



WAITING
for
SUNRISE

a cedar key novel

EVA MARIE EVERSON

a cedar key novel • book 2

W A I T I N G
for
S U N R I S E

EVA MARIE EVERSON



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Prologue

Spring 1964

Patsy Milstrap sat on the passenger's side of the jet-black '63 Ford Falcon Futura. Her husband, Gilbert—whose face seemed transfixed on the road before them—rested an arm over the steering wheel as though they'd not a care in the world.

Earlier in the drive from their South Carolina home to Cedar Key, Florida, and as the sun grew warmer, Gilbert had lowered the convertible top. It was now midafternoon. In spite of the scarf tied around her head and secured under her chin, Patsy's long hair had been whipped to a frenzy. Her face felt sunburned. She would ask Gilbert to raise the roof, but she couldn't find the energy to do so.

Besides, she liked knowing her body could still feel . . . something. Lately, she'd only wanted to slip between the sheet and the coverlet of their bed—the one she'd shared with Gilbert for nearly fourteen years now—cover her head, and sleep. Not her devotion to her husband nor her love for their children—five, ranging from four years of age to

thirteen—could penetrate the pain she'd been living with since the first had been born.

Or had it been forever?

Clearly she was dying, she thought. Clearly no one could hurt this much and survive.

And the pain . . . so deep . . . maybe even Jesus couldn't reach it.

So deep . . . like the blue-green water on both sides of the road leading into Cedar Key, where Gilbert had rented a cottage for them. They would stay a week, he'd said. Just the two of them. The children could stay with his sister Janice and her husband. And their children. It would be like going off to church camp, he'd said, while Patsy and he would come for the arts festival he had heard about.

She liked art, didn't she? he'd asked.

And they would go boating. Take bike rides. Relax in the sunshine. It had rained so much in Trinity lately. It would do them *both* good.

Okay, she'd said. Okay.

"And maybe," he'd hinted with a wink, "we can snuggle like we used to."

Patsy closed her eyes at the thought. If she came up pregnant again . . . it would be worse than the other times. Every time, a little worse. Every time . . .

"We're nearly there," Gilbert chimed from beside her.

She opened her eyes, turned her head slowly toward him, and forced her lips to curl upward into a smile. She could do that much, right?

"Was that a smile I just saw?" he said. The deep dimple of his cheek came into view. "See there? One minute in Cedar Key and you're getting better." He squared his shoulders. "I knew this was a good idea."

Patsy looked back to the front of the car. A town—a little harbor town—was coming into view. Fishermen on a dock. Weathered hands pulling crab baskets from the water and into a boat. The scent of the marsh washed over her.

In spite of its pungency, she liked it.

“Are you hungry, Patsy? I’m ravenous.”

She looked at him again, nodded. “Yes. A little.”

The dimple returned. “See there?” he repeated. “Another good sign.” The car slowed as they entered the city limits. “Let’s get to the cottage, settle in, clean up, and find this place Walter told me about.”

“Sikes?”

“Sikes’s Seafood. I’ll bet the food is about as fresh as anything you can get on the coastline.”

Patsy inhaled deeply. She liked a good fried shrimp. And deviled crab. She hadn’t had that in ages. That with a baked potato . . .

The cottage was everything it had been touted to be. The cottony-white walls, the dark, rich furniture, the white eyelet curtains and bed linens, and the polished hardwood floors helped Patsy begin to relax. To feel that maybe her life was going to be okay. Even if only for a week.

A week in Cedar Key.

Patsy unpacked their luggage while Gilbert showered. When he was done, she took a quick bath, worked the tangles out of her hair, then brushed it until it shone. She worked it into a long braid that snaked over her shoulder before dressing in a knee-length mint-green A-line skirt with matching sleeveless blouse. She wore no jewelry, no makeup. Only coral-colored lipstick.

The way Gilbert liked it.

“Will you put the top up on the car?” she asked as they stepped from the front porch of the cottage. “It took forever to get the rats out of my hair.”

Her husband slipped an arm around her waist. “Anything for my lady.”

She sighed as he opened the car door for her. Allowed her to get in gracefully. Closed it. She watched him sprint around the front to his side.

He is trying so hard.

A few minutes later they arrived at the seafood restaurant near the harbor they’d heard about from Walter, one of Gilbert’s business associates. Walter had also told them about the tropical healing balm of the island.

Already a line was forming at the front door of the establishment. Patsy glanced at her watch. It was only five o’clock. She thought they would have been early enough. Maybe the food really was that good.

She waited at the end of the line while Gilbert gave the restaurant’s hostess their name. He returned a minute later. “Fifteen minutes. That’s not bad.”

Over the fifteen minutes, she found herself drinking in the sights and sounds of Cedar Key. Already she liked it here. It called to her, like an old friend, and made her feel as though she’d been here before.

Seagulls soared overhead. Patsy craned her neck to watch them, then lowered her chin to view them through the glass walls of the restaurant as they dove into the rhythmic waves below.

They inched closer to the inside of the restaurant. Gilbert slapped his flat stomach, drawing Patsy’s attention from the white birds to the pressed white of his button-down shirt. “I smell good ole fried seafood. I think I’ll have shrimp. What about you?”

She strained to make the decision. “Deviled crab.”

He wrapped his arm around her waist again and squeezed. “Somehow I knew you’d say that.”

“You know me well.”

“Since you were no more than a pup.”

“Milstrap, party of two?” the hostess called over the heads of the few hopeful patrons left standing in front of them.

Gilbert raised his hand. “That’s us.”

They entered the restaurant, Patsy behind the hostess, Gilbert behind her. Sikes’s Seafood was all wood and glass. The walls sported lifesavers and nets with shells caught between the yarn. Large mounted fish. Stuffed replicas of tropical birds perched on beachwood. It was typical tropical, and to add to the setting, the Beach Boys sang “Surfin’ USA” from a jukebox.

The hostess stopped short before turning toward a man in dress casual attire. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she said to Patsy and Gilbert. “Just a minute, please, while I ask my boss a question.” She returned her attention to the man. “Mr. Liddle?”

At the sound of the name, Patsy felt the air suck into her lungs before she heard the intake of breath. Gilbert’s hands gripped her forearms.

The man stopped. Turned toward them. Smiled briefly at them. “Yes, Brenda . . .”

How could it be, Patsy wondered. How was it that here, in Cedar Key, she stared into a face she hardly recognized.

And into eyes she would never forget.

1

Summer 1946

With the war a lasting memory and the manufacturing of appliances back in full swing, thirteen-year-old Patsy Sweeny and her thirty-year-old mother went to town to splurge on a new Maytag wringer washing machine. Not so much for herself, Bernice Liddle told her husband Ira—a man as tight with a penny as he was firm on her role as wife and mother—but to enable her to bring in other people’s wash. It was for a good cause too, she’d told him, what with so many women still working outside of their homes.

“And goodness knows,” she told Patsy as they drove to Gibson’s Department Store—a place Patsy always thought smelled of new tires and cleaner—on the day of purchasing, “we could use the extra money.” She cut a sharp eye toward her daughter. “You tell Mr. Liddle I said that and I’ll deny it, you hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Patsy replied. She was smart enough to know the rules of the house. No one demeaned her stepfather. At least, not to his face.

“You’re a good daughter,” Mama said after several minutes.

Patsy knew her mother had been thinking. Thinking about what she'd just let slip. Thinking about what would surely happen if Mr. Liddle found out she'd said it, even to her own child. Her words of praise were no more than a line of insurance, but Patsy felt pleased to hear them anyway.

Patsy looked out the open passenger window of the oversized black 1936 Chevy coupe Mr. Liddle had purchased for his wife the year before. "To use when you have to do your shopping or if the kids get sick," he told her when he brought it home. "Not for any running around to visit with your friends."

As if Mama had many friends for visiting.

"Sure is hot out there." Patsy tilted her face toward the June sun then drew her head back into the car. "The beans are already near about drying up before I can pick 'em, and it's not even July yet."

"You just have to get out there earlier, is all."

Patsy's eyes scanned lazily from the side of the long dirt road they traveled to the woman behind the steering wheel. Mama was only seventeen years her senior, yet she looked and seemed so much older. Like a grandmother instead of a mother.

"Yes, ma'am."

They purchased the washer for \$54.95 plus tax. As her mother counted out the last of the loose change, Patsy ran her fingertips along the wringers of the floor model. She listened when Mr. Gibson said someone would deliver it to the house within the next few days. Then her mother gave their address and phone number—931—and asked that someone call before they arrived. "To make sure we're home," she said, as though they had a busy social schedule.

Patsy looked up, wondering where else they'd be when

the washer came. She heard her mother whisper, “Will you let others know, Mr. Gibson, that I’m taking in wash now?”

Patsy walked away from the embarrassment of the moment. Not that she was ashamed of taking in wash; she merely felt the sting of her mother’s humiliation.

But a week later, that machine became her own cross to bear. While her friends from school met at Cassel Creek on hot summer afternoons, Patsy stayed busy washing clothes for her family while her mother took care of what felt like the rest of Casselton, Georgia. Her days became endless hours of caring for her little brothers, five-year-old Harold and four-year-old Billy, picking and putting up vegetables from the dusty fields behind their two-story bungalow, and washing clothes.

The washing was one thing. The ironing and the folding and the putting them away was another.

They kept the machine next to the back door on the wide, screened back porch. Twice a week Patsy pulled the washer from the outside wall, ran the electric wire to a kitchen plug, added water and Duz detergent to the tub, allowed it to agitate for a few minutes, and added the clothes. While they washed, she ran clean water into a wooden rinse tub, which she then dragged to the back side of the washer. After flipping the chrome switch of the machine to the “off” position, she pulled the soapy clothes into the rinse tub, added another load to the wash, and began the backbreaking task of wringing the individual pieces.

When it was all done, she hung the clothes on the line before setting everything to rights on the back porch, including returning the Duz powder to its place under the skirted kitchen sink.

Oh, how her mother loved Duz. Their kitchen had been

furnished by the goblets, dishes, dishrags, and drying cloths that came inside each new box, which meant she didn't have to spend any extra of the allowance Mr. Liddle gave but could still have nice things.

On the days she wasn't washing the laundry, Patsy ironed it. And on the days she didn't iron the laundry, she dusted the house and broom-swept the carpets. Living on a dirt road, in a house that sat on a plot of land without a blade of grass, meant the house always stayed dusty and the rugs sometimes felt like a sandbox to bare feet. To keep from stirring the dust, she used the sprinkling bottle from laundry days and cast droplets of water on top of the worn wool before sweeping. She thought it a good idea and her mother had even praised her for it. Life was too hot and too busy. And her body ached at night from the stress of her labor, but in the morning she felt all right.

Then came a day in August.

Her mother had been overwhelmed with other people's laundry and two little boys who'd eaten too much of the taffy they'd pulled the day before. "Patsy," she called out the back door as Patsy walked up from the vegetable garden; a bushel of freshly picked field peas rocked against her hip.

Patsy shielded her eyes against the late morning sunlight and squinted to the back of the house. "I got enough peas to shell for a month of Sundays," she called back.

"Never mind that now," her mother hollered.

Patsy made her way to the unpainted wooden steps leading up to the porch before she set the bushel basket at her feet. "What do you need, Mama?"

"I need you to help me out here, clearly I do. I'm running back and forth with a chamber pot for your brothers and trying to stay on task with this wash here. Mr. Liddle will

be home tonight from his sales route, and if he sees the dust that's built up in the house . . . well, you know how he gets. Go put on one of my aprons and get to work in the house, now.”

Patsy ascended the steps and got right to it. Sometime later she went to the kitchen in search of her mother, finding her there stooped over the sink, wearing her old housedress and a pair of Red Goose shoes in need of resoling, washing the peas from the earlier picking. “Mama, I dusted the whole house except for your room.”

Her mother glanced over her shoulder. Her eyes went first to the kitchen wall clock and then to Patsy. She raised her hand to press against the brush rollers that held her hair in tight curls. “Lord-a-mercy, I gotta do my hair, so go ahead and dust in there too.”

Patsy did as she was told before her mother could change her mind. Oh, how she longed to be in that room . . . to touch the dainty items that rested atop her mother's vanity. She walked into the room as though entering a church—reverently, taking it all in. Every bit of furniture, every framed picture, every needlepoint pillow from her mother's hand.

She moved to the bedside tables, ever so careful to pick up the lamps, dust under them, and return them to the exact spot she'd found them. Patsy swallowed hard when she came to Mr. Liddle's chest of drawers. If he thought for a moment that Patsy—rather than his wife—had been the one to touch his things . . .

She drew in a deep breath, picked up each item one at a time—the brush and comb set, the matching lint roller, the small jewelry box placed perfectly in the middle. A library book—*Listen, Germany* by Thomas Mann—rested along one edge. Patsy picked it up to run the oily cloth over the wood. Thinking herself quite wise, she laid the book on the

white crocheted bedspread her mother had made from a Star Book pattern so as not to get oil stains on the back cover of the book.

Her mother's vanity was neatly arranged. Her lotions, perfume, and dusting powder were to the left of the oval mirror. To the right, a faux gold filigree lipstick holder, with Cupid playing a guitar in the outside center, held four tubes of lipstick with the matching vanity set angled to the left in the center. Patsy glanced toward the opened door. With a captured breath, she removed each item and placed it on the padded stool at her knees. She oiled the wood until the patina reflected her image. Before replacing her mother's pretties, she pulled a dry cloth from the pocket of the apron and wiped each one as though she were drying a freshly bathed infant.

Before finishing the vanity, she inhaled from both the perfume bottle and the dusting powder tin and imagined herself getting ready for a fancy party, the likes she'd probably never see. When everything was as it had been before she entered the room, she straightened and smiled. She'd done a good job. Maybe good enough that Mama would let her do it again.

"Patsy?" The voice came from behind her; it was neither harsh nor gentle.

"Oh, Mama," she said turning. "You startled me."

"Hurry, child, before Mr. Liddle comes home."

Patsy crossed the room to where her mother stood framed by the doorway. "I did a good job for you, Mama," she said.

"I know you did, now come on. The boys need a bath and the dining room needs preparing and then I want you to comb out my hair."

The ritual was always the same. As soon as Mr. Liddle returned from his sales trips, her mother put away his traveling

things. For a while, he played with his sons, then smoked a pipe and read the paper in wait for supper.

He never said a word to Patsy other than, “Girl, you been helping your mama?”

“Yes, sir.” She tried not to look him in the eyes—they were steel gray and sharp as a shark’s tooth. She just replied and then went on her way.

It had always been like that between them. He only spoke to her—really spoke to her—when he was giving her a whipping. On those occasions—not as frequent since her twelfth birthday—his words came in staccato beats. “What. Did. I. Tell. You. About . . .” Then he’d finish with whatever he’d told her about that she’d done or hadn’t done to his liking. It made no never-mind. One time he hit her across the back so hard she lost her breath. That night Mama tucked her into bed, asked if she was all right, then said, “Just don’t make him mad, Patsy, and you’ll be fine.”

He never hit the boys. For that, at least, Patsy was grateful. But he’d hit Mama a few times—most often a slap across her face. Those times he called her names like “stupid” and “worthless,” said she was lucky he came along when he did to rescue her sorry self from “that pit five-and-dime and Mr. Harvey Jenkins.”

Patsy didn’t know what that meant exactly, but she knew better than to ask.

After supper—the night of the bedroom dusting and Mr. Liddle’s return—Patsy said good night to her mother, who sat knitting in her overstuffed chair in the living room, the one Patsy had polished to a shine earlier in the day. She added a quick “Glad you’re home safe, Mr. Liddle” to the man whose oversized frame filled the chair sitting catty-corner on the other side of the room, listening to *Abbott*

Mysteries on the Philco console radio between him and his wife.

“Good night, Patsy,” her mother said.

“See to it that you check on the boys before turning in,” Mr. Liddle answered as he shifted his pipe from one side of his mouth to the other. Even from where she stood, Patsy could hear the black Bakelite bit as it raked across his teeth, and it made her shudder.

She did as she was told—the boys were both sleeping in their upstairs bedroom, the one right across the hall from their parents’—and then returned downstairs to her own simple but comfortable room. She stripped out of the clothes she’d changed into for supper—they weren’t fancy but they weren’t ripe with the smell of field peas and lemon oil either—out of her underthings and into the pretty, thin pink cotton gown Mama had made for her.

Sometime later—she couldn’t be sure how long since she’d slipped between the cool sheets of her bed—she heard the racket coming from upstairs. Her mother’s voice pleading. Mr. Liddle’s voice demanding. She bounded out of bed and into her mother’s cast-off slippers. Patsy was out the door and halfway up the stairs before she had time to think better of it.

“I’ve told you and told you,” Mr. Liddle shouted. “Haven’t I?” Patsy heard the slap of flesh against flesh. “Haven’t I?”

“Please, Ira,” her mother whimpered. “The boys . . .”

Patsy took a few more steps up the stairs and stopped. She hardly breathed, but her eyes blinked rapidly. She’d never interfered in her mother’s fights with Mr. Liddle before, but this time sounded . . . different.

“A man has to know,” Patsy heard him say as though spoken through clenched teeth, “that he can leave his home in proper order and come home to it the same way.”

“And you have.” Her mother’s voice shook.

Patsy heard something—someone—stumbling across the room followed by the sound of something else dropping to the floor.

The book! She’d left it on the bed, had failed to return it to the chest of drawers.

“I expect that when I leave this house, you and you alone come into this room. Haven’t I made myself clear on that issue?”

Mama’s answer came in sobs. “But . . . if you knew . . . how hard today . . . has been for me . . .”

“Stop your nagging.” He swore—using the “unpardonable sin” expletive, according to Patsy’s best friend, Mitzy. He said it again and a third time. “I don’t want the girl in my bedroom. And if I have to beat that into you, then so be it.”

Patsy heard the sound of his belt buckle coming undone, the swish of it leaving the loops, the first smack of it against her mother. She fled up the remainder of the stairs, pushed open the nearly closed bedroom door, and screamed, “Stop it! Stop it! If you’re going to hit someone, hit me! I left the stupid book on the bed!”

She reasoned later that it had been the shock of seeing her standing there and of hearing her shouting like a mad-woman that stopped Mr. Liddle from hitting her mother that night. That it had been the sight of her nearly nude body silhouetted by the night’s bright moonlight bursting through the gauzy drapes and open windows that caused him to stop seeing her as “the girl” and start seeing her as she soon was to be. A woman, fully budded. No longer did the gray of his eyes hold steel ready to rip her to shreds. Instead, they held something more monstrous than that.

Something she'd never witnessed before but knew to stay away from.

And—she knew—no longer did his hands itch to hit her, but to embrace her. To stroke her. To touch her in a way that would leave her permanently scarred.

2

Patsy loved riding the school bus. And why shouldn't she? It was there, squeezed together on the last seat to the right, that she and her best friends Mitzy Powell and Jane Cartwell shared the secrets and laughter that came from being thirteen. School had been in session only a week, and already it was unfolding to be a banner eighth grade year.

On that first Friday afternoon, the girls sat huddled together.

"How'd you do on the spelling test?" Jane asked Mitzy.

"I made a ninety."

Patsy looked at Mitzy. "Me too. What word did you miss?"

"Ominous."

Patsy smiled. "Me too. I forgot the last *o*."

The three friends giggled. "It's still *unbearably* hot," Mitzy said. She threw the back of her hand against her forehead, a dramatic flare she'd learned from hours spent at the picture show. Her dark curls danced about her face as the bus bounded down the rutted road outside Casselton. "I say we meet tomorrow afternoon at the creek for a swim." She looked from Patsy to Jane and her dimples deepened. "In?"

"I'll say," Jane said. Slender fingers raked blonde hair up

from her swanlike neck. “If it weren’t for having to babysit my little sister this afternoon, I’d be there today.”

For the last half hour, Patsy, who sat closest to the window, had felt sweat roll from her armpits down her sides. Her handmade cotton shirt became damp in places. She peered out the half-opened glass, watched the scenery go by in a blur of green. She held back the mousy brown hair her mother had trimmed just the night before—had insisted on it, in fact—with her left hand, keeping it away from her face and eyes. Turning to her friends with a shake of her head, she said, “I wanna go. Honest I do. But . . . Mr. Liddle returns tomorrow night and it will all depend on what Mama has for me to do.” Her upper lip curled as she said, “I’ve got field peas to shell this afternoon too. Mountains of them. I declare, sometimes I think my fingers are going to fall off from all the shelling, and I’m sure she’s going to have me picking more tomorrow besides.”

Mitzy, who sat on the aisle side, leaned over Jane and rested her forearm on the seat back in front of them. “Sneak away, then.”

Jane’s eyes grew as large as Patsy’s felt. “Why, she can’t do that, Mitzy.”

Mitzy’s expression grew stern. “Why not? All she has to do is say she’s picking the peas, which is pretty much all she ever does. We can meet up at the creek, swim, then go to the lower lot and help her gather a bushel.” Her dark eyes darted up at Patsy. “We won’t stay long, Patsy.” She held up three fingers. “On my honor as a Girl Scout.”

Tempting as it sounded . . . “I can’t unless Mama says it’s okay,” Patsy said. “I want to. I do. But if Mr. Liddle found out I’d done anything without Mama’s okay . . .” The memory of weeks earlier still seared her memory.

Jane crossed her arms over the schoolbooks resting in her lap. “I don’t know how you stand living in the same house with that man.”

“That makes two of us, Patsy,” Mitzy added.

Patsy shrugged. “He’s all right, I guess. He has his occasional outbursts, but he’s been a good provider, and like Mama says, he took the two of us in when nobody else would have.”

Patsy returned her attention to the world outside, drawing near the road where Mitzy and Jane would be dropped off to walk the rest of the way to their homes. Another mile or so down the road and it was Patsy’s turn.

She hadn’t told either of her friends about what had happened. Hadn’t shared with them that she was doing everything in her power to avoid Ira Liddle. He’d almost cornered her once, since that night. The previous Saturday she’d been in the storage pantry, putting up mason jars full of green beans and fresh peaches she and Mama had canned that day. When she heard footsteps over the tune she hummed, she peered over her shoulder expecting to find her mother there. “I got it, Mama,” she said. Then, “Oh. I didn’t . . . I thought you’d gone to town, Mr. Liddle.” If she hurried, she could be done with the chore and get out. Patsy reached toward the deep oval-shaped basket beside her feet where a few more jars stood at attention. “I’m just helping Mama . . . putting up these cans of beans and peaches.”

Her hands shook; she could barely grip the jar’s mouthpiece.

“You’re a good helper for your mama, aren’t you, girl.” It wasn’t a question. It wasn’t even meant to be a compliment.

Patsy’s insides churned. “I try, Mr. Liddle.” She gripped the handle of the basket and then wrapped it in her arms, pressing it against her middle.

Her stepfather took another step into the room, his frame all but blocking the light from the kitchen. “Why don’t you call me Ira, Patsy? I am, after all, your stepfather. Or, you can call me Daddy.”

The churning stopped, replaced by a lack of any ability whatsoever to feel. She could only stare at the man. His face was shadow, his scent of pipe tobacco and some kind of pungent aftershave. Patsy tried to think of something to say, even as plans of escape tried to form. “I . . . I . . .”

Another step. He leaned against a shelf’s frame to his right. Light broke from around his left shoulder. Now she could see the dingy white of his teeth, the hint of a smile.

The steel in his eyes.

“You know, Patsy . . . you and I . . . could be friends. Good friends.” Beefy arms slid across his barrel chest. “It would make me happy and it would make your life a whole lot nicer.” Another smile. “If you get what I’m saying.”

Patsy took a step back, realizing with it that she had trapped herself. She had nowhere to go. If she screamed for help, her stepfather would only claim she was lying. Her mother would suspect her of causing trouble, perhaps. Her brothers—so precious to her—would see her as the source of problems in the household.

“Mr. Liddle, I . . .”

“Ira, Patsy. Call me Ira.” Another step forward. “I think we should begin again, you and I. Shall we?” His arms stretched toward her. “Maybe start with a hug.”

“I . . .” The basket toppled to the floor and rolled atop her feet.

“Patsy?” Her mother’s voice rang from beyond the monster at the door. “Patsy!”

Patsy’s eyes darted toward the light. “Mama, I’m in here!”

She gathered the basket and straightened as her mother stepped into the pantry.

“Oh, Ira,” she said, coming up short. “I thought you’d gone to town.”

Patsy’s stepfather turned. “I was going to . . .” He nodded toward Patsy. “But your daughter needed some help first.”

Patsy’s mother looked first from her husband, then to her daughter, and back to her husband again. She smiled. Weak, but it was a smile nonetheless. “Oh, I see. How kind of you, Ira.” Then to Patsy: “Child, the boys need their baths. See to it, will you?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Patsy turned her eyes to the floor and willed her feet to leave the room as fast as they could. Passing Mr. Liddle, she heard him say to her mother, “Such a good little helper you’ve got there, Bernie. I don’t know what we’d do without her.”

The school bus screeched to a stop, jarring Patsy from her memory. Mitzy and Jane pulled books to their chests before standing and peering down at her. “So, are you in or out?”

Patsy nodded. “In. Meet me at one o’clock. That’s when the boys go down for their naps.”

Both friends smiled. Nodded. They ambled up the aisle, toward the front of the bus. Jane looked over her shoulder, mouthed “See you tomorrow,” and then continued forward.

“See you,” Patsy said to no one. She sighed, nervous at the thought of swimming before working. Wondering if Mama would allow it or if she’d have to sneak to the creek after lunch.

At least, she thought, Mr. Liddle wasn’t home until tomorrow night.

When Patsy arrived home it was to find her mother standing on the front porch. She was dressed as if she were going to

town. Her dark-brown felt suit hat—the one with the single feather and a pearl flair on the front side—was cocked perfectly atop her head. She wore her matching dark brown gloves, a purse was draped across her forearm, and she wore a hint of lipstick from one of the tubes from the little cupid holder.

Patsy felt elation. If her mother had to go to town . . . and she needed her to help with her little brothers . . . maybe she'd be more apt to allow for swimming on Saturday. "Going to town, Mama? Do you need me to watch the boys?"

Mama came down all three of the concrete steps that led to the landing. "The boys have gone over to Mrs. Dabbs's house. She's watching them for me this afternoon."

Patsy blinked. She clutched her books tighter to where they rested low on her belly. "Are you okay, Mama? Are you sick?"

"No, Patsy, I'm not sick. But I want you to get in the car with me now." She took a breath, exhaled slowly. "We have to go somewhere."

Patsy looked from her mother to the car and back again. "Where?"

Mama inhaled deeply. "Just do as I say," she answered, walking past her daughter.

Patsy had never defied her mother, never argued with her about anything; she wasn't about to start now. Not today. She walked up onto the porch, placed her schoolbooks on one of the wicker rockers, and then skipped back down the steps and to the car, an embroidered purse swinging at her side.

They were halfway to town when Mama cleared her throat. Patsy thought she sounded like a little girl. "Patsy," she said. Her hands flexed on the steering wheel, then rolled—pinky to index finger—like little drumsticks. Another deep sigh slipped from her red-painted lips. "Patsy, do you remember . . ." Her mother swallowed.

Patsy tucked her left ankle under her right knee and swung around so that she could better see her mother. “Remember?”

“When you were a little girl . . . a very little girl. Do you remember your father? Your real father?”

Patsy nodded. “A little. Not a lot. I remember . . .” She peered out the windshield. “I remember the smell of him mostly.” She smiled. “And sometimes I dream about him. I dream of him walking through a doorway and I run to him and he picks me up and swings me around and around.” Patsy blinked. “And he sings . . .”

“Come, Josephine, in my flying machine . . .”

Patsy looked again to her mother, who looked at her child. Together they sang, “Going up she goes, up she goes . . .”

The older smiled at the younger before adding, “That was no mere dream, Patsy. That was a memory.” Her gloved fingers drummed along the steering wheel again. “I’m glad you have it. It will keep you warm on cold nights as you grow older.” She smiled weakly before continuing. “Do you remember anything else, Patsy? Anything about our lives together?”

“Sometimes I think . . . I think about a house. With a narrow staircase beside a paneled wall.”

“That was our home. Anything else?”

Patsy shook her head. “Not really. There’re little things, but I don’t always know if they’re real or imaginary.”

Her mother stole a glance at her watch ticking silently at the hem of her glove. “We’ve time,” she said, mostly to herself.

“Time?”

“Patsy,” her mother continued. “Do you remember anything—anything at all—about me in those days?”

“Of course, Mama. I remember you being in the kitchen. I remember your laughter. I remember . . . Daddy coming home and the kiss he always gave you.” Patsy squeezed her

hands together in her lap, where they rested atop her purse. “You don’t do that with Mr. Liddle, Mama. Why?”

Mama shrugged. “Ours is not a marriage born out of . . . passion.” She looked at her daughter. “Ordinarily, these are not the kinds of things I would discuss with you, but . . . there are things I want you to know.”

“Like?”

“Like about love. And marriage. And motherhood.”

“Does this have anything to do with where we’re going?” Patsy licked her lips as she looked out the windshield. “And can it possibly be to Slim’s? I’m simply parched and absolutely dying for a Nehi.”

Slim’s Service Station served three functions. It was a place to buy gas and get your car fixed, a place to buy ice-cold sodas and snacks, and a place to stop along the new Trailways bus route.

Mama cleared her throat again. “Actually, that’s exactly where we’re going.”

Patsy sat up a little straighter on the seat. “Really? Then can I? Can I have a Nehi Peach?”

“Yes, you may.” Her mother smiled toward her. “But Patsy, I must talk with you first. And you must listen. Listen carefully.”

“Okay, Mama. I’m listening.”

Patsy noticed her mother’s hands gripping the wheel tighter now, the outline of her knuckles nearly visible through the cotton. “Patsy, when your daddy died on that awful day . . . I was . . . expecting.”

Patsy frowned. The forbidden topic. “You mean the baby.”

“Yes. Your oldest brother.”

Patsy stared beyond the hood of the car to the road before them. Stretched out like an old clothesline bobbing in the wind, dipping here, curving there. “My brother,” she

whispered. “But . . .” The *t* was stuck on the back of her front teeth. “I thought you never wanted to talk about him, Mama. So, I haven’t.”

“I couldn’t take care of him, Patsy. My son. Not without your father. And both our families were struggling through the Depression, you know. No one could afford another mouth to feed.”

Patsy could feel herself growing angry. Unsure. She turned her face toward her mother, whose face was streaked by silent tears.

“You can’t begin to understand, Patsy. But I . . . I did what I thought best.” She swallowed. “My parents had been against my marriage to your father, as you know. They’d given me a lovely wedding, but they’d made it clear we were on our own. I had too much pride to . . .” Mama’s eyes batted back tears. “To go back and beg.” She shook her head. “And, like I said, they were no better off than we, really. How could I ask them to take us back? Me, with a toddler and a baby besides.”

“But they were your mama and daddy.”

“You don’t know them like I know them. As far as they are concerned, I have done the right thing. I found myself another husband, a man who provides well enough. A good man when you get right down to it. I’ve had more children. I run a good home.”

Patsy frowned. A *good man*. Ira Liddle provided well, yes. But he wasn’t *good*. At least not from what she’d seen over the years. But that wasn’t the point Patsy wanted to focus on. “You are a good mama, Mama. You do run a good home.”

Mama gave her a weak smile. “Let me finish, Patsy. I need to tell you now about your brother.”

“Okay, Mama.”

Another deep breath. Then, “The reverend—our pastor—knew of a couple in a place called Trinity. Trinity, South

Carolina. Buchwald is their last name, and they couldn't have children of their own. He made all the arrangements—"

At hearing their name, Patsy felt nausea wash over her. She'd imagined, at the very least, that the adoptive parents of her little brother had been friends. But strangers? "I knew you'd had him adopted, but I didn't know who to."

"Patsy." Her mother extended a hand toward hers, but Patsy slipped it away. Something was wrong. Bad wrong. She could see it in her mother's face.

She crossed her arms; her voice took a tone she'd never before taken with her mother. "What's this really about, Mama?"

"I don't have time for tantrums, Patsy Sweeny. You must listen to me now." Her chest expanded beneath her best go-to-town dress. "Yes, I gave my son to a nice couple to raise. I didn't know them personally, but the reverend did and he said . . . he said they were good people. Christian people. If that makes me a horrible mother, then so be it. God forbid you ever have to know . . ."

The car slowed as they neared town, and Mama continued. "Before you go judging me, you should know I married Ira Liddle because I needed to put food in your stomach. We were hungry, and I can only pray that this is one thing you do not remember. We were hungry and I was working seven days a week for hardly enough money to put a roof over our heads. Making sure you were safe and sound was my number one priority." Patsy watched in earnest as her mother's chest heaved several times. "We're near the bus station."

"Slim's." The name came out like a prayer.

This time, it was Mama who licked her lips, a tiny pink tongue sliding over thin red. "Today I make another sacrifice, Patsy. Today, I'm putting you on a bus to go to the Buchwalds, to live with them and your little brother."

Tingling began at the top of her head, poured down her face, over her shoulders, and made its way along her spine. The whirring inside her ears kept her from hearing anything else her mother said, though Patsy could see her lips moving. “What?” she finally said. The car rolled to a stop in front of the small white brick building. SINCLAIR GASOLINE was stretched across the front—white over burgundy between two square columns—and, for some reason, Patsy’s eyes moved upward until they fixed on the letters, tracing each one. S-I-N . . .

Her mother continued. “Mr. Liddle is—”

Patsy’s head spun to face her mother. “An ogre!”

“Patsy!”

A knot formed in Patsy’s throat as tears pushed their way from the corners of her eyes. She glared at her mother. “He is and you know it!” She clapped a hand over her mouth, if only to show Mama that even she was shocked at the way she was speaking. But Mama didn’t seem upset with her. For a moment, Patsy felt they were no longer mother and daughter, but friends. If she were going to bare her soul, the time was now. “The way he treats you, Mama. The way he . . . the way he looks at me.” Patsy pounded her palm against her chest in tiny staccato beats. “Don’t you even see, Mama?”

Mama pulled her firstborn toward her, drawing her closer until they met in the middle of the front seat. “Hush now, child. Yes. Yes, I know. Yes, I see. Why do you think . . .” She kissed Patsy’s hair, just behind her ear. “Why do you think I’m letting you go?”

Patsy was crying too. Her mother’s hands held the sides of her head, pushed it back until their eyes—wet with tears—stared into each other’s. “What do you mean, Mama?”

“The bus will be here soon, Patsy. Everything is set. I’ve called Mrs. Buchwald and I have a bag packed for you.”

Something inside Patsy shook. This couldn't be happening. Mamas didn't send their thirteen-year-old daughters away.

Did they?

"Mama, don't do this."

"Patsy . . ."

"No." She felt her eyes go wide. "I know! Go with me." She grabbed her mother's shoulders, then jerked her head toward the backseat. "Harold and Billy. Where are they? Why aren't they here?"

"I told you, Patsy. They're with Mrs. Dabbs."

"Go get them. We'll all go . . . to Trinity, did you say? We'll be together, Mama. What will it matter that we've left home? I can get a job." Desperation rose within her. "I can help."

But her mother shook her head. Patsy took in the blue of her mother's eyes, eyes drowning in tears. "Don't make this difficult, Patsy. I cannot leave Mr. Liddle. Don't you understand? He will find me. He will come after me . . . for the boys. Besides, he's my husband. By God's law, I should stay."

"By God's law—" Patsy swallowed past the lump. "But if you send me away . . . what will he do to you, Mama?"

Mama looked down. "Whatever it is, I can bear it. As long as I know you're all right."

"Nooooo . . ." Patsy clung to her mother again, buried her face into the gentle curve of her neck, inhaled the scent of Coty perfume. "Mama," she whispered. "Don't . . . please don't. I'll do anything. I'll stay away from him."

"Patsy, don't make this more difficult than it already is."

Patsy opened her mouth, hoping for one more plea, one more argument. But before the words could tumble out, they were drowned out by the sound of the bus screeching to a stop.