

The
RECKONING
at
GOSSAMER
POND
JAIME JO WRIGHT



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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ISBN 978-0-7642-3029-5 (trade paper)

ISBN 978-0-7642-3203-9 (cloth)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Control Number: 2017964317

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Cover design by Jennifer Parker

Author is represented by Books & Such Literary Agency.

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Mom

*It's not every mother who would let her daughter
trade in house chores for book reading,
cooking lessons for conjuring up ways to kidnap people,
mowing the lawn in exchange for pretending
to escape imminent death,
and piano lessons for escapades with Nancy Drew,
Trixie Belden, and Anne Shirley.*

Who's the smart one in the family, I ask?

You.

All my love.

Thy soul shall find itself alone
'Mid dark thoughts of the gray tombstone—
Not one, of all the crowd, to pry
Into thine hour of secrecy.

Be silent in that solitude,
Which is not loneliness—for then
The spirits of the dead who stood
In life before thee are again. . . .

Edgar Allan Poe, “Spirits of the Dead”

CHAPTER I

Libby Sheffield

GOSSAMER GROVE, WISCONSIN

1907

Libby Sheffield had never stopped to wonder what she would take specific note of if she ever stumbled upon a dead body. Still, she hadn't expected to pause in consideration of the black, patent leather shoes, the finely cut wool trousers, or the shirtsleeves cuffed at the man's wrists with cuff links boasting a scrolled G for Greenwood, his last name. Taking note of a corpse's clothing was certainly not important, but maybe it was merely a distraction to deter her from letting loose the longest scream she'd ever let scrape from her throat. The man's feet dangled in the air, any thrashing having long since ceased. His face . . . Libby looked away. His face wasn't one she ever wished to see again, though it was more likely than not permanently grafted into her vault of memories.

Movement beside her ripped Libby from her subconscious attempt to manage the repulsive shock that rendered her limbs stiff and her mouth open in horror.

Calvin shuffled forward, his shoes clomping on the wide beam

floors of the Greenwood carriage house. He snatched the wooden stool that had been kicked out from beneath the man. Calvin struggled to right it, pushing up against the man's unbending legs as if positioning his feet on the top would somehow encourage the body to breathe again.

"Calvin . . ." Libby's attempt to put a stop to her friend's efforts halted as she gagged. She clapped her hand over her mouth and spun on her heel, staring out at the morning light that stretched across the Greenwood driveway. The shaft of sunlight seemed to lead a path straight to the carriage house doors where it collided with a darkness that could only be described as evil. The open carriage doors had been what beckoned her inside to begin with, rather than knocking on the house's front door across the drive.

"It's not working, Lollie." Calvin sounded out of breath as he called her by his nickname for her. His desperate tone made Libby summon old remnants of gumption she had long kept dormant.

Libby turned and skimmed the face of Deacon Harrison Greenwood in all his strangled condition, the rope hoisted over a rafter beam and cutting into his neck. She shuddered and fixed her eyes on Calvin, who still hugged the dead man's legs.

"It's too late." Her words echoed through the wooden structure. "Calvin, let him go."

The boy—rather, the man—Libby had long called her best friend gave her a lengthy, searching stare. The kind he so often did when assessing how serious she was, the truth behind her statement, and how to decipher her intent. Libby despised how the town of Gossamer Grove had labeled Calvin as a simpleton. He was more empathetic and intuitive than other adults who were considered "functional." She cursed Calvin's critics many a time in the secret places of her mind. But now she grieved that Calvin could not process the difference between a man fighting for his life and a man whose face was gray and swollen in suffocated death.

"Calvin!" Libby's voice was sharp but not stern. Panic made her hands tremble, and it welled inside her until her own throat

tightened, as if asphyxiating by sheer empathy for the very stiff, very dead Deacon Greenwood.

“We need to get help.” Libby pointed toward the house just across the circular drive, its yellow siding cheery in the dawn.

“But you said he’s dead.” Calvin had released the deacon and now frowned at her.

“Yes, but . . .” Libby couldn’t help but wave her hands, flustered. It wasn’t supposed to have actually happened! The obituary in her pocket—the one foretelling Deacon Greenwood’s death like some horrid omen—she’d thought it must have been a prank. “Please, Calvin.” She started for the Greenwood house, knowing he would follow. He always did.

She was at the doorstep far sooner than she was prepared. It was seven-thirty in the morning and not a time for callers—certainly not for this type of call.

Her chest rose and fell, the soft gray silk of her morning dress ruffling as the breeze picked up and brushed her body with a late spring chill.

“Are you gonna knock, Lollie?”

She licked her lips and swallowed, almost imagining constraints around her throat.

Before she could stop him, Calvin’s knuckles rapped on the door.

What could she say when the door was answered?

Good morning, Mrs. Greenwood. I received a strange missive this dawn when I arrived at the paper. An obituary for your husband. I thought perhaps it was a hoax, but I’m afraid to tell you he is most definitely hanging from the rafters in your carriage house.

That wouldn’t do.

Libby tried to reconstruct her verbiage.

Mrs. Greenwood, I’m so terribly sorry to tell you this, but your husband isn’t well. He’s—

“Dead!” Libby half shouted as the door opened, and the questioning raised brow of Elijah Greenwood, Deacon Greenwood’s son, greeted her.

“Libby Sheffield, what in the name of all that’s holy—?” Elijah stepped out and closed the door firmly behind him, as if to spare his family from her horrible communication skills and the utter impropriety of her early morning call.

Elijah’s questioning stare bounced between Libby and Calvin. He would be used to seeing them together, for Calvin was often her shadow. He would also be used to her inability to compose coherent thoughts when under duress, and even worse, anytime he was present. It didn’t serve her well now. This was not a moment to be consumed by the overwhelming emotions she combatted anytime Elijah was within two feet of her.

Calvin shifted from foot to foot, tongue-tied, as usual, in the presence of the enigmatically serious visage of Elijah Greenwood.

Libby cast her friend a desperate look, but Calvin had taken to wrapping his hands and humming under his breath.

She lifted her eyes to meet Elijah’s. His brows had risen in annoyance, and he tilted his head as he crossed his arms over his chest—his marvelously broad chest that Libby had oft-imagined hiding herself against.

“Libby, this isn’t amusing. Why are you here at the break of dawn?”

Libby stared into Elijah’s brooding eyes. How was she to tell him that his father was in the carriage house, dead? History was a horrid repeat offender. She was always the storm to Elijah’s serenity. She had been since she and Calvin were fifteen, and Elijah the noncompliant participant to her worst and darkest memory of all.

She shook her head. A hapless attempt to steady her thoughts and nerves.

“There was an obituary, and when I read it, I thought it best . . . my father hasn’t been to the newspaper office this morning, so I had to open it, and I—most people don’t submit obituaries before they die—maybe some do. No. No, I don’t think one would, would you? Submit an obituary before you died?”

“Libby!” Elijah’s bark brought her stumbling babble to a swift halt.

Libby widened her eyes and reached for Calvin. Someone to ground her, to make her think sensibly. But all she could see in her mind’s eye was the lifeless face of Deacon Greenwood.

Elijah shook his head, his arms still crossed, his expression one of austerity. “I’m not amused. Slow down, gather your wits, and tell me what on God’s green earth has landed you on our doorstep before I’ve even had my breakfast.”

Libby swallowed hard, fished in her pocket, and rammed the obituary against Elijah’s chest. That was a mistake. The heat from his body warmed through the paper and reached her gloveless palm. Libby dropped her hand, the paper fluttering toward the ground. Elijah snatched it from the air.

Calvin stepped closer to her, and Libby looped her arm around his. Elijah skimmed the words on the page, his countenance shifting from confused to outright fury. He balled the paper in his palm.

“Is this a joke?” he demanded.

Libby sputtered, “That’s what I believed.” Tears clogged her throat. “That’s why I came so early, to check on your father, but—” She pointed toward the carriage house.

Elijah studied her face, then followed the direction of her pointing finger, and his face paled. His arm swung out, shoving her and Calvin aside. He took the stairs in a leap and sprinted across the yard. Every footstep he took was in cadence with the pounding of Libby’s heart. A pounding she could hear in her ears, mocking the grim silence of the body that hung just yards away. A life snuffed out while the world slept, immune to the wickedness of death that haunted the grounds of Gossamer Grove.