

A TAPESTRY
of
SECRETS

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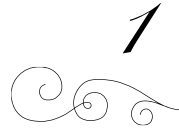
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For Aunt Bess (1904–2006)
who taught me to listen for God
and then patiently waited
for me to do it.





Craggy Mount, Virginia
June 2008

WHY DID SHE AGREE to have lunch with Mark? He'd been out of her life for almost a year now. What had possessed her to say yes when he suggested meeting? Ella peered at her former fiancé over her menu, then refocused on the day's special when he caught her looking.

Honestly, she wasn't even attracted to him anymore. She'd once thought those dense, dark curls and square jaw were handsome, but what she'd once seen as chiseled just looked hard now.

"Don't you have Perrier?" he asked the server.

"We have bottled water," she said.

"Only still, though. Am I right?"

The server looked confused.

"Not effervescent." Mark spoke slowly as though talking to someone who wasn't very bright.

"Oh. Right." The server nodded. "Yes, only still."

Mark sighed. "Fine. Unsweetened tea for me, and Ella, do you still prefer yours sweetened?"

“Yes, please.” She folded the menu and gave the server an apologetic look.

Mark dismissed her with a wave of his hand. “We’ll order in a minute.”

The server raised her eyebrows at Ella and headed for the kitchen.

“I was ready to order.” Ella tried to tamp down her annoyance. Although she wasn’t seeing Mark anymore, she could still be nice. Based on what she knew of him, he could use a few examples of nice in his life.

Mark leaned in. “We’re in no hurry, right? Now that I’m an associate at the firm, I can afford a long lunch now and again. And you, well, artists set their own schedules, don’t they?”

Ella bristled. She bit her lip to avoid speaking too quickly. Gran always said, “Sow in haste, repent in leisure.” She tried to take that to heart. Words were hard to take back once spoken.

“Generally, that’s true, but I do have a deadline I need to meet so I can’t stay too long.” That was almost the truth. She did have a self-imposed deadline that she had pretty well already met, but Mark didn’t need to know the details.

Mark’s face pinched, but then he smoothed it back out and smiled. “Fine. What looks good to you?”

Ella caught the eye of the server, who was approaching with their drinks. “I’ll have the shrimp quesadilla special.”

The server nodded and looked at Mark.

“Are the crab cakes made with lump crab?”

“I think so,” she said.

Mark rolled his eyes. “Bring me the crab cakes.”

As soon as she walked away, Mark shook his head at Ella. “Ten to one it’s backfin.” He smirked. “I could probably bring suit against them for false advertising.”

Ella suppressed a sigh. What was she doing? “But you wouldn’t waste your talents on a frivolous lawsuit.”

Mark considered her. “No. I wouldn’t.”

“So,” Ella began as she smoothed her napkin in her lap, “what have you been up to? Seeing anyone?”

Again, Mark looked annoyed. “Well, as I mentioned, I’m an associate now. It was down to Paul Warren and me, and Paul, well, he just didn’t want it as much as I did. You’ve got to be willing to sacrifice to get ahead at Finley, Robertson, and Ellison.”

“What did you sacrifice?” Ella chastised herself. That wasn’t a nice question.

“Whatever I had to,” Mark said. He watched the server approaching and narrowed his eyes at the plate she set in front of him. He poked a crab cake with his fork and opened his mouth as if to speak.

Ella jumped in. “Thank you so much. It looks delicious.” She widened her eyes at the server, who darted a look at Mark and then scurried away.

“This is not lump crab. I was going to send it back.”

“I’ve found that backfin can be more flavorful,” Ella said, cutting into her quesadilla. “Why don’t you taste it first? And anyway, we’re here to catch up with each other. Let’s not let the food be a distraction. By the way, has the name of the firm changed? Seemed like it used to just be Finley and Robertson.”

Mark’s mouth twitched as he examined her. “You should probably study the law yourself. You’d make a fine defense attorney. Yes, Mr. Ellison is the newest partner. I’m still getting a feel for him.”

Ella sipped her tea. “I suppose that’s one of the advantages of making my quilt hangings—no co-workers or supervisors to figure out.”

Mark sneered, then caught himself. “You’re a fine crafts-person. How’s business, by the way? Still dreaming about running off to your family farm to live the artist’s life?”

Ella bit the tip of her tongue, wishing she’d never confided

her dream of building a studio near her family and creating quilt hangings that would carry the art of Appalachia to the wider world.

“Dreams are just that, I suppose.” She wasn’t going to defend her ambition to Mark. Not now.

Ella suffered through another twenty minutes of chitchat and did her best to enjoy her food, which was really good. She persuaded Mark that she honestly didn’t want dessert and walked through the front door into the heat and humidity of June in southwestern Virginia with a sense of relief. But Mark wasn’t quite done with her yet. He draped an unwelcome arm around her shoulders and pulled her against him.

“We should do this again.” He stopped and turned her to face him. “I’ve missed you. I know you had your reasons for leaving, but I’ve changed. I’d like to try again.”

Ella swallowed and used all her self-control to keep from twisting away from him and running for freedom. “That’s quite a compliment, Mark. I appreciate it. But I really don’t think there’s a future for us.” His face darkened, and she rushed her words. “Thanks for lunch. I wish you luck at the firm—I’m sure you’ll be successful.” She smiled and took a step back so that he had to release her. “After all, you’re quite the eligible bachelor. I’m sure you’ll find the right girl for you.”

Mark’s head drew back, and he sucked air in through his teeth. “Yes, well, I think I know which girl is right for me.” He reached out and tweaked her chin. “We’ll talk again.”

Ella opened her mouth, but Mark had already turned and was disappearing around a corner. She watched him go as dread rose in her belly. Why oh why had she agreed to lunch today?



Perla got out the good sheets with the embroidered pillow slips. She flicked the fitted sheet over the bed in the guest room,

letting it drift into place. She couldn't say why, but she had a feeling someone might come for a visit. And if no one did, it was still nice to use the good linens. Maybe she'd sleep on them herself. She smoothed out the creases and wished it were Ella coming. Perla worried about her granddaughter—maybe more than she should. She sometimes thought Ella was too willing to make sacrifices to please others. And when you got right down to it, there was only one opinion that mattered. A Bible verse popped into Perla's head: "*For they loved human praise more than praise from God.*"

She shook her head. She'd never really tried to correct what she saw in Ella, even though she well knew how destructive it could be to spend too much time worrying over what everyone else thought of you.

She sat on the edge of the bed to rest a moment, reaching up to smooth a stray wisp of white hair back into its twist. Maybe it was time to share her own story. It was common knowledge that she'd had Sadie out of wedlock back in 1949, something no one raised an eyebrow at anymore. It had become an overlooked fact rather than the shame she once carried. What Perla had never shared—what she'd long assumed she never would—were the circumstances and the name of the man she once loved. She'd loved him and wanted to please him enough to risk everything and suffer the consequences. Of course, she wouldn't trade a minute of that pain now, but that was because God had been merciful enough to redeem her.

Perla finished making the bed and leaned against the headboard. She was so very tired. Normally the thought of visitors—actual or hoped for—energized her, but today she felt worn to the bone. Maybe it was thinking about her mistakes and dredging up those days she'd long put behind her. And such thoughts inevitably brought her around to Sadie. Should she try to tell Sadie the truth first? Sadie had refused to listen the

one time she offered to share the tale. Her daughter said that Casewell Phillips was more than father enough for her and she didn't want to sully his memory with another man's name. Perla had felt shamed by her daughter and never mentioned it again, but maybe now was the right time.

Perla stood to go into the kitchen when a wave of dizziness washed over her. She braced against the bedside table, taking deep breaths and fighting nausea until the moment passed. That was the second time she'd felt like that—she should probably mention it to someone. Maybe she'd tell Henry when he came to get her this afternoon. Her son tended to worry less about her health than Margaret did. Perla smiled. Maybe that's why their marriage was so strong—Henry took things in stride while Margaret paid attention to every little detail.

But right now she had some details of her own to tend to. Like baking a caramel cake for supper with her son and daughter-in-law this evening. She'd worry about sharing her story with Ella and Sadie later. Right now she had more pressing things to do.



When Ella returned to her apartment after lunch, the phone was ringing and her message light was blinking. She spied her cellphone on the counter. She was forever forgetting to stick it in her purse when she went out.

Snatching up the receiver, Ella used her other hand to thumb at the keypad on her cell, trying to see if she'd missed any calls. She had. Six.

“Ella, oh thank goodness. Where have you been?”

“Mom? Is everything okay? Looks like I've missed a bunch of calls.”

“Sweetheart, it's your grandmother.” Ella felt like she'd been splashed with ice water. Mom never got worked up.

“What about Gran?”

“We’re here at the hospital with her. Your dad went to fetch her over for the afternoon, and she . . . well, we’re not sure what happened. It might have been a stroke.”

“Is she . . . ?” Ella couldn’t think of what word to use.

“We don’t know much at this point. They said we can go in and see her soon, which seems encouraging. Your father is talking to your aunt Sadie right now. I think she’s planning to come.”

It must be serious if Aunt Sadie was driving in from Ohio. She only came once or twice a year as a rule. Ella wanted to ask if Gran would be okay, but couldn’t bring herself to put something like that into words. Instead she asked, “Should I come?”

“It’s up to you, but I think it would be a good idea. Oh, Henry’s waving me over. I’ll call you again after we see her.”

Ella dropped the phone back into its cradle and considered her options. She could sit tight and wait to hear more, or she could throw a bag together and hurry home. An image of Mark saying they’d talk again floated into her mind. She remembered the primary reason she decided to break up with him and found her decision suddenly easy. She hurried to her bedroom and considered what to pack.



Ella pulled into her parents’ driveway and sat for a moment, staring at the white farmhouse she’d known her entire life. She had the strangest feeling something was different, but she couldn’t say what. She assured herself that everything was going to be okay. Mark would forget about her all over again and Gran would be fine. She shook off the strange feeling and opened the car door, appreciating the cool breeze even on a June evening.

She pasted a smile on her face and put a bounce in her step, but no one came out to greet her. Normally Dad would rush

out, with Mom not far behind. She opened the rattling screen door and called out, “Anybody home?”

Her mother poked her head around the corner from the kitchen. “Oh, Ella, thank goodness. You can come with me to the hospital. I was about to write you a note, but felt terrible about not being here when you arrived.”

Fear shot through Ella. “Is Gran worse? Where’s Dad?”

“He’s at the hospital—he simply won’t leave Perla’s side. Will you drive me over there? I know you just got out of the car—”

“No, that’s okay. I can drive.”

They climbed back into the car, Ella’s luggage still in the trunk, and headed to the hospital in Clarksville.

“So tell me more about what happened,” Ella said.

Her mother took a deep breath and let her head fall back against the seat. Ella noticed, maybe for the first time, that her mother was more than a little gray.

“Henry went to get Perla and found her . . . unresponsive on the kitchen floor. He called for an ambulance, and they got there right away. Now we’re just hoping for the best.”

Ella gripped the steering wheel and tried not to speed. She had so many questions, but looking at her mother’s exhausted expression, she resigned herself to riding in silence the rest of the way to the hospital. She thought she saw Mom’s eyes drooping a bit at one point, but then she jerked and sat upright, rubbing at her face. She gave Ella a weak everything-will-be-all-right smile, but Ella wasn’t buying it. At least not yet.