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SAMPLER

BETH MOORE

the
UNDOING
of
SAINT SILVANUS

a novel



the
UNDOING
of
SAINT SILVANUS



BETH MOORE



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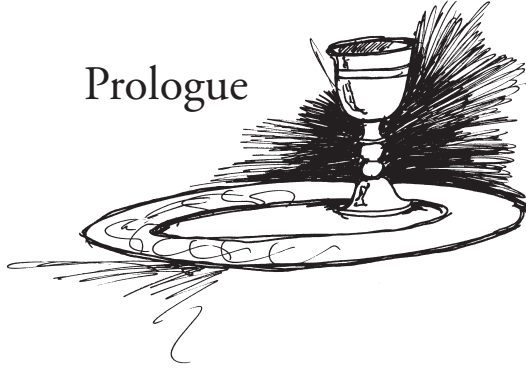
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Prologue

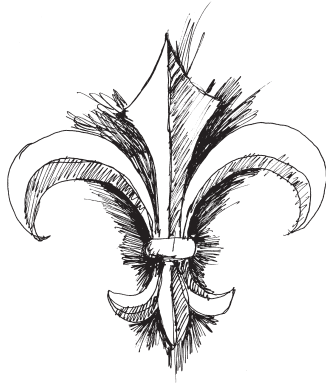


CHRISTMAS EVE 1921

REVEREND R. J. BRASHEAR dipped the bread into the wine. He lifted his chin and stared at the stained-glass image of Jesus, the rocking boat, and the daring disciple. Then he took the bread.

Not a single ear was open when the gun went off.





CHAPTER I

PRESENT DAY

SERGEANT CAL DACOSTA GLANCED at the digits on his dashboard as he threw the car into park. “Sheesh. Eighty-four degrees and barely daylight. That body’s going to be ripe.” Several patrol cars were already at the scene, zigzagged all over the pavement. The lights were flashing but they’d saved themselves the sirens. As he shut the door and walked toward the small circle of officers, he took a few seconds to absorb how odd the ordinariness of it was. Only a handful of spectators were lurking. The few people on their way to work at this hour took the other side of the street to avoid the inconvenience. This was the nocturnal side of town, where the night was as the day. The patrol officers seemed almost as detached, chugging down weak coffee from a convenience store and eating something unidentifiable out of clear wrappers.

Sure enough, he got hit by a whiff of the body from twenty feet. “How do you guys do that?”

“Morning, Sarge. How do we do what?”

“How do you eat with that smell? Can’t you taste it?”

One of them mumbled as he stuffed the last bite of a sticky bun into his cavernous mouth. When the man licked his fingers, Cal decided he’d pass on breakfast.

The odor radiating from the sidewalk wasn’t so much the smell of death. Not yet anyway. It was the smell of filth, blown his way by a hot, humid gust that seemed to belch from the underworld. Frank Lamonte, Cal’s closest friend and former partner, said what all of them were thinking. “Finally drank himself to death.”

Cal imagined those five words etched beneath his own last name on a granite marker. At least half a dozen family members on his daddy’s side were vying for the same epitaph. He’d considered going to a couple of meetings to try to dodge the family fate, but opening up to people wasn’t exactly his strong suit. Anyway, his alcoholism wasn’t in a glass. He was scared it was in his blood.

“Any chance we’ve got a name?”

Frank took off his hat and tried to rub out the permanent dent it had made in his forehead. “No, but I’ve seen him around here enough to tell you that this was his corner. He held that old cardboard sign over there and sat right here with his back against these bricks.”

Cal glanced over at the sign and saw the usual scrawl with a black permanent marker. *Out of work. Hungry. God bless!* The words *need a job* had been scratched out with a blue ballpoint.

Another officer joined them, out of breath. “Hey, guys. Sorry I’m late. The light’s out at Canal.”

Frank nodded at him and continued. “To tell you the truth, I’ve seen him passed out in that alley as many times as I’ve seen him awake. I’m not sure how anybody could tell he was dead.”

But he was dead alright. He'd probably been dead a long time. His lungs were just the last to know. He had that look a person gets when he's tried too long to make friends with the sun and enemies of his organs. Concrete made a poor cushion no matter how drunk you got. Cal squatted down beside the crumpled corpse, gave a firm grip to the right shoulder, and turned him faceup. The eyes were half-open and the teeth were almost as dark as a rotted pumpkin.

The late-arriving officer suddenly heaved and coughed until everybody still on their feet scattered like mice. Why Bully couldn't do them the courtesy of turning away when he pulled that stunt was a mystery to Cal. He said it was because he never actually vomited—he just had a weak gag reflex.

Bully was a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound anomaly. He had the sensitivity and the stomach of a nine-year-old girl. All of them had seen him cry on the job at least once. This was first on the list of top-ten reasons Billy Bob La Bauve was the most picked-on member of the NOPD. And, some would say, the favorite. For Cal, it depended on what day it was. It wasn't today. Honestly, if he started sniffing, Cal was going to send him home.

Once they recovered, Frank bent over toward Cal and the corpse. "You've seen him before, haven't you? I've threatened to haul him in a few times for harassing people for money, but these days there are so many just like him, who knows where to start? The old rules don't hold near as well this side of the levees." Frank forgot every now and then that Cal had joined the force after the hurricane. This was the only New Orleans he knew from behind a badge.

To Cal, cops didn't get much better than Frank. He'd never once caught him in a lie. He didn't have a foul mouth about women. He had a wife he apparently liked going home to. He worked with Midnight Basketball for kids at risk and was the closest thing some of them had to a father. He'd told Cal recently that he was studying

up on soccer because the YMCA had asked him to coach a team. He'd never played, but no one else would volunteer. Frank actually had a life outside the force.

Cal answered Frank's question. "Yeah. I've seen him around here. How old a man do you think he is?"

Bully had pulled himself together by now. "Well, he looks a hunerd."

"He's not nearly as old as he looks. He's only gray at the temples and beard." The thick mop of matted hair looked out of proportion on the body's slight frame. Only God knew what color the man's hair was naturally, but the sun had turned it some faded shade of auburn. He was wearing a pair of black sweatpants and an old plaid Western shirt with snaps on the pockets. No shoes.

"We've got everything we need here. Y'all want to let us at him or do you want to carry him to the morgue yourself?"

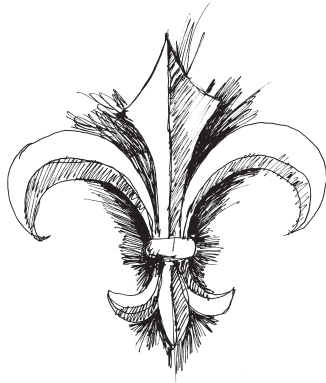
The officers stepped aside and watched the coroner's team lift him onto a stretcher like he was a five-pound sack of Idaho potatoes. Cal was particularly impressed that one of the heavy lifters was a woman. He knew a lot of faces on the response teams since they were destined to gather at the same scenes, but names were another story.

Cal's big brother, a politician from diaperhood, had tried to teach him how to make name associations at a barbecue one Sunday. It was particularly humiliating because he'd had to go around the picnic table and practice associating the names of a few of their family members with memorable images. Maybe it was his imagination, but his aunt on his dad's side had acted cold ever since the word *horse* popped out when he got around to her. It was the dentures, his mom explained later. Either they were a size too big for her or the front teeth needed filing down.

"Sarge, anything else you want done here?" Bully wanted to know.

“Yeah. You and Sanchez ask around and see if you can get a few of the others who hang here to tell you anything about him once we’ve cleared out. They usually network. Maybe we’ll get lucky and his prints will turn up a name pretty quickly. I’ll head back in and handle the paperwork.”

Some days Cal would almost rather shoot off his little toe than fill out forms. At least he’d be indoors with the AC. He and the rest of them already had sweat rings halfway to their belts and it wasn’t even midmorning. With all the talk about cutbacks and financial woes in the department, he was glad no one had cut back on the air-conditioning. Raw meat would keep for a solid week on his desk. AC was something to be thankful for in a triple-digit June, and lest people forget, the cantankerous unit would freeze up and shut down at least two or three times a summer. It was no mystery to Cal why crime spiked in the sweltering summer. Heat sometimes made him want to haul off and hit somebody too.



CHAPTER 2

“RAFE IS DEAD.”

Jillian might have found a better way to say it if she hadn't been caught off guard. Her mind was still whirling from the phone call, and her mother had picked that day of all days to stop by the restaurant where Jillian worked.

She knew Jade wouldn't be grief stricken. It was just that the two of them never spoke of him. They hadn't in years. Somewhere along the way—by high school, if Jillian's memory served her right—they'd come to an unspoken agreement to simply act like he'd never existed. It was easier. But now that he was dead, Jillian felt strangely compelled to face the fact that he'd been, all that time, alive.

Jillian waited for her mother to respond, but she didn't make a sound or move a muscle. She'd have been easier to read without her

sunglasses on. It wasn't particularly sunny, but Jade never walked out the door without a pair of expensive sunglasses on. She teased that sunglasses made it harder to tell how old a woman was. Jillian seated her at one of the patio tables so they'd have a small hope of privacy and asked the assistant manager if she could take her fifteen-minute break early.

"Mom, did you hear what I said?"

"I heard you."

A chilly breeze swept a small stack of cocktail napkins off a nearby table. Jillian jumped up to grab them and saw Jade rub her bare arms. "How about a cappuccino? I've gotten pretty good at making them. Want one?"

"Nonfat milk?" Jade responded.

"Got it."

Jade added, "Extra foam."

"Coming up. And I'll make it extra hot. I probably should have seated us inside."

Sigmund's was a privately owned hot spot perched like a bird-of-paradise in the hub of Pacific Heights with a spectacular view of San Francisco Bay. If a person aimed to eat healthy, their chefs made it more than bearable. The food was downright ambrosial, but a customer would be a fool to confuse that with affordable. Even with her employee discount, Jillian could only afford to eat there a couple of times a week, but nobody made a black bean burger like Sigmund's. The sandwich was stacked nearly four inches high with perfect slices of California avocado—never mushy, never rubbery—sprouts, Swiss cheese, and garlic-herb mayo on a toasted whole-wheat bun with lightly grilled plantains on the side. Depending on the number on the scale that morning, sometimes she'd substitute a side of sweet potato fries. All that and a glass of iced tea tallied up to fifteen bucks.

Jillian considered herself fortunate to have a job here, and she

needed to keep it. As it was, the assistant manager resented Jillian for having a personal gig with the owner, so she had to work twice as hard and watch her back, especially when he wasn't around. She glanced at the time. She had nine more minutes before she had to get back to waiting tables. She steamed the extra foam, wiped off the frother, and headed to the patio with Jade's extra-hot, imperfectly coiffed cappuccino.

"When I'm not in a hurry, I can make a double-heart shape in the foam. This looks a little more like a boiled egg. Sorry."

Jade took a sip. "It's perfect. I've just got a few more minutes before my appointment. A new client at the gallery wants me to take a look at her office and make some art recommendations. It's a bay view near here. If there's something you need to tell me, you'd probably better go ahead." Jade wrapped both her hands around the cup like she was warming herself around a campfire, leaned forward, and sipped as casually as if the deceased were no one she knew.

"Do you want to know?"

"No, not particularly. Nor do I want you to know. But since you do, you may as well tell me."

"About two hours ago I got a call from an area code I didn't recognize, so I let it go to voice mail. The woman left a pretty cryptic message saying Rafe had been found dead and there would only be a private burial. No service or anything. Just said she thought I should know and it was up to me what I wanted to do about it."

"I truly believed we'd moved on a long time ago, Jillian. Have you been in touch with those people without me knowing about it?"

"No! Absolutely not. I haven't had any contact with them since we moved to California. What was I, six years old? I hardly remember them."

Jillian and Jade seldom argued. Jade had always been the live-and-let-live kind. Whatever Jillian wanted was fine with her, as

long as whatever Jade wanted was fine with Jillian. But somehow bringing up any part of the past, distant or recent, that could in any way call Jade into question, was completely off-limits. She lived by the philosophy that the past was exactly that, and the only relevance was *now*. Anything else would invite an onslaught of negative energy. Jillian usually agreed. She hadn't come to work that day looking for skeletons. They'd dropped by unexpectedly, just like Jade had.

"So Rafe's mother called you today out of the blue? How on earth did she know where to find you, Jillian?"

"Well, it wasn't actually her. It was a woman who works for her," Jillian tried to explain. "This woman said she was calling me because her boss was overwhelmed with the arrangements. She also said, word for word, 'Your grandmother will cover the expenses.' I could go for free."

"Your *grandmother*. Well, she was some grandmother. I'll tell you that. And this woman found you *how*?"

"Okay, this is where it really gets weird. She did one of those searches online. The kind you pay something like ninety dollars for. It listed where I work and she looked up the number and called here. She said there had been a family emergency, so the assistant manager gave her my cell number."

"And now they have your cell number and can get in touch with you anytime. Perfect." Splotches of red surfaced on Jade's neck, the usual sign that her mother was trying to remain controlled on the outside but was simmering hot underneath that thin layer of skin.

"Why are you freaking out?"

This time Jade's emotions permeated her pores. With uncharacteristic volume, she blurted out, "What do you mean, why am I freaking out?"

A woman at a nearby table shot them a glance, but the gentleman with her was more concerned with his empty glass and shook

his ice annoyingly. Jillian was probably out of time since the waiter who'd agreed to cover for her was nowhere in sight. She got up, grabbed a pitcher of blackberry tea, poured the customer a refill, threw in some fresh mint, and picked up a credit card from a corner table.

When she slid back into the chair opposite Jade, her mother said, "Jillian, I dropped by here today to surprise *you*. I wasn't looking for you to surprise me. You tell me you've heard from the Wicked Witch of the South and that Rafe is dead and some stranger has your personal contact information, and you want to know why I'm unnerved?"

"I know. I get it. Can't we just talk about it? I need to sort it out. Don't you?"

"No. Actually, I don't. You're not telling me you're upset over this, are you? Are you suddenly all grieved over him?"

"Are you kidding? I have zero feelings for the man. But it's a little intriguing, don't you think? I mean, a few days in New Orleans? I haven't been since I was a little kid. I have a few vacation days. If you did, too, maybe we could go together and you could show me where I—"

"*W?*" Jade stood up from the table, grabbed her purse, and pulled the strap over her head to her left shoulder. "I am not going to New Orleans. And if you know what's good for you, neither are you." She placed both palms on the table, leaned forward, and spoke in a whisper. "Anyway, how is Vince going to feel about all of this? Since when is he going to let you that far out of his sight?"

That one hit home. Vince owned Sigmund's. At this point, Vince basically owned Jillian. He'd hired her a year ago, and not long after that, they began seeing each other on the side. Those were the good days. He'd talked her into moving in with him about two months ago, but at work, he still acted like he hardly knew her. He said it was to keep things professional.

Jillian hadn't had to deliberate for long when he first suggested she move in. It was so nice to have someone take care of her for a change. She'd felt like an adult all her life. Vince was ten years older, established and confident, and the idea of not being stressed over money was as big a lure as the man himself. Her mom understood how lucky she was. The guy was way out of her league. He was gorgeous and loaded with cash and could have anyone he wanted. He'd chosen her, and she needed him to keep choosing her.

"Are you listening to me?" Jade's tone softened a little as she lifted Jillian's chin with her fingertips. "Answer me. Would Vince mind you going to New Orleans?"

"He's out of town for a few days trying to close a deal for a location in Los Angeles. Why would he care? And anyway, he's been so aloof, he probably wouldn't know I was missing even if he was home."

"Jillian, don't risk what you have here for those backward people. They aren't worth it. They'll poison you."

"But he's dead."

"That's just it. He's been dead to you for nearly two decades. He had nothing to give you. Never even tried. He was a total loser in every way."

"I know he was," Jillian responded, standing. "You've got to go and I've got to get back to work." She stepped around the table and hugged Jade. "Thanks so much for dropping by. I was so happy to see you walk through the door."

Jade returned the embrace and whispered in Jillian's ear. "You don't owe those people anything. Put yourself first. Your future needs to be with Vince. If I were you, I'd hang on to him at all costs."

When they let go of one another, a few strands of Jillian's hair got caught in Jade's sunglasses. "Oops! Sorry about that, honey!"

“No problem.” When Jade turned to wave good-bye, Jillian caught a glimpse of her own black hair plucked by the roots and sprouting from the hinge of her mother’s shades. In a way Jillian couldn’t exactly explain, something about the sight seemed fitting.

Jillian sighed as she cleared her mom’s half-empty cup from the patio table. Jade was probably right. She would be an idiot to risk a conflict with Vince to fly halfway across the country to bury a man she didn’t know. A man she couldn’t care less about.

When she grabbed her apron from behind the bar, one of the other waiters piped up. “I can’t believe that was your mom. I guarantee you my mom doesn’t look like that. She looks more like your sister.”

“Yep. I get that a lot.”

“You must look more like your dad.”



This was a mistake, Jillian thought for the fifteenth time since boarding the plane. The dead meant nothing to her. All she wanted was Vince’s attention—and she got it just long enough for him to twist into a tornadic rage. She’d tried to call him during her hour layover in Houston but he hadn’t answered. She knew he wouldn’t.

The pilot announced their final descent and asked the flight attendants to take their seats. From the middle seat, Jillian craned her neck to see the edge of the city from the window. She felt panic rise like poisonous floodwaters all the way from her feet to her throat. When the wheels bounced onto the runway at Louis Armstrong, she pressed her feet to the floor like she was slamming on the brakes. She knew what she had to do. She had to go straight to a ticket counter and book the next flight back.

“I can get you to Houston today, but I may not be able to get you back to San Francisco. The flight’s already delayed and may be canceled. They’re expecting a serious late-afternoon fog to roll in.”

The woman's fingernails kept clicking on the computer keyboard the whole time she addressed Jillian. "Want to go to Houston? You could stay for the night and catch a flight out tomorrow. But I'll need your credit card. There's a charge to change your flight."

Jillian's heart sank. What if her grandmother didn't reimburse her after all? And why should she if Jillian didn't even bother to show up? "Thanks anyway." She threw the strap of her carry-on over her shoulder and headed down the terminal with tears burning in her eyes. As she took the escalator down to baggage claim, she panned the crowd for anyone who might be looking for her. Not that she would recognize her grandmother even if she tripped over her broomstick and tumbled into her lap.

"Miss Slater?"

Jillian jumped. Standing beside her was a chocolate-brown woman of medium stature and middle years, with a white, toothy smile that swung from the east to the west. Her eyes were dark and bright at the same time and full of mischief.

"Hey. Yeah, I'm Jillian Slater. And you . . . well, you are not my grandmother."

"You are mighty right about that, young lady, but I am about to stick you in my chariot and drive you to her. Anyway, you're safer with me behind the wheel." The woman pitched back her head and laughed and then reached forward to give Jillian a proper handshake. "I'm Adella. We met on the phone. For a minute there, I was afraid you'd backed out."

Jillian fought the urge to say, "I tried." Instead, "You work for her, right?"

"Yes, ma'am, I do and have for going on eight years. She and I do right well together. I run that big old house of hers and manage the tenants. My sons are thankful. They say it keeps me from managing them as much as I'd have a mind to. My mama claims I was born bossy. That one bag all you've got?"

“Yeah, this is it. I’m only staying the two days.”

“Well, women from the South have been known to average about one large piece of luggage a day. I’d say you’re traveling light. That’s good then.”

“Oh. Well, not me. Not from the South.”

Adella looked like she might be inclined to argue that point, but all she said was “Come on. Help me find my car. It’s somewhere over there. It’s the silver economy.”

Jillian attempted a weak smile as she cased the overstuffed parking lot. Only about twenty cars in close eyeshot fit that description.

After finding the right car, Adella made several stabs at light conversation as they navigated the traffic, but Jillian put on her sunglasses and hoped her driver would take the hint.

The farther they drove from the airport, the more magnificent the houses became. The thick two- and three-story columns, the ornate European trim, and the vast porches were like pages turning in a pop-up history book as they drove quickly past. Many of the houses had clearly withstood the ambitions of modern architecture and the ire of Gulf winds for well over a century. Some of the live oaks arching over them must have been six and seven times their seniors, lurching up from trunks wider than a woman is tall.

The longer they drove, the closer Jillian drew to the window. Her nose was nearly pressed to the glass. She’d landed on another planet. That much was certain. And it was hot.

After what felt like next to forever, Adella finally pulled over. The tires squeaked and squealed along the curb, bumping up and over and back down before she came to a stop. With a jolt. Alarmed, Jillian pulled off her sunglasses and said, “Where are we? Why are we stopping here?”

Adella opened her car door and glanced back in at her, looking puzzled. “This is it!”

“But this is a *church*.”

“No,” Adella responded, “this *used to be* a church. It’s a house now. Has been for years. Renters live here—three right now. And of course your grandmother, who owns the building.”

Jillian shoved her glasses up the bridge of her nose and pulled her bag close to her chest. No way was she going into that place, whatever Adella wanted to call it.

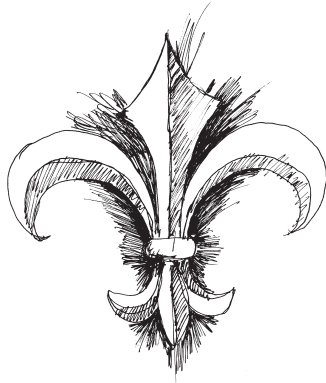
The woman circled around the car and headed toward Jillian’s door. She paused at the curb for a moment, obviously waiting for Jillian to open it. “In your dreams,” she whispered under her breath. When Adella reached for the handle to open it herself, Jillian locked the door. Adella threw her hands onto her hips, tilted her head, and gave her a look that suggested she might consider growing up. Exasperated, Jillian hit the button and unlocked the door.

Adella opened it and swung out her left hand. “After you, my dear.”

“This isn’t a house.”

“It *is* a house. Or an apartment building, anyway. If you take one step inside the door and spy a pulpit, I promise to drive you right back to the airport. Deal?”

Jillian slammed the door harder than she really meant to.



CHAPTER 3

SPARING THE ORIGINAL FRONT DOORS of Saint Sans had come at no small price. Even after considerable refinishing, the wet heat kept them swollen all summer, and an ample arm was required to open them. The renters and more familiar guests opted to bypass the wrestling match and head straight for the back. The dramatic effect of the building, however, was woefully diminished by entering through the back, and right about now, Adella was looking for enough drama to make a twenty-five-year-old snob glad she'd shown up.

Jillian stepped through the front door, and instead of feasting her lucky eyes on the startling collection of antiques, she gawked at the gargantuan stained-glass window on the upper back wall, which had at one time been the front of the chapel. She looked squarely back at Adella like she'd been kidnapped. Adella cased the giant room, trying to see it through her reluctant traveler's eyes.

As house manager, she'd grown so accustomed to treating Saint Sans as a business that she'd let herself lose sight of what, with fresh eyes, was a rather glaring history. The leaded glass depicted a wind-tossed wave, the tip of a boat, and Jesus robed and standing on the water, his hand extended to Peter. When the room was shadowy, the scene brooded with the dark pigment of fear, but let a beam of the sun catch it just right, and faith would find its feet.

They could have used more sun that day.

Of the actual furnishings, only a few pieces were distinctly ecclesiastical, and all of them had been repurposed. In fact, the organ was the only other giveaway to the untrained eye, and if Jillian had a trained eye for church wares, Adella was a little green man from Mars.

The pine altar still had its original white marble top, but the sterling tea and coffee service captivated most of the attention. And what little was left for the taking, the china cups and saucers robbed blind. The parson's bench just inside the front door looked like a regular settee, and the baptismal font was out on the back porch with a fern growing in it.

"Well, do you see a pulpit anywhere?"

If a look could cause a kidney stone, Adella would have doubled over.

"As you can imagine, the shape of this room might have made an adequate sanctuary a century ago, but it was a nightmare of a great room. Hard as petrified wood to furnish."

"Why? Because it's shaped like a big coffin?"

"Girl, what are you talking about? Haven't you ever been in a church shaped like this before?"

"You said it wasn't a church."

So it was going to be like this, was it? Adella fought the urge to ask if Jillian had been raised by hyenas. Instead, she'd take the high road, ignore the girl's insolence, and get her revenge by giving

a less abridged version of the tour. “The fireplace and mantel were added, of course, when Saint Sans was refurbished as a house. It’s limestone. Impressive, isn’t it?” And it was. Placed in the center of the long wall along the left side of the room, it was seven feet wide at the base and the hearth jutted out two and a half feet. Three or four people at a time could sit on it, and when it was cold enough outside to build a fire, many a cup of hot cocoa had been consumed right there. The limestone blocks were stacked all the way to the ceiling, providing the central attraction in the oblong room.

The problem with a den of these dimensions was the necessity of arranging three stations, one right after the other, and on a hardwood floor. Just inside the front door was a couch so gloriously comfortable that, once you sat down, you couldn’t soon stand up. And when you did, you were liable to need help. They called it the Snapdragon because it had a way of swallowing its happy victims whole. A dark-brown leather recliner was to one side of it and a deep-red overstuffed chair with an ottoman to the other, all on one Persian rug.

The fireplace and its surroundings comprised the second, central station, the most formal, with wing chairs, a delicate antique love seat, two tables and lamps, all on a second spacious rug.

Deepest in the room, on the left, was a long dining table that seated eight. A late arrival, of course. Once upon a time, congregants had probably been fed with the Word and the elements from a dark wooden lectern right there. With the remodel, a generous kitchen had been built along the right wall, across from what was now the dining area.

“Afternoon, Adella. Who’ve you got there?” It was David, coming in through the back door.

Startled by the sight of him, Adella glanced at her watch. “Are you home already? It can’t be that late!”

David Jacobs had rented apartment 2A for the better part of

Adella's tenure as manager. The man was the consummate tenant. His rent was automatically withdrawn from his bank account on the first of every month. He complained little, lived rather quietly, and was meticulous with his grooming and his belongings. Adella tended to think most folks were half-crazy and sanity simply meant you spent more time living out of the other half. As far as she could tell, David kept his mad side mostly to himself.

He had a highly evolved palate for fine art and antiquities without an equally evolved budget. Never married and nearly forty, he said that he found the surroundings of Saint Sans altogether worth squeezing himself into little more than a one-room dwelling with a kitchenette. In Adella's opinion, if Jillian had a fraction of David's taste, she'd have seen that Saint Sans was a veritable museum. All the renters got to enjoy the main room, even to entertain guests on occasion, as long as the other residents weren't put out. They could use the large kitchen freely—first come, first served—as long as they used their own food and left the counters cleaner than they found them.

The young woman walked over to David and extended her hand, taking Adella by complete surprise. "Hey, I'm Jillian." It was the girl's first sign of life in fifteen minutes. David was obviously less alien to Jillian than Adella and this church-turned-house.

"Oh, goodness, where are my manners? David Jacobs, this is Jillian Slater. She's from California and she'll be staying with us a couple of days. Jillian, David teaches music at the biggest public high school in this district. He's a talented—"

"Nice to meet you," Jillian interrupted.

"Likewise. Do tell me what part of California. The coast?" And they were off to their own tête-à-tête as if Adella had fallen through a trapdoor. Not a bad idea. She felt queasy. Time was running thin and she knew it. She pulled her phone out of her purse and looked at it hoping someone with a hint of empathy might call her with an exit strategy.

“Are you going to the burial?” Jillian’s question to David nearly jolted the sense out of Adella, but he responded before she could think exactly how to hijack it. Clearly she could have used a few more days to work out the kinks.

“Burial? I’m sorry. I don’t know what you mean. What burial?”

At that moment, Jillian jumped like she’d stepped on a live wire. Her eyes shot to the floor. With one foot still wrapped around the other ankle, she offered a bare explanation. “Sorry. I don’t like cats.”

Clementine had appeared on the scene. That blasted cat could mean only one thing.

“Adella?”

At the sound of that familiar voice, Adella’s stomach lurched into her throat. Every pair of eyes except hers darted toward the hallway opposite the apartment wing. Adella’s mind spun like a wobbling top, but she turned around in slow motion, trying to buy a few extra seconds and get control of her expression. How long exactly had the woman been standing there? She wasn’t due home for almost an hour.

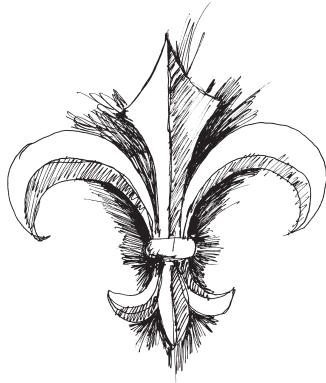
Everyone in the den seemed bound and gagged, so David played the gentleman. “Mrs. Fontaine, it’s good to see you. I haven’t run into you in the last several days. I thought maybe you’d gone out of town, but I’d seen the car. But then again, I hadn’t seen you out on the grounds. Of course, it’s so hot. I thought maybe you’d flown somewhere. Are you well?” David didn’t usually talk so much, or at least quite so fast. He was acting like a kid who’d been caught cheating on a spelling test. Adella took it as a moment’s mercy and left him to fry while she scrambled for words.

At the next dead silence, she jumped in, hoping everyone would mind themselves. “Olivia, look who’s here! Say hello to Jillian! How long’s it been since you two . . . ?”

Jillian looked at Olivia, but Olivia’s gaze never wavered from her

employee's face. "Adella?" she posed again with the same unsettling, upturned pitch, each syllable distinct.

Some folks had a knack for making people nervous. An uncanny gift for running every perfectly reasonable explanation out of another person's head. In one fell swoop, yesterday's inspiration had become today's perspiration and Adella, for one, didn't appreciate it. She couldn't think of a single thing she liked less than sweating, and here this blouse was, fresh from the cleaners. Olivia owed her three dollars and fifty cents and she was lucky Adella had more manners than to tell her so.



CHAPTER 4

ADELLA WOULD HAVE FELT BETTER if Olivia had bitten her head off. But she just stood there stoically, black eyes boring a hole through her, letting Adella dig herself a grave. She knew the dirt was about to fly when Olivia refused to acknowledge Jillian and said instead, “Adella, may I see you in my quarters, please?” She’d followed her with the enthusiasm of a woman walking off a diving board into a drained pool.

David had thrown his Korean stir-fry on the kitchen counter and run for his life. The man had the sense to recognize the primal danger of placing himself between two unhappy women. They were like the blades of a pair of scissors, getting sharper by the rub, held together by the tight screw of territorialism.

After ten of the longest minutes known to man, Olivia uttered her first words. “What hotel did you put her in? We’re at full capacity.”

Adella tilted her head and looked at Olivia, pleading wordlessly for her to be reasonable. “We have the guest room, Olivia. Let her stay in it.”

The discourse didn’t get loud, exactly, but what it lacked in volume, it made up for in tension. Olivia was the kind who yelled the loudest when she got the quietest. She carried an authority that was a little undoing if she wasn’t on your side. And really, she didn’t seem to often be on anyone’s side.

“You had no right.” Still, she never raised the volume, but Adella could hear Olivia breathing deep and hard and she could almost feel the reverb of her employer’s heart through the hardwood floor. “You know it’s impossible for her to stay in there. You had no right. You have overstepped your bounds, and I . . .” Olivia let the last word hang in the air.

As Adella steadied herself to accept the loss of her job, Olivia turned around, walked into her bathroom, and closed the door behind her.

Adella found Jillian in the front yard on the concrete bench. In this temperature, its surface had to be almost as hot as an iron. Even under the shade of that monstrous live oak, the young woman was sweltering, her carry-on bag still clutched in her lap.

Jillian didn’t give her time to utter a word. “You lied.”

Adella was taken aback. In this part of the world they tended to beat around the bush before they plowed it up by the roots. “I prefer to think I helped.”

“Helped?” Jillian raised her voice. “What part of manipulating me here without her even knowing I was coming is helping? Did you see the look on her face? She’s a witch!”

Adella gasped. “Young lady, don’t you talk about your grandmother that way. Why, you ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

“What grandmother? Did that look like a grandmother to you?”

Don't you dare shame me. Shame her! She's a hateful old stone. She doesn't even want me here."

"Yes, she does. She . . . just doesn't know it yet." After the face-off she'd gotten in the house, Adella figured she'd probably lied again and guessed God could as easily forgive two fibs as one.

For the first time she realized how much the child favored her estranged grandmother in both looks and temperament. She couldn't charge Jillian with silent stoicism, however.

"I'm calling a cab," the young woman stated. "And I'm going to stay in one of those dives by the airport. You couldn't pay me a thousand dollars to stay in this . . . *house*."

The magnitude of what Adella had done was settling in on her, and she felt fresh out of remedies and twice her age. All the progress she'd made with Olivia in the last six months had sprouted wings and flown like a hawk. "I can't let you do that. After the mess I've made, the least I can do is offer you a room at my house. You can catch a flight out tomorrow. I'll cover the costs of the ticket change. We have a comfortable home and you'll look a mighty long way to find a man as fine as my Emmett."

"I'm not staying at your house. I'm staying by myself."

"Jillian, I'm asking you nicely. Please don't do that. Don't put yourself in harm's way in a strange city."

"Strange is right. That may be the first truthful thing you've had to say to me. I'm an adult. I can take care of myself."

Adella blew out a long sigh. "Let me go get my keys and I'll take you wherever you want to go. But Mrs. Fontaine will have my hide if I don't pay to put you somewhere decent."

"I bet," Jillian quipped with a disrespect Adella didn't run into every day.

Adella had retrieved her purse and was heading back toward Jillian with her keys dangling from her hand when two police cars pulled up to the curb, one in front and the other behind her

vehicle. The back one blocked the driveway. “What on earth? Officers, can I help you?”

There were four of them. Two men had gotten out of the first car, and another man and a woman crawled out of the second.

“Yes, ma’am. I’m Sergeant Cal DaCosta. This is Officer Frank Lamonte.”

“Good afternoon, ma’am.”

“And Officers Bill La Bauve and Carla Sanchez.”

Officer Sanchez reached out to shake Adella’s hand. She responded in kind, though she didn’t want to. She preferred knowing their business to holding their hands.

“We need to see a family member of Mr. Raphael Fontaine. This is the address we tracked down for nearest of kin when he was found deceased,” Sergeant DaCosta explained.

“We already know he is deceased, officers. Two others brought us the news several days ago. So unless you have further business here, I’ll need you to move your cars from right in front of Saint Sans. You’re illegally parked.” Adella knew she’d lost her mind to talk in such a way, particularly since hers was the car between theirs. But she was at least a decade older than all four, and the last half hour had frayed her nerves to threads.

“Yes, we are aware that there’s already been a visit to this address, ma’am, by patrolmen from this district.” Officer La Bauve was talking now. He sounded like a man who was used to defusing tense situations. “We’re awful sorry for the difficult circumstances. We’re from the Eighth, where the body was found. We’re only over here now because we have additional information. What did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t say. My name is Adella Atwater. I manage this place of business. I feel certain the owner would have me serve as a go-between.” Her heart started pounding. She wasn’t sure how much more turbulence this day could take. “What is the news?”

Sergeant DaCosta was kind but insistent. "Are you a relative of Mr. Fontaine's, Mrs. Atwater?"

"No, technically I am not, but I can relay any pertinent information to his kin. Surely you would spare her further indignity."

"I'm afraid we need to see a family member if at all possible."

Jillian stayed put on the concrete bench but Adella could clearly see in her peripheral vision that she'd shifted her position enough to catch every word of the interchange.

Officer Sanchez spoke up. "Mrs. Atwater, the officers talked with a Mrs. Olivia Fontaine. I understand that she is the mother of the deceased. Is she in?"

Adella realized there was no deflecting. Whatever news they had, Olivia was going to have to hear it. "Officer Sanchez, you can come in the house with me. Gentlemen, you can pull your cars into the driveway around back and we'll meet you at that door."

"Come on, boss." Officer Lamonte put his arm on Sergeant DaCosta's shoulder, and after a slight hesitation, the sergeant turned and walked with the other men toward the cars.

As Adella walked to the front door with Officer Sanchez, she said to Jillian without glancing her direction, "Miss Slater, I'm sure you heard all that. You may as well come in the house and rest a minute. That ride to a hotel will have to wait."

Out of curiosity more than anything, Adella supposed, Jillian followed them. She went straight to a barstool at the kitchen counter and sat down, holding on to that same tired piece of luggage.

After letting the other officers in, Adella tapped on the door to Olivia's suite and soon Olivia appeared, looking as inconvenienced as possible. When her eyes met Jillian's, the young woman turned her head and stared coldly out the window.

"Officers, this is Mrs. Fontaine," Adella said, gluing herself to Olivia's side.

All four greeted her as cordially as they could, apologizing for the intrusion. She nodded at them but said nothing.

Sergeant DaCosta took the lead. “Mrs. Fontaine, Mr. Raphael Fontaine is your son, correct?”

“Yes.” Her voice was low. She spoke as if each word would take a year off her life.

“We have learned that your son died as a result of a stab wound rather than natural causes.”

Olivia looked directly into his eyes. She’d never been much on making anything less difficult.

Adella jumped in, horrified. “What are you saying, Officer? Are you saying that Rafe was killed?” She could hardly force herself to say the right word. “*Murdered?*” Her voice cracked as she reached over and held Olivia’s wrist.

“Yes, ma’am. I’m afraid so.”

“How could you not have known this when you found him?” Adella was incensed.

“That’s why we asked to be the ones to come today. We felt we owed it to you for the oversight.”

“Oversight? Did you say oversight? How could you not have known?” One tear slid down Adella’s cheek and then another. Her voice quivered but she intended to hold them accountable and to say everything Olivia couldn’t.

“Not our oversight. Our mistake, Mrs. Fontaine. We missed it. Everything about the condition of his body looked textbook for natural causes that typically claim lives on the streets. The abdominal wound was several days old, so there wasn’t the bleeding that—”

“Oh, my Lord in heaven, help us.” Adella was still doing all the talking. Olivia had yet to add another word but she was no longer looking in Sergeant DaCosta’s eyes. She stared blankly toward the wall.

“Mrs. Fontaine, we won’t pretend we know how hard this is. Within only a few hours, we were able to identify him by his fingerprints and the officers were dispatched to inform the nearest of kin. Your name appeared on a court record for paying his bail a couple of times. There was a mix-up between the district and the morgue over a second John Doe. A drug overdose that took priority. Word didn’t get to us about the stab wound until today. He might have had some chance of making it—” the sergeant paused and took a deep breath—“had he reached out for help. Probably not much chance, I’ll admit, but he wouldn’t have died on the concrete. At some point after the stabbing, he must have been sober enough to change clothes, unless someone else changed him. We deeply regret the delay on this information reaching you.”

Hardly above a whisper, Olivia asked, “Who?”

The sergeant looked at Officer Sanchez like he could use some help, and she stepped up instantly. “Mrs. Fontaine, perhaps you could sit down.”

“I’ll stand. I trust you won’t be staying long. Is that all?”

“Ma’am, in answer to your question, no, we don’t know who the perpetrator was.” Sergeant DaCosta looked at the floor and then once again met Olivia’s cold glare.

Adella never had more trouble buttoning her lip than when she got a verifiable invitation to bear some indignation. “Well, are you even going to bother to find out?”

Officer Lamonte put his hand on his boss’s shoulder and took up the charge. “Mrs. Atwater, you know that’s exactly why we’re here. We fully intend to get to the bottom of it, but we have to start right here. At this point, we suspect it wasn’t personal. He might have had some money on him or—”

“A bottle.” Olivia finished his sentence for him.

“Maybe. Yes. Sad things happen out there on the streets.

Desperate things. We'd all seen him around, ma'am. Some of us for years."

At that, Olivia turned and walked back to her room without another word.

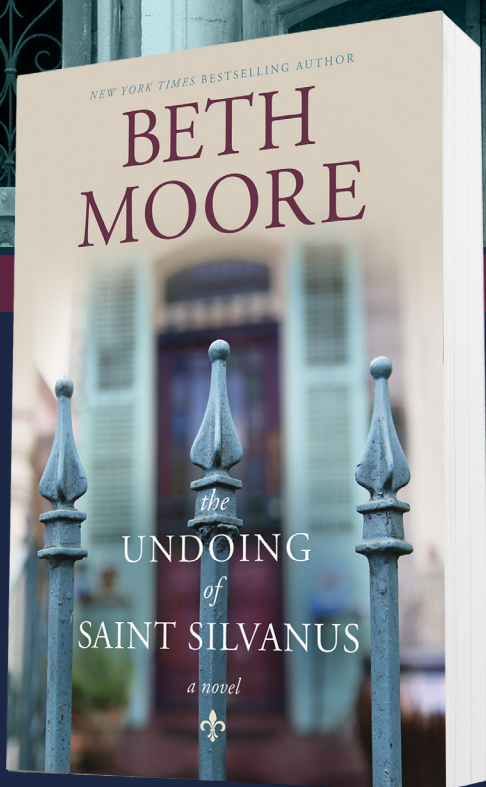
"I'll need to see to Mrs. Fontaine, Officers." Adella grabbed a piece of paper from a kitchen drawer and scratched her cell number and the main number for Saint Sans on it. Noticing the unoccupied stool at the end of the kitchen counter, she realized Jillian was gone. "Here's our contact information. I don't live on the premises, but I'm here Monday through Thursday during normal business hours and half a day Friday and occasional Saturdays."

As the officers let themselves out the back door, Adella rushed to the front in time to see Jillian climbing into a cab. "Jillian, wait! Don't go yet!" The door slammed and the driver pulled onto St. Charles and, seconds later, out of sight.

Adella realized Officer Sanchez had followed her when the woman spoke.

"Mrs. Atwater, I saw that young woman when we drove up and then again inside. Is she a resident here?"

"No, Officer. That was your dead man's daughter."



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