

CHAPTER EIGHT



1 That night Mary waited for the house to grow quiet. When the door to
2 Papa's study clicked closed, she peeked into the hall. A dim light filtered
3 under his door. In slow motion, she rolled past it. Putting her ear to the
4 door, she listened for him. Papers rustled, and a pen tapped on the desk.
5 Satisfied he was occupied, she edged forward. As the chair tire bounced on
6 a rough spot, she grimaced and held her breath. After a minute, her heart
7 slowed again, and she inched toward his bedroom. Maneuvering through,
8 she eased the heavy door to lay against the frame. His bedside lamp
9 softened the room's edges. A woody scent hung lightly in the air, reminding
10 her she was intruding on Papa.

11 She stared at the cedar chest against the window overlooking the
12 gardens. It had been a fixture in her life without her realizing its
13 significance. Her finger traced the wood's red grains, polished to perfection.
14 She opened the lid, inch-by-inch; terrified it would squeak and alert Papa.

15 With both hands, she eased out a dainty, gold-satin hat. Black ostrich
16 feathers overlaid its wide brim and rippled under her fingers. Tucked
17 sweetly inside the hat rested a white handkerchief embellished with
18 miniature, tatted-lace flowers. She placed the hat softly on her head and
19 tilted it for style—transforming her into a lady. A tissue-wrapped package
20 crinkled as she pinched it, folding it away to uncover a veil. Beneath the
21 veil nestled a pair of white satin gloves. Pearls, that had long since yellowed,

22 studded the soft fabric. Mary slipped the gloves on, and they bunched up
23 over her elbows. Rubbing her hands on her gloved forearms, she hugged
24 herself.

25 From the bottom of the chest, she lifted a Bible. The pages plopped open
26 to reveal a dried, pressed flower. "Ah." It looked white, but she suspected
27 it had once been pink blush. She peered into the garden's darkness toward
28 the pink blush camellia bush. The flower in her hand explained why her
29 papa dug up the plant to take with them every time they moved.

30 On a dedication page, a feminine scrawl recorded a wedding date. Mary's
31 birth was celebrated, and her christening—"set aside for the Lord" on June
32 20. Strong print lettering documented the date, March 21, 1944, with no
33 other notation. She didn't have to be a genius to know that was the day her
34 mama died.

35 A sudden disturbance of the air in the room caused Mary to look up and
36 over her shoulder. Papa stood with his hand on the knob, his face a blank
37 white mask. Her eyes pleaded with him to forgive her for peeking into his
38 heart where she had not been invited.

39 He came across the room, removed the Bible from her lap, and knelt
40 beside her. Turning to Psalms, he slipped out a slightly tattered photo and
41 placed it in her hand. In the photograph, her papa stood behind a couch
42 and stared directly at the camera. Mother and daughter, however, ignored
43 the photographer. They were otherwise occupied with an intimate moment
44 as they shared smiles. For the first time, Mary understood the enormity of
45 her loss. As her body crumpled, he drew her close and held her tight.

46 "I know." He stroked her hair. "I know. She loved you deeply and dearly."

47 Mary bit down on her lip. "Tell me about her."

48 Papa sighed. "She was beautiful. Inside and out. Every inch a lady. She
49 was always grateful and appreciative. While she was gentle and kind, when
50 it came to watching over you, she had the heart of a warrior." His fingers

51 rubbed Mary's arm. "This is really Mrs. Tate's story to tell, but you can get
52 her to fill in the details later. You would have been... almost three. You and
53 your mama were outside enjoying a spring day. As you played with your
54 doll on a quilt in the grass, your mama stepped into the kitchen to get a
55 cup of peppermint tea. She watched you through the window as the kettle
56 heated. A wild dog crept on its belly toward you. We'd heard it had killed
57 several neighborhood cats and wiped out a flock of chickens." His arms
58 tightened around her. "Though she was only a few steps from you, the dog
59 got there first and snatched you by the dress. It growled and shook you as
60 it dragged you across the grass. You were screeching in terror."

61 Mary's fingers clutched his shirt as she huddled into him.

62 "Your mama raced after that dog, grabbed it with her bare hands. One
63 hand on its neck and one hand at the base of its tail. As it yelped, she flung
64 it. Mrs. Tate says over the moon." Papa chuckled. "She was the most
65 amazing woman—your mama." He took the picture from Mary's hand. "She
66 was an angel, so I guess she is exactly where she belongs."

67 Mary wrapped her arms around his neck and laid her head on his
68 shoulder. "You'll always have me, Papa." She tugged on the folds of his
69 warm jacket. "Why did I live when the virus killed Mama?"

70 Papa didn't answer and just rubbed her arm. Finally, he said, "Maybe it's
71 time you knew."

72 She leaned backward and looked up at him.

73 "The virus ran rampant in East Texas at the time with devastating
74 consequences. I knew a researcher at The Mercy Hospital in Houston who
75 was working on an experimental immune therapy cure. My friend had one
76 minuscule culture. He was certain it could save one of you, but not both.
77 Your mama and I discussed the ramifications at length. You were so very
78 sick, and without something immediately, we knew you would die." He tilted
79 his head to look down at her. "We decided we didn't have anything to lose
80 and took a chance it could save you. She was completely bedridden by then,

81 so I gathered you up and took you to the hospital. My friend secretly
82 administered the immune therapy shot. We could tell no one because it
83 would have meant the end of his career and jail time."

84 Papa sighed deeply and shook his head. "Mrs. Tate nursed you day and
85 night at considerable risk to her own health. It took about three days before
86 we had hope you would survive. Your mama was sleeping most of the time.
87 I carried you in to see her, and for a moment, she opened her eyes and
88 smiled with joy. She knew you would live, and she passed away in my arms
89 in complete peace later that same day."

90 Mary curled into Papa's shoulder.

91 "The tragedy is there was so much love between the three of us that
92 hadn't been shared yet."

93 Several long minutes later, Papa squeezed her. "Nice hat. Gloves are a
94 little big though."

95 Mary smiled. "You're the best, Papa."