

Chapter One

Then

“What time is it?” Annabelle’s voice quivered as she studied the shadows huddling under the sliding board in Lincoln Park. She expected the streetlight at the corner to come on at any minute, and she didn’t think her four-year-old legs could outrun those misshapen silhouettes if they had a mind to chase her. They were in spitting distance of home, but her fear made it feel much farther.

Apparently unperturbed, Frances Mae peeled off the paper from her second block of Hubba Bubba and popped it onto her tongue. Her teeth worked at the gum until she could chew more easily. When she opened her mouth to speak, she wiped a bit of spit from the edge of her lip. “Mama’s not expectin’ us any time soon. She likes time to herself after she closes the store.”

They both knew their mama wasn’t going to be alone for long. But at that moment, all Annabelle could think about was that *she* didn’t like being outside at this time of day. On top of that, she was hungry, and the overpowering scent of strawberries wafting from Frankie’s mouth wasn’t helping a bit.

Their mama had shooed them out of the house two hours ago with strict instructions not to come back until not one, but all the lamps standing guard around the playground were brightly lit. Annabelle peered up at the sky that had started out a pale blue but had transitioned to streaks of purple and gray. Birds flapped across the horizon and disappeared, as if they, too, knew it was time to go somewhere cozy and settle down for the night. Her eyes welled. “It’s gonna be dawk soon.”

“No, it’s not. Besides, Mama’s friend said if we listen, he’ll get her to give us some more candy next time he comes over.” Frances Mae used her index finger and thumb to pinch the end of her gum. She extended her arm as far as it could go while her teeth clamped onto the other end of the sticky treat their new friend had given her.

Annabelle scratched the inside of her elbow and watched her sister twirl and stretch her gum this way and that with her dirt-smudged fingers, mindless of the mosquitoes and gnats flying about.

Annabelle didn’t want another piece of Hubba Bubba or a Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup, even though she loved licking at the chocolate until she worked her way to the middle. Besides, wrapped or not, those miniature bricks Frankie had stuffed into her cheeks looked like they’d been gathering dust by the register in Mama’s store more days than Annabelle could count with both her small hands.

All the treats from McNair’s were either leftovers or stale. Her sister should know that as well as Annabelle did. But no, Frances Mae scarfed down all those soft crackers and chewy potato chips like they tasted better than the hamburgers and fries from McDonald’s. Mama smiled and carried on like her new man had done something, making them shake his hand and say thank you.

Shoot, Annabelle didn't want any part of that gum.

Dry leaves skittered in a crackly circle near the swings. Fall was definitely on the way, shortening the days and lengthening the nights. Sure enough, the tall lamps began flickering on, one after another, along the sidewalk that encircled the park. The changing light redirected the movements and shapes of the shadows Annabelle's eyes had been glued to for the last ten minutes. She jumped and clutched at her sister's arm. "What's that?"

"Dang it! You made me drop it." Frances Mae squatted and reached for the gum that had plopped into the sandy space between her jelly shoes. She must have thought better of it because she stopped an inch or two before picking it up. Hands balled on her small hips, she glared at her younger sister. "You're just like a monkey, all over the place. Just can't be still. The monkey in the middle, that's what you are!"

Too agitated to be insulted, Annabelle spun, and her sneaker came down on the gum. When she lifted it, elastic threads connected her foot to the ground. Frances Mae's glob of Hubba Bubba was squished between the ridges on the bottom and plastered to the side of her left sneaker.

"Ugh, look what you did! Why can't you stop for once? Nothin's gonna get you out here! Haven't we been in this park a thousand times? Now I've gotta get this gum off your shoe or Mama's gon' have my head when we get home. Come on now, be still, Anna. Stop all that fussin' and movin' around. You heard what I said. Don't move a muscle, and let me go find a stick or somethin' so I can clean your shoe."

Tears streaming down her dusty cheeks, shoulders heaving, Annabelle ran in place, her feet pummeling the dirt. Too frightened without her sister to stand still, and too afraid of her sister to leave that spot, she peered through the growing darkness as Frances Mae's outline trudged toward the grassy area near the edge of the park where a few spindly trees grew. Those pines provided meager shade when the sun was at its peak, but their cluster of thin trunks shielded her from Annabelle's view.

Wait. There! Another light buzzed, then clicked on. Something rattled across the trees as the wind picked up in force. *What's that creaking? The swings? What's that shadow?* Unable to contain her fear any longer, she let it fly. "Fwanna Mae!"

The girl crunched across the leaves toward Annabelle, holding a sturdy stick that the Lord must have pointed out to her in the faint evening light. Frances Mae squatted and studied Annabelle's feet. "You're makin' a mess of yourself!"

Sure enough, both Annabelle's shoes were speckled with bits of gum and clumps of dirt.

"Hush, and sit down." Frances Mae none too gently pushed her sister, whose bottom kicked up dust upon landing on the sandy ground at the base of the sliding board. When her aggressive action elicited more screeching, Frances Mae reached into the pocket of her denim shorts and withdrew a smushed orange packet. "Here, pretend this is your banana. Eat it and be quiet. Go on, eat your banana. Oo-oo-aa-aa." She shoved the Reese's Peanut Butter Cup into Annabelle's hand. Then she knelt, lifted the girl's foot, and started digging gum from between the treads of the shoe.

Annabelle's cries ebbed and then petered out altogether once she accepted that crying out and speaking up weren't helping. She hiccuped and blinked, her chest hitching, as she clutched the candy. Snot drizzled from her nose and mingled with the tears on her lip.

Frances Mae looked across and ran her free hand along her little sister's shoulder. "See? There's only the two of us, and your Frankie wouldn't ever let anything happen to you. Okay? Now, eat your banana, little monkey." She nodded at Annabelle's hand. "Go ahead, Anna Banana."

Annabelle looked down. She could barely make out the words on the orange wrapper as the last of the streetlights buzzed to life behind them. "Oo-oo-aa-aa," she whispered.

Chapter Two

Now

Annabelle McMillan should've been used to feeling odd woman out after all these years. Still, she had to fight the urge to plop down between Frankie and Charlotte, angled toward each other on their spots on the sofa in Frankie's living room. Their heads bobbed back and forth, pecking at the conversation they were sharing, leaving only bits and pieces for Annabelle to snatch up for herself from her place in the recliner, several feet away.

I don't know why in the world I bothered coming to Frankie's. Oh, that's right . . . Miss Hattie, who couldn't be bothered to come! Why did she call me anyway? She's been around long enough to know that calling either of those two would've made more sense.

Annabelle rocked side to side to the rhythm of her thoughts and absently patted the baby on her shoulder.

Frankie pointed at Charlotte and chided, "Girl, you are no kinda good." Laughing, she scooted around in her seat and snapped her fingers at her three-year-old, who was halfway into a wooden trunk, throwing out one toy after another on the floor behind the sofa. Finally, eyes twinkling, she swung in Annabelle's direction. "Did you hear what Charlotte said? Are you gonna take that?"

Annabelle sighed. Swallowing the questions she'd felt compelled to ask, she offered a noncommittal shrug. She couldn't muster any outrage, feigned or otherwise. Miss Hattie was a longtime family friend. As trustworthy as they come. *I'm not sure what she expects me to do, or to want to do, but at least she cares enough to try.*

Frankie hooked an index finger with her baby girl's and led her through the obstacle course of discarded gadgets, doodads, and board books. Settling the child on the floor in front of her, she wedged her daughter's head between her knees and parted her hair with a narrow brown comb. "Mmm-mmm-mmm." Frankie shot a glance that ricocheted off the woman near her and landed on Annabelle. "Charlotte said *your* mama changed her wedding band as often as she replaced her coffee filter."

Annabelle forced a chuckle. "Now, you know good and well mine drank instant." Her tone was as dry as the child's scalp Frankie was greasing.

Smiling crookedly, Frankie nodded slowly at the comment, like a connoisseur appreciating a work of art. "*My* mama didn't bother gettin' a new ring, did she, Charlotte? She kept her finger oiled up so she could slip hers off and on when she got good and ready."

Charlotte shifted her hips that nearly covered her square cushion. "Well, mine never got 'good and ready' to take her husband's name. Probably because he had a foot out the door before they ever left the church." She raised and lowered her shoulder, her eyes rebounding off Annabelle as if she didn't want to get caught looking in her direction. "Of course, I was too young to remember."

Annabelle knew she wasn't the object of the affectionate glance. It was the baby on her

shoulder whose every inhale and exhale Charlotte was monitoring. She knew the woman tended to look at life through lenses tinted green, not rose.

Frankie sobered. “Your mama was a mess, wasn’t she?”

“*Our* mama,” Charlotte said.

“Yes, *our* mama. A hardworkin’ mess.” Sounding as drained as she felt, Annabelle wasn’t sure who she was talking to—herself or her two sisters.

Each of them slowly waved a hand high in agreement.

Frankie angled her daughter’s head from one side to the next to see if any of her lines were crooked, then leaned in close. “Go on to the kitchen and tell your brother and your sister to settle down. I shouldn’t be hearin’ everything they’re doin’.” She sent her on her way with a tap on her bottom. “Then bring yourself right back here so I can finish doin’ your hair.”

The three women sat silently for a minute, watching the child do her mama’s bidding, before Annabelle, feeling a little green around the gills, muttered, “You two are bound and determined to have your way. The way you and Charlotte gang up on me, I don’t stand a chance against your united front.” She stroked the baby’s back, her eyes moving like bumper cars between Charlotte and Frankie.

“Common bond? Who, me and Charlotte?” Frankie sighed and started collecting all the tools of her mama’s trade.

“I disagree, Annabelle,” Charlotte spoke up. “Frankie and I may have the same father, but that doesn’t mean we think alike.” Of all the Winters girls, Charlotte had been blessed with the most of Mayhelen’s attention, not that any of them believed it was heartfelt. “What sticks out in my mind is that coat Mama loved more than any of the men in her life. You remember, the one with the gold stitching and fleece lining? It definitely kept her warm longer than her marriages.” Charlotte’s chuckle was gossamer light and seemed to melt under the heat lamp of their tempers.

Annabelle knew Charlotte was trying to distract them, but her laugh bubbled up from her belly. She covered her open mouth with one hand and pointed at Charlotte with the other. A tear ran from the corner of an eye, and three-year-old Nora giggled with her auntie as she returned to her spot in front of Frankie. Annabelle wiped her face. “It was too big for either one of us, but Frankie and I fought over that thing for years! Mayhelen snatched it back and put it away for good. I didn’t think we’d ever see it again, but then it turned up.”

“Yeah . . . just like Mama.” Charlotte hugged herself.

If only the three of us could’ve shared a father, like that hand-me-down jacket. The thought dried Annabelle’s tears. “Maybe Mama didn’t want to part with her classic denim because she was wearing it when she married your daddy.” That was how the story went anyway. They never knew what really happened when it came to Mayhelen. They believed only what they experienced themselves, even though Miss Hattie warned them that trusting an eyewitness was like trying to catch the seeds of a dandelion. Annabelle remembered her saying, “Only God knows all.”

“Ain’t *that* the truth.” Frankie’s words were so low, she hummed them.

But Annabelle recognized their familiar tune, and she nodded a little as it played over and

over in her head. She was Mayhelen's middle child, though her red-tinged brown curls, caramel skin, and grayish eyes testified to what had to be her own daddy's mile-long roots—whoever he was. Her outspoken ways were all her mama's doing, despite the fact the woman never took the blame nor the credit. Annabelle's art teacher called her student "headstrong, yet creative," and told the entire class she'd go far.

Mayhelen, on the other hand, declared her daughter "too mouthy for her own good" and believed her stubbornness would be the ruin of her. At least that's what Miss Hattie heard her yell once, from all the way across the street. Annabelle figured those very qualities provided her best offense and defense, her outspokenness then and her obstinance now. Getting rejected early on had readied her for life—once she stopped running from it.

"I'm surprised Mama made time to have one wedding, let alone four!" Charlotte's gaze danced around the baby once more before finally settling on the hot-pink blossoms of the camellia bush in Frankie's backyard, visible through the picture window to the right of her. In another month or two, one of North Carolina's late-spring storms would have washed away the last of the delicate petals.

Frankie's lips pursed. "Maybe we should consider it three, since she married our daddy twice, Charlotte. How does the saying go? 'When you know, you know.' At least you're supposed to."

What Annabelle didn't know was what to do with the five-month-old she was holding, though she'd best figure it out soon. Burp him? He was sleeping soundly, so that seemed superfluous. Her off-key humming or singing might make him cry—but then she'd have a reason to pass him back to Frankie with an understandable, oh-well-I-tried-here's-your-baby shrug.

Knowing at least this much—that it was a sin to disturb a sleeping child—she opted for shifting him to the shoulder he hadn't soaked with his drool and resumed patting his diapered bottom. She jiggled her elbow slightly to stop the uncomfortable tingly feeling in her arm.

Frankie snapped the last plastic butterfly around the end of the ponytail. The pink bow flitted among the lavenders, yellows, and light greens crisscrossing the glistening parts in the girl's hair. After admiring her handiwork, Frankie pressed her lips to the youngster's round cheek and nudged her in the direction of the sunlit room adjoining the den. "Go on back to the kitchen and play Uno with the twins."

The child took pains to wave at each woman as she toddled around their outstretched legs, bags, and various odds and ends. Annabelle, her hands full, grinned and nodded a goodbye, and Charlotte waggled her fingers at her. Frankie stretched for the towel she'd laid across the back of her green plaid sofa, causing the buttons on her short-sleeved blouse to work overtime. One finally gave up the ghost and popped free of its buttonhole as Frankie playfully swatted her daughter's bottom with the thick cloth to speed her along.

Neither Frankie, Charlotte, nor Annabelle was so quick to lay claim to Mayhelen Winters, the woman who had raised them from the ground up, like the pair of cherry trees Annabelle had planted in her own backyard. God did most of the work. Not one of the three dared to outright deny their mama, however, not even behind her back. Her hold on them was as firm as it was painful.

Frankie's baby stirred, and Annabelle bobbed up and down, causing the springs in the leather armchair to squeak. Truly, she was grateful he was awakening on his own so she could hand him back quick and in a hurry, the beauty of being his auntie instead of his mama. Not that her big sister was paying him a bit of attention, which surprised Annabelle. His teeny-weeny fingers had been splayed against her upper arm, but now they curled into a fist and rubbed at the bridge of his nose.

Blowing out a bang-ruffling breath, Annabelle pretended not to notice that her little sister's eyes had again pinned themselves to their nephew's back. She grimaced at the sour taste in her mouth, and her stomach contents did a jig. Dealing with her mama on top of everything else just wasn't sitting right with any parts of her. "I still say we'll never get anywhere if y'all won't listen to reason. You're teaming up against me only to have your way! As usual."

The plastic bag in Frankie's lap crinkled when her hands flopped into it and the jar of grease and unused hair bows went sailing across the sofa. "To have *our* way? Huh, this is all Mama's doin'! I've made it almost thirty years without seein' hide nor hair of the woman, and I figured I could go more than twice that with my eyes closed and my hands clasped. Lord knows I have plenty enough to do without addin' her wants and needs to my list."

Frankie dropped snarls of hair into a plastic grocery bag in her lap, then scooped up extra bows, rubber bands, and the small jar of hair pomade. Never one to waste a thing—opportunities, hair grease, or otherwise—she used her thumb to swipe the side of the Nature's Blessings container and rub the edges of her own scalp.

"But you've been fine with heaping her wants and needs onto Miss Hattie's plate all these years." Charlotte's voice rumbled from her spot at the other end of the sofa. "Is that any way to treat Miss Hattie, who was so good to us? I'm willing to do your part and mine, even though I'm overrun with kids and grown folks alike. At least you have a husband to depend on. I had to shift my entire afternoon around so I could meet y'all here."

Annabelle considered the "here" to which Charlotte referred: Frankie's ranch-style house outside Jasper, North Carolina, where she lived with Melvin, her husband of eighteen years, and their four children, aged nine and under. One October evening, Frankie had been driving through a neighborhood a few streets over from their childhood home and spotted a couple raking leaves in their yard. Frankie had pulled to the side of the road, complimented them on their begonias, and spent the next hour convincing them to accept her offer for their home.

Frankie, you certainly made their place your place, Annabelle thought as her eyes meandered from the artwork mounted on the sage green walls to the cherrywood curio cabinet in the far corner, treasures Frankie had found at the Goodwill. Annabelle couldn't help but think her sister preferred other people's memories, something Annabelle could understand to some degree.

But there was no way Annabelle could build *her* house, figuratively and literally, in the backyard of the Winters family's old stomping grounds. For her, living an hour away was a bit close as it was. She caressed the baby's head, the family's youngest little piece of history, to the tune of the background music her sisters provided as they continued to harangue each other. The past might be behind them, but some things never changed.