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SUSAN MEISSNER, bestselling author of *The Nature of Fragile Things*

B y W a y
o f t h e
M o o n l i g h t

A NOVEL

A silhouette of a person riding a horse against a full moon. The horse is rearing up, and the rider is leaning forward. The moon is a bright yellow circle in the dark blue sky. The background shows dark silhouettes of trees.

ELIZABETH
MUSSER

*By Way
of the
Moonlight*

ELIZABETH
MUSSEY



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To three of my favorite people:

Ashlee Winters Musser, my beautiful new daughter-in-law, who stole our son's heart and then all the family's. You are the answer to the prayers I've been praying for Chris since he was born: a wife who is bright, kind, courageous, and godly. You've become like a daughter to me, and I love you.

Jere W. Goldsmith IV (1934–2022), my beloved father, who lived on Nancy Creek Road for over fifty years and put up with a barn filled with horses for most of that time. Thank you for your love, good humor, and generosity of spirit that richly blessed the lives of your family and many others, most of all mine.

Barbara Goldsmith (1938–2016), my mother and the real Barbara Dale, who was every bit as feisty as her namesake in this novel and whose love for God, family, horses, and Hickory Hills inspired so much of this story.

“A dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world.”

—Oscar Wilde

1

Allie

Atlanta, Georgia

Thursday, March 5, 2020

Dinosaur Bones Found in Buckhead Backyard

It was the silliest of presuppositions, only the alliteration worthy of notice, and I loved alliteration. And yet . . . dinosaur bones.

When I read it online in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, I normally would have laughed out loud. Instead, I burst into tears because I knew exactly whose backyard it was and exactly who those bones belonged to. And it wasn't a dinosaur.

It felt like death to me. I wanted to scream that some crazy backhoe was unearthing my whole life—my history and my future—and would it please, please stop?

My cell beeping a familiar tone pulled me out of my morbid mood.

“Hey, sis. I guess you saw the article in the *AJC*.”

“Yep.”

"I blinked about a thousand times when I read it. Those were almost your exact words from twenty years ago! Remember? 'Someday someone's going to dig up the ring and think they've found dinosaur bones in Nana Dale's backyard!'"

"Of course I remember! It was funny back then. A joke. Now reality is crashing in, and I hate it!"

"Hey, don't go down that road of self-incrimination. This is *not* your fault. You put up a fight worthy of a T. rex."

"Ha. Thanks, bro." But my words sounded flat. I knew that Wick was staring at the article from his computer screen somewhere in France. I thought of my months' long fight and of his frustration at being far away.

Wick had loved genealogy since he learned he was named after our maternal great-grandfather, Jeremiah Wickliffe Butler. He had recently gotten his master's in historic preservation and combined the two skills in many unusual ways, the most recent being a twelve-month contracted job at the Louvre in France. He had already come back to the States for Nana Dale's funeral and the reading of the will back in December. He couldn't leave again.

Nevertheless, I said, "I wish you were here. You could help me straighten out this huge mess."

"It was all straightened out in January. This is not your problem anymore."

"But that's just it! Not being my problem *is* my problem. It was my dream, my life's ambition. Everything." I let out a muffled sob because I did not want to cry on the phone with my brother. "More important, it was *her* dream too. She commissioned me to keep it."

"Hey, I'm sorry. Yeah, I know it stinks, but there's nothing you can do about it. Have you finished cleaning out the house?"

So much for sympathy.

"Almost," I lied. I had yet to pack the first box.

But Wick knew me too well. He gave an exaggerated sigh. "Sis, if you don't go through and pick out what we want, everything will get sold or given away. Please."

"I will. I promise."

"And let the estate-sale agency help you, for heaven's sake."

"I don't trust them."

"It's not their fault. Or our lawyer's. You know that."

Silence on my part.

"C'mon. Let someone help you."

I was thankful he didn't bring up Austin.

"I'm going to see the bones!" I snapped, desperate to change the subject.

"What?"

"The dinosaur bones." I gave a dry chuckle. "I'll bet they haven't found half of them yet."

"For crying out loud, just leave it all alone. You've got enough living things to worry about without . . ." He hesitated, suppressing his deep chortle. "Without helping the *AJC* reporter solve the mystery of the dinosaur bones."

I shut out the thought of childhood games and the muggy summer days when our parents dropped us off at our grandparents' estate while they gallivanted around the world. "Gotta go," I said.

"You behave yourself, sis. Promise me that?"

I didn't answer, and I knew Wick wasn't surprised.

I set down my cell phone and stood up abruptly, dislodging my cat, Maggie, from my lap. She glared at me, green eyes intense, fluffy white fur leaving its residue on my black leggings. On purpose.

I grabbed the keys to my Hyundai, left my eleventh-floor studio apartment in Buckhead that overlooked Peachtree and East Paces Ferry roads, and drove ten minutes down West Paces Ferry to Nancy Creek Road and the neighborhood that housed so many memories and so many dreams.

The people who used to live in my grandmother's Buckhead neighborhood had built their homes with their bare hands when Atlanta was still recovering from the Civil War and the roads were made of dirt. They'd worked hard, scraped by, and loved their neighbors. But now it was a mishmash of old wealth and new wealth and weasel-eyed contractors destroying perfectly beautiful

homes so they could plant cluster mansions on land that used to boast of columned manors and horse stables.

I slowed down in front of my grandparents' house, the one that was supposed to become *my* house. It sat far back from the road, tall hickories blocking the view so that one had to peek through an abundance of new spring leaves to see the redbrick-faced beauty just over a small hill of manicured fescue. I passed the rock driveway and the house on my right and turned into a second rock driveway.

My little Hyundai bumped down a steep descent that eventually headed back up the hill, old hickories and dogwoods and oaks lining the road. *These woods are lovely, dark, and deep.* I quoted Robert Frost in my mind as a squirrel dashed across and up a tree, fat gray tail swishing as it climbed frantically to a waiting limb. My stomach lurched. How I loved these woods and the wildlife that happily inhabited the property.

"For heaven's sake, don't let them cut down the healthy trees!" my grandmother had ordered—so the story went—when an ice storm had knocked down a dozen of them, along with power lines all over the city, in 1973, long before I was born.

"They're gonna level it all now, Nana Dale," I whispered as I parked the car in the clearing. I shook away the anger, choosing instead to get out and take the path on the left, back up the hill, an acre or two farther behind the house, instead of veering to the right on the flat rocky path that led to the barn.

I arrived in the riding ring, where a backhoe stood, its steel-cage mouth gaping empty beside a mound of Georgia red clay. I stared at the flattened expanse where the wooden fence and the jumps and the paddocks and the trees used to stand.

Dinosaur bones, indeed.

The driver of the backhoe paid me no attention. Dressed in mud-caked overalls, his back to me, he was stamping out a cigarette in the clay. And as his smoke swirled lackadaisically in the air, I heard Nana Dale's umpteenth warning: *"Never ever carry a match near the barn!"*

“How dare you smoke here!” I shouted. “When the whole thing could go up in flames!”

He turned slowly, looked over at me with a smirk, lifted his bushy gray eyebrows, and motioned all around him to the red clay that went on for yards and yards around us. “Ain’t much chance of that, Miss Allie.”

I caught my breath. “Barnell!”

I walked over and threw my arms around his hunched shoulders.

“Miss Allie,” he repeated, a smile spreading across his face, the wrinkles interspersed with a thick gray beard. “You ain’t s’posed to be traipsing around here, you know.”

“I know, and I don’t care. How’d you get to be the one to dig everything up? Do you know the contractor?”

Barnell made a nasty face. “Everyone knows that contractor and his reputation.” He shrugged. “I was real sorry to hear your grandmother sold it to that scoundrel, Miss Allie. Figured the least I could do was be the one to dig it up.”

“Thank you for being here. What a nice surprise on such an awful day. Came out of retirement to do it, didn’t you?”

He gave me a sympathetic nod. “I’m real sorry about all of this,” he repeated.

“Have they taken the bones away?” The question came out harshly, but when I turned to look at Barnell, he was laughing, his beard moving up and down with the rhythm of his chuckle.

“Dinosaur bones! Of all the inane things to say.”

I shrugged back tears. Funny how I felt like giggling and bawling at the same time.

“How many of them did you bury back here, Barnell? Three?”

“Yes, ma’am. And my papa buried two others. And I ain’t dug up but the one.”

We grinned at each other.

“Can I see the bones?”

“C’mon,” he said, motioning with his head as he swiped his tanned face with a ratty bandanna, then wiped the back of his neck, bright red from the sun.

We walked to the center of what used to be a riding ring, with an outside track that was one-quarter of a mile around. I closed my eyes and saw myself as a teen cantering around the periphery on my mare, then cutting diagonally across, where she and I jumped effortlessly over the brick wall—made of plywood and painted red and white—and then took five strides before going up and over the white coop. Then we'd weave between several tall pines and canter around a thick oak before heading back across the ring in another diagonal, leaping over a row of green and white poles, all the jumps that had made up my childhood and teenaged years.

Now the whole thing was a flattened bed of red clay, except for where it looked like a crater had fallen from the sky, creating a mammoth indentation in the ground.

Barnell and I walked over to the gaping hole. "Had three reporters over here yesterday morning," he said with a chuckle.

I glanced up at him. "How'd they find out about the bones?"

He shrugged, then threw his head back in his robust laughter. "You called it in, didn't you?"

"I couldn't help it, Miss Allie. I remember all them times when I was over here repairing a fence or fixing the waterline or something else and you and your big brother would be tearing around this ring playing that you were the Flintstones and chanting about burying dinosaur bones. Thought it was worth a good story."

"And they actually believed you?"

Forensic experts will be examining the bones in the next days to determine their age, the article in the *AJC* had stated.

I took a seat in the clay, beside the hole.

"Any idea which one this is?"

"It's No-No Nicotine," he said, reaching for another cigarette, which I found delightfully ironic.

"Sweet Nicky," I whispered. "She was the last one to be buried here, wasn't she?"

"Yep, she was."

"Who was the first?"

“It was your Nana Dale’s pony. . . . Can’t remember his name, but he was buried up here before I was born. And then there was a mare called Krystal, I believe. My papa buried her up here when I was about ten or eleven. And of course, there was that beautiful dappled gray mare, the one she called Essie. I helped my daddy bury her. Like near ripped all our hearts out, that one.”

Essie. Oh yeah. Of course. I’d heard plenty of larger-than-life stories about my grandmother and her prized thoroughbred. In the house were numerous black-and-white photos of my grandmother on that mare, soaring over jumps, or standing together, Nana with her fresh-faced smile wide, holding a silver trophy. My grandmother used to serve homemade biscuits or a hock of ham on silver platters engraved with things like *Chastain Park Shriners Hunter Show, Champion, 1947*.

Nana Dale had told me stories about her beloved mare from the time I was small. “*Most striking markings I’d ever seen on a horse*,” she’d say. “*Steel gray with dapples as white as snow, a flaxen mane and tail, and white legs, every one but her right back leg, which was pitch-black up to the hock.*”

I hadn’t known what *flaxen* meant, but when I looked it up, I was disappointed to find it basically meant “off-white.” I’d imagined a much more exotic color.

Barnell peered down in the hole, then knelt and retrieved a bone bigger than any human specimen. “Yep. Still can picture your grandma out here, yelling at me to get that hole dug for Nicky faster, ‘before the police come around and arrest us for burying horses in the Atlanta city limits.’”

I remembered it too. I was no more than six or seven when I had sat, much like I was sitting at the moment, in a pile of red clay that Barnell’s backhoe had dumped to the side of the hole. I’d walked over and peered in before he could grab me by my ponytail. The body of a bay mare lay in the hole.

“*Why’s Nicky sleeping like that?*” I’d asked, even though my mother had explained to me the night before that my grandmother’s ancient mare was dead.

Now I reached into that same hole and let my hands wrap around a thick bone. "It's been over twenty years, hasn't it?"

"Yep. 'Bout nearly killed your grandmom, burying that one, almost as bad as when she buried Essie."

Every horse my grandmother buried had cost her dearly. Nana Dale had been one of the feistiest, most stubborn women on the planet. Hard like steel. Except about her horses.

And now the legacy she had wanted me to prolong, the property that had been part of the family since right after the Civil War, was sold, and the back acres were being cleared so that the rocky road from the street could be paved and three new houses planted in the riding ring, where so many of my memories were made.

"Thought ya might want to keep this, though."

Barnell handed me a metal box, and as I opened it, my eyes clouded over.

When my grandmother buried her beloved horses, she sent each into the ground with a small metal box. Nicky's body had long since decayed, but the metal box, covered in clay, was intact.

I opened it and saw four rusted horseshoes. For reasons that made no sense to anyone but Nana Dale, she would have a blacksmith remove the horseshoes before burying each horse. "*Wouldn't want them to be uncomfortable up there in eternity*" was her odd explanation.

I stared at the horseshoes. "We never did figure out why she buried these separate from the horses, did we?"

Barnell tilted his head and almost looked embarrassed. "Truth is, Miss Allie, long time ago, your grandmom told me, 'Barnell, if I ever lose Hickory Hills, promise me you'll dig up the bones.'

"Thought your grandmom had suddenly lost more of her marbles till she explained it." Here Barnell's eyes softened again as he pointed to the tin box. "She said she wanted you to have the horseshoes. Said you would put 'em to good use, Miss Allie, like she used to. Said it would be her gift to you. She was mighty insistent. Made me swear on Essie's grave that I'd do it." His grin was bittersweet.

I swallowed twice, cleared my throat, and took a deep breath as the memories cascaded around me. One summer when I was about twelve, I had watched as Nana Dale nailed old horseshoes to wooden plaques so that each shoe stuck out at a right angle, allowing us to hang a bridle or a lead shank or a halter from it. Before the nailing, she'd allowed me to stain the wood and burn each horse's name onto a plaque with the woodburning kit she'd given me for Christmas that year.

After that, whenever a new horse came to board at the barn, we'd repeat the same ritual. Nana Dale kept a stash of old horseshoes in the tack room just for that purpose. Then the plaques would be attached to the wall beside each horse's stall.

"Jeff Jeffrey was the first one to give me the idea when I was a girl not much older than you," Nana Dale had explained. "I think it's mighty appropriate that we continue what was started so long ago."

I stared down at the four horseshoes and the yellowed piece of monogrammed stationery where Nana Dale had written in her lovely cursive script *No-No Nicotine (1962-1995)*.

"Horseshoes are for good luck, Allie," she'd often remind me as we worked. "In this life, we need all the luck we can get." The first time she'd said it, she'd stared out the window in the tack room where we were working and said, "I don't like to call it luck, though. I call it faith."

I'd never thought of my grandmother as especially religious. She attended church, as did most people her age. But Nana Dale was filled with secrets and surprises, not the least of which was barnyard wisdom that often included phrases that sounded a lot like they came from the Good Book.

I lifted the horseshoes out of the box and cradled them in my hands. How many times had I stood outside the barn area down below watching as the blacksmith shod one of the horses or ponies?

"Thanks," I said, trying to push past the knot that had lodged itself in my throat. "Thanks for convincing the contractor to let you

be the one to dig them up.” Then, staring straight at him, I asked, “You’ll call me when you unearth the other ones, won’t you?”

He met my gaze with his dark brown eyes still twinkling. “Don’t you narrow those perty turquoise eyes at me, young lady. I knew you’d read it in the paper, Miss Allie. I was just waiting for you to show up.” Then he shrugged again. “But yeah, I’ll call you when I bring up them other bones.” He fished in his overalls and brought out an ancient cell phone. “I got your number in here somewhere.” He let his eyes roam the whole expanse. “Might take me a while to do all the diggin’.”

“Taking your time, aren’t you?”

“They hired me as the expert to dig up them trees, which I done. Now I can take all the time I need. I hinted that we might find a passel of other bones. Keeps me busy and keeps that weasel away from the barn.”

“He’s gonna tear it down in a blink.”

“I know.”

“When will they implode the house? Has he mentioned a date?”

Barnell fiddled with another cigarette. “Believe they’ve set the date for March twenty-eighth.”

His eyes bore into me.

Three weeks away. Three weeks, and there’d be no going back. Three weeks, and my family could let out a sigh of relief. *“Thank goodness she’s finally got to give up! It’s about killed her, trying to save it. Nothing worth saving now.”*

Barnell interrupted my thoughts. “Where’s that fiancé of yours gone off to, Miss Allie?”

“He’s not around anymore.” *“Couldn’t save that either,”* I reprimanded myself silently.

“Sorry to hear that. What, don’t he have no sense in his head?”

“I think he has way too much sense,” I mumbled. *“Allie, sweetie, sometimes it feels like you love the land more than you love me.”* “He got real tired of me spending all my time trying to save the house and the property.”

“Know how much this place means to you. To all of you.”

“Yeah.”

I’d wanted to argue with Austin when he said it, but then I admitted that perhaps he was right.

And now I’d lost the land and the house and the guy I loved. All of it was gone.

I drove away, the rusted horseshoes sitting on the seat beside me, taunting me with thoughts of good luck when I knew all my luck had run out right when Barnell’s backhoe opened its mouth and started to chew.