

C H A P T E R · 1

CHICAGO, 1969

When the dog began to howl, did Becca want to howl too? Kneeling there on that Chicago sidewalk with Reuben's blood on her hands, did she want to howl out her rage and grief and disbelief to the heavens? Were her sobs and screams too paltry, insufficient for pain so primeval? Did she want to reach up with her bloody hands and yank down the sky and send the moon and the stars and the planets tumbling and crashing in white-hot fury around her?

I have tried to imagine what it was like for her on that night . . . but only from a safe distance. I refuse to put myself in her place and imagine Quinn dead.

The year was 1969, and I was not there. I was four years old and lived with my grandparents in Drucilla, Kentucky. Becca, my mother, was in Chicago because she had fled there when she left Drucilla. On the night Reuben James died, she was a few months short of her twenty-second birthday.

According to the newspaper I read on microfilm, New Year's Day, 1969, dawned cold enough to break records. Frigid air stretched from the Midwest to the Deep South.

By the next day, the temperatures in Chicago and vicinity had climbed back into the twenties, but the mercury dropped again that night. Anyone who didn't have a good reason to be outside stayed in.

It was after 11:00 P.M. when the summit meeting ended with promises of cooperation all around. The street was empty when Reuben, Becca, and TJ came out of the house. I can't swear to every detail of what happened next, but here is how I have imagined it, based on the article in the newspaper and what I learned later. . . .

"Damn, it's colder than a—" TJ stopped and glanced up and down the shadowed street. "Where the hell's Wesley with the car?"

"He'll be back," Becca said. "I sent him over to the Shack to get us some fried fish."

TJ wheeled on her. "You what?"

"He was just sitting out here doing nothing, and I'm hungry."

“You’re hungry?”

“That’s what I said. So I sent Wesley to—”

“Who do you think you are, girl? You don’t give orders to—”

“Hold it, you two,” Reuben said, holding up his hand. “TJ, it’s cool. Wesley’ll be back in a minute.”

Becca said, “So there’s no reason for you to get your drawers in a knot about it, TJ.”

TJ glared at her. “It wasn’t your place to tell Wesley to go nowhere. Reuben may be keeping you busy on your back, but that don’t mean the rest of us care what you—”

Becca sprang at him. TJ threw his arms up to protect himself from the blows that she rained on his upper body.

Laughing, Reuben caught her around the waist and hauled her away. He kissed the top of her head. “My woman’s got fire,” he said.

“Your woman?” TJ said. “Ain’t you forgetting about—”

Reuben cut him off. “Don’t go there, man,”

“I’m Reuben’s woman,” Becca said. “All his.” She twisted around and slid her hands inside Reuben’s jacket as she cuddled up against him. “As soon as JoJo comes back to town, I’m going to take care of everything.”

TJ scowled at her. “What you getting JoJo into now?”

“None of your business. She’s just gonna help me with something.”

Reuben held her away from him. “Help you with what, Becca?”

“It’s all right, baby. I’ll tell you all about it later.” She pulled his head down to hers and whispered in his ear.

Reuben laughed and drew her closer.

TJ clapped his bare hands together and stamped his feet. “Damn, Wesley. Where are you, man?” He turned to Reuben again. “I’m getting some bad vibes about this.”

Reuben smiled. “You get bad vibes about getting up in the morning.”

“Ain’t you the one always telling us about staying alert?”

“We just shook hands with our enemies. We made peace.”

“And now we’re freezing our damn asses off.”

“Prime Chicago weather, man. Just chill.”

“I ain’t no damn Eskimo.”

Reuben had stopped listening; Becca was whispering in his ear again.

Snowflakes danced in the wind that whipped around them. Up the street, a mangy-looking dog paused beside the lamppost, its hind leg raised.

TJ cursed. “This ain’t making it. I say we go back inside and wait for—”

Tires squealed, and a car barreled around the corner, its lights on high beam. TJ plunged his cold-numbered hand into his jacket, fumbling for the gun in his shoulder holster. He yelled out Reuben’s name and leaped toward him. Reuben shoved Becca to the ground as he went for his own gun.

The bullets ricocheted off the concrete wall behind them. Becca screamed as Reuben fell. TJ fired back, but he was down too.

The car roared off into the night. The silence hung there for a moment, and then the mangy dog howled.

Becca crawled to Reuben, sobbing, calling his name.

TJ struggled to sit up. "Reuben?" He toppled sideways.

Becca screamed.

The dog echoed her distress, but no one rushed to Becca's aid. . . .

Maybe she did love Reuben James.

Maybe my mother loved Reuben as much as she was capable of loving anyone.

C H A P E R . 2

GALLAGHER, VIRGINIA, SATURDAY, JUNE 5 (SEVERAL DECADES LATER)

When I woke up, it was raining, but I felt pretty good for 8:45 on a soggy Saturday morning.

I didn't see it coming. No goose walked over my grave.

I was in the shower when the telephone rang. Certain it was Quinn, I turned off the water and grabbed a towel.

"Hi! Hold on. I've got water running down my back."

"Professor Stuart?"

It wasn't Quinn. The last time his voice had been that high-pitched, he would have been going through puberty. "Yes, who is this, please?"

"This is Ray Nathan, your renter."

Calling from Kentucky when I didn't have time to talk to him.

"Oh, Mr. Nathan, I'm sorry. I have an appointment at ten, and I'm rushing. Could I call you back this afternoon?"

"My wife told me to call you. We've got a shutter loose on one of the bedroom windows, and it keeps banging."

"I'm sorry about that. I'll ask Mr. Womack to come over and fix it."

"My wife says you need to tell him to check the roof too. When it rained yesterday, it was leaking in two places in the upstairs hall."

Just what my bank account needed, a new roof and ceiling repairs. "Thank you for telling me. I'll ask Mr. Womack to climb up there and have a look."

"Another thing about the house, it creaks and groans at night."

"There's not much I can do about that, Mr. Nathan. The house is almost a hundred years old. At night it needs to settle its old bones."

"My wife says with all that creaking and groaning, maybe you got a ghost."

I bit down hard on my lip to keep from laughing. Ray Nathan was heart over head in love with his flighty little bride. What she said was his gospel.

"Please tell your wife that if there is a ghost, it's either Hester Rose, my grandmother, or Walter Lee, my grandfather, and they're both friendly."

Well, Walter Lee would be anyway. Hester Rose as a ghost might be more difficult to live with.

"My wife thinks you might have mice up in the attic. She's been hearing

scurrying around and gnawing coming from up there when she's trying to have her nap."

She was on safer ground there. At various times, squirrels, even a pair of raccoon, had found their way into that attic.

"I'll ask Mr. Womack to add the attic to his list. If he can't deal with the problem, he'll call in a professional."

"My wife wants me to go up there and put down some traps and rat poison."

"No, please don't do that. We don't want anything to die up there and begin to smell. Mr. Womack will handle it." I hitched my slipping towel. "I really do have to run, Mr. Nathan. I'll get all of this taken care of, I promise."

"The weatherman's forecasting rain today. What do you want us to do if the roof starts leaking again before your handyman gets over here?"

"I'll ask Mr. Womack to get there as soon as he can. But if you should have another leak, there ought to be two or three big plastic buckets out on the back porch."

"I had to use those when I was digging up the flowers."

"Pardon me? You were doing what?"

"Digging up the flowers. I hated to dig up the peonies and the day lilies. My mama used to grow those. But those red ones—my wife said they call them 'bleeding hearts.' That didn't sound too good to have a flower with a name like that growing by the house. I got the blue ones that looked like little bells, too, and the . . . what do you call it? The . . . crepe myrtle?"

It took me a moment to find my tongue. "Are you telling me that you dug up all of the flowers growing in back and around the sides of the house?"

"I had to. My wife likes to open the windows in the morning to let the house air out. She said all those flower smells coming in on the breeze were bothering her sinuses."

"So you dug up—?"

"Those tulips alongside the front walk had to go too. And the rose bushes."

"The rose bushes? You—"

"I chopped those down. Then I dug out the roots. Too many bees were coming around. My wife got stung once when she was a child, and she's afraid of bees."

I had to squeeze my words out of my tight throat. "Mr. Nathan, henceforth, before you remove or change anything in my yard or in my house, you are to ask my permission. That is in your lease. You would know that if you had bothered to read it."

"The lease? We didn't think you'd mind if we—"

"Not mind if you dug up all my flowers? You didn't think I would mind that?"

"I had to do it. My wife's sinuses—"

"Yes, her sinuses. And she might've been attacked by a marauding bee." I

closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and told myself, *Please let me be calm, when I want to throttle this man.* “It’s not me you have to worry about, Mr. Nathan. It’s my grandmother.”

“Your grandmother? You mean the one that’s dead?”

“That’s the only one I have. It was her house, and those were her flowers.”

“You don’t really think she. . . . There’s no such thing as ghosts.”

“Well, you’d better ask your wife about that. Meanwhile, I’ll ask Mr. Womack to come over and see to the other problems.” I hung up the telephone, careful not to slam it down.

I did not have time to stop and cry over dug-up rose bushes. I had to get dressed for my optometrist’s appointment. But first I needed to call Mr. Womack and get him over there to check the roof before the Nathans dealt with the leak by burning down the house.

It was 10:08 when I rushed through the doors of the eyeglass superstore. My tardiness turned out not to matter. I spent the next half hour cooling my heels in the reception area.

The optometrist to whom I’d been assigned seemed competent, but she made me feel every one of my thirty-nine years. If I had seen her on campus, I would have sworn she was a senior—or a master’s student, at most. She wore a short denim skirt and pink tee shirt under her white coat. Her dark brown hair hung in a thick braid down her back. She had dimples and a toothy smile. She told me her name was Trish Bauer.

She leaned over me, peering into my eyes with her light. She went back to the right one and said, “Ummm.”

“Is something wrong?” I had made this appointment because I had a faculty insurance voucher for an eye exam and new reading glasses. I did not want to leave with bifocals.

She stepped back and looked down at me. “Did your former optometrist ever mention that your pupils are asymmetrical? The opening of one of your pupils is wider than the other.”

“What? I mean, no. Wider?”

She reached for a piece of paper and began to draw. “They look like this,” she said, holding it out to me. Her drawing showed a significant difference in the size of the two holes. “What that means is that more light is passing through one pupil than the other.”

“He—Dr. Prentice—never mentioned that. I went to him all my life from the time I was twelve when I got my first pair of reading glasses.”

But Dr. Prentice was a small-town “eye doctor.” I had continued to go to him as an adult because I didn’t want to hurt his feelings. Maybe both he and his equipment had been past their prime. With his death and my move to Gallagher, over two years had passed since my last exam.

“It could be a fairly recent development,” Dr. Bauer said, echoing my thought.

“I haven’t noticed any change in my vision.”

She stood back and surveyed my eyes. “It’s not obvious when I look at you. Nothing’s evident to the naked eye. But sometimes a problem can sneak up.” She smiled and touched my arm. “I’d like to have one of my colleagues have a look-see. Sit tight.”

When she came back into the room, she was accompanied by her gray-haired colleague. He introduced himself as Dr. Nielsen.

“I agree,” he told her when he’d finished his own peering.

“You agree about what?” I said.

Dr. Bauer, my young optometrist, touched my arm again. Obviously in school they had taught her that touch soothed nervous patients. She said, “We both think you should come in for some additional testing.”

Dr. Nielsen nodded at me. “You’re in good hands. I need to get back to my own patient.”

“Thanks,” she called after him. She smiled at me. “I’m new at this, so sometimes I like a second opinion.”

“What do you think it might be?”

She sat down on her stool. “Let’s wait and see what the test shows. We want to check your visual field.” She made a notation on my chart. “How about we get you back in here this coming week to get that taken care of?”

“Is it that urgent?” I asked.

“Well, we want to find out what’s going on. No point in waiting, right?”

“Right,” I said around the lump of panic forming in my throat.

C H A P T E R · 3

I was almost calm by the time I got home. I had even stopped at the supermarket. Quinn's black Bronco was parked at the curb. I pulled around his car and into the driveway of the glossy white, three-bedroom, ranch-style house that I had been leasing since last August. If it had been my house, this spring I would have planted flowers to soften the lines of the boxy front lawn.

I pulled the collar of my jacket higher and reached for my umbrella.

"Hi, sweetie!" Mrs. Cavendish, my neighbor across the street, waved from her front yard. Her yellow rain slicker and hat matched her sunshine yellow house.

She pointed to the side of her house, where Quinn—wearing an identical yellow slicker but no hat—stood on a ladder propped beside the trellis of scarlet roses that climbed toward the second-story windows.

"Got a clogged rainspout," Mrs. Cavendish called out, sharing that bit of information with me and the rest of the neighborhood.

I nodded, waved again, and gathered up my plastic bags from the backseat.

My landlords confined their flowers to the abstract explosion of red poppies on the fabric that covered the living room sofa. Given their traveling ways, I had been puzzled by the wide-screen television opposite the sofa until I discovered their alphabetized collection of documentaries about exotic locales. At the moment, they were in Helsinki. Their attorney had sent me a lease for another year. If they intended to work their way down the list to Zanzibar, I could probably stay even longer.

But, as I had been reminded this morning, life is unpredictable.

Out in the kitchen, I took the cellophane off the daffodils I had bought at the supermarket and put them in a vase. Then I put my groceries in the refrigerator. Fifteen or twenty minutes later, I heard the front door close. By then I was sitting at the table, cradling a warm mug of peppermint tea in my hands.

"Hi," Quinn said as he came in.

He had discarded his rain slicker, but his damp hair still clung to his head. Dry, it would be thick and full, burnished auburn with gray at the temples. Browns of that same auburn arched over eyes that glistened silver like a mountain stream dappled with sunlight. High cheekbones stood out against fair skin that

was not prone to tan, even during our Southern summers. When it came to coloring, the one-eighth Comanche had been upstaged by the Irish and Scot.

“Hi, yourself,” I said. “Want a towel?”

“These will do.” He tore a handful of paper towels from the roll on the counter and walked toward me as he rubbed at his hair and around the collar of his blue sweatshirt.

“Sorry I wasn’t here when you arrived,” I said. “I had an appointment with the optometrist.”

He leaned over me. “I have a key now, Lizabeth. I can let myself in.”

“Yes, you can.” I breathed in the scent of rain and a hint of aftershave as his lips brushed mine.

His fingers caressed my nape. “You got a haircut.”

“A trim yesterday.”

“It feels like baby’s fuzz.”

The image of a half-bald baby sprang into my mind. I pushed his hand away and felt the whorls of hair on my scalp. “I cut off too much this time, didn’t I?”

He laughed. “I said it *felt* like baby fuzz, Lizabeth, not that it looked that way. Fuzz on babies doesn’t do a thing for me.” He kissed the side of my mouth. “But on you, half an inch of hair is damn sexy. You taste good too.”

He tasted like cinnamon. Mrs. Cavendish must have rewarded him for his rainspout duty with his favorite pastry.

I moved closer, deepening the kiss.

He raised his head. “Is the movie marathon still on? Or would you rather—”

“Yes, I would. But the movies are research for that chapter that was due two weeks ago. I promised the editor of the anthology that it would be in her e-mail on Monday.”

“Then I guess we’d better make some popcorn.”

“I’ve already made coffee.”

He ran a finger down my cheek. “Thank you, Lizabeth. I appreciate the thought.”

“The *thought*, Quinn? I think my coffee-making has improved significantly in the past few months.”

“Absolutely. You make better coffee than any tea drinker that I know.”

“Faint praise.” I pressed my hands against his chest. “Out of my way, sir. I’m going to commune with Spike Lee.”

We sat on my landlord’s sofa and watched *Do the Right Thing*, about the hottest day of the summer in a Brooklyn neighborhood. Racial tensions simmered in a series of encounters between the owners of an Italian pizzeria, their black employee, the Korean grocery store owner, and the assorted black residents of the neighborhood. The day ended with a riot triggered by a brutal arrest by the police.

Quinn had been silent through most of the film. I had been silent too, because half my mind was on what the optometrist had said and the fact that I hadn't told Quinn yet.

I would tell him later. I wanted one more afternoon when we were thinking only of romance.

I almost laughed at that thought. If I wanted romance, we should have been watching *An Affair to Remember*, not *Do the Right Thing*.

I put my coding sheet down on the coffee table. On the screen, quotes from Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X about violence appeared before the closing credits.

I glanced over at Quinn, who had slouched down on the sofa. But I suspected it wasn't from boredom. "So, what did you think of this movie the first time you saw it?" I asked.

"I've only seen it once before. I was one of the cops assigned to attend a screening to see what kind of trouble we could anticipate. Some higher-ups had heard the movie was going to set off race riots in New York, and they wanted Philly to be prepared."

"Quinn, I know that the media and even some black intellectuals were predicting that the movie was going to cause trouble. But are you saying you were actually assigned to watch it and make an assessment?"

"Back in 1989, having people on the screen rattling off a litany of racial slurs seemed pretty explosive. The way the cops were portrayed in the movie worried us too."

"After you watched it, what did you do?"

"Nothing. Nobody rioted."

"I know that, but what would—"

"I'd rather talk about what's going on here, Lizabeth." He reached for my hand. "What's up?"

"You sound like Bugs Bunny."

"I'm trying to decide if I need to retreat to my hole. The past couple of hours have felt a little strained, and I don't think it was the effect of Spike Lee's racial commentary. Are you upset with me about something?"

I shook my head. "It was just a really bad morning."

"Want to tell me about it?"

"First, Ray Nathan called. He had a list of repairs that need to be done on my house in Drucilla, from a leaking roof to mice in the attic."

"A new roof could be expensive."

"I know that, but it was the flowers that upset me. He dug up all the flowers, Quinn. All of Hester Rose's flowers."

"Why the devil did he do that?"

"Because his wife has sinus problems and she's afraid of bees."

Quinn's response was succinct and obscene.

I nodded. “That’s exactly what I wanted to say.”

“I’m sorry about the flowers, babe. I’ll help you plant some more when you take me to Drucilla.”

“Thank you.” I sniffed and straightened. “It was just that he made me so mad and there was nothing I could do about it.”

“You could have told him to get the hell out of your house. I don’t suppose that occurred to you.”

“Yes, of course, it occurred to me. I almost did. But I need to have someone in the house, and they haven’t been bad tenants . . . except for the flowers.”

“The flowers are a big ‘except,’ Lizabeth. Sometimes, sweetheart, you’re too damn nice.”

“I’m not nice,” I said. “I mean I am nice. But that doesn’t mean I’m incapable of being assertive.”

“You’re perfectly capable of being assertive. You just have a hard time being nasty to people, even when they deserve it.”

“I told him Hester Rose would get them.”

Quinn laughed. “From what you’ve told me about your grandmother, she just might.”

I smiled. Our gazes held, and the expression in his eyes changed from amusement to something more intense. He said, “If we’ve finished with our Saturday afternoon at the movies—”

“I do need to watch *Fury* again.”

“Later?”

“Later,” I agreed.

He started to reach for me, then stopped. “You said, ‘First, Ray Nathan called.’ What else happened?”

“There was—”

The cell phone that he had unclipped from his belt and put on the coffee table began to ring. He glanced at the phone, then back at me.

“It’s all right,” I said. “It can wait.”

He picked up his phone. “Chief Quinn.”

As the university police chief of Piedmont State University—a campus with 26,000 full- and part-time students, plus faculty, staff, and visitors—Quinn was prone to receive calls even when he was off duty. Monday would be the beginning of the first six-week summer session. The undergrads were flocking back to the dorms. The grad students had never left. Something was always going on.

Unless he had a good reason not to, Quinn answered his cell phone whenever it rang. I, on the other hand, was still inclined to turn off the one he had given me and shove it to the bottom of my shoulder bag.

That would have to change come fall semester when the Institute for the Study of Southern Crime and Culture opened its doors. As the executive director, I would have to be accessible. But I intended to have one last cell-phone-free summer.

Quinn listened as the person on the other end talked. I picked up our empty mugs from the coffee table and headed for the kitchen.

I had my head in the refrigerator, surveying my ingredients and debating the merits of making a big pot of vegetable beef soup, when he spoke from the doorway.

“Lizzie?”

“I know,” I said, pasting a smile on my face. “That was your office. Something’s come up on campus and you have to go in.”

“No, that was Wade.”

Although he was Quinn’s good friend, Wade Garner was holding two shoes that could rock my world. Either one of them might be about to drop.

I tried the best-case scenario. “Was he calling to thank you for the birthday gift you sent to Josh?”

“They haven’t opened it yet. Bree wants to wait until the party tomorrow and let Josh open his gifts.”

“He may need some help with yours. Those were pretty big boxes for a three-year-old to open on his own.”

Quinn, the three-year-old’s godfather, did not rise to my teasing about the railroad set that I had seen and he had insisted on buying. “Lizzie, there’s something we need to talk about.”

Was it Becca? Or was he about to tell me that he had decided to take Wade up on his offer of a partnership in his international security firm? Either way, I really didn’t need any more unsettling news today.

I closed the refrigerator door. “I’m listening.”

He gestured toward the table. “Let’s sit down.”

“I don’t want to sit. Just tell me.”

Quinn took my arm. “We are not going to have this conversation standing in the middle of the floor. Sit down.”

I sat down in the chair that he pulled out for me. “Is it about Becca? Is she dead?”