.

“How are we going to get out of here?” Claire asked.

The concern and fear was evident in her voice.

“I’m going to carry you down the fire escape.” he replied.

Once he had Claire secure in his grasp, he carried her to the door of her room and opened it carefully. He didn’t want to signal anyone of their departure. He peered out of the crack in the door. He couldn’t see Charles, but he could hear his thundering voice demanding to know the whereabouts of his daughter.

“Okay baby, we are leaving.” he stated in an attempt to comfort her.

He exited the room with Claire in his arms. He crept slowly to the door to the fire escape, and opened it. He tightened his grip on his wife before descending the stairs as quickly yet safely as he could. Just as he reached the last flight of stairs, he heard the angry shouts of Charles Vandivere.

“Oh God. Alex go. Faster please Alex, faster.”

Claire was now frantic, and her tension made her harder to carry. It would have been easier if she could run, but Alexander wouldn't dare ask her to try.

He finally made it to the exit door for the fire escape, and the two were outside in the cool summer night. He tightened his grip once more to ensure Claire was secure in his arms. He ran as fast as he could toward his car. When he finally reached it, he placed Claire on the ground.

“Can you stand for a second?” he asked before letting go of her.

“Yes, please hurry.”

Alexander nodded to signal that he understood the severity of their situation. He unlocked the passenger side door and opened it.

“Get in.” he instructed.

Once Claire was inside, he closed the door, and ran around to the driver's side. He inserted the key in the lock, and turned it. As he opened the door, he heard Claire scream in horror. He looked up to see Charles in hot pursuit of them. He jumped into the car, turned the ignition, and threw the shifter into reverse. Without a moment of hesitation, he threw the car into drive, and sped away with Claire safe and sound. He looked up into his rearview mirror to see Charles Vandivere standing there smiling.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The paranormal activity at the Vandivere estate was beginning to flourish. It seemed as though not a single night had passed without something unusual happening. There had been everything from pictures falling off the walls when someone walked past, to apparitions in the night. Michelle could have simply passed the occurrences off as coincidence or her eyes playing tricks on her, but she knew that that wasn't the case. Although no one else had spoken of experiencing the same things she had experienced, she knew that the events were indeed real. She only wished she could discuss the events without causing a panic or worse, causing everyone in her home to believe that she was going crazy.

Sleep had been a chore since the first night she arrived at the estate. The dreams and strange occurrences had made it seem almost impossible to experience a rem cycle. She was thankful that she had rested just enough to function during the day. She had so many renovation projects going on at once, that she needed to be alert. She didn't want everyone that was helping her to feel as though they were her servants and nothing more. Michelle valued people, and she made it a point to acknowledge that.

At least she was resting well tonight. She was dreaming peacefully instead of violently. She had noticed that since James had arrived at the estate to assist with the new landscaping, she was having pleasant thoughts about the dashing young man that had caused her to blush by simply being there. This was the first night that her thoughts of him carried on into her dreams.

She saw the two of them sitting together on a bench overlooking

the ponds. He sat with his arm around her, and kept her close. He would smile as he ran his fingers through her hair, and she could actually feel every stroke. He would whisper in her ear, and tell her he loved her. He would brush his hand across her cheek, and kiss her slowly. In her dream, Michelle would soak in the feel of every touch like a sponge soaking up water. She consciously knew that she was dreaming, but she concluded that she didn't want to ever wake up from it.

She wasn't lucky enough to sleep throughout the entire night. She woke up at three a.m. Michelle's mouth was dry, and she desperately needed to use the bathroom. She crawled out of her bed, cursing the entire time because she had to wake up. She made her way across her bedroom to the bathroom, and turned on the light. After she had relieved herself, she washed her hands, and turned out the light. She walked over to the sink area, and filled a glass with water. She turned up the glass, and consumed all of its contents before making her way back to her bed.

Michelle lay there, thinking about the dream she hadn't wanted to wake up from. She smiled as she pictured the flawless face of her landscaper. Something about his eyes made her tingle inside, and excited her to a degree that she had never known. Even at the age of twenty-seven, Michelle was a virgin. She had decided to wait until she married to engage in any sexual activity. The decision had cost her several boyfriends in high school. Of course, when the word got out that Michelle Brown wouldn't put out, the invitations for dates stopped coming. Even as an adult, her decision still complicated her dating status. Between the long hours at the diner, and her vow of chastity, dating was almost nonexistent.

She began to think that things were different now. She thought about James, and the possibility that his interest in her could be that intense. She had decided long ago that she may be able to back out of her agreement with herself to wait until she was married, and simply settle for being in love. She secretly hoped to herself, and prayed to

God that James could love her. She wasn't ready to say she was in love with him, but she welcomed the possibility.

Michelle finally realized that she was wide awake. She decided to get out of bed, and go into the study. She had a wonderful book collection that belonged to her grandfather, and she had been aching to read one of them. She put on her green silk robe, and left her bedroom. She made her way down the staircase, and across the hall into the study. She flipped on the light, and entered the room. She walked over to the bookshelf, and began reading the titles of the books. She noticed one that didn't have a title. She removed the book from the shelf, and opened the cover. Much to her surprise, it was one of her grandfather's journals.

"Did everyone in this family keep a journal?" she asked aloud.

She turned to make her way over to one of the Queen Anne chairs, when a loud crash startled her. She looked down on the floor to find that she had accidentally knocked a picture frame off the desk. Michelle cursed to herself as she bent down to pick up the picture. She froze where she stood as she saw a shadow travel down the wall of the hallway. Her heart began to race, and her breathing became hard. Fear began to overtake her body. She wanted to scream, for she didn't know if it was an intruder, or a ghost. Considering all of the ghost encounters she had experienced since her arrival, she wouldn't have been surprised. She also thought that she would be used to them by now. She realized rather quickly that she was still startled by them.

James emerged through the doorway into the study with a baseball bat in hand. Michelle could feel the fear let loose of her when she realized that the shadow was merely James'.

"Jesus Christ! You scared the hell out of me James." she said as she raised her body, and placed her hand over her heart.

"I'm sorry. I heard a noise and thought someone had broken in." he lowered the bat, and walked over closer to her. Michelle was suddenly breath taken at the sight of him. He was shirtless, and the definitions of his muscles were clearly visible. He had hair on his chest,

but it wasn't in excess. It was the perfect amount to be considered arousing. His blue pajama pants resting against his tan skin just accented his appearance even more.

"Michelle, are you alright?" he asked.

He had clearly noticed that she was staring at him, and had even watched her eyes wonder as though she were undressing him with them, but he wouldn't say anything. Michelle suddenly felt embarrassed. She knew that he had noticed her staring, and she could feel the heat in her cheeks begin to rise.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just relieved that it was you is all."

She turned and made her way over to the chair that she had intended to sit in to read. She had placed the book down on the desk and hadn't realized it. She had to sit down. She could feel her legs growing weak due to the presence of the object of her affection.

James walked over and took a seat across from her.

"So what are you doing up this late?" he asked, placing the bat on the ground beside him. "I couldn't sleep, so I thought I would come down and read for a little while. It usually helps."

Michelle immediately thought of how much of a nerd she had portrayed herself to be. She thought that if he had any interest in her at all, it was quickly diminishing. James smiled at her. He couldn't help but notice how beautiful she was. He made a mental note of it every time he saw her. She was an intriguing woman, and very intelligent. She fascinated him, but he would never say that. He learned early on in life that a poor man doesn't make advances to a rich woman. They think that they only want their money and nothing else.

"So is it working?" he asked her.

"What?" Michelle hadn't remembered the comment she had just made about reading makes her sleepy.

"Reading. Is it working its magic?"

Michelle smiled. "I didn't get to try. I bumped into the picture before I even sat down." She could feel her heart begin to race again.

She hated the effect that his presence had on her. It made her feel like a timid little mouse avoiding the hungry cat.

“Am I bothering you?” he asked.

He was trying to make conversation. He wanted to get to know her better, not that he thought it would do much good.

“Oh no. I’m actually glad you’re here. I hate being up at night by myself in this place.”

James gave her a puzzling glance.

“Why? Are you afraid of the boogey man?” he asked attempting to make a joke.

“No, my grandfather.”

It took a moment for Michelle to realize that she had indeed voiced her thought. She knew then that he would think she was crazy, and probably be so afraid of her that he would quit and leave. Indeed, James had heard her response, and wanted her to explain what she meant.

“Isn’t your grandfather dead?” he asked her.

“Yes, I meant that. Oh God, you are going to think I’m a total psychopath.” she stated. She could kick herself for starting this conversation.

“I’ve been seeing things since I came here.” she began.

James nodded. “Like the ghost of your dead grandfather?” he asked.

Michelle smiled for a moment, though she didn’t think it was funny at all.

“I know, you think I’m crazy. Just forget about it. I’m going back to bed.”

Michelle stood and began to leave the room. James reached up and grabbed her arm.

“No wait a minute. You can talk to me.”

Michelle stopped in her tracks, and looked down into his eyes. She could see that he was sincere, and didn’t think she was crazy. In fact, he seemed genuinely concerned and interested in what she had to say.

She turned and reclaimed her seat. She took a deep breath, and held it for a moment. She felt she needed to gather her thoughts, and choose her words carefully.

“Since I first came to the estate, I have had some crazy dreams.”

“What about?”

“A murder. I see him murder a woman, a black woman. I read my mother’s journals, and I believe it is her house maid.”

Michelle paused for a moment to analyze the look on his face. She quickly decided that if he gave her one look that said she was crazy, she would get up and leave. He didn’t.

“So you think that he killed your mom’s maid?”

“I know he did.” she replied.

“How can you be sure?” James asked.

“Because my mother wrote about it.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tom and Valerie were walking down the driveway. It felt nice to escape from all of the insanity that the renovations were causing. They had been busy working, and rarely had any free time. However, when they did, they were finding themselves spending it together.

“Michelle seems really happy.” Tom said in an attempt to begin a conversation.

“Yeah. She sure is. I just hope it doesn’t blow up in her face.” Tom was curious about the comment. He began to wonder if Valerie knew something, he didn’t.

“What do you mean?” he asked her.

Valerie looked up at him. “I don’t know. I think that the Bradshaws are up to something.”

Tom stopped walking. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“I mean that the day you came, a chandelier almost landed on Michelle’s head.”

“What?” Tom couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Did Valerie really believe that David and Caroline were trying to kill Michelle? He sure intended to find out.

“So you think they are trying to hurt her?”, he asked. Valerie paused for a moment.

“No, but I believe they are trying to scam her.”

She definitely had his full attention now, and Valerie knew it. She had been waiting for an opportunity to talk to Tom about her concerns regarding the hired help. She informed him of the conversation that she had over heard the day that they got there. She told him about the comments they made about they had a hard job to do, and they couldn’t

fail at their mission. Tom definitely found the information surprising, and was even more concerned to learn that when Valerie informed Michelle of the conversation, she had brushed it off as nothing. Surely all the money wasn't blinding her judgment. That just didn't seem like his sister. Granted she had always been naive, and wanted to see the good in every one, but that was something that couldn't be overlooked. He was now more grateful than ever that Valerie had come with Michelle to Valdosta. He was also grateful that he had come as well.

They decided that they would watch them closely, and when an opportunity presented its self, they would go snooping through the Bradshaw's room and see what they could find. He knew that he couldn't sit idly by and watch someone rob his sister of her fortune. Granted, she didn't work for it, but she damn sure deserved it. Tom promised Valerie that he would help her, and they both vowed at that very moment to protect Michelle and her estate at all costs. Valerie was pleased to hear it, and thanked him before taking his hand in hers and making their way back to the house.

Tom waited for the perfect opportunity to catch the Bradshaws. Finally, the day came three days later. David and Caroline were going into town to pick up a friend from the bus station. When Tom heard them inform Michelle of their errand, he was delighted. Now he and Valerie could finally prowl around the room and see what evidence they could find. When he saw their car leave the house, Tom went to the studio to find Valerie.

"Hey, now's our chance. Let's go." Valerie didn't have to ask. She knew what Tom meant. She dropped her pencil and architect scale on the desk, and followed him out.

Inside, they didn't see anything out of the ordinary, but they didn't expect to find anything in plain sight to begin with.

"You go through the closet, and I'll go through the dresser. There has to be something here." Valerie stated.

She made her way over, and began searching each drawer one by one. She found the typical items that are kept in a dresser, under

garments, clothing, socks, and a small sandwich bag with a small amount of change tucked away in a corner. As she searched each drawer, she became frustrated. She couldn't find anything to prove they were guilty of trying to run a scam. Valerie closed the last drawer, and walked over to the closet to help Tom.

"Find anything?" she asked.

"Not a damn thing. They probably didn't write out a plan, they're probably master con artists."

"Yeah, well, they won't pull this con off."

Tom and Valerie were disappointed that they couldn't find anything in their room that could convince Michelle to fire them. They contemplated ways of their own that they could get rid of them before they could finish their "mission".

"I have an idea." Valerie said. Judging by the look on her face, Tom concluded it had to be a good one.

"What is it?" he asked. The eagerness was evident in his voice.

"Why don't we plant drugs in their room? We could tell Michelle that she needs to check it because we saw them with straws up their noses." Tom smiled at her, and was near the point of bursting into laughter.

"That's a great idea, but it wouldn't help. Michelle's property would be tied up in legal shit for a while until they could prove she wasn't involved."

Valerie sat down on the edge of her bed. She was clearly stressing over this. Tom walked over and sat down beside her, placing his hand on her knee.

"I'm sorry I had to burst your bubble. It was a good idea though." Valerie looked down at his hand.

"Yeah, I guess we will just have to wait until something comes up that we can use." Tom admired her compassion for his sister, and the devious side of her that he didn't know existed. He had been interested in Valerie for a while, but she was making him even more interested with every moment they spent together. He was enjoying

investigating with her, and had fallen in love with her early on.

“Marry me Valerie.” Her eyes grew wide, and she looked at his face.

“What did you say?” She needed him to confirm that he had indeed just purposed marriage to her.

“Marry me. I love you Valerie. I have for a long time now.” She could see the sincerity in his eyes. He meant it. He really wanted her to marry him. She could feel a number of emotions all merging into one, and overcoming her with such a force that she felt she would lose all control.

“Yes, Tom. Yes, I’ll marry you.” She wrapped her arms around him, and kissed him passionately. She was overwhelmed with joy, and desperately wanted to be close to him, to feel him. She made her sexual, physical invitations, and he caught every signal. Almost as quickly as he had fallen in love with her, they were now making love for the first time together. Valerie didn’t want it to end, so she started it again, and again.

When she woke up from a blissful sleep, she found that she was still in his arms. Valerie smiled at the sight of him. As she watched him sleeping, she thought of how wonderful it would be to wake beside him every morning for the rest of her life. He had purposed marriage to her, and she couldn’t have been happier. She had never imagined that underneath that hard, sophisticated workaholic, a true compassionate man was lurking there. She had begun to see Tom in a new light, and she was pleased with the man that he truly was. He had let his defenses down, and opened himself up to new emotions. Valerie was pleased that he had chosen her to see the real Tom Brown.

She wondered what Michelle would think when she discovered they were engaged. Would she be angry with her for marrying her brother? Perhaps her anger would be directed at Tom for fear that he was trying to steal her best friend. She wasn’t sure what type of reaction to expect from the woman that was her best friend, as well as the sister of her betrothed. Valerie was certain of one thing. They

would be happy together despite the reaction from Michelle. She and Tom would spend the rest of their lives together, and she was pleased at the thought.

Valerie slowly crept out of bed, so she wouldn't wake Tom. She had been so exhausted from all of the lovemaking that they had both skipped dinner. She was feeling the effects of her malnourishment, and decided to go into the kitchen and find something to eat. She exited the bedroom, and began making her way down the hall toward the staircase. She was lost in thought until she heard an eerie creaking noise. She stopped, and turned to look behind her. She expected to see someone there, but she was wrong. There wasn't anyone in the hallway but her. She shrugged her shoulders, and continued forward. Just then, in her peripheral view, she saw the bookshelf coming at her. She threw her arms up over her face and screamed at the top of her lungs as the bookshelf came crashing down on top of her. She now lay underneath a pile of books and wood, knocked out cold by the impact.

Michelle heard the scream coming from the second floor. She had also recognized it as Valerie's scream. She jumped up from her seat in the living room, and ran up the stairs. David and James ran close behind her. When they reached the top of the stairs, they found Tom frantically digging Valerie out of a pile of books.

"Jesus Tom, what happened?" Michelle asked as she fell to her knees to assist him.

"I'm not sure. I was sleeping in Valerie's room, and all of a sudden I heard a scream." Michelle stopped slinging books at this point. She couldn't believe what she had just heard. What was Tom doing in Valerie's room sleeping?

"Tom, why were you in." Tom quickly cut her off. He wasn't concerned with being interrogated by his sister. He was more concerned about Valerie. Michelle began to call Valerie's name as she resumed digging through the pile. David and James had joined the dig at this point.

Finally, much to their relief, they heard a faint moan coming from

the books. Valerie was alive at least. They would be able to see the extent of her injuries once they turned her over. Once the last of the literary collection had been removed, Tom reached down, placed his hands on her shoulders, and shifted her body so that she would be facing him.

“Are you alright?” he asked with tremors evident in his voice. Valerie blinked her eyes for a moment in an attempt to get them to focus. She placed her hand on her head.

“Yes, I’m fine. If I can survive a metal scaffold, this solid oak book shelf is like being hit by a feather.”

They were all relieved to see that not even her sense of humor had been scarred. She was as facetious as ever. Valerie managed to reach a standing position, with assistance from Tom of course. She continued to rub her head for a moment. When she removed her hand, she noticed that she had blood on her fingertips.

“Shit! Tom, my ring cut my head. How does it look?”

That was the moment that Michelle had noticed the diamond engagement ring on Valerie’s left hand.

“Would either one of you care to explain to me why Tom was in that room, and where that ring came from?”

Michelle was a bright woman, and she already knew the answer to her own trivia. She had noticed how close Tom and Valerie had been lately. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that they were getting married. As for what they had been doing together in Valerie’s bedroom, she didn’t really want to hear the answer to that question. She was more than capable of deriving a conclusion, and reaching the accurate sum of four.

Tom and Valerie exchanged a long glare before either of them spoke.

“You see Michelle, Tom and I are, well, we are planning to get married. We had already decided that we would tell you in the morning.”

Michelle wondered if she should inform them that the logic puzzle

had already been solved, and she was in a current state of shock. She decided against it. She really didn't know how to react or what to say for that matter. She was certain of one thing, and that was she had never imagined that her brother would marry her childhood friend.

"I'm going to bed." Michelle dismissed herself, and made her way to her bedroom at the other end of the hall.

Michelle lay in her bed, trying to cope with the fact that Tom and Valerie were getting married. It wasn't the fact that they were engaged that bothered her, it was the fact that she was actually happy for them. She had heard stories about a girl's best friend marrying someone close to her, and they were always furious. Michelle wasn't angry, she couldn't even comprehend why anyone else in her position would be.

She began to think about her reaction. She was sure that both Tom and Valerie thought that she was angry. She made a mental note to discuss the issue with them first thing in the morning. She wanted to tonight, but it was a happy occasion for them, and they needed this time alone together. After coming to a conclusion about what she must do, Michelle suddenly felt the sleepiness return to her body, so she pulled the satin comforter up over her body, closed her eyes, and drifted off into a restless sleep.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

His spirit moves through the house, ever so quietly. His steps are made with an evil gracefulness, accompanied by a slight limp on his right side. He travels the halls of his beloved mansion every night at this late hour. That is when he knows that the occupants of his house are sleeping. He has already been seen, and more than he would have liked to be.

He is a restless one. Charles Vandivere had never mastered the art of relaxation. Of all of the abilities of this ruthless tyrant, sitting still was never one that he possessed. One by one, he examined the rooms of his estate. As he lurked in the darkness, he planned, he plotted, and he laid in stone his desire for revenge.

Tom and Valerie had been most useful. They were suspicious of Caroline and David, and believed that all of the paranormal activity was somehow the work of these con artists. That was perfect. As long as he could remain undetected within the walls of his luxurious estate, his plan could be carried out. Tom and Valerie were his guarantee. As long as the Chamberlins remained the number one suspects, then all would occur according to the plans.

James, the new hired hand. He had not been a pre decided occupant, but his presence, nonetheless proved to be both useful and convenient. He had distracted Michelle's attempts at uncovering the truth about her past. She was so caught up in her lust for this man that she ignored a lot of loud bangs and other odd sounds during the course of the day and the night. James had made all of Charles' efforts worth wile. Deep inside, Charles hoped that the criminal background that James held secret wouldn't compromise his employment. If Michelle

discovered that the man that she fantasized about every night did hard time for an assault charge, she would fire him on the spot. His termination of employment would make things more difficult for Charles to achieve his mission.

Little Michelle, she was the spitting image of her mother. Every time Charles observed her, he thought that she was Claire. He could feel the anger build inside of him, but he could hold back the urge to decapitate her. He couldn't simply kill her. He had to destroy her. He had to first murder all that was good and angelic in her before he could allow her body to fall victim to him. The kindness and purity is what had destroyed his beloved little Claire, and in an act of irony, it would too be the destruction of her bastard daughter.

He approached Caroline and David's room. The rage inside of him made his blood boil. It angered him to see the two of them sleeping in his house. He had wanted them to be there. It was all part of the plan. Yet, he still couldn't fathom the thought of them being under his roof again. He couldn't conceive the fact that they had the audacity to return. They had been traitors of the Vandivere dynasty. They should be ashamed of themselves. What purpose did they have for returning? Did they come to rescue Michelle from her fate? Did they expect her to reward them with his riches, or perhaps even property?

He had needed them there in the beginning. He needed them to meet their fate, along with Michelle. Vandivere estate deserved retribution for all of the wrong that had tainted it because of all of the disobedience that had occurred there. They had to pay, but it would have to be in a different way. He couldn't allow them to spend another night in his house. They had to leave.

His vengeful soul pondered for a moment. What could he do? How could he convince them to leave? How could he scare the living hell out of the people that had betrayed him? Then, an ingenious idea entered his devious mind. He turned and left the room. He made his way down the hallway. He was quick, but silent in his steps. He descended the stairs, and shifted his direction to the closet beneath

them. He entered into the darkness, and closed the door behind him. He shuffled around for a moment, and then located his cane. He pulled the lever, and the door to his hidden rooms opened. He entered, and made his way down the stone staircase.

All would be set right by morning. It had to be. His time in this house was running short. He would have to leave soon, but before he did, vengeance had to be his. Once at the foot of the stone stairway, he made his way over to the cabinet across the room. There, stored inside an old mason jar, was blood.

The typical typing associated with blood is that it is that of an animal of some sort. This blood was not. This blood had been drained from the body of his wife, which still hung on the wall. She had a grave marked in the cemetery, but her body wasn't there. Charles had cleverly stated that she had gone out on the lake for a little while and never returned. After considering all of the forestry that surrounded the lake, investigators concluded that she had drowned, and her body eaten by wild animals. He had drained the harlot's blood from her body, and put it away for safekeeping. Now, he would finally have the opportunity to use it.

With the jar in hand, he made his way back up the room that the Bradshaws were sleeping in. He placed the jar of blood on the vanity. He removed the lid from the jar, and inserted a brush into it. The consistency was thick. Over time, the blood had coagulated inside the jar. He had added a little water to thin the substance. He began painting words on the wall. He wondered for a moment if the aroma of the blood would wake them. He quickly pushed the thought back. He didn't care if they did wake up. He was dead. What would they be able to do to a ghost?

A loud scream echoed through the mansion. One by one, the occupants followed the sound to the source. It was Caroline. Michelle entered the Bradshaw's bedroom. When she opened the door, she saw David sitting on the edge of the bed with his arms embracing Caroline. She was sobbing uncontrollably.

“What is the matter?” Michelle asked with great concern in her voice. David looked at Michelle with anger in his eyes.

“Look at the wall.” he stated.

Michelle did just as she was instructed. She turned and looked at the wall. She was speechless at what she saw. The words, “DIE WHORE DIE” had been painted on the wall. Michelle also noticed the foul odor in the room. She was afraid to ask what it was. Sure enough, David would start searching the room and find a dead animal under the bed.

“Who did this?” Michelle asked.

“I don’t know.” David replied.

Tom and Valerie entered the room.

“Oh! What is that God awful smell?” Valerie exclaimed as she covered her nose in an attempt to shield it from the scent.

“Look at the wall. Someone painted that on the wall.” Just as Valerie and Tom turned to read the words, the sound of David’s voice caught their attention.

“That’s not paint. It’s blood.”

The mouths of the three bystanders dropped open. They couldn’t believe that someone had painted such vulgar words on the wall in blood. Who would do such a thing? Tom and Valerie had their own suspicion. It was obvious that the Bradshaws knew that they were on to them. It was quite palpable to them that they had done this themselves in an attempt to throw them off their trail. It was also quite obvious that they had absolutely no respect for Michelle or her house. Did they have any idea how difficult it would be to remove and cover bloodstains?

“David, take Caroline down stairs, and call the police. We need this to be investigated. As for your duties today, please take the day off. After the police leave, I want you to take Caroline somewhere for the day.”

Michelle was appalled at the injustice that had occurred in her house. This was completely unacceptable. She was determined to get

to the bottom of this, and whom ever was behind this would pay dearly. Money was no object to Michelle, and she would use it to her advantage. She would pay anything that had to be paid in order to bring the perpetrator to justice. She gave one last look at the wall before turning to leave the room.

The police had spent at least an hour investigating what they had ruled an act of vandalism, or at least until they found out that Tom was an attorney. By the time he had finished spouting law to the officers and the investigator, they had a list of charges that could very well put the suspect behind bars for a long time. The threats, and felony burglary was enough by themselves. When you add vandalism and destruction of property to the list, it just makes it better. Tom had pushed for robbery instead of burglary considering there was a threat against a human life, but the investigator prevailed in that area. At least he wasn't completely incompetent.

They took samples of the blood to run tests to determine that it was in fact blood. With all of the new branches of research, they would also be able to tell what type of animal it had come from. They also dusted the room for fingerprints. The room had been thoroughly cleaned the day before, so the fingerprints of the contractors that had renovated the room wouldn't be there.

They interviewed everyone in the house, and took written statements. The investigator went out to one of the patrol cars, and ran a check on all of the occupants of the house. Michelle, Tom, and Valerie didn't have so much as a speeding ticket. He became very interested in the other three. James had a criminal record. He had assaulted a man about five years ago after breaking into his home. He had beaten the man so severely that he lost all use of his right side due to nerve damage. He was currently on parole for those charges. The Bradshaws didn't exist. Their licenses were false, as were their social security numbers. Well, their social security numbers were real, but the names were fake. They were actually Alexander and Claire Chamberlin from South Carolina.

Michelle and Caroline were sitting in the study. Caroline was still a little shaken up by the ordeal, but she had for the most part been able to calm herself. Michelle couldn't imagine how she must be feeling at that moment. She knew that it couldn't be a good feeling at all to know that someone wants you dead.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in." Michelle instructed.

As the door opened, Tom, David, and James entered the study. Michelle noticed that the investigator was behind them.

"I'm sorry detective, I thought you had gone?" Michelle stated.

She could tell by the look on his face that he wasn't pleased with the reason that he had returned.

"Ms. Vandivere?" he stated.

"Yes?" Michelle replied.

The detective didn't respond immediately. He looked as though he was trying to find the right way to say whatever it was that he intended to say.

"Not you ma'am, I mean her." he stated as he pointed toward Caroline.

Caroline sat there paralyzed. She couldn't move, couldn't speak. Judging by the look on David's face, he had the same reaction. Michelle's reaction was a cold silence. "I'm sorry detective, you must be mistaken."

He looked at Michelle. "no ma'am, I'm afraid not.", he stated.

He didn't know how to tell her that he believed that her biological mother wanted to swindle her out of everything she had.

"No detective, you are mistaken. My mother's last name isn't Vandivere. It is Chamberlin."

Sheer and utter shock hit the detective like a ton of bricks. She knew that the woman was her mother. One question still puzzled him. Why had everyone kept referring to Claire and Alexander Chamberlin as David and Caroline Bradshaw? That question is one that he asked them all. Michelle offered him an explanation that was satisfactory to

him. She informed him that she knew that her brother would be angry with her for allowing her parents to be a part of her life after they had abandoned her at birth. So she printed them fake identification. She had said that she scanned their social security cards, and simply changed the names on them.

The detective was reluctant to believe her story at first. It honestly sounded like something you would see in a government conspiracy movie, but what could he do? She had explained the fake identifications, and everyone had validated her claim. He could have charged her with fraud, but why would he go through the trouble of trying to prosecute a Vandivere for a felony charge? He knew that it would be futile to even attempt the action. So, he decided to over look the issue, and bid them all farewell as he left the Vandivere estate.

After the detective departed, Michelle went back into the study. Someone had some serious explaining to do. She now knew that her parents were indeed alive and well. What she didn't know was why they were there. She didn't know what they hoped to gain from their presence, but she damn well intended to find out.

“So, what do you want?”, she asked them as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“Before you answer, keep in mind that you better hope it is a good one.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Michelle listened attentively as her mother and father explained the reason behind their appearance. They told her the whole terrifying story about why they had to give her up. They told her about Charles Vandivere's multiple threats against their lives as well as her own. They told her that they were concerned for her safety and well being. Neither of them believed that Charles Vandivere had wanted to give her all of his riches simply out of a sudden change of heart. That was not the man they knew.

It seemed like hours had passed since the conversation began, and it didn't appear that it was going to end any time soon. Valerie and Tom wanted to stay for the discussion, but Michelle forbid it. She told them that this was something that she had to handle on her own. She did however, assure them that if she needed them, she would call for them. Frankly, they couldn't take very much comfort in that, but they would have to settle for what little alleviation she offered them.

"I can't believe it. Her parents are here, in this house with her. What do you think they want Tom?"

Valerie was concerned about Michelle. She couldn't help but to be. Her mother was supposed to be dead, and her father gone. Now they both sat alive in the study, with her best friend.

"I swear, if they hurt her, I'll make sure those bastards live to regret it."

Tom sat silently on the edge of his bed. He was trying to find a way to tell his fiancée that he recognized both of them as soon as he saw them. He also wasn't sure how he would tell her that he knew why they were here all along. He was sure that she would find it deceptive

in some manner. He also knew that if they were to be married, that he would have to be honest with her, no matter the outcome.

“Valerie, I know why they are here. I know them. They are worried about her.”

Valerie couldn't believe what he was telling her. He actually knew that they were her parents, and he didn't tell her. Why would he do that? Michelle was like a sister to her, and if she were in any kind of danger, then she would help keep her safe, not endanger her more.

She felt betrayed that they felt they couldn't trust her. She could understand Claire and Alexander's concern, but Tom knew her. He had known her his whole life. He should have known that he could have told her the truth, and she would have been happy to help in any way that she could. She felt all of her feelings for him turn from love and desire into distrust and anger. How could she marry him now, knowing that when things get rough, he will keep secrets and lie to her? She couldn't. All of her dreams of being his wife, and the two of them growing old together were quickly dissipating. She knew then what she had to do.

“Tom, I'm going home. I need to check on my Design firm, and I need to figure out what to do with this.”

He looked up at her with glossy eyes. His biggest fear was manifesting itself, and he was powerless to stop it. She was going to leave him. She was going home to Adairsville, and his plans were going with her. His life was going with her. He wanted desperately to stop her, but he knew her well enough to know that it would only make matters worse. He made sure she didn't see the tears forming in his eyes when she removed the ring from her finger, and placed it on one of the pillows on his bed. As he looked at the diamond that served as a symbol of his eternal love, he wondered if the rightful owner of that symbol would ever return.

Tears fell from her eyes as she packed her things. She had pictured a life full of happiness and joy, and her life with him. She had thought she would grow old with him. She finally thought she would get to be

an official member of the family that she had loved for so long. Michelle was like a sister to her, and her parents were like Valerie's parents too.

When Tom had proposed to her, she began to think that her life couldn't get any better. She was wrong. He had been a part of this conspiracy, and he hadn't trusted her enough to ease her thoughts, and let her know that Michelle was safe. He hadn't had enough faith in her to tell her that the people that she thought were out to hurt Michelle were indeed her biological parents and there to protect her. She had been betrayed, and her heart was slowly breaking because of it.

Michelle sat at her desk in the study. She tried desperately to process all of the information that Claire and Alexander had given her. She learned that after they left her with the Brown Family, they had left the state and made a life for themselves in South Carolina. Alexander went to work for a landscaping company that specialized in luxury gardens. That would explain why he handled the renovation of the Vandivere Gardens on the estate so well. He had been employed in that field for twenty-six years.

He had worked his way up the corporate ladder at his company, all the way up to a field manager. He was supervisor over the crews, and didn't have to work on the job sight itself unless he really wanted to. Of course, Alexander wasn't like Charles Vandivere. He wasn't the type to recline in the shade sipping lemonade while his employees worked their fingers to the bone. Alexander Chamberlin gave true meaning to the term, "Equal opportunity Employer".

Claire, had used her sewing talents to get a job at a bridal shop in Columbus. She started out as a seamstress, and eventually worked her way up as well. Claire became head of the alterations department. She had wanted to design her own product line, but knew that it would be too risky of a venture. So, she settled for adding her own unique, yet intricate touches to the gowns in the shop.

Eventually her ambition, the one attribute that she did inherit from her callous father, prevailed and she opened her own bridal shop. She

would order bland dresses with literally no design to them, using sequins and glass beading to make them shine. The first year had been a struggle, but she succeeded in her business venture.

After three or four years of untainted happiness, and absolutely no sign of Charles Vandivere, they decided that they were finally safe. They bought a house in Columbus, and soon after that Claire was pregnant again. She gave birth to three more children. Two were twin boys that she named Michael and Alexander. The third and the baby of the trio was another son by the name of Isaac.

Michael and Alex were twenty-three. They were fraternal twins, so Claire and Alexander had always been able to tell them apart. Michael ended up with his father's dark hair and emerald eyes. Alex took more after his mother with blonde hair and blue eyes. Both of the boys had graduated high school. Michael was engaged to be married in three months, and attending community college back in South Carolina. Alex was more of a free spirit, and had gotten a job with a contracting company straight out of high school. They traveled across the country, building shopping malls and other business buildings.

Isaac was twenty-one, and a police officer for Columbus Police Department. He too inherited his mother's looks. He was also a very practical young man like his father, as well as a perfectionist. The most interesting fact that Michelle had learned about Isaac was the fact that he was currently in Valdosta. He had come to visit Claire and Alexander for his vacation time.

They also informed Michelle that they had planned to tell her who they really were while Isaac was here. All three of her brothers had been told about her, and Isaac insisted on meeting his sister. They had told him how dangerous it was in Valdosta for all of them, but he had insisted upon visiting regardless. He had said that his presence would be beneficial to their mission.

Valerie had loaded all of her belongings into her car. She entered the driver's side, and started her engine. She shifted into drive, just as she saw Michelle running out of the front door. Valerie hesitated for

a moment, contemplating the idea of listening to what she had to say, but then decided against it. She knew that Michelle would try to get her to stay, and she couldn't. She needed the comforts of Adairsville, and the space between her and Tom. She forced back the tears, and released her foot from the brake.

Michelle watched as her best friend made her way down the driveway. She ran after the car, yelling for her to stop. Valerie kept driving. Michelle realized that it was pointless to continue her pursuit. She stopped running, and stood there watching as the rear end of Valerie's car faded down the long dirt driveway. She could feel the ache in her soul take control of her tear ducts as they began to produce the salty liquid. She turned back, and made her way to the porch.

Tom walked out onto the porch with Michelle.

"I'm sorry Shelly. I tried to stop her, but I couldn't."

It was evident by the sound of his voice that he was choking on the pain in his heart. Michelle suddenly became more concerned for her brother than for herself.

"Are you alright?", she asked compassionately.

Tom looked up at her. He wanted to tell her that he felt as though his soul had left his body, and that he was dying inside. He knew however, that the day had been a stressful one for her, and he didn't want to put anymore on her. So he lied when he informed his sister that he was fine.

The tears continued to flow from her eyes as Valerie drove toward the end of the driveway. Her eyes were so consumed by tears that she could barely see the road. She didn't even stop to look both ways before turning left out of the driveway and away from Vandivere Estate. She continued down the road, trying to stop the flow of tears. She closed her eyes briefly to push them back. When she opened them, she saw a man standing in the road in front of her car. She panicked and swerved to miss him. As she swerved, she lost control of the car, and it began to slide on the dirt road. She fought frantically with the steering wheel in an attempt to regain control of the car. The

attempt failed. She saw a pickup truck coming at her head on. She swerved again, and began sliding once again, head on into a tree. The last thing she saw was the speedometer, which registered sixty-five miles per hour.

The sound of the crash, and small explosion sent chills through Michelle and Tom. “Valerie!”, Michelle screamed as she took off running down the driveway toward the crash. Tom took off running behind her. With every swift step that Michelle took, the horror inside her grew. She had to get to her. She pushed herself to go faster. When she felt her legs grow tired, she pushed them even harder.

The flashes in her mind were terrifying. She didn’t know what kind of state she would find Valerie in, but she knew that it wouldn’t be good. As she shortened the distance between herself and the car, she could see that the car had caught fire. She ran faster. As she turned the corner, she saw a man standing there, fighting to get the door open. She stopped for a moment, and thanked God that there was someone close to the accident trying to help.

Alexander’s green Chevrolet pulled up beside of her. She quickly jumped onto the bed of the truck. She turned to find Tom there beside her with clenched fists and tear filled eyes. The truck slid to a stop, and Michelle and Tom jumped off the back. They raced over toward the car. Just as they were about to reach the car, they saw the door open, and the man pulled Valerie from the wreckage.

Michelle stopped running, and smiled. A sigh of relief escaped her exhausted body. Her smile quickly diminished as she watched the car explode again, but this time into a blazing inferno. Valerie and the man that had rescued her were thrown back and the car door that he had fought so hard to open impaled them. Michelle felt her heart sink, but it broke when she heard Claire scream a familiar name.

“Isaac!”

Now her best friend and her biological brother lay there unconscious.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

He sat in his bentwood rocking chair laughing. He was so proud of himself. He had caused that nosy bitch to hit a tree head on and kill herself.

“People are so weak, so sympathetic. She was too kind hearted to plow an old man down in the road with her car.” She had been more concerned with his safety than her own. “She was such a damned fool.”

“You see, I tried to tell you long ago that no good can come from being good.”, he said before turning up his scotch glass and consuming its contents in one drink.

He reached for the bottle that rested on the table beside of him. He removed the cap, and refilled his glass.

“I told you that I’d get that little bitch. She tried to fuck with my plan.”

He took another drink, and looked at her.

“Perhaps you should have told them my dear, that no one crosses me. You learned that lesson the hard way, just like she did.”

He glared at her. The remains of his wife, and the mother of his children. He had made sure that he would keep her forever. The night that she tried to leave him, was the night that she met her fate. He had made sure they wouldn’t find her body. He kept her. He kept her in a glass coffin in his basement. It was so easy. She had tried to escape him, and he didn’t allow it.

“You were so concerned for that harlot of a granddaughter of yours. She is just like you, a slut.”

He stood up from his seat, and placed his glass on the table.

“Do you see how she lusts for that good for nothing criminal she has working here? It’s pathetic. She is pathetic. She can’t get a real man?”

He ran his fingers through his gray hair. He wondered why no one in his family could get their life right. He wondered why Claire had to be a whore. He wondered why Michelle had to be the product of wedlock. She ruined everything.

Claire was supposed to be the heir to the Vandivere fortune. She was supposed to marry Alexander Chamberlin, and let his money merge with theirs. She was supposed to build the Vandivere Empire into a stature greater than royalty, but she ruined it. She ruined the name, the reputation, and the prospect of more riches than he could have ever dreamed of spending.

The thought of his diminished fortune, and missed opportunities angered him. He decided that he would have no more missed opportunities. The house was empty. Everyone there had gone to the hospital to be with Valerie and Isaac.

He cast an evil grin at the thought of Isaac. He turned back to the skeletal remains of his wife.

“You know, that boy was a bonus. I got two with one hit.”

His sinister grin became a sinister smile, which transformed into an ominous laughter that could make the devil shit himself.

“You know my dear, I have gotten too good at this. Revenge should be my profession.”

He walked the halls of his home. During the stroll up and down the hallway, he pondered his next move. What could he do? He needed a new torture. He believed that he was close to pushing Michelle to her breaking point. He had already killed her best friend, taken her parents away, and murdered her brother that she had never known. She had to be close to breaking.

Then, he realized what he should do. He turned back, and descended the stairs behind his hidden doorway. He made his way through the corridors that ran beneath the house. He had a multitude

of passageways that led to different locations throughout the estate. It was a literal labyrinth of cold, stone corridors, but he knew exactly which one to take. He reached a location where the corridors split into three directions. He turned to his right, and proceeded toward his destination.

His plan was brilliant. It was cunning and ingenious. It would destroy her finally. He would take away the one thing that her adoptive parents gave her, the one thing she had that she held so dear to her. He would take away her diner. He would destroy the only thing that she knew remained of her beloved parents. He realized that the diner wasn't all that was left. She still had the house as well. That was it. He would destroy her business and her home. It was perfect. It was evil. It was the right thing for him to do.

He reached the end of the dark tunnel, and ascended the stone stairs. He retrieved a key from his pocket, and unlocked the pad lock on the door. He was careful to close the door behind him, and to secure the lock as well. He made his way over to a wooded area where he hid his car. He reached into his pocket and retrieved a remote. He pushed the lift button. He heard the sound of the motor to the door as it lifted to reveal his Camaro. He entered his car, placed the key in the ignition, and pulled out of the garage.

He drove away from the Vandivere Estate toward that rough end of Valdosta. It was the end of town that harbored gang members, drug dealers, and hardened criminals. This was the sanctuary for those types of people. They resided in old abandoned warehouses, run down churches, and dilapidated houses that had been condemned by the county.

He traveled down Mission Street, and took a left onto Sunbelt Drive. That would lead him to Raven's Point. Raven's Point was a dead end street that led to an old abandoned factory. He knew it well. He owned it. He had made a deal with a local gang that they could occupy the building in exchange for doing his dirty work. He had called on them before for a kidnapping job. They had performed their job with

the greatest care and artistry. They were smart, and they knew how to make something or someone disappear without any clues as to where or why. He knew that they could pull this job off with the same outcome.

As he approached the gate to the factory, he wasn't surprised to find Emilio there standing guard. He was your typical gangster with baggy jeans, a solid T-shirt, a green bandanna tied around his head, and gold chains dangling from his neck. Charles stopped the car outside of the gate. Emilio approached the driver's side of the car. It was obvious by the position of his hand that it was resting on the handle of a handgun.

"Mr. Vandivere, good to see you sir. What can we do for you?"

"I need to see Gauge. Is he here?"

Emilio removed his hand from the gun.

"Yeah, he's here sir. Drive on in."

Emilio walked in front of the car, opened the gate, and stepped aside.

Charles pulled in front of the factory, and turned off his Camaro. He exited the vehicle and made his way toward the door. There were two members of the twelve-gauge gang standing guard at the entrance. When they saw Charles approaching them, they stepped aside to allow him entry into the factory.

"Charlie, how's it goin' brother?"

Charles turned to see the leader of the twelve-gauge gang approaching him.

"I thought I told you not to use that ignorant terminology when you speak to me."

"Sorry sir. I forget. So what brings you here?"

Charles walked over to a chair, and took a seat.

"What else? I need you to do a job for me?"

Gauge sat down across from him, and slid back in his seat like a rap artist preparing to discuss his contract renewal.

"You got it. So what do you need?"

Charles relaxed himself in his chair.

“I’m sending you and a few of your boys to Adairsville again.”, he stated.

“Another kidnapping and cover up?”, Gauge asked.

“No. this time, I want you to cause some damage. I want two buildings burned to the ground, and I want it to be an arson that no one will ever forget.”

Gauge liked the sound of that. The wheels in his head had already begun to turn, contemplating a way to achieve ultimate destruction. He liked it when Charles gave him a job where he could cause some damage. Then, an idea hit him like a brick wall.

“How would you like them to explode?” It was obvious that he had the complete attention of his employer.

“I’m listening.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Tom sat beside his Valerie holding her hand for dear life. The surgery had taken about eight hours to perform. The doctor had said that she had fractured her skull when she hit her forehead on the steering wheel. For some reason, the air bags in her 2002 Nissan didn't deploy on impact. This also resulted in her breaking four ribs, a cracked sternum, and a bilateral femoral fracture. She had also suffered a broken nose, and second degree burns over sixty percent of her body.

Now, Tom sat by her side praying for a miracle. She was in a coma, and the doctor had told him that the chances of her waking up were slim to none. Tom had called her parents in Adairsville to inform them of her accident. They were on their way, but an accident on interstate 75 had them held up.

Isaac also received multiple life threatening injuries that had him in nearly the same condition. When the car door blew off the car, a piece of glass from the window cut into his neck, penetrating his jugular just enough that he nearly bled to death, but not enough to actually kill him. The blow to the head that he took when he hit the ground was the worst. He too had surgery to repair his fractured skull. Claire and Alexander didn't leave his side.

Tom imagined it must be difficult for them to see their son in that condition. His heart went out to them. He remembered how they used to play with him when he was a child. They were kind and loving. Most adults make the kids leave the room when other adults are visiting, but Alexander had always insisted that Jacob and Shelia allow him to visit as well. He remembered Alexander telling

him that he enjoyed playing with him because he got the chance to be a kid again.

Michelle had been hysterical. She was distraught over the accident, and the fact that the doctors were saying that neither Valerie nor Isaac may wake up from this. They had said that their next forty-eight hours were critical, and for them not to get their hopes up. Tom finally convinced Michelle to allow James to take her home.

Michelle now sat alone in the study at the mansion. She was trying her best to understand why all of the horrible things that had been happening had to happen in the first place. Her mother and father had informed her that they believed that she was in danger. After everything that had occurred since her arrival eight months ago, it made sense.

She realized now that she wasn't crazy. She couldn't see why she wasn't, with ghosts and falling bookshelves, she should be. She began toying with the idea of leaving the estate to rot. She had once wanted to make it a home, and make it beautiful like it used to be. She wanted to honor her families by doing something with her estate and her money. She didn't care about it anymore. All she cared about was reinstating some level of normalcy to her life. She longed for the sweet sensation of contentment. She craved safety and security.

Life wasn't fair. She had lost her adoptive parents in a horrible death. She had nearly lost her diner that her father had spent so much time and money in for her. She had her relationship with her brother compromised. Then, she inherits all of the money that she uses to improve not only her life, but also the lives of the people around her. She discovered that her biological parents were right there with her for eight months, and the reason they had come was to protect her. She learns that she has three brothers that she never knew, only to have one of them busy, another traveling, and the third in the hospital fighting for his life because he tried to save the life of her best friend that also might die.

Michelle arose from her chair, and made her way over to the mini

bar that was set up in the study. Her grandfather had kept it there so that he could relax after a hard day of work. Now she planned to utilize its services in an attempt to force the painful thoughts from her mind. She wasn't the type to resort to the use of alcohol to solve her problems, and that wasn't her intention now. She only wanted to forget about them for a little while. She retrieved a shot glass from the shelf, and selected a bottle of Autumn Sky coconut rum. She removed the cap, and filled the glass to the rim.

"Alright my friend, don't fail me now.", she stated before turning up the glass and consuming its contents. The clear liquid burned her throat as it traveled down into her digestive system. She loved the burn. The burn meant relief from her problems for a while. She refilled and emptied the glass three more times before placing it on the bar beside the bottle of rum.

Michelle looked down at the glass and the bottle. She couldn't believe that all of the stress she had endured had pushed her to this. She looked up at her reflection in the mirror, which hung on the wall above the bar.

"Who are you?", she asked aloud.

Michelle no longer recognized her own reflection. She didn't recognize herself. She had become someone else. She had become someone that she didn't recognize. She had become someone that she didn't like very much.

James sat on a bench in the center of the garden. He removed a cigarette from his pack, lit it, and inhaled deeply. He needed every ounce of nicotine that he could consume. Things had been hard at the Vandivere Estate for a while now. Granted, he wasn't dealing with all of the pain and suffering that Michelle was dealing with. His problem was different.

He cared for Michelle. In fact, he loved Michelle. He hadn't wanted to admit the fact, but he couldn't deny the truth any longer. He took another draw of his cigarette. He had wanted to tell her how he felt so many times, but he was afraid. He was afraid that she wouldn't

believe him. He was afraid that she would think that he only wanted her money. She wouldn't believe that the only thing he wanted from her was her.

He also was afraid of the Estate. He had only been there six months, but during that time, he had come to learn that secrets don't stay secrets there. He had nearly had his secret exposed earlier that day. If it hadn't been for the secret about Caroline and David coming out, the detective would have probably told Michelle about his past.

He had to tell her. He had to tell her everything. Michelle was a practical woman with kindness and compassion for people in general. She was very understanding when the secret came out about her parents. He had thought for sure that she would have told them to go to hell, and kick them out of the house, but she didn't. The same had to be true for him as well. He had made up his mind. He would go and tell Michelle the truth, and he would do it right then before he lost his nerve.

Michelle was reclining on the sofa in the study. The four shots of rum were finally working, and she was thankful for it. Her mind was no longer focused on ghosts, secrets, or death. Instead, it had settled on James. She closed her eyes, and pictured him working in the garden on a hot summer day. She could see him there with his tan skin glowing in the sunlight from the sweat that cooled his shirtless back. She watched as every muscle flexed in his arms as he spread mulch around the rose bushes. She could hear his voice saying her name.

"Michelle, are you awake?"

She opened her eyes to find that he was leaned over her. His face was so close that she could almost feel his lips on her. His breath sent chills down her arms.

"Yeah, I'm awake.", she said as she sat up on the sofa.

"I was just resting my eyes. I had a little headache so I was trying to ease it a little." Truth be told, she had fallen asleep.

Michelle rubbed her eyes, attempting to focus as she repositioned herself.

“So, did you need something James,” she asked.

James searched deep inside of his soul for the courage that he had possessed only minutes before. As soon as he entered the study and saw her lying on the sofa, his courage went into retreat.

“I wanted to talk to you about something Michelle.”

Those were the only words that he could force from his lips. He could feel his knees begin to tremble. He quickly took a seat in one of the Queen Anne chairs to avoid falling on his face.

“Okay. So what did you want to talk to me about?”, she asked.

He had peaked her interest. Considering her interest in him was more than professional, it hadn’t been difficult for him to do so.

“Well, I’ve wanted to talk to you for a while now. I just didn’t know how to approach you with the subject.”

His words trailed off once again. He had faith in her and her compassionate heart. He just wasn’t sure if she could find it in her heart to love him, or forgive him for his lie by omission. Still, he knew that he had to try. He didn’t want to be an old man lying on his deathbed one day asking himself what would have happened if he would have said something.

“You see Michelle, I have been thinking about you a lot for a while now and I know that you’re not seeing anyone.”

Michelle’s face lit up. Could this really be happening? After months of pain and heartache plaguing the people within the walls of the Vandivere estate, could something good finally be happening for her? She wanted to blurt out her feelings for him, but she decided to allow him to finish.

“Yes, go on.” she stated.

This was it. This was his moment of truth. She could obviously tell where this was going, and she hadn’t cut him off.

“I’m in love with you Michelle. I have been for a while now, but I was afraid.”

He had finally done it. He had told her how he felt about her. His heart began to race as he watched her stand up, and walk over to him.

She knelt down in front of him, and looked deep into his eyes. His heart suddenly stopped when he gazed into those beautiful emerald eyes that had captivated him long ago.

“What were you so afraid of James?”, she asked as she took his hands in hers.

“I was afraid that you would think that I just wanted your money. I’m a poor man Michelle. I have nothing in this world to offer you except a promise that I will love you unconditionally, and do everything in my power to make you happy.”

Michelle leaned toward him and kissed him passionately. She had waited what had felt like a lifetime for this moment and it was finally here. He indulged in her kiss. He wrapped his arms around her like he had been aching to do for so long. He rose to his feet, never once loosening his hold on her. He finally had her in his arms, and he didn’t want to let go.

Their first kiss seemed to last for ever. At that moment when her lips touched his, she felt as though the world stood still for a moment to change course, and revolve around them. She embraced him with all of her strength, afraid to let him go. She could feel a fire ignite inside of her, one that she had never felt before. When he moved his hands up and inside of her tank top, she didn’t flinch. She didn’t pull away. She didn’t want to. If he wanted to make love to her to seal their love, then she was willing to go that far.

With each stroke of his hands across her breasts, she could feel the desire she had for him grow. She pulled away from him, ending the kiss that had seemed like an eternity of bliss. She gazed into his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” he asked her.

He grew scared when she pulled away from him.

“Nothing is wrong. Everything is finally right,” she said before leaning in for another kiss. This one seemed more passionate than the first, and the passion seemed to intensify with each passing moment. He could feel his arousal from her taking over. She made him ache

for a satisfaction that can only be achieved through the most passionate act that can be performed.

He didn't want to rush her, but he wanted her. He pulled away, and whispered in her ear, "I want you."

"I want you too," she replied.

He had received his conformation. Nothing was going to stop him from making love to her now. He knew now that she wanted to be as close to him as she could and he longed to be with her. He picked her up and carried her to the nearest bedroom.

She felt safe and secure in his arms. Now, he was about to shelter her in the closest embrace that they could share. She was ready. She had fantasized about this moment for so long, and she wasn't going to pass it up. Her body trembled as he lay her down on the bed. He positioned his body on top of hers. He lay there for a moment, and looked deep into her eyes.

"Tell me you love me?" he requested.

She looked up at him and smiled.

"I love you James," she proclaimed.

He leaned in and kissed her. His hands traveled once again inside her shirt, and he began caressing her gently. The sensation that came over her was intense. She had never felt any touch that had ever felt so invigorating. She wrapped her arms around him, and removed his shirt from his body. She was finally able to touch the skin that had given her so many erotic dreams.

Her body trembled more as each article of her clothing was removed. Now, she lay there completely exposed to him, and he was in awe at the sight. He lifted his body just enough that his eyes could travel every inch of her.

"You are so beautiful," he said before placing his mouth on her breast. The sensation she felt from his touch felt like electricity running through her body. With each touch, he made her want him more.

She trembled as he moved down her body, lightly kissing every inch of her. When he reached her navel, his kisses became a caress of the

tongue. She felt as though she would reach climax the moment he placed his mouth between her legs, and began massaging her. With every pleasurable moan that escaped her lips, his pressure intensified until he could feel the tremble of her body that said to him his job was done.

Michelle had never known that this is what she had missed all those years. However, she didn't regret that decision. She was pleased that her first time had been with him. Her body still trembled as he rested on top of her. He leaned in and kissed her intensely, as he separated her legs and entered her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Gauge and the other members of his street gang arrived in Adairsville at 2:00 a.m. he had brought four with him to ensure the job would be done right. After careful planning, he had constructed a plan that was pure genius. First, they would turn off the gas to the lounge from the outside. Then they would disconnect the alarm system from the power source. Gauge was an expert at that. Before he joined the gang, his father worked for a security company. So he could disarm and disconnect any system without setting the alarm off, or alerting the monitoring company about a defect.

Next, he would enter the lounge. After they entered, they would turn on lights in random areas, then break them so that electricity would be going through the wires. Then, one by one, they went through the lounge turning on the grills and ovens, after blowing out the pilot lights. Once all of that was complete, Gauge and the other members exited the building. Once outside, they turned off the power to the building. Then, they turned the gas on. They waited ten minutes, and then turned the power back on as well. When they did this, electricity surged through the wiring to the broken lights that were in the on position. With the gas running for ten minutes, flames consumed the building when the broken lights sparked.

As soon as the power switch at the meter was turned on, the building exploded. Gauge was proud of himself. He had performed one of the tasks he was hired to do, and gotten rid of a snitch in the process. That poor fool was the one in charge of throwing the switch. Too bad, it was so close to the building. It was the perfect cover up. The suspect that committed the arson would be found lying beside the

building dead, because the poor fool didn't think his plan through, or at least that is the way that it would appear to the police and fire department.

The next stop was the Brown home. That one would be easy. On the way to Adairsville, the gangsters stopped at a liquor store, and bought the biggest bottle of bourbon that they could find. Once they arrived at the house, Gauge quickly constructed a simple bomb using the bottle of bourbon and a gold bandanna, (which was the color of their rival gang in Valdosta, the gold bullet mafia.) he replaced the cap as secure as he could possibly get it. He retrieved the lighter from his pocket. He struck the lighter, and lit the bandanna. He pulled his arm back as if he were a quarterback in a football game attempting to throw a hail Mary. He released the bottle, and it landed on top of the house. It didn't take long for the roof to become a blazing inferno.

This was the best way to take care of the house. Gauge knew that if you pour an accelerant on the structure, and light it, it leaves traces of the accelerant that had been used. By using a bottle of bourbon and throwing it on the roof, the roof would be completely burned to ashes. Therefore, there would be nothing for an arson investigator to find a pour trace. It was clever, and it worked.

Gauge had thought his plan through thoroughly. He had parked his SUV at a truck stop thirty miles away. He then hijacked a car that he and the other gangsters used to drive to Adairsville. They would abandon the car in the field near the truck stop, but not close enough that it could be linked to him. The purpose of the carjacking was to cover for them if anyone had happened to be awake and see them.

His job was complete. He called Charles's phone and left him a message, stating that the job had been done. He then made his way back to his SUV, after abandoning the stolen car just as he had planned. He smiled as he walked away because he knew that the police had a surprise waiting in the trunk. It was the body of the owner. Gauge lived by one rule in his illegal business, leave no witnesses.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Mr. and Mrs. Miller arrived at Valdosta Medical Center in the middle of the night. The delay that they had experienced on the way there had been a frustrating one. Their daughter's life was hanging on by a thread, and that fact hadn't made the delay any easier to bare.

The phone call that Debbie Miller received while sitting in traffic in interstate 75 had been a disturbing one. Joyce Jolly had called to let her know that Adairsville was covered in fire and police rescue squads. Debbie had been appalled that Joyce would even call her with any concerns about Adairsville with Valerie in the hospital. She had contemplated the idea of scolding her for the thoughtless act until she informed her of the reason why.

Joyce thought that Debbie and Alvin should inform Tom and Michelle that their childhood home had burned to the ground.

"That's awful. They will be devastated.", Debbie replied with genuine concern in her voice.

"That isn't the worst of it Debbie.", Joyce stated.

Debbie was puzzled. How could things be any worse than that for the Brown children? Debbie Miller was afraid to ask, but she knew that she couldn't resist the temptation.

"What else happened Joyce?", she asked.

There was a long, uneasy pause on the line before Joyce finally answered.

"Michelle's Lounge exploded about an hour before that."

Debbie Miller had nearly dropped her cell phone when she heard the news. First Valerie is nearly killed in a head on collision

with a tree, and now the diner had exploded just before the Brown home went up in flames. Debbie knew that Michelle and Tom were concerned for Valerie, but now they had problems of their own.

“I’ll be sure to tell Tom when I get to the hospital. Thank you for calling to let me know.”

Debbie and Alvin Miller found Tom exactly where they had predicted, at the hospital by their daughter’s side. He had fallen asleep beside her with her hand resting in his. They looked so peaceful that Debbie hadn’t wanted to disturb them. Taking the news that she had to share with Tom into consideration, it made the procrastination easier for her.

“Tom? Honey it’s Debbie. Wake up sweetheart.”

Tom used every ounce of energy he had to open his eyes. When he realized that he had been sleeping, he jumped up out of the chair.

“Valerie? Is she okay?”

He looked around the room, and then back down at her bed. There she lay, still hooked up to machines and wrapped in gauze. Tom reached up and removed the sleep from his eyes.

“Debbie, Alvin. I’m sorry if I startled you. I can’t believe I fell asleep.”

Tom felt ashamed. He hadn’t wanted to face her parents. He didn’t want them to blame him for what had happened to their daughter. He wasn’t sure how he could expect such leniency. He blamed himself. He had proposed marriage to her, and had failed to protect her. For a moment he thought that her decision to go back home had been a good one for her to make.

“It’s alright Tom. I know that you aren’t super human. Anyone would get tired after sitting up with someone that they loved as long as you have.”

Tom tried to find comfort in the words of his ex future in-laws, but he couldn’t. He felt like a failure, and he wasn’t sure how to overcome those feelings.

“I shouldn’t be sleeping.”, he said before looking back down at

Valerie, then taking her hand in his again. “What if she opens her eyes for one second, and I miss it? It could be the last time that I could see those eyes.”

Tom could feel the tears attempt to form in his eyes. He didn’t want to admit that he could very well lose her and any hopes he had ever had of a future with her. Her injuries were too severe. After all, he was an attorney. He has to deal with the facts. Hope isn’t a foundation for a case in law, or in life for that matter. It is facts, and realistic thoughts. Still, he refused to give up hope that she would wake up from her coma. He also refused to give up hope that she would realize that he did love her, he did trust her, and he did need her.

“We have to have faith Tom. God hears our prayers.”, Debbie said.

“Does he?”, Tom asked.

His faith had been tested as she drove out of the driveway. He had to admit that it had cracked when the car plowed into the tree with Valerie inside.

“He does hear them. It’s his decision as to what he will do with them. He knows best.” after listening to the heart broken words of her daughter’s fiancée, she didn’t know how to tell him about his parent’s house, or the diner for that matter. He was so wounded due to Valerie’s accident that he obviously couldn’t handle any more bad news at that moment. He was dealing with enough pain over Valerie.

Debbie turned and looked at Alvin. He met her gaze, then nodded as if he had read her thoughts. They had been married for twenty-eight years now, so the possibility of marital telepathy wouldn’t have been that far fetched.

“Tom, what happened? What caused Valerie to wreck her car today?”, she asked.

She had decided that it would be best to get the necessary information regarding the accident covered, before unleashing another heartache on him. Tom of course could have gone the rest of the night without hearing that question. How could he explain to the

Miller's where Valerie was going today, and why she was going there? Better yet, how would he make them believe the story line of this real life soap opera that had so viciously sucked them in?

Tom inhaled deeply as he tried to find the words to say. Finally, he realized that the procrastination was futile.

"Debbie, Alvin, Valerie left the house today to come home. She was coming back to Adairsville for a while."

Tom decided it would be best to stop for a moment and allow the first bit of information process with them before continuing the story.

"So she was coming home to visit us?", Debbie asked.

"No. She was coming home because we had a problem at the estate this morning, and Valerie got angry at me."

The words that came from his mouth cut through him like a knife. He wasn't sure if he could finish telling them that their daughter was in this state because he had neglected to tell her about the Chamberlins.

"Why was she angry with you Tom?", Alvin asked. He could feel his blood pressure begin to rise. If this bastard had caused his daughter to become comatose, then he would regret it. He would make him pay for hurting his little girl. His first instinct was to punch him out and leave him in a coma, but the rational side of him wouldn't allow it without the remainder of the details just waiting to be revealed.

Tom took a seat, and began telling the Millers the entire crazy story about the Chamberlins. He told them about the accidents that had been occurring at the estate since the first day that they had arrived. He told them about the chandelier that almost landed on Michelle's head, and the bookshelf that had landed on Valerie's entire body. Then, he told them about the words painted on the Chamberlin's bedroom wall in blood. He then went on to tell them who the Chamberlins were, and about them coming because they believed that Michelle was in danger.

Naturally, the story about Michelle's biological parents led into the story of her grandfather Charles. Tom told of how he was a ruthless

tyrant that had committed murder and other crimes to avoid being caught for previous acts of violence. He told them about Sara, the maid that had raised Claire. As each moment passed, the story grew in intensity. The Miller's listened so attentively, as if they were children listening to their father read them a scary bedtime story.

With each word of each story that emerged from Tom's mouth, Alvin's anger grew. Did Tom really expect him to believe this bullshit? He could see how he had become such a successful lawyer. He could tell some stories. He could make up some of the best tales that he had ever heard. Alvin Miller could think of another profession that would have been perfect for Thomas Brown, and that was a fictional novelist. There may be people in this world that would believe such outlandish fabrications, but he wasn't one of them.

Alvin could no longer contain his rage. Before he had a moment to rethink his decision, he clinched his fist, pulled back, and made contact with Tom right in his nose. Tom flew backward and hit the bed where Valerie's near lifeless body lay. When he hit, it caused the alarm on her heart monitor to sound. Tom looked up at the monitor, and Valerie's heart rate was skyrocketing.

"You bastard! Are you trying to kill your daughter?!", Tom yelled.

Debbie watched in horror. She was a small woman, and she stood no chance if she tried to separate the two of them. She did the only thing that she knew to do, and that was to scream.

"Stop it! Both of you need to stop this instant!"

Her instructions had no effect on the men that were now throwing each other around Valerie's hospital room. The insults and accusations flew from each of them.

"Your daughter is lying in that bed fighting for her life, and you are acting like a fool. You should be ashamed of yourself!", Tom scolded.

"Yeah, and she wouldn't be there if you hadn't put her there! What really happened? Did she walk in and catch you licking the whore's cunt?", Alvin attacked.

Finally, security ran into the room and tackled the two men. They

were both wrestled to the ground, and hand cuffed. All Debbie could do was watch and cry. Once Tom and Alvin had been contained, a nurse ran into the room with a syringe filled with atropine. She quickly inserted the needle into Valerie's IV. Tom watched as her heart rate slowed to a normal pace. He released a sigh of relief, only to realize that he was escorted from the room by the Valdosta Police Department, not hospital security.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Michelle awoke to the sound of her phone ringing. She fought to open her eyes, and become coherent enough to locate the phone.

“Hello?”, she said.

“Tom? Is that you? Are Valerie and Isaac alright?”

James heard the conversation, and sat up in bed. He had the feeling that he needed to prepare himself for whatever would come next.

“You’re where”, she asked. Michelle sat straight up in bed at this point. James knew that the news wasn’t good.

“Yeah, I’ll be right there. Bye.” With that, Michelle replaced the receiver. James waited patiently, but ready for anything, or so he thought.

“Is everything okay?”, he asked.

Michelle turned and cast him a puzzled look.

“Tom has been arrested for assault and battery.”. Michelle informed him, still trying to process the information herself. James also sat there confused.

“Tom has been arrested? What happened?”

Michelle ran her fingers through her hair in an attempt to comprehend everything that she had been told. Alvin had attacked him at the hospital? That made no sense to her. Alvin was a very rational adult. He never struck her as the type that would lash out in anger. She understood that he loved his only daughter, and that he was obviously grieving over her condition, but that type of action was still above the man she knew.

“Valerie’s father attacked him at the hospital. He hit him, and

caused him to bump into Valerie's bed. It set off the alarm, and they both were arrested."

Michelle's explanation of the events was quick and to the point, but it hit a soft spot inside of James. He knew immediately how Tom must have been feeling. He too had spent some time behind bars, and it wasn't a walk in the park either.

"I'm sorry, but I have to go. I have to go and pay his bail so that I can bring him home. I have to go and check on Valerie too. Tom said that when he hit the bed it caused her heart rate to escalate."

Michelle removed the covers from her body, and stepped out of bed. She retrieved her robe from the post on the headboard, and fixed it on her body. James stared at her, watching her every movement. She could feel his gaze which was fixed upon her as she turned back to look at him.

"What are you staring at?", she asked him as she smiled.

"The most beautiful woman in the world.", he replied as he returned her smile.

She could see his pearl white teeth illuminated in the darkness of her bedroom. She managed to cease the temporary paralysis that his smile placed upon her.

"Are you going with me? I really don't want to go alone."

The smile on his face quickly receded when he heard her request. He had been so relieved to finally be free from that literal prison, and had promised himself that he would never return. How could he tell her no? How could he tell her that he didn't want to go back to a place that he had finally left behind in his past? How could he explain it all when his past was still a mystery to her?

He couldn't go with her and manage to keep his past incarceration a secret. Everyone at the county jail knew him, and would certainly make that fact known when they saw him enter the building. He then had an idea.

"Well, I was thinking that I could go to the hospital for you and check in on Valerie and Isaac while you do that. You've heard all of

the horror stories about what it's like to be in jail. I'm sure Tom wants to get out of there as soon as he can. So why don't you go get him, and I'll wait for you at the hospital?"

Michelle thought for a moment. James did make a valid point. She knew that if it were her sitting in jail for the first time that she would want Tom to get her out as soon as possible. She also thought that her mother and father could use the company, and would more than likely want to see a friendly face. He could also check on Debbie for her as well. Michelle quickly concluded that James had a valid point, and agreed that his recommendation was a good one. Therefore, she agreed that they would meet at the hospital after she bailed Tom out. Just then, another thought came to mind. She might as well bail Alvin out while she was there. She knew that he didn't need to be there anymore than Tom, even though he had started the quarrel to begin with.

Tom sat alone in a holding cell. The room was cold, and the fact that it was made of cinder block and had concrete floors didn't help with the temperature situation. He sat there analyzing his surroundings. He couldn't believe that he had ended up here. He had fought for so long to keep people out of places like this, and in an unusual twist of fate, he ended up here. He glanced over at the combination toilet and sink. He really had to pee, but he couldn't force himself to do it there. He would rather take his chances and piss all over himself than to do his business where everyone and their mother could see. Of course, if he pissed himself, then they would put him in one of their famous orange uniforms that had been worn by hundreds of inmates with athlete's foot, herpes, body lice, and God only knows what else. As the nausea settled on his stomach, he decided that he would relieve himself in the wide open toilet.

He heard the door to his cell open up just as he had finished.

"Jacob Thomas Brown. Let's go.", he heard the guard instruct.

"Where are we going?", he asked.

"You're going all the way. Let's move it.", the guard replied.

Tom didn't know what the term "All the way" meant in jail. He knew that it wasn't referring to an order of hash browns at the Waffle House, and he was certain of that. He wondered if "All the way" meant that he was going to be put in population for the night. If that was the case, then he would have to change into one of those disgusting uniforms anyway. He felt the nausea return with a vengeance. He prayed silently that "All the way" meant that he was getting hash browns.

The officer led Tom to a small cubical. He instructed Tom to sit down in the chair that was provided. Tom noticed that there was a computer directly in front of him.

"What is your full name?", the officer asked.

Tom felt as though he could punch the officer. He knew what his full name was. Hell, he just called him by it less than forty-five seconds ago. Still, Tom decided that he had thrown enough punches for one night, and that he didn't like where throwing punches gets you. So, overlooking the moment of ignorance that the officer had, Tom answered him.

"Jacob Thomas Brown.", he stated, trying not to sound sarcastic.

Tom watched the computer screen as the officer typed in his name. Just then, a familiar face appeared on the screen.

"Excuse me Sir, but could you step aside and let me see that picture please?", Tom asked as politely as he possibly could. The officer turned toward him.

"I'm not supposed to let you read criminal backgrounds without a warrant or a consent form. Hell boy, you're a lawyer. You know that."

"Yes I know, but I think that man right there works for my sister. If he is dangerous, then I want to know. Sir, please just let me see the picture. You can cover the charges with that file folder right there."

The officer studied him for a moment. He wasn't sure if he should trust Tom or not. He had been in this business for eighteen years, and he knew damn good and well that you can't trust an inmate. However, he knew that Tom was an attorney, so he wasn't your typical criminal.

“If you tell anybody I did this, I promise you when you receive your sentence and come back through those doors, I’ll put you in a cell with the craziest, horniest, sickest son of a bitch we have in here. You got that?”, the officer threatened.

“Yes Sir, I understand. You have my word that I won’t say anything.”

The officer stepped aside and Tom could see the picture as clear as day. The man in the picture was James Walker. He had been arrested five years ago for assault. Tom could feel his heart sink.

Tom finally figured out by process of elimination that he term “All the way” in jail lingo actually meant release. Of course now he was more concerned with the safety of his sister instead of this new form of legal terminology. He had to hurry and warn Michelle that her personal gardener was indeed a convicted felon. He wasn’t sure how he would tell her. She loved the work that he had done on the estate, and he would be willing to bet that she was actually in love with him. She hadn’t actually told him that, but he could see it in her eyes. She lit up like a Christmas tree every time he walked into a room. If she did care for him, then this would crush her. Still, as her brother and her friend, it was his duty to protect her.

As he sat there waiting for his escort to the exit of the jail, he thought about how coincidental it was that Valerie had been concerned about Claire and Alexander being a threat. She had been right. There was a threat in the house, but it wasn’t them. Instead of it being a jealous heiress, it was a money hungry convict. He wished that he could tell Valerie about his discovery. He wished that he officer would hurry back so that he could warn Michelle.

Tom was still lost in thought and concern for the well being of his sister. He hadn’t noticed right away that Alvin Miller had also been released and happened to be approaching the seating area where Tom was waiting to leave.

“Tom? Look, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have lost my temper like that.”

The sound of a familiar voice pulled him away from his thoughts,

concern for his sister was no longer an option. He now had to deal with the father of his comatose girlfriend. At least he was apologizing. That had to be a good sign. Tom inhaled deeply before responding.

“I’m sorry too Sir. I feel awful about the way I acted.”

Tom’s apology was both heartfelt and true. Although he could not bring himself to look the man in the eye, he was sincere in his words.

Alvin sat silently for a moment, trying to find the words to say. Truth be told, he was distraught over his daughter’s current medical condition. It was a painful time, and he needed someone to blame for it. Tom had been an easy target. He was the man that would have taken his little girl away from him. He would have been the one that Valerie would have spent the rest of her life with. Now he wished that he knew that she had a life to spend with Tom. It would bring him comfort to know that his daughter would live. However, it was still too soon to feel the relief associated with the knowledge that she would be alright.

“Tom, I’m scared. I’m scared that my little girl will not be leaving that place. I’m afraid that I will lose her.”

Tom could see the twinkle of tears in Alvin’s eyes. They had misted over as if he were about to burst into tears. He could feel the pain that plagued Alvin. He shared his pain. He too was afraid that she would never wake up. He was afraid that he would never have the chance to see her smile again, never have the chance to hold her, taste her kiss, or to tell her that he was sorry for keeping the true identity of David and Caroline a secret.

The doors leading to the exit of the jail opened, and an officer emerged through the doorway.

“Let’s go you two, and no more fighting. We normally don’t allow two suspects involved in the same crime to be around each other, but since the same woman bailed the both of you out, I don’t see how it can be avoided.”, the officer stated before stepping aside and allowing the two men to exit the doors. On his way out of the doors, Tom stopped and turned to face the officer.

“Would you happen to know when our court date is?” he asked. The officer shot him a puzzled look.

“There isn’t going to be one. The charges were dropped against both of you. The hospital administrator said that she didn’t want to pursue them.”

With that, the officer closed the doors, which led into the jail.

Tom and Alvin stood there for a moment staring at each other. They had always heard that money talks and bull shit walks, but that was the first time either of them had seen it in action. Michelle had played her cards well in this gambling game, and both Tom and Alvin benefited from it. She had made a mockery of the criminal justice system, however Tom didn’t care. He was simply grateful to be out. He couldn’t fathom how difficult the lingo of jail would be to learn, or how long it would take for that matter. All he knew was that they could keep their lingo, for he didn’t need it. He didn’t plan on returning.

They were both pleased to see Michelle waiting for them outside of the building, but only for a moment. She stood there with her arms crossed across her chest, and tapping her left foot. She possessed a stern look upon her face. Tom and Alvin suddenly felt like children being scolded for misbehaving in school or something. They were like two puppies returning to their owner with their tails between their legs.

Michelle stood glaring at the two men as they approached her. She had considered all of the options of words that she could use to destroy their dignity with. She was very disappointed when she heard of the childish actions that they had engaged in hours earlier. She couldn’t understand why they would act in such a manner. Further more, she couldn’t understand why either of them would do something so disrespectful.

“Michelle, let me explain,” Tom stated as he approached his sister.

“Save it Tom. What were you thinking? Do you know what I had to go through to convince the hospital administrator not to press charges?”

She then turned her attention to Alvin.

“And you Alvin, I can’t believe that you of all people would cause such a scene in a hospital, where your daughter is fighting for her life.”

Michelle stopped her ranting long enough to allow her words to sink in, and to analyze their reaction. She would then decide her next step in her discipline of the two men.

When she realized that they had already settled their differences, and remorse for their actions had set in, she decided that she would back off.

“Well, I’m sure that the two of you are hungry. Let’s grab some food and then we’ll head over to the hospital. James is there with Claire and Alexander.”

With that, she turned away from the men, and led the way to the doors to exit the jail. The trio made their way across the dimly lit parking lot to Michelle’s car. She had made the trip in her Trans-Am. Tom was a little disappointed. Considering both he and Alvin Miller were both over six feet tall, he knew that one of them would have an uncomfortable ride. Knowing his sister as well as he did, he was certain that Michelle had already created a system to decide which one that would be.

Michelle inserted her key in the lock on the door, and unlocked it. She then directed her attention back to her brother, and his attacker.

“So, who started the fight?”, she asked.

Both men looked down at the ground. Alvin didn’t want to admit that he had started the fight. Tom felt the swelling persist in his left eye, therefore he didn’t want to tell on Alvin either. He might not be able to go “All the Way.”, the next time.

“Well, are you going to answer me?”, Michelle asked.

Finally, after swallowing his pride, Alvin spoke up.

“I did.”, is all that he could manage to say. Michelle began to grin, and then gave one last instruction.

“Well then Alvin, you can ride in back.”, she stated before entering the car.

The two men entered the car as instructed. Michelle was typically

quiet. However, when provoked, she could be very intimidating. Tom had considered allowing Alvin to sit in the front seat out of respect for his elder, as well as his future father in law, but he didn't dare tempt his sister. He cast Alvin a look that said he was sorry for not being in a position to help him. Alvin returned the look that clearly stated that he fully understood the situation. Tom closed the passenger side door of the car, and fastened his seat belt.

“So Shelly, where are we going to eat?”, Tom asked. Michelle thought for a moment. “I think that Waffle House will do.”, she replied. Tom nodded his head in approval. He actually developed a craving for some hash browns, scattered all the way.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Michelle, Tom, and Alvin entered the Waffle House located on Auburn Avenue, just across the street from the Valdosta Medical Center. Tom slid in the booth beside of Michelle. Alvin sat across from the Brown Children. Their waitress approached the table.

“Hey, I’m Dianah, and I’ll be your server this evening.” She paused for a moment to give them a chance to respond. When it was evident that neither of the three customers were going to return the polite gesture, she then proceeded to the next step of her seven steps to success; taking the order before fetching their drinks.

“Do you know what you would like to eat? If you have made a decision, then I can call your order in while I get your drinks for you.”

She then paused yet again to await a reply.

Tom was the first to speak up.

“Yes. I would like the patty melt plate with hash browns scattered, smothered, and covered please.”

Dianah wrote down the order, and then asked what he would like to drink.

“Sweet tea Please.”

Okay, and for you?”, she asked, directing her attention to Michelle. Michelle looked up from her menu.

“Yes, I’ll have the grilled chicken dinner with hash browns covered in cheese please, and sweet tea to drink also.”

Alvin spoke up as soon as he had noticed that Dianah had finished writing Michelle’s order.

“I’ll have the same with extra cheese please.” He then placed his menu in the designated location behind the napkin dispenser and the condiment rack.

“Okay, I’ll have it right out for you.” As she walked away from her table, she was certain that this would be that familiar table that every night guaranteed. This would be that table where she would do everything right, and get nothing in return.

Michelle waited until Dianah returned with their drinks before beginning her interrogation regarding the events that had taken place earlier that evening.

“So Alvin, what in God’s name possessed you to attack my brother, the son of your best friend?” Michelle’s voice was stern. She was determined to get an answer. She felt as though he did owe her an explanation. Alvin took a deep breath before answering.

“Michelle, I’m sorry. I was so scared. I’m so afraid that I’m going to lose my little girl.”

Michelle could tell by the look on his face that he was sincere. Given that tragic accident that Valerie had been involved in, the people close to her were feeling the wrath of injustice. Deep down, Michelle knew that if Valerie didn’t survive her injuries that their lives would never be the same again.

Although she felt sympathy for the parents of her life long friend, her sympathy was mainly focused on Tom. even though Valerie had called of their engagement, Michelle knew that Valerie still loved him, and he still loved her. If Valerie didn’t pull through, then Tom would be forever heartbroken. He would never recover from the loss.

Since her relationship with James had flourished, Michelle knew the pain that Tom would feel. She couldn’t fathom the thought of losing James now that she finally found him. She contemplated the idea of discussing her relationship with Tom, but she didn’t want to get into that conversation right now. Although she was thrilled that she had gotten what she wanted, she wasn’t ready to deal with her brother on the issue.

“Alvin, I understand. I’m sorry that this happened. I tried to stop Valerie from leaving that day, but she wouldn’t listen.”, Michelle explained.

“I know Michelle. I’m sorry that I accused Tom of causing this. I know that this wasn’t your fault.”

“Thank you sir. That means a lot to me. I love her very much. When she wakes up, I want to fix this. I want to marry your daughter.”

Although Tom didn’t directly ask for Alvin Miller’s permission to marry Valerie, Tom hoped that he would give his approval. Despite the altercation that had occurred between the two of them, Tom still had great respect for the man that had given him his first black eye, and fat lip.

Alvin miller sat in silence for a moment as he tried to fight back the tears. He was ashamed of himself. He was ashamed that he had allowed himself to act in such an irrational fashion. He prayed to himself that God would allow his only child to wake up. He desperately needed her to scold him for his actions.

What the hell was he thinking? How could he attack the man that his daughter was in love with? Just to make matters worse, he was also the son of his deceased best friend. Jacob brown would be so disappointed in him for his actions. Tom didn’t deserve such a vicious treatment. He hadn’t done anything wrong. Alvin felt that he should devise a way to show his appreciation, as well as his remorse for his actions. That is the moment that Alvin miller knew what he had to do.

“Tom, when Valerie wakes up, I want the two of you to work things out.”

Tom replied, “I want that too Sir.”

It wasn’t a direct approval, but Tom was good at reading between the lines. He was well aware of the meaning behind the vague comment made by his future father in law. Tom suddenly possessed a newly renewed hope for his life with Valerie as his wife. He knew

that if her father was on his side, then Valerie would consider working out the pointless issues that had emerged with the discovery of the true identity of Michelle's hired hands.

Tom was relieved that all of the deceit that had plagued their lives since the discovery of Michelle's inheritance. Tom reviewed the past seven months in his mind. As he surveyed the occurrences, he realized that the only secret that still existed in their lives was the truth about James Walker. Tom suddenly felt his heart sink. He knew that the time had come to reveal the truth about the dirty criminal that had weaseled his way into his sister's affections.

"Michelle, we need to talk about you and James."

The statement made by her brother nearly caused the tea to spew out of her mouth. How did he know about that? She hadn't told him anything about her relationship with James.

"How did you know about that?", she demanded.

Tom lowered his head, and rested it in his hands. It was too late. He couldn't stop it before a relationship truly started. Tom pondered for a moment to decide what he should do now. He had hoped that he would get to his sister first. He couldn't back out now. He had already peaked her interest by simply acknowledging that he knew that she was indeed interested in the man with a secret.

Truth be told, Michelle had gone through so much in the previous seven months that he wasn't sure that she could handle another surprise right now. So much had happened so quickly in her life that he had actually had the opportunity to see her strength first hand. She was an inspiration to him. He had learned more about her in the past seven months than he had in the past twenty-seven years of her life. She had taught him to never under estimate her, and he had learned that lesson the hard way.

Despite the vast amount of strength his sister possessed, he still felt a dread in his soul for what he was about to tell her.

"Lucky guess. Anyway, I found out some information about him today." He began. He wasn't sure of exactly how he was supposed

to begin this conversation. He hadn't considered the fact that she had initiated a relationship with him so quickly. Michelle glared at him for what seemed like hours. Her eyes screamed at Tom to reveal his information, as well as his source. Her first thought was that he had been checking up on James earlier on in the day, and the altercation that Tom had with Alvin had postponed their discussion of the matter.

She could feel the anger and rage deep within her soul manifest, and take over her body like a demonic possession. Had he actually gone behind her back to dig up information about James in an attempt to sabotage her relationship with him? She didn't like the assumptions that she was making about her brother. Their father always told them to never assume anything. His theory was that assuming anything would make an ass out of you and me. Surely he hadn't reverted back to the irrational Tom that he used to be. She decided that she would give him the benefit of the doubt, and allow him to explain himself before jumping to conclusions.

"How did you get any information on him at all? Did you call that Private investigator that you use a lot?", Michelle asked.

"No Shelly, I didn't contact Ava Taylor about him. I didn't utilize that tool in this case.", he replied. Now she was really interested. She wanted to question him about the issue in more detail, but thought against it. She decided to allow him to finish his story, and then she would definitely comment on the information.

Tom inhaled deeply, clearly dreading the second half of the conversation.

"While I was being processed at the jail, I saw a rap sheet on a computer screen. The picture is actually what caught my attention. The picture was James. Apparently he is out on parole for an assault charge."

Michelle sat motionless in her seat. How could he keep such a secret? Had he seriously over looked everything that had happened at the Vandivere Estate? Did he think that the fact that he was currently a paroled felon was useless information? Michelle kicked herself for

not running the criminal background check that Tom had suggested. It proved to be a useful tool, had she decided to utilize it.

With everything that she had been though, and everything that he had witnessed, how could he think that more secrets and lies would be okay? This didn't make any sense. Michelle knew that she should feel her heart breaking into a million pieces, but she couldn't feel pain for the situation. All she could feel was betrayal, disappointment, and rage.

Without a second thought, Michelle arose from her seat.

"Shelly, where are you going?" Tom asked.

Michelle turned to her brother and cast him a devilish glare.

"This is the last time anyone ever keeps a secret from me."

With that statement, she opened her wallet and threw money on the table before walking out the door, and crossing the street toward the hospital. Tom and Alvin followed close behind.

Dianah turned to see all three of her customers leaving the restaurant. Her arms were loaded down with plates. Her mouth dropped at the sight of their swift retreat.

"Damn it to Hell.", she said as she dropped all of the plates in the dish pit. She mumbled to herself as she made her way over to the table to retrieve the drink glasses. She noticed that there were several bills resting on the table. At first glance, she thought that their were seven one dollar bills there, but as she picked up the cash and examined it closer, she realized that it was seven one hundred dollar bills. She simply lifted her head, and stared out the window in the direction that the woman had traveled.

Michelle crossed Auburn Avenue without even looking for on coming traffic. She was so overwhelmed with anger that the rationality that she possessed was literally nonexistent. She couldn't believe that he had the audacity to deceive her in such a way. No more. This was the last time that she would be played for a fool. She had dealt with so many lies and secrets that for the first time she thought she might explode.

James saw her as she crossed the street, and made her way over to him. A smile emerged on his face as he reached out to take her in his arms. He was stunned when he felt her shove him back away from her.

“You lying bastard!”, she yelled as she made contact.

“What are you talking about?”, he asked. He honestly didn’t know what she was referring to. Then, all at once, he realized what had her fuming with anger.

“You know what I’m talking about. Did you honestly think that you could keep something like parole a secret?” Michelle waited for an answer.

James was speechless. This was exactly what he was afraid of. He had tried to tell her the truth, but the moment was interrupted by something. He couldn’t remember right off hand what had occurred to stop him.

“Michelle, I can explain.”, he stated in an attempt to save himself.

“I don’t want to hear it! There is nothing you can say that will excuse this. Tell me something James, are you blind? Did you not see everything that I have gone through all because of secrets and lies? Have you seriously overlooked every event that has taken place since I hired you?”

James didn’t know how to respond. He had never seen her like this. Michelle didn’t get angry and lash out. It wasn’t her style. He had observed that since he had come to Vandivere Estate. He knew that it was futile to attempt to reason with her. He knew that there was nothing he could say to change her mind.

Michelle was near tears as she looked him in the eye. All of the pain and anger that she felt pierced him to his core. Tears began to form in her eyes. James could now feel the pain. He had to try to reason with her.

“Michelle, please. I love you. I wanted to tell you.” Michelle quickly interrupted him.

“You love me? How can you say that? When you love someone,

you don't keep secrets from them. I want you to go back to the Estate, gather your belongings, and go. You're fired! Get the fuck out of my life now!"

James suddenly realized that it was really over. It had ended quicker than it had started. He didn't say a word as he turned and walked away. Michelle watched as the man she loved walked to the corner of the intersection, and flagged down a cab. He entered through the back door. She watched as the taillights faded into the darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Alexander pulled into the driveway at Vandivere Estate. Michelle had asked him to go and supervise James' departure. The news of his secret criminal background came as a shock to both Alexander and Claire. Alexander had tried to reason with Michelle, and question her as to whether or not she had given James a chance to explain himself. She didn't respond to his request for information.

He saw James exit the house as he parked the pickup. He had a backpack draped over his shoulder and a box in his hands. Alexander got out of his truck and approached James.

"Can I give you a hand?" he asked. James looked at Alexander as if he were studying him, as if he were searching for a reason behind his offer of assistance. If the request was a legitimate offer of assistance, then James would be happy to accept. However, if it was simply to speed up his eviction from Michelle's life, then Alexander could go to hell.

"You're not pissed off at me too? Everyone else is." he stated as he placed the box in the bed of his pick up. Alexander walked up beside James with his hands resting in his jean pockets.

"I'm just as guilty of keeping secrets from Michelle as you are." he stated as he propped his body up against the truck.

James placed the backpack in the bed of the truck with the box.

"Yeah, but you have seniority over me. You are her father, man."

"I may be her father, but I still kept secrets from her."

James remained silent for a moment. Alexander did have a point, but did he really think that Michelle would kick he and Claire out of her life? She had parents again. She wouldn't pass up that opportunity.

“You have more of a right to her than I do.”, James stated. Alexander studied him for a moment. He knew that his situation wasn’t as simple as James made it out to be. Sure he was Michelle’s biological father, but the situation was similar to his. Claire was her father’s property when he took her and fled to Adairsville. Alexander would never be as cruel to Michelle as Charles Vandivere was to Claire.

Alexander knew that James truly loved his daughter. He had confessed his feelings for Michelle on numerous occasions prior to his true identity being revealed. He could also tell by the way James would act around Michelle. It isn’t a common act for a professional landscaper to be concerned with the amount of dirt that he received on his body. Especially while constructing a new designer garden. However, James always did that.

“Look James, I know that you love my daughter. I’ve seen that first hand long before she did.” James found comfort in Alexander’s words. He was relieved to know that someone believed in him. He was glad to know that Michelle’s current perception of him wasn’t considered accurate by all parties involved. He also knew that an attempt to salvage their relationship would prove to be pointless. He also knew that was where this conversation was leading.

“She made her decision Alex. I can’t change her mind. She is stubborn as hell.” Alexander couldn’t help but to chuckle. She was stubborn, and he knew that she come by the trait honestly.

“That’s my fault. She gets that from me.” Alexander thought back to the will and determination he had all those years ago. He had to be stubborn to continue his mission of protecting the lives of his wife and daughter. He never considered his own life during that time. As far as he was concerned, Claire and Michelle were his life.

“I don’t mean any disrespect Alex, but now I kind of wish she was actually a Brown. Things would probably turn out different for us.”, James stated.

“The end isn’t written in stone son. Did you explain this to Michelle?”, Alexander asked.

“She didn’t give me a chance.”, James replied.

Alexander paused a moment. He understood why Michelle had acted so irrationally with James earlier. He felt responsible for that as well. He thought that had she not learned so much about her past, she would have been patient with him.

“Well, why don’t you explain it to me? I’ve got time to listen. I can tell by the look on your face that you need to vent to someone?”, Alexander offered. James considered the offer. It would be nice to finally discuss this with someone. He was tired of having to hide his past, and lie about it. He needed someone to listen.

“I was working a landscaping job in Dalton about six years ago.”, he began. James trembled as he forced himself to remember that painful night.

“I finished the job around seven that evening. So I decided to go have a quick drink before calling it a night. I stopped at a local bar. I parked my truck and began walking through the parking lot toward the entrance to the bar.”

Alexander listened carefully as James revealed the details about his arrest. He listened as James confessed that he did in fact beat a man in the alleyway, and cause him to have several injuries. Apparently, James heard the man and his wife arguing in the alley beside the bar. He tried to ignore the commotion. After all, it was none of his business what they were arguing about. When he heard the sound of a woman screaming after he heard the impact caused by the man’s fist, he could no longer ignore the altercation.

When James turned the corner into the alley, he saw the woman on her hands and knees in an attempt to pull her body back onto its feet. Just as she was about to regain her footing, the man pulled his leg back, and kicked his wife in the face, throwing her body back. James immediately attacked the man, slamming his body into the brick foundation. He wasn’t sure what had happened after that. The next thing he knew, he had police officers knocking on the door of his motel room, and arresting him for two counts of assault and battery.

Alexander took a moment to process the information that James

had provided. If he was defending another person, why didn't he fight the charges? Defense of others is a legitimate defense in the state of Georgia, or in any state for that matter. He wanted to know why James didn't fight the charges, and that is the question that he answered next.

James explained that there was no point in even attempting to fight the charges. The man that he had attacked was a city police officer. He had forced his wife to lie and say that James had attacked both of them in the alley. James ended up accepting a plea bargain that would charge him with one count of assault, and he would receive a sentence of ten years. He would serve the first five, and then be paroled for the remaining five years. All he had to do was to enter a plea of guilty. That is exactly what he did.

Alexander thought for a moment. James' story actually made sense. Granted, it did appear to be a little far fetched, but it wasn't impossible. Given all of the corruption Alexander had witnessed with Charles Vandivere, he knew that it was possible for James to be caught in legal whirlpool and sucked away.

"James, I'm sure that if you discuss this with Michelle, she will listen. She just needs a little time to cool off.", Alexander stated.

James grinned a little. He wished that were true. However, the truth was that Michelle didn't really love him as much as he thought. If she had, then she would have given him time to explain, despite all of the issues that she had dealt with. If she didn't listen this time, why would she listen next time? The confrontation that he had with Michelle earlier was a painful one. He didn't want to relive that pain again. He just wanted to leave, and begin the healing process. He opened the door to the driver's side of his pick up, climbed up into the cab, and closed the door.

"I'm sorry Alex. It's too late for that.", he said before starting the engine. He put the truck into gear, but before pulling away, he looked at Alexander and said, "Take care of her okay?" Alexander nodded to indicate that he would do just that. James returned the nod before driving down the driveway, and out of Michelle's life forever.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Michelle now sits at Valerie's bedside. Her heart was broken, and the one person that could help her cope, couldn't help her now.

"Valerie, I wish you were awake. I need you so much right now." Michelle began. Tears began to flow from her eyes. The doctors had said that Valerie could hear if anyone wanted to talk to her. Michelle decided to pour her heart out to her friend. She knew that Valerie couldn't respond, but she could listen. That is really what Michelle needed her to do right now. She just needed her to listen.

"It's about James. You see, I fell in love with him." Michelle paused for a moment. By simply admitting that she had fallen in love with James, the pain in her heart seemed to amplify. "I thought that I could trust him, but he lied to me Valerie. He's a criminal." Tears flowed from her emerald eyes like rain pouring from the sky. "Now he's leaving, and I really don't want him to. I can't stop him now. It's too late."

Michelle lost all control of her emotions at that point. She could no longer contain them. She was angry with James for keeping such a secret from her. She was furious with him. She was also angry with herself. She was angry with herself for not allowing him to explain. She knew that she couldn't fix it. He had left over two hours ago. Alexander had confirmed that when he returned to the hospital.

Michelle rested her head beside Valerie, and continued to cry.

"Hey girl, chill out. This will fix itself." Michelle heard the words spoken to her in a voice that sounded like an angel. The tears

falling from her eyes quickly dissipated as she sat up and saw Valerie lying there with her eyes open. Michelle smiled through her tear stained face. She couldn't believe what she was seeing.

"Oh my God! Valerie!" Michelle reached out and ran her fingers through her hair.

"Oh thank God!", she exclaimed as she leapt to her feet and embraced Valerie as tightly as she could.

Valerie moaned slightly. Michelle's tight grasp caused her physical pain. "Easy there. I didn't heal completely.", she exclaimed. Michelle quickly pulled away. "I'm sorry. I'm just so happy to see you awake." Valerie tried to reposition herself.

"It's okay." Valerie took a few moments to recover from the pain that Michelle had accidentally inflicted on her. It was actually worse than she had let on. She just didn't want to worry Michelle. It was obvious that she had enough to worry about.

Tom left the hospital before Valerie woke up from her coma. He had gone to the mansion to retrieve some paper work he needed. He needed something to take his mind off of Michelle and Valerie. He was exhausted. He needed to rest, but knew that an attempt at sleep would be pointless. No matter how tired he was, he knew that his brain wouldn't shut down and allow him to rest.

Tom entered the house, and made his way toward his room. He fumbled through his desk for a moment, and located the files on the civil suit he was working on. He was now thankful that he had switched from criminal defense to civil law. It was a nice change. Considering the information he had learned about James while being processed, it made work easier.

Tom had just finished gathering his files, and inserted them into his brief case. He turned to leave his room, and caught a glimpse of his bed. It looked so tempting. He decided that taking a nap wasn't such a bad idea. He didn't even remove his shoes, or turn back the covers before crawling into bed. He told himself that he would take a short nap. Much to his surprise, he was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Tom slept for hours. His mind was so tired. Despite the tired state, it didn't stop the events from replaying in his mind like a silent film from the early 1900's. every event that he had witnessed flashed in his dreams like lightning. Just as the memories were vivid, so were the emotions that accompanied them.

Of all the memories that flashed in his mind, only one became hung up on the projector. The car crash that had caused Valerie's coma. That was the memory that he wanted so desperately to forget. He watched in horror as the burning wreck came into focus. He could see Valerie slumped over the steering wheel. He could see the blood that coated her face like crimson paint. He watched the flames as they engulfed the car, transforming it into a blazing inferno.

Tom sat straight up in bed. The nightmare caused him to wake from a somewhat restful sleep. He used both of his hands to rub his eyes. When he opened them, he began to focus on his surroundings. He was in his bedroom. He glanced down to see that the brief case was still there in the floor beside his bed. It was.

"Damn. It was just a nightmare.", he said as he turned to get out of the bed. He blinked three times in an attempt to adjust his vision. When he opened his eyes for the third time, he saw something flying through the air. The last thing he felt was the impact of a two by four as it made contact with his face.

Valerie's room was full of visitors. Michelle left her side long enough to locate her parents and tell them the news. Debbie and Alvin miller took permanent seats on each side of her bed. That is where they all slept for the remainder of the morning.

Michelle had pulled out the sofa bed, and that is were she slept the entire day. Debbie had considered waking her, but Claire had asked her not to. She needed her rest, and Alvin confirmed that. He had heard all of the horror stories about what they had endured. After explaining it to Debbie, she agreed with the majority.

"That is awful. Now I don't want to tell her about what

happened to their parents' house." Debbie quickly realized that she and Alvin hadn't told anyone about the fire.

"What happened to their house?", Claire asked. Debbie didn't want to share the news. As it was with all of the information she was just given, she felt as though she would be putting more of a hardship on Michelle and Tom.

"The brown house burned to the ground the other night. Apparently, there was a gas leak.", Alvin announced.

Valerie, Alexander, and Claire were all in shock. They knew that when Michelle heard about this, she would be devastated.

"What did you say?"

Everyone turned to see Michelle sitting up on the edge of the pull out bed. No one said a word. It was like they had all lost their ability to speak.

"Well, is someone going to fill me in?", she said. She waited patiently for a response. Claire finally made her way over to Michelle, sat down beside her, and put her arm around her.

"Honey, your parents' house burned down. The millers said that it was caused by a gas leak." Michelle sat speechless and emotionless. It was as if she had completely shut down.

Michelle stood up, and walked over to the window. She gazed out at the dusky dark streets below. She watched the headlights on the cars that passed by Valdosta Medical Center. She watched the people traveling the sidewalks. They were smiling and laughing. They were happy. They were normal. She was happy once too. She knew that she was. She tried hard to think of when that was. She tried hard to remember when she was one of them.

At that moment, she knew what she had to do. She would go back to the place that was normal. She would go home. She would leave this God forsaken place, and never think of it again. She would go back to Adairsville. The house may be gone, but the property was still there. If she had to, she would buy an R.V. and park it there. She would rebuild the house and stay there for the rest of her life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

James sat alone in a little café on the outskirts of town. He wanted to get as far away from Vandivere Estate as possible. He just wasn't ready to leave Valdosta yet. He wasn't exactly sure why. He wanted to leave Valdosta, and begin the process of putting Michelle in the back of his mind so that he could live his life. He had tried to begin the process the night before, but the dream he had made the task impossible.

His thoughts drifted back to the dream. He was sitting in the garden on the east wing of the mansion. It was a beautiful summer day, and the aroma of flowers was thick in the air. The sun was blazing down from the sky. The feeling the atmosphere that surrounded him was pleasant. He sat on the bench in the center of the garden, soaking up the day.

Suddenly, the sky went black, and the sound of thunder crashing against the summer sky pounded against the clouds. Rain began to pour from the sky, and the wind howled as it blew all around him. He opened his eyes to analyze his surroundings. He turned and looked toward the house. As he turned his body, he saw a woman standing directly in front of him. As he looked closer, he could see that she was missing half of her face.

James stumbled backward, and tripped over one of the stones that he had constructed the walls around the flowerbeds. The woman approached him. "Who are you?", he demanded of her. She continued to move in closer. "Do not be afraid of me James. Be afraid of him." The moment was peculiar, but he didn't feel the fear that he had felt only moments earlier. "Go back James. Go help Michelle." With those

words, she disappeared, as did the unusual weather phenomena. In the blink of an eye, the beautiful summer day returned, and James was left there alone on the ground with a puzzled look on his face.

James shook his head quickly to force the memory of the dream to retreat. He had tried to make sense of the dream when he woke up. He would have taken it as a warning, but he didn't believe in that sort of thing. He had comforted Michelle when she thought that the mansion was haunted, but he had made sure that he didn't voice his opinion.

The doorbell on the entrance to the café rang. The sound of the bell pulled James away from his thoughts and back to reality. He quickly glanced up to see an older man dressed in an out of date business suit enter the dining establishment. Normally, James didn't pay attention to people. He liked to keep to himself, but there was something familiar about this man. He thought he had seen him somewhere before. He continued to watch the old man, and what he did next was out of the ordinary. He took a seat at a table in the back of the café with a black man that was a lot younger than him. The black man was dressed like a thug. He wore a green T-shirt, and matching bandana.

James continued to watch the two men. It was obvious that they were discussing something, but James wasn't sitting close enough to hear the conversation. Judging by their body language, they were discussing business. Just then, it hit him. The older man was familiar to him because he had looked at his face every day for seven months. The man meeting with the gangster was Charles Vandivere. James casually stood up, and left the restaurant.

He had to hurry. He didn't know what the old tyrant was planning, but taking the looks of his companion into consideration, it wasn't good. He quickly drove in the direction of the hospital. He had to warn Michelle. As he drove, he realized that the dream that he had the night before was a warning. He needed to protect Michelle from what ever this man was planning to do to her. For the first time in his life, he was afraid.

James pulled his truck into the parking deck, slammed the shifter into park, and jumped out of the truck. He took off running through the parking deck. He didn't want to waste any time. He decided to take the stairs instead of waiting on the elevator. He took the stairs two by two all the way down to the base level where the entrance to the hospital was located. He ran through the doors, and made his way to the elevator. He quickly pushed the button to go up. He paced back and forth as he waited for the doors to open.

Finally, he heard the low-pitched ding of the elevator as it reached the first floor. He was about to run into the elevator when he saw Claire and Alexander exit. "James, what are you doing here?", Alexander asked him. James paused for a moment, trying to catch his breath. "Slow down boy. You look like you've just seen a ghost.", Alexander stated as he placed his hand on James' shoulder. "He's alive! Charles Vandivere is alive!" Claire and Alexander froze where they stood. "What do you mean?", Claire asked. "I saw him in a café on the outskirts of town. He was meeting with this guy. I think that it was the leader of that local gang."

James paused another moment before asking, "where is Michelle?" Claire and Alexander both got a look on their faces that scared him. "Where is she?", he asked again. "She just left to go back to the house to look for Tom.", Claire explained. The fear was evident in her voice. James could feel his heart sink. "We have to go now. I don't know what he's planning, but if it involves a gang, then it can't be good." Alexander cast a glance at his wife. He saw a familiar fear in her eyes that he hadn't seen in years. "I have to go get her Claire.", Alexander stated. "I won't lose her to him." Claire smiled at her husband. She understood what he meant. "Be careful Alex.", was all that she could say. He embraced his wife, and whispered in her ear, "This is the last time that I will have to fight this bastard for Michelle's life." With that, he turned away from her. He followed James out of the doors. As Claire watched Alexander fade away, she began to pray.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Tom could feel the piercing pain in his face. It was so excruciating that it had caused him to regain consciousness. He tried to raise his hand to his head, but he couldn't move it. He tried the other with the same result. He could feel something over his mouth. It was sticky, and pulled the hair on his face from his five o'clock shadow. He opened his eyes and surveyed his surroundings.

He didn't recognize the room he was in. It was cold and damp. The smell was horrible. It smelled like something or someone had died in there. It didn't take but a moment to realize that it was someone. There in a glass coffin in front of him was a human skeleton. His eyes grew in size. He couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"I see you've met my wife." Tom turned his attention in the direction of the voice. Tom couldn't believe it. Charles Vandivere was standing there before him in the flesh. Tom began to fidget violently in his seat. He tried his best to get loose. Charles walked over to him. He lowered his body to where he would be face to face with Tom.

"You know, she actually looks better this way." Charles rose back to a standing position.

He walked in circles around Tom. His eyes possessed a devilish look, as if he were possessed by the worst of all demonic entities. "You know Tom, I'm sorry we had to meet under such bad circumstances. Truth be told, it wasn't you I had pictured in this seat." Charles stopped directly in front of Tom. "I can't stand to have a conversation with someone that refuses to talk. Why don't

you say something boy? Oh you're a little tongue-tied. Here, let me help you?" Charles reached down, and removed the duct tape from Tom's mouth. He didn't spare him any pain in the gesture.

"Oh shit boy, you seem to be bleeding again." Tom inhaled deeply in an attempt to catch his breath. "What do you want?", Tom demanded. Charles chuckled a bit before answering. "You know, for a lawyer, you're pretty stupid. You really haven't figured out what I want?" Tom cast him a look that clearly said that he was getting pissed off. "You better hope that I don't get loose."

Charles Vandivere burst into laughter. Even his laugh sounded evil. "Are you threatening me boy? You really don't look like you are in much of a position to do anything. You're all tied up." It was at that moment that Michelle emerged from around the corner. She had a walking cane in her hands that she had picked up from his collection that was on display in the hallway. With one swift motion, she put all of her strength into the swing. Charles Vandivere was out cold at the moment of impact. Tom watched as the body of Charles Vandivere fell lifeless to the floor. Michelle stood over him, and stared. "Like Grandfather, like granddaughter you son of a bitch."

She dropped the cane beside his body, and went to untie her brother. Tom was stunned. He never contemplated the idea that his sweet, quiet sister was capable of such violence, but he liked it. "Michelle, how did you know that I was down here?", he asked as she went to work on the ropes. Michelle looked up at him. She had a calmness about her that honestly scared him. "The dumb ass left the secret door open.", she replied as she untied the last knot. "That works.", Tom stated as he stood up. "Can you walk?", Michelle asked as she placed her arm around his waist. "I think so.", Tom replied as he followed her out of the basement.

They made their way down the dark corridor to the stairway that led up to the house. Michelle tried to help her brother move faster. She hit Charles pretty hard, but there was no guarantee that he was dead. Not yet anyway. She had a plan for him. They finally reached the top

of the staircase. They went through the doorway, and Michelle slammed the door behind them. They made their way to the front door of the house. Just as they reached the door, it flew open.

Michelle and Tom stopped dead in their tracks, waiting to see who would come through it. Michelle was on guard. She was relieved to see Alexander and James. “Michelle, Charles Vandivere is ...”, James began to explain. “He’s alive. I know, but not for long. James, get Tom out of here. Dad, go get the gas cans out of the shed.” Alexander paused for a moment. “Why the gas cans?”, he asked. Once James had Tom in his grasp, she turned back to him. “Because we are going to burn this fucker to the ground.”

Alexander made his way out to the shed. He busted through the door, and retrieved the gas cans. He took off running back to the house. He was still trying to get the words to sink in. Michelle called him Dad. She also said that she was going to burn down the house. He loved the idea. In his opinion, it was long over due.

Michelle met him at the door. She took one of the cans from Alexander. “Go through the first level and soak it the best you can. We will meet at the front door.”, Michelle instructed. Alexander did as he was told. He started at the back door where he currently stood, and quickly made his way through the house. Michelle did the same. They continued to saturate the carpets with the accelerant until every room was thoroughly coated. The two of them stepped outside of the doorway. Michelle retrieved a grill lighter from her back pocket, struck it, and touched it to the gas trail.

Michelle turned back to face Alexander. “There, it’s done.”, she stated. She was taken by surprise as she felt arms tightly embrace her. She struggled to free herself as she felt her body being pulled back into the house, and cold steel pressed into the side of her head. She hadn’t killed the bastard. She had also underestimated him. She continued to struggle. She had one last attempt at saving her life. She quickly wrapped her leg behind her

grandfather's. It worked. As he tried to prevent himself from hitting the floor, he let go of Michelle, and the gun. She turned and retrieved the gun.

She sits there with her salvation in the palm of her hand, with only one chance for redemption in the chamber. She was unsure of how she could go on. So much had happened in only a few short months of her life. She had endured more torture than anyone could endure in a lifetime. All of the pain, and emotional trauma had taken its toll on her. She was physically and mentally drained. She just wanted this to be over. She wanted these events of her life to cease, and if it required a life then so be it. She felt as though her soul had died, and her body ached and begged to join it.

An eternity in hell would be more appealing than one more second in the life she was now living. She was drained, exhausted, and felt indescribably lost. She thought back to a time in her life when it was simple, when she was simple. She was a small town girl with small town dreams. Normal. She once was normal. Now, she was cursed to a life of solitude, with only her own company to keep. It would be better to be dead. She felt dead already. Her head pounded with pain. She barely had the strength to think. She was so weak.

What was she waiting for? She wondered why she was wasting time reminiscing. Perhaps she was searching herself for a reason to change her mind. She could not find a logical one. It had to be done. She had no other choice. She had to rid herself of the curse that was her birthright. She had to find an end to the torture that plagued her, and all of the people she loved. They too had been through enough. They too had suffered.

This had to end. She had to rid the world of this terror. A person that carried such a plague should not live.

The time had come. She had to finish what she started. She knew that it would not end unless she stopped her procrastination. She looked at her left hand. There it lay.

The shinning metal in her hand was the freedom she longed for.

Inside the revolver was her one chance at salvation. She grasped the revolver tightly. She placed her index finger on the trigger, and closed her eyes. She had to find the courage to pull it. She inhaled a deep empowering breath. Without exhaling, she squeezed the trigger.

She got him with one shot point blank in the head. She quickly scrambled to her feet, and took off running for the door. She managed to make it outside just before the house exploded. Alexander and James ran over to her, and helped her to her feet. The three of them ran back to the truck and drove half way down the driveway. They stopped the truck, and stepped out.

James stood by Michelle's side as they watched the house continue to burn. It was a beautiful sight. "I'm glad you came back," Michelle said as she looked up at James.

He smiled at her before replying, "Me too." He leaned in and kissed her. They turned their attention back to the house. After a lifetime of pain and hell, Michelle found comfort in the words she spoke. "It's over."

EPILOGUE

It was hard for Michelle to believe that in only one short year since they left the Vandivere Estate in Valdosta that life was already back to normal. She was working in her lounge again after rebuilding it. The millers had neglected to inform her that the night her parents house burned down, the lounge had suffered the same fate. That still didn't stop her from rebuilding her business as well as her parents' house. It was obvious that the horrible occurrences hadn't changed her for the worst, but for the better. She had a newfound strength, as well as a determination to succeed.

Valerie had made a full recovery. Thanks to the money that Michelle had paid her for her work on the Estate, the renovations of the lounge, and decorating the new house, Valerie was able to afford extensive reconstructive surgery to cover the scars from the burns. Granted they couldn't completely repaired, she was happy that the scars couldn't be seen unless someone was actually looking for them.

Tom didn't renew his bar registration. He decided that he had had enough of court from an attorney's standpoint. He opened his own private investigation firm, and has dedicated his life to preventing injustice similar to what he had experienced in Valdosta. He thoroughly investigates similar cases as a precaution for his clients.

Private investigation isn't his only passion for life. Tom and Valerie managed to put the past behind them, and make a fresh start. They married ten months after returning to Adairsville. The two of them couldn't be happier. They are now awaiting the arrival of their first child, a son to be named Isaac. Tom decided that it would be appropriate to name his son after his wife's real guardian angel.

Isaac returned to Columbus after recovering from his injuries. He is working a desk job with the Columbus police department until he can be reevaluated after completing his rehabilitation. Michelle had faith in her brother. He had the stubbornness that comes with being a Chamberlin, and the will to survive that comes with being a Vandivere.

Claire and Alexander decided that they had missed enough time with Michelle. They relocated to Adairsville, residence and businesses. Claire hadn't thought that a bridal shop would be a successful business in Adairsville, but when she appropriately named her shop Jackson's Bridal, the small town of Adairsville made it successful.

Of course, Alexander didn't have to worry about his landscaping business. It had actually become easier to manage in Adairsville than Columbus, especially with his new business partner. James Walker had become a valuable asset to Chamberlin Landscaping, and made it possible for the business to flourish after Tom had his record expunged. With his new six-figure income, he was able to purchase the perfect princess cut diamond engagement ring for Michelle.

The temporary occupants of the Vandivere estate often get together to celebrate life with outdoor barbeques and late night card games. Even though they agreed to never speak of their experiences at the Vandivere estate, they often find themselves discussing that very topic. They were able to decipher the mystery of how Charles Vandivere managed to accomplish such a horrid scheme.

It began with locating Michelle's adoption information with the help of his corrupt attorney, Charlie Dutton. Apparently, he had used his legal power combined with the never-ending monetary supply to obtain the adoption records.

His next step was to put Jacob and Sheila Brown out of the picture. He made a deal with Gauge from the twelve-gauge gang to handle that. In exchange, he would pay off a judge and prosecutor to have three murder charges dropped.

After that, he had to locate Claire and Alexander. That had taken

a while. He eventually had to hire a private investigator of his own to achieve that mission. The investigator had found the Chamberlins, and bugged their house to catch personal conversations that could verify that they were in deed the ones that Charles Vandivere was searching for. That is also how he learned about his three other grandchildren.

Tom had taken it upon himself to uncover the mystery behind this heinous plot. He found all of the documents in Charlie Dutton's office in a filing cabinet that was labeled private. With a little muscular intimidation from Alexander and James, Mr. Dutton was more than glad to hand them over.

Charles Vandivere had concocted this entire ordeal to avenge himself of the wrong that had been done to the family name. He had faked his death, and then had Charlie Dutton to run an ad in the Columbus newspaper for the sole purpose of dragging Claire and Alexander back to Georgia.

Of all of the details about that faithful venture into the world of the Vandivere family, there was one that never could be answered. They concluded that the two spirits they had seen at the house were Sara, the housemaid, and Mrs. Vandivere. What they couldn't figure out was how Charles had managed to produce such a realistic hoax, and how it had managed to follow them all back home?

The End