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The Sins of the Mothers

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The Sins of the Mothers

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Emphasis in Fiction

by

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B.S. University of New Orleans, 1962
M.S. Louisiana State University, 1967
M.D. Louisiana State University, 1967

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This novel is dedicated to John my husband of fifty-one years without whose lifetime support none of my educational and professional accomplishments was possible.

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“Thou shalt not bow down thyself unto them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God (am) a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth (generation) of them that hate me.” **Exodus 20:5**

“The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin.” **Deuteronomy 24:16**

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” **John 1:9**

PROLOGUE

The slender white columns on the wrap-around porch stood in stark contrast to the deepening evening shadows. The veranda once crowded with white wicker furniture and laughing people now held only a solitary wooden rocker. Long ago, Bridgette grew tired of the green and pink flower-patterned cushions covering the porch chairs and stuffed them into an inside storage room. There they lay, forgotten, graying dismally, their former brightness unappreciated. Soon afterward the chairs and swing frayed, and those pieces she dragged to a landfill.

Bridgette loved the West-Indies-style house and porch which had once belonged to her French ancestors, then to her grandmother Mamere, and now to her. The porch's solitude suited her. Every afternoon, even afternoons when a tropical rainstorm drenched the surrounding shrubs, she rocked to and fro. The rhythmic creaking sound of the runners competed impotently with the cracking clash of thunder. On such an afternoon, Bridgette shuddered with each flash of lightening but remained fixed at her post. Sometimes minutes, sometimes hours passed in this singular pursuit, and after the storm passed, Bridgette counted each falling raindrop as it dripped, dripped, dripped onto the elephant ear leaves surrounding the porch. Each drop she tallied, first reaching one-hundred, then one-thousand, and finally one-million.

It had not always been this way for her. Once on another porch, a lifetime ago, her arms cradled a baby girl. Soft, swaddled in pink, blonde hair smelling of the sweet aroma of infancy, Celeste slept. Back and forth, up and down, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, Bridgette pushed with her feet giving motion to herself and the child. She smiled down at her, sometimes unraveling the blanket to marvel at each perfectly formed finger, each perfectly formed toe. When the child stretched and squirmed in her arms, Bridgette saw this as a sign to unbutton

herself in readiness. She knew her milk would satisfy the babe and usher in moments of smiling playfulness. Although her mother Amanda said these smiles represented gas pains, Bridgette knew otherwise. Freshly sent from heaven, this little girl still spoke to the angels and glowed when they commented on her beauty.

Bridgette, arms hanging listlessly over the sides of the chair, looked out over the second floor railing towards the bayou. The branches of the crepe myrtle trees almost hid her from the view of an inquisitive passerby. Directly across the waterway, the porch of her first home, now painted a somber gray color, stirred a multitude of memories. She cringed when two neighborhood children hurried past, pointed at her, and muttered something about “the lady in the haunted house.” Dust did cover the wooden plank floors, and some of the shutters, green paint peeling, sagged. To Bridgette the house still carried the aura of a stately past. As she, arms now empty, rocked to and fro, she no longer matched her motion to the in and out breaths of the sleeping infant but instead to an imagined Strauss waltz. Her lost memories glorious, her current emptiness abysmal.

The ballroom of the house with its mirrored walls was dark. No longer could she watch herself twirling round and round, as the full, black chiffon dress, cinched tightly around her narrow waist billowed out with each gliding movement. In Edwards’s arms, she often threw her head back and imagined herself soaring unencumbered into a fairy-tale world. This descent from splendid princess to wailing witch was so gradual, she could not recount it to herself or anyone else. Not that she ever tried.

CHAPTER ONE—THE CHRISTENING

1962

When Bridgette was a little girl, she knew Mother hated her. Mother sat in her big easy chair and made pronouncements about Bridgette's hair, her clothes, the way she walked, talked, everything. When Mamere gave her a perm, Mother said Bridgette looked like a "bowling ball with curls." When Mamere took her shopping for a new dress, Mother said she looked like a "feather pillow tied in the middle." Bridgette cowered when Mother shouted, "Your father would still love me if you had never been born," and blamed herself for Father and Mother's bad marriage. So many ugly words, Bridgette never imagined herself saying anything like them to Celeste, her own sweet child.

Bridgette gave a gentle push with her foot to the cradle sitting beside her rocking chair and relaxed. "Please, God, help me be a good mother to my child." Long rosary beads nestled in

her lap, their wooden, café au lait colored beads worn smooth from two centuries of feminine hands. Beginning with Isabelle, her great-grandmother-six-removed, these beads were passed down from one generation to the next, either at the recipient's Christening or her First Communion. Bridgette had not decided whether to pass these down to Celeste Sunday at her Christening or wait. Her brow wrinkled when she remembered that Mamere, not Mother, gave them to her on her Communion Day. Why that significant break in the customary mother-to-daughter practice when Mamere was such a stickler for tradition, she never figured out.

*

1942

Bridgette pranced out the front door of the house and noticed Mamere sitting in her favorite rocking chair on the porch. Mamere was fingering the antique rosary beads with eyes closed and seemed to be praying. Bridgette dashed over, stood in front of her grandmother, and hopped back and forth from one foot to the other. Mamere opened her eyes.

“Hello, my angel,” Mamere said. She reached over and put the rosary down on the side table with a rattling sound. “Let me get a good look at you. Don't you look pretty?” Mamere took both of Bridgette's hands into hers. “Be still, honey. You don't wanna make a mess of your hair and that white dress, do you? You're just like a Jack-in-the-box.”

“No, I'm not,” Bridgette said pulling her hands away. “He can't dance as good as me. See.”

Bridgette twirled, and her white dress flared around her. She shook her head to make her long corkscrew curls bounce and giggled. “See, just like a ballerina.”

“You are a love, but perhaps more a princess than a ballerina,” Mamere said when Bridgette stumbled. She reached out to catch her and smiled. “Let’s go pick some bridal wreath to put on those lovely curls. We can make a crown. The nuns wanted you to wear something on your head. How about we make something from the flowers?”

Bridgette ran down the front steps. She looked back to see Mamere struggle to get out of the rocking chair.

“Hurry up, Mamere,” Bridgette shouted from the bottom of the stairs. “Pick me up. Pick me up. The best ones are on top.” She jumped up and down.

“OK, I’m on my way,” Mamere grumbled. “Twisted my ankle last week. That’s slowed me down a bit.” Mamere supported herself on the bannister and descended the stairs one at a time.

“What’d you say Mamere? I can’t hear you.”

“Nothing, honey. Just mumbling to myself.” Mamere leaned harder on the bannister mid-way down and stopped. “Don’t wanna worry you. Ankle needs a little rest is all.” She started down the steps again. “See, told you I’d make it.”

“Pick me up,” Bridgette said. “Pick me up. I can’t reach them.”

“It’s okay, Bridgette,” Mamere said. “I’ll get them. I am bigger than you, you know.” She reached high up into the bush. As she snapped off several long branches, some of the delicate white flowers broke apart and like snowflakes floated down. Arms and shoulders dusted with the blossoms, Mamere laughed, “Look, fairy dust.” She waved the boughs over Bridgette. “I now pronounce you Princess Aurora.”

“Not her, Mamere. She’s in that story you read last night. She went to sleep for a *thousand* years.”

“It was a hundred. But you’re right. The prickles on this bush made me think of that picture of the Prince. He cut through all those brambles just to find her.” Mamere bowed low. “I christen you, Princess Bridgette.”

“Let me hold them, Mamere,” Bridgette said reaching for the branches of bridal wreath. “They’re for me. You picked them for me, didn’t you?”

“Okay, Princess Aurora,” Mamere said. She grinned and chuckled.

“Not her! Bridgette. Princess Bridgette. I’m the princess. Remember.”

“Oh, right,” Mamere said. “Princess Bridgette. I forgot.” The wrinkles around her eyes and mouth crinkled as she laughed. “Just don’t knock any of those flowers off, my precious Princess Bridgette.” Mamere bowed again, handed the boughs to her, and kissed her on the forehead. She walked over to the porch steps, gripped the bannister, and pulled her wounded ankle up. “Bring them up here. We’ll make a crown.”

Bridgette struggled with the boughs and bent over to pick up the few she dropped.

“You need some help with those?” Mamere started down the stairs. “Just bring up what you can. This ankle is bothering me. It’d be hard for me to do it.” Mamere jumped when the screen door slammed shut.

“Mother,” Amanda yelled. “What the hell are you two doing? Bridgette, stop fooling with those flowers. You’re getting that dress all mussed up.”

Bridgette flinched and dropped the rest of the branches. She stood there frozen and lowered her head when tears started to run down her cheeks.

“Now, Amanda,” Mamere said. “The child’s just doing what I told her to do.”

“You stay out of this, you hear. She’s making a mess of herself.”

“We were just getting some flowers for...”

“Flowers? I don’t give a damn what you’re doing.”

“But the nuns wanted a wreath for her hair. A fresh one would be pretty. Delicate and alive, like her.” Mamere gulped down words, limped to the rocking chair and plopped down.

“I already bought one, and that’s what she’s going to wear,” Amanda shouted. “It’s made of pearls and rhinestones.” She ran down the stairs, grabbed Bridgette by the arm, and yanked her toward the house. Bridgette stooped to pick up some of the flowers, and Amanda kicked them aside. Bridgette sobbed. “I didn’t mean to be bad, Mommy. Don’t hurt the flowers. Mamere got them for me.”

“I don’t give a shit who got them for you. I’m sick of her meddling.”

Mamere gripped the arms of the chair. “I’ll get them, honey,” she whispered and fumbled to pick up her rosary.

1962

Bridgette closed her eyes and shuddered. The beads in Mamere's lap that day were the same ones she now held. She rubbed two of the beads. Smooth circular motions, caressing each bead, perfectly in synch. One rotation, two rotations, three rotations, four. One rotation, two rotations, three rotations, four. The rhythmic, soothing movement drove the memory from her mind.

Celeste stretched and whimpered. Feeding time again. She had so much to do to get ready for the Christening. It was already Thursday, and Sunday would be here soon. It was hard to believe Celeste was three months old. Just after Celeste was born, Bridgette argued with Mamere for several hours whether to christen the baby at the traditional time or wait a few months to do so. Bridgette had worried germs from guests would sicken the baby. She was proud of herself for winning that round because seldom did she convince Mamere of anything. The germ thing still bothered her. Bridgette believed that with all those people coming by kissing and breathing on Celeste, she needed to scrub the house until it sparkled. The furniture needed dusting and bathrooms where the bad germs hid had to be rubbed down with Clorox. She also wanted to

polish the floors and make them clean enough to eat off, but Edward said let them be. The scuff marks were part of the house's character.

Bridgette did love the house, a small Creole cottage just across Bayou St. John from Mamere's house. Hers was not nearly as splendid as Mamere's, a grand plantation built in the late-seventeen-hundreds as part of a land grant given in 1710 by King Louis XIV to their ancestors. Bridgette prided herself on the fact that her ancestors had been among the earliest settlers of New Orleans, a fact that Mother taunted her with when she was growing up.

"Mamere is filling your mind with foolishness." Bridgette recalled the scathing tone of voice Mother used when speaking of Mamere. The words still hurt, and she grimaced when the rosary's crucifix dug into her clenched fist.

"You see City Park down there," she remembered Mamere saying, her finger pointing down the Bayou. "And the lights shining on the front of the Art Museum. That was once our land. Your great-grandfather-six-removed canoed up the Bayou from Lake Pontchartrain with four other French explorers and landed there. He built a house right where the Bayou curves at City Park Avenue, tiny compared to this later house, just one room with four teeny slave houses in the back."

"What happened to the little house, Mamere?" Bridgette asked.

"We don't know, honey. Somehow it was lost." Mamere got a far-away dreamy look in her eyes, the one she always had when she talked of past family glories. "Maybe it fell apart or one of the big storms took it. All that's left to remind us of those days is that sign on the corner of the Park saying the land was donated by Allard to the city for a park."

Maybe, like Mother said, everything was just bloated talk, but early in life Bridgette believed only Mamere loved her. Thus, when Edward wanted to buy their first house, it made

sense that Bridgette wanted one near Mamere. When the cottage put up a for sale sign, Edward jumped on it, quickly giving up his plans to buy a house in the Garden District near his parents. The house was the wife's domain, the business, the husband's.

The cottage had a front porch decorated with gingerbread curlicues and a porch swing. Bridgette spent a great deal of time on that porch especially after Celeste was born. She watched the ducks feeding along the shore, young people canoeing, and day-dreamed of things she and Celeste would do. They too would save bread to throw to the ducks, walk to City Park, ride on the carousel, climb on the oak trees.

Bridgette jumped at Celeste's piercing cry. Putting the rosary on the end table next to her, she reached down and lifted the baby out of the cradle. "Hush little baby, don't you cry. Mama's gonna sing you a lullaby, and if that lullaby doesn't ping, sing?" How does that go? It must rhyme with, "Mama's gonna buy you a diamond ring." The picture of diamonds of all shapes, colors, and sizes came into her head. They cascaded like a waterfall of gleaming blue, yellow, and green sparkles from her hands onto Celeste, a treasure trove of love from God to her to her baby. Bridgette's arms tingled, and a shiver ran through her body at the thought of such a responsibility.

*

The day of the christening turned out to be one of those crisp November days when it felt good to walk outside and breathe in the fresh air. On the porch, Bridgette took some deep breaths, squared her shoulders, and looked out at the sunshine sparkling on the bayou. The muggy, humid air was gone at least for a few days, and the dry no longer soggy air enlivened her. This would be a good day. Only nine o'clock and already Dorothea was arranging finger sandwiches and making canapés. Mamere was so good to loan her for the party. Two hours to dress herself and

Celeste. Then feed her. She was still sleeping after her last feeding and probably would not wake until ten or so. Plenty of time to nurse her and put on the christening dress. Perfect timing was required to keep her from being hungry in church, crying, and spoiling the service.

The christening dress had taken hours yesterday to wash, starch, and iron. Mamere's mother had been baptized in it just before the Yankees took New Orleans in 1862. Made of white lawn, it had smocked pleats on the bodice and was trimmed in tiny satin roses. Mamere had sent Dorothea over to help Bridgette with it. She did not understand why Mamere did not trust her to do it up. After all, Bridgette ironed Edward's shirts for him every day. Those starched collars and French cuffs were tough to do, but she did it perfectly. The thought of a brown, triangular, scorch mark on the front of his shirt made her shiver. Good wives did not mess up that way.

Dorothea gave Bridgette such a look when Bridgette took the dress from her after Dorothea unwrapped it.

"You not gonna do that yourself are you child?" Dorothea folded each piece of tissue paper, smoothed out the edges, and laid them back in the satin storage box.

"Why not? I'm a good ironer. I do it all the time."

Dorothea pursed her lips and screwed up her nose like the whole operation smelled bad. "Maybe so, but this dress is special. You know your grandma'd kill me if that got ruint."

"I'm not a baby anymore, you know. In fact, I'm the one with the baby now." Bridgette watched with satisfaction as Dorothea backed away, but her wrinkles became more pronounced, and her wiry, gray hair seemed to stand up straighter.

Dorothea put the box down, wiped both hands on the apron she always wore, folded her arms, and pronounced, "You want me to just stand here and watch you mess up? Then that child'll have to dress in any ole thing. And what'll Mister Edward say? Huh? You tell me that?"

Bridgette cringed at her words, and suddenly the dress felt flimsy and seemed to crumble into lacy shreds in her hands. Flakes fell through her fingers and raised clouds of dusty filaments. Displease Edward? That was frightening. She did not resist when Dorothea took it from her hands, and as if by magic, the dress came together into one glorious piece. Bridgette sat limply in a chair while Dorothea washed it in Ivory suds, starched, and ironed it. Thinking there was not much starch in her backbone, Bridgette imagined herself crumpling into a folded up, wrinkled, old worm.

“Edward, hurry.” Bridgette took a deep breath and yelled up the bayou. “You need to dress and tell Dorothea how you want the champagne glasses set out.”

Waving, Edward brushed his brown hair off his forehead. She knew he hated its thick, unruly nature but also did not want it close cropped. After his usual exercise this morning, he looked so boyish, not at all like the successful broker he was. This year he had been, after his dad, the top earner in his father’s brokerage house. Newly mown grass stuck to his white tennis shoes when he dashed across the green strip lining the bayou. Six-foot four with long gangly legs, he looked like a praying mantis jaunting across a meadow. She wanted to tease him about that but held her tongue. He did not always appreciate her vivid imagination and “bizarre” sense of humor.

“Gotta get showered and dressed,” he said brushing her cheek with a kiss then slamming the door behind him.

Bridgette jumped when Celeste’s cry rang through the closed door. Her stomach turned, and her chest tightened. Celeste could not be waking up already. Looking at her wristwatch, she counted the seconds as they ticked off one minute, then two. Celeste’s cry became more insistent. Only 9:10. What’s the matter with her? Being hungry now did not fit Bridgette’s

schedule. She calculated and recalculated. If she fed her now, then Celeste would be hungry in church, but if she did not feed her now, then the little angel would scream while she tried getting them both dressed. Bridget clenched her fists. Celeste's cries became more and more frantic. Babies certainly did mess up plans. If only Edward would deign to pick her up, but that did not happen in his man's world.

Bridgette put her hands over her ears to shut out the sound, ran down the center hall to the nursery, kicked open the door, and pulled Celeste from the crib.

"Stop that screeching," she roared, fumbling to open her nursing jacket. The rocking chair banged against the wall when she dropped into it.

"What's all that commotion?" Edward yelled from the bathroom.

"Everything's going wrong. Just like I knew it would."

"Stop worrying," Edward said sticking his head through the doorway. "Everything's going to work out."

"No, it won't." Bridgette gulped down a sob. She grabbed Celeste's flailing arms with one hand and unbuttoned her nursing bra with the other. "For you maybe, but never for me. Can't you see how she is? She just won't co-operate." For the millionth time, Bridgette wondered why being a mother did not match the picture she had in her head. The ones in the magazines looked so peaceful. All those chubby, pink-cheeked babies in lace bonnets nestled in the arms of their smiling mothers. Nothing at all like this, feeding one end and mopping up poop from the other. Bridgette sighed deeply, brushed away tears, and lifted her breast so Celeste could latch on.

"I just wished this were easier." She looked up at Edward.

“It’ll be OK. Mamere’ll be here in a few minutes anyway, and Dorothea has everything ready for the party.” Edward leaned over and kissed her forehead. “You just keep doing what you’re doing. That’s your part. “

Bridgette gave a half smile when Celeste’s eyes closed, and Celeste nestled into her.

See.” Edward patted Bridgett’s arm. “What’d I say? You just put her down and get yourself dressed. It’s going to be a lovely day.”

“Maybe so.” Bridgette watched Edward head for the bathroom. Immediately she looked down at her watch. Let’s see. It’s nine-forty-five. That’s an hour and fifteen minutes until the Christening. So, ten minutes to get to church, a half hour to dress herself, fifteen minutes to dress Celeste. That leaves twenty minutes to check if Edward left his smelly clothes on the floor of the bathroom and clean that up. She was only thirty minutes off her original schedule. Maybe, it would work and Celeste would sleep through the Christening, like a healthy, happy baby was supposed to. Taking a deep breath, she decided to take a few minutes and relax.

Back and forth. Back and forth, her feet pushed the rocker. The tension in her shoulders gave way, and she kissed Celeste’s head. Her baby fine hair tickled her cheek, and Bridgette smelled the sweet baby aroma. She smiled. Maybe, there was something to being a mother after all.

Edward stuck his head into the doorway again.

“Shush,” Bridgette said before Edward could say anything.

“Shouldn’t you be getting dressed?” he whispered. “Mamere’ll be here any minute to check and see if everything’s to her liking. Nothing but the best for her first great-grandchild.”

“Quiet. Let me put her down,” Bridgette said. She watched Edward go again toward the bathroom. When would it be her turn?

Bridgette stood by the crib a couple of minutes to make sure Celeste did not awaken then turned and headed to the bathroom. She tensed slightly when she saw Edward was still there fumbling with the diamond tie tac his grandfather left him. As expected, his clothes lay in a soggy pile on the floor, the shower door was open, and the towel was draped half on the basin, half on the floor. Stooping over, she gathered his clothes and wrinkled her nose at the stale smell of body odor. Muttering to herself, she pulled the towel off the basin and tossed it into the basket along with his gym shorts and T-shirt.

“I’ll get that in a minute,” Edward said. “As soon as I finish with this thing. I’m having a hard time shoving it through the material.”

“No. I got that stinky stuff,” she said with a knot in her stomach. “If only you’d do this without me asking.”

“I said I’ll get it. Can’t you leave things be for a minute. Always fussing and picking stuff up.”

“You can say that now after I already got it. But earlier? No way.”

“For God’s sake. Calm down and stop bitching. Everything’ll be fine.”

Bridgette grimaced when Edward hurried from the bathroom and banged the door shut. Here she was sounding just like Mother when she had sworn never to be like her. Ugly words seemed to jump right out of her no matter how often she vowed to speak sweetly and never to complain or argue. She looked in the mirror, and her image scowled back at her. Reaching for her make-up, she demanded, “Color yourself sweet and innocent from now on instead of ugly and guilty.”

When Bridgette pulled the christening dress from the closet, she was again amazed at its condition. It showed no hint of the hundred years it lay in its special satin box, none of those

unsightly yellow stains or brown water spots. She wondered how that was possible and guessed Mamere must have some secret technique for preserving aged treasures. She did collect antique dolls, and maybe the dealers she befriended taught her how they restored them. The dolls' clothes, made of taffeta, satin, cotton, and fine lace, looked new even though some were a couple of centuries old. Mamere said last week that the dress had been used only four times before, once for Mamere's mother, once for Mamere, once for Robert, her four-year-old son who died in the 1918 flu epidemic, and once for Bridgette. For a reason Bridgette was not privy to, neither Mother nor Jacqueline were christened in it. Bridgette wanted to ask Mamere why, but the look on Mamere's face when she started to ask caused her to swallow the question.

Holding the dress away from her body so as not to wrinkle it, Bridgette pushed open the nursery door with her foot. Ten-thirty and not a peep out of Celeste. That last feeding should hold her until twelve-thirty or so. If dressing her does not awaken her too much, then a pacifier may keep her quiet throughout the service. Bridgette hated the way those plastic things looked poking out of Celeste's mouth, especially in pictures, but they did serve a purpose. The dress started to catch in the side of the crib when Bridgette tried to lower it quietly. Damn, Mamere would have a fit if it tore. The bed side dropped with a horrific clang, and Bridgette jumped. Nuts, that'd wake her for sure.

Draping the dress over the back of the crib, Bridgette reached down to soothe her back to sleep. Something was wrong. That noise should have awakened her. She was too still. "Come on, honey, time to wake up. Time to go to church." Bridgette's stomach churned. It felt like thousands of butterflies or ants were beating against her innards trying to get out. She rubbed harder on Celeste's back. "Come on, wake up." She shoved her hand deep into the baby's spine. "Wake up. I said, wake up." Bridgette wanted to grab her with both hands, punch her, and

squeeze her like draining water from a sponge. Instead, she stared down at her. Celeste did not squirm or stretch her arms, something she always did when waking up. There was no movement at all, no breaths visible. Bridgette turned her over. “Mama’s so sorry she made that banging noise. You can stop pretending now. Just open your eyes. Show me your pretty smile.” Bridgette picked her up, and Celeste’s head fell backwards like a newborn’s. She dropped her down onto the mattress, and the baby crumpled into a heap, floppy like a ragdoll.

It took a few moments for Bridgette to realize that the squealing sound filling the space around her was coming from deep inside her. Shoving her hands over her ears, Bridgette moaned, “Stop it,” and looked down at Celeste. One arm was tucked underneath her body; the other splayed out at a strange angle. Her body was twisted sideways at the waist, and her legs were humped up beneath her. Oh God, she’s broken, just like one of Mamere’s antique dolls. Worried that she had killed her, Bridgette muttered, “Please, Baby Jesus, I did not mean to drop her. She was just so quiet. She scared me. See, I’ll fix her. She really isn’t broken. I can use some of that special glue that Mamere uses.”

Bridgette reached down to fix Celeste but shuddered at the sight of her closed eyes and still face. She lifted the christening dress, hanger and all, off the bed and draped it over Celeste’s face. The yellow nightie, the one Mamere had embroidered with tiny white daisies in anticipation of her first great-grandchild, was scrunched up underneath her knees. Bridgette yanked on the side of the crib to pull it up, and the familiar clicking sound it made when it latched comforted her, a sense of normalcy in the midst of madness. In slow motion, Bridgette leaned over gathered the bottom of Celeste’s nightshirt in her hands and pulled it down. Celeste’s little legs were caught up in the bottom of the shirt and slid down with it. They did not flail or kick or move in any way on their own. Bridgette straightened the material so the embroidered

daisies along the hem stood out in a perfect line. The stillness unnerved her even further, and she stared at the baby. Celeste looked ridiculous with her face covered by the christening dress and her nightie forming a perfect bell shape. The yellow crocheted booties she wore peeped from beneath the dress like a bell's clapper. Air rushed through clenched teeth, and Bridgette giggled this long uncontrolled hiccupping noise.

Another sound, soft at first, then more urgent alerted Bridgette. She looked beyond the crib to the window overlooking the bayou and then back at the unsightly mess in the crib. Were those reverberations coming from beneath the dress, from her, or from outside? Maybe this was nothing but a dream and Celeste was waking up. She welcomed the thought of those hungry, screaming cries which had annoyed her just an hour earlier.

Bridgette slumped against the crib railing when she realized the sounds came not from inside the room but from Holy Rosary Church across the bayou. The bells tolled the hour, eleven o'clock, time to leave for Celeste's christening. Bridgette fell to the floor tears streaming down her face. Too late. It was too late. She imagined everyone gathering, the collection of invited relatives and friends, Edward holding the dead Celeste, Bridgette walking alongside, a procession. They walked in straight lines two abreast like she had in grammar school at Holy Rosary. No talking, no singing to accompany this unholy procession, a march not to church or to heaven but instead to limbo, that dreary place for unbaptized children. Mamere was right. Bridgette had chosen to christen her too late.

CHAPTER TWO—DRIFTING

When Edward walked into the nursery, Bridgette was still kneeling on the floor her head resting against the sides of the bed. He touched her shoulders, and she jumped as though awakening from a deep sleep. Indeed she had been in a trance-like-state in which the room around her had disappeared, and she found herself inside a tiny crib with Celeste. She and Celeste were miniature china dolls like the ones she and Mamere had peopled her doll house with when Bridgette was a child. The railings of the crib were made of steel like those enclosing a jail cell. Celeste's arms and face were cracked, and the hand which held a tiny replica of the christening dress had two broken fingers. Celeste's back was rigid, and she pointed at Bridgette with the index finger of her other hand. "I accuse you," she seemed to say. As Bridgette watched, the tucked pleats across the bodice of the dress so meticulously starched yesterday stood out in severe rows. They reminded Bridgette of the white unbending bonnet of Sister Mary Agatha her

sixth grade teacher. Sister marched out from behind the crib bolster and sat next to Celeste, ruler in hand.

“Put your hand out, Bridgette,” Sister demanded. “You need to be punished severely for this crime.”

Her tiny, china parts rattling, Bridgette put her hand out just as Edward came in and touched her. Her hand and shoulders burned, and she moaned.

“Brigitte, what’s going on? Did you fall?” Edward queried. “It’s past eleven and Mamere’s here. We’re late. Do you need help with Celeste? Why’s her dress covering her face?”

Edward lifted Bridgette, walked her over to the rocker and turned back to the crib. Lowering the side of the crib, he lifted the dress off Celeste’s face. The ghastly look he gave Bridgette when he looked back at her erased any hope she had that her imagination was playing tricks on her. She rubbed the arms of the rocker and whimpered. It took only two strides for Edward to reach her, raise her into his arms, and carry her to the porch swing.

“What’s the matter,” Mamere called out. “Is Bridgette sick? What’s she doing out there? You want me to get the baby?”

“No. Watch her,” Edward yelled rushing back inside.

Bridgette sat on the swing. Her stiff arms gripped the seat beneath her. Her feet kept up a rhythmic tap, tap, tap. One tap, two taps, three taps, four. She turned her head to the right and looked over the porch railing. The sun sparkled on the bayou as it had earlier. Inside, a gasp followed by the sound of people running receded into silence. The sun’s rays struck the water and bounced off its surface. It must be almost noon. This morning there had been too much to do, too much to get ready for. And now this strange happening. What had she done wrong? The glare from the sun blinded her, and she blinked back tears. Mustn’t cry. Mother said only bad

girls cried. She forced herself to breathe deeply. One breath, two breaths, three breaths, four. In and out. One, two, three, four. Her hands, arms, and legs felt more and more pronounced. Every fiber of clothing seemed to rub against her, pierce her skin. Her body tingled and then went numb.

One of the diamond ripples, larger than the others, caught her attention. She focused on it. Mustn't blink. Keep your head turned, eyes on the water. What is that? A ship, ah yes, a slave galley coming for the prisoners. The oars projected outwards but were still. Looks like its resting, waiting. Its deck was empty save for a small silver box, just large enough to hold a baby doll. The box, trimmed with green and pink rick-rack ribbon, reminded Bridgette of something she had seen before. Something important. Although she closed her eyes and thought very, very hard, she could not remember what. It was just on the edge of her memory. She shook her head and looked again at the sun-washed ship. Come aboard, it seemed to say. Come drift with me. Then all will be well. Drift. You won't hurt. You won't notice anything that way.

*

Crib death, they called it. The words made no sense to Bridgette. They did not tell her what happened. She wondered how a crib could kill her baby. Was something wrong with the crib, the sheets, the side rails? Crib death? A short, meaningless term designed to give comfort but which in its vagueness haunted Bridgette. For the past two days, she went over everything she did that morning and the night before. She examined every inch of the crib. Had she left something in it that caused the death? Were the sheets too cold, too dirty, too clean. Had she left clothes in it, too many blankets? Was the bumper pad responsible?

After finishing with the crib, she wondered about herself. Did she wash her hands and nipples before feeding Celeste? Did Celeste get enough to eat? Too much? Did Bridgette cover her too tightly when she put her down? Was the room too hot, too cold? Did someone touch her who had a cold, the flux? She replayed the moments and the days before, even keeping a notebook in which she listed every event she could remember.

“Remember, Edward,” Bridgette said, pen and notebook in hand. “Last night after I fed her, you took her and put her in her bed. Remember, I had to go to the bathroom. Did you wash your hands before you touched her?”

“Of course, it’s something I always do.” Edward put his hands over his face.

“What about last week? Your mother was sniffing, wasn’t she? Did she go near Celeste?”

“No. You forced her to sit on the porch. Don’t you remember how upset she was? She left.”

“Maybe when she touched the door, she left germs. I don’t think I scrubbed the doorknobs.”

“Stop it. Put that damned book down. Just stop it.”

“I can’t. I have to see. If I list everything we all did and show it to the doctor, then he can tell me what went wrong.”

“He already did, honey.” Edward reached for the black notebook. “He said nobody knows why this happened. It just did. Besides, we need to get going. It’s time.”

“Do you think it was because I screamed at her that morning?” Bridgette gripped the book tighter. “I just wanted her to be calm for the Christening. It would’ve looked so bad for her to cry in church.”

“We need to go. Everybody’ll already be at the funeral home for the wake. It looks bad for us to be late. Give me the book to put someplace safe.”

“No. You’ll just hide it. I’m taking it with me. I’ve got to fill it out.” Bridgette ran down the sidewalk to the waiting car.

The next day, the morning of the funeral dawned warm, cloudy, and sultry, a bleary reminder of the city’s steamy, August weather. The very air seemed to sob with moisture. Bridgette’s only black dress, wool with long sleeves, clung to her. At the cemetery, she leaned against the nameplate covering the tomb across from that of her ancestors. The sweat on her back blended with the wetness dripping from the tomb’s moldy concrete facing. She reached behind her and with her index finger outlined one of the words imprinted on the crypt. M for man, M for murder, M for misery, M for me, M for mother; M for man, M for murder, M for me, no for misery. Start over. No mistakes allowed. M for man, M for murder, M for me. Wrong. Must make it come out perfect. The letter’s sharp outline left a crease in her finger when she pressed harder and harder on the word.

“Blessed Virgin, pray for us,” Father Dominic said.

“St. Joseph, pray for us,” Father Dominic intoned.

“St. Peter, pray for us,” Father’s voice settled into a monotonous chant.

“St. Lazarus, pray that Celeste rises from the dead,” Bridgette murmured. Reaching for the letter O on the tomb behind her, she continued. O for awful, no that’s an A. O for obsolete, how she felt. O for obstinate, how she wished she had been when Edward and Mamere discussed where to bury Celeste. O for ostrich, how she buried her head in the sand when decisions were made. She could decide whether to cook red beans and rice or gumbo for dinner but nothing as significant as where to put her baby.

The Family, herself not included, had decided to bury Celeste in the Gaudier/Sausion Family tomb in St. Louis Cemetery #1, the first resting place outside the Quarter for French and Spanish Creoles. Bridgette did not want her there, but, as usual, what she wanted counted for little. They, Edward, Mamere, Mother, and an absent Jacqueline were standing in Mamere's kitchen looking at Bridgette. She was slumped in a corner of the breakfast nook, head leaning against the window. They must have gotten Jacqueline's permission to vote on the burial issue before she went off to see patients because nothing happened without her psychiatric input.

"We've agreed then," Edward said. He looked at Bridgette and nodded as though to include her.

"Who's we?" Bridgette stammered, "Definitely, not me." She raised her head in defiance then lowered it. "I don't want Celeste there," she choked. "I'll never get to see her way over there by the French Quarter. Why can't she go in the cemetery on Esplanade right around the corner? That way I can just walk over."

"Honey, we don't own a tomb there," Edward said. He walked over to the table and reached out a hand.

"Well, buy one." Bridgette pulled her hand away and hid it inside the pocket of her robe. "You have plenty of money."

"Be reasonable." He and Mamere exchanged glances. "This was so sudden, and this is simpler and quicker."

"Quick? Why's it have to be quick?"

"Edward's right," Mamere intruded, her voice oozing comfort. "It'd take so long to arrange something else. Besides, everyone in the family is buried in the old cemetery. You know the story."

“I’m sick of hearing those dead people stories. It’s always this grandfather did this and this uncle did that. I just want my baby back. I want to hold her again, and I don’t want her miles away.”

“I’ll take you whenever you want to visit,” Edward said. He looked beseechingly at Mamere. “You will too, won’t you?”

“That’s the whole trouble,” Bridgette screamed, interrupting Mamere before she could throw in another argument. “Somebody’d always have to take me. I don’t even have my own car. I’m stuck here without one of you.”

Here it was the sixties, and like some idiot Bridgette had never bothered to learn to drive. Women were starting to do impossible things. Why, Jacqueline was already a doctor living in her own apartment. Yet, Bridgette went straight from her mother’s house to her husband’s house. She did not pass go. In fact, she did not stop for a minute to learn how to have a life of her own. She dreamt only of getting married and having babies, but now where was that dream. She had just as soon crawl into the coffin with Celeste. What was left for her? No car, no baby, no life.

“There’s nothing left for me to do,” Bridgette whined as she started to slide out from the breakfast seat. Mamere rushed over, sat down next to Bridgette, and prevented her from leaving.

“I’ll take you whenever you want to go,” Mamere said. “You know, I still go often.”

“That’s not a life.” Bridgette moved closer to Mamere and shouted in her face. “Mother always said you were weird, living in the past, talking to the dead, sprouting off about those olden days of glory.”

“Bridgette, stop. I know you’re upset, but there’s no need to be mean.” Mamere moved to the edge of bench but did not get up. Instead she turned and reached over for Bridgette’s hand. “Don’t you remember how we went to the cemetery when you were little? You loved it,

especially All Saints Day when we'd stop in the French Market to buy picnic stuff, muffalottas, navel oranges, satsumas."

"Having picnics by the tombs? That's crazy. Waiting for the skeletons to come out and dance. The idea makes me sick to my stomach."

"You didn't think it was crazy then. You used to run up and down the aisles talking about the people who lived there. What was that you called it, in the big doll houses?"

"Maybe so then, but not now that Celeste will be in one of them, shoved inside in some tiny box." Bridgette shuddered at the idea of her pretty, soft, sweet smelling baby rotting inside that pink coffin. The idea of the smell and worms crawling around repulsed her, and she shook her head back and forth to get rid of the gruesome pictures. "Let me out of here. I can't stand it."

Looking from Edward's grimly fixed face to Mamere's teary blank stare to Mother's smug expression, Bridgette realized her wishes would go unheeded. She pushed hard against Mamere and tried to get out, but Mamere sat fixed in her seat.

"Just sit there," Mother said. "You can't beat them. They just gang up on you. Didn't take long for me to figure that out." Mother sipped on her drink.

Bridgette sighed, put her head between her arms on the table, and gripped the wooden bench seat. They had to notice her. What she wanted for her baby was important. What if Celeste got scared alone there in the dark? What if she cried out? In the tomb downtown, Bridgette would never hear her, never be able to get to her. It was just too far away. Her arms got heavy, her shoulders slumped, and her body felt like it was dissolving. "Goodbye," she whispered and drifted away.

* * *

"St Michael, pray for us," Father Dominic continued with the litany of saints.

Bridgette looked up, clasped both hands together, and pretended to pray. Mother stood directly in front of her, closer to the priest conducting the service than Bridgette. Over the years, Mother's fine figure had faded, becoming first pleasantly plump, then matronly, and now unpleasantly obese. She too must have had to scrounge through her closet for something black to wear because the fabric encasing her round rump stretched itself obscenely. The black and white horizontal stripes caressed each bulge and created an undulating, pulsating line whenever she shifted from one foot to the other. Bridgette watched as each cheek bounced in rotation.

"Amanda," Mamere whispered to Mother. "Bring Bridgette closer. She needs to be up here." She touched Mother's arm and gestured toward Bridgette.

Mother turned and made to walk over to her but stopped. She pointed a finger at Bridgette and crooked it. Mother gestured toward the coffin and hissed, "Here. Now."

Bridgette blinked and scowled. She pressed her back harder against the tomb behind her and prayed for the door to open so she could crawl inside and hide. Please let her disappear from her loving family, from Mother's finger, from Edward and Mamere's familiarity. Impeccably dressed in black, they stood close enough to each other to hold hands. Perhaps lovers? One, two, three... but who was four? Her? Dead Celeste? Jacqueline? Maybe.

A tiny pink coffin lay exposed on the bier in front of them next to the priest. How often did the funeral home drag that miniature wooden frame from the back room to escort some other baby to its cold resting place? How many other mothers stood in Bridgette's place wondering why God chose them to torment?

Bridgette started to tremble. A stinging wave of sensation crawled from her guts into her chest, through her skin, and out onto her arms and legs. Panic overtook her, and Bridgette knew she would soon scream and disrupt the solemn proceedings. Run, run, run. Get away as fast as

you can. Her mind searched for a safe place, something from long ago. There was the window seat tucked into the third floor of Mamere's house. That was the room that had been hers during the War when they lived with Mamere and even after when Father left for another woman. She had often scampered there to hide from Mother.

Bridgette turned and kicked over a planter that was perched on the stairs of the tomb she was leaning on. Everyone turned, and she froze. She had no car. She could not drive, and she could not imagine the limo driver taking just her back to the bayou. Just as she had worried, here she was far from her familiar spaces in a cemetery too far from home. Bridgette sat down on the steps of the nearest tomb. Everyone except Mother turned back to the priest. Stop staring and pointing at me, she wanted to yell.

Coming here, Edward had yammered on and on about crib death as though that would comfort her. He said he and Jacqueline talked it over and they thought it best if Bridgette talked about it, if not to them then to someone else. They did not understand how frightened Bridgette was, how she wanted to scream, "Leave me alone." She was desperate, desperate to escape her scary thoughts. She feared talking led to screaming, then to throwing, then to destruction of everything around her. While Mother glared at her, Bridgette imagined her arms clearing tabletops, ripping curtains, overturning furniture, and punching out at the world. She forced herself to stare back. Staring made it easier to will the deadness to reappear.

She looked past Mother, past Mamere, past Edward, and past the priest with his unholy burden. She blinked at Sister Joseph's presence. Why was she here? Bridgette hardly knew her, but it would be just like Mamere to invite her. Mamere could do nothing important without Sister's input. All of them, plus Jacqueline, Dorothea, other family members and friends blurred into a black formless mass. Bridgette went behind her eyes. From there, life was controllable.

Nothing reached her; no one hurt her. It was a trick she had learned as a child, a strange state, like looking at the world from underwater. Bridgette existed on one side of the shimmering surface, everyone else on the other. Best of all, it was quiet there. Ugly words, critical words reached her only dimly as though filtered through a fine mesh screen. Bridgette looked past the assemblage. Tombs in all stages of repair and disarray faced grassy walkways. Yellow chrysanthemums from last week's All Saints Day brightened the graves. All ran together like art work in a picture book, but from behind her eyes Bridgette could not see or feel the blackness that inhabited her life.

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"Talk to me," Edward insisted. His hand held a plate of finger sandwiches. "Stop looking that way. It frightens me." He pushed the food in front of Bridgette.

Without his coat and tie, he looked disheveled. Sitting around all day did nothing for his appearance. He looked better at the funeral, Bridgett thought, wondering if he could sense her distaste. Her dress still clung to her, and sweat dripped from her forehead.

"You need to take that hot dress off and get into something more comfortable. You've had it on for the past two days," Edward said. Putting the sandwiches down on the glass-topped table, he sat on the swing next to her.

Bridgette scooted away to the far side of the swing. If Edward touched her in any way, she would panic. Two sleepless nights and nibbles of food made her jumpy.

"Here, eat something," he said reaching for the sandwiches.

Bridgette stared at the bayou. No sun today. The water was a dreary gray. A moist southerly wind blew and caused white ripples to surge from one shore to the other. Black thunderclouds rose like mountains on the horizon, and Bridgette cringed thinking of the coming

lightning and thunder. Directly across from her house, the third story window of Mamere's house beckoned. She imagined herself curled into a ball on her window seat, legs tucked beneath her with an old quilt snuggled under her chin. The thick stuffing, balled in places, clutched in her fists, provided a sense of security. She knew she needed to get there. Her little cottage so cozy and inviting a few days ago felt alien, and except at bedtime Bridgette refused to enter it, choosing instead to sit on the swing.

"Try to eat something, honey," Edward murmured. "You're going to be sick."

"I can't," Bridgette whispered. "Maybe, I'll starve." Her tone of voice chilled her.

"Come on, let's go inside. Mamere can help you change."

Edward's solicitous tone sickened her. Didn't he know she was going mad? Bridgette cowered against the side of the swing. Her dress snagged on a rough piece of wood and pulled out a long woolen thread. "Look what you've made me do," she yelled. "It's my only wool dress. What'll I wear when it gets cold?" Tears rolled down Bridgette's face. She jumped off the swing and knocked against the cocktail table. The sandwich platter fell to the floor and shattered spilling the chicken salad everywhere. "Look at the mess. Leave me alone."

"Bridgette, stop." The back of the swing thudded against the railing when he hopped off. Edward grabbed Bridgette's hands. "Come here, honey. Everything's going to be all right."

"No," she shouted. "How can you say that? Celeste is dead, and I killed her." Bridgette gasped. There it was, the truth, what she really believed. She had been an even worse mother than her own. At least, Mother had not killed her. Bridgette looked across the bayou at Mamere's house. She had to figure a way to get there, away from these people and their sympathetic murmurings, their solicitous pawing, their food. There, inside her attic cave, she would escape.

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The week after the funeral passed Bridgette by. Everyone else went back to their usual life, Edward to work, Mamere to her charity functions, Mother to her drinking, Jacqueline to her psychiatric residency, and Dorothea to her cooking and cleaning. Bridgette sat glued to the swing and watched the bayou go by. When the wind came up, she counted the ripples on the water. She watched as each one moved from one shore to the next. If one evaporated in the middle, Bridgette started over with another. She was only satisfied when four in a row reached the other side. Four was such an even perfect number, with neat angles and straight intersecting sides. When the wind calmed and the water glassed over, frazzled thoughts took the place of counting waves. Worms slithered from her eyes, and snakes writhed and crawled from her head. Babies huddled together in limbo and moaned and screamed obscenities at her. Celeste led the group of infants.

“You did this to me,” Celeste screamed. “It’s because of you that I’m in this horrible, dreary place with all these deserted, bawling creatures. Mamere was right. You and your germ phobia.”

Bridgette whimpered. She had no defense, and she felt possessed by evil. Over and over, she counted porch railings, outlined gingerbread curlicues on houses, and the wrought-iron sides of the bridge. Even the slates on Mamere’s roof across the way cluttered her list.

Loud voices from inside the house startled her. Had she been asleep, dreaming? She did not realize anyone was still there. She pushed the furry coverlet off, sat up, and leaned in the direction of the door.

“Jacqueline said she’d make an appointment with her psychiatric mentor,” Edward said in that no-nonsense tone she heard him use when speaking with clients.

“Don’t you think we should ask Bridgette first?” Mamere asked. Her voice sounded unsure, shaky, a tone Bridgette was unused to hearing in her.

“She hasn’t been off that swing this whole week except when I carry her to bed. Jacqueline thinks something’s mentally wrong with her. I hate the idea, but maybe she’s right.”

“I don’t know. We should handle this in the family. I don’t want to bring a stranger into it.” Mamere sounded more certain, family a topic she warmed to.

“A stranger?” Edward shouted. “For God’s sake, he’s a doctor.” He emphasized the word doctor. “What’s the matter with you? Are you back in the dark ages where they locked people in asylums or hid them in attics.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’s natural to be upset when you lose a baby. Look at me. When Robert died, I cried myself to sleep for weeks.”

“Maybe it’d be OK if she did cry, but she just sits and stares and rocks back and forth. She doesn’t talk to me about it or hug me or anything. She just looks past me at nothing. It’s not normal, and she’s scaring me.”

Bridgette heard the chair legs scrape across the floor when someone jumped up so fast the wingchair banged against the wall. The door to the back hall slammed shut, and Bridgette wondered who left whom. She grinned at the idea of Mamere sitting there flustered for once. So, Jacqueline spoke to her husband about Bridgette. That meddling bitch, she thought that because she was a psychiatric resident she knew everything about everything. Bridgette’s stomach clenched, and she wondered if she was getting an ulcer. She had zero intention of talking with anyone. How could she face some stranger with the fact that she had murdered her baby and damned her to limbo until judgment day?

At least, Mamere sounded like she was on her side about keeping the secret. Mamere and Edward were against her about the cemetery, but now it was Jacqueline and Edward who ganged up on her. Two by two, then two paired against one, and off they marched holding hands and left her. What else did they do together while she sat alone on the porch? The wind picked up and ripples streamed across the water, one wave, two waves, three waves, four.

Bridgette stared at Mamere's house with its two dormer windows. Two, not four. How could she turn two into four? Her unkempt nails clicked against the glass top end table. Rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat, four. Rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat, four. Continuing to drum with one hand, she held the other hand out and pointed at the window which once housed her bedroom. She outlined the margins of the window with her index finger numerous times without figuring a way to make it come out with four sides. The gabled roof got in her way always ending with a point at the top. One, two, three, four, five. The unending, asymmetrical conclusion to her count gave her the jitters, and she left that futile task to count the more precise porch columns. Content when she counted sixteen of them, she matched them up in four groups of four. One set of four, two sets of four, three sets of four, four sets of four. Nice.

Often, many years earlier, Bridgette had sat on that porch with Mamere, had milk and cookies and watched the goings on in the neighborhood. In the summer, boys swam in the bayou and sometimes jumped from the top of the bridge. Bridgette knew if she did it, she would hit her head on the bridge railing and knock her brains out. One day one of the boys must have hurt himself because Bridgette remembered such a commotion, sirens screeched and police cars zoomed past the house with lights flashing. When one of the policemen jumped into the bayou, Mamere dragged Bridgette inside. Nobody swam there for the rest of that summer, but the next

year the boys came back. Nibbling on cookies, Bridgette made a game of it and sang, one boy in, one boy out, two boys in, two boys out, make it come out even, and they'll be all right.

Satisfied that she had grouped the porch columns to her liking, Bridgette contemplated her old bedroom window. It both invited and repulsed her. It's bleary, unwashed appearance defeated her desire to see inside. She knew no one went up there any more except to bring a piece of furniture or some old clothes to store. When Bridgette, Mother, and Jacqueline lived there during the War and after Father left, Jacqueline, five years older than Bridgette, had the larger room with the bigger window. Bridgette did not mind because hers was cozier, more isolated, and felt safer. Built inside the dormer was a window seat upholstered with a plush, yellow, chintz cushion. The cushion covered a deep bin where Bridgette stored her favorite dolls. Many times, Bridgette hid in that nook from Mother, reading and pretending. A couple of years after her marriage, Bridgette and Edward looked through those rooms for old furniture they might use in their house. Everything looked faded and dusty, and they decided not to bother. She craved the safety of her window seat but feared if she did the cobwebs could grow over her and cover her with their sticky filaments.

Bridgette clenched and unclenched her hands, and her nails dug into her palms. She was furious that Edward talked to Jacqueline and then to Mamere. What if he also brought Mother into it? Acid burned her stomach, her heart raced, and she took several deep breaths. She fumbled beneath the blanket for her pocket and reached inside. Wisps of cotton lint clung to the sharp edge of Mamere's extra house key that had nestled in her bathrobe for a week, ever since she changed out of her funeral dress.

A melodic, whistling tune came from inside the house. Bridgette's shoulders sagged, and she looked at the old iron bridge. Picturing herself crossing its ancient roadway to the other side

of Bayou St. John, her ragged pink chenille robe flowing behind her, she shook her head in disgust. She had sabotaged herself by not putting real clothes on this morning. She knew Edward and Mamere would soon leave. They could not stand to be around her, but it sounded like Dorothea was here. Bridgette wondered how she missed all this coming and going this morning. She remembered Edward saying earlier that he would be late, that he had an after-hours client. Yesterday evening, Mamere said she had an all-day meeting to plan this year's Opera Ball. With those two out of the way, Bridgette figured no one was there to stop her from sneaking into Mamere's house to the safety of her old room.

That unholy pair, Edward and Mamere had enlisted Dorothea as watchdog. Solid, good Dorothea planned to stay all day to change the sheets, to clean the bathroom, and to fix lunch and supper for Bridgette. She hated them. They trapped her. Bridgette felt her determination to escape drain from her body. She slid down into the swing, covered her head with the blanket, bunched up her knees, and slept.

CHAPTER THREE—CAVES AND BOXES

Bridgette caressed the heavy brass key. Its scrolled top nestled into her palm, and she marveled that after all these years it still shone. When she rubbed its intricate carved surface, she relaxed when she recalled how safe she once felt in this room. It was right to come here. Grateful that Mamere still hid the key in the hall desk, Bridgette unlocked the door to her old bedroom. Years ago when hiding from Mother, Bridgette often took the key into the room with her and locked the door from inside giving her a much needed sense of power over Mother.

The door creaked open and Bridgette paused to look around. The room, now used as a storage attic, was much dustier than she remembered. Dorothea must not even bother to clean up here anymore. Rolled up carpets and old end tables filled the space between the door and her window seat. Bridgette picked her way around the mess and crawled into her safety nook. Much smaller than she remembered, the nook barely accommodated her and she folded her legs under

her, turned, and looked out the window. Outside, the bayou sparkled. Two young people paddled a canoe along the bank. One paddle stroke, two paddle strokes, three paddle strokes, four. They maneuvered under the bridge, around the bend, and out of sight. Safe.

Bridgette wiggled around until her back rested against the window pane and looked at the room. It was filled with family treasures, things Mamere complained about having to put away. Barely visible behind a huge armoire, Mamere's wedding dress hung from a rack against the far wall, its plastic cover split in two places. Next to it sat the dinette table, an American flag folded into a precise triangle on its red Formica top. The flag's edges were frayed and roach droppings nestled in the crevices. Bridgette gulped, closed her eyes and shivered. She was terrified of those huge, disgusting creatures that crawled on walls and sometimes took flight. She checked her surroundings through half closed eyelids and resisted the impulse to run. Sadness overcame fear, and she looked again at the flag. Buried beneath it was the flag that belonged to grandfather when he was a member of the flying Lafayette Escadrille. It reminded her of several Fourth of July parties when she was a child. For three or four years after the Second World War was over, Mamere insisted they celebrate the day with fireworks and a family-get-together. Mamere always brought the flags out, settled in a chair in front of the French doors in the living room, and demanded all gather round.

"You see these flags," she pronounced unfolding them over her legs and caressing them against her cheek. "The Air Force gave them to me at your grandfather's funeral. He was a hero in the War, you know."

No, Bridgette did not know. She did not even know which War. Certainly, not the one Daddy had been in. Even though Bridgette barely remembered her father, Grandpa had to be much older than him. What Bridgette did know was that Mamere holding the flag that way

confused her. As soon as Mamere brought out the flag, Mother scowled and shooed everyone outside to play and light sparklers. Bridgette wanted to follow but did not want to leave Mamere alone with the flag. Instead, she walked over, patted Mamere's leg, and kissed her cheek.

"You're my special girl," Mamere said. She folded the flags. "Here, you can touch them."

"They're pretty," Bridgette said. "I especially like the red one with the Indian on it." She looked out the door. The sound of Jacqueline and her cousins pushing each other on the swing set beckoned her, but she stayed by Mamere's side.

Bridgette shook her head to erase the memory, turned away from the room, and looked across the bayou at her house. Its vacant windows stared outward with unholy eyes. No one was there. The emptiness which allowed for her escape that morning now haunted her. The swing glided to and fro in a brisk north wind as though driven by unseen ghosts. Bridgette squirmed around, looked first at the room and then twisted back to look at her house. Should she stay in her nook or run back to her house? No answer came, and she sat, stared, and drifted. Minutes, perhaps hours, passed. The setting sun turned the sky over City Park orange, then red, then iridescent gray. The gas lanterns on each side of her doorway fluttered with an ever widening arc of light. Edward's car pulled into their driveway, and he and what looked like Mamere got out. Edward must have picked her up from the Opera Guild home on his way from the brokerage house. He had murmured something about her car being in the shop.

Bridgette watched them reach the front steps. Maybe they should hold hands to go up, or maybe they should kiss, or maybe... What a bizarre thought. She did not understand where it was coming from. Mamere was much too old to do that with Edward. Shivering, she shoved her hands over her eyes to shut out the incessant thought. Compelled to look again, she peeped out.

One step, two steps, three steps, four steps, five steps, six. That's not even. Go back down two steps to make four and start over again. No. March up in synch and come out even that way. Mamere, use your right foot when Edward uses his. Do it exactly, the same foot at the same time. Reach the top together and then kiss. Bridgette shut her eyes and when she opened them again Edward and Mamere had gone inside.

In a few minutes, Edward ran out, bounded down the stairs to the sidewalk, stopped and looked up and down the bayou. Bridgette could almost see the panic on his face and hear him yell, Bridgette. Hide, she knew she needed to hide. She shoved her way out of the nook, fell to the floor and crawled to the cubbyhole where she once stored her toys. Long ago, Mamere's handyman built shelves for Bridgette's baby dolls and an alcove for the dollhouse great-grandpapa had built for Mamere and which she had given to Bridgette. Modeled on a pre-Civil War version of Mamere's house, it had been one of Mamere's treasures, and Bridgette was surprised to see it in its present condition.

The windows of the dollhouse were broken. Someone must have dragged the dollhouse up here into this corner and forgotten it. Tears welled up. It was once so precious to her and Mamere, and now it was in deplorable condition. One of its French doors hung loose; another was missing entirely. The paint had peeled in large splotches. The wallpaper so carefully glued in place many years earlier was ripped and sagged in spots. Much of the miniature furniture although still there was piled in a corner. The tester bed which Bridgette had imagined belonged to the daughter of the house stood unharmed with its yellow flowered bedspread faded but intact. Bridgette reached inside the living room corner to pull the dining room table from its pile. Two chairs, one unharmed, another with two broken legs came with it. The furniture was made in the Queen Anne style, and Bridgette recalled the days she and Mamere spent wandering the French

Quarter to collect the pieces. Reaching into the corner, Bridgette dragged another four chairs out. She wiped the furniture pieces with the bottom of her blouse and tried to set them right. Again and again and again she tried but the broken one continued to fall over.

Bridgette scooted around on the dusty floor. She pressed the fingertips of her hands together and pushed until her wrists hurt. She wondered what had happened to the drapes she had watched Mamere make and the rugs they had both hand hooked. Nowhere did she see the tiny china dolls, the little girl in her flowered chintz dress, the baby in its white christening dress, the nun in her Ursuline habit, or the grey haired grandmother in her blue smock. Bridgette searched the doll house, its wrap around porch, and the shelves in the alcove but the dolls were missing.

Bridgette closed her eyes and frowned. She must find that baby doll. The last time she saw the tiny thing it was sitting in the crib with its white dress and lacy bonnet on. Unlike Celeste, it was dressed for church, ready to be baptized. Bridgette knew she had made a mistake with her baby. She left Celeste in her nightie with the dress draped over her head. No wonder she never made it to Church. If only she could rectify that, complete her duty like a good mother and dress her child. Maybe, if she practiced mothering on the china doll, God would give her another chance. He could give Celeste back or if too late for that, then at least move Celeste from limbo to heaven early and give Bridgette another baby.

Determined to find the china doll if it took all night, Bridgette crept out into the darkening shadows of the room. Over in the far corner, Bridgette spotted something silver hidden beneath the red Formica table. It seemed familiar, and she crawled in its direction. Reaching behind the table legs, Bridgette pulled out a large cardboard container. It resembled an old shoe box but was larger and heavier. Crinkly silver foil covered the outside and a green rickrack ribbon enclosed it on four sides. She and Mamere had made that box one day when they were

playing dollhouse. For some reason, it seemed important for Bridgette to remember why. She stopped, closed her eyes and focused on her memories. It had to do with hiding treasured mementoes, something precious only to Mamere that she wanted to share with Bridgette and no one else. She remembered a ring, an engraved champagne glass, maybe a story they played out in the dollhouse. Bridgette struggled to sharpen the distorted images in her mind.

She picked the box up and whatever was inside rattled. The china baby doll she was looking for bounced against her fingers. Someone had tied a gold string around the baby's neck and hung it over the backside of the container hidden from view. Bridgette reached for the doll. Now she could practice on it and satisfy God that she was a good mother. It was difficult to remove so she put the figure in her mouth and used both hands to untie it. It came loose with the thread hanging from its neck.

Downstairs, the front door slammed shut. Startled, Bridgette jumped, grabbed the china baby from between her teeth, and shoved it into the front of her underpants. The box tumbled to the floor and whatever was inside seemed to break into pieces. She stopped to open it, but Edward's voice interrupted her.

"Bridgett," Edward shouted.

Then a murmuring response which Bridgette guessed was Mamere.

"She has to be here." Again Edward's raised voice, more impatient sounding this time.

"Where else would she be?"

Another voice. This one more irritated.

Shoving the box back into its resting place, Bridgette crawled to the door, opened it slowly, and crept to the top of the stairs. The stairs' curved banister hid her from view. In a

crouched position, she looked around the curved railing. Edward, Mamere, and Mother stood in the foyer looking at each other.

“Where the hell’d she go?” Mother clenched a clear plastic cup half full with her usual bourbon. Ice cubes clinked, and some of her drink sloshed onto the floor. “Damn. That little bitch, always causing trouble.” Her speech slurred.

“You didn’t have to come, you know, Amanda. Just shush.” Mamere gave her that I can’t believe you’re for real look.

“Y’all wait here while I search this house from top to bottom,” Edward said. The sound of rapid footsteps in the direction of the living room reached Bridgette. Then a shout “She’d have to come here. I thought she might’ve taken the bus to the cemetery but not without her purse. And I found her shoes in our bedroom. All she had on were slippers.”

Edward’s voice trailed off, and Bridgette heard him clatter downstairs to the enclosed ground floor breezeway. Mother and Mamere continued to glare at each other.

“I told you we should’ve buried that baby in the cemetery around here.” Mother sat down on the entryway bench alongside the stairwell. “But no. You have to bring that God damned family stuff up, that ridiculous family stuff, so false.” Her voice rose to a shout. “Bury her in the family tomb, my ass.”

Even though Mother was hidden from view, Bridgette could feel the poison in her voice and picture the sneer on her face. Mamere walked over and stood in front of her.

“Get off it,” Mamere said her voice barely audible. “You have no right to take a position on this.” She sounded like a snake hissing.

“Oh, yeah. That’s what you think. I have more right than you, but you poisoned her mind to me from day one.”

“Actually, you did not need me. Turned out you were expert at that.”

Mother jumped up, and Bridgette saw her hand clutching the cup. She winced afraid Mother would strike Mamere or throw her drink on her.

“Stop,” Bridgette yelled. “Please stop.” She crumbled to the floor. “I can’t bear any more of this. Everything in my life has turned ugly.” Bridgette covered her ears and curled into a ball. She felt numb, and the sounds Mamere and Mother made reached her dimly. A giant plastic bubble seemed to enclose her. Footsteps clanged up the stairs. Mamere, then Mother, then Edward peered down at her. Their faces clouded over and their voices receded. Mamere reached down to brush Bridgette’s hair from her face. Bridgette knew there was a secret she must let them in on but also needed to keep hidden, all that stuff about practicing on the baby. She struggled with what to say. Her body stiffened and her hands clenched into fists. With one arm pressed against her body, Bridgette reached down with the other hand, lifted up her blouse, and rubbed her belly. Her fingers drifted over the doll. “Baby, baby, baby here,” she mumbled through clenched lips and choked on her saliva. “See, we can find baby to fix it here. Celeste didn’t make christening because I didn’t put her dress on.” She gulped down a sob. “Now she’s in the tomb in the wrong dress. It’s pink, not white. Please help me get baby out. I need to practice. God’ll forgive me if I do it right this time.”

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Bridgette turned over in the darkened room. A table lamp dimmed to its lowest setting cast an eerie glow on Jacqueline who sat reading in the same chair that Bridgette once used to nurse Celeste. She wondered what it was doing in her bedroom, particularly since she had asked Edward to get rid of it.

“Are you awake?” Jacqueline said. She got up and approached the bed.

Bridgette shivered when Jacqueline touched her shoulder. She scooted down farther in the bed and pulled the cover tighter. “What time is it? How’d I get here?”

“I called in a Valium prescription for you.” Jacqueline pulled the cover back and shoved a small blue pill into Bridgette’s hand. “Here take this. You need something to calm you down. You were sobbing hysterically when Edward brought you back from Mamere’s. What were you doing there anyway? You had everyone scared to death.”

Bridgette rolled the pill around and around on her fingertips and shuddered. It was blue, not pretty girl pink but ugly boy blue. She always hated boy blue.

“Here’s a cup of water. Let’s us wash that down.”

Bridgette knew Jacqueline did not really mean us. She meant just her. Jacqueline was not the type to take medicine of any sort, much less nerve pills. “I don’t want your stupid pill. I want my baby.”

“You need something to help you sleep. I’m worried about you. We all are. Edward says you’re not sleeping or eating.” Jacqueline pulled the rocker close to the bed.

Bridgette squirmed down still farther in the bed and tried to pull the cover up around her head, but Jacqueline clasped the edge and held it away from Bridgette’s face.

“There’s something we need to talk about,” Jacqueline said. Continuing to hold on to the blanket, she sat down in the rocker.

Bridgette turned her face to the wall but did not resist further. “I don’t want your pill. I need to do something for my baby. I didn’t put the dress on her, and God is punishing us.”

“What do you mean by that?” Jacqueline demanded, a puzzled look on her face.

“You know, the christening dress? It’s all wrong. She should’ve worn it to her baptism, but she didn’t make it to church. You know what I mean?” With an effort, Bridgette slowed her

speech. In a measured tone, she continued. "Celeste did not have a baptism, so she went to limbo. You know that place where babies who still have original sin on their souls go?" She stared at the ceiling and tapped the bed to emphasize each word.

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand. Tell me again." Jacqueline settled back in the rocker but continued her grip on the coverlet.

Bridget turned to face Jacqueline. She took a deep breath. "You know, limbo?" she shrieked and took another deep breath. "You do know what limbo is, don't you?"

"Of course, I know. I went to Holy Rosary School too, didn't I? That stuff about unbaptized children not going to heaven 'cause they still have that black mark from original sin on their souls." Jacqueline shook her head. "I don't really believe all that stuff anymore. Do you?"

"Limbo's not a nice place. It's boring and there aren't any pretty angels to look at. No sparkly wings."

"I guess so."

Bridgette tried to pull the blanket from Jacqueline's grasp. "You've got to understand. You know Mamere's special christening dress," she gulped. "Remember how pretty and clean it was. Well, I ruined the whole thing. I was supposed to put it on Celeste, but I made a mistake. I used it to cover her face instead. God didn't want me to do that, but I couldn't stand the way she looked. I was supposed to put it on." Bridgette struggled to sit up. "If I just hadn't been so stupid, she wouldn't be in Limbo. She'd be in heaven or maybe even here with me." Bridgette clenched her eyelids shut and shoved the cover down around her legs. She tried to swing her legs out of the bed, opened her eyes, and stared at Jacqueline. "Now, do you understand? I have to fix this. I made such a stupid mistake not putting the christening dress on." When Jacqueline looked

confused, Bridgette became agitated and insisted. “Listen to me.” She grabbed Jacqueline’s hand and sat up. “It’s my fault Celeste is stuck in limbo. I covered her face with the dress. Don’t you see? I was supposed to put the dress on her, not cover her with it. Then we could have gone to church for the Baptism. Who knows? Maybe she would have come back to life. At any rate, she’d be with the angels in heaven, not in Limbo.” She slumped and let go of her sister.

Jacqueline frowned and looked away from Bridgette toward the wall. A few minutes passed before she turned back toward her.

“That doesn’t make sense. It’s not about the dress at all or what you did or didn’t do.” Jacqueline tried to hug her, but Bridgette pulled away. “As awful as it is, Celeste just died,” she said in a kind voice. “No one really knows why, but everyone knows it wasn’t your fault.” She paused again and looked thoughtful. Taking a deep breath, she continued, “And there’s something else I need to ask you. Earlier, Edward said that at Mamere’s you were rubbing your hand over your stomach and saying Celeste was still in there, like you were still pregnant.” She took Bridgette’s hand.

“What do you mean?” Bridgette shifted in the bed and snatched her hand away. What a ridiculous idea, still pregnant with Celeste. She wished she were. That would solve everything. Bridgette began to rub circles with her thumb and forefinger. One, two, three, four circles, one, two, three, four, she counted to herself. The continuous stroking soothed her and after a few minutes, she pulled her legs under the covers and closed her eyes. Could she be having blackouts? There were other times in the past couple of weeks she could not remember what had happened. Bridgette recalled Jacqueline telling her not to bother with some of the things Mother said and did while she was drinking, that she was most likely in a blackout and would not remember what went on, that it happened often with alcoholics. Bridgette frowned. She did not

drink. True, she had gone to Mamere's to escape and found the doll house. Her china dolls weren't in the house, and she had spent time looking for them, especially the baby in its christening dress. The christening dress was important. Then, she'd heard voices downstairs, but after that everything went blank.

"I couldn't have said that." Bridgette yelled. "Don't you think I know she's dead?" She slumped back.

The door opened, and Edward came in followed by Mamere.

"Finally awake, huh?" Edward said. He came over and sat alongside Bridgett on the bed. Mamere plopped down next to him. Bridgette pulled herself up and leaned against the headboard. She grimaced, tucked her legs beneath her, and tensed the muscles in her back. If only Edward and Mamere shifted backwards a bit and sat up straight like her, then the outline of their three bodies formed a perfect capital T. She drew the letter in her mind and wished she could grab them and make it come out right. Again that weird thought of Edward and Mamere touching each other popped into her head. Maybe he'll give her a little kiss. Handsome Edward kissing Mamere's wrinkled face? Bridgette shuddered and prayed the awful thought would disappear. Sister Agatha's creed echoed in her mind. "God hears your thoughts as well as your words," she had admonished in sixth grade. "You sin with impure thoughts as well as with impure deeds."

"Sleep make you feel any better?" he asked. "This is the first time you've slept since the funeral." He and Mamere exchanged quizzical looks, and he nodded.

"You had us worried back there at my house," Mamere said. "You were talking out of your head. Something about Celeste still being in your tummy. Jacqueline said you probably

were just sleep deprived and said she'd get something to calm you so you could sleep." Mamere jumped up and paced around the room.

Bridgette watched. It looked like Mamere was gathering her forces. Back and forth. One step, two steps, three steps, four steps, five. No, that's not right. When you come back, take bigger steps to make it come out four. Bridgette counted, five to the wall then six back. That's not even close. Bridgette's stomach clenched, her heart pounded in her chest, and her breathing quickened. Her vision blurred, and she reached out for a hand to hold her down, something or somebody to anchor her. Nobody noticed, and her fingers struggled to catch hold. She moaned, and Jacqueline touched her arm. Bridgette jumped like she had been scalded. "No," she screamed. "Touching burns."

Mamere stopped. Edward jumped up from the bed. Jacqueline shoved her hand behind her back. All three stared at Bridgette. No one spoke. Bridgette hid her face in her hands. She knew she had messed up again.

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Bridgette slept, fitfully at first, but then soundly, like falling deep into a black pit with soft sheep's wool at the bottom. Edward and Jacqueline had convinced her to try the little blue pill. It made her feel sort of peaceful, drowsy, removed. It was like going behind her eyes only softer, quicker, easier.

She woke to hear Edward tiptoeing out of the room, clothes in hand, and guessed he did not want to wake her. Bridgette stretched, turned over, and wished for another of those blue pills. Maybe she could sleep forever. Her shoulders and stomach quivered. During the night, she had awakened from a terrible nightmare. In the dream, Celeste was not sleeping peacefully inside the satin-lined coffin, but instead was pointing an accusing finger at her. The concrete tomb was cold

and black inside, and the tiny pink coffin rested on all their ancestors' bones. Bridgette shivered. Celeste's resting place was not even safe. She had insisted Celeste's coffin be steel, painted pink steel, something so sturdy it resisted all future efforts to break it down.

When Bridgette fought against Celeste's burial in the family tomb, she had questioned whether there was any room for the baby coffin in there. So many family members rested in that enclosed space, Bridgette knew there was no place left for her little one. Mamere reassured her. After a period of time and before the family placed another coffin in there, the grave diggers broke the old coffins apart and scattered the bones to the back of the tomb. Bridgette found the process loathsome and begged Edward to buy the heaviest box he could, one that would stand up to the gravedigger's hatchet. Bridgette vowed to never forgive Edward for denying their child an everlasting resting place. Bridgette had denied Celeste heaven for her soul, and Edward had denied safety for her body. They had both sinned and needed lifelong punishment.

Bridgette turned toward the door when Edward came back into the room.

"Did I wake you up?" Edward closed the door softly and walked over to sit beside Bridgette. "I'm on my way to work, and Dorothea's coming when she finishes at Mamere's to fix lunch." He leaned over, kissed her forehead, and started to walk from the room.

Bridgette sat up on the side of the bed. "Wait. I don't want Dorothea. Tell her not to come."

Hand on the doorknob, Edward said, "Jacqueline's not sure you should be alone yet."

"What's she got to do with it?"

"It's better if you take it easy for another few days. I'll tell Dorothea not to bother you."

"She bothers me by being here."

“Well, we’ll see. We’re all going to Mamere’s for dinner tonight. Everyone will be there so be sure you rest up. We’ll talk about it then. Gotta go. Call me if you need anything.”

“Yeah, like a baby or a life.” Bridgette hollered down the hall to the sound of the front door slamming.

CHAPTER FOUR—OPTIONS

Bridgette leapt from the bed and hurried to the closet to pick something to wear. She looked at the clock, only eight-thirty. Edward said Mamere scheduled Dorothea to come help her at ten, but Bridgette planned to leave by nine-thirty to miss her. She must visit Celeste today because Celeste was upset with her. Already mid-December and she still had not been to the cemetery since the funeral. She wanted to sit beside her tomb and listen. Maybe she could calm Celeste's soul with her presence. It was supposedly cold today so she needed to find one of her wool sweaters if she planned to be outside. Rooting through the built-in drawers in her closet, Bridgette's fingers brushed against a small box surrounded by a piece of wrapping paper and curlicues of ribbon. She withdrew her hands and jumped back. Air hissed through clenched teeth. "Oh my God," she whimpered.

Bridgette reached again into the chest and pulled out a small, pink, cloth box still partially covered by paper. She pushed the white wrapping aside and dropped the satin ribbon to the floor. Peeking into the hinged box, Bridgette recalled the day Celeste died. While everyone was gathered around the phone, she had sneaked inside to eavesdrop. Beside the table decorated with her Battenberg lace tablecloth and a flower arrangement of gardenias and pink roses, Bridgette saw a white wicker basket. Nestled in the folds of pink muslin and shredded yellow paper, Bridgette found a package, a gift no one thought to remove. Knowing it must be from Mamere, Bridgette grabbed the present hoping no one noticed her. Bringing it to her bathroom, she sat on the toilet seat and for several minutes looked at it before starting to unwrap it. Footsteps rushing down the hall and voices clamoring to find her forced her to abandon what she was doing. She ran to her bedroom closet and shoved the package, wrapping and all, under her sweaters. There it lay forgotten until today.

Bridgette sat on the floor, curled her legs underneath her, and gazed at the box. It just fit into her hands, and its size caused her to tear up. Without any trouble, Celeste could have held and maybe even chewed on it. Pastel pink cloth embossed with dark pink rosebuds covered the container. In the center, the words *Baby's First Bible* stood in stark relief. Bridgette opened the box and in spite of herself smiled. She took it out and thumbed through the pages. It surprised her that it was an actual Bible, not one of those picture books for children. Interspersed at relevant points in the stories, Bridgette noted full page color pictures. She stopped at the pictures of Moses and of Abraham and Isaac. Something about them reminded her of last night's nightmare.

In her dream, a tall man in an orange and blue striped, homespun robe stood alongside a jumble of large rocks. In his left hand he held a large hunting knife. With his right hand, he

clutched Celeste against his flowing, dark beard. She scowled and pointed an accusing finger toward Bridgette. Beside the man, a young boy in a white, homespun smock pointed to a lamb peeking out from a bush. He wanted to convince the man of something. Two rows of figures lined up behind the man. One man with a long white beard leaned on a staff and stood at the head of the line. A younger man in a multicolored robe followed him. A young boy in a brown smock cinched with a knobby rope stood in the midst of a group of infants. He demonstrated to them how to use a slingshot, but they were sad and disinterested. Only Celeste was angry.

“It’s your fault I’m here,” she yelled. “You should’ve listened to Mamere. You were so stupid to wait three months to baptize me. Look what happened because of your damn germ phobia. Better to have caught a cold, even pneumonia, than end up stuck here. And the other children here? Do you see them laughing and playing? But, nooo. Then there’re all these supposedly good and righteous, old men. What good did being honorable do for them? Not a damn thing. They’re stuck here just like me.”

Bridgette dropped the Bible onto the floor. Of course, Limbo of the Patriarchs. Not only did unbaptized babies go there but also those moral people who died before Christ rose from the dead. She remembered how Dante’s version of limbo in the *Inferno* surprised her during her sophomore year at Newcomb College. It was in the first circle of hell and contained not just babies but also the Patriarchs from the Bible as well as Homer, Plato, and others.

This was so different from what the nuns taught her at Ursuline High School. There, limbo was a stopping place on the way to heaven where only unbaptized babies waited until Judgment Day to see God and play with the angels. There was no punishment in limbo but not much happiness there either. In one class, Bridgette sat riveted by the nun’s instruction to her. It was their responsibility as good Catholics to make certain a baby was baptized, even to the point

of performing the sacrament behind a parent's back if they did not consent. She instructed them to do it even after a child died in case its soul had not yet left its body. Bridgette recalled feeling eerie, dazed by this proscription. The nun looked sacred in her determination to save these innocent ones from Limbo and Hell.

Bridgette shuddered. She failed to protect her own child. Those damn germs. Her fear led her to deprive Celeste of heaven. Always straightening things, always dusting and wiping down counters with bleach, always scrubbing the floors. Edward joked that you could eat off her floors. Bathrooms freaked her out, and she scrubbed and scrubbed the toilet and basin, sometimes until her hands rubbed raw. Jacqueline teased her about her "OCD" as she called it, but this was not funny. It condemned her baby to the first circle of Dante's hell and herself to this torment.

Bridgette struggled to get up, but her feet felt frozen beneath her. The thumb and forefinger of her right hand rotated frantically in a circle. She stared at the clothes hanging on hangers, hers sorted into those appropriate for winter, those okay for summer, whites together, blues together, blacks on one end, colors on the other. She noted four red garments hanging together, four yellow ones together, all colors grouped in fours. Everyone laughed at her need to have four of each color. If only one dress was pink, she shopped until she found three others.

Bridgette looked across the closet to Edward's side. None of his things were in order. Usually, this did not trouble her, but today her heart pounded and her stomach clenched. She needed to straighten everything out. She panicked and jumped up. After gathering everything she could carry off the rack, Bridgette went to dump them on the unmade bed. She dropped all the clothes on the floor and rushed to make the bed. Dorothea was coming, and she needed to get out of there. First though, she would straighten Edward's closet. Back and forth she went from the

closet to the bed to the floor to the closet and back to the bed. Then back to the closet. Get it done, get it done, Dorothea's coming. Must get out of here. Her heart pounded and her breathing came in short gasps. Her arms hurt. She simply had to get to the cemetery to see Celeste.

Bridgette sank into the pile of Edward's shirts on the floor, looked up, and glared at the wall. The pink roses in the wallpaper lost their distinct outline and blended into a wall of bright pink, no red blood. Frozen, Bridgette shook her head to rid herself of the gruesome image. The blood drizzled down the wall as the roses ran together. Count them. Put them back together. One pink rose, two pink roses, three pink roses, four. No more blood running to the floor. Five, six, seven, eight, group in multiples of four before too late. Roses coming back again. No more blood, but still everything is wrong. Have to get out soon. Breathe.

The hall clock chimed. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. A key turned in the front door lock, and Bridgette heard it open. Just on schedule, and she forgot to lock herself in her room when Edward left this morning. Sitting rigid with Edward's shirts stacked around her, Bridgette waited for Dorothea to find her. She watched shadows in the hall approach as arms, legs, and then torso loomed toward her.

"You up, Miss Bridgette?" Dorothea whispered through the partly open door.

Bridgette scooped up several of Edward's shirts, hangers and all and huddled in the midst of them.

"What'd you doing with all them clothes on the floor?" Dorothea pushed the door open. "Now, I'm gonna have to iron the whole bunch of them again." She walked over and tried to pull the shirts from Bridgette's grasp.

"No, I have to fix them. They're all mixed up. The colors are wrong. You don't know how they go."

“Sure I do. Who you think’s been doing it ever since that baby died.”

“It’s wrong. I tell you. It’s wrong. I can’t leave ‘til it’s done right.”

“Leave? Where’s you fixin’ on going? Mister Edward said you were supposed to stay here today, supposed to rest up. Some kind of big meetin’ tonight at your grandmother’s.

*

Bridgette looked around the dining room table. Dorothea cleared the dinner plates and washed up.

“Time to go,” Dorothea mumbled.

No one moved. At dinner, food went untouched and silence interrupted by a few murmured attempts by Mamere and Jacqueline to recount their daily activities prevailed. Every time someone spoke, Bridgette cringed awaiting a question about the closet incident as Edward had called it when he got home. Evidently, Dorothea informed on her.

“Let’s go into the kitchen,” Mamere suggested. “We can brew some coffee.”

Chairs scraped the floor as everyone, Edward, Mother, and Jacqueline, hastened to follow Mamere, leaving Bridgette at the table to watch the kitchen door swing back and forth on its hinges. One swing, two swings, three swings, four. One swing, two...

“Come on,” Edward insisted through the partially open door before it swung shut.

Bridgette jumped. She hated having her counting interrupted. Staring at the door, she hesitated. She was afraid to follow but terrified to return to the emptiness of her own house. The door swung open.

“Come on, honey.” Edward reached to pull her chair from the table. “Mamere’s brewing some coffee and chicory, and Jacqueline’s heating some milk for the café au lait. And would you believe, Mother even made chocolate chip cookies.”

“You’re not gonna tell on me messing up your clothes today, are you?”

“Aw, Bridgette baby. What’s the matter? You’re not yourself at all.” Edward leaned over, kissed the top of her head, and helped Bridgette from her chair into the kitchen.

Bridgette looked around the country-style room. Large, it occupied almost half the front of the house. Its warm pine floors gleamed with light streaming from Mamere’s two Tiffany floor lamps. An antique table with four Windsor chairs stood next to the side window, and a breakfast nook cushioned in green-flowered chintz looked out over the front porch toward the bayou. Mamere stood next to the white porcelain coffee pot on her Chambers Range. After each cupful of hot water dripped through, she poured another from a pot on the stove. Jacqueline filled a silver pitcher with hot milk and carried it to the side table already laid with china cups and saucers. Mother nibbled one of the cookies and placed the rest on a plate in the breakfast nook. All stopped what they were doing and stared at Bridgette when she came in on Edward’s arm.

Bridgette lowered her head and shuffled her feet back and forth. She felt so tiny.

“Sit over here,” Edward said pulling her toward one of the Windsor chairs.

Bridgette jerked her arm away, hurried to the breakfast nook, and scooted in toward the window. Turning her body away from the room, she leaned her forehead on the windowpane and sighed.

“You want hot milk in your coffee or just black?” Edward picked up a cup.

“I don’t know.” Bridgette selected four cookies from the plate and stuffed one into her mouth. “Whatever,” she slurred through a mouthful of crumbs.

“She usually likes lots of milk,” Edward said. He poured coffee and milk simultaneously into the cup, brought it to Bridgette, and slid into the seat opposite her. “Here. Why not turn around and join us?”

Bridgette pressed against the window but shifted sideways a little when she heard Mamere, Jacqueline, and Mother pull chairs over and set them in a semicircle around the breakfast nook. Edward and Mamere nodded to each other and smiled. Did he actually wink at Mamere, or did she imagine it? What’s with them pairing off like that? She wondered again what was going on between them, worry about her or some kind of tryst. They often looked at her and whispered to each other. Were they murmuring sweet nothings to each other or what? It was bad enough that she turned those happenings into pictures of them kissing and holding hands. That was bizarre enough, but today while sitting home alone, she imagined something more sinful and disturbing.

Edward had not gone to work that day. Instead he had waited in the car outside Mamere’s house until Dorothea left. When Mamere knew she was alone, she came onto the porch wearing a lacy white negligee that drooped open with its top four buttons undone. Edward ran up the stairs and stood gazing at Mamere’s body. He gasped and grinned at the sight of Mamere’s sagging breasts and wrinkled skin. His hand brushed the shoulder of her gown down around her back. With his fingertips, he rubbed her bony collar bone and caressed her furrowed nipple until she moaned and closed her eyes. Mamere reached down to stroke him and her eyes popped open at the full, bulging size of his member. He pushed her backward into the house, careful she did not stumble. The door slammed shut.

Bridgette grabbed four more cookies and stuffed them one by one into her mouth. Those tingling sensations were assailing her again. Today when she had the impure thoughts, she knew

she must confess them to Father Dominic. She could admit to sinning in thought like Sr. Angela warned but was ashamed to acknowledge how the images made her tingle and touch herself. That was too embarrassing. This afternoon after sinfully pleasuring herself, she rummaged through Edward's study looking for the little blue pills Jacqueline gave him. She stole ten from the bottle, swallowed two of them, and slept for the rest of the day.

She wiggled her legs together to rid herself of that evil sensation and turned again to look outside. The lights from the houses across the bayou reflected in the water and each residence gave birth to an eerie upside down mirror image of itself. The reflection of the flickering gas lanterns from her house across the way looked like stacks of giant gold coins. The shimmering images leaned first one way and then the other. What a splash that would make if the coins tumbled over. One falls in the bayou, two fall in the bayou, three fall...

"Bridgette," Edward said.

Bridgette winced at the demanding tone of his voice. She pressed her forehead harder against the window and continued: three fall in the bayou, four fall. The cookies she stuffed into her mouth repeated with a loud belch which she gulped down hoping no one noticed.

"Honey, turn 'round," Edward said in a softer tone and reached for her shoulder.

"Don't tell on me," Bridgette whispered. Her face puckered and tears welled up in her eyes, but she did turn around. "I feel so bad."

"We know, honey. That's why we wanted to talk. Maybe there's something that will help." Edward glanced again at Mamere who commanded the middle chair at the end of the breakfast nook table. He squeezed Bridgette's hand. Jacqueline sat to Mamere's right while Mother's chair was pulled slightly back and looked more toward the side window than toward Bridgette. Bridgette sat up straight when she saw the grim looks on Mamere and Jacqueline's

faces. Mother appeared dazed and sipped on coffee which Bridgette knew was laced with bourbon.

“Bridgette, honey,” Mamere jumped into the silence, her voice firm and business-like. “We’re all worried about you.”

“I too am worried about you,” Jacqueline chimed in, sitting forward.

“We are worried,” Mamere emphasized. She placed her hand on Jacqueline’s forearm and pressed her back into the chair. “You’ve been acting a little distraught since Celeste passed on. I remember when my baby boy died. I was upset for ages.”

“Well, maybe she’s more sad than distraught,” Edward said. “And we understand that. It’s only natural that you’d feel that way.”

“Mamere, Edward, I told you. She’s not distraught or sad or just upset or being natural.” Jacqueline sat forward again and leaned toward Bridgette. “She’s ill.” Jacqueline sat back and smirked like she had just delivered a complicated diagnosis on grand rounds.

“Let me handle this,” Mamere glared at Jacqueline, got up and slid in next to Edward. She reached for Bridgette’s other hand.

Mother gulped down the rest of her coffee, got up and poured herself a cupful of bourbon. “Everyone getting fired up,” she snickered, pulled her chair closer to Jacqueline and sat down. She gaped at each one and swallowed a mouthful of liquor.

“Bridgette, honey,” Edward said. “Mamere and I have been talking.”

“Talking?” Bridgette wondered aloud. “Is that all?”

“Huh?” Edward asked and looked sideways at Mamere. “Yeah, just talking. About how to help you. We’ve come up with some ideas and wanted to see what you thought.” He stopped for a few moments as though waiting for Mamere to pitch in. Frowning, he continued. “We

haven't decided anything yet. That's why we wanted to meet like this. To get your input. We think you need to take some steps to figure this out." Edward paused, looked toward Mamere and with his eyes beseeched her to proceed.

Mamere took a deep breath. "We all agreed you need to talk to someone. Edward and I thought a priest. You always liked Father Dominic."

Jacqueline pulled her chair up to the edge of the table. "She doesn't need a priest. She needs a psychiatrist." The word psychiatrist burst out with a rush of air.

Bridgette looked from one to the other. She took her hands from Mamere and Edward and folded them on her lap. Sitting up straight, she pressed her back into the cushioned banquet. After leaving her to herself all these long weeks since Celeste's death, they suddenly had the nerve to decide what she must do. How dare they? While they were living, she was dying. Her teeth clenched.

"I talked to Father yesterday," Mamere said. "And he told me there's an ongoing grief group at the church." She nodded to Edward. "Remember we talked about that possibility."

"Yeah, but I'm not sure that would work. You told me the group was mostly old people who'd lost a spouse. How's Bridgette gonna fit in with them?"

"Well crying's crying, isn't it?" Mother contributed and leaned forward.

"Just stay out of it, won't you," Jacqueline sneered.

Mother jumped up, poured herself another shot of bourbon and began to pace back and forth. "I can't see why this is important anyway. She'll get over it. Before we know it she'll be out gallivanting."

"Oh, Mother. Quit."

"That's what I did after Johnny left. Just got the hell out of the house."

“Yes, you did that and then never stopped running,” Mamere said softly and shifted her body away from Mother. “But to get back to the problem. Bridgette, any ideas?”

Bridgette jumped. She did not understand what they wanted from her. “I don’t know. Maybe Father Dominic.” She did need to confess the impure thoughts she was having, but then she would have to admit to the sin of touching herself. She cringed at the thought of telling Father that. If she said it aloud, then she would have to run from church before Father saw her and knew it was her. Maybe a psychiatrist? Then she could get some more of the little, blue pills. They knocked her out so she did not have to think. This whole thing was stupid. No one could give Celeste back to her or baptize her or send her to heaven. Neither psychiatrists nor priests had that kind of power. So what good did talking about it do? Then, there was the old people’s group. She bet all of them were baptized. For sure, they could not possibly fathom where she was coming from.

“None of that works,” Bridgette said. “The only thing I need is for Celeste to still be alive or if she has to be dead, to give me a chance to baptize her so when I think about her, I can imagine her playing on the clouds with the angels.” Bridgette paused to catch her breath. “That’s the only two things that help. Give her back to me or send her to God and the angels.” She sobbed into her hands. “She doesn’t deserve to be in limbo. She didn’t commit any sin. I did. I fought with Mamere, and I ignored all the things I was taught at Ursuline.” She glared at Mamere and Edward. “And you all were there right after she died. Why didn’t you baptize her? Maybe, you’d have caught her soul before it was too late.”

Mamere and Edward looked at each other.

“What?” Bridgette yelled. “Didn’t you even think of it?” Bridgette slithered across the banquet, jumped up, and shook her finger at Mamere and Edward. “Why not? Mamere, you’re

such an expert on religion, and Edward, you're so good at telling everyone else what to do. Why didn't one of you baptize her?"

CHAPTER FIVE—REPERCUSSIONS

Bridgette sat on her porch swing and stared across the bayou at the playground. She had insisted Edward sleep on the pull-out sofa in his study last night, and he had stormed from the house just a few minutes ago on his way to work.

“That was unfair of you to accuse us last night.” Edward said through clenched teeth. “We only wanted to help you out of this foul mood you’ve been in.” He started down the steps. “You ran outside so fast after your outburst that you didn’t see how upset Mamere was. I thought she was gonna make herself sick.”

Startled, Bridgette looked at him. “What’s the matter with you now? And Mamere? Upset? You all upset me last night. Telling me I needed a crazy person doctor.”

“Is that all you got out of that?” Edward started to walk toward his car but stopped and turned back. “And we didn’t say that. That was Jacqueline’s doing. We thought a priest was best. If not that group of Father Dominic’s, then just talk to him by yourself.”

“I can’t. I don’t know what to say.”

Edward looked at his watch. “I don’t have time for this now. I’m meeting an important client.”

Bridgette sighed and watched Edward drive off. Her body went limp. Back and forth on the swing, one push, two pushes, three pushes, four. Her eyes glazed over, and she wondered how to spend this empty day. Nothing but waiting for Dorothea to show up and take over the few functions remaining to her, straightening the house, cleaning, washing their clothes, fixing dinner. Not very exciting stuff but still something. She could watch some of those soap operas on TV, but they mostly bored her. Before Celeste, she spent hours reading, but now her mind drifted, and she reread paragraph after paragraph. Maybe, she could take another of those blue pills and sleep her life away.

“Miss Bridgette, what you doin’ out here?” Dorothea asked coming up the steps.

Bridgette jerked awake. She must have drifted off. “Just resting, I guess.”

“Well, you get yourself inside. It’s cold out here today.” Dorothea reached to help her up.

Bridgette scooted away and pressed herself against the armrest. The swing shuddered to a stop. “I can get myself up,” she yelled. “Don’t touch me.”

Bridgette got up and marched ahead of Dorothea into the house. Sitting down on the sofa, she watched Dorothea, shoulders slumped, steal down the hall to the kitchen. Bridgette lowered her head into her hands. Guilt assailed her. There was no reason to be mean to Dorothea just then, and certainly no reason to be ugly to Mamere last night. The accusing words just burst out

there too, and according to Edward sickened Mamere. She hated herself for that. What if she really made Mamere ill? Her grandmother had always been so good to her. She even introduced Bridgette to Edward and what a blessing that always seemed. Now she did not know. Those screwy feelings she was having, putting the two of them together as lovers. And the sick sexual fantasies? Very strange, and she had no idea why she had them, and they disturbed her. Maybe, it came from Mamere knowing him first. Another image of them together forced its way into her mind, and she tightened her fingers around her head to squeeze the sinful thoughts away. Perhaps, Mamere was right, and she needed to talk to Father Dominic if only to confess. Or could Jacqueline be correct about her needing to see a psychiatrist. Maybe she was crazy.

Bridgette jumped up from the sofa and hurried toward the kitchen. Shaking her head from side to side, she told Dorothea, "I can't think about that now. I'm going out today. Just have to get dressed."

Dorothea turned from the eggs and toast she was making. "Think about what? Don't you want this breakfast? I'm almost done."

"I'm not hungry."

"Mister Edward said you supposed to eat somethin' healthy today."

"Just the thought of eggs makes me sick. Besides I'm going out."

"You're what? Mister Edward won't like it. You not eating and then goin' out. He's gonna be upset with me."

"I'm fine. I'm gonna head for the park. One of my friends, Ellen, you remember her, called earlier and invited me to meet her and her baby in Storyland. It's a nice day. I'm gonna catch up with her."

“Well, that’d be a first these days. I better call Mr. Edward and tell him something’s going on with you. Something I don’t like.”

“Better not. He’s so busy today. I told you, I am fine.”

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Bridgette snuck across the iron bridge on the side away from her house. She stopped behind a post and peeked around it. If Dorothea saw her heading away from the Park, she’d tattle to Edward, “Miss Bridgette told me she was going to the park with a friend then she just headed off in the other direction.” What a commotion that would cause. Bridgette scurried across the bridge and looked back a couple of times to make certain Dorothea did not see her cutting through the playground to get to Holy Rosary Church.

When Bridgette pushed the gate to the playground open, she froze at the sight of the neighborhood mothers there with their children. Some stood alongside the slides while their children tumbled down, others pushed toddlers on swings, while others congregated and visited. Oh God, she forgot how often they got together at the playground to visit while their children romped and played. When Celeste was alive, she sometimes joined them.

“Bridgett, how are you?” Ellen asked in a soft tone of voice. “We’ve been so worried about you. You don’t leave your house or answer the phone. We know about Celeste, and we all feel so sad. We’ve even started a prayer circle for you.” She pointed to the other mothers. “You could join us sometime.”

Bridgette shoved her hands over her ears and darted behind the storage shed. Startled, the mothers stopped what they were doing and looked. A couple of them started toward Bridgette, but Ellen signaled them to stop. “I’ll see what’s wrong,” she said to them.

The mothers turned away. Tiny fingers pulled on hands and legs. “Stop talking, Mommy. Wanna swing, Mommy. Come on. Swing, Mommy.” The children’s whining grew into a clamor.

Bridgette peeked out.

Ellen came toward her. “Bridgette, I’ve been calling you and calling you,” Ellen said in a soft voice. “I’m so sorry. I thought we could talk.”

“Stay away from me,” Bridgette yelled. “Can’t you see I’m poison?”

Ellen stopped but reached a hand toward Bridgette. “We just want to help. I know if this happened to Jenny, I’d be devastated. You must be terribly sad. I just can’t imagine the pain.”

“Shut those kids up. Please, shut them up. I can’t talk to anyone now. Just go.”

“Are you sure? All right, but remember I’m here if you want to talk.” Ellen turned and walked back to the group. “I’ll keep calling in case you want to go somewhere or join our prayer group,” she said over her shoulder taking hold of Jenny’s stroller and pushing it toward the gate.

Bridgette counted, one baby, two babies, three babies, four, one mommy, two mommies, three mommies, more. How many were there, more mommies than babies? Her stomach tightened. Do it again. Make it come out even. Bridgette’s thumbs moved frantically in circles on her index fingers. No longer able to stand the sight of all those mothers with their live children, she snuck farther behind the shed. Gradually, the circular motions of her fingers got slower and more soothing, her breathing quieted, and she looked from her hiding place. Thankfully, they were gone.

The swings moved out of sync with each other. Some rocked gently in the wind; others looked as though someone shoved them in anger. Bridgette walked over and grabbed the nearest one and sat down. Hours passed. As though waking from a nightmare, she felt her body re-emerge from its trance-like state. Bridgette’s arms sagged at her sides, her head drooped on her

chest, and her legs dragged in the dust under the swing. A cold, north wind blew hair into her face, but she had no energy to brush it behind her ears. She shivered, wishing she had thought to put a sweater on this morning. Time to go back home, but the idea of seeing anyone burdened her.

What to do? No place to go to. Everything felt strange. Bridgett's feet seemed to float inches above the dusty ground. Her toes reached out into nothing. She felt unmoored with no sense of self. Mothering had been her calling. There was nothing beyond. Such a frightening thought. Bridgette pushed hard with her feet. Her body grabbed hold. Up, up, she went, rocking back on the swing, hands tight on the chains. Feet in front, then down, pump those legs, harder, higher. Her hair streamed out behind; the late afternoon sun captured its golden hue. A sense of power surged through her. She had to be all right. She would finish today's errand. She would speak to the priest.

Bridgette jumped from the swing. She dug the toes of her shoes into the dust and watched the dirt color her white tennis shoes brown. The swing bounced against her back. Even it wanted to nudge her forward. Four-twenty-three. Better get going if she wanted to catch Father before the five o'clock Mass. Bridgette turned toward Esplanade Avenue, then stopped and grabbed the wooden seat, gave it a shove, and watched it clang upward. Again, she felt a surge of strength. She was on her way somewhere.

Bridgette stood on the sidewalk looking up the stairs to the Church. Only six of them, and yet they loomed tall above her. She recalled having a similar feeling standing at the bottom of these steps once before, at the head of a line of classmates, dressed in white with a wreath of pink and yellow flowers in her hand. She was in the first grade and Father chose her to crown the Blessed Virgin on May Day. Mother said Father picked her because she was so short, and

Mamere said he picked because she was so pretty. At any rate, she worried that either she would stumble climbing the ladder to reach the statue or drop the wreath on the floor when she tried to put it on the Virgin. Everyone would laugh as she exposed herself to ridicule. Her hands trembled then as now.

Bridgette hesitated, then stepped forward. A thin fragile lady, her graying hair pulled backward into a chignon, hobbled to the foot of the steps next to her. She looked at Bridgette, seemed ready to ask her a question and then thought better of it. Wisps of hair fluttered around her lined face. With shaking hands, she set a large black purse down, reached inside her bun for a hairpin, drew it out and tried to catch the loose strands with it. The hairpin dropped to the ground, and she looked at it for a moment shaking her head. She again glanced at Bridgette, then proceeded to walk up the steps. She mumbled something, and Bridgette struggled to hear what she said.

“Henry, why’d you pick this time to go leavin’ me with no arm to lean on?” she grumbled placing one foot on the bottom step, then brought the other one up beside the first. “It’d been better if you’d let me go first. You could still walk.” Crab-like, she shifted her weight from one foot to the next until she reached the top landing and disappeared through the heavy doors into church.

Bridgette watched her until the door closed. Maybe she was one of those old baptized ladies in Father’s grief group. Bet her husband was baptized too. Probably, like Bridgette she had nothing to do either, so she came extra early for Mass. The Esplanade Avenue bus roared down the street behind her. Bridgette turned. That was the bus to Celeste’s grave. Should she go to comfort her baby in limbo instead of talking to Father? She grimaced. Better to get seeing the priest out of the way. She could at least follow through on something.

Even in the glow of a crisp fall afternoon, dark clouds assembled within her. A flood of tears and wracking sobs inundated Bridgette. Better to hide in church like that old lady with the dead husband than to stand in the open where everyone could see her. Bridgette rushed up the stairs, shoved open the door, ran inside, and stopped. The silence overwhelmed her. She tiptoed to a back pew, grateful her tennis shoes made no sound on the marble floor.

Father Dominic walked onto the altar, bowed low before the host, walked to a chair, sat down, and opened his prayer book. Oh no, she thought, slid along the bench and squeezed behind one of the large white columns. She did not want Father to see her with uncombed hair and rumpled clothes. She had known him a long time. The first time they met was during catechism practice for her First Communion. Sister Mary Frances her first grade teacher must have told him how Bridgette's hands trembled and her voice shook in class because she was so afraid to make a mistake. Father reassured her and distracted her by pretending to catch the butterflies he saw coming out of her stomach. "Whoosh. There's a Monarch with big speckled wings. It's coming out your mouth right now. Now a blue one flying over your head. Catch it. There they all go. See no more in your tummy. Nervousness all gone." Bridgette had been somewhat startled by the notion of butterflies flying from her mouth, but now she smiled at the memory.

The elderly lady bustled around the altar arranging the articles needed for Mass. She did not appear as feeble as Bridgette originally thought but instead moved with authority to freshen the flowers and assemble the vestments. Every so often, she glanced out at the pews, her eyes lingered once or twice on Bridgett. Moving toward Father, she stooped over, whispered

something in his ear and nodded toward Bridgette.

Father looked in her direction, waved his fingers, and said something to the lady in a low voice. The woman responded, and Father shook his head in agreement. Bridgette felt her face get hot, curled her legs beneath her skirt and maneuvered farther behind the column. Although they could no longer see her, neither could she see them. Her breathing quickened, and she sighed. Muffled footsteps startled her.

“Are you meeting someone for Mass?” The lady leaned toward her.

“Uh, no,” Bridgette stuttered. Her body jerked sideways, and she moved away.

“Mind if I squeeze in here a moment? My name’s Susan, Susie to some. You can call me whichever.”

Bridgette could not imagine calling her anything except old lady and that seemed kind of rude, so she knelt down and pretended to pray. Maybe she will get tired of pestering and go away.

“I saw you standing at the bottom of the stairs when I came in and wondered about you. Most of the people who come to this Mass are regulars. We have a bit of coffee, tea, and cookies afterwards with Father in the Rectory.”

Bridgette did not know if some response was expected of her, so she gripped the knuckles of her hands together until she felt her heart pulsing through the fingers. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, she counted following along with the second hand of her watch. Ninety-eight beats a minute. That’s fast. A gentleman in a dark gray pin-stripe suit walked up the center aisle. He waved at Susan, sometimes Susie, and slid into the front pew. A lady, red silk scarf

fluttering behind her hurried after him and sat down. She smiled, whispered in his ear, and smoothed down the grizzled wisps of hair on his balding head. Others drifted in. A young girl, long blonde hair folded in a French twist, walked in along the side aisle, stopped and told Susan hello. Bridgette lifted her face from her hands and watched the woman proceed toward the front of the church. She was dressed in a matching skirt and sweater much like the ones Jacqueline wore to the hospital under her white coat. Bridgette marveled at the precise linear seam in her stockings. It ran midway down the back of her leg and ended in her stylish pumps. With pointed toe and four-inch heels, the shoes clack, clack, clacked up the aisle. Mentally, Bridgette ran her finger up and down the seam.

“Why not join us after Mass,” Susan suggested with a gracious smile. “You look like you could use some company.”

Bridgette jumped and looked at Susan. No words came.

“It’s not a big deal.” Susan smiled. “We just sit and have a few cookies, keep Father company, visit a bit.”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, why not think about it during Mass. Pray on it.” Susan started to slide out from the pew. “Father’s housekeeper makes the best cookies.”

Bridgette watched Susan head back to the altar. She shrugged her shoulders at Father and finished her altar duties. Father got up and went into the sacristy to change for Mass. Bridgette realized she missed Confession and the opportunity to speak to Father alone. Not knowing what to do, she leaned back on her knees and waited. One, two, three, four people on the other side of the center aisle. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine on her side.

It was not even. Count again. Bridgette eyes moved from one person to the next. Father came out and everyone except Bridgette stood to participate in the Mass. If it had come out even, that would have been a signal from God telling her to go for tea and cookies.

Midway through the Apostle's Creed, Bridgette saw a young man sneak in through the side door. Dressed in gray pants and a button-down blue shirt under a navy sweater, he looked to be about thirty-five. She smiled when the side door hit him in the back when it closed on him. Head crunched on his neck and a deep furrow in his brow, he tiptoed down the side aisle nearest her. She identified with his furtive behavior but grimaced when she realized his appearance made for an even number of congregants. Still, it was ten on her side and four on the other. Not the requisite multiple of four. Her mind panicked. She had to fix that.

If she took two people from her side and put them on the other side, then that made eight people by her and six on the other. Her side now had two sets of four, but what to do about the unsatisfactory six. She needed to get rid of two of them or add another two. One of the ladies on the other side was very overweight. Maybe she could cut her in half to make two of her but that made an uneven seven. No good. The bells rang for the raising of the Host, and Bridgette looked up at Father. Of course, she needed to count him, and God on the altar made for another. She needed to put the overweight lady back together to again make six, and then place Father and God on the side with her. Now, Bridgette had the requisite eight participants, two multiples of four, on both sides of the aisle. Pleased with herself, she leaned back in her seat and breathed deeply. That was a tough one. She frowned. Damn. Now she had to attend their stupid meeting and eat cookies with the old people.

Bridgette, Father Dominic at her side, straggled into the rectory door after everyone else. Not all of the fourteen people headed that way after Mass. The lady with the red scarf, minus her

grizzly-haired husband, the girl with the perfect seam in her stockings, the attractive man in the navy sweater, and a couple in their sixties, all jumped up after Mass and led the way. The old lady remained in her pew, looked back at Bridgette and nodded to her. She gestured for Bridgette to follow and even waited a couple of minutes before Father, shaking his head, signaled Susie to follow him. Bridgette sat there and tried to imagine what this meeting was like. She rubbed her fingers together and felt her body getting numb. Only blank darkness filled her mind. Then Father stuck his head through the side door and smiled.

“Come on, Bridgette,” he called through the empty church. “It’ll be fine. Mamere said you might come by.”

“Oh,” Bridgette exclaimed. “Okay.” Then, like a child summoned to the principal’s office, Bridgette slid from the pew and hurried to catch up with Father. She stopped in the long center hallway of the priests’ house and tried to force herself to follow him through the door into the front room. She sagged, and her legs refused to move. Her pulse raced, and her breathing quickened. Feeling dizzy, she leaned against the wall. She could not do this. What would she say to these strangers? They would pry into her feelings, her thoughts, her secrets. No one could know she failed to keep her baby alive; no one could learn the sinful thoughts she had, how her mind played tricks on her, how sometimes she thought she was still pregnant, that none of this horror actually happened. She imagined their condemnation, their ridicule. Laughter came from the front room. Already, they talked about her, discussed her worst sin, criticized her for rejecting Mamere and the Church’s doctrine to baptize a baby right after its birth. They knew her fear of germs sentenced Celeste to limbo. Bridgette cringed at the door. Punishment rather than cookies awaited her.

“Bridgette, join us.” The old lady approached her smiling. “Would you prefer coffee or tea? We have decaf in both.”

Bridgette looked at her. This woman is not for real. Welcoming out here but condemning in there. Bridgette took a step toward the door. She just as soon get it over with. If she accepted her punishment like a good girl, then maybe she could move on.

“Come, let me introduce everyone.” Susan opened the door. “This is Bridgette. I think some of you know her grandmother, Mary Alice Giraud. Mary Alice lives in the big house on the corner and belongs to the Confraternity of the Virgin.” Susan pointed to each person in turn and stated each one’s name.

Bridgette nodded but heard none of the introductions. She was numb. When the red scarf lady handed her the plate of cookies, she looked down but did not select one. Iced sugar cookies in the shape of sleighs, Santa. Green ones in the shape of trees, yellow stars, they all blended together into a distasteful pile of icing.

“Come sit over here.” Father indicated a chair next to him. “Tea or coffee?”

Bridgette shook her head back and forth and sat down. The girl with the perfect stockings stood with her back to the room pouring coffee. The seam had shifted sideways and no longer formed a straight line. Bridgette started to get up and reached out as though to straighten it but then dropped back into her chair.

“Were you coming to get some coffee?” Straight-now-crooked seam turned and asked. “Here, I’ll pour some more.”

Red scarf offered the cookies again. Crooked seam presented coffee. Bridgette folded both arms across her chest and slunk down into the chair.

“That’s okay,” Father said. “She just needs time to get used to us. I’ve known Bridgette a long time, and she’s always been a bit shy. She just lost a baby. Only three months old. Very sad. On her Christening Day.”

Now it was out. The mortal sin. Bridgette jumped up and started toward the door, but Susan reached over and touched her arm.

“Do stay,” she said. “Give this a chance.”

Crooked seam chimed in, “Stay. You don’t have to talk. Just listen for a little.”

“Right.” This from red scarf. “If it doesn’t work for you, then don’t come back.”

“I’ve known your grandmother for many years,” Susan said. “She’s been a big help to me since Henry died. She told me how troubled you’ve been, especially about the Baptism thing.”

Bridgette turned and glared at Susan. “Right, the Baptism thing?” emphasizing the word thing. “So that’s how you put it? Or even better, the Baptism that didn’t happen. My baby condemned to Limbo, no Heaven, no angels to play with, just sitting and staring. A Baptism thing? Yes, indeedy, an absent Baptism? You’ve got to be joking.” She fell back into her chair. The room which seemed so large and airy when she walked in now disappeared into gloom. Heavy green drapes blocked the last of the evening twilight. The walls covered in gray patterned wallpaper seemed dingy, even dirty. Father’s desk lost its polished glow and appeared heavy and much too ornate for a priest. No sign of the vows of poverty and simple living here. Bridgette always admired the rectory before. It too was in the West Indies style, newer than Mamere’s house but still over a hundred-years-old. It boasted lovely white Gothic columns across its front porch, far more elaborate than the pilasters on Mamere’s house. Bridgette always wondered why the priests lived in such a fancy place when they preached alms for the poor. When Mamere

spoke so highly of the inner decorations and details, Bridgette wanted to see them but not this way, not with her secret sin exposed. She struggled to get out of the chair.

“Wait,” the gentleman with the navy sweater complained. “I brought something for you to look at.” He reached over to hand Bridgette a thick manila envelope and brochure. She ignored the information but did settle back into her chair. Van something or other, a nice short name, the only one she remembered hearing. She lowered her eyes, but not so much that she could not study him. He turned toward Susie, reached out to give the information to her, changed his mind, and tried again to give the material to Bridgette. Bridgette shook her head and sat on her hands. Van gave Miss Susie a quizzical look as though asking what to do next.

His nose, in profile, was long and narrow. Some might call it unattractive, but it appeared manly to her. Fine lines distinguished his cheek bones and formed creases around his eyes. The term chiseled came to her. That along with his tanned skin and tight crew cut screamed masculine. He was handsome, the type of man that thrilled her. A Greek God.

“Van has something that might interest you,” Susan said. “When Mary Alice told me how upset you were, I remembered he and his wife went to Provence two summers ago. They brought back pictures. Henry and Van were friends, worked together with the Knights of Columbus, and we often went out to dinner together. I remembered the pictures and the Church, outside Gordes. I couldn’t remember exactly what the legend was, only that it had something to do with limbo and unbaptized babies. So I called him and asked him to bring me the pictures tonight. I was going to give them to Mary Alice. Then, you showed up in Church, and I thought, God’s will. There are no coincidences, only Godincidences.”

Bridgette was startled. She made no sense of what Susan said. A church for unbaptized babies, dead babies she supposed? How could they bring them to church? Van placed the

envelope and brochure on the table next to her. She glanced at it. Something about summers in Provence, the sunlight of Southern France, bullfights in Arles, the markets of St. Remy and Gordes. Memories of her Art History courses, Van Gogh, sunflowers, the asylum at St Remy, these occurred to her but nothing about unbaptized babies. Confused, she reached for the envelope, opened it and removed the pictures. Six in all. Three pictures of the outside of a small church, one of the inside, and two of several rectangular holes carved into the rocky base surrounding the church. The holes looked tiny, just the size to fit Celeste's coffin. Bridgette grimaced and shoved the pictures back into their packet. She tried to force the photographs back on Van, but he returned to his seat and sat down.

"They're for you," he said and smiled.

"Why? What do they have to do with me?"

"They're pictures of Saint Pantaleon Church outside of Gordes in Provence. My wife Marie and I came upon it one day when we went to look at the Village of the Bories, little igloo-like stone houses inhabited, they say, from the Iron Age until the mid-nineteenth century. Marie's a Professor of Medieval History at Tulane, and she'd heard about them at the conference we were at in Avignon. Very interesting, worth seeing."

Bridgette shifted in her chair, shoved her hand inside the envelope again and pulled the pictures out. Shuffling them like a deck of cards, she watched them tumble to the floor. Susan jumped up to retrieve them.

"You need to look at these," she said stacking the pictures together. "I think you'd be interested. They're pictures of a church." She pointed to the top picture. "A church with a fascinating legend." Susan sat down in the chair next to Bridgette. "The legend says that in early times children who died before being baptized were brought to the church for Mass. During

Mass, they came back to life, were baptized, and after Mass were buried outside in the graveyard. See the tiny gravesites, an infant necropolis. It's a way the people who lived back then dealt with what you're going through now."

"You mean the babies all went to heaven?" Bridgette gasped and shuddered. Pins and needles ran down her arms into her fingertips. She gulped back a sob. "Is that for real?"

"Well, not in the way you mean. It's only a legend. The babies couldn't really come back to life. The people were upset about the injustice of the doctrine and needed a way to help themselves deal with it, just like you do."

"It's not a legend," Bridgette insisted. "It has to be true. It must be for real." She grabbed the pictures and sorted through them. "Don't you see?" She pointed to the picture of the baptismal font. "Celeste needs a way to go to heaven too, just like them."

"She is in heaven, honey," Susan asserted. She and Father exchanged glances. "We told you about the legend to show you that even centuries ago the Church was concerned enough to provide these people with a legend to believe in."

"Think a minute, Bridgette," Father said. "You know that once someone dies, they don't come back to life. It's not possible."

"In miracles it is," Bridgette said. "They got miracles. Why can't Celeste and I have one too?" She sat down clutching the pictures.

"That'd be nice, Bridgette," Father said. "But, we can't just order one, can we?"

"Not from here, we can't. But we could if we were there. Right?" Bridgette looked from one person to the other. "What's the church's name? Where is it again?" Bridgette turned the pictures over. "There's nothing on the back except the date. How can you tell where this is?"

When no one answered, Bridgette turned to Van. “You know. You were there. You have to tell me. No! You have to tell Edward. He’ll want the miracle too. Edward will help me get Celeste from the tomb and bring her there.”

Susan and Van exchanged glances. Susan started to speak, “I told you this was a mistake, that she’d want to...” Susan paused. “Mary Alice warned me that Bridgette wasn’t thinking straight.”

Father’s look silenced her. “You’re right, Bridgette,” Father soothed. “We do need to bring Edward into this. He’ll know what’s best.”

CHAPTER SIX—TOMBS AND BABIES

Bridgette skipped down the steps and turned toward the entrance of St. John Court. The enclave was charming. Built in the early twentieth century by owners of the American Can Company for their workers, it contained sixteen identical bungalows. Each house, tiny by today's standards, with a porch and double sets of French doors, had housed two families.

"Wait," Edward called out through the front door. "Just let me change out of this suit."

Bridgette stopped, looked back at her house and then down at the sidewalk. Little cracks ran through the concrete like swarms of spider legs. She traced each one with the toe of her shoe studying how one groove meandered along until it connected with another.

"We're late," she yelled back. "Actually, you're the one who's late, even after I told you last night how important this was to me." Head down, counting crevices as she went, Bridgette missed the entrance to the court. Uncut grass and debris littered the empty lot next to the turn, and the mess shocked her out of her reverie. She turned, pushed back through the weeds to the path and hurried when she saw Edward bound down the stairs.

The first house was numbered A; Van and his wife, who apparently was not dead, lived at M. Turned out the group was not Father's grief group but was actually what Miss Susie said, a daily coffee klatch or tea party for Mass regulars. Miss Susie was the lone griever. Her husband had died a few months earlier. Bridgette spelled out each letter, charmed that some were concrete, some were wood, and others were blue tile surrounded by white tile. If she lived here, she would have one of the tile letters. It was so orderly, and besides the blue tiles harmonized with the name pates in the sidewalk at each corner of Moss Street, so neat, so precise and so old-fashioned.

Bridgette was disappointed to hear Van's wife was not dead. Not that she dreamed of flirting with him, too sinful since she had Edward, but somehow he now interested her less. She still thought him adorable, and she could not wait to see the inside of his house. His must be toward the end of the lane. Sixteen of them, so that would be A, B,C,D, E...all the way to P, so M would be toward the back, probably situated on the triangular park.

Once, in the early fall, she had taken Celeste exploring in her stroller, and although the lane was only five houses down from her house, she had never noticed it before. Its entrance, obscured by a huge, cascading bougainvillea vine, seemed to jump out at her. Feeling like a policeman or guard might accuse her of sneaking in there, she had crept down the stone lined walk. The rattling noise of Celeste's stroller alarmed her until she found the tiny park with its children's toys strewn everywhere and an infant's swing hanging from one of the three oak trees. People with children lived here. It must be okay to wander in. However, on seeing that swing again today, Bridgette's stomach knotted and tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Hey, wait up," Edward said touching her arm. "I told you I'd only be a minute." He looked at her. "What're you crying for? You told me you found an answer."

Bridgette turned away from Edward and brushed her eyes with her sleeve. "I'm not crying," she sniffled.

"You sure?" He turned her toward him. "You seemed so happy last night after you got home from that church meeting. Excited, like I haven't seen you in ages. It was nice. What'd you say that guy's house number is? Who is he again? Let's sit here so you can fill me in before we get there." Edward pointed to one of the wrought iron benches that circled an oak tree. "No. It's too late for that."

"Which house is his?" Edward said. He looked around.

“His is M. That one over there with the brick posts. I don’t like the brick very much, do you? But these other houses, aren’t they cute? See they all started off alike, with side stairs, and a porch, and two French doors leading out, but some people screened the porch, and they are all painted a different color. I like that one with the curli-cue gingerbread posts, the one next to Van’s. See, its railings are painted such a pretty turquoise and the trim kind of a different color, kind of pink-orange.”

“Okay. Slow down, sit here.” Edward led Bridgette to the bench. “Tell me who Van is and what answers he has. Something about a church in Provence?”

Bridgette pulled away. “No, just come on. Let him tell you. He’s got some pictures. It’s too important to sit here and babble.” She ran across the grass and up the steps. Not waiting for Edward to catch up, she knocked, then turned and gestured for him to hurry.

“Hi, Bridgette,” Van said when he opened the door. “Come on in.” He walked to the porch railing and waited for Edward. “Come on up. I’m Van Livingston.” He reached out to shake Edward’s hand. “Glad you could make it. Everyone’s already here.”

Bridgette turned. “Who’s everybody?”

“Well, after you left last night, I invited Susan and Father. Thought they could help explain this to Edward.”

“I don’t know,” Bridgette said in a suspicious tone. She looked around for a way to escape. “I just wanted you to show the church pictures to Edward.”

Edward looked at Van and shook his head. “Well, now we’re here, we ought to go in,” Edward said. He took Bridgette’s hand and squeezed it. “It’d be rude not to after they’ve gone to all this trouble.”

Van followed them inside. “You all know Bridgette, and Father, you know Edward. This is Susan Morrison and my wife Marie.”

“Hi, everyone,” Edward said shaking Father’s hand and nodding to the ladies. “What’s this all about?”

“It’s about getting Celeste baptized.” The words exploded from Bridgette’s mouth.

Edward looked from Bridgette to Father to Van. “What?” was all he said.

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Bridgette sat, hands folded in her lap, listening intently to the murmurings in the other room. Like a bad child, she had been banned from the proceedings, and the elders were deciding her fate. The jury was out, and she felt hopeless to influence the goings on. Even a condemned prisoner had his day in court, but upon returning from Van’s, actually after being dragged home, Edward convened a meeting for the next day. It was Saturday so everyone including Jacqueline could be there. Mamere appointed herself chief justice, Edward, prosecutor, Jacqueline, expert witness, and Mother, irrelevant witness.

Here she was back at Mamere’s, not in the comfy kitchen, the site of that last “what can we do about Bridgette get-together” but this time in the more formal living room. Bridgette squirmed on one of the high backed, pink damask chairs. Such an uncomfortable room, it was more a museum than a place for socializing. Mamere kept it like this filled with period furnishings, baubles, and her collection of antique dolls to show off to her Symphony and Opera Guild ladies. Bridgette averted her eyes from the pianoforte in the corner. Allowed to play it herself as a child, she often before Celeste’s death imagined teaching her child a few tinkling

tunes. Bridgette reached for the magic lantern on the marble-top, curved-leg end table, peered through it, found its dusty interior dull, and laid it down with a clunking sound. Over the fireplace, the portrait of great aunt Adele three-removed glared at her in rigid condemnation. Painted by Vaudechamp in 1839, she sat frowning against the painter's classic greenish background, chin raised, hands fixed in her lap, and eyes focused straight ahead.

The murmuring grew louder in the adjacent dining room. Bridgette got up, and careful to avoid creaking floorboards, crept to the edge of the rug near the closed pocket doors. She leaned against the door hoping to catch a word.

"To take the coffin to that church?" Words louder than most coming from Mother. "She's..."

"Shush," Edward said. "Let's move across the hall."

Then silence, followed by footsteps and the door to the old ballroom/library slamming shut. Disappointed, Bridgette listened for a few more minutes and drifted toward the double display cabinets across the room. Large, floor to ceiling, taking up much of the available wall space, they were hand crafted to match the original molding and cornice work in the house. Double pane doors made to resemble the lead doors of old fronted them. Dolls of all shapes, sizes, and dress lined the shelves. Mamere selected each one only after much research and consideration. Bridgette often wondered if Mamere purchased them to fill some hole in her being, some imagined fantasy world. The variety of dolls fascinated Bridgette and many times, especially before Celeste's birth, she studied them. Mamere presented an enigma. Though kind and caring, almost overly solicitous toward her, she was mean and ugly toward Mother and only pleasant to Jacqueline. When she was little, Bridgette imagined she was Mamere's only child and Mother and Jacqueline were distant relatives. However, when she got older, she realized

Mamere was too old to have actually been her mother, but still she felt curious about Mamere's feelings.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight...More dolls than that. Four on this shelf, seven on the one below that. There were one, two, three...nine dolls in long dresses. There were one, two, three, four, five in taffeta dresses, one, two, three dressed in red. These had curly hair. Others had blonde hair; this one wore a hat. How many with hats? One, two, three, four. Bridgette counted ten baby dolls, all boys but no girls. Long ago Bridgette had asked Mamere why there were only boy babies and Mamere mumbled something about boys being necessary for happiness and family name continuity, a strange answer since after Robert's death, Mamere's family consisted only of girls.

One of the boy babies was dressed in a long, white christening gown. That doll was always Bridgette's favorite, and she often pestered Mamere to let her hold it but was never allowed to. Sometimes, she could touch one of the other dolls but never that one. The christening dress had been hand-made by Mamere and resembled the christening dress that Celeste was to be baptized in. Bridgette had watched Mamere make it, and she told her the tiny embroidered roses matched the ones on the ancestral gown. The other boy babies were dressed in crocheted snuggies and outfits and nestled in baby blue blankets. Since Celeste's death, Bridgette felt compelled to place them someway, somehow in groups of four. Her stomach clenched, and she turned away from the dolls and sat facing the window. Her hands trembled, and she shook her head to rid herself of the confusing display. She jumped when the door opened and Edward came in.

"Bridgette, come with me, please," Edward said pointing to the old ballroom doors across the hall. He came over and helped her up. "We need to straighten this christening business out."

Bridgette winced at the formal tone of his voice. “What’s there to straighten out? Celeste’s in limbo, and if there’s a way to get her to heaven, I don’t see why we can’t do it.”

“Mamere talked to Father about that yesterday, and he said the Catholic Church is unofficially changing their position on that. For a while now church authorities have wondered why babies should be penalized for something they didn’t do. It’s not their fault they weren’t baptized.”

“No, it’s mine.” Bridgette pulled away from him. “I agree. It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have gone against Mamere. And you said unofficial, right? What’s the pope say?” Bridgette stuck both hands on her hips and glared at Edward.

“He’s working on it. Calling a conclave soon. Don’t worry. They’ll straighten it out before long.”

“What? When?” Bridgette shouted. “Is he too busy to listen to God now? So my poor baby has to stay in limbo ‘til they get around to having a meeting?” She stomped her foot. “I don’t get it. How can they keep changing their minds? It’s either one way or the other.” She covered her face with her hands.

“Come. Don’t take my word for it. Let Mamere explain it to you.” Edward opened the French doors and motioned Bridgette to follow him. “Come on. Nobody wants to see you blaming yourself like this.”

Bridgette hesitated for a moment then followed him into the room. Its newly renovated appearance still startled her. As a child, she felt dwarfed by the floor to ceiling doors, like Alice entering Wonderland, and although the room still impacted her that way, she now experienced a sense of disconnect. Last year, Mamere decided to remake the ballroom into a library in the style of her early French Creole ancestors. Prompted by the new Ursuline Convent’s need to sell some

of the furnishings from the original Convent, Mamere negotiated with Sister Joseph, once her high school French teacher and now the Convent's Historian, to purchase three of the pieces. Craftsmen removed the full length paneled mirrors which once encircled the room from three of the walls and built bookcases along one of those walls. They carved intricate fleur de lis patterns and fretwork into wainscoting along the remaining two walls and left one set of mirrors in place.

Bridgette stopped inside the room, turned to the mirrored side wall, and gaped at her image in the large mirror. No longer the whimsical teenager who practiced waltzing in this room, she looked thin and disheveled with scraggly hair and blank eyes. She grimaced. While in this room, she had met Edward at one of Mamere's Opera Guild fund raisers. Recently graduated from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton school, Edward attended the ball with his mother, one of Mamere's newest and soon to be dearest friends. The two ladies planned her and Edward's encounter and encouraged the romance. During her first waltz with him, she relaxed into his arms and bedazzled by their twirling motion in the mirrors, fell in love. What a difference these few years made.

Bridgette turned from the mirror and watched Edward's back as he made his way to the long, walnut, refectory table along which everyone sat. Although used by the nuns for dining, the table was placed along the wall across from the mirror. It seemed rather silly to Bridgette for Mamere to arrange the table this way because it hid the furniture's most unique aspect, the utilitarian set of "through drawers" in which the nuns stored individual flatware, linens, and personal items. When she and Mamere first looked at the table before Celeste was born, Bridgette imagined the nuns sitting across from each other sharing a single drawer which slid open from both sides. Perhaps her ancestor Isabelle sat at this table. Did she and the nun across from her play with the drawer as Bridgette was tempted to do? At dinner, who pulled the drawer

open first? What happened if they both pulled at the same time? Who gave in to whom? She and Mamere wondered if Isabelle took her things from the drawer when she left the convent or did she leave with nothing.

Mamere motioned Bridgette to sit in the Creole upholstered chair next to the one she sat in at one end of the table. At least it was more comfortable than the matching, mid-eighteenth century, slat-back chairs relegated to Edward, Jacqueline, and Mother. Bridgette sat on the edge of her seat. Her fingers caressed the scrolled edge of each of the arm rests. Feel the grooves; count the ridges, so smooth, so even. She fit her index finger inside one of the indentations and rubbed the wood, back and forth, one, two, three, four times.

“We’ve been talk...,” Edward started to say.

“Yes, Bridgette,” Mamere jumped in. “We’re all worried.”

“Really?” Bridgette grimaced. “Just because I don’t have a self,” she whispered. “And nothing important to do?” Her finger moved faster and faster on the arm rest. Five, six, seven, eight. So glossy, so smooth, the bumps so regular.

“What can we do to help you?” Mamere leaned toward Bridgette, reached out, took her hand, and stopped the rubbing motion. “This stuff about taking Celeste to Provence to be baptized and reburied is ridiculous. Just think about it, and you’ll see why the whole idea worries us.”

Bridgette slumped against the back cushion. Her shoulders sank and her eyes closed. She pictured herself approaching Celeste’s tomb, key in hand. Or maybe you needed a crowbar. She honestly did not know. Maybe a caretaker could come with her to open the door. Did it smell of death inside? What did Celeste’s body look like? It had been several weeks. How long did the embalming fluid last, until after the wake or longer.

“Bridgette, pay attention.” This from Mother but in a softer tone than usual. “Listen to Mamere.”

Bridgette blinked, turned toward Mother, grimaced and then turned back to Mamere, the usual family spokesman. She sat up straight. Maybe, she should hear them out. Mamere fanned Van’s vacation pictures out in front of her like playing cards in a poker game while everyone watched. Bridgette wondered who would win this round, confident it would not be she. The sharp, grating sound of Edward scooting his chair up next to Bridgette broke the silence. He reached for her other hand and patted it. Trapped between the two of them, Bridgette felt her stomach tighten. She wanted, no needed, to draw circles on her fingers but could not. Torture me, she thought. Pull my arms apart. Draw and quarter me.

“Bridgette,” Mamere said. “Celeste is in heaven already. How could she not be? She was an innocent baby, pure and sweet.”

“I know. Celeste wasn’t the bad one. I was. I shouldn’t have gone against you.” Bridgette pulled her hands free, shoved them on the table and looked straight at Mamere. “No one ever does without some form of punishment.”

“Bravo,” Mother murmured.

“Honey,” Edward said and gave Mother a you-shut-up look. “No one thinks you’re bad.” He sat back in his chair and sighed.

Bridgette scooped up the pictures and selected three of them. “Look. This is the church. Tiny, isn’t it? Just outside of Gordes, not too far from Avignon. I looked it up on a map. See the stone wall. Apparently, it’s a rocky, somewhat mountainous area near the Lubérons. I looked up Saint Pantaleon too. He’s the patron saint of doctors and was a physician himself in the late third and early fourth centuries. He became famous by curing many illnesses. There was even a vial of

his blood in Constantinople that supposedly liquefied on his feast day and got oxygenated.

Charlemagne brought some of it to France. It was said that Saint Pantaleon brought the babies back to life during Mass and the priest baptized them.”

“Bridgette, listen to what you’re saying. You don’t really believe in that relic and miracle stuff, do you? Nobody does any more. It’s too old-fashioned,” Jacqueline interrupted. “Like the ‘true cross baloney? There’re enough of them around to crucify thousands of men.”

“That’s enough of that doubting Thomas talk, Jacqueline,” Mamere said in an even tone of voice. “It’s not helpful.”

“It isn’t old-fashioned to believe in God. How can you even say that?” Bridgette gave Jacqueline a puzzled look and hurried on. “Look at these. Plenty of people believed it helped their babies. See in these two pictures, you can see the infant-size graves carved into the rock where the people buried them after the priest baptized them. One picture shows graves outside and the other one shows graves inside the church, and they’re just the size to fit Celeste’s pink coffin.”

Edward took the pictures. “Those gravesites are empty. Nobody’s buried there anymore. I know you wouldn’t like Celeste buried there. No flowers, no upkeep, just coffin-like holes in the ground. It’s too desolate.”

“But, that’d make it easier to move Celeste. The graves are already dug. We can just put her right into one of the empty holes. It’d be no trouble.” She leaned over to Edward and pointed at the picture of the inside of the church. “See, we can put her there, right in front of the little table that must have been the altar. Isn’t that the perfect spot?”

“What’s this inscription mean?” Edward pointed to a plaque beside one of the holes. “It’s hard to make out and it’s in French. You speak French. Did you translate it?”

“What the hell are you getting into that with her for, Edward?” Jacqueline queried in an angry voice. “You’re only egging her on.”

“Well, you try to distract her then, if you’re so smart.”

Bridgette looked back and forth from one to the other. “Distract me? Huh? Sure, I can read it.” Bridgette ran her finger over the words on the plaque. “It says, eight skulls were discovered in the same tomb. Burials dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.” Bridgette looked up and nodded at the others around the table. “See, they believed it for a long time, so it must be true. Look, in this picture, they have the Baptism Font. Isn’t it pretty, carved into the stone like that? The carvings make me think of Roman or Greek baths. Father Dominic could give us some holy water from Holy Rosary Church in a little bottle, and we could pour it over Celeste’s head.”

“Bridgette? What’re you talking about?” Mamere gulped. “That baby’s been dead since before Thanksgiving. Even if we did get the coffin there, there’s no way we’d want to open it. The very thought makes me shudder.”

“But, Saint Pantaleon would have already brought her back to life,” Bridgette pleaded. “So everything’d be okay.”

“Bridgette,” Jacqueline said, her voice settling into a soothing cadence. “I hear how much you want to do this, but try to think about what you’re saying. It really doesn’t make good sense. There are too many details that could never be worked out.”

“It makes me not want to think,” Mother interrupted in a sarcastic tone.

Edward and Mamere exchanged looks.

“Maybe, we ought to think about this some more,” Mamere said looking around the table. “I don’t think we’re getting anywhere like this.”

“Let’s just sum up to see if we all understand.” Edward took Bridgette’s face in his hands and turned her to face him. “Bridgette, you want us to exhume Celeste’s body and fly it to France so Saint Pantaleon can bring her back to life. Then we’re to baptize her in that tiny church and rebury her there. Is that right?”

“Yes, please.”

“But so much is involved in that. How can we be sure Saint Pantaleon will hear our prayer? What happens if he doesn’t? I thought it only happened during Mass but this church looks deserted, a shrine or relic itself.”

“Edward!” Jacqueline intruded.

“Where’ll we get the priest?” Edward took a deep breath and continued as though Jacqueline had not spoken. “And to rebury her over there? Then none of us could visit her grave, bring flowers on All Saint’s Day. You already hate that she’s as far away as the French Quarter. France is a lot farther.”

“It will work out if we just do it.” Bridgette’s hand slapped the table, and Mother jumped. “I have this strong feeling about it.”

Mother grinned. “I’d say so. Almost made me spill my drink.”

“Edward’s making sense, a compromise of some sort.” Mamere reached toward Bridgette.

“Edward’s not making sense,” Jacqueline interrupted again. “Listen to yourselves. You’re talking to her like moving this baby is a real thing.” Jacqueline placed both hands on the table and leaned toward Edward and Mamere. In a firm, decisive tone, she said, “Stop placating her. This is foolish and mean. One of you needs to come to your senses and stop playing along

with this reburial stuff. You know you have no intention of taking Celeste's body to France. Just say so."

"Calm down, Jacqueline," Edward said. "We're just trying to decide how to help her."

"By fooling her into thinking you're going to dig up that baby. That's not help, and it only prolongs the hurt."

Bridgette looked from Jacqueline to Edward. Tears spilled over onto her cheeks. She grabbed Edward's hand. "You're not fooling with me, are you? I couldn't stand that. This is too important to me." She looked into Edward's eyes and pleaded, "Don't pretend you're going to do something if you're not. I couldn't stand it. I can't stop thinking of Celeste in limbo and knowing I'm the cause of her misery. You have to do something to make the way I feel go away. I'm going crazy thinking about it." She released Edward's hand, covered her face and sobbed. "Somebody make it stop."

Mamere pulled Bridgette to her and put her arms around her. "Please, baby, don't cry like that. It breaks my heart seeing you hurting this way. We want to help, but we don't know what to do. We can't bring Celeste back, and we don't believe you've done anything wrong."

"But, don't you see, I have, and if I just could get her body to France at least she'd go to heaven. That'd be something. Wouldn't it?"

Mamere hugged her tighter. "Baby, she's in heaven already. That sweet little thing couldn't be anywhere else."

"Then why's the church say she isn't?" She pulled away from Mamere and sat up straight. "Tell me that, huh."

Jacqueline slumped in her chair. "This is too much," she sighed. "Mother, you haven't said much. Somebody else in this room needs to see the truth about a psychiatrist."

“I think you ought to give that child a shovel and a plane ticket and let her do what she wants to do.” Mother gave a self-satisfied sigh.

“You’re all ridiculous,” Jacqueline emphasized and pushed away from the table. “I can’t sit here and listen to this anymore.” She marched to the door and opened it. “Let me know if any one of you wakes up.” She let the door slam behind her.

Bridgette jumped. One, two, three, four, let’s all run to the door. One, two, three, four. Jacqueline’s gone, and we’re down to four. Nice rhythm there, as long as we’re four. The thumb of her right hand tapped her index finger to the beat. Mamere and Edward scowled; Mother grinned. Bridgette, lost in the regularity of the tempo, stared at the blanket chest across the room from where she sat. Several moments passed before anyone spoke.

“I’m gonna get another drink,” Mother slurred. “This requires adequate libation.”

“Sounds like a fine idea.” Edward pushed his chair back. “I’ll get one too.”

Mamere reached over for Bridgette’s hand. “Everything’s going to be all right. We can pick this up another day.”

Bridgette blinked, once, then twice, then three, then four times. A new rhythm, a blinking one. Satisfied to find a new ritual that worked, she blinked again. One, two, pause, three, four, blink, one, two, pause, three, four, blink. Safe again. “Look, Mamere. See the pretty chest,” her tone that of a three-year-old child. She pointed to the blanket chest and blinked.

Mamere took Bridgette’s hands in hers and caressed them. Startled, Bridgette shook her head from side to side. “Was I dreaming, Mamere? It felt like I dozed off while Jacqueline was talking. What’d she say? Did I miss much? Where’d everybody go?” Dazed, she looked around the room her eyes lighting again on the blanket chest. “I just love that chest, don’t you? When it came a few months ago you were so excited. Remember how surprised we were when we looked

inside. The bottom was false and hid a velvet lined drawer. The nuns never said anything about it when we bought it, and we wondered if they knew. They did tell us they'd traced its origin to 1820, long after great, great, you know how many greats-right, grandmother Isabelle was there."

"Yeeess," Mamere said looking both startled and relieved at the change in topic. "I do remember talking about that, especially how the hidden drawer got there and what it contained, some secret treasure a novice brought with her from a convent in France, or maybe from somewhere here in Louisiana? By the early eighteen hundreds, the Ursulines had built up quite a congregation of young girls whose mothers and grandmothers were students of theirs over the years. Some of them probably became nuns. It was a go-to vocation for girls then."

"Maybe, I should've been a nun, Mamere. I felt so safe at Ursuline High School. Some of the nuns were like mothers to me, maybe 'cause they knew Isabelle had once been there. You remember Sister Joseph, my French teacher. She was especially kind. I even learned enough French from her to speak to you and Mother." Bridgette turned to face Mamere. "I did think about it, for a long time. Every morning in chapel I prayed and watched the sun shine through the stained glass windows. It made such pretty colorful patterns on the floor, and I felt so close to God. But, I wanted a baby. I wanted to be a mother so bad." The last word gulped down as tears flowed.

"You were a good mother, honey. You loved that little girl, and it showed."

"Then why'd God take her away from me?"

"Nobody can answer that. I was so angry at God when baby Robert died in that epidemic, I stopped going to Mass for a spell."

"But then you had Mother. He gave you another baby."

“So He did.” She stopped caressing Bridgette’s hand and leaned back in her chair. “Your Mother was a special gift.” Mamere looked toward the blanket chest, and her eyes glazed over.

“Took some doing, too.” She nodded her head several times as though reassuring herself.

“Huh, Mamere. What’s the matter?”

“Nothing, baby. Just that old chest catches me up sometimes.”

“It does. How come? What’d you do with the drawer? You said you had some mementos you could keep there.”

“Oh,” Mamere said after a long pause. She turned again to Bridgette. “Just shoved some old papers in there, nothing much.” She covered Bridgette’s hands with her own.

“Oh,” Bridgette said, and the tears rolled down her cheeks. “What’s gonna happen to me?” she pleaded.

“Edward and I will speak on it this afternoon. We’ll work out what’s best.”

CHAPTER SEVEN—LET’S GO

Bridgette crept up the back stairs of Mamere’s house to the wrap around veranda. Thank God these West Indies style houses did not have grand center stairs leading to the front porch like the Garden District houses did. She felt obvious enough as it was, sneaking around the rear like this, without having to march up the front steps exposed for all along Bayou St. John to see. Again she had left Dorothea humming to herself in the kitchen, only shouting out that she was meeting a friend as the front door slammed shut. She was sick of all the whispered conferences that left her out; but most of all, she hated Dorothea’s new avocation of hyper vigilant spy. Dashing off the porch of her house, she laughed aloud at Dorothea’s hurried steps and shouts that Mister Edward would “have her apron” for allowing Bridgette to escape.

Bridgette removed the key from her pants pocket and fitted it into the door. The Opera Ball was next month, and Mamere was Ball Chairman this year. Her every moment was

occupied with organizational details, committee meetings, selecting menus, and soliciting items for the silent auction. Bridgette decided to spend the day here away from prying eyes. She had plans and needed time to search for the Christening dress.

Last night, Edward had informed her that after talking it over with Mamere, they decided it best not to go to France. A trip would be good though but only to get Bridgette's mind off what troubled her. Mamere even thought having another baby would help although Edward worried about the added stress. Jacqueline, of course, was against the trip, still thought she needed a psychiatrist, but Edward pronounced that he and Mamere knew what was best for her and came up with a novel solution. Bridgette was to accompany him on a business trip to London for a few days next month and then go on to Venice to relax.

Bridgette remembered blinking in disbelief at such foolishness. Her protest, "What about Celeste and Limbo and Saint Pantaleon?" went unheard. Were they really refusing to let her bring Celeste to Provence? How could they? Didn't they realize how important this was to her, how miserable she was? How guilty she felt? Her stomach boiled, and she planned revenge, particularly on Edward. Even after all their *tete a tetes*, nothing she said had penetrated his overbearing, self-righteous character. He designed every solution to make himself feel better and look good, the perfect, caring husband, always doing what was best for his sick wife. Mamere too never considered anything except family and old time solutions. As much as she hated to admit it, Mother was right about that. Well, she would show both of them that what she wanted counted most of all.

Dreams of Celeste throwing stones at her, of pointing an accusing finger at her, of begging to be set free haunted her. Sinister outbursts and mumblings sprouted from Celeste's mouth as she crawled unhampered in the dust beneath the feet of the Patriarchs. Abraham and

Jacob reached down to pat her, comfort her, but Celeste rolled onto her back and kicked and screeched at them. Bridgette cringed, horrified at the foul words and clawing motions. Celeste's once rosy cheeks appeared desiccated, gray skin flaking into the dirt.

Bridgette's tolerance for such images diminished with each hour, and her counting rituals intensified. She barely made it down a hallway without stopping to count the number of wooden planks in the floor. Some she arranged in groups of four with no difficulty. The disorder of other floorboards frazzled her, and she wrung her hands in dismay. She knew she needed to forget about family input and take matters into her own hands.

Concentrating on taking revenge soothed her and, after discarding several plans as unworkable, she decided how to both punish Mamere and Edward and save Celeste. So, they wouldn't let her bring her baby to France? Well, the hell with that. She needed another solution, one that worked to get Celeste to heaven and also heaped revenge on Edward and Mamere. Bridgette remembered the curl of Celeste's hair she had saved in the baby locket. Steal Mamere's prized hand-made dress and attach the curl to it. Then show Edward that any plans he made without her input went nowhere. Oh, sure! She would go to Venice all right pretending she was enjoying their little get away. Once there she would take a train to Provence and christening dress and hair in hand go to Saint Pantaleon church by herself.

After all, it was Bridgette's inability to dress Celeste properly for the Christening that condemned her to limbo, perhaps even created an environment that killed her. The dress was all-important. If only she had placed the revered dress on Celeste instead of dragging it over her face, the group would have proceeded to the Baptism, and Celeste would either be alive or in heaven. Steal the dress, go to London, then Venice, and take a train to Provence. Once there, lay the dress and attached hair out on the altar, beg Saint Pantaleon to intervene for Celeste's soul,

sprinkle holy water stolen from Holy Rosary Church on it, say the Baptism prayers, and bury the dress and lock of hair in one of the graves. Return to Venice and pretend she had taken off a couple of days to sort things out. Who cared what Edward thought happened? Everything taken care of, but first she must find that precious dress and attach the hair to it.

Bridgette entered the center hall. Off to the right, the library/ ballroom and to the left, the living room, dining room, and opening off them, the kitchen. One, two, three, four rooms, but three on one side and only one on the other. Bridgette's stomach clenched, and she sat in the middle of the hall and counted the number of slats in the floor. She scooted to the center two planks and ran her finger up and down the crevice and counted. It came out even, four on one side and four on the other. Sighing, she looked through the open door to her left into the living room.

The doll display cabinet caught her eye as it had a few weeks earlier, and she rushed over to it. Four long drawers ran along the bottom of the cabinet. Thanks goodness there were four of them and not an uneven number. It must be a lucky spot, the perfect place to store the Christening dress. Bridgette tucked her legs beneath her and shifted toward the narrow panel which defined the center of the piece. She looked up at the vast array of dolls staring down at her. There were just too many of them, and she knew she could not let herself get caught up in counting them. If she was going to regain some control of her life and future, she needed to get on with her plan. Her breathing quickened, her heart thumped in her chest, and her stomach churned. With trembling fingers, she opened the nearest drawer. Only scraps of material, taffeta, silk, calico, and fur, pieces left over from Mamere's doll dress sewing projects. The next drawer over contained hat brims, large cloth flowers, fancy ribbons, and wire frames for hat making. Bridgette resisted the urge to sort them by type and color into piles of four. She slumped over

and shook her head at the effort required to control her compulsion. She needed to find the dress now so she could stop at Holy Rosary Church for the holy water.

Determined, Bridgette attacked the other two drawers with a vengeance. Shoving everything aside, paying little heed to papers and fabric scraps tumbling to the floor, she burrowed deep into the drawer. “Ouch,” she yelped. “Damn this broken package of needles.” She squeezed her thumb and sucked the blood droplets. She was certain Mamere kept the dress in this cabinet with the dolls. Disappointment rose within her, and she gasped in dismay. Was she always doomed to have things go wrong? She scooped up the pieces of paper and material, avoided looking at them, and stuffed them into the drawers. Wobbly with the effort of controlling her rituals, Bridgette took several deep breaths, one breath, two breaths...”No, mustn’t do that,” she whispered. Her body shivered, and she wrapped both arms around herself and squeezed until her fingers ached. The pain distracted her from counting further breaths.

Bridgette looked around for another hiding place. Nothing else here but uncomfortable chairs, a loveseat, and end tables without drawers. Maybe it’s in the library/ballroom, maybe in the antique blanket chest? Of course, that had to be it. Bridgette ran across the hall and shoved the ballroom door open with a bang. The wall of mirrors caught her up as it always did, and she swiveled her body around and hid her face to avoid looking at her reflection. She stopped. As much time as she had spent in this room, she never noticed what a central place the blanket chest occupied. Its location across from the entrance door marked it with a peculiar single-mindedness. It seemed to call to Bridgette, look at me. Focus your entire attention on me. The dress called to her.

Bridgette walked over to the chest and its heavy, sturdy construction distracted her. She caressed its gleaming, smooth wood. A large chest, it was built of cypress, and she admired its

gently curved skirt and iron band lifts on each side. She grimaced. Stop this, she commanded. Remember Celeste is pining away in Limbo. She depends on you not to let her down like you did before. Bridgette noticed the ornate, iron key she remembered seeing in the large keyhole was not there. Reaching down, she pulled on the lid, but it did not budge. Damn, it's locked. Where in this house would Mamere hide the key? Certainly, it must be nearby. She looked over toward its companion piece, the refectory table. Of course, it has to be in one of the through drawers. Mamere was as charmed by them as Bridgette was. Pulling the one closest to Mamere's chair open, she found the key and unlocked the chest. The lid was heavy, and Bridgette needed to grip it with both hands to open it. Her deep resolve to punish Edward and Mamere strengthened her, and she pulled it open with a jolt. As there was no bracket to hold it open, Bridgette rested the top against her shoulder and leaned in. Two cashmere blankets covered the hidden panel drawer, and she pulled them out. Bridgette smiled, grateful that it was she and Mamere who discovered the drawer. Had she not been here, she never would have guessed its existence.

Bridgette slid the panel out. Surprised, she almost dropped the lid onto her fingers. Inside the hidden drawer was a small replica of the blanket chest with the same scalloped skirt and iron hinges. This one was identical to the larger piece except for a tiny plaque of some sort on the top. Bridgette wondered when Mamere got the duplicate one. It resembled a large jewelry box, and Bridgette knew it was not delivered the same time as the blanket chest and refectory table. She had been there the entire time and helped Mamere examine the furniture. Lifting the smaller piece out, Bridgette closed the lid of the trunk and sat on it clutching the valuables case. A raised lozenge contained the initials, IDM, intricately scrolled into it. Isabelle Marie Dubuisson, her ancestor. How was that possible?

Bridgette rubbed her fingers over the carvings and struggled not to count the number of curlicues. She had no time for that foolishness if she was going to get the things she needed for her plan today. She comforted herself with a smooth, repetitive motion over the letters but admonished herself not to focus on the number of rotations. Perspiring with the effort at control, her stomach in pain, she opened the box. Filled with official looking documents, some loose, others tied in a gold ribbon, the chest demanded attention, attention that Bridgette had no patience for. She was there to solidify her revenge plot and not to succumb to one of Mamere's ancestral mysteries. Chagrined, Bridgette let the lid drop and set the small chest on top the larger one. What a frustrating dilemma.

The two cashmere blankets which Bridgette had pulled out earlier lay in a heap on the floor. Scowling, she shoved one foot under them and kicked with all her might. The coverlets tumbled over her leg and settled in a muddle in front of her. Hidden in a fold between the two of them was the christening dress. Thanking God, Bridgette grabbed the garment and pulled it free. She shook it out and pirouetted in front of the mirror. The dress twirled around her like a dancing Maypole ribbon, except it was all white instead of springtime colors of pink, yellow, and sunshine. She clasped it to herself feeling Celeste's spirit within. Knowing that soon her baby would find peace, her heart pounded and shivers overtook her. She looked at her watch. Still plenty of time to get the holy water.

"Bridgette, you in there?" Jacqueline's voice echoed through the center hall.

Bridgette jumped. Damn. She did not need an interruption especially from her nosy sister now. Bridgette hugged the dress closer to her bosom, then thought better of it and shoved it behind her back. Desperate to hide it, Bridgette rushed back to the blanket chest. Jacqueline's footsteps boomed outside the library door, and the doorknob rattled. Bridgette rolled the dress

into a ball, thrust it under the papers in the smaller box, and slammed the lid shut. Just as Jacqueline pushed the door open, Bridgette sat down on the larger chest. She brushed her hair back with one hand and with seeming indifference slid the smaller container with the dress over to her leg.

“Thought I’d find you here.” Jacqueline smiled and pulled the door closed behind her. “We should talk.”

“Oh, about what?” Bridgette caressed the lid with her fingertips and pulled the box closer. If only she could make it part of herself, she could protect herself from Jacqueline’s snooping and get on with her plan.

“Oh, not much, just chat. What’s that you got there? Looks old.”

“Nothing important. Just something Mamere asked me to get and hang on to.” Bridgette let her arm drape over the top.

“Well, come out on the porch. We haven’t visited in a while, and I thought it’d be nice to catch up with what’s happening.” Jacqueline inched backwards toward the door and reaching it signaled Bridgette to follow.

Bridgette sat there a few moments after Jacqueline went out and tried to think this through. She did not relish a talk with Jacqueline, especially one that ended in a confrontation about treatment. Nor could she let on about the contents of the box. She needed to get the dress to her house without anyone knowing she had it, but most of all, she needed to get to church and finish what she started. Bridgette opened the lid and shuffled the papers around so they covered the dress. Some threatened to spill out, but Bridgette pressed the top closed.

The door opened again. “What’re you doing? What’s in there?”

“Just some stuff Mamere wants for the Opera Ball.”

“Well, grab it and let’s go outside and talk.”

Still clutching the chest, Bridgette settled into one of the old, white, wicker rockers on the porch. She scooted her chair behind a pilaster column and folded her arms over the top of the box. The weight of her arms pressed on the lid and kept the papers from slipping out.

“How’s it going?” Jacqueline squirmed in her chair. She turned to face Bridgette and looked her in the eye.

Bridgette averted her gaze and instead fumbled with the box’s iron handles. She lifted first the right, then the left and let them fall in sequence with a rhythmic clack. One, two, three, four times, she counted, then blinked her eyes and shook her head to rid herself of the ritual.

“Huh? What’d you ask?” She forced the top of the box closed and pushed some tiny, curled, paper edges back inside. “Oh, OK, I guess. Trying to get ready for Europe. I have stuff I still need to do and don’t have time to waste talking to...” Her voice trailed off.

“Yeah, I heard Edward and Mamere decided that a trip to, where is it, London and Venice would take your mind off things.”

“So they say,” Bridgette said, drawing the words out in a slow whisper.

“Sounds like you have some concerns about that.”

Bridgette looked up from fiddling with the box. “You think? Why would I be concerned about a lovely trip to London and Venice with my dear husband? Just because my baby died a few months ago and is stuck in Limbo ‘til the end of time. Why would that be a bother? It should be fun, fun, fun, fun. Wow, a new adventure for poor crazy Bridgette, something to take her mind off her miseries.”

“You sound angry,” Jacqueline said and reached for Bridgette’s hand.

“Gee, you think.” Bridgette pulled her hand back but kept tight control of the box. She looked Jacqueline straight in the eye. “Let’s cut the friendly, sisterly bull here. Say your piece, and then leave me alone. I have things to do.”

“Well, I know you may not be ready for this any more than you are ready for a trip to Venice, but you should try telling someone about what’s going on inside you, a psychiatrist or a grief support group. I can see that you’re suffering and having difficulty coping with what’s happening. Often, sharing this with others who’ve been through something similar can help.”

“You’re saying I’m sick.” Bridgette grabbed the chest into her arms and hugged it. “You’re saying I have a mental illness. Well, I don’t. I’m just sad my baby died, and that I have nothing to do.”

“I know, and that’s normal. But I’ve watched you, the counting that you do and the redoing of things several times. Like setting the table, you had to rearrange the napkins, dishes and silverware four times. I counted along with you. That’s an illness. Today, we call it obsessive-compulsive disorder, OCD for short.”

“What’s wrong with wanting to do things correctly?”

“Nothing, but that’s not what your redoing that table was about.”

“Oh, yeah? Since, you’re so smart. What’s it about then?”

“It’s about controlling the uncontrollable. You can’t stop what happened to Celeste, but your mind tells you that you can control how the dinner table looks. Those small measures of power over things in your environment which you can control act to decrease your anxiety over the larger ones that you can’t.”

“Huh.” Bridgette looked at her, blinked, and shook her head four times. “What? Nothing but a bunch of intellectual gibberish. Is that your solution?”

“There you just did it with your eyes.” Jacqueline paused. “Oh, never mind. Just take time to see someone. Just do it. It’ll help.”

“No, I have my own plan.” Bridgette gave Jacqueline a defiant look and grasped the chest. She swallowed a couple of times and took a deep breath. “I have things to accomplish before I go.”

“Well, I’ve said my piece. What’s in that thing you’re hanging on to like it’s a chest filled with gold nuggets?” Jacqueline reached for it. “Come on, gimme a look see, just a little peek.”

Bridgette shoved it under her chair and blocked access with her legs. “Nothing, I said, just some stuff for Mamere’s ball.”

“Oh, forget it. Nobody can say I didn’t try to get through to you. Do what you want. You will anyway. You always have, and Mamere always let you get away with it.” Jacqueline headed toward the stairs. “I never did figure out where I fit in this family, anyway. Just some lost sheep tagging along behind the h...” Her voice drifted away.

Bridgette pulled the box from beneath her chair onto the floor next to her and rocked back and forth in the chair. Faster and faster, the rocker’s curved legs shattered the silence left by Jacqueline’s exit. Breathless, Bridgette counted the porch columns and lined them up in groups of four. Furious over Jacqueline’s continued insistence she see a psychiatrist, Bridgette missed a couple and had to go back to redo it. After correctly arranging the pilasters, her breathing and heart rate slowed. She needed to master herself so she could get on with it, but her mind drifted to the small chest she was clutching.

Bridgette lifted the lid and removed several papers covering the dress. She glanced at the first couple. Just as she thought, nothing important here, just more of Mamere’s genealogy trees. Her grandmother collected so many of them, of grandparents, aunts, uncles, their spouses, and all

their descendants dating back to 1699, quite a collection of dead people. Bridgette let those slide to the floor and reached to uncover the christening gown. Her hand touched an ornate, official-looking document made of parchment-like paper rimmed with gold curlicues. Curious, she pulled it out. Thicker in consistency than the other papers scattered on the floor, the document looked legal. A picture of the former Mother Cabrini Sacred Heart Orphanage built in 1905 by Saint Frances Cabrini was embossed in its center. The picture was of the front of the building, the part on Esplanade Avenue.

Bridgette shivered. Mother often threatened to send her there when she was little. The part of the property that Bridgette remembered most was not the one pictured on the document but the twelve-foot-high concrete wall on the Bayou St. John side. Every day to and from school, Bridgette dashed past the wall as fast as she could, fearful that a nun would pop out and drag her inside at Mother's behest. Those times when Mamere saw her come in the front door breathless, she tried to comfort Bridgette with stories of the kindness of those nuns. She told of knowing the orphanage's founder Mother Frances Cabrini, and how Bridgette's grandfather knew the wealthy, Italian merchant who helped Mother Cabrini buy the property.

Last year, the Missionary Sisters turned the orphanage into a high school for girls, and as part of the transition tore the wall down. The first time Bridgette walked past, she knew a past horror had been eliminated from her life. With the wall gone, she saw the welcoming play yard, the French Quarter style courtyard, and the old Pitot House which the nuns still used as a convent.

Fingering the document, Bridgette thought back to how she always found Mamere's interest and knowledge about Mother Cabrini curious. It seemed more than neighborly. Mamere knew something of Mother Cabrini's years as a child in Italy and of her troubles establishing

herself and her missionary sisters in New York. She also knew of the Saint's dream of the Blessed Virgin which reinforced Mother's mission to heal and house the poor. This kind of information certainly did not come from a casual acquaintance. Then, there was the insight into Mother Cabrini's first orphanage in 1892 for poor Italian immigrants in New Orleans. "Little Palermo," the nun called it.

From small odds and ends of Mamere's reminiscences, Bridgette gleaned that Mamere's father was a business associate of the wealthy Italian who helped Mother Cabrini purchase the property on Esplanade in 1905 when the sisters outgrew their home on St. Philip St. Just recently, Mamere expressed concern over the fate of the Pitot House. There was talk of tearing the historic Creole Colonial house down to expand the new school. "Save the Pitot House," was Mamere's latest societal mission. She even suggested Bridgette take up the cause as a way of taking her mind off Celeste. "The sisters who live in that house sure helped me back when Robert died in 1918 in that flu epidemic," she remembered Mamere said trying to convince her. "It's the least I can do to repay them."

Bridgette flattened the document's curled edges out on her lap. Must have been twisted into a scroll for years, she figured, as the paper threatened to roll again onto itself. Grasping the top and bottom ends with both hands, Bridgette attempted to read the handwritten words. Someone with beautiful, flowing penmanship had penned the entire text. It was signed not by Mother Cabrini as she expected but by a Mother Josephina Busoni, Superior General. It was divided into two sections; the first half in what Bridgette guessed was Italian, the second in French. Scanning the French portion, some of the words she knew, but others required a dictionary to translate. The date at the bottom of the page, December 22, 1918.

Impatient that she could not easily read it, Bridgette let the document slide off her lap onto the floor where it curled up into itself. She watched Jacqueline climb into her new car, a two-seater Mercedes in racing silver gray with red upholstery. Her sister's constant bragging about having earned that car by going to medical school made her sick. Bridgette could almost hear the click, click, click of Jacqueline's Gucci spike-heeled pumps when she hurried to her next patient or conference. Breaking into a man's world certainly gave her airs. She watched Jacqueline drive off. Good riddance. Now she could get back to the task at hand.

Bridgette reached down and pulled the christening dress out. She shook her head and sighed at how rumpled it was. That bitch of a sister had to show up just at the point she did. If Jacqueline had minded her own business, Bridgette would not have had to ball the dress up to hide it and these papers would not be strewn all over the floor. She scooped them up and shoved them back into the chest. She glanced again at the Mother Cabrini scroll. It was curious but she had no time to figure out now what it said. Deciding to do it later, she rolled it up, its parchment-like paper crinkling in protest. She smoothed the dress out and thought back to the day Dorothea insisted on ironing it. Everyone thought she was incapable of doing anything right, even ironing. Well now, they would see what she was capable of. She'd show them. Folding the christening dress and placing the scroll on top, she picked up the antique box. She must hide the box in the blanket chest again so Mamere would not notice anything was missing. That done, she would stop by Holy Rosary Church on her way home to pick up the holy water. Then off to Provence.

CHAPTER EIGHT—EXCURSIONS

Bridgette unfastened the buckles on her backpack, slid the items out, and laid them on the bed. Some guide books, an Italian/English dictionary, a French/English dictionary, a packet holding the scrolled document, and an Art History book from her days at Newcomb College. Mamere had handed the book to her when she was packing suggesting she look up Miss Magwith in Venice. Sister Joseph had told Mamere that Bridgette's old art teacher would be there the same time as Bridgette and would love to see her.

Bridgette reached deeper into the satchel and pulled out the old sanitary napkins box hidden at the bottom. She drew a tissue-paper wrapped item out of the box, undid it and placed it on the bed. The christening dress was still fresh. Putting it in there was a genius idea because she knew Edward would never look inside the box. Those female things were anathema to him. She checked to make certain the locket containing Celeste's hair was still sewn to the inside of the dress. She grinned at how tight it was, and feeling pleased with herself picked the scroll up and shoved it and the French/English dictionary back into the bag and tossed that into the bottom of the closet. She had planned to translate the document on the plane but exhaustion at the stress and excitement over overseas travel prevented her. Maybe she would get to it later. Bridgette turned her attention to the dress. Where could she put it? It needed to be handy for when she took the train to Gordes but also out of Edward's sight. How about back into the Kotex bag and into the bathroom closet?

Those two days in London proved useful. While Edward met with his business associates, she and the Savoy's concierge arranged a train excursion for her to Provence. The story she fabricated of meeting an elderly aunt in Bores near Gordes to search the graveyards for

her French ancestors interested the kindly gentleman at the hotel, and he dove right into finding the best route from Venice, arranging her ticket, and procuring a car and driver to take her to a fine boutique hotel in Gordes to meet her aunt. Now she just had to hire a boat to take her to the train station tomorrow. Hadn't she just given her best smile to the handsome young concierge downstairs in the Danieli's lobby? Some Italian men were gorgeous hunks of humanity with their olive skin and curly dark hair, and he was one of them. What fun it was to plan revenge rather than count porch columns. Her stomach clenched and anger threatened to boil up in her throat. How dare they treat her like a crazy idiot when all she wanted was peace for her baby? No one could stop her.

The door to their suite slammed closed with a thump.

"Where are you honey?" Edward called.

"In here unpacking." Bridgette shoved the Kotex box under the fluffy, decorator pillows that lined the head of the bed. Edward's arms encircled her, and he kissed the top of her head. For a moment she stiffened but then forced herself to relax and nestle into him. She needed to pretend everything was all right. Twirling around, Bridgette brushed his cheek with a kiss. "Let's go see Venice. I've been looking at the guide book while you were tending to business, and it sounds phenomenal." Edward tried to pull her close, but she grabbed the Michelin Guide and opened it to the map of Venice. "Look at all the starred places. It'll take ages to see them all."

"Okay," Edward agreed slowly. "We can go. It's great seeing you excited about something."

Bridgette grinned. He need not know the number of times she had counted those Michelin stars and arranged them and the sights into groups of four. "Let's go, the Frari and the Scuola di San Rocco first." Since both were three star sights, they would have to pick up a two

star sight or two one star sights along the way to satisfy her compulsion. Studying the map, Bridgette gestured Edward to follow. Luckily there were several including a church to Saint Panteleon, spelled differently but still the same Saint as in France. What a coincidence. Bridgette knew she had to be on the right path.

Outside, Edward took her hand as they walked alongside the Ducal Palace and into St. Mark's Square.

"We need to spend some time in there," Edward said pointing to the Palace. When I was here a couple of years ago for that meeting, I only had time to take a run through tour. You'll love it. So much art, Tintoretto and Veronese on the walls and ceilings. Even a few Titian's .

Bridgette stopped at the entrance to the Square. Staring ahead, she dropped Edward's hand. "Huh, Titians? No." She grimaced. "No old painters. Not now. Look, Edward. Over there. Orchestras playing, three of them. Can we stop? I want to listen." She ran toward the Café Florian. In her excitement, she forgot Celeste and her anger toward Edward. "Can we, please?"

"Sure, if you want. Why not? There's no rush."

Bridgette snaked her way through the tables until she found one close to the stage. "Guess they're not really an orchestra," she said. "Just a few players, but they sound like one, and the black tie and tails they wear are just too elegant for a regular old band."

Edward pulled a chair out for her to sit on and one close to her for himself. A tuxedoed waiter handed Bridgette the menu. She let the Green Guide fall from her hand and opened the menu to page after page of pictured ice cream desserts. "Look at all their fancy sundaes and sorbets. Maybe the chocolate one, or no, look at this one sauced with fresh cherries and Kirsch. It's too hard to decide. I guess chocolate with whipped cream and nuts and a cherry. Tell him

that's what I want." She settled back in her chair, forgot her worries, and squeezed Edward's hand. Maybe everyone was right. She simply needed to get away from the grief for a while.

"Now that wasn't so hard was it? Mamere called this morning while you were bathing and I told her I thought this might work. She even said to look out for Miss Magwith."

"Miss Magwith. I know. Mamere told me. Maybe. I don't know. I don't think I'm up to seeing anyone now."

"Well, think about it. Mamere said she was in Venice chaperoning an art tour for Ursuline. It'd be fun to see her. You liked her so and it could be good for you to see someone different than just family. I told Mamere to find out where she's staying and we'd contact her." He clasped her hand tightly. "Now, how about some coffee? I think you'd like a cappuccino. It's strong like New Orleans coffee but with a little milk and foam. Not as milky as café au lait." He nodded to the waiter and pointed at the picture of the chocolate sundae. "This and two cappuccinos, please."

The orchestra finished the Strauss waltz they were playing and started up with a piece Bridgette found familiar but one she did not quite recognize. "What's this song? You know it, don't you?" She twisted her chair around to face Edward. "It's from an opera, one I've seen."

"I'm not good with recognizing stuff like that. You need Mamere here. She'd recognize it in a second."

Bridgette started to hum. "I know I know this." She frowned. "Mamere has a record of it. The chorus sings it." She twisted back to the orchestra. "I know. It's the last part of Gounod's *Faust* where the angels take Marguerite to heaven. You know, God forgives her for killing her baby. It's so beautiful. It always makes me cry." Bridgette slumped back in her chair. "Do you think God forgives me?" she whispered choking back a sob. She stared at the sundae the waiter

left. So many nuts on top, too many and too tiny to count. She shook her head. Mustn't do that. Remember, mad not sad, and she pulled her chair away from Edward.

"What's the matter now? Something wrong with your ice cream, your cappuccino?"

"Guess I'm not hungry after all." She turned toward him. "Don't you ever miss Celeste? So many things remind me of her, like this music. I can be all right for a few minutes and then it all starts up again. Something makes me think of her, and I can't get the picture of her suffering in Limbo out of my head. Pleading for me to get her out. It just goes round and round in my brain. But, not you." Her voice came out in a loud screech. "You're weird. You go on your way, never crying or saying anything about her. It's like she never even existed for you."

"There's no need to be ugly." Edward shifted in the chair planting his long legs firmly on the ground in front of him. Drawing his gangly body upright, he harrumphed, "Of course I miss her. Wasn't she my child too? I think of her sometimes, but infants always made me nervous. I do better with older children. Babies are more for their mothers. You nursed her and bathed her and rocked her. She was so much a part of your day. It's only natural you'd feel empty without her. Maybe if she'd been older, and I played with her or took her places." Edward stopped, grimaced and fumbled around for the next words. "That didn't come out right. You know what I'm trying to say, don't you?" He tried to take her hand, but she pulled away. "Come on, Bridgette, I'm sorry. This is hard on me too. I didn't mean anything by what I said. It came out wrong. I'm just trying to help. I'm worried sick about you and so is everyone else. And this limbo foolishness. I hate to see you torturing yourself over nothing. Throw yourself into this trip. Make it the start of something new." He smiled as though to take the edge from his words. "We can have other children. Even some sons to carry on the business." He patted her shoulder.

Bridgette stared at him. God, who was this person she married, so nonchalant over something so important to her. Babies are for mothers? She could not believe he actually said that. When does the father come in? Maybe never for girls? Her stomach clenched. She jumped up and shoved her chair so hard it struck the table behind her. Images flooded her mind. She imagined grabbing the table in front of her and turning it over. Dishes scattered everywhere and shattered on the concrete. Waiters came running, coffee and ice cream, nuts and chocolate syrup pooled under hers and other patrons' feet. "I'm leaving," she yelled. "Go find your Titians and make sons with them." By the time Edward signaled the waiter and paid the check, Bridgette was at the far portico exiting the Square.

Stumbling through the archway, tears streaming down her cheeks, Bridgette realized she had left the Michelin Green Guide at the table. Faced with a maze of alleyways heading off in all directions, she panicked. Go straight, turn right, she had no idea. Keep moving, her mind directed. Store fronts filled with designer dresses, lace tablecloths, and leather purses seemed to race past as she plunged farther into the labyrinth of narrow passageways interrupted by canals and bridges. Breathless, she stopped along one such waterway. Three and four story houses, no palaces, lined the canal. They were painted pink, burnt orange, or gray, and their windows looked out at her through Gothic arches, each opening fancifully decorated with elegant filigree and pointed arcs. She stopped to count the number of windows in each house, the number of porticoes, the different colors. Her mind begged her to order the decorative elements into multiples of four, but rage consumed her. Mad, not sad, she reiterated her mantra. Better mad than sad; count no more; release baby from limbo.

If only she could find the hotel, she could buy another guide book in their gift shop. The Danieli was on the lagoon at the end of the Grand Canal. One of these smaller canals must lead

to the bigger one. That way, she figured. After several minutes, she came to a hotel on the Grand Canal, not the Danieli but the Gritti Palace. She recognized the name as one Edward considered booking. Bridgette hesitated. Her stomach was queasy, and she swallowed several times. Maybe they would laugh at her, or expect her to speak Italian, or look down on her mode of dress. Three couples, the men dressed in gray pin-striped suits, the women in tea length silk dresses walked out. One of the women smiled and nodded to her. Maybe it was all right.

Bridgette walked through the simple glass doors into an ornate lobby. Walls covered with red flocked paper, glittering sconces, and gilded wall mirrors greeted her. Patterned tile floors in beige, yellow, and red designs pleaded with her to count them and arrange them in groups of fours. She rushed past the imposing reception desk centered in the middle of the lobby and looked for the gift shop. Pushing through doors leading to an outside terrace, she marveled at the number of boats on the Grand Canal, some speed boats, some barges carrying fruits and vegetables, some carrying what looked like garbage. The sound of the traffic penetrated her ears, and she cringed. Several gondolas rocked to and fro on their moorings, one or two crashing into their barber-striped poles when a vaporetto sped by. The terrace was filled with couples and foursomes eating breakfast or drinking cappuccinos.

“Can I help you, Madame?” the maître’ de inquired.

“You speak English, sir?” Bridgette stammered.

“Breakfast?” He pointed to an empty table by the railing.

Confused, Bridgette walked over and sat down. She searched her purse for the money Edward gave her that morning but was clueless as to what each piece represented. How much was a dollar; how much a quarter? Would this coin buy her some coffee, or was it too little, too much? The pink azaleas lining the window boxes on the terrace buzzed with bees, and

Bridgette's heart pumped louder in her chest. She had to get away from here before she lost it. She looked across the Canal at the large church lining its opposite bank. Gorgeous. There were so many steps leading up to it, so many windows, so many domes. Her mind settled into counting the steps and sorting out the windows and domes. She arranged them in groups of four, eight, ten, twelve steps to the top, three groups of four. The windows and doors were more difficult and required some imaginative rearranging but the exercise calmed her.

"Menu, if you please, Madame?"

"No. I need the gift shop."

"Oh, nothing for you?" The waiter looked confused.

"Just the gift shop."

"This is the restaurant. Go back through that door, and it's right off the lobby. You can ask at the desk."

Marveling at how well he spoke English, Bridgette walked to the gift shop, sorted out the money Edward had given her with the shopkeeper and bought a Green Guide and a map of Venice. "I'm off," she murmured to herself and left the hotel. Meandering through alleyways and across canals, Bridgette eventually found her way to the Rialto Bridge. Vendors sitting along the railing of the bridge hawked purses, scarves, and trinkets. Bridgette ignored all of them but did lean over the side to watch a water bus filled with people slide under the bridge. So many bodies in one spot. They seemed to be hanging out the sides and across the front of the bus. She pushed the temptation to count and rearrange them out of her mind. Let them fall in, she thought. I must save my baby.

She sat down at the foot of the bridge and studied the map. Down those alleyways to the left was the three starred Scuola San Rocco and right behind that the one star Saint Pantelon. A

sense of doing what she was supposed to do flooded her, and the easy arrangement of the enterprise in a multiple of four soothed her. For some reason, she needed to visit the Saint Panteleon Church here, maybe simply to ask Saint Panteleon to help her find his Church in Provence; then she needed to figure out how to get a water taxi to the train station. She bet that nice lady in the gift shop who helped her with the money could order one for her. She imagined Edward waiting for her at the hotel and becoming frantic when she did not return this evening. With furrowed brow and closed eyes, she savored his discomfort and panic. What a gratifying sense of meanness, she thought. Let him suffer that horrifying sense of loss and confusion that she experienced these many months. Hatred for his supercilious manner overtook her, and she shuddered. Could she really dislike him that much? If so, what chance did their marriage have? But divorce was a sin. Can't think of that. Taking a deep breath, she repeated her mantra; better mad than sad; count no more; release Celeste from limbo.

Saint Pantelon looked dreary in the mid-morning sun with its plain façade and lack of ornamentation. In fact, it looked unfinished, and the smell of fish from the market across the piazza added to its distasteful aura. Bridgette hesitated. Could this be a warning not to continue with this undertaking? Did what she was doing stink too, an unfinished, smelly, dead baby seeking restoration. Heart fluttering, she pushed open the door. It took several minutes for her eyes to get used to the gloom, but she resisted the urge to plunge outside into the sunshine. It did not look like a church; there were no aisles and no place to kneel down and pray. The walls and ceiling were covered in paintings. She took out her Green Guide and squinting to see in the darkness identified the artwork.

The ceiling, she read, was covered with the largest oil painting in the world, made up of forty canvases sewn together. Bridgette looked up. The painting was huge, and it was framed

with ornate Baroque arches. Marvelous in scale, it depicted the Martyrdom of Saint Panteleon. Too bad the Church was so gloomy. She had read of his martyrdom while studying about the church in Provence and tried to pick out the different elements of the story here, but it was too dark to truly distinguish any single aspect. Her muscles tightened with frustration, and disappointment overwhelmed her. She had expected so much. Some kind of peace or message from God or the Saint that her plan would be successful.

Bridgette looked for the Veronese mentioned in the guidebook, *The Miracle of St Panteleon*. Maybe that one would speak to her. Some paintings during her art history classes seemed to clarify problems for her. This painting held more promise as it depicted the miracle of Saint Panteleon bringing a child back to life. That aspect mattered more to her than did the Saint. She located it in a chapel to the right of the main church. It showed Saint Panteleon using prayer not medicine to bring a young boy killed by snakebite back to life. The snake slithered off the bottom right side of the painting. Like the devil, Bridgette thought. Her shoulders slumped. This meant nothing to her. A boy killed by a snake had no resemblance to Celeste's plight in Limbo. What had she come here for?

Bridgette left the Church and wandered aimlessly to the fish market. This place really stank. She remembered what Mother had said at the family meeting, that Celeste in her coffin smelled. At the time, it meant nothing to her, but every now and then the image of Celeste in the coffin came to her and like now, she felt nauseated. She questioned what in the world was she doing. The child was dead, buried, and turning to dust, and she was on this crusade to get her out of Limbo. She had alienated Edward and felt estranged from him.

She slumped down against a post alongside the canal some ways from the fish market and looked at the guide book. What now? The Scuola San Rocco was just around the corner. She

remembered from her art history studies that Tintoretto had covered its walls and ceilings with frescoes. Recalling the amazement she felt in class when Miss Magwith, her art history teacher in college, flashed the slides on the screen, she determined to see it. Certainly, she could interrupt her devotion to Celeste for a moment to do something for herself. She pushed the vision of Celeste pleading with her out of her head, stood up, and ran away from the stink to the Scuola.

Bridgette pushed open the doors to the Chapter House. Dark, gloomy, and devoid of people, it emphasized her unhappiness and underlined her isolation and loneliness. She thought back to the class where she had first seen slides of the art contained within this building. It was a bright, sunlit day shortly after her engagement to Edward. While Miss Magwith readied the slide machine, Bridgette had admired her engagement ring, a single large diamond which sparkled with color whenever the sun's rays hit it. That morning she had told her teacher of her upcoming marriage and that she planned to drop out of college at the end of the semester. Miss Magwith was concerned and tried to convince Bridgette to finish her degree, but Bridgette explained that her ambition was to marry and have at least four children and college only interfered with that. Didn't she realize that God expected married women to stay home and care for their husband and children? Miss Magwith frowned and started to say something but then demurred. Bridgette read the distress in her face at losing her most dedicated student. Miss Magwith was the only person who always complimented Bridgette on her brains and interest in intellectual things. Her own family never mentioned it.

Bridgette rushed toward the back of the large room to a bench placed against the side wall and sat down. She glanced around. There were seven paintings in the room, four on one wall but only three on the other. A large marble staircase to her left led to the second floor where she now remembered the ceiling and wall frescoes were located. Bridgette spent several minutes

trying to incorporate the stairwell and the seven paintings into cohesive groups of four. Growing more anxious at her inability to create an orderly arrangement, she stared at the painting directly across from her to see if she could incorporate elements of it into those of the painting next to it. She was desperate to make an orderly pattern out of the chaos she felt and eliminate the twitching in her stomach and the sensation of ants crawling on her skin. God, she hated these anxiety attacks.

Bridgette shuddered at the scene across from her. Dead babies lay everywhere. Glancing at the guide, she read about the paintings on this ground floor. All were dedicated to Mary, and the one directly across from her was *Massacre of the Innocents*, Herod's slaughter of all first born children. Jesus had escaped by fleeing into Egypt. The pathos of the mothers drew Bridgette across the room to stand in front of the horror. A shaft of light focused Bridgette's eyes on the babies in the center. She counted them, one, two, three, four, five, not four but five. Bridgette wanted to run but was compelled to stay. She dropped the guide book.

One of the babies, obviously the central character of the painting, dangled over a wall. The sight of the mother's hand grasping the child, either to keep it from falling or to bring it back upward to her, mesmerized Bridgette. She reached out her hand to touch the child but realized she was as powerless to save it as was the mother. The thought that she could not bring Celeste back from Limbo any more than this mother could save her child from slaughter made her body go limp. No mother should ever feel that helpless. She felt a deep urge to cry, but no tears came.

Dragging herself back to the bench, she looked at the two nearest paintings on that wall. The Green Guide said they were the *Presentation in the Temple* and the *Assumption of Mary*. Both contained babies, one in each painting. The delicate child in the *Presentation* looked so much like Celeste. It was tiny and fragile and was being offered to the priest on a delicate lace

blanket, just like Celeste should have been offered up on her Christening Day. The flimsy mantle reminded Bridgette of the antique garment hidden away from Edward in the Kotex box.

Somehow, that seemed obscene at this moment, and Bridgette closed her eyes against the thought. The other painting showed Mary taken up to heaven with a childlike cherub dangling from her foot. She seemed to lift the child from its casket and bring it with her to heaven. That was what she wanted for Celeste, but she had no power to achieve that wish. Tears ran down her cheeks. She felt foolish and wanted nothing so much as to hide in a dark corner somewhere for all time.

Loud voices and clanging footsteps startled her, and she shook herself as though to awaken from a bad dream. A group of teenagers and young people came thundering down the marble staircase. They gathered at the bottom of the stairs chattering.

“Ladies, ladies, softly, softly, inside voices, please.”

“But, Miss Magwith, we’re just talking about the art. So many pictures. The ceiling was covered with them. I got dizzy just looking up. And when Lillian knocked those chairs over ‘cause she wasn’t watching where she was going. That was too funny.”

“And that guard dressed in that red velvet outfit and strange plumed hat running over to pick her up and then tripping himself. That was just too, too much. I couldn’t stop myself from giggling. Sorry.”

Bridgette whirled around to face the wall knocking her foot against the bench. The clattering sound reverberated in her ears, and she covered her face. Not Miss Magwith. Of all the thousands of people in Venice, why did she have to run into her? She had to hide.

“Dear, dear. Bridgette? Is that you? Mamere said you would be here this week.” Miss Magwith walked toward her. “You didn’t hurt yourself, did you?”

Bridgette muttered beneath her breath and turned. Miss Magwith looked just as she had when Bridgette last saw her three years ago. Her straggly, silver-blond hair hung in strands down both sides of her face. She wore no makeup, and her gray sweater drooped almost to her knees. It covered an olive-green, corduroy skirt that seemed to bunch up at her waist under the sweater. But her smile gleamed with friendliness.

“Who’d have thought we’d run into each other. In this treasure house of art, of all places? Come meet my girls.” She reached out and pulled Bridgette toward her. “Come, girls. Look. One of my old students, one of my better ones, I might add. She loved learning about art and especially loved the stories each painting told. Why, she wrote several essays associating episodes in the painter’s life with what he painted. Loved trying to figure out why he painted this particular piece at this particular time. Looked up facts about his life and tried to put them together. Bet that’s why you’re studying that Tintoretto painting of the Innocents. Remember, we thought that baby in the middle represented Tintoretto’s son who died. That explained why it’s so poignant.”

Bridgette stepped back. Somewhat chagrined, she did not know what to say, but looking at her old teacher, she started to be amused. Miss Magwith always brought joy with her. Her chatter was infectious. She remembered her heart smiled just listening to her. Something about her enthusiasm had once charmed Bridgette and made her want to learn more about what she said. “I’m here with my husband, Edward, you know?”

“No, guess I don’t.” Miss Magwith grinned showing a line of glowing white teeth. “Don’t see hide nor hair of a man down here. Just us girls. Is he upstairs? There were a few of that gender up there. Right girls?”

“He’s, uh, working.” Bridgette gulped. She had no desire to share her Celeste problem with Miss Magwith. “He came here for a meeting.”

“What a silly thing to do in Venice. Too much else to see here to fool around with work. Well, wait a minute, guess I’m kind of working. Brought these girls on a tour, but looking at art is not, in my humble opinion, what you’d call working. We’ve been just about everywhere, first, of course, to the Academia with all those paintings by Titian, Tintoretto, and Veronese. Even some Bellini’s and a few Canaletto’s but, you know the French ended up with a lot of those. Too bad, cause I just love Canaletto’s post card views of Venice. Could have been painted yesterday. But me personally, I like to see paintings in the spots the artist painted them for. You know, like in the Doge’s Palace, that room with the Titian and then the ceilings by Veronese, and who couldn’t love the Grand Council Chamber, that gigantic room with the whole wall by Tintoretto. Have you been there yet?”

Bridgette shook her head. “Nooo, not.....

“You must go. Get your husband, what’s his name again, to take a minute away from those business meetings and show that to him. It’s called *Paradise*, and it makes you feel like you’re in heaven just to stand there in the middle of the room and gaze at it. Remember, girls, I told you all about that. Something to see. We’re saving it for tomorrow. The best for last. Right, girls?”

“Right, Miss Magwith,” they giggled in chorus.

Bridgette grinned. She recalled the times when she had attempted to get a word in with Miss Magwith. Impossible. She never seemed to take a breath, but that for Bridgette was part of her charm. She never felt those anxious, negative feelings around her. It was as though

Bridgette's mind did not have time to enter into self flagellation or negative self pity. Miss Magwith's enthusiasm for everything she did or knew was infectious and captured Bridgette.

"What's on your agenda now? We're on our way to the Frari, to see Titian's *Assumption*, right over the altar where he and God wanted it. You must cancel whatever you had in mind and come. No sense doing Venice by yourself. It's not a city for loners. It's a place for twosomes or that lacking, a group of young folks." She motioned to her girls. "Let that, what's his name, meet, meet, meet with his important personages. Come see Venice with us." She linked an arm through Bridgette's. "All right, girls, let's hit it."

Bridgette shuffled to keep up with Miss Magwith's rapid pace. Maybe, she needed this respite. She did not want to sink into that dark hole, the one she inhabited since Celeste's death. She picked up her pace and snuggled her arm into Miss Magwith's.

"That's right, smile, child. No room for gloom in Venice. The Frari's just around there, not far a'tall. Just look at the colors of those houses reflected in the canal, and the Gothic aches with all that filigree. Reminds me of the gingerbread on those little cottages and shotguns in uptown New Orleans. I must tell you about the house on Chestnut Street I just bought and am renovating. Have some pictures here in my purse. We must stop and get an espresso after we see the Church. There's a little piazza just across the canal from it. We can sit, and you can fill me in on your life while the girls go off for some gelato. Doesn't that sound special." Miss Magwith patted Bridgette's hand. "Sure it does. I want to hear all about you. Join us."

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“Here’s a good spot.” Miss Magwith pulled a chair out and signaled for Bridgette to sit next to her. “Girls, supposedly the best gelateria in Venice is just across the Square. Get yourselves some. I’m going to visit here with Bridgette, get a cappuccino. Sit and chat. Y’all just hang out too. I know you’re good at that but don’t run off with one of those handsome Italians. I’m checking on you even when you think I’m not. Two cappuccinos,” she said lifting two fingers at the waiter. “You hungry, Bridgette? We missed lunch. Spent too long in that Church but couldn’t miss that wedding. Wasn’t it gorgeous? And the choir and organ? Made me swell up with joy. Listening to all that and watching them take their vows, in Latin. Did you notice that? And all of it in front of that Titian over the altar. It doesn’t get better than that.”

“I am kind of hungry.” Bridgette shifted in her chair and watched Miss Magwith’s group of girls pulling tables together across the Square. All that squealing and laughing? She wondered if she could ever be that way again.

“Shall we splurge on one of these pastries or a sandwich or how about both? Look salami or prosciutto, toasted on that thin bread, with cheese and tomato, pressed or plain. Looks delicious. They make the best sandwiches here in Italy. Well, maybe not better than our po-boys.”

“I’ll have something, not much. I haven’t had much appetite lately.”

“Well, this is the place to get that appetite back. We’ll take two prosciutto and cheese. Yes, pressed. Thanks. And bring the two cappuccinos now.”

Bridgette looked around the Square. It was large with several outdoor cafes lining it. One corner had an open air market and Bridgette could see bins filled with fresh fruits and vegetables. A meat market opened onto the Square and ladies carrying rush baskets meandered from one stall to the next fingering the fruit and bartering with the shopkeepers. Several of the cafes were

filled with students, reading, or studying, or working together in groups. “Are they from the University we passed on our way here?” she asked Miss Magwith.

“Certainly are. Gives this place a nice atmosphere, doesn’t it. Far away from all those tourists with their guide books and cameras.”

Bridgette leaned back in her aluminum chair. Far more comfortable than it looked, she let the rounded arms embrace her. Letting out a huge sigh, she forced herself to relax and vowed no counting today. She sighed again.

“God, that was a sad sound. What’s going on with you, girl? That’s too miserable sounding for Venice.”

“Just making a resolution.”

“A good one, I hope. I’ve broken so many of those in my lifetime. Nowadays, when I resolve to do something, I picture what I want to accomplish and then picture what’s gonna get in my way. Something always does, you know. Whether it be the miseries, or the lazies, or even the do-goodies.” She chuckled. “Forgive my phrasing, but you know what I’m talking about. Soon as you decide to do something, your mind starts working overtime to stop it. Maybe, I won’t have time, or there’s that dinner party coming up, or it’s too cold, or it’s too hot.”

Bridgette smiled, a half-hearted grin. “So true. Then what’s the answer?”

“Well, you wouldn’t have to resolve to do something if it was easy. You know in advance that you’ll have trouble following through, else you’d just live it and let it happen naturally. It’d be like getting up and breathing.”

“Sometimes getting up doesn’t happen just natural either.”

“You got a point there, honey, that you do. Anyway, since I know I’ll have trouble with it, I picture it in my mind, sometimes even write it down, especially if it’s a hard resolution, what

will get in the way. Then I plan how to overcome what it is that's going to stop me. I don't think of the end point of my resolution, like I'm going to be twenty pounds thinner by my birthday. I imagine each day what will get in my way that day or even that hour and plan how to tackle that, like no cookies in the house or whatever. It's what the nuns at Ursuline used to tell us, plan your daily work and leave the outcome of your work to God."

"I remember Sister Joseph used to say that all the time. You remember her, don't you?"

"Sure do. She taught me French when I was a junior and a senior there. She never seemed like a nun though, always full of fun, laughing and joking, not serious or holy like you expect nuns to be. She really didn't look like the praying type to me. But, guess they need some worker bees in those convents, anyway. Not that she seemed serious enough for that either. Smart, though and loved to study and learn new things. Kind of like you that way. You were always so curious. Hated to see you drop out of college. How's that working out anyhow?"

"Fine." Bridgette grasped her cappuccino with both hands and stared down at the table.

"Fine? Well, that sure sounds like the berry cups to me. And you don't have to hang onto that cappuccino that tight. It ain't going nowhere."

Bridgette sipped her coffee and looked at Miss Magwith over the edge of the cup. Miss Magwith's soft gray eyes sparkled at her, and her lips turned upward in a sympathetic smile. Could she reveal her soul to this lady? A tiny voice inside said try, try, try. Anything but this darkness she lived with. "My baby died," Bridgette said with a rush and choked on a sip of coffee.

"My poor child. Mamere mentioned it when I spoke with her." Miss Magwith sat back in her chair. "Tell me." She waited, eyes sympathetic and face composed.

"I can't."

Miss Magwith picked up her coffee cup, seemed to think twice about taking a sip, and placed it back on the table untouched. She waited.

“She died and went to Limbo, you see, Limbo, not heaven.” Bridgette waited for Miss Magwith to speak.

Miss Magwith looked at her as though wondering what else Bridgette would say.

“That’s all.”

“No, my child. It doesn’t look like that’s all.” She waited.

“Stop looking at me.” Bridgette felt her neck and face getting red with shame, and she slumped forward onto the table. If only she could disappear.

“Miss Magwith,” one of the girls, the one with long dirty-blond curls, interrupted.

“We’re finished. Let’s go. Weren’t we supposed to see that church, the one with the huge painted ceiling?”

“Saint Pantaleon, you mean?”

Startled, Bridgette looked up.

“Sure, OK.” Miss Magwith hesitated. “Where’re you staying, Bridgette?”

“The Danieli,” Bridgette mumbled, the words stuck in her throat.

“We’re not far from there, at the Moderne, just across the canal by the Bridge of Sighs. Maybe, we could meet for lunch tomorrow at their roof top restaurant.” Her voice lacked its usual sprightliness. “Don’t know what I’d do with the girls though,” she said almost to herself.

“Ok,” Bridgette said, gulping down her coffee and getting up.

“Come. Walk with us. You have to go this way anyway to cross the Rialto.” Miss Magwith turned and waved to her group. “Come. Let’s move out,” she said with her usual exuberance.

Bridgette tagged after her and her girls. She felt forlorn. Had she lost another opportunity to clarify her thinking, her planned trip to Provence? Her confusion weighed on her.

“After Saint Pantaleon, we’ll have finished the important art sights on this side of the Grand Canal. Tomorrow, we’ll take in the Ducal Palace. I left that for our last day. It has such a magnificent collection of art. Every ceiling and wall space just covered with masterpieces. Come with us, Bridgette. Is that husband of yours working again tomorrow? We could see the Palace and then have lunch.”

“I don’t know. I had plans to go somewhere tomorrow, on my own.”

“Someplace important?”

“I guess.” Bridgette shook her head as though to disavow her answer.

“Was that a yes or a no? We’re coming,” Miss Magwith signaled to the blonde-headed girl who seemed to be the spokesman for the group. “Come on, Bridgette. We need to catch up with them. Come see this church. The ceiling is so interesting. It’s not a fresco, like everything you see in Italy, but several canvas paintings sewn together. A marvelous undertaking.”

Bridgette hesitated at the church door letting them go in ahead of her. Should she tell Miss Magwith she had just been here and share her reason for coming, that she wanted some guidance, some sense from God that she should precede with her mission? No, revealing herself was too embarrassing. Best to keep what she was doing to herself. Safer that way.

“Bridgette, come on in. We’ll just be a short time. You don’t want to miss one of my famous art history lectures, do you?” She held the door open.

“I’ve been here before,” Bridgette blurted out. “Right before I ran into you. There’s another Saint Panteleon church in Provence, near Gordes. I’m planning to go there tomorrow.”

“You’re what. Why? Provence is a great place to visit, lots of old Roman stuff, but there’s not much art in that part of France. Maybe, around St. Remy where Van Gogh got one of his rest cures and Cezanne in Aix-en-Provence; certainly, there’s great art in Paris and maybe further south, but Gordes is in the mountains, isn’t it?”

“I guess, but I wasn’t going to see art. I wanted to see the church.”

“Why? I can’t think of any famous art history there.”

“I have something I want to bring there. It’s about my baby. I want to pray for her there.”

Bridgette rubbed her eyes to hide the tears that welled up.

“But, God’s everywhere, honey. You can even pray here.”

“Come.” Bridgette took Miss Magwith’s hand and brought her into the side chapel. “See this painting. It’s Saint Panteleon bringing the boy back to life.”

“But, Bridgette. How long ago did your baby die?” Miss Magwith looked confused.

“She died around Thanksgiving last year. I didn’t have a chance to save her or even to baptize her. Don’t you understand? I would have if I could have. I can’t stand that she died so fast, before she even had a chance to really be alive.” Bridgette was sobbing now. “She never had a chance to grow up, or go to school, or be a teenager, or meet boys, or get married, or have babies and watch them grow up. Do you know how that feels? It feels awful. I want to cry all the time, but I hide it because people don’t want to see you cry or feel sad or anything. They expect you just to go on as though nothing happened, as though the most important thing in your life never even existed. I hate them. I hate everybody. But, most of all I hate myself because I didn’t do all the right things. If I had, it wouldn’t have happened like it did.” She gulped for air.

Miss Magwith reached out.

“Don’t touch me. I have to get out of here. I have to get away. I can’t stand this anymore. I have to make it stop. Let go of me.” Bridgette ran. Her footsteps echoed as she pushed open the door and dashed into the plaza.

*

The next morning Bridgette got off the elevator and was astonished to see Miss Magwith sitting in the lobby reading. She shook her head in disbelief. Miss Magwith here? Was this one of those deja vu moments considering what she had just told Edward before sneaking out the door?

“I left my girls eating breakfast at the hotel,” Miss Magwith said. “Thought I’d see what’s up with you today, and if you’re going to join us at the Ducal Palace. Realized I didn’t get your married name yesterday and didn’t want you to think I stood you up.”

Anxiety welled up in Bridgette’s chest. What if Edward came down now and confronted her and Miss Magwith. Panic threatened her, and she ignored Miss Magwith and hurried past her to the concierge’s desk. “Remember,” she said to the concierge, struggling to catch her breath and calm the pounding in her heart. “Yesterday evening, I arranged a water taxi to take me to the train station.”

“Yes, indeed I do.” The concierge smiled. “Do you want me to call for it now?”

Bridgette nodded. “Where do I catch it?”

“Do you have luggage?”

“No, my husband will be staying. I’m just taking a side trip.”

“What’s his name and room number, Madame, so I can charge it to you?”

Miss Magwith came up and stood beside Bridgette.

“Williams, Room 340,” Bridgette whispered trying to keep Miss Magwith from hearing.

“That’s Williams, Room 340,” the concierge repeated making a note on his pad.

Bridgette shuddered. “Where do I go to catch it?” Her heart thumped and fluttered.

Alarmed, she clutched her chest and pleaded with the concierge. “Where do I go?”

“I’ll show her,” Miss Magwith took her hand. “I’ve taken one from here before.”

The concierge looked relieved. “Right through those doors to the dock on the canal.”

“Yes, I know.” Miss Magwith ushered Bridgette to a seat alongside the dock. “Sit here a second. I’ll check to see if that boat there is for you.”

For the fourth time, Bridgette checked the large shoulder bag she carried to assure herself that the Kotex box with the christening dress was still there. Still not reassured by the feel of it sticking out the opening of the box, she took several deep breaths to calm her heart. Let it go, she admonished herself. Edward was still upstairs, and here Miss Magwith was helping with the taxi. Maybe her mission to save Celeste had God’s blessing.

“That’s not your taxi.” Miss Magwith pointed to the one at the dock. “Yours should be here in a moment.” She turned to face Bridgette. “Now, honey. You sure you know what you’re doing? Couldn’t you get that husband of yours to go with you? Seems like this is something the two of you should do together. Maybe, make a side trip to France around it.”

“No, I’m just fine. He’s so busy with work.” Bridgette did not want to tell Miss Magwith her real plan. She would pooh pooh her like everyone else in her life. By now, she was supposed to have gone on with her life.

“Couldn’t he even see you off this morning? I don’t like to pry, but this whole adventure of yours worries me.”

Bridgette frowned. Miss Magwith always came straight out with what she was thinking. She shook her head. Sometimes, it was annoying. The argument she just had with Edward this

morning was fresh in her mind. He was furious last night when she returned to the hotel. Angry that she had left him sitting in St. Mark's Square, "holding the bag with that ice cream of yours melting right into the bowl," was the way he put it. What had she expected him to do all afternoon by himself? After all this entire trip was for her. She recalled smiling to placate him and chatting about meeting Miss Magwith and the art they saw. The last thing she needed was for him to interfere with her trip to Gordes. That after all was her only reason for being here.

Needing him to relax, Bridgette suggested dinner in the hotel's roof-top restaurant. What started off as an icy dinner grew more relaxed, at least it seemed to her for Edward, as they ate grilled prawns and watched the lights come on over Venice and the Grand Canal. Bridgette even pretended to reciprocate his love making, playfully suggesting they make one of those boys to carry on the family business that he talked of earlier. Anything to fulfill her mission of releasing Celeste from Limbo.

Bridgette looked out on the Lagoon to see if a boat was coming. She did not need Miss Magwith's worries to add to her own anxiety. This morning she barely escaped Edward. Remembering it, her heart pounded, and she again felt as though she were suffocating.

"What do you mean you've made plans to spend the morning with Miss Magwith and her girls?" she recalled Edward saying. "We're going to the Ducal Palace today. I'm not sitting around here another minute while you go trailing off after some old maid art teacher. Enough is enough." Edward raised his voice. "No more running off. I came all this way to be with you, and that's the way it's going to be. Right?"

"Well, just breakfast then," Bridgette mumbled rubbing her thumb and forefinger together. "I'm supposed to meet her in the lobby." She looked at her watch. "In just a couple of

minutes. You shower and dress and meet me downstairs. I'll tell her I can't get away." She picked up her large purse and ran out the door.

"Wait a minute. Damn." The door slammed shut.

Bridgette looked again up the Grand Canal. No boat. "There's no need for you to wait here. I can manage this. I've been places by myself before." She took a deep breath. "I wish that boat would come. I don't want to miss my train." She looked at her watch.

"How long a trip is this?" The words rushed out. Miss Magwith took a breath. "Are you going to see some sights along the way? I'll bet there's a bunch of stuff between here and, what's that place you're going, somewhere in Provence, Gordes wasn't it? Another Saint Panteleon Church like the one we saw yesterday?"

"Yes, Gordes, an infant necropolis," Bridgette murmured. She hesitated, looked again for the boat and sat down. "Fourteen hours. That kind of made me nervous. I have to change trains in Lyon, and it'll be dark by the time I get to Gordes, but the people at the bed and breakfast are meeting me." She looked at Miss Magwith's kind eyes and face. "I guess it'll be easy to find the next train. I can still read French pretty much. You know my family spoke French in my house a lot when I was little, and Sister Joseph taught me a lot more in high school. I can even speak it a bit. Mamere and I talk sometimes just to keep in practice. She's a lot better than me."

"You see much of Sister Joseph?" Miss Magwith queried. "She and I still get together sometimes at the Convent to talk about upcoming exhibits there and go out to lunch." Miss Magwith hurried on seeming not to notice Bridgette's diffidence. "Seems like I remember she had some special connection with your family or was it with you?"

"It's mostly Mamere who's friends with her, and I guess she was extra nice to me in high school. Sort of a mentor. One of my ancestors was a nun there a long time ago. Seems like that

gave us a special connection. Oh, here's the boat." Bridgette jumped up and ran to the boat jumping on without waiting for the boatman to help her aboard. "Bye, Miss Magwith," she yelled back and waved. Miss Magwith hurried to the end of the dock and reached out as if she wanted to grab Bridgette. The boat roared off, and when Bridgette looked back, she saw Miss Magwith standing there looking straight out at the Lagoon.

CHAPTER NINE—DESTINATION

Bridgette asked her driver to return in an hour and turned toward the church. Although she had seen pictures of Saint Panteleon Church at Van's house, she was disappointed at how small it was. The church of miracles had loomed large in her mind with soaring spires and stained glass windows, but this tiny stone façade almost hidden by a crude, stacked-stone wall disheartened her. The richly robed Saint Panteleon painted by Tintoretto at the Church in Venice would never have picked this place to bring babies back to life. Dismayed, she picked her way through fallen stones and unkempt grass to an entryway in the wall. Stone slabs lined a dirt path which led through rotten, wooden doors down uneven steps to an iron door into the church. Several rectangular holes jumbled together in an indiscriminate pattern alongside the church caught her attention, and she walked over to them. They continued around the back, and she realized they were empty grave sites, small enough for baby coffins that had long ago been removed. Large, irregular, white mounds of stone with numerous, black, eroded pockets in them surrounded each hole leaving the impression that the earth had bubbled up around the coffins lifting them to the surface. There was no order to this graveyard, and all the graves were empty.

Bridgette walked around to the front and sat down on a slab nearest the door. She leaned over to look at a collection of objects placed on the slab next to her. They reminded her of the mementoes grief stricken family members left on the graves of loved ones in cemeteries in New Orleans. These, however, were aged beyond recognition except for the few rusted metal ones embossed with a cross.

Feeling defeated as well as exhausted, Bridgette let her hands fall into her lap and stared at one of the empty holes. The christening dress which she so carefully unwrapped this morning

at the inn lay untouched in her bag. At least the bed and breakfast place the concierge in London arranged for her was charming. Her room which had a pleasant balcony looking out over a pasture toward the Luberon Mountain Range was quiet and comfortable. It was only one of three rooms in an old farmhouse, a mas, the owners called it. A sweet elderly couple, they spoke passable English, and she practiced her French on them. They sympathized with the loss of Celeste and her desire to pray at the Church of the Saint Panteleon miracles but told her that most people came not to pray in the deconsecrated church but because of its history. They did, however, arrange a car and driver for her and explained to him he was to leave Bridgette there and return in an hour.

Bridgette dragged herself to her feet and shuffled toward the church door. Made of iron, the door looked heavy and had a large keyhole in the center surrounded by an iron ring. She pulled hard on the ring, but the door did not give an inch. Frantic that she had come this long way only to be foiled by a locked door, Bridgette summoned all her strength and pulled again. The door gave way with a burst, and she almost fell. Catching herself, she walked inside.

Instead of pews, the church was filled with more of the tiny rectangular graves. Although the inside was small, there seemed to be more empty burial sites in here than outside. Bridgette wished she had been compelled to count those out there. Then she could compare. Along the wall facing the back of the church were two niches. One contained a tiny table likely used as an altar, and the other niche held a marble baptismal font. Someone had placed a tiny standing crucifix on the altar along with a vase containing a bouquet of lavender flowers. Tiptoeing between the numerous holes in the floor, Bridgette walked to the altar and smelled them. These were fresh unlike the many rows of lavender she saw in the fields on her way here. Those were not yet in bloom. A stained glass window filled a narrow slit in the wall behind the altar and let

in a shaft of light, just enough for Bridgette to read the words scratched on the walls next to the altar, something about an exhumation of the tombs in the seventeenth and eighteenth century and reburial elsewhere.

Careful not to fall into one of the former graves, Bridgette inched over to the baptismal font. A heavy marble slab covered what once had been the bowl containing holy water. A wooden *prie dieu* stood next to it, and just like the lavender flowers, it looked new. Even though the church was not consecrated, someone in the village obviously took care of it, perhaps even came to pray like Bridgette for her deceased child. Encouraged, Bridgette took the gown from her purse. Having left the Kotex box at the inn, she felt the dress through the tissue paper. With reverent care, she unfolded it. There was no place to sit so she knelt down on the kneeler and draped the dress across the marble surface of the baptismal font. No prayers came. She pulled the vial of holy water from her purse and sprinkled it on the dress.

Bridgette struggled to recall the baptism prayers she had learned in high school. Her mind filled with jumbled words and images, Celeste reaching out to be picked up, Mamere fumbling to find the christening dress, Edward walking in the door whistling, nothing she could latch onto. Then the mean criticisms came to mind: baptize her right away, you're as bad a mother as your mother, stop the crying, get on with life, have another baby. She shuddered and covered her ears with both hands.

The church door grated open. Startled, Bridgette dropped the bottle of holy water and watched in horror as it rolled into one of the graves. Perspiring even in the mid-spring chill, she shuddered and looked around. The church was so tiny she could easily see the details of a woman's face and figure outlined in the morning glare. Olive skin, short bobbed black hair, and somewhat protruding teeth from an overbite gave her a mouse like appearance. The dark cape

wrapped around her shoulders reminded Bridgette of the one worn by Mouse King in *The Nutcracker* ballet and emphasized her uncanny appearance.

“Hello, anyone there?” the woman announced as she flounced into the church.

Bridgette watched as the woman blinked her eyes several times in the gloomy interior.

“Here,” Bridgette squeaked. “I dropped the bottle.”

The woman flung her cape off, folded it, and hung it over her arm. She walked toward Bridgette. “Hi, I’m Sandra,” she said draping her cape over the kneeler. “And you’re?”

“Bridgette. My bottle.” She pointed toward the hole nearest her.

“Huh? Right. Not much place to sit in here unless you drape your legs over one of the holes. Kind of creepy though, so after the first time I was here, I brought that kneeler. Been coming every day for the past ten days or so, praying and bringing some lavender for the altar. This place was deconsecrated ages ago, so it’s more of a tourist attraction these days than a place for someone like me to pray.”

“Oh.” Bridgette did not know how to respond to this lady. She spoke perfect English so must be an American, but Bridgette could not figure out why she was here. Maybe a tourist but why come every day to pray. Bridgette slumped back on her knees.

“Are you staying in Gordes? I didn’t see a car and thought the church was empty. Then the unlatched door confused me.” She pointed toward the dress. “That’s a beautiful dress. Did you put it on the baptismal font like that? Looks like an old-fashioned christening dress. An antique, I bet. Is it fragile? You don’t want to get it torn on that rough slab.”

Bridgette shook her head, reached up for the dress, took it and folded it carefully. “It belonged to my baby who died.” Now, why did she say that? She seemed to be telling everyone these days.

“This is a church for dead babies,” Sandra said as though instructing a class. “An infant necropolis, the natives call it. Kind of sad, don’t you think?”

Bridgette nodded and hugged the dress to her chest. “I lost the bottle.”

“My child died too, a little girl. She wasn’t a baby. She was eight. Had cancer, leukemia. You know cancer of the blood.”

Bridgette stared. Sandra said it so matter-of-factly. Bridgette did not think she could ever be that way. “How long ago?”

“Three years ago this summer. She wasn’t sick very long. There’s not much they can do for cancer, you know. Gave her some experimental drug, but it didn’t work, just made her sick. Don’t know if we should have tried it, but I was so desperate for her to live. My husband was against the chemotherapy, and we fought about it. Finally, a couple of years after she died, we ended in divorce. Never could reconcile to what happened. They say that happens. Couples blame each other.”

Bridgette wondered at Sandra’s methodical way of speaking. It seemed too measured to her but did catch her attention. Maybe this was a warning to her, especially when she thought about the trouble she and Edward were having. “Why do you come here if your daughter wasn’t a baby? This is a church for babies.” The sight of Celeste pleading with her from Limbo forced its way into her mind. She sighed. “And especially for babies who die without baptism.”

“Right,” Sandra said in her controlled cadence. “Never did baptize Elizabeth. Gave up on the Catholic Church in college. One of the things Steven and I fought about, especially when she was dying. Steven wanted the Last Rites, but I refused. Didn’t want to be a hypocrite. Nothing to be done about it now, so I come here. Find it helps. Feel some companionship with other mothers

who lost their children. Know what I mean? People say they understand how I feel, but they can't really, not unless it happened to them."

Bridgette felt a catch in her throat and chest as though a light went off inside her. She said all the time no one understood her not even Edward. Mamere often made feeble efforts to sympathize with her loss, but Bridgette minimized Mamere's words. Baby Robert's death happened so long ago that for Bridgette it was meaningless. "I feel that way too."

Sandra smiled. "Figured as much when I saw you kneeling there with that dress. How'd you find this place? It's really out of the way."

"Somebody from my church in New Orleans." Bridgette hesitated and hugged the dress tighter. "It's a long story."

"New Orleans, huh? I've never been there. I'm from Louisville. Found my way here kind of the roundabout way. I gave up trying to deal with all this on my own, so I went on a retreat to this Trappist Monastery outside of Louisville, the Gethsemane Abbey. It was given by one of their monks, Father Merton. He wrote a book called *The Seven Story Mountain*. Kind of famous. He suggested it at the retreat, and I tried to read it, but it wasn't my type of book. I'm not much of a reader." She wrinkled her forehead and shut her eyes.

Bridgette started to say something, but before she could Sandra took a deep breath and continued.

"Turned out that what he said during the retreat was important to me." She emphasized important. "He told us about his life before he became a Catholic. He was old, in his thirties, I think, and had led a very wild life, traveling everywhere, partying; you know that sort of stuff. He talked of being on a road to find his inner self and finding it in the monastery. He was so kind

and spiritual that I told him how I felt lost and about Elizabeth and Steven. I felt so guilty about Elizabeth.”

“I feel guilty too. Like my baby is in limbo because of me.”

“He suggested I come on a retreat,” Sandra went on as though Bridgette had not said anything. “Here in Gordes at the Senanque Abbey, another Cistercian monastery. He’d visited it. He’s French, you know. Well, it’s right up the road from here. They’re the ones who take care of this church and even have some of the babies from here buried there. Moved them a couple of centuries ago. You see the lavender on the altar. That’s from their fields. Their fields are famous everywhere, and in the summer people come from all around just to see and smell the flowers.”

Bridgette slumped farther down on the kneeler. This was too much information to assimilate, and Bridgette wondered if Sandra even knew she was there. She put the dress on top of the kneeler. The disorder of the holes in the church floor distracted her, so many of them and all randomly placed. Which one held the bottle? There was no sense of order, only chaos. Bridgette’s stomach clenched, and she wrapped her arms around herself. The compulsion to line the empty graves up in order one after the other overwhelmed her. Doomed to look at the black empty holes, she scrunched her eyes shut to blot out the sight.

“What’s the matter?” Sandra walked over. “You look like you’re going to throw up. Let’s get out of here into the sunshine. It’ll make you feel better. You’re right. It is pretty dreary and chill in here. Never noticed it so much before.” She picked up the dress and pulled Bridgette off the kneeler. “Come on. Who’s coming for you? Why not come back to the monastery’s retreat center with me, and we’ll get you a cup of tea.”

Bridgette allowed herself to be led to the car and did not open her eyes until they were well on their way further up the valley to the abbey. She gave no thought to the car coming for her.

*

Bridgette rested her head against the back of the passenger seat. She looked over at Sandra who was humming a tune that Bridgette did not recognize. The return from the Senanque Abbey was even more peaceful than the one up had been. Bridgette had started the ride up with her eyes shut and her hands clenched, but as they got closer to their destination, Sandra reached over and nudged Bridgette. She opened her eyes to view the entire town of Gordes sitting atop a mountain. Its terraced streets and alleyways circled upward like tiers of a wedding cake to a flat topped plaza with church spires rising above it. After passing Gordes, they drove deeper into the valley between two mountain ranges. A fog descended cutting off tree tops and mountain peaks. Its mystical greyness, fluffy rather than enveloping, soothed Bridgette, and she opened herself up to this experience.

Around a curve in the road, at the very end of the valley, Bridgette saw the abbey in the distance. Rows of bushes, probably the lavender Sandra had mentioned, marched in silent procession toward the long sidewall of a great church. Built of stone, its rough exterior spoke of its nine-hundred-year old history. A church steeple and belfry tower penetrated the fog defining the abbey's stalwart presence over time.

Sandra had driven around to the other side of the church to a small building built with the same-layered flat stones as Saint Panteleon Church. Once part of the chancery, it had been converted into a retreat house. Two bicycles leaned against the wall near the entrance. To Bridgette, the bicycles gave the stone mas a homey feel unlike Saint Panteleon Church that left

her bereft and sad. Sandra showed Bridgette her room, an austere chamber with a single bed, desk, and chair that looked over a small courtyard to the back wall of the abbey church. Bridgette wondered if the lack of stimulation would give her peace or drive her mad. Not much to count and everything was already ordered.

Taunting, ugly thoughts pushed into her mind, and Bridgette to rid herself of the images urged Sandra to show her the church and grounds. Bridgette pretended interest when they walked through the church and the cloister. Sandra pointed out the pointed barrel vault and the carved capitals on the rounded pillars supporting the arches in the cloister. Sandra seemed relaxed and less dogmatic here, and Bridgette wondered about the change in her attitude. It could not be the silence because that disturbed Bridgette more than anything.

On Bridgette's way out of the abbey, she and Sandra came across a small graveyard hidden in a muddy niche between the church and the chancery building. Several tiny, iron crosses marked spots in the ground. Too close together to mark adult graves, Bridgette realized this must be the burial place of those babies from the infant necropolis. "Is this where the babies are?" she asked Sandra.

"Yep," Sandra said in her matter-of-fact manner.

"How many are here, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven." Bridgette counted on her fingers. "How'd they decide which ones to take?" She stopped Sandra from moving on.

"Don't know. Can't say anybody knows." Sandra ran her fingers through her bobbed hair. "My retreat master just showed me this when I asked and didn't say more. Can't say I wanted to know or even cared. I'm much more into getting past all this stuff rather than delving into it."

"Then why'd you come back to Saint Panteleon today?"

“I’m on my way out of here. It was a symbolic visit to close the door on Elizabeth’s death, a way to say good-bye.”

“What about not baptizing her? Don’t you feel bad about that?”

“I’m teaching myself not to. Father Merton told me some about his conversion and his life before that. Sort of like me, and he found a way. I’m studying to be a lay retreat master.” She took her eyes from the road and looked directly at Bridgette. She seemed to want confirmation that this was all right. “He talked about his being and not doing, about becoming a ‘human being’ and not remaining a ‘human doing’. Was confusing at first but now I’m getting the hang of it and going to that infant necropolis today was my giving up doing something to make me feel better. Now I can start to be someone, someone who helps others. You see?”

Bridgette did not see. Unlike Sandra, her reason for being here was unrealized. She had not accomplished what she came for. The trip to the church, the laying down of the dress with its attached hair, the sprinkling of holy water, those things she had done, but like an idiot she could not remember the simple Baptism prayers. Nor had she buried the dress. The burial holes in the rocky ground had confused her. There were too many and in such disorder. Which one should she use, and how could she cover it up when there was no soil? Then to make it worse, the bottle rolled into one of the graves. She should have just thrown the dress and the curl into that one, but Sandra interrupted her before she could figure which one it was. Instead of being in that hole, the christening dress now sat between her and Sandra on the seat. It seemed to taunt her. Your plan didn’t work, she thought. You’re an idiot she silently taunted herself. You’re too stupid to make it happen, so you and Celeste are doomed.

Sandra stopped the car in front of Saint Pantaleon Church. “Looks like your driver is waiting,” she said. “Bye and take care.”

Bridgette slid out of the car.

“Here. You’re forgetting your dress.” Sandra pushed it toward her.

Bridgette grabbed it and watched Sandra drive away. Desolation. She slipped to the ground and hugged herself. The dress hung limp in her hand and dragged on the rocky soil. Tears flowed down her cheeks, and her breath came in gasping sobs.

“Bridgette, love.” Edward choked on the words. The car door slammed shut, and his footsteps crunched. “I’ve been frantic.” He reached down for her.

Bridgette shuddered and continued to weep. “My baby died. Celeste died. I can’t bear it.” The words tumbled from deep inside her being. She scooted around in the dust and clasped Edward’s knees. “She died. Don’t you see? She was my life, and she died.”

Edward tried to disentangle her arms from his legs, but she resisted and clung to him. “Bridgette, let go. Let me hold you.” He caressed her curls. “It’s all right to cry. You hardly shed a tear since Celeste died. Just let it out. I’ve been frantic with worry these past couple of days. If Miss Magwith hadn’t reached me, I’d have gone out of my mind. Come, let go of my legs. Let’s sit in the car and sort this out.” He reached down for her hands, grasped them, and pulled Bridgette to her feet.

Still sobbing, Bridgette let the dress and hair slip from her fingers into the dirt and followed him to the car. When he helped her into the passenger seat, she huddled against the backrest and covered her face with her hands.

CHAPTER TEN—THE MAS

During the night, dreams of babies crawling out of graves in shredded dresses awakened her, and Bridgette drifted downstairs into the courtyard encircling the inn. Eerie landscape lights played along stonewalls surrounding the patio creating ghostly shadows. A rectangular reflecting pool glistened in the moonlight, and grasping her comforter about her she sat at its edge and let her bare feet dangle in the water. Cold. Brrr. Kick one foot, then the other. Watch as ripples flow outward from each foot toward the water plants grouped in the center. Measure each stroke so that the ripples reach the water plants in the center in order: one, two, three, four. Discomforted, grow weary. Wander to the divan on the covered terrace and wait, for what she did not know. Whether hours or minutes passed, she did not notice.

Bridgette curled her legs up under her and burrowed into the plush white cushions backing the divan. Soon, the pink glow of sunrise in the distance suffused the sky over the flat-topped Luberon mountain range. She shivered and wrapped the coverlet from her room around her. Her fingers picked at the loose fringe, and she stared ahead without seeing the measured rows of grape vines that filled the field between her and the farm's outbuildings. Instead she visualized the christening dress lying in the churchyard with centuries old dust blowing over it erasing its very existence. Locked inside it lay Celeste's hair, the last remnant of her baby's existence on earth.

Tears rolled down her cheeks, and she wondered if her eyes ever again would be dry. Leave the dress there. No, go get it. Leave the dress but go retrieve Celeste's hair. Get up and get in the car and save the only piece of her baby that was left. So what if Mamere was furious, heartbroken? What about Bridgette's last earthly connection to Celeste? Her heart pounded. No

one in her family forgave her, but now she wondered if she would ever forgive herself? Not only had she abandoned Celeste to limbo, but she had also discarded the one real thing that linked them together. Not only did Celeste and God condemn her but so also did Edward, Mamere, and Jacqueline. Their disembodied, critical faces stared at her. Mother alone, forever censured by the family, stood aside and smiled, either a knowing smile of acceptance or a sarcastic gaze of good riddance.

Although a gloomy haze blocked the sun from view, the shadows on the terrace disappeared. The sound of someone setting tables inside the adjoining breakfast room startled Bridgette, and she worried what the day would bring. Edward had been kind last night, putting her to bed as though she were a child. She pulled the throw around her even tighter when a chill wind rustled the new spring leaves budding out on the olive trees in the orchard. A cluster of purple iris swayed to and fro, and a kitchen maid hurried out to light the stone fireplace in the wall next to Bridgette.

“Bonjour, Madame. Café?” she managed to ask before she bustled back inside.

Bridgette watched the flames take hold and shivered. Wisteria blossoms hung heavy from the arbor leading to the vineyard, and Bridgette saw a young couple stop under the purple flowers and kiss, not passionately but tenderly. If only she and Edward were that way, starting over, without any children. Perhaps, she would decide to stay in college, get her art history degree, teach like Miss Magwith or work in the New Orleans Museum of Art, anything but this devastating need to be a mother.

“Good morning, Madame. Have you seen my wife, Mrs. Williams?”

Bridgette turned and looked through the breakfast room door. It was so like Edward not even to try to speak French, even a few words of greeting. She winced. Must everything be done his way? She doubted he would have allowed her to stay in college. He was so set in his ways.

“Michelle said Madame was on the veranda, Monsieur Williams.”

“Thank you.”

“Take this café to her, s’il vous plait.”

Bridgette burrowed deep into the corner of the divan. Maybe Edward would not see her. She watched as he came out onto the porch and looked toward the tables usually set for breakfast but gone unattended because of the morning chill. He stopped and looked outward toward the vineyard and olive grove. She heard him mutter something and turn to go back into the house.

“Oh, there you are,” he said and smiled. “I’ve brought your coffee.” He sat down and handed her the cup. “It’s a café au lait. Hope that’s what you wanted.”

Bridgette took it and sipped. The coffee was nice and hot, just as she liked it. Claspings the cup with both hands, she let the warmth flow into her. It felt good after such an upsetting night. She shifted her body toward him. “I was waiting,” she said.

“Waiting?”

Bridgette sat there and stared, first at Edward and then out at the mountain range. “Yes, waiting,” she murmured and took another sip of coffee. It tasted good, and she only wanted to sit there and sip the soothing liquid. Nothing more. Time seemed to be standing still. There was nowhere to go and nothing of importance to do. The baby was gone, the dress was gone, Celeste’s hair was gone, and the life she planned was gone. Here she sat in the land of her ancestors listening to the lyrical, rhythmic French words of her childhood. The newly wed couple

laughed and talked over their breakfast; the owners spoke to each other and Michelle. Mamere and Mother had chatted this way in French long ago before their words to each other grew ugly. Bridgette listened now as she had as a child trying to make sense of the conversation. Just as then a few words made sense, but mostly what she heard was the tone, friendly, busy, demanding, or demeaning, each one setting a mood for the day. The sound today comforted her. It soothed her. Perhaps, waiting, listening for tones was best.

“We need to talk.” Edward reached for her hand.

Bridgette ignored his offering and continued to nestle the coffee cup in her hands.

“No, I mean that,” he said.

Bridgette closed her eyes, took another sip of the warm liquid and listened to the sound of Edward’s voice. So far, not demeaning, mostly inquisitive.

“I want to know what I can do. I think we’ve been at odds since Celeste died. Somehow we’ve lost touch. That bothers me.”

Bridgette opened her eyes. The morning haze lightened and the sun showed promise of breaking through. Maybe, they were in for a clear, crisp, day after all when the sky blazed a brilliant Provence blue. Only thing lacking was sunflowers, and she imagined they bloomed later in the summer heat.

“What’re you thinking?” Edward asked.

“Thinking?” she mused. “About flowers,” she said sticking to the safe, immediate thought. Bridgette looked at Edward and wondered who was this man she married. He was tall and gangly, his legs hanging loose on his body. She thought him not bad looking but also not particularly handsome. His nose was too long for his face and in that way matched his legs. It was aquiline; some might say patrician. When in a group of colleagues, he was reticent perhaps

even shy, but if approached always spoke with so much authority that he commanded his audience. Bridgette admired that about him but also felt intimidated by it. She watched as he pursed his lips, a habitual action she had noticed before when he was uncertain how to proceed. He turned to face her and with furrowed brow took a sip of coffee.

“Bridgette, what do you want to do now? We have several options. We can stay here for a few days and see something of Provence. This is a lovely inn you’ve found, most comfortable and centrally enough located so that we could go to Arles and Avignon, even take a long day trip to Aix en Provence. There are some lovely markets in the area. I’ve checked with our hosts and there’s a large one in St. Remy as well as the asylum there where Van Gogh was hospitalized. I know how much you love art so we could go there. L’Isle-sur-la-Sorgue is near here too and has several large antique markets. If you like, we could shop there and perhaps pick up an antique table for our breakfast nook.

Bridgette listened; his voice seemed formal, distant, like that of a lecturer. It was unlike his usual confident tone. She wondered if he was anxious, uncertain what to do or say. Perhaps, worried.

“Or we could return to Venice. We have to anyway to pick up our things, although I asked the concierge to hold them for a few days, that I might have him forward them either to us here or to New Orleans.”

Bridgette listened, his voice still measured but soft, not angry or alarming.

“Or we could pack up and go home tomorrow. I’ve checked the flights and there’s one we could take from Marseilles, about a half-day drive from here. I’d suggest we check out today and go on to Marseilles tonight if that’s the choice.”

Bridgette winced. Going home was not on her list. She preferred waiting. Home spelled Mamere, the dress, as well as a nothing-to-do life. Worst of all, the last remnant of Celeste was here, waiting too, waiting for her mother to care enough about her to salvage the curl. It did not look as if Bridgette was going to be able to release Celeste from limbo, but Bridgette should be able to bring her baby's lock of her hair home to frame and hang in a special place. Waiting was definitely the thing to do, wait until certain how to return to the dusty parking lot of that Church. Best to remain at the Mas with the French sounds and the sunshine. It might take a long time to decide what to do. Perhaps after the sunflowers and the lavender bloom. She nodded her head up and down. Yes, of course, wait for the flowers. Time would pass and the answer become clear.

Bridgette got up and let the coverlet drape across the divan. She wandered to the other side of the terrace and fingered the dried lavender stacked in a blue wooden cart. How pretty, she thought and wondered if it came from the fields surrounding the abbey. The visit there with Sandra yesterday moved her in a strange way. Here was a woman who lost a child and became reconciled to the loss, even allowed a vocation to grow out of it. She marveled that something like that could happen. "I met someone yesterday whose child died. She seemed all right with it. Do you think that might happen for me?" She looked back at Edward and waited. Her mind drifted toward Sandra and her daughter. So sad.

"I don't see why not." He patted the seat next to him, his voice uncertain, his brow furrowed "Come sit here, and you can tell me about it." He smiled as though to encourage her.

"I don't know what to say. It's just a thought. What happened to her was sad too, but she seemed OK now." She walked to the edge of the patio and looked toward the mountains.

"The Church is that way, you know. I left something there I might ought to go get." She paused

for several seconds. Should she tell him about the dress and Celeste's hair? No. Best keep that a secret. He would not understand why she brought that here. "Yes, some holy water in a bottle."

"Holy water?" Edward sounded puzzled. "I'm sure that's all right. It'll be fine there. Holy water belongs in a church." His voice became more assured. "I don't think it's a good idea to go back there. I saw all those empty graves while looking for you. It's too sad of a place for you now."

Bridgette meandered into the garden and stopped. It was impossible to get the dress and hair without Edward's help. She could sneak off in his rental car, but she did not have a driver's license. She could ask the owners of the mas to order a car and driver for her like they did yesterday. But how to avoid Edward's knowing? She doubted he would take his eyes off her now. "I left some other stuff there, things I maybe should get, but I don't really want to go back to that church. It upset me. It was very sad and desolate, like you said." She wanted him to tell her what to do. She felt lost, and he sounded soft, measured, assured now in his usual way.

"Of course, don't go back to that church. You've done much too much as it is. Leave everything there. None of it is as important as your getting better. Come, let's go inside and get some breakfast." He smiled and walked toward her. "We can decide later what to do."

Dazed, Bridgette let Edward lead her inside to a table. She sat down, silent, still, not moving and waited.

"Coffee with warm milk for two," he said. "Anything else, Bridgette?"

Bridgette got up and looked out the patio doors in the direction of the church. "There is something there I need." She pointed toward the mountains. "But, I can't get it. Isn't that sad?"

"What, honey? Sad? I guess so. You can get more holy water at home." Edward looked straight at her. "You're acting kind of strange, you know. Come sit here. I'll get you a croissant

and poached egg.” He got up, took her hand, and directed her back to the table. “Just sit here. Look, another café au lait. You enjoyed the first one. I’ll get you something from the buffet.”

Bridgette clasped the coffee cup and stared outside. Again its warmth soothed her. She decided it was best to wait and listen. There was no need to act today.

*

Bridgette awakened early but lay in bed watching the ceiling fan slowly rotate. She counted the number of blades and tried to order their rotation into patterns of four. The slow, repetitive motion hypnotized her into a bewildered apathy. “What’s happening today?” she queried in a faint voice when Edward awoke. Her mind and limbs felt lethargic, and she lay there motionless. Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, she recalled her decision to wait until the flowers bloomed to do something, but what that was she could not recall.

“Yesterday,” Edward said. “You said you weren’t ready to go home, so I thought today we’d go to the antique market in L’Isle-sur-la-Sorgue.”

“Why? Are you sure?” Bridgette turned over and slid from the bed. The floor was cold, and she shivered. “Antiques? Really?” She grabbed the coverlet and wrapped herself in it. “Did we say that?”

“Well, you really didn’t say much at all yesterday, just mumbled several times about waiting for the flowers. Sat around. I thought it all right for you to rest after your overnight journey here. To tell the truth, I was exhausted myself, though mostly from worry.”

Edward jumped out of bed and reached out to give Bridgette a hug.

“Let’s get going then,” Bridgette pulled away from him. The thought of having another child panicked her. What if the next one died too? The thought of motherhood, once so precious to her, was anathema now.

*

Bridgette ambled across the bridge leading into the heart of L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue. It was a quaint town surrounded by canals, and large, symmetrical plane trees lined its streets and reflected in the canals' blue waters.

Edward, walking ahead of her at an impatient pace, gestured her to come alongside him. "Here's the antique shop the hotel mentioned. Come along. Let's see if there's something in there I can get you, something to make you smile. You've been so sad and quiet lately." He pushed the door open and was met with a tinkling bell sound.

"Bonjour," the shop owner said giving Edward a studied look. "Can I show you something?" the shop owner said switching to English with a charming French accent.

"You speak English?" Edward said. "That's good. I'd like something for my wife." He held the door open for Bridgette.

"We have some lovely jewelry, some rather old, delicate pieces. This way, Madame."

"Bonjour, Monsieur," Bridgette frowned. Why did Edward have to say that about speaking English? It was so embarrassing. Of course, the owner could tell we were Americans from the way Edward dressed. Of course he spoke English. "I wasn't looking for anything special." Bridgette glanced in the cases. There were several antique pieces made of filigreed silver with different sizes and types of stones. Sitting at the back of the nearest case, Bridgette noticed a large cameo set in a gold locket. She gasped. "This reminds me of the tiny, silver, cameo I gave Celeste when she was born. You remember, don't you, Edward? It belonged to one of my great aunts."

"I suppose so," Edward said.

“Don’t you remember anything about our baby?” Bridgette sighed. “None of this interests me, and besides I’m tired.” Bridgette walked out, crossed the street and looked into the canal water. Celeste’s face seemed to appear in the ripples. *You shouldn’t have left me there in that churchyard. That was mean and hateful. Did you forget about me so soon?* Bridgette covered her face with her hands to block out the frightening sight. The critical voice seemed to continue. *The least you could do is go back there and get that part of me or is it too leftover for you. You’re just spoiled and selfish. I hate you.* Bridgette sobbed and sat down in the grass.

“What’s the matter now?” Edward said reaching down to pull Bridgette to her feet.

“We’ve got to go, got to get away from her.” Bridgette looked down in the water and shook her head to clear the image from her mind. “I have to ride back by that church. I need to see it again before we go home. It’s very, very important. Can we go now?” Bridgette jumped to her feet and ran back over the bridge. She stopped every few steps and looked over the rail into the water as though something followed her.

“Bridgette, stop. Wait,” Edward called out to her with no success. He arrived to find her sitting in the car, tears running down her face, sobbing.

“There’s no escape,” she said in a horrified, trembling tone. “Go by Saint Pantaleon Church and slow down but don’t stop. You mustn’t stop.” What if the dress was gone? She could not tolerate seeing that, but she still had to know. There was no peace without knowing. “Then we go home.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN—ART

Bridgette and Edward returned to New Orleans the next day. Even though Edward was kind and thoughtful that last night, Bridgette continued to tremble. She awoke several times crying over what she said were horrible nightmares. She had no interest in remaining longer in Provence. The locket she saw in L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue haunted her, but not as much as finding the dress no longer in the churchyard. After leaving the town, they drove past the Church and Bridgette insisted Edward slow down and even drive through the lot. There was no evidence the dress or piece of hair were ever there. Both were gone. That night, Bridgette dreamed not of Celeste accusing her from Limbo, but instead of Mamere rocking back and forth on Bridgette's porch swing. Stretched over Mamere's lap was the tattered christening dress. In one hand, Mamere held the open, empty locket, its treasured memento lost. The other hand pointed at Bridgette in the same accusatory manner as Celeste once had. She began to frantically rub her fingers together and count everything in sight.

There were other worries. Other than the last night in Europe when Edward was so distressed over Bridgette's fears, Bridgette worried over Edward frequent sexual advances.

"Let's have another baby," he said. "Something to console us both."

Bridgette could no longer respond and pleaded headaches, sadness, and even pretended to have her period. The risk of having another child hovered over her, and she felt far too vulnerable to contemplate it. Home offered the best chance to distance herself from him so she insisted they return.

On the plane home, Bridgette was silent. Images of Mamere and Celeste scowling with disapproval over loss of the precious christening dress and lock of hair plagued her the entire

flight. The sadness she suffered over leaving the last treasured piece of Celeste behind somewhere in France at times overwhelmed her. At the airport, Mamere was all smiles and rushed to give her a hug. Wanting to hide her sadness and fear, Bridgette pushed ahead and dashed for the car.

“Wait up, honey,” Mamere called after her. “I want to hear about your trip. Edward didn’t want to talk about it when I called. Did it work out like we hoped?”

Yeah, sure, she thought, the whole thing worked out perfectly. Your precious dress disappeared and so did Celeste’s hair. “Yeah, Mamere, it worked out, perfectly,” she yelled back to Mamere and ran on. The Limbo thing is still broken and there are more worries, like about you finding out about the dress. Was it possible that Mamere never noticed the dress was gone and would not until another baby came along to christen? Bridgette knew that baby was not coming from her. She, at least, had decided that while in Provence. She wondered how difficult it would be to avoid Mamere for a while. The Opera Ball was only a few weeks away, and Mamere was frantic over the arrangements. Bridgette knew she could hide out from her, but hiding from Edward was more difficult. She knew a way to deal with it without avoiding him, but it was sinful. Just get some of the new birth control pills and don’t tell Edward about them. Keep him safe from sin by her silence, but also let him wonder why she who had once been so fertile didn’t get pregnant now.

*

Bridgette stopped her new two-door Chevrolet Impala in front of Miss Magwith’s house. When she got back to New Orleans six weeks ago, she had gone along with the charade and told Jacqueline the trip was helpful to her, and she needed to learn to drive. Jacqueline was skeptical, but Bridgette insisted and explained how easily she got around Europe on her own. She figured if

she could arrange to go from Venice to Provence, she could drive a car. Her sister suggested a reputable driving school and told Bridgette to insist Edward buy her a small, steady car with automatic transmission.

Although compelled to count every new street she turned on, she almost enjoyed her sense of freedom. This trip from her house on Bayou St. John to Miss Magwith's uptown home required one, two, three, four, then five different streets to get there. Her hands trembled and her stomach burned, but she made it. It had been easy to avoid seeing Mamere but apparently the busybodies in her life were still working behind her back. Miss Magwith had talked to Sister Joseph who talked to Mamere, and the three meddlers arranged the lunch. Miss Magwith called yesterday to invite her over. Although annoyed by these interfering tete a tetes, she had wanted to ask Miss Magwith something anyway and this made it easier to look like it wasn't coming from her.

Bridgette sat in the car for several minutes. Miss Magwith's front porch was inviting with its white wicker furniture, tall thin columns, green shutters, and floor to ceiling windows opening onto the porch. A brick walkway surrounded the house inside of a wrought iron fence, and brick stairs led to the porch. The car's open windows allowed the sweet smell of the Confederate jasmine that enveloped the fence to permeate the front seat, and Bridgette breathed in deeply. She loved the heady aroma of spring in New Orleans. She relaxed and after counting the number of gingerbread curlicues along the top of the porch and imagining her hand sliding along the inside of them like riding the zephyr at Pontchartrain Beach, Bridgette exited the car.

"Hi, Bridgette. Thought that was you sitting there. Come on in."

"Hi."

“Been expecting you.” Miss Magwith came down the steps, opened the front gate, and grabbed Bridgette’s hand. “Come on in. Don’t dally so.”

Bridgette grinned. Miss Magwith still had that effect on her. She let herself be dragged into the house where she stopped and looked around with mouth open. Of course, the house had to match the owner’s personality. Bright colored walls were covered floor to ceiling with artwork, pictures, portraits, wooden artifacts, and bronze wall hangings. It was so busy that Bridgette cringed and blinked her eyes. It seemed to lack cohesion. However, Bridgette knew Miss Magwith, at least the one who taught her, had very definitive ideas about arranging art. So there had to be a pattern here, even if one only meaningful to her. Bridgette pushed her way out of the living room into the kitchen that was far less muddled.

The kitchen was bright with an antique pine table in the middle of the room set for two with luncheon size Fiesta Ware plates, one pink and one green. Different colored place mats and napkins complimented the dishes and gave a festive air to the table.

“Sit there, Bridgette, and I’ll get lunch.”

Comfortably seated in a Windsor style sidechair, Bridgette admired the room. The floor made of wide pine planks looked old, and she wondered at the age of the house. Painted white walls and glass fronted white cabinets lightened the room as did the French doors leading to an outdoor patio filled with greenery and potted plants. More colorful Fiesta Ware dishes and goblets adorned the cabinets.

“Hope you like chicken salad,” Miss Magwith said offering the serving dish to Bridgette before sitting down. “Take some.”

“I do. One of my favorites.” Bridgette served herself and handed the bowl to Miss Magwith. “I love that vase.” Bridgette pointed to the one on the table holding a bouquet of azaleas.

“From my garden out back. They needed a little pruning this year so I brought them inside.”

“Right. The flowers are pretty, but I meant the vase. It’s such a pretty green.”

“Oh, that. I’ve had it a while, from when I was at Newcomb in the thirties and forties. That one is Litchen Ware. See, I have others in that corner cupboard.”

Bridgette finished her lunch and walked over and looked at the vases. “These are beautiful, especially this one with the moon.” Bridgette pointed to a blue vase.

“Bring it here and the other blue one with the flowers. Those are irises. Let me clear the lunch dishes, and I’ll tell you about the vases if you like.”

“Sure. Why not?” Bridgette welcomed the distraction. She was uncertain whether she wanted to broach her reason for accepting the luncheon invitation or not.

“Anyway,” Miss Magwith said. “It can lead into what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Oh?” Bridgette was pleased this meeting was not going to be some simple hello, how are you get- together like Mamere implied but was meaningful, at least to the old women in her life. When Mamere suggested it a couple of weeks ago, she had been very close-mouthed, simply saying that Miss Magwith enjoyed seeing her in Venice and thought they should get together sometime to talk about Bridgette’s plans. “What plans?” was all Bridgette could think to say at the time. However, after thinking about it these two weeks, Bridgette wondered if Miss Magwith could help.

“I’m sure you remember something about the Newcomb potters from when you were in my art history class there.” Miss Magwith picked up one of the vases.

“A little, I guess. Why?”

“Well, this is one of their vases, made by one of their most famous potters, Sadie Irvine. She was one of my teachers when I started school there in the mid-thirties. See the moss draped oak tree with the moon peeking out behind it. It was her most famous design.” Miss Magwith turned the vase over and pointed to the bottom. “There’s the N with the C around it, the Newcomb Pottery mark, and the initials are hers and those of the man who threw the vase, Joseph Meyer. Women weren’t supposed to do that part, too messy, I guess, or something, so they were told they could only decorate the vases, a way to get an education in the 1890’s.” Miss Magwith frowned, turned the vase upright and outlined the moon with her fingertip. “Can you believe that?” she asked pursing her lips. “Not able to perform the whole process without a man’s help? Pooh. Why women can do anything a man can do and often do it better. And, you know, the vases won awards and became famous but only because of the women who decorated them.” Miss Magwith stopped talking, looked thoughtful, caressed the vase and slowly put it down on the table. She walked over to the sink and started fiddling with the luncheon plates.

Bridgette sat silent for several minutes waiting for Miss Magwith to say something further. What was she getting at anyway? All this talk about women doing stuff as well as men seemed out of character for bumbling Miss Magwith. She of the brusque, cheerful, let’s get on with it attitude now seemed to have a strong opinion about something, and this something she wanted to communicate to Bridgette. Bridgette wondered what she ever said to Miss Magwith that made her think this would strike a chord with her. All Bridgette could think of was should she help with the dishes or put the vases back? It was awkward just sitting here, listening to the

clatter and waiting. She picked the iris vase up, rubbed her hand up and down the individual petals and counted them, one, two, three, four. Even.

“It’s no different now than it was then.” Miss Magwith turned, dried her hands, and came back to the table. She sat down. “See this vase you’re holding. It’s from the heyday of Newcomb Pottery, 1918, Anna Francis Simpson.” She tightened her hands into fists. “The women were allowed to do something reminiscent of darning their husband’s socks or mending his shirts. Society believed it was all right for them to sit around chatting, doing needlepoint, something delicate for the all too gentle female. Nothing too strenuous, nothing that required any brains.” She scowled and looked directly at Bridgette. “Can you believe men thought, no still think that, no brains? Only fit to sew and clean and have babies, and maybe with permission from their fathers, paint a few vases?”

Bridgette stared at Miss Magwith. Why, she sounded just like Jacqueline. Constantly bragging how she was only one of three women in her class at medical school. Complaining there was no place for women to sleep in the intern’s quarters when she was on call, and that she had to use an empty patient’s room. And she loved telling the story of how when male patients refused to see her because she was a woman, the psychiatry department insisted they accept the appointment with her if they wanted to come to the clinic. Bridgette figured that made for an interesting visit and would love to be a fly on the wall for one of them. She wondered how Jacqueline’s brusque personality came across then.

“Don’t you think so?” Miss Magwith’s tone of voice insistent.

Bridgette flinched. Think about what, Newcomb pottery or women’s brains or mending socks? Programmed to be a wife and mother, she had gone along with the schedule never giving thought to any of it. First, finish high school and hopefully find a man to marry her.

If she did not marry right away, spend a couple of years in secretarial school or possibly college studying some ladylike subject like art or nursing. Secretary, nurse, or teacher, those were the options available to Bridgette to keep her from being a twenty-four-year-old, unwed, old maid. Thankfully, Mamere had saved her from that fate by introducing her to Edward when she was just twenty.

Bridgette put the vase down, got up, walked to the French doors leading to the patio, and looked out. Edward? Had she ever loved him or was he a convenient way to follow the life plan ordained for her? She never gave it much thought, just went along with the program. These past few weeks, she pretended exhaustion and went to bed early to avoid sex. He told her several times while they were in Provence that he thought they should have another child right away to “console her.” The responsibility of another child to care for when she was incapable of keeping the first one alive was far from a comforting thought. Bridgette shuddered. “I don’t know what I think any more,” she said and walked back to the table.

“Well, I tell you what I think,” Miss Magwith said, grabbed the vase, and thrust it at Bridgette. “You see this vase? Sadie Irvine gave it to me when I graduated Newcomb. She stayed on there after the pottery school closed and never said anything, but if it’d been me after I was the cornerstone of that program like she was, and they had kept me on as just an instructor, I’d have been pissed. She seemed okay with it, but I wondered if she was bred to be one of those don’t make waves women, like me, and I believe like you. Just go along to get along, and then we’re stuck. Oh, I like my girls all right, but if I’d had some gumption or some support, maybe I could have been a famous artist with pictures in galleries or even museums. But nobody said or even noticed anything positive about me except Miss Irvine, and by then, it was too late.” She

took a deep breath, sighed, and put the vase down. “Don’t let that happen to you. Seems to me you’re in grave danger of that.”

Bridgette sat there unable to speak. Grave danger? That sounded ominous. Her sadness over Celeste was miserable. Bridgette’s worries about Mamere’s reaction to leaving the dress in Provence were menacing, but she did not feel threatened by her life choices. Motherhood and homemaking were time-honored professions, and she believed in their importance. She was simply unsure if she could manage to do them well, and she needed time. The problem was how to get that time. She needed to look like she was doing something meaningful, something to explain why she wasn’t having a child other than she was terrified of having one.

Bridgette took a deep breath and fiddled with her napkin and place mat. “Do you think...” she hesitated. “Do you think I could go back...” She looked down. “...go back to school?” She avoided looking at Miss Magwith and looked down at her hands. She did not know what to think of Miss Magwith’s feelings about men and art, but she did know she needed something to fill her life besides babies. She did get a prescription for birth-control pills in spite of the Church’s position on it, and Edward did not know or suspect. She hid both her visit to the doctor and the pills from him. He need not sin, but for her, having a child was the more evil choice of the two.

Both thumbs rubbed frantic circles on her index fingers until the skin tingled painfully. She sighed and having said what she came for started to get up. No, sit down and wait for a reply. “You know, just sort of pick up with a couple of art history courses. Something to keep me interested.” Bridgette walked over to the patio doors, opened them, and walked out. A profusion of pink azaleas and confederate jasmine assaulted her eyes and her nose. She stopped and stared at the spiked wrought iron fence buried in greenery and tiny white flowers. Thoughts of Celeste

accusing Bridgette of abandoning her in Provence replaced the ones of Celeste berating her from limbo. She learned to hide her counting rituals that grew more intense each day. Bridgette knew if she did not find a way to erase Celeste's ruthless accusations, to erase Mamere's desolation over the lost christening dress, to erase her grief over the hair, and to erase Edward's continued obsession with having another child, his consolation prize so to speak, she would disappear in madness.

"I hoped you'd say that. Of course I'll get you the course schedule for next semester," Miss Magwith called through the door.

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Bridgette looked around the first floor of the New Orleans Museum of Art. Two large vases of fresh flowers graced the pedestals on each side of the marble staircase leading to the second floor. Orchestra music drifted down from the upstairs gallery where men in black tie and tails and ladies in floor-length evening dress leaned against the balustrade and called down to friends as they entered the hall. Mamere, looking regal in an off the shoulder, silver-lame gown that complimented her white hair, greeted guests to the Opera Ball at the top of the staircase. A gold choker encrusted with pearls encircled her neck and iridescent pearl earrings complimented the ensemble. She waved Bridgette and Edward up the stairs and pointed to the room where their table was.

Shaking hands with Edward and brushing Bridgette's cheek with a kiss, Mamere said, "I'll join you shortly after most everyone is here. Jacqueline is already at the table with her friend, Dorothy." She frowned. "I don't know why she didn't bring one of those male residents she always complains about, but anyway, there's no accounting for your sister. The bar's in that direction and the things up for auction are in that room. Take a look and put down a bid. We got

some really great donations this year, and this year I finally convinced Edgar to donate three dolls from his French Quarter shop. I might bid on one of them myself.” She turned to greet the next couple, “Hello, Mayor and Mrs. Schiro. So nice of you to come.”

“Let’s leave her to do her thing,” Edward said and took Bridgette’s hand and led her to their table. “Hi, Jacqueline, Dorothy. I’ll get you a drink, honey. How ‘bout you two? Okay for now?”

Bridgette sat down and nodded to Jacqueline and Dorothy. Why had she come she wondered as she looked around the room. Of course, Mamere had placed her table in the room that contained the museum’s French collection. Faces of aristocrats stared down at her, Marie Antoinette, Madame Degas, Louis XVI, some countess whose name she cared not to remember, even Napoleon visiting plague victims, all proudly presented to Bridgette the numerous times she visited the museum as a child with Mamere. As though hers and Mamere’s ancestor was more than a simple farm girl who only happened to make it to Nouvelle Orleans as an Ursuline novice escaping poverty in France. Strange what an obsession Mamere had with her ancestral history, glorifying it for some reason Bridgette did not understand.

“Mamere said she was on her way over, for us to get settled since they’ll be serving dinner shortly.” Edward sat down and handed Bridgette a glass of champagne. “What’s new with you, Jacqueline? Mamere said you’re thinking of taking a fellowship in child psychiatry. That’ll add another year to your residency, won’t it?”

“Yes, been thinking about it. It’d be easier to set up my own practice that way, not so much male competition.” She looked sideways at Dorothy.

“Well, that’d be worth something, I guess.” Edward took a sip of chardonnay. “Here’s Mamere. Sit here between me and Bridgette.” He moved over a chair. “We haven’t seen much of

you since we got back. You've been so busy with this Ball. Looks like a great turnout, the mayor and some councilmen too."

"Right. Vic and his wife have been season subscribers to the opera for years but this is the first time they've attended the Ball. Quite a coup, I'd say. How're things with you, Bridgette?" She patted Bridgette's hand.

Bridgette curled her hand up into a fist and mumbled, "Just fine, but you know I hate these things with all their small talk and chatter." She scrutinized those at her table and the ones around her. Such gaiety when she could only force laughter. Such chatter when she could think of nothing to say.

"You'll be fine, honey," Mamere whispered. "Just sit back. It's a lot easier than you imagine. Just takes practice." Mamere looked into Bridgette's eyes. "I really do appreciate you coming. I know how hard things have been for you. Losing a baby does strange things to us." She smiled and turned around to speak to one of the guests.

Bridgette shrank back into her chair and looked quizzically at Mamere. How so? Strange things to us? She herself never felt so different, so isolated, and as insecure as she did now. How long did it take to adjust? She lowered her eyes to her plate and pushed her food around. Gazing again at the portrait of Marie Antoinette with her royal blue gown and jaunty, plumed hat, its white feathers perched upright, Bridgette marveled that she could look so regal and composed. If only she had a little of that self-possession, maybe she could learn to enjoy situations like these.

"Mamere, I've been meaning to ask you something since we got back from France," Edward said.

Bridgette jumped. He isn't going to bring up the christening dress, is he? She did not think he noticed when she dropped it or even knew she had it with her in Europe. She had hidden from him the reason for driving by Saint Pantaleon Church. Her stomach churned and her heart pounded. Please do not mention it, she prayed. Bridgette had waited these past few weeks for Mamere to ask about the dress, but she had not, so Bridgette surmised she did not know it was gone. "Let's go look at the stuff up for auction." She pulled Edward's arm. "We might want to bid on something."

"In a minute. I've been wanting to ask Mamere to help me, us, with something, and besides you've barely touched your dinner."

"The good things might be gone if we don't bid now." Bridgette started to get up from her chair. She needed to distract him.

"Well, eat your steak," Edward admonished. "And then we'll go. You've been starving yourself lately." He turned his chair toward Mamere. "You know how Bridgette took off that day in Venice. Well, I waited and when she didn't come back, I got worried not knowing where she'd gone. So I decided to search her things to see if I could get some ideas. That's when I found her backpack shoved far back in the closet, hidden under a pile of clothes. I got suspicious and opened it. There was nothing to help me find her, but buried deep in the bottom was a scrolled paper, half in French and half in, I think, Italian, dated 1918. There was a picture of the old orphanage on Esplanade Avenue embossed on it. I don't know where Bridgette got it or why she hid it like that, but I know you're fluent in French so I thought you could translate it for me, maybe for us, huh Bridgette? I guess you wanted to know what it was too, and that's why you had it?"

Bridgette looked at him and then at Mamere. “What are you talking about?” she asked with a puzzled look on her face. “You searched my stuff?” Her voice rose. “Why wait til now to say something? At a party with all these people around?” She looked at Mamere.

“What else did you expect me to do when you disappeared? Of course, I searched your things.” Edward grumbled, “What’s the big deal anyway? It’s just something I’m curious about.”

“This is no place to discuss that,” Mamere said in a tremulous voice. She shoved her chair back from the table, jumped up, and grabbed her empty wine glass. “I’m going to get me another one of these.” She touched Bridgette on the arm. “Come along. I’ll head for the auction table with you after I get a drink. I want to get a closer look at those dolls. I need a new one, another baby boy. And I know there’s plenty there you’d like. Let’s take a look before the bidding shuts down.”

“What?” Edward stammered. “What’s the rush? How about that document? It looked so official. What’d you think it might be? Bridgette, where’d you get it?” He jumped up and followed after them.

“Not now,” Mamere said continuing to walk away. “Later, Edward. I’ve worked so hard on this. Just let me enjoy it.” She took Bridgette by the arm. “Go back and keep Jacqueline company. That Dorothy is such a hostile bore.”

CHAPTER TWELVE—AWAKENINGS

Bridgette watched the small, elongated, black insect make its way up the porch column. Splotches of mold embedded deep within the post gave it a gray appearance, and the lime-green fungi that encircled the bottom of each of the handrails looked like pools of slime. The creature was only half of a love bug combination, and Bridgette wondered if it was lonely and on the lookout for its partner. Suppose Edward disappeared that way, became detached, would she look for him, or like the bug just meander on by herself?

Her thoughts wandered from the bug, to the need to paint the porch, to Edward and his shocking revelation last night about the orphanage scroll. She shivered and tried to erase from her mind the document's connection with the christening dress that she left behind in Provence. When Edward brought the scroll up out of the blue last night, she thought he would also mention the dress and panicked. Then Mamere saved her by dragging her to the auction. As Mamere babbled on and on about bidding on this or bidding on that and told stories how she got this donated and how she got that donated, Bridgette worried. Would Mamere mention the scroll or the dress? Instead she whispered to Bridgette how much this was worth and gave tips on how much to bid for this or for that. Mamere seemed so taken by the auction and Edgar's dolls that she did not mention the scroll or how it came to be in Bridgette's possession, and she still gave no indication she knew the christening dress was missing. Bridgette wondered if Mamere even heard Edward's request to translate the document for them. Although Bridgette thought it peculiar of Mamere not to even question how the document got in her possession, she was relieved to let it be.

“Hi, honey,” Edward said opening the front door and sitting in the rocking chair across from her. “Thought I’d find you out here. Up early, aren’t you? It’s barely six.”

“A bad dream woke me up, and I couldn’t go back to sleep trying to remember it.”

“I thought the Ball was quite a success last night, didn’t you?” Edward rocked back in his chair, hesitated a few minutes, and then said, “What’d you think of Mamere jumping up like that after I asked her to help translate the document? Seemed kind of strange to me. Did she say anything about it? The two of you disappeared for the rest of the evening.”

“So what?” Bridgette gave him a defiant look. “We were just fooling with the auction. She spent a lot of time examining those dolls and talking to Edgar about them. She wanted another baby doll like the one she already has. You know, the one in the christening dress. Told him she absolutely had to have a new one to replace one she’d lost. I didn’t know what she was talking about, but she looked at me like I’d know what she meant. The whole thing was kind of strange,” she said emphasizing the last sentence. “But so were you,” she said pointedly and started to get up.

“Wait, we haven’t finished. You’re not going to pull a Mamere on me about this.”

“She wanted a boy baby,” Bridgette said returning to the topic she felt safe with. “But he didn’t have one of those, only a girl, and she would have none of that.” Bridgette’s stomach clenched, and she stopped talking. She shook her head to block out her worry about the real dress. “She was upset, told him he had promised to bring a match to the boy doll she already had, made him promise to look for one for her, that she had to have it to put the christening dress on.” Bridgette stopped and stared. Which christening dress did Mamere mean, a new one she was making or the antique one?

“Hey. Where’d you go? We were talking about translating the document?”

“Right. She never mentioned it. I mostly just stood there and listened. Nothing much interested me, a bunch of jewelry, and trips, and dinners with different people. She wanted me to bid, but after everything I just wanted to go home. I was tired.” Bridgette got up and turned to go inside.

“Wait. I’m really curious about that scroll. I couldn’t tell what it was about. You know how awful I am with languages. I just glanced at it. There was some sort of name on it obliterated with white out. Where’d you get that paper anyway? It was old. Could you translate any of it?”

“It’s nothing. Was in my backpack for ages. Just some old thing I picked up in an antique store way before Celeste died. I’d forgotten it was in there.”

“Well, it looks interesting to me, especially now that they’ve turned the orphanage into a school and are thinking of tearing the Pitot House down. I’d have thought Mamere would be interested too since she’s all tied up with that Save the Pitot House Committee. Maybe she didn’t hear me last night or was too caught up in doing her duty for the Ball. You know how she is when it comes to taking charge.”

Bridgette turned and glared at Edward. “I don’t know why you’re making such a big deal out of this. What’d you do with it, anyway? It’s mine, you know. I bought it, and I’ll decide who gets to see it.” She crossed her arms and waited. “Go get it right now and give it to me. I never said you could take it.”

“What?” Edward looked startled. “What’s the matter with you?”

Bridgette sat down hard on the swing and pushed back and forth with her feet. She flinched when the swing struck the railing.

“Now you’ve made me more interested,” Edward said. “We’re going by Mamere’s for dinner tonight.” He nodded his head as though that settled it. “I’ll give it to you then, and we’ll have her translate it.”

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Bridgette sprinkled powdered sugar on her beignets, sipped her café au lait and listened to the mournful sound of a trumpet player hoping to earn his nighttime board from the tourists who gathered daily at the Café du Monde. His rendition of “A Closer Walk with Thee” suited her funereal mood. After leaving home this morning, she decided to visit Celeste’s grave for the first time since her burial but lost courage as she rode along Basin Street. The imposing concrete wall surrounding the cemetery seemed so cold and forbidding that she could not force herself to stop and enter through the wrought iron gate. Instead she continued through the French Quarter and parked in a lot along the River.

Her high school friend Ellen from the Mother’s group whom she had not seen since running into them at the playground right after Celeste’s death called her yesterday. Ellen had called several times in the first few weeks after Celeste died and left a message with Dorothea about getting together, but Bridgette ignored her. This time when Bridgette herself answered the phone, she managed to seem pleased, part of the “fake it ‘til you make it” philosophy she learned from Sandra at the monastery in Provence. When Ellen suggested they meet for coffee, Bridgette acquiesced.

She looked at her watch and fidgeted. Not stopping at the cemetery left her with another hour to kill, and she hated to be alone with her thoughts, especially her new fear about whether Mamere was making a new christening dress or would look in the chest for the old one. This anxiety replaced the one about Celeste in limbo with the same dreaded vengeance and

triggered her counting rituals. Again she struggled to force them from her mind. The trumpeter moved on to another soulful sounding spiritual. Wondering what his problem was this morning, she leaned over the railing and requested something more spirited. When he shoved his hat toward her begging for a tip, Bridgette grimaced, picked her coffee and beignets up and moved to the other side of the covered patio. Thank God it was not crowded this morning.

The wrought iron balconies on the Pontalba apartments beckoned, and she fought the impulse to count each one of the railings and place them in multiples of four. Reaching into her purse, she pulled out the class schedule Miss Magwith dropped off with Dorothea yesterday. There were only four art history classes in the summer session, but they crammed a lot of information into a short time frame. Bridgette figured being forced to study and analyze a number of art works in just a few weeks was the answer. Better to fill her mind with an artist's imaginings than create her own images of misery and worry.

Dipping her napkin into the water glass, Bridgette wiped the powdered sugar off the table. She sipped her coffee and studied the course description. Two of the courses were similar to ones she took before; one was an introductory course on paintings from the Renaissance to the present and the other a study of the different art history movements. These did not interest her. As long as she was doing this, Bridgette wanted to concentrate on one or two artists or a specific movement.

The other two courses looked great. One on the art of the Northern Renaissance focused on Brueghel, Van Eyck, and Memling, artists she knew little about. The other, "Impressionism to Surrealism, Manet to Magritte to Dali," sounded really interesting. Salvatore Dali's paintings had fascinated her from the first one she ever saw. The whole idea of there being an unconscious expression to art and its depiction of dream states absorbed her early in her

studies, and she spent time in earlier classes trying to understand why an artist painted what he did. She folded the brochure and put it back into her purse. Turned out this was an easy choice. Nothing to do but sign up for these two courses and tell Edward. She wondered how his “stay at home and be a housewife and mother” mentality would take to this. She smirked, better this than his baby as consolation prize.

“Hi!” Ellen walked up, pulled out a chair and sat down. “It’s been a while. What’s with you?” She smiled and placed a couple of paperback books she was carrying on the table. “I’ll just have a café au lait, no beignets,” she said to the waiter. “You don’t have it with skim milk, do you.” She grimaced when the waiter said no. “Still trying to take off my baby weight. Awful, isn’t it after almost a year? Jenny is ten-months-old already. Left her with my mom today. Needed to get out. Having a baby is so confining. Get sick of diapers, and feedings, and babbling. I get hungry for grown-up conversation.”

Bridgette stared and gulped down the rest of her café au lait. She had forgotten what a talker Ellen was. In the past, Ellen’s chatter had exhausted her. It was hard to keep up with, but today, maybe that was good. The chatter blotted out her miserable thoughts. Feeling self-conscious Bridgette picked up the two books. “What’re these?” she wondered aloud and turned them so she could read the cover.

“Just a couple of how-to-do babies books.” Ellen reached and took one of them back. “I stopped at that book store on Royal Street on my way. Had some time to kill. Didn’t want to be early and have to sit by myself. Bringing up kids is not as easy as you think. Whole thing is driving me crazy. It’s boring. Feed them, burp them, dress them, take them for a walk. The Mothers’ Group helps, but all they want to do is sit around and talk about formula and when to give solid food, and which one is crawling and which one is walking. I don’t know. Sometimes,

I'm so frustrated in the evening, I yell at Jeff when he gets home. He's tired from work and wants to read the paper or watch TV, and I'm stuck wanting some adult conversation, something other than babbling and cooing and smiling."

Bridgette stared at the book's title, *The Magic Years*, and tried not to listen to Ellen. A discussion of the misery of living with a live baby was not one she wanted to hear. Not when her whole life revolved around how not to think about her dead baby. Just having a live child made her so jealous. She counted the number of letters in the title and tried to arrange them in multiplies of four. Impossible. She pushed her chair away from the table and thought about leaving but was too embarrassed, so sat back.

"That book's interesting," Ellen said. "More so than this one, I think." She picked the other one up from the table. "I looked at them both in the bookstore, even read a little bit from each. This one is Dr. Spock on child rearing, permissive child rearing, it's called. All about giving children space to express themselves. No more of that 'children will be seen and not heard stuff,' like when we were growing up. I remember you and I used to talk about how to raise kids. Neither of us wanted to do it like our mothers."

Bridgette concentrated her attention on the picture of the little boy on the cover. The world around her blurred, and Ellen's voice droned on in the background. The boy, dirty looking with disheveled, sweaty curls, pointed upward either toward a dismal, gray sky or toward the title, *The Magic Years*." The book's summary, understanding and handling the problems of early childhood, might have fascinated her a year ago, but now that was the last thing she wanted to think about. Ellen's words, something about getting out and finding some other interest, interrupted her for a moment and then receded into a murmur.

Bridgette thumbed through the book. The pages rippled through her fingertips, and the words blended into a single splotch. “Laughing Tiger,” what a peculiar chapter title, then “The Right to Feel,” another chapter caught her interest. She read a few lines. “Ernest died this morning.” It was a story about a little boy, maybe the sad-looking one on the cover, whose hamster had died that morning. The mother was asking this person, Selma Fraiberg, the author, what she should say to him? Imagine a mother who wanted to know the correct thing to say to a child. Bridgette read on. This Fraiberg, she assumed a Dr. Fraiberg, told the mother to be honest with her son, to tell him what had happened. After all, a child was entitled to his feelings. His pet had died, and he was entitled to feel sad. The mother simply needed to help him through it.

Bridgette sat back astounded. Help him through it. What a novel idea? Images of Celeste, her death, her lying still in the crib, her funeral flooded her, and she slammed the book closed and let it slide on to the ground. No one helped her. The people in her life seemed to think she should just move on, pick up the pieces like they did and get on with life, find a hobby or better yet replace the old child with a new one.

“I’ll get that,” Ellen said as she reached down.

Bridgette, her mind a whirlwind of memories and feelings complied. “I never feel,” she said. She was silent a few minutes looking at Ellen. “Well, maybe, nobody helps me with it,” she queried. “Like now, I feel awful and overwhelmed, like my whole insides are churning but what do you call that?”

“I don’t know? What were you thinking about? You looked lost in that book by Fraiberg. I tried to get your attention, but you didn’t hear.”

“I don’t remember.” Bridgette furrowed her brow and thought. “It’s vague. The chapters, the story, something about a little boy, him, the one on the cover, I guess.”

Ellen pointed to the cover. "He looks curious to me."

"Well, whatever. More sad, I think, or dirty like he's been playing hard, flying a kite or something. Maybe, that's what he's pointing at. He lost his kite, and he's sad about it."

"Hard to say. It's left to your imagination. That's what the book's about, you know, children and their imaginings. I can't wait to read it. Fraiberg's a social worker. Teaches here at Tulane School of Social Work. She's giving a talk tomorrow evening. I'm going." Ellen thought a minute. "Hey. Maybe, you'd come with me. I hate going to these things by myself, and Jeff'd never come. I can't complain though. He did say he'd watch Jenny for me."

"Maybe," Bridgette dragged the word out. "It'd have to be all right with Edward. He likes me home." She sighed. That probably got her off the hook. She did not know if she could take any more of Ellen's baby complaints. But, then, maybe she could learn something from this author. Learning to feel was a novel idea but having someone help you through those feelings what a different concept. She had to admit it made her curious. "I'll ask and let you know." Bridgette jumped up. "Bye. Call me." She waved as she rushed out. She simply would not answer the phone tomorrow if, as usual, she did not want to be with anyone.

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The dinner Dorothea prepared looked delicious but nothing tempted Bridgette to eat more than her usual few bites. She looked around the table where her family members, other than Mother who had pleaded a monstrous headache which most likely amounted to nothing more than an ordinary hangover, continued to sit around the dining room table after dinner. Bridgette longed to get away from this gathering but sat there in silent dread. At least Mamere had not suggested they move to the living room or ballroom for coffee. There was no comfortable seating in either of those rooms.

Mamere seemed fidgety to Bridgette. Throughout dinner she constantly jumped up to check on Dorothea in the kitchen, something Bridgette imagined Dorothea, who considered the kitchen her rightful domain, resented. In fact, the whole meal that was supposed to celebrate the Opera Ball's success bordered on disastrous. Edward had refused to remove his suit coat and frequently patted the scroll folded into his inside pocket. Bridgette flinched every time it crackled. Jacqueline looked at her watch as though determining when it was safe to leave, perhaps on some timetable known only to her.

Bridgette could almost hear the death bell toll when Edward slid his hand into his coat pocket. She sighed and put her head between her hands on the table.

"I brought this by tonight thinking you could translate it for us," Edward said. He unfolded the parchment and laid it on the table. "Remember I mentioned it last night."

Mamere paled and gripped the table edge. Her chair screeched when she shoved it back. "I'll tell Dorothea to hurry with that coffee." The swinging door to the kitchen slammed against her backside in her haste to leave.

"What's with her?" Edward looked confused.

The three of them sat there for a few minutes saying nothing. Bridgette kept her head down, and Jacqueline checked her watch. "I can't wait for that coffee," Jacqueline said. "I'm supposed to pick Dorothy up. We're meeting some friends in the French Quarter."

"I'll see what's with it," Edward said heading for the kitchen.

"I'm going." Jacqueline started for the door. "It's always something," she mumbled on her way out.

Bridgette kept her face hidden. This was the end of her. The story of the theft of the christening dress was going to come out. Who cared about that stupid document anyway? She

did not understand why Edward was so curious about it. Maybe, he thought it had something to do with her since she had hidden it away in her backpack. Some secret she was purposely keeping from him. As far as she could make out, it was some old document from that orphanage on the Bayou, but one from many years ago before she was born. She wished she had tried to convince him not to bother with it, but she did not even know he was bringing it until he shoved it into his pocket on their way out the door. By then it was too late, and she only hoped he would get caught up in the dinner conversation and forget about it. No chance of that tonight though. Everyone was so preoccupied with his or her own thoughts, conversation lagged.

“Mamere said she’d be right in,” Edward said. “Where’s Jacqueline? What’s wrong with you? Are you having a headache or something?” He walked over and rubbed Bridgette’s neck before sitting down.

No, just a slight nervous breakdown, she thought. That little boy on the cover of the book this morning had that doctor to help him through whatever bad happened to him, but which of the people in her life could she turn to. She ticked them off one by one. Mamere was always busy at some do-gooder function or other. Edward spent his time and energy playing with stocks. Jacqueline nowadays rushed off to be with this Dorothy person at some special French Quarter bar. Mother sat at her breakfast room table staring at and sipping from a glass of whiskey on the rocks. Not much there. She looked up when Mamere came through the swinging door followed by Dorothea with the coffee service.

“I told Dorothea to just bring two cups. I heard Jacqueline leave.” Mamere turned to go back into the kitchen. “I’ve got a couple of phone calls to make, but y’all take your time with the coffee, and I’ll see you tomorrow.” She pointed for Dorothea to leave the tray.

“Wait. How about translating this for us.” Edward picked up the scroll and reached to give it to her.

“Haven’t time,” Mamere said. “These people are waiting for my call.” She stopped half way through the door to the kitchen. “By the way, Bridgette. How’d you get that? It was in a box hidden away in that chest.” She hurried back into the kitchen without waiting for an answer.

Bridgette gulped and stared after Mamere. She pushed her chair back. “I don’t want any coffee, and I do have a headache. I need to go home.”

“Wait.” Edward frowned. “An antique shop, huh? That was a pile of you know what, just like I thought. I knew you weren’t telling the truth. That’s what’s had me so curious, but taking it from Mamere, from someplace where she hid it? Why’d you do that? That seems strange.”

Bridgette stood up.

“No, you don’t. Sit back down. We’re gonna figure this out now.” He shoved the document at her. “You know enough French to figure this out. Sit down and have some coffee,” he jeered.

Bridgette felt frightened. He seemed like a growling bear out to attack her. She sat down and cringed when he pulled his chair close to hers. That lady doctor would know what to do, but Bridgette’s mind was blank. Even her numbers and counting rituals deserted her.

Edward spread the scroll out in front of them and weighed the top edge down with the sugar bowl. “Now look at it. What’s it say? What do these words mean?”

“I don’t know.” Bridgette’s voice quivered. “I tried to translate it before, but it has a lot of words I don’t know.” She started to cry.

“Stop blubbering. You need to snap out of this funk you’ve been in.” He pointed to the top of the page. “Look at this. I know you understand a lot of French.” Edward turned and

looked straight at Bridgette. “And don’t you think Mamere’s acting strange about this? She hid it away? Why, for heaven’s sake would she do that if it’s just some ancient scroll?”

“I told you, I can’t read it.” She shoved her coffee cup and spilled it on the table.

Edward reached out to save the parchment. “I’m leaving. You stay. Read it yourself,” Bridgette shouted and rushed out. She ran home and locked herself in her room. That’s it, she thought. I’ve got no one to help and no place to go where I’m safe. She crawled into bed and covered her head with the blanket. Tomorrow I’ll go with Ellen to hear that doctor.

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Grateful there were few cars around, Bridgette pulled into a parking place alongside the Woldenberg Art Center. She had not realized she would have to parallel park and had little experience parking that way. Thunder rumbled in the distance and ominous deep gray clouds swept across the sky. Wind blew leaves from the alley of oak trees lining the central green space, and their branches swayed to and fro beckoning the distant lightening bolts to strike them. The Newcomb campus was deserted, as it was the break between spring and summer sessions. What few people were wandering about scattered indoors to await the thunderstorm.

Bridgette jumped at each lightening flash and wondered if she was safe in her car. Recalling wading through flooded streets during thunderstorms when she was a student a few years back, she fretted over whether she was on high enough ground to prevent water from coming into her car. Should she leave or should she stay? What if the rain came down while she was driving away? She had almost no experience driving in rainstorms and was terrified at the thought.

Why had she left so early for her afternoon appointment with Miss Magwith? The weather was clear when she left home, and she felt the need to get away from the house and her

thoughts. Again last night, she had lain awake. Her mind kept replaying that moment in Provence when she dropped the christening dress in St. Pantaleon's parking lot. She pictured the garment lying in the dust, its crisp whiteness grayed by crushed pebbles or else frayed into tattered shreds by unseeing drivers. The journey from Bridgette's proud ironing board to desecrated object of loss had been a tumultuous one. This gray day matched her mood.

Ellen had called earlier while she was half-heartedly nibbling on a piece of toast, and Bridgette agreed to meet her tonight to hear that lady social worker talk. There was nothing to lose, and the idea of someone helping her through this time tempted her. When she started to fight the jitters over Mamere finding out about the dress by counting the crumbs left on the table by the toast, Bridgette jumped up and fled the house. Now here she sat with nothing to do but watch the threatening clouds pass over, and so they were. It looked as though the storm missed her. Maybe, it was her lucky day. She started her car and drove around the quadrangle to the Union for a cup of coffee and lunch while she waited to see Miss Magwith.

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"I'll see you later," Bridgette yelled at Edward walking out the door. At dinner, she had interrupted his talk about the document to tell him she was going with Ellen to a meeting. She had no intention of responding to any queries he had about that document or anything else for that matter. As long as he kept bringing that up, she planned to stay away from him. She did not care where he thought she was going with Ellen. Let him worry. Today's visit with Miss Magwith went well. She signed up for the two courses she wanted and simply had to buy her books. Classes started next week, and she looked forward to them, the first time she wanted to do something since Celeste died.

Bridgette pulled her car into Newcomb Drive. This morning she had not realized the discussion tonight was to be in Dixon Hall, just across the quadrangle from the art school. The air smelled fresh and clean, the dust and pollen washed out by the earlier thunderstorm. Droplets dripped from the centuries old oaks, and the sky glowed a deep red- orange through the darkened branches. They looked like one of those old-fashioned, silhouettes pictures Bridgette loved but did not have the confidence to buy for herself. Edward and Mamere had conspired to decorate her house for her, only tangentially asking her opinion.

Bridgette looked for a place to park. There were more cars tonight than earlier today, but she managed to find a spot to pull directly into on the far side of the art building. Even though it meant a longer walk, at least she did not have to squeeze into a small place between two cars. She should have accepted Ellen's offer of a ride, but she did not want to be trapped inside the car while Ellen babbled on about her baby and what a boring life caring for the child was.

Bridgette walked around to the front of the Woldenberg Center's West Wing. At one time, it held a swimming pool for the students. Studying the building with its open windows high up near the roofline, she remembered Mother dropping her off here when she nine or ten for swimming lessons. She had been afraid of water, especially the bayou in front of Mamere's house, ever since her friend drowned diving from the bridge. Mother seemed so sympathetic at the time so different from the way she was now. She could feel that child inside of her now, waving goodbye to Mother and walking confidently toward her lessons. She too was so different now. She stopped and sat on the edge of a reflecting pool and looked back at the building. It read sculpture studio now, and Bridgette wondered if they had filled the pool in with concrete or

simply covered it with a floor. Did concrete dust fill the air inside rather than the smell of chlorine, that memory still strong in her?

She looked around the courtyard. Hydrangeas, their puffy, pink, flower heads bobbing, lined the sidewalk between the reflecting pool and the building. Rising from amidst the plants were several sculptures. Totem like, glass balls no longer gleaming but instead grime streaked, were stacked in asymmetrical columns. A dusty area about ten by ten startled her. It was filled with sculpted, concrete heads, their necks or upper torsos bursting from the pine straw mulch that surrounded them. The disembodied heads sat in random disarray, their untidiness disconcerting. Bridgette walked over. If only she could lift them from their spot of entombment and place them in orderly rows. She reached down and stopped, her hand poised over the head of a woman whose neck had a ragged crack through it. It looked ready to separate from its upper body. Bridgette avoided touching her instead looking around for someone to show the damage to. The courtyard was deserted.

The woman's hair hugged her face in the fashion of the twenties; a style much like one Mamere wore in her portrait over the fireplace. Bridgette grinned at the ridiculous thought that she represented Mamere cracking up. But unlike Mamere, this woman's eyes were closed, and she seemed angrily resigned to her fate. The artist had sentenced her to this inward fuming immobility, unable to rage but unable to escape hatred. Bridgette squirmed. She too lived in this moment. Trapped in the anger and remorse she felt about Celeste's death but unable to express it and let it go. She hated more than she ever had, hated God, hated Edward, hated Mamere, hated Mother, even hated Jacqueline. And then, there was Ellen, the supposed friend she planned to meet tonight, ungrateful Ellen who could only complain about a live child, something Bridgette had so desperately wanted.

She shivered and turned away from the plot of severed heads. Looking at her watch, she realized she was still fifteen minutes early. People were milling about across the green space in front of Dixon Hall, she assumed waiting for the doors to open. Ellen was nowhere in sight so Bridgette found a bench in front of the art school where she could watch for her. Spider lilies their white fronds swaying to and fro lined the walkway behind a waist-high brick wall. A post stood at the entrance to the garden. Delineated in bronze print on a black plaque, Bridgette read, *“Margaret’s Muse, in the garden...the joy we share as we tarry there. None other has ever known. For the love of art.”* In her classes, Miss Magwith often spoke of the importance of a muse, a tiny voice in the artist’s head that led her to communicate the deepest part of herself with others. Bridgette feared that inner self. It was angry, grief-stricken, guilty, and ashamed. She hid it from herself and others, but deep within she knew she needed to find it. She needed to set it free like she wanted to free those heads from their doomed fate.

“Ellen,” Bridgette shouted seeing her across the lawn. She waved her arms, jumped up, and ran across the grass to the auditorium. “Ellen,” she cried again. “I’m here. Wait.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN—GHOSTS

The auditorium was crowded. Bridgette looked around. It was filled with women and just a few men. Could all those women be mothers? She looked down at the program. *Dr. Selma Fraiberg; Tulane University School of Social Work; Consultant to Family Services Center of New Orleans on Blind Infants*. All that sounded impressive, but what did it have to do with helping children with their feelings. Bridgette looked at Ellen who was sitting expectantly on the edge of her seat. She pointed to the program. “You sure this is going to be helpful. What’s blind children have to do with anything?”

“Shush. She’s being introduced.” Ellen dug into her pocketbook for a pad and pencil. “I don’t want to miss anything.”

Bridgette slumped back in her chair. These seats were very hard and uncomfortable. Why had she even bothered? She could not imagine what a woman who studied blind children had to offer her. This evening would prove to be like many others boring and useless. Her mind drifted to Provence, the church, the dress, and Sandra. Sandra’s ideas about living in the present and moving on from painful past memories interested her, and she was even trying to implement some of Sandra’s wisdom. This expert on, of all things, blind children probably had little to impart. Bridgette looked around. Everyone sat poised, some like Ellen with pen in hand, and waited to hear this woman’s magical words. She closed her eyes. Maybe she should just get up and leave.

Bridgette jumped. The auditorium was dark and everyone was laughing at a slide on the screen. She must have spaced out. She had started doing that again. A woman dressed in a muted plaid skirt, white blouse, and clunky loafers with stockings instead of socks stood to one

side of the stage. Her hair was short with tight curls and she would have looked masculine except for the white pearls she wore around her neck. For some reason the necklace, although incongruous with her clothing, softened her face, and her smile enlivened her. She spoke in a measured authoritative cadence that could have been off putting but instead was reassuring.

The lady whom Bridgette assumed was Doctor Fraiberg pointed at the slide and told a story about her two-year-old niece. The picture, a caricature of a large tiger slinking away into a corner at the behest of a small girl, reminded Bridgette of the Technicolor comics she loved to read in the Sunday paper. The child, dressed in a pink dress and starched, white pinafore, carried a white purse. She stamped her foot and pointed an imperious finger at a shamed, cringing tiger. The caption read, “No, Laughing Tiger, you *cannot* come with us for ice cream. You’ve been bad and have to stay home.” The doctor told of encountering an imaginary tiger while visiting her sister one day. The little girl, at the age of two, was herself undergoing civilizing demands from adults in her world that she too give up what she wanted at times and obey them. Apparently, the child used imaginary friends, mostly animals, to cope with the angry feelings she had about learning to behave. Dr. Fraiberg called it “identifying with the aggressor.”

Bridgette reached down and fumbled in her purse for a shred of paper and a pen. She needed to write some of this down. It was fascinating. The way people behaved had something to do with the way they were raised. Jacqueline often rambled on about this but usually in such an accusatory tone that no one in the family paid her mind. Bridgette looked up. “Loan me a couple of pages from your tablet, will you?” she asked Ellen. “Do you have another pen?”

“Hush. I’m trying to listen. Just pay attention.”

Bridgette sat forward on her seat. Doctor Fraiberg went on to explain how things can go wrong. If a child’s parent is often angry or abusive, then such imaginings can break down. The

abused child's ability to cope with the normal fears of monsters under the bed or in the closet is compromised by having a "dangerous," angry parent. Such a child experiences difficulty distinguishing fact from fiction and his personality development is affected.

Bridgette sat back. She was flooded with pictures of Mother screaming at her. One memory of Mother slapping her in the face for what Mother called speaking up was particularly painful. It happened in the schoolyard in front of a few of Bridgette's friends. They had been playing jump rope, and Bridgette asked Mother if she could stay a little longer.

"Don't speak to me in that tone of voice," Mother had said and slapped her, so hard Bridgette stumbled.

The shame she felt then enveloped her all over again, and she reached down and rubbed the arms of her chair. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. Absorbed with the rhythmic quality of her fingers, she missed several minutes of the lecture.

"What're you doing? Stop that noise." Ellen grabbed her hand. "Pay attention. What she's saying is interesting." She laughed aloud and pointed. "Look at that picture. It's too much."

Bridgette jumped. Another comical caricature, this one of a baby in a crib, filled the screen. If anything, it was more colorful than the last one she remembered seeing before she blanked out. The nursery walls were yellow and covered with large and small butterflies. The child, perhaps seven-months-old, half stood, half hung onto the sides of the bed. It looked as though the child had tried to pull himself up but then gave up and fell back down. Ghosts, much like Casper in the nursery story but each one in vibrant rainbow colors instead of white, surrounded the child. Some came from the floor, others dangled from the ceiling, and some pranced on an attached mobile. Tiny dollhouse size figures hung from the mobile that seemed to

be spinning. Bridgette counted the dolls, one father, one mother, one tiny daughter, and two older sons. They clung to the circling threads. The caption read, "Ghosts in the Nursery." Were these spirits supposed to be friendly like Casper? And, who were the figures hanging from the mobile, the baby's family? Bridgette doubted the ghosts' friendliness. The baby in the crib looked anxious and confused.

"Isn't that the cutest thing you ever saw?" Ellen asked. "She has the best slides, so telling. Look at the cute ghost that's balancing on the crib railing. Such freaky looking eyes and yelling, 'Look out. Here I come.'"

"Kind of scary, if you ask me," Bridgette mumbled wondering what in the world was the matter with her. Everyone else in the audience seemed to be as delighted with the slides and lecture as Ellen.

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Bridgette poured the third packet of sugar into her coffee and counted to herself each time she completed another circuit around the cup with her spoon.

"Give that a rest, won't you?" Ellen said. "I'd imagine that sugar is dissolved by now. Although you loaded it up so much, you may have to stir another thousand times."

Bridgette blinked, shook her head, and took a sip of coffee. She grimaced. "You're right. How much sugar did I put in here? I wasn't thinking."

"You act like you haven't thought a thing since the talk was over. Didn't you like it? I was super impressed."

"I don't know. I kind of got lost there. Some of her slides threw me. Wasn't sure I heard it all."

“Well, maybe it made more sense to me ‘cause of those psychology courses I took in college before I got married. She was talking about how the way your mother treats you affects the way you are with your own children.” Ellen reached for her tablet and opened it to a replica of the ghost slide. “See, I tried to copy this one while she was explaining it.”

“Yeah, I remember that one. It all got vague to me after that.” Bridgette turned the tablet around so she could see it. “You’re pretty good at drawing. Those little dollhouse people bothered me.” She pointed at the figures flowing from the mobile. “They made me think of the ones from Mamere’s dollhouse I played with when I was little. I saw the house in her attic a while back, right after Celeste died. I tried to find the dolls we played with then, but I don’t think I did.” Bridgette pointed to the smallest of the figures. “I take that back. Maybe, I found the baby. Right, I did. It was in a christening dress. Funny, I can’t remember much about that day.” Bridgette paused. “We didn’t have a mother or a father, just a grandmother, that baby I found who Mamere said was a boy, a little girl doll that Mamere pretended was me, and a nun doll. I always pretended the nun was our ancestor, Isabelle.” Bridgette sat back and stared past Ellen at the trees outside the Student Union. “Mamere called her Mother. I wonder why. It seems kind of strange, don’t you think, to call a nun Mother.”

“Not if she was the nun in charge of the order.” Ellen sipped her coffee.

“I guess so. But, Mamere played with her like she actually was a mother, like the four dolls made up a family. But, it was so long ago. I wish I could remember what part that nun doll played in the game. Maybe, there were other nun dolls, and she was in charge of them.”

Bridgette looked at her watch. Quarter to ten. She ought to call Edward. He must be worried. She had not been very nice to him lately. There must be a phone in here. She looked around. Nothing. Maybe, there was a booth outside. The kids who came to college here must need a phone

sometimes. She bet the people behind the counter had a phone she could use. She started to get up.

“Where’re you going? I thought you wanted to hear about this?”

“Edward’ll be worried. I hardly ever go anywhere without him and especially not at night.”

“Well, it’s time he got used to that. You’ve heard of women’s lib, haven’t you?”

“Sort of, I guess. Jacqueline tries to talk, well mostly complains, about that sometimes, but she doesn’t get anywhere with it in my family.”

“Some of those ghosts in the nursery, I bet.” Ellen pointed to the picture.

“Huh?”

“You know. We are what we learned from our parents as children, even if we can’t remember having learned it. It’s like ghosts popping out when we least expect them and controlling what we say and do. Ghosts of our parents and the things we learned from them without knowing that we were learning them. We just automatically do the same things. I thought about all those conversations we had before our kids were born, about how we did not want to be mothers like our own mothers. You know? Before Celeste and Jenny were born.”

“I don’t know. Doesn’t make a lot of sense to me. I don’t think I heard everything that doctor said. It bothered me. I really need to call Edward. He can come get me. He’s nice that way. Then I won’t have to drive home in the dark by myself.” Bridgette got up. “I’m gonna look for a phone. Maybe, we can get together again sometime.”

“Sure,” Ellen said to Bridgette’s back as she hurried away. “I’ll call.”

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“How was the meeting?” Edward took her hand and placed it on his knee. “Where’d you leave your car?”

“Over there on the other side of where the swimming pool used to be.” Bridgette pointed out the car window. “Thanks for coming.” She smiled at Edward and squeezed his knee. “I felt nervous about driving at night. I never have, and that meeting kind of bothered me. I don’t know why exactly, just a doctor talking and showing a bunch of slides. I felt strange. Ellen and the other people there seemed really interested in what she had to say. Ellen even stopped to talk to her at the back of the auditorium and got her to sign her book, *The Magic Years*. All the doctor did for me was get me to think about my childhood with Mother. Something I’d rather not do.”

“Well, I agree, that’s not good. The past is over and done with, and you certainly don’t need to think about it.” Edward drove a few blocks. “You know, Mamere came by tonight looking for you. She wanted that scroll. I told her it was at my office. I planned to have Julius translate it, but he wasn’t in today. He speaks French fluently. You both are so mysterious about it that I can’t wait to find out what it says.”

Bridgette sat up straight and gripped the handle of the door. “What?” she gasped. “Did she ask about anything else?”

“Nooo,” Edward said taking a minute to think. “She just seemed very upset that you took it and wants you to bring it back tomorrow afternoon. Why’d you take it anyway? And why’d you lie about it? Did you also lie about not knowing what it said?”

“I told you before I don’t know what it says. In fact, I never really looked at it, and I don’t want to talk about it.” She emphasized the, *don’t*. “In fact, I’m not going to say another word about it. I’ve got other things on my mind right now. Things that are far more important than some old piece of paper.”

“Oh, like what?” Edward looked sideways at her. “And what am I supposed to tell Mamere, that you refuse to give it back to her?”

“She can have it. I don’t really care. You’ve got it so you give it to her. Get it translated or whatever you have to do. Just leave me out of it.”

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Bridgette looked across the table at Jacqueline. She wondered what it would be like to be finishing her first year of a psychiatric residency and on her way to a life determined by her own ambitions.

“Sorry I missed Edward,” Jacqueline said. She sipped the coffee Bridgette made. “I’m looking to buy a cottage in the Garden District and wanted to get his opinion on it. It’s on Annunciation Street just a few blocks from his parents’ home. The realtor said it’s an up and coming neighborhood, and I wondered how valid that was.”

“Miss Magwith just finished renovating a place on Coliseum Street, but it’s a little farther uptown. Really turned out nice. Maybe you ought to talk to her too. Some of those areas are better than others.”

“That’s an idea,” Jacqueline said. She started to push her chair back. “When’s Edward going to be home?”

“Wait. I have something I want to ask you. How about another coffee?” Bridgette got up and returned with the pot. “I went to this lecture with Ellen last night. You remember, my friend from high school who had that baby last year.”

Jacqueline covered her cup with her hand and looked at her watch. “Don’t have much time. I have to make rounds.”

“Just a quick question. A Doctor Selma Fraiberg gave it. On her book *The Magic Years*. Do you know her?”

“Yeah, I know her, but she’s not a doctor, just a social worker, a smart one though, one of the few non-physicians to become a psychoanalyst. She’s done a lot of research on child and infant development. It’s a fascinating new field of study. I wouldn’t mind working with her. She’s been on the faculty at the Med School a couple of years now. Don’t know if she plans to stay. She’s gotten famous, and I heard she has a couple of offers to start a child development clinic, one for sure in Michigan. Right now, she teaches a course on mother/infant interaction to the residents, and the last couple of months I’ve worked with her on a couple of patients, one a nine-month-old baby and its mother. Fascinating. You wouldn’t think you could see pathology in a baby that young. It didn’t attach to its mother. I could see that. She’s the reason I got so interested in child psychiatry. What did you think of her?”

“I don’t know. Ellen loved her, and everybody in the audience was enthralled, so I couldn’t figure why what she said bothered me so much.” Was she revealing too much to this know-it-all sister of hers? They used to be close, but that had changed when Jacqueline went to medical school. She got different then, more standoffish. Maybe she had to be to get along in that all male world she talked about. “Anyway,” she went on, taking a chance that Jacqueline wouldn’t rush off to a lecture or patient or something, something more important than her. Still, she watched to see Jacqueline’s reaction. “She had these slides, one about a crouching tiger and another about ghosts in the nursery.”

“Yeah. She gave us that lecture back in March. Interesting, isn’t it?” Jacqueline looked at her watch and back at Bridgette. “I will have some of that coffee if you’re still pouring.”

“I don’t know.” Bridgette poured a cup for herself and Jacqueline and put the pot back on the coffee maker. “I think I missed a lot of what she said. The slides bothered me. I don’t know why. Everyone else in the audience was laughing at them and writing down what she was saying. She seemed like a really nice lady. I just don’t know. That’s why I asked if you knew her.”

“You sound a lot like me. I was nervous and upset when I first...”

“Huh?” Bridgette interrupted. “How? You’re so sure of yourself. Always have been.”

“I think I’m just better at pretending. You let everyone see exactly what’s going on with you no matter how crazy or off the wall.”

Bridgette lowered her eyes and chewed on the inside of her lip. Sometimes she could not help what came out. It would be nice to have the wherewithal to pretend, but curiosity overcame her embarrassment. “What happened to you?”

“It wasn’t anything with Fraiberg. For me, it happened with one of my first patients. This patient was telling me about how she never felt she belonged in her family, like she was adopted or something. And for some reason, I felt like crying as though that had happened to me. I couldn’t get over the terrible anger and sadness I felt, so I told my supervisor. He reassured me that it was not unusual for that to happen to residents. That’s why the residency program recommends a year of therapy for all residents. Most don’t take advantage of it, but the program directors think that those who do become better therapists. So I started seeing Doctor Jamison, and I’m really glad I did. It’s helped me deal better with this dysfunctional family we grew up in, and I’m becoming much more comfortable with who I am. I’m finally finding people I can belong with. I’ve always felt like a stranger on the outside looking into a house where I did not belong.”

“Our house and our family, you mean?” Bridgette rubbed the rim of her coffee cup several times. “What’s wrong with them?”

“What’s wrong?” Jacqueline laughed and laughed and choked on her coffee. “Don’t you mean what’s right?”

“I never thought about it. They do make me upset sometimes, especially Mother. One of the slides made me remember how she used to punish me when I was little. The lady said it was abuse. To me, it seemed like the way Mother was, and that I was just bad, like an evil seed or something. I tried to stay away from her, but other times I wanted her to love me. I used to stand behind her when she sat at the kitchen table, a drink in her hand and wish she would notice me, hug me, kind of like Mamere did. But Mother never saw me. If I went up to hug her, she didn’t even look up. I felt like I didn’t exist.” Bridgette started to cry. “What’s wrong with me that my own mother didn’t love me?”

Jacqueline reached across the table and took Bridgette’s hand. “I know. The way she treated you was awful. Sometimes I tried to help, to get her to stop yelling or slapping you, but then she turned on me so I just gave up. I was just a child too.”

Bridgette looked at Jacqueline. Years of longing to be understood choked her. She reached out with her other hand and clenched Jacqueline’s hands with both of hers. If she just held on maybe the hurt would go away. When Jacqueline did not pull away as Bridgette expected, she moved her chair closer to her sister.

“Would you like to talk to Mrs. Fraiberg?” Jacqueline queried in a soft tone of voice. “I can arrange it.”

“What would I say?”

“What you just told me.” Jacqueline squeezed her hand.

“I couldn’t,” Bridgette gulped down a sob. “I’d be too embarrassed. She might laugh at me.”

“Well, just meet her then. You could tell her you saw her lecture and have some questions about her slides. She’s very kind. I think you’d like her. She’d never laugh at your pain.”

Bridgette felt her eyes glaze over. “Maybe so.” Her body slumped as though a weight was lifted, but her mind refused to let go. Her head sagged onto the table, and her hands let go of Jacqueline. “Maybe so,” she murmured. “Just not now.” Her words were barely audible.

“I’ll arrange it.”

*

Dinner was a silent affair. Edward said very little, and Bridgette worried that Mamere would come by demanding the scroll. Earlier that day Ellen had called, and Bridgette without thinking mentioned that Jacqueline knew Selma Fraiberg. Ellen’s enthusiasm distressed her, and she avoided any of her questions. What was she thinking of to open herself up that way, not just to Ellen but more alarmingly to Jacqueline? Then there was Mamere, the scroll, and the christening dress. She fiddled with her food, choking down each bite so that Edward did not complain she was getting too thin.

After dinner Bridgette went onto the porch and took her favorite spot on the swing. The summer heat had dissipated somewhat, and there was a cooling breeze. She watched the waves whisper along the bayou. The setting sun turned the sky behind the trees in City Park a glowing red, and the dome on Holy Rosary Church blazed crimson-gold. None of the beauty broke through her worries though, and the brilliant colors were for naught. Listless, she pushed the swing back and forth, first with one limp foot and then the other.

“Pretty evening, isn’t it?” Edward let the door slam behind him and sat across from her. Bridgette jumped.

“Didn’t mean to startle you, but all evening I’ve been thinking.”

Bridgette continued the apathetic to and fro movement. She watched Edward spread the scroll out on the table between them and anchor it with a paperweight. Starting to get up, she decided the activity was too much for her and sank back onto the swing. Her back and forth motion resumed.

“Julius translated this for me today,” Edward said and pointed to the scroll. “It’s an adoption paper of some sort. The name of the baby being adopted is whited out, but it says the child was a thirteen-month-old girl. The adoption date on the scroll is December 18, 1918, so that means the child was born in November 1917. Isn’t November fourth your mother’s birthday? Very strange, don’t you think?” Edward paused and looked to Bridgette for a response. When she did not look up or stop the back and forth motion of the swing, Edward continued. “How old is your mother? She’s never said or admitted to her age when her birthday comes around, but I figured around forty-four or five, right? That means she’s born in nineteen-sixteen or seventeen. Did she ever say?” Edward waited. “Do you know what year she was born?” Edward emphasized the words. “Bridgette, stop that infernal swinging and listen to me.”

Startled, Bridgette looked up. “Huh?”

“I said, listen,” Edward insisted. “This could be very important. Your mother might be adopted.” When Bridgette looked down again, he said in a louder voice, “Do you hear what I’m saying?”

“Not really.”

“Look at this. It could be about your mother.”

“I told you. I’m not interested in that.”

Furious, Edward grabbed Bridgette’s hand and put her finger on the child’s birthdate. “See, this could be your mother’s birthdate. Don’t you see what that means? It means that Mamere adopted your mother.” When Bridgette tried to pull away, Edward continued in a cruel tone of voice. “That means Mamere is not really your grandmother and all that ancestry stuff she’s filled your ears with all these years is bullshit where you’re concerned. Descended from some poor, innocent nun like Isabelle. What a joke. You probably came from some ignorant Irish laborer. That explains your mother’s love of the whiskey bottle.”

Bridgette gasped, jumped off the swing, and ran toward the bayou. She stood on the water’s edge. Just sit down, close your eyes and slide right in. It will be warm and soothing. Everything will close over you. No more pain. No more worry. Slide in, let go, relax. She put one foot toward the water. Then her whole body tensed and fell backward when Edward grabbed her.

“Stop,” he yelled. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Dying,” she sighed.

Edward sat her down on the grass. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that to come out that way. It’s just the whole thing got to me. Mamere’s secrecy and then what the document implies. Julius today, the look on his face when we both realized what it meant. Being fooled all these years. Your grandmother’s sanctimonious attitude.”

“You said she’s not my grandmother,” Bridgette said in a little girl voice. “But she has to be. She loves me. Mother doesn’t.”

“Well, if she did adopt your mother, then legally she is your grandmother.”

“But not for real. It has to be for real. And what about Isabelle? I always thought she belonged to me too. I liked that. It made me feel important.” Bridgette started to cry.

Edward put his arms around her. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. Everything’ll be all right. We’ll figure this out.”

Bridgette nestled into him. “Maybe so,” she said in an uncertain, quiet voice. “We don’t have to tell anyone, do we?” She looked up at him, and her eyes pleaded for his silence. “No one has to know. We can pretend everything is all right just like always.”

“But Bridgette, nothing is all right. I’m not sure it ever has been.” Edward was silent for several minutes. “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it. Come inside. It’s late.”

*

Bridgette woke the next morning at eight-thirty to find the house quiet. Edward must already have left. Although she had trouble getting to sleep the night before, exhaustion overtook her and when she did sleep, it was deep and dreamless. She pulled the covers up around her neck and stared at the ceiling. She had to get up and face her day, but she felt paralyzed, unable to do so. If she got up, she would have to face yesterday’s discovery, tell someone, ask Mamere about it, tell Jacqueline, even Mother. How could she keep such a secret? How had Mamere kept silent all these years? Did Mother suspect? Did Jacqueline? The words and questions tumbled through her head, back and forth, one after the other. She felt numb, trapped under the blanket. Then stay in bed, never talk to anyone, never get up. She started to count the number of pictures on the wall, the lamps, and even to outline the grooves in the furniture. This was madness, absolute madness. Get up and face the secret or stay in bed and descend into counting oblivion. Trapped. Neither solution was acceptable. Both led to hopeless desperation.

Bridgette folded the coverlet backward and slid her legs to the floor. Standing up, she wrapped her arms around herself, then shuddered, reached for her robe and slipped it on. She stumbled down the hall to the porch but could not make herself open the front door. The thought of seeing Mamere's house across the bayou was anathema to her. Numb, she walked to the kitchen in the back, poured a cup of coffee from the pot Edward must have made, sat at the kitchen table, and looked out toward the back yard. Usually, the yellow, orange, and red zinnias bordering the yard's picket fence brightened her morning, but today they went unappreciated. She started to count them but shook her head in dismay. She must reach out to someone or remain in this limbo of numb dissolution. Ellen, of course, she could go see Ellen.

She thought of Ellen's calm, certain way of seeing things. In high school Ellen was her best friend, always there with a reassuring word. And Ellen even understood about the importance of ancestry. Her own family was descended from the early Spanish settlers of New Orleans. They had joked about it in high school, how the Spanish took over the administration of New Orleans from the French in 1765 but did not affect the French language or culture. They debated who had the strongest influence on New Orleans society, the French or the Spanish? Both agreed the city went downhill when the Americans took over in 1803. It was a stupid game they had played but Ellen would understand the importance of Isabelle and family continuity to Bridgette.

Ellen lived in one of the new areas way out Veterans Highway. Bridgette never had driven out that way, but she dressed, got in her car and started driving. She figured the way would come clear to her once she started. Besides who cared if she got lost? The area seemed alien, a big canal in the center of the neutral ground instead of grass, oak trees, or streetcars. No big, old houses with gingerbread curlicues or columns gracing their front porches. Everything

was new, and many of the houses looked similar to each other and lacked character. Bridgette wondered how Ellen tolerated living there so far from everything familiar.

Bridgette stopped her car in front of Ellen's house. Compelled to go in, she rushed up the front steps and knocked.

"Bridgette, what's going on?" Ellen asked when she opened the door. "I didn't know you were coming. What's the matter? Are you sick or something? You look awful."

"Everything I cared about has disappeared. Mamere is not my grandmother; Isabelle is not my special ancestor; my baby is dead, and I don't know what Edward's going to do. All that's left is Mother, and she hates me, always has." Bridgette started to drop on her knees to the porch floor, but Ellen grabbed her.

"Bridgette, come inside. Tell me what's happened."

"Mamere adopted my mother. Took her right from the orphanage down the street from her house. Who knows what her background is, the bastard child of some illiterate Irishman? That's what Edward said. He even laughed about it."

Ellen put her arm around Bridgette's waist and walked her to the nearest comfortable chair. She gestured for Jeff to turn off the television and go into the other room. "I can't believe Edward laughed. Doesn't seem like him, but you tell me."

"There's nothing else to tell. It was on this document that Edward had translated, from the orphanage where Mamere got her. She kept it hidden away all these years, since 1918."

"How'd Edward get it, then?"

"He found it." Bridgette did not want to lie but could not bring herself to reveal that she found it while stealing the christening dress. It was too shameful to admit that to anyone, even Ellen. "He asked Mamere to translate it, but when she didn't, he had a friend at his office do it."

She held her breath in fear that Ellen would ask where he discovered it. “What am I going to do?”

“I don’t know.” Ellen thought a few minutes. “Sit here for a while, then we’ll call Edward. He must have some ideas how to help with this.”

*

Bridgette jumped off the sofa when the doorbell rang and looked at Ellen. “Don’t leave me alone with him,” she pleaded. “I’m afraid I’ll lose it.”

“I’m here. Don’t worry.” She patted Bridgette’s leg on her way to let Edward in. “Bridgette’s been telling me about her mother and Mamere,” she said bringing him into the living room. “What’s going on? Seems bizarre to me, after all this time. How’d she keep that secret? And all the talk about ancestors when they aren’t even Bridgette’s. The old lady’s nuttier than I thought. Always seemed a little off the wall to me with her dedication to her ancestors and that foolishness about her dolls, but I never said anything to Bridgette. She worshipped her so, and Mamere doted on Bridgette.”

Bridgette started to defend her grandmother but clamped her mouth closed and shook her head. Confusion and sadness overwhelmed her. She reached her arms out to Edward who came and sat on the chair next to her.

He pulled the chair to face her and took both Bridgette’s hands into his. “I thought about this all yesterday and again this morning. We need to bring it out into the open.”

“We can’t,” Bridgette exclaimed. “What’ll happen to us if we do. Everyone will be so angry and upset, and other things could come out,” she said, thinking about the christening dress. “We have to keep this a secret. Both of you swear we won’t say anything. We can just give the document back to Mamere, maybe drop it off in her mailbox after she’s asleep. She knows

what's in it, and she won't want to say anything either. We can pretend that you never got it translated. We can all go on as though this never happened."

"Bridgette, honey, I can't pretend that well. I'd feel so strange the next time we got together for one of those family things; it would show on my face. I don't have the where with all to pull off a lie like that. Besides, I already showed it to Jacqueline. She met me at the hospital before she made rounds this morning."

"You couldn't have done that. You shouldn't have done that, especially without telling me first what you were going to do." Bridgette jumped up and started pacing round and round the room. She felt as though her whole insides were collapsing inward. She stopped in front of Edward. "Now what? You're so smart." She turned toward Ellen. "Now what?" she shouted as loud as she could. "Do you think he's right? This whole thing terrifies me. It could destroy the family. What if Mamere gets angry with me? Then who will love me? Ellen, make Edward stop. Make it not be true. Why can't it just be a dream, a bad nightmare?"

"Come sit here next to me." Ellen patted a spot on the sofa. "Edward, we need to think about it some more. Bring Bridgette into it."

"But now that Jacqueline knows, everyone will know." Bridgette said in an exasperated tone of voice. "It'd be like trying to stuff an elephant into an ant's hole to get that much mess back inside our brains." She started laughing and laughing and gasped for breath. "Stuff it back into our brains," she choked on the words. "Stuff it, stuff it, stuff it," she sang in a singsong rhythm, interrupting every few lines to gasp with laughter.

"Bridgette, get ahold of yourself. Stop." Edward stood up, grabbed her and held her. Her hysterical sobs mixed with laughter ran down like a failing clock. "There, there," Edward

crooned. “We’ll figure it out.” He sat her down on the sofa between him and Ellen. “We’ll work something out.”

“I don’t know how,” Bridgette whispered, her voice trembling. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Edward and Ellen both turned and looked straight at her. “I am here,” both of them said together, looked at each other and laughed. “We can and will make it,” Edward said in an emphatic tone. Ellen repeated his words and then said, “Together we three will make it work.”

Bridgette looked back and forth at each of them. “All right,” she said knowing she could not go on this way, trapped in her lonely misery. “If you both promise to make it come out right.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN—SINS

Bridgette looked around the kitchen in Jacqueline's house. It was a double shotgun characteristic of the houses in mid-city near Charity Hospital and Tulane Medical Center. The battleship gray walls spoke of years of paint and renters, as did the flaked ridges along the windowpanes.

Bridgette forced a smile at Jacqueline's brave attempt to brighten the walls with art posters and gewgaws. She studied the garish, red and yellow painted bird on wood that her sister picked up last summer in Mexico. Its elongated beak and stark feathers poked outward from the painting and screamed notice me instead of the dankness of this place.

"Let's get started on this," Edward said. "We need to make some decisions here."

"We might as well," Jacqueline responded. She looked tired and struggled to keep her eyes open. "I was on call last night, and the emergency room was busy with the crazies. It put me in the mood for this family, I guess."

Edward looked from Bridgette to Ellen and back to Bridgette and frowned. "Let's not get into that, all right?" He looked straight at Jacqueline. "How about we go round the room and everyone say how they think this should be handled. Bridgette has been very clear that she wants us to ignore it, give the scroll back to Mamere without mentioning we translated it, and just go on as always. I've told her I don't think I can do that."

"I'm not family so don't want to have a say in this except to let Bridgette know I'm here for her," Ellen said and smiled at Bridgette.

"I'm most worried how Mother will react," Jacqueline said. "She doesn't handle stress very well anyway. Just uses alcohol to cope and that makes her mean and vindictive. We certainly don't need that added to the pot."

“I gather except for Bridgette we all agree to confront this and talk about it,” Edward said.

“I didn’t hear everyone say that,” Bridgette whispered. “You’re going too fast. I love Mamere too much and don’t want to be mean to her. It’s not right to mess up her life with this. It sounds like we’re accusing her of something evil. She’s too old. What’s wrong with keeping it secret? It’s been a secret for over forty years.”

“We’re not accusing her of anything,” Edward responded in a gentle voice. “We want to bring the truth to light.”

“A family is only as sick as the secrets it keeps,” Jacqueline said in her doctor’s voice. “Those families with the most or the worst secrets are the most dysfunctional. The children learn from a very young age not to talk about things that could upset the precarious family balance. It’s not the secret that matters but the fact that family members never speak to each other about anything stressful. It leads to isolation, blame, and distrust.”

“Well, that settles it,” Edward said. “We talk about it. Now, let’s think of the best way to do it.”

“I can’t be there,” Bridgette said. “I can’t hurt Mamere that much. She did what she thought was the best thing to do. I don’t think you need to tell someone she’s adopted. I bet a lot of people don’t.”

“You’re right,” Edward said. “Sometimes people don’t talk about it and do what Mamere did, not tell the adopted child, thinking it’s better the child doesn’t know. But it’s the way Mamere hid it and refused to talk about it when I showed her the scroll. It just seemed peculiar to me. Like she was hiding something else.”

“You think there’s more to this?” Jacqueline questioned.

“Maybe,” Edward said. “Maybe not.”

“Bridgette,” Ellen said. “You need to be there. It’s important for you to face this. Just remember, we’ll all be there, and everyone knows how hard it is for you.”

“Edward,” Jacqueline said. “I talked to my therapist yesterday about this, and he suggested we bring it into the open, but also that we find a mediator to help us all through it, even Mother, as much as I hate including her.”

“You mean like family therapy?” Edward asked and frowned.

“No, I told him I didn’t think this family would go for that.” She looked at Edward and Bridgette and smirked. “We need someone who knows all of us and someone who everyone trusts.”

“I can’t imagine who that’d be.” Edward looked around at everyone.

“I know,” Bridgette exclaimed. “Sister Joseph.”

“Right you are, honey.” Jacqueline grinned. “Sister Joseph,” she emphasized the name. “She and Mamere were confidants from the time Mother was born, maybe before, and she knows all of us since we were children. She’s perfect, especially since Mamere trusts her so.”

*

Bridgette stopped between the two rows of box hedges that lined the sidewalk leading to the front door of the Old Ursuline Convent in the French Quarter. She had been to the convent many times with Mamere but was uncertain she could go farther than the front door today. She looked at the imposing two-story structure with its crisp, white façade and gray shutters, some open, some closed. She wondered what the original convent looked like, the one finished in 1734, when Isabelle was still there. She guessed someone knew why it was replaced with this one in

1745, only eleven years later. Sister Joseph probably knew, and she determined to ask her that today. Even with that, it was the oldest surviving building in the Mississippi Valley.

Standing there, she again admired its symmetry and attention to detail and order. When Edward and Ellen gestured for her to follow them, she told them to go ahead through the building to the back garden where they were to meet Jacqueline, Mamere, and Mother if Mother decided to come. She wanted to spend a few minutes inside looking around. She was certain Sister Joseph whose office as Director of the Archives was in the back building would meet with them as soon as she finished her meeting.

Bridgette watched as Edward and Ellen hesitated for a moment, and when she saw them pass from the hallway into the back garden, she followed through the front entrance. She stopped inside the door and looked to the staircase on her left. A rope blocked access to it, and she read the sign next to it. *“This staircase was originally part of the 1734 convent that stood closer to the river. It was reinstalled here when the present convent was built. It is the only open, winding staircase remaining in an American Colonial building. The hand-forged railing is the only original ironwork left from French Colonial Louisiana.”*

Awed as always, she imagined her ancestor Isabelle dashing up and down these very steps performing her duties. Mamere’s stories spoke of a young girl from a farm outside Rouen, France daring to come to New France as a novice intent on teaching the daughters of early settlers. She told of letters received by Isabelle’s father back in France that told of expanding her teaching duties to include the children of free people of color and native Indians. Then her letters abruptly stopped and rumors of her refusal to take final vows replaced them. Bridgette walked down the hallway on her right to stand in front of a long list of names painted on the wall. Isabelle’s name was seventh from the top: Isabelle Marie St. Pierre, Sister Marie Francois, and

on the left of her name the date 1727, when the nuns arrived in New Orleans and on the right 1734, the date Isabelle was rumored to have left the convent.

Bridgette reached out and touched the name hoping no one came and told her to stop. “Please, Isabelle, give me the courage to face my fears today with the same bravery that you faced your dilemma those many years ago,” she whispered. “I’ve loved having you as a member of my family all these years and don’t know what it will feel like for you not to belong to me anymore.” She looked around embarrassed that someone might overhear her, but the convent was quiet. Footsteps echoed from the brick entrance hall, and Bridgette looked over to see Mother and Mamere arguing.

“I don’t know why I had to come to this place,” Mother shouted, her speech slurred. “I hated when you made me come when I was little. It’s more of your foolishness.”

“I told you, Sister Joseph called and said there was some family business she wanted to meet about. Maybe it has to do with Isabelle. You know she’s been researching the original nuns for the archives.”

“Isabelle, Isabelle,” Mother jeered. “Who gives a shit about her?”

“You two, stop it,” Jacqueline grumbled rushing up behind them. “This is no place to act that way.”

“Didn’t know you were coming,” Mamere said and kissed Jacqueline on the cheek. “Thought you were tied up at the hospital. Do you know what this is about? We were just speculating.”

“Edward’ll tell us,” Jacqueline said.

“Edward? What’s he here for. I thought it had to do with family history.” Mamere looked uneasy.

“Well, yeah, sort of. Hey, Bridgette, let’s go. Come on.”

Bridgette let them go ahead, pushed through the back door into the garden, and paused to look around. Mamere, Mother, and Jacqueline joined Edward and Ellen at the wrought iron patio table centered in front of the two-story building that housed the archives. Edward started to rise and gestured Bridgette to join them. She shook her head and walked to the rear of the garden to the shrine of the Blessed Mary and the Infant Jesus. Sitting on the bench next to it, she fingered the wooden rosary in her pocket. She had found it this morning buried deep in her underwear drawer where she had stuffed it after Celeste died last year. She could not bear the sight of it then as she had planned to give it to Celeste after her Christening. It had once belonged to Isabelle, and Bridgette wondered if her ancestor led her to it today.

Several statues of nuns kneeling in prayer faced her and the shrine. She recognized the names of three of them, Mother Saint Francis Xavier Cabrini who achieved Sainthood in 1946, Mother Saint Augustin (Marie Tranchepain), the head of the group of Ursuline nuns who came to New Orleans in 1727, and Sister Henriette Delille, a free person of color who founded the Sisters of the Holy Family in 1842. As usual when she visited here, Bridgette stared at the nun whose nameplate was blank. Sister Joseph once told Bridgette that she embodied the bravery of all the nuns who left the known world to attend the souls of settlers in an unknown land. The statue, its simple, innocent face raised heavenward, prompted Bridgette to wonder if it might have represented Isabelle had her ancestor not chosen to leave the convent. As always, she could only wonder at the reason behind what must have been a daring decision in that day.

Bridgette watched Sister Joseph walk along the second floor balcony toward the side stairs. She stopped alongside the railing, looked down at the family below her, frowned, and then waved to Bridgette. As though seeing the building for the first time, Bridgette marveled that it

resembled Mamere's West Indies style house, just simpler and not as elegant as Mamere's. She had not realized that type of architecture existed in the French Quarter.

When Sister approached the table, Edward signaled Bridgette to come over. He introduced Ellen and reached down for his briefcase as though in answer to a question Sister asked. Starting to open the portfolio, he stopped when Sister shook her head. Bridgette watched as the family group plus one greeted Sister Joseph and started up the stairs after her. Such a ragged, disgruntled procession, it almost made Bridgette laugh at its outrageous composition; some she felt loved her, some were indifferent to her, and at least one hated her. She worried that at the end of today Mamere would hate her too. The theft and loss of the christening dress must come out. She got up and stopped before the unnamed nun and fingered Isabelle's rosary. Please don't let me lose both you and Mamere today.

Everyone was seated in a group of wing chairs next to the fireplace. Sister motioned Bridgette to take the empty place between Edward and Ellen. "Edward, I didn't expect the whole family today," Sister Joseph said. "I thought it'd be just you and Bridgette. You said something about clearing up the family story, so I assumed you wondered if we'd found anything in the archives about Isabelle. I'm sure Ellen here is not interested in that."

"What?" Jacqueline said astounded. "You didn't tell Sister Joseph we wanted her help clarifying the document? I told you to be specific. What if Sister didn't want to be involved?"

"Huh, what's going on here?" Mamere queried and looked bewildered. "Involved in what?"

Edward reached into his briefcase and pulled out the scroll. "We need to talk about this. It's important to the family to clear this matter up." He gave it to Sister Joseph.

"Some sort of document? It's in French. Give me a minute to read it."

“Sister, give that to me,” Mamere insisted and reached to snatch it from her. “It’s mine, and somehow they got ahold of it. How’d you find it?” She narrowed her eyes and glared at Bridgette. “You found it didn’t you?” she sneered. “It was in the same chest as the christening dress. And, where is that, miss? I looked for it today. Edgar found the boy baby doll for me, and I planned to put that on him until you had another baby. Maybe, that would insure you had a boy this time. Not another unhealthy girl. That’s all we got in this family since Robert died, a bunch of no good girls.”

“Why, you hateful old biddy,” Mother rasped and reached out as though to strike her.

“Mamere, Mother, stop,” Jacqueline pleaded.

Bridgette tried to get up and run but slumped back into the chair when Edward and Ellen reached for her hands. She sat there immobile and stared at the empty fireplace.

“I see what this is, Mary Alice,” Sister Joseph said. “It’s from the orphanage, isn’t it?” She looked around the circle. “Let’s take a moment here and ask God to help us talk this through.” She folded her hands and murmured a prayer. “Please, everyone pause a moment and ask for guidance.” She looked around as though to take everyone’s measure. After a few minutes of silence, she continued in a calm voice. “How many of you know what this is about?” She showed them the document. “You do, Edward, Ellen, Jacqueline, Bridgette, Mary Alice?” She nodded to each of them. “How about you, Amanda? Do you?”

Mother jumped as though she had been slapped. “Am I the only one in the dark here?” Mother said. “That’s always been my role, hasn’t it, to be left out.” She started to cry. “Someone, please tell me what’s going on.”

“Show her, Sister,” Edward directed. “She has a right to know.”

“This doesn’t tell it all,” Sister said. She looked at Mamere and nodded. “Right, Mary Alice?”

“I don’t know what you’re saying,” Mamere said. “It shows I adopted her, that’s all.”

“What?” Mother yelled. “That’s all?” She jumped up and paced the room. “I need a drink. Sister, do you have any sherry? I have to have something. I can’t stand this. What’s going to happen to me? My whole life, just one miserable mistake after the other. Oh, God! Adopted?”

Sister Joseph got up and took both of Mother’s hands. “Come back and sit down. You need to hear all of it.” She led her to the chair, turned and sat down herself.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” Mamere protested. “You were my friend. I trusted you. I confided in you. You can’t tell anyone the things I told you years ago. I felt safe with you.”

“Are you not really my grandmother?” Bridgette said in a small voice from deep in the chair. “I can’t bear it if you’re not, and what about my ancestors? Who are they? What about Isabelle? It isn’t fair. I lost my baby and now I lose you too. You were the only one in the world I trusted, and now I find out you lied to me. You told me all those stories, even played them out with me when I was a little girl.” Bridgette started sobbing. “Don’t you remember how we searched the French Quarter shops for doll house furniture? The tiny dolls we looked for to put in the house. It was such fun. No one else wanted anything to do with me, but you treated me special and now it’s all ruined. Stop it. I can’t stand it anymore.”

Edward and Ellen looked at Bridgette and then each other. “Maybe we shouldn’t have said anything,” Edward said and shook his head. “It seemed the right thing to do at the time.”

Mamere got up and went to Bridgette. Kneeling on the floor in front of her chair, Mamere took her granddaughter’s hands into hers. “My precious, I do love you and have from the moment you were born. You were and still are one of the most special people in my life, so

please listen to what I'm going to tell you." She nodded to Sister Joseph and continued in a sad voice. "The years after your grandfather's death in the War were horrible ones for me. Your anguish over Celeste's death reminded me of myself then." She stopped and took Bridgette's face in her hands. "Worst of all, I was pregnant and desperate. I did not think I could take care of another baby. Robert was not even two at the time. The War was going on, and it was just awful. When Mother Francis Cabrini came to visit the orphanage not long after I discovered I was going to have a baby, it seemed like a miracle, like God telling me what to do." She stopped and rubbed her hands together as though to pray but thought better of it and dropped them to her sides. "I knew her, you know, through my father, and when I was a young girl helped her move some of the orphans from their place in the French Quarter to the new one on Esplanade Avenue. Frantic, I went to see her and explained my situation, that I was pregnant and asked if she would take the child." She looked back at Mother. "Amanda, I am so sorry." Mamere looked around the group as though for understanding before she continued. Sister Joseph nodded. "Mother Cabrini understood but worried that at some point I might regret my decision and want the child back. She suggested they accept it but only as a border, maybe take care of the child for a few months, not sign any formal papers."

Edward reached for the scroll that Sister had put on the table. "But, what's..."

"Mother Cabrini kept trying to reassure me," Mamere interrupted. "The United States had just entered the War, and the thinking was with America joining the Allies, Germany's defeat was certain. Everything would look brighter, and I'd want my baby. I didn't think so, but I agreed anyway. So when your mother was born, I gave her to the nuns. I wanted someone to adopt her and love her in the way I couldn't." She stopped and looked around. At first no one said anything, and then everyone spoke at once.

“You gave me away?” Mother screeched, her face red.

“But that means you really are my grandmother,” Bridgette exclaimed. She reached out to hug Mamere.

“Why this document then?” Edward tried to hand it to Mamere, but she ignored him.

“I knew things were screwy in this family,” Jacqueline said with a self-satisfied air.

“Why’d you take her back then if you didn’t want her?”

Bridgette looked at everyone’s face and thought, my sister just said what everyone is thinking but didn’t have the heart to say. Why take her back, especially since she turned out so mean and hateful?

“Because a year later, Robert died from the flux, and I needed someone to hang onto.” The words burst from deep within Mamere. “There was nobody. I felt so alone. I couldn’t stand the isolation.”

“Oh, Mom,” Mother sighed. “Why say that now? Is that what I was to you? Not even a person?” She got up and silently walked out of the room.

Sister Joseph looked from one anguished face to the other. No one spoke. After several seconds, Sister said in a kind but firm voice, “Jacqueline, go get your mother. I hear her crying outside.”

When Jacqueline returned with Mother, Sister Joseph said, “Amanda, sit here next to me. Now, Mary Alice, tell the rest of it.”

Mamere looked around as though pleading for understanding. When no one said anything, she continued her story. “Well, I went to get her. Mother Cabrini had died the year before, not long after I left Amanda with her, and no one knew of our arrangement. I hadn’t visited the baby the year she was at the orphanage, even though it was right down the street. I

couldn't. The nuns knew they were keeping the child for a troubled mother, but they never met me. The new Mother Superior, the one whose name is on the document, insisted I formally adopt her. Amanda didn't even know me. I took her from the nuns who adored her. For months, she cried and cried. She was only a little over a year old. We never had a chance." Mamere stumbled back to her chair, slumped backwards into it, and covered her face with her hands.

Bridgette reached inside her pocket and pulled out the ancient family rosary. Getting up from her chair, she handed it to Sister Joseph. "This belonged to Isabelle, you know. It's been passed down from one woman in the family to the next." When Sister stood up and took the rosary, Bridgette gestured for everyone to come stand beside them. She clasped one piece of it in her hand and signaled everyone else to do the same. When Ellen hesitated, Bridgette nodded for her to join them. As they held each other through their grip on the rosary, Bridgette prayed, "Let's each take hold of this gift from Isabelle and God. We women have handed down more than this rosary through the years. Let's pray the pain and ugliness stops here, and we learn to forgive ourselves and each other."

VITA

The author was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in Chemistry from the University of New Orleans in 1962. She was in that University's first graduating class. She obtained her Master's degree in Microbiology in 1967 from Louisiana State University and obtained her Doctor of Medicine degree from Louisiana State University School of Medicine later that same year. She completed a residency in General Psychiatry and Child Psychiatry at Tulane University's Department of Psychiatry in 1974. She practiced general psychiatry, child psychiatry, and psychoanalysis in New Orleans from 1974 until her retirement in 2006. Following retirement, she enrolled in the University of New Orleans Creative Writing Workshop with a concentration in Fiction. She has three chapters in *Voices Rising, Stories from the Katrina Narrative Project* published by the University of New Orleans Press. She also has another chapter "Broken Promises, Shattered Dreams, Wordless Endings" in *Therapist in Mourning*, published by the Columbia University Press. She has been married to John Schneller, III, PhD for 51 years and has three children and seven grandchildren.