

*The
Vanishing
of
Josephine
Reynolds*

HARPER
MUSE
A NOVEL

Jennifer Moorman



HARPER MUSE

The Vanishing of Josephine Reynolds

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Published by Harper Muse, an imprint of HarperCollins Focus LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
[CIP TO COME]

Printed in the United States of America

\$PrintCode

PROLOGUE

Couples moved around them, swaying to a sensual rhythm of brushes on drums, the steady thump of a bass guitar. Feathery high notes on the piano accentuated the lightness moving through her. The singer crooned about love and flying and blue skies. With her cheek pressed against the warmth of his chest and his arms wrapped tightly around her, she wouldn't have believed that in a couple of hours this would all be gone. All the people, the music, the joy.

The sway of their bodies mesmerized her, temporarily tricked her mind into believing that everything would be okay. Days and days would stretch out before them. Hours to laugh and love and make a future together. Endless kisses and parties and more dancing just like this. A thousand more moments with his body pressed against hers.

She looked up at him and smiled. "I could do this forever."

His grin fluttered her heart, and he leaned down to press his lips to hers, pausing only long enough to ask, "Promise?"

She didn't answer with words. She didn't have to. Their kiss made a promise she'd never be able to keep, though she wanted to. Because keeping that promise to him tonight would unravel the entire future.

CHAPTER I

Josephine Reynolds was a ghost.

She moved through life like an untethered being, a shadow on the periphery. If you turned your head to catch a glimpse, it was gone. *Gone*. That word played on a loop in her mind, had been playing for months. Her previous life. *Gone*. Her purpose. *Gone*. Nathan. *Gone* in a heart-stopping moment.

Josephine stood in the sticky warmth of the sunroom among the ZZ plants, the ferns, the Meyer lemon tree that ached to be repotted this year. A lone orchid drooped, heavy with crisp white blooms. The Christmas cactus showed off at least a dozen exotic bright-pink blossoms. Even with all the suffering, she'd managed to keep the plants alive. Most of them. The peace lily in the corner sagged as though it was in the throes of giving up, too weary to go on. No peace around here. That feeling she knew intimately.

Josephine stared out the windows at velvety smears of pink and violet reflecting on the surface of the swimming pool during sunset. If she stared hard enough and closed her eyelids just enough, she could imagine Nathan doing laps in the pool just before sunrise. After precisely half an hour of gliding through the water, back and forth, back and forth, his toned body would

rise out of the pool, water droplets beading on his skin, and reach for the folded towel on the end of the chaise nearest him. Then he'd towel off before coming inside to shower. She could almost smell the chlorine on his tan skin, almost see his wet footprints marking his path from pool to house.

Her cell phone buzzed in the living room, startling her out of the vision and forcing her back into now. Now, where every moment stretched toward nothing, heavy and meaningless. She turned her back on the sunset, on the memory of Nathan's routine, and walked into the living room. Her bare feet sank into the plush rug, which softened her steps. Grabbing her phone off the coffee table, she swiped it open to see a text from her sister, Katherine.

Hey! Let's grab dinner. I'll be there soon.

Josephine's sigh slumped her shoulders. She texted, Not tonight. I have . . .

What did she have? What excuse could she make up this time? When declining her sister's weekly invitations, she'd said she had paperwork to review, accounts to close, arrangements to make, a house to clean, laundry—a never-ending to-do list of inconsequential tasks. Anything to keep her from reengaging in anyone's life.

Before Josephine could draft a reason, Katherine sent another text. Open the door.

Josephine glanced through the living room toward the front door. The chiming doorbell caused her to flinch. The peal reverberated through the grand two-story foyer. Josephine stood still. Maybe the person would go away. Unless it was her sister.

A banging sounded against the door. "Open up, Jo!"

For a terrible second, Josephine considered ignoring her sister. Then she crossed the living room and padded across the cold marble-tiled foyer. She unlocked the front door and opened it slowly, hesitantly, as if her sister might spring through in a defiant manner. But Katherine stood on the front landing, long dark hair flowing around her shoulders, with an expression of kindness that quickly shifted to concern. A canvas grocery bag hung on one shoulder.

“Hey,” Katherine said. “Assuming you would turn down my invitation to go out, I already picked up dinner. Can I come in?”

Josephine paused with the door halfway open and nodded. “Of course.” Her voice sounded hoarse, unused. When was the last time she’d actually had a real conversation with someone in person? Had it been weeks? She couldn’t recall. She cleared her throat. She fully opened the door and stepped back to allow Katherine to come inside.

Katherine walked past her toward the kitchen, and Josephine closed the door, flipping the deadbolt to lock it, and followed her. Katherine pulled clear containers of prepared food from Whole Foods out of her bag and displayed them on the island. Josephine stood awkwardly in her own kitchen.

The pendant lighting created pools of soft white light on the granite island. Nathan had chosen the lacquered bronze pendants from Restoration Hardware when they’d built the house five years ago. He preferred the classic-modern combination with its geometric angles and industrial vibe with a hint of timelessness. Josephine slid her fingers across the beveled edge of the counter.

With the last container removed, Katherine stilled and locked her gaze with Josephine’s. “I want to ask how you are, but it’s obvious. Selfishly I wanted to come over and see you were doing better, finding your way back, but you look—”

"I'm doing fine." Josephine's defensive tone revealed otherwise. A bit too punchy. Her stomach cramped. Heat rose up the back of her neck and flushed her face. She wasn't fine, unless *fine* meant something sunken. But to try not to appear like the heap of sorrow she knew she was, Josephine added, "I like to wear comfy clothes on Saturdays."

Katherine didn't speak for a few moments, then she exhaled. Placing both hands on the island, she stared at her splayed fingers. "Jo," she said in a quiet, gentle voice, "you're wearing Nathan's shirt, and it looks like you've been wearing it for days. I don't want to sound like Mama, but did you brush your hair today? You look like you've lost weight, and you didn't need to, and it's Thursday. If this is you doing fine, then I don't think I have the heart to see you doing badly."

Josephine swayed on her feet. She reached for the edge of the island to steady herself. Glancing down at her—no, *Nathan's*—rumpled button-up shirt, she saw she'd misaligned the buttons, so the right side of the shirt hung lower than the left. Was that a coffee stain near her hip? She finger combed her long, messy hair, which resulted in her fingers snagging tangles. When she gazed up at Katherine, tears stung her eyes.

"I'm okay, sort of," Josephine lied. "Today has just been a bad day." Actually the last few months had been a string of bad days that each bled into the next like a bloodstain.

"It's been six months," Katherine said, coming around the island to stand close to her sister. "I know there's not a time limit on grieving, and I'm not suggesting you 'look at the bright side' or any of that other garbage people blubber when you've lost someone, but, Jo, you *have* to move forward. Nathan wouldn't want this for you. If the roles were reversed, would you want him in this state?"

Josephine laughed a dreadful, bitter sound that ripped up her dry throat. “Nathan would *never* be in this state. He’d be doing what he always did, work. He’d fill up his days with patients and parties and working lunches at restaurants where people hero worshiped him.” Josephine clenched her jaw. The acid of her words felt like blisters on her tongue. Adored, handsome, wildly successful Nathan had *left her* to deal with this gaping hole alone. She’d poured everything into his life, molded herself into the perfect polished wife, and now . . . Now she was no one but a grieving widow. Someone people pitied for a while and then forgot like last year’s fashion.

Katherine touched Josephine’s arm. “Hey, it’s going to be okay. We can get through this. You and me, we can get through anything.”

A stabbing sensation choked her breath halfway up her throat. Josephine nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

“Maybe today isn’t the best day to catch up over dinner,” Katherine said. “How about I put this in the fridge, and you eat when you’re hungry. Let’s make a plan for this weekend, though, okay? You need to get out of this house.”

Katherine looked around the kitchen. She bit her bottom lip the way she always did right before she told Josephine something that had a high probability of hurting her feelings.

“You might consider selling this place,” Katherine finally said. “It’s not really your style.”

Nathan had spent as much time choosing all of the finishings and fixtures and furniture as he did working his practice. This house was a labor of love—or a labor of something. A status symbol. A way to showcase his ambition and impressive lifestyle. Josephine hadn’t offered many opinions on the house’s style or

décor because Nathan's fondness for top-of-the-line, extravagant possessions was hardly something she wanted to argue with him about. He reminded her that his taste was impeccable, which included his choice in marrying her. Now she was just part of the collection he was no longer around to admire. This house was a museum dedicated to Nathan's prized belongings, including her.

"Nathan loved this house," Josephine replied.

"I get that, but what do *you* love?"

Josephine *heard* the words, but she didn't understand them. "I love this house too. It has everything I need." Everything except Nathan. Without him directing life and filling the house with his presence, Nathan's absence eliminated Josephine's purpose and direction.

Katherine's sigh betrayed her frustration. "Do you love this house because Nathan did or because you actually think this is your dream home?"

Josephine's expression slid downward. This time, heat akin to anger flared up the back of her neck. "What are you trying to say?"

Katherine pushed her long hair over one shoulder and leaned her hip against the counter. "Remember Seth?"

Josephine's mind squealed to a stop, then riffled through years of memories as if they were files in a drawer. "The guy I dated freshman year in college?"

Katherine nodded. "That's the one. He was obsessed with Pink Floyd and gas station burritos. I think the only clothes he owned were band T-shirts and ripped jeans. He played air guitar *in public* all the time. It was embarrassing."

Josephine's memories of the young man rose up in her mind like fog, barely formed and wispy. "How can you remember any

of that? All I remember is that he was tall and cute.”

“He was cute,” Katherine agreed, “if you could ignore all the other things not as attractive, which I couldn’t. And the only reason I remember him is because *you* started loving Pink Floyd and dressing in grungy T-shirts and faded jeans. You thought his air guitar was endearing, but the day I saw you eating a lukewarm burrito from Circle K, I nearly flipped my lid.”

“Why?” Josephine asked, not able to recall the moment.

Katherine sighed and pushed herself away from the counter-top. “There’s a pattern here, Jo. Whenever you dated a guy, you always became whatever *he* was or what *he* needed. You stopped being Josephine. You were Seth’s girlfriend or . . . Nathan’s wife. You lose yourself in them. You give up your friends, your preferences, your identity.” She motioned to the house. “Like this house. It’s a beautiful home, sure, but it’s all Nathan, and I can’t help but wonder if you even know who you are without him. After all these years, who’s Josephine? What does *she* want? What does *she* love?”

Josephine’s fingers crept up to her collarbone and rested there on clammy skin. A twinge of nausea, the faint yet staggering awareness that Katherine was right, alarmed her. Who was she without Nathan?

No one.

Katherine moved toward Josephine. “I can help you get this place on the market, find the right buyer. Not that you need the money, but you’d bank a lot for this house based on the Green Hills neighborhood alone. It would probably sell in less than a week, and I wouldn’t be surprised if there was a bidding war. Think about it.” Katherine pulled Josephine into a hug. “I love you, Jo-Jo.”

"I love you, Katy-bug," Josephine said, surprised to hear the childhood nickname for her sister rise from the abyss.



AN HOUR LATER, Josephine had showered, brushed her hair, and changed into a pajama set. Nathan's shirt lay on top of a growing pile of laundry in the basket. She wandered the second-floor hallway, recalling the worry marking her sister's face. Katherine wasn't the only person in her life who'd voiced concerns about Josephine's downward spiral. Her mama called every other day, and Josephine only answered once a week. Her neighbor had just yesterday dropped off a gift basket with not one but *five* business cards for therapists, ranging from grief counselors to energy healers.

Josephine had no desire to talk to anyone about anything; she didn't need their advice or their easy-step plan to getting on with her life. When had she become a burden to everyone, a nagging worry they carried around, a thorn in their side? She brought discomfort and worry to her family and friends. This was not the woman she'd dreamed of becoming.

Her feet dragged her toward her bedroom. As she passed Nathan's home office, she paused in the doorway, breathing in the scent of him that still lingered in the room. Her laptop had replaced his on the oversize mahogany desk, and it was open and facing the windows that overlooked the backyard.

A surge of sorrow caused a realization to hit her like a slap across her face. "I can't do this anymore," she whispered. She sagged beneath the weight of her grief, beneath how meaningless her life had become. "I wish I'd never been born."

The lights in the room flickered like a pulse. Off, on. Off, on.

Off, on. The electricity continued this heartbeat rhythm for a few seconds before darkness prevailed. Her entire body tensed. Her lungs squeezed out the last of her breath. The steady hum of electronics and the air-conditioner—ordinary sounds that no one ever noticed—ceased, leaving the house in a stillness so complete that Josephine heard her next intake of breath. She stood in the silence, almost as invisible in the darkness as she felt in life.

A ding sounded from her laptop. Within seconds the power kicked back on, and the house whirled to life again. Josephine's body unclenched, and she opened and closed her hands, flexing her fingers. She walked into the office, slid behind Nathan's desk, and sank into the cushy leather chair. She gripped the edge of the desk and pulled herself closer. Reaching for the nearest lamp, a Tiffany replica that Nathan loved, she pulled the cord and illuminated the desktop. Josephine slid her finger over the laptop's touchpad, waking up the screen. After keying in her password, she saw her email inbox was open, and one unread message waited for her. Katherine had forwarded an email. The subject line read Fw: Foreclosed Homes in Nashville, TN. In the body of the email, Katherine had written: Look what's on this list! Josephine clicked open the email.

Distractedly she scrolled through the houses and wondered about the people who had lived in these homes. Were they as lost as she was? Had they loved their homes? Had they spent more than they should have? Had someone died and left no one responsible?

A historic Victorian home in Belle Meade caught her eye. "It can't be," she said, leaning closer to the screen. Josephine's heartbeat quickened as she speed read the information, clicking through the blurry photographs, which confirmed she recognized the home. The Carter Mansion was in foreclosure?

The Carter Mansion had been a wedding gift to her great-grandmother, Alma, when she married in 1916. Josephine hadn't set foot inside the house since she was a little girl, but seeing these online photographs resurrected delicate memories. After her grandmother's death six years ago, Josephine's mother, Emily, and her mother's brother, Donovan, had inherited the house. A disastrous family squabble ensued, and Emily had relented to Donovan, giving him complete ownership. When Josephine questioned her mama about it, Emily refused to discuss it, not wanting to further break her own heart over her brother's selfishness. Seeing the confusion and distress on her mama's face, Josephine hadn't brought it up again.

Josephine and Katherine were probably seven and five the last time they'd been inside the Carter Mansion. That was right before their dad's job moved the family to Atlanta. With its large rooms, narrow closets, and unusual storage spaces, the house had been ideal for endless games of hide-and-seek. Katherine would often give up because she tired of searching for Josephine, who Katherine swore became invisible. They ran wild through the back garden and helped Grandma Dorothy clip roses to place in Mason jars around the house. If she closed her eyes, Josephine could still smell the sweet mix of blooming flowers, lemon furniture polish, and dusty books that permeated the house.

Now five years after Uncle Donnie's underhanded act, here was the Carter Mansion in foreclosure. A barrage of questions rushed through her. What happened to her uncle? Had Uncle Donnie sold the house to someone who couldn't afford the upkeep? Had he not been able to maintain it himself? How could a historic home in the gorgeous Belle Meade area go into foreclosure? If Uncle Donnie hadn't been able to keep it, why hadn't he sold it? Why hadn't he reached out to the family?

Josephine inhaled slowly, remembering Katherine's suggestion about selling her house. She reached for her cell phone and stared at the lock screen that lit up when she lifted it off the desk. An image of her and Katherine taken last year smiled up at her. They'd been caught laughing, and Josephine remembered the moment. She knew her sister fretted about her, which twisted her stomach. She opened her texts and typed a message to Katherine. Hey, just read your email. That's Grandma's house!

Katherine's reply vibrated Josephine's phone. Yep, the one Uncle Donnie stole.

Josephine surprised herself by laughing. She wouldn't have phrased it as such, but Katherine wasn't wrong.

I loved that house, Katherine texted. Remember that time you hid in the armoire, and I gave up searching for you?

Josephine texted, Which time? You always gave up. She could almost hear her sister laughing.

The time you found me an hour later eating cookies in the kitchen. You were furious. Until I shared my cookies.

Another question ballooned within Josephine, a question so startling her back went rigid and her breath held. She put down the phone. Should *she* buy back her family's home? Tingles moved over her skin, pushing goose bumps to the surface. Was that a yes? A confirmation from the soul fighting for survival within her? Josephine pushed back from the desk and spun herself around in the chair to gaze out into the moonlit backyard. Fireflies winked off and on in the darkness. Situated on just less than two acres, this home was on one of Nashville's most coveted streets. Although Nathan hadn't been into gardening or yardwork, he wanted a gorgeous backyard with landscaping, a pool,

and a shaded patio.

He insisted on a house with excess room for entertaining friends and family, and they'd hosted incredible parties, lavish holiday gatherings year-round, and more intimate pool soirees in the summers. Josephine couldn't even—and didn't *want* to—imagine hosting anyone in this house ever again. Maybe Katherine was right; this home no longer fit her. Maybe it never had. Maybe this had always been Nathan's desire.

Would Katherine think Josephine had completely lost her mind if she did something outrageous and bought their ancestral home? She picked up her phone and typed, I think you're right about me needing a new start. I'll need your help selling this place.

Three little dots hovered on the screen while Katherine typed a message. Just reading this makes me want to cry. Is Jo-Jo back?

What if I buy the Carter Mansion? Josephine's finger hovered over the phone before she sent her final question. Am I crazy?

Three bouncing dots had Josephine holding her breath. Then the dots disappeared, and Josephine frowned. She startled when her phone rang in her hand. Katherine was calling.

"What do you think?" Josephine said in a rush of breath.

"Let's do this, Jo-Jo."

CHAPTER 2

TWO MONTHS LATER

Metal scraped against metal and the rolling mechanism groaned when Josephine shoved up the garage door on the storage unit. “I can’t even remember what’s in here.”

Katherine stood beside her, swiping the neck of her Vanderbilt T-shirt against her sweaty brow. “Says pretty much everyone who owns a storage unit.” As the door lifted completely, she gasped and stepped forward into the half-filled space. She went immediately for the oversize armoire and ran her hands over the intricate inlays and the polished wood. Her fingers left streaks in the layer of dust coating the furniture. “Why have you been hiding this beauty?”

Josephine’s eyes moved from one piece of furniture to the next. Along with the armoire were upholstered chairs, a sideboard, a few end tables, lamps, a framed full-length mirror, and a few stacks of boxes and clear plastic containers.

Josephine rested her hand on the back of an antique wing-back chair upholstered in a soft tan fabric. “Nathan wasn’t into antiques. He preferred shiny and new. But I couldn’t bear to give away these family heirlooms. I guess I thought maybe one day I could find a home for them.”

Katherine gave Josephine *a look*, and the meaning was clear.

The abandoned antiques were yet another indicator that she had molded her life to suit his. Instead of commenting, Katherine said, "I'd forgotten how gorgeous these pieces were, Jo. They'll be perfect in the Carter Mansion." Katherine smiled at her.

"You know they were all originally there, don't you?" Josephine said.

Katherine's smile widened. "Of course, and we'll return them to where they belong." She stepped back out into the sunlight and glanced toward the parked U-Haul truck they'd rented. "Let's load up what we can reasonably carry. We'll pay the movers extra to swing by and grab the rest of these items. What time did they say they'd be finished at the Green Hills house?"

Katherine had taken to calling Josephine's previous home, which now belonged to a local attorney and his family, "the Green Hills house." It was as though she was trying to separate Josephine as much as possible from her former life. To help ease her sister out of the old and into the new, Katherine made it seem like slipping out of her old life was as easy as slipping off a pair of heels. To Josephine it felt more like wrangling off a sports bra.

"By three," Josephine said. "I'll call and give the movers directions here, and I'll ask the attendant to open the door for them since we'll be gone."

"I'm sorry Mama and Daddy can't be here to help," Katherine said. "And if Neil wasn't showing the Eastwoods a dozen different houses today, he'd be here too."

Josephine waved away the apology. "Mama and Daddy have had that trip to Charleston planned for months, and you've moved Neil around enough. One more move might do him in. How many times have you made him change houses? Nine? Ten?"

Katherine pretended to pout. "I can't help that I fall in love with a new house every year."

“Better houses than men.” Both sisters laughed. Josephine lifted the lid on the closest plastic container. A faint moldy scent of items boxed for years wafted out. “I’d forgotten Mama gave me some of great-grandma’s clothes.”

Katherine moved in close beside her sister and touched the navy-blue dress on top. “I bet you’re as tiny as she was. You should have a fashion show after we get these to the house.”

“Why just me?” Josephine asked with a hint of a smile. “Shouldn’t you be subjected to trying to wedge yourself into antique clothing?”

“Not a chance,” Katherine said with a laugh. “Not with this bust. No way those zippers or buttons would hold me in. I’d look like a harlot.”

A sound between a snort and a laugh rose up Josephine’s throat. “A harlot? You know that means ‘prostitute,’ right?”

Katherine’s laugh matched her own. “Poor word choice. But you—these clothes would look great on you. You’ve got the coveted flapper’s body.”

“You mean the body you keep reminding me has lost too much weight?” Josephine said, her dark eyebrows lifting.

“We’re working on that!” Katherine said lightly. “We can’t adjust everything all at once. Some of these changes have to happen slowly. Otherwise it’ll throw you into a wild panic, and you’ll bolt faster than a wild mustang.”

Josephine sighed. “Or sink like a stone.”

Katherine nudged her shoulder against Josephine’s. “Hey, none of that. You’re doing great. Remarkable, actually. Now let’s get these boxes into the truck and ride over to the mansion.” Then she laughed. “Don’t we sound fancy? Darling, let’s return to the mansion, shall we?”

Josephine rolled her eyes as she grabbed the nearest box, but

she was smiling.



ON THE FRONT veranda of the Carter Mansion, Josephine balanced a cardboard box on one hip while retrieving the ring of house keys from her front pants pocket. They snagged on the hem. She gave the keys a yank and wobbled. Shoes clacked against the front brick stairs. Josephine half-turned to ask her sister for help with the keys but didn't get the words out. It wasn't Katherine coming up the steps.

A tall woman dressed in a burgundy cable-knit sweater, pressed khakis, and stylish black boots stepped onto the front porch with a small wave. Her pewter-colored hair was styled into a shoulder-length bob. "Hello, I hope I'm not disturbing you."

Did any polite person *ever* admit they were being disturbed? If Josephine were less courteous, she would wholeheartedly admit to being bothered. Didn't the woman see Josephine was busy moving in? If Josephine's sweaty, disheveled appearance wasn't obvious enough, then the U-Haul and boxes were.

Without waiting for Josephine's reply, the woman held out her hand and said, "I'm Barbara Blanchard. I live up the street, and I wanted to welcome you to the neighborhood."

Josephine repositioned the box on her hip. "It's nice to meet you, Barbara. I'd shake your hand, but as you can see, I have my hands full. It's move-in day for me."

Barbara's burgundy lips stretched into a polite smile. "Of course, of course. What a headache moving is." She glanced toward the U-Haul truck, where Katherine must be still inside deciding what to bring in next. Unless her sister was hiding. "I hope you aren't trying to move all by yourself. I know a great

moving company—”

“No, thank you, though. The movers will be here this afternoon with the rest,” Josephine said. “I’m Josephine Reynolds.”

“So nice to meet you, Josephine. I’m vice-president of the neighborhood association. This is a historic neighborhood, you know.”

There it was. The real reason Barbara stood on the front porch. She wanted to ensure Josephine knew that there were certain rules to be followed, all of which Josephine had already researched. “Yes, I know. It’s a beautiful street, and I’m happy to be a part of it.”

Barbara’s smile dimmed, and her lips pinched together. “The last owner didn’t care much about keeping our street beautiful or about our responsibility to this historic neighborhood.”

What could she say to get Barbara off her porch so she could continue moving in peace? “That’s unfortunate,” Josephine said. “I have all the information about the historical society and its requirements. Thank you so much for stopping by. I look forward to seeing you around the neighborhood.” Although she didn’t mean it; Barbara didn’t seem like the kind of person Josephine could picture herself having a meaningful friendship with. What she was most looking forward to was finishing up today, taking a shower, and falling into bed.

“Donovan Grant was his name,” Barbara continued, clearly not picking up on Josephine’s social cues or not caring. “Did you know that just before he moved out, he painted some of the trim black on the windows at the back of the house? Only *some* of the trim. Not all of it. And *black*. Why would anyone paint trim black?”

Josephine had noticed the unusual paint job and made a note to strip the paint and match the trim to the rest on the house.

"Some historical homes *do* have black trim," she countered.

"Not this one!" Barbara said, a little too aggressively. "And he didn't ask permission. He also added that hideous shed in the backyard, which we repeatedly demanded he remove. Heaven only knows what he used it for."

"A lawnmower or yard tools?" Josephine said, placing the box down on the porch to free her aching arms. This conversation didn't appear to be winding down anytime soon.

"Doesn't matter, because adding an outbuilding is against the codes. And besides, I looked inside the shed after he moved, and you know what was in there? Nothing."

Josephine pressed her lips together before speaking, gathering more courteous words than the options that threatened to tumble out. "Wouldn't the shed have been empty since he moved?"

Barbara huffed. "It didn't look like he'd ever kept anything in there. I'd bet he just added it for spite. And have you *seen* the weathervane?"

Josephine craned her neck as though she could see through the porch roof to the top of the house. "I haven't noticed it."

"It's a turkey," Barbara said. When Josephine laughed, Barbara's eyes narrowed. "It *must* be taken down. He didn't get approval for that unsightly thing, and we didn't notice it until a month or so before he left. When I confronted him about it, he said he'd had it professionally made, as if that makes it okay. And this"—she straight-arm pointed at the front door—"Is highly unacceptable. I *know* he replaced the front door with this monstrosity on purpose."

Monstrosity was an exaggeration, but the generic primer-gray front door, probably purchased at a big-box store, was a woeful sight on the stately Carter Mansion. Changing the current front door to a historic one from the late 1890s was a top priority for

Josephine once she was all moved in.

Katherine bounded up the steps and lifted her eyebrows in question. Josephine forced a smile. "Thank you for all of this information, Barbara. I'll do my best to bring the house back into line with its historic distinction."

"I certainly hope so," Barbara said, glancing between the sisters. "We take our historic neighborhood seriously."

"That much is clear," Katherine said, "since you've wasted no time in coming over here while we're in the middle of moving in. We appreciate your zeal for neighborhood codes, and if you don't mind, we'd love to keep going. It's already been a long day."

Barbara looked mildly snubbed, but she nodded curtly and walked down the stairs. Once on the sidewalk, she glanced over her shoulder at the sisters, a haughty look on her pinched face, then hustled away.

"I think you offended her," Josephine said, freeing the keys from her pocket, picking up her box, and unlocking the front door.

Katherine shrugged and carried two boxes inside the house. "Her spiel could have waited a day or another week."

Josephine crossed the small foyer and placed her box in the wide hallway that ran the length of the first floor. The switchback staircase took up half the foyer. Directly to her left was an opening to the living room, and the parlor was to the right. Branching off the long hallway were doors to the dining room, a reading and music room, and the kitchen.

Katherine stacked her boxes near Josephine's. "My guess is she's probably busting at the seams to find out who we are and see if we're going to sully her precious neighborhood. I know her type."

Josephine headed back toward the open front door. She

knocked her knuckles against it. “She’s not wrong, though, about the front door. It is ugly. I can’t believe Uncle Donnie got rid of whatever was here before. It had to be better than this eyesore.”

“I know a great salvage yard you can check out,” Katherine said. “I send all of my clients there. The owner, Leo Freeman, has been in the business for years. He’ll know exactly what you need to replace Uncle Donnie’s disaster door.”

Josephine and Katherine brought in the remaining boxes and smaller items they’d taken from the storage unit. The movers agreed to stop by the unit after leaving the Green Hills house, load up the remaining larger items, and bring everything to the Carter Mansion. Though furnished, there was plenty of room for the antiques and personal items Josephine wanted to add.

At least half of the furniture in the mansion was antique, and why Donnie had left behind such priceless pieces was anybody’s guess. It was as puzzling as why he fought viciously to own the house and then allowed it to go into foreclosure.

The dining room table, chairs, buffet, and china cabinet were original to the house, and the end tables, lamps, and a few of the upholstered chairs in the parlor were too. Stepping into those rooms felt like stepping back in time. But the living room furniture was a mishmash of styles and eras. Josephine planned to replace pieces over time and bring more cohesion to the space.

The main bedroom upstairs had updated furniture, but the other two still held their original bedroom suites. With or without permission, Donnie had added an en suite primary bathroom and a Jack and Jill between the smaller bedrooms. He’d also renovated the kitchen and added modern appliances and fixtures. Perhaps those additions had bankrupted him. Josephine knew how expensive high-end taste was. She’d been married to someone with it for fifteen years.

An hour after Josephine and Katherine arrived at the house, the movers parked against the curb. In less than two hours, they unloaded their truck, situated everything inside the house according to the sisters' directions, and drove away with their tip money.

Josephine dropped onto the mauve, floral-patterned couch, a holdout from the eighties. She flopped her arm across her eyes and sighed. "I could probably fall asleep right now."

"The smell of that couch alone would give you nightmares," Katherine joked, lying across the living room rug, arms splayed. "But this rug might be worse. It probably hasn't been cleaned in a decade."

Josephine turned her head to look down at her sister. Love and gratefulness swelled so quickly in her chest that tears stung her eyes. She'd actually done it. She'd sold the house she shared with Nathan, leaving behind his ghost. Leaving behind the dreams they'd had for a future there. Now she was free to start over, and if possible, to attempt a reconnection with something alive and real again. "Thank you. For everything."

Katherine opened her eyes and looked at Josephine. "You'd do the same for me."

Josephine nodded. She would have, but Katherine was the most competent person Josephine knew, possibly had ever known. Katherine always appeared in control and stable, which was the opposite of how Josephine would describe herself recently.

Katherine sat up with a groan. "I'm going to feel this tomorrow. You going to be okay tonight by yourself? Want me to stay over?"

"I'll be fine," she said. After all, she'd been sleeping alone for months, even before Nathan died. He worked so many hours that he often came home after she'd gone to sleep. Rather than wake

her, he'd sleep in another bedroom. That thought caused a cramp in her heart. She sat up and rubbed her fingers across her collarbone, looking around the spacious living room. "I've just moved from one big empty house into another."

Katherine's serious expression softened for a moment. "This won't be anything like where you've come from. I have a good feeling about this place."

"Because you won't be the one trying to air out Uncle Donnie's bad vibes? I wish I'd thought to buy sage for burning."

Katherine chuckled. "They call it smudging. The bathrooms and kitchen upgrades he did are excellent. Looks like he took care of most of the antique furniture, and as far as I can tell, with the exception of the kitchen, all the original fixtures are still here. Although he wasn't much of a gardener from the state of those rose bushes in the back. They're sadder than a steel guitar in a country song. You can hire a landscaper, unless you're interested in gardening."

Josephine had loved the Green Hills backyard and garden. Though she mentioned to Nathan she'd like to help with the upkeep and plantings, he insisted on hiring landscapers to come every two weeks. Again he made her an observer rather than an active participant.

Katherine continued, "With a little care, the garden will perk back up."

"Sounds like you're talking about me," Josephine said, trying to make a joke, and yet the truth of her words created a visceral ache inside her.

Katherine stood and reached out for her sister. She pulled Josephine into a sitting position on the couch. "Don't forget to call Leo Freeman next week and get that front door replaced."

Josephine nodded and rolled her eyes. "I won't forget. I gotta

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get Barbara off my back for a while.”

Katherine grinned. “You might be surprised at the wonders changing out a front door can do for a house.”



CHAPTER 3

The next morning Josephine lingered in a slant of sunlight in the kitchen and drank a cup of instant coffee. The light warmed her bare feet on the white tiles. Katherine had helped Josephine find her bed linens and make up the main bedroom's bed before she left last night. By the time Josephine collapsed onto the mattress, she'd been so exhausted she was certain she'd sleep for a week. Instead, she'd tossed and turned all night because of strange dreams involving being chased by a swarm of bumblebees and standing in a smoky, crowded bar screaming for help, though no one could hear her.

Even now a trace of restless energy coursed beneath her bare feet, a steady hum as though the tiled floor vibrated with impatience and edginess. Lack of sleep was probably to blame. But also the emotions brewing within her.

What had she been thinking, moving into a strange house too enormous for one person—or even four people? How was uprooting herself from one empty home and planting herself in another a good idea? What would she do with all this space? Open a B&B? Take on renters? Both options were dismal. She didn't want an influx of strangers in her house all the time, didn't want to cook and serve them. Renting rooms sounded even less

appealing. The last time she'd shared a place with anyone other than Nathan was in her college dorm, and those memories of no privacy, cramped bathrooms, and unclean living spaces were enough to elicit a firm *no way*.

Josephine didn't need the money. But she wanted to understand why she felt so out of place and alone. Didn't everyone feel a little off when they moved into a new house? *I need to be more patient. There's no way this place could possibly feel like home yet.* But would it ever?

She glanced around the room. Part of Donnie's kitchen renovation included new cabinetry, a walk-in pantry, a butler's pantry, and a laundry room. Unlike many original historic homes, there was plenty of storage space in this kitchen. Boxes labeled *Kitchen Items* were stacked nearby, creating a wall of cardboard squares. She needed to start unpacking them, but the sheer amount of stuff to unpack ignited a spark of frustration inside her.

The terrible coffee added to her darkening mood. Even so, she took a final gulp, grimacing at the lukewarm liquid on her tongue, and then poured the dregs into the oversize ceramic farmhouse sink and washed the basin clean.

Josephine stared at the boxes. She thought about when she and Nathan had moved into the Green Hills house. He'd paid the movers to unpack everything so when he came home from work that day, the entire house was live-in ready. He'd been pleased with the effortless move, but Josephine had spent weeks trying to locate and relocate items.

But here in the Carter Mansion, she could arrange the house exactly like she wanted. She could take her time opening each box and deciding the best placement for everything. This freedom should comfort her, cheer her onward to creating a place perfect for her. Instead, Josephine clenched her jaw at the over-

whelming task. If Nathan hadn't died, then she wouldn't be in this house unpacking hundreds of boxes. Annoyed, she kicked the nearest box. She cried out as her toes jarred against the cardboard. Leaning over, she squeezed her aching foot as a column of boxes wobbled, sending the top box falling onto her back.

Josephine groaned and failed to catch the tumbling box. It landed upside down on the tiles. A sound between a laugh and a cry erupted from her lips. Then she righted the box. Handwritten in marker across the top was *kitchen linens & utensils*. She stood and stretched her back, unable to reach the soreness between her shoulder blades where the box corner jabbed her, somewhat thankful it hadn't been a box of china.

Pull yourself together. You made the choice to be here, so unpack these boxes and get on with it. Why did the voice in her head sound like a feisty teenage version of herself? Back when she was so sure of herself, she could have accomplished anything. If her younger self could see her now, lip trembling in the kitchen because of moving boxes, she'd be shamed right out of the house.

"Get on with it," she said, repeating the voice in her head. She could unpack boxes without falling apart or breaking her toes.

Josephine thought about what Nathan would say: *Unpacking yourself? That's ridiculous and a poor use of your time. We could pay someone to do the same job in a quarter of the time.* She imagined her response: *I have all the time in the world now, Nathan.* And she did. No one was depending on her for anything. It baffled her how this new independence felt like a devastating loss when the opposite could also be true. Every single aspect that had controlled and dictated her life was gone. Every choice from this moment on would be hers and hers alone. Some women would fight for and celebrate this kind of release from every obligation, every expectation. But after fifteen years of surrendering her autonomy to

someone else, this level of liberation was utterly terrifying. With Nathan she had purpose. Without him, who was she?

Well, for today at least, she was just a woman unpacking boxes.

Josephine grabbed the box cutter and lifted a box from the stack. She placed it on the countertop and slit the tape across the top. After opening the flaps, she pulled out a layer of bubble wrap. Then she paused. *Is that music?* The tinkling of piano keys drifted into the kitchen. Was it coming from outside? From a neighbor's house? She walked out of the kitchen and into the long hallway that stretched from the back of the house all the way to the foyer. But the farther away from the kitchen she walked, the softer the music became.

She returned to the kitchen, and with each step, the music, although still quiet, grew more distinct. Josephine stepped into the butler's pantry and listened. The piano solo was joined by an orchestra. Her eyes darted to the basement door. Before she had moved into the mansion, she and Katherine had inspected the small basement, which was mostly empty except for cobwebs, crumbling wooden shelving, and an assortment of forgotten items such as Mason jars, tools, and a bedframe leaned against one wall.

Josephine wrapped her fingers around the basement door's knob, and a zing rocketed up her arm. She startled at the jolt of energy reminiscent of a static electricity shock. Josephine shook out her arm, then tapped her fingertip a few times against the metal. Nothing happened. She gently wrapped her fingers around the cool knob, but a second sting didn't occur.

When she opened the door, the music swelled into a recognizable tune. "Rhapsody in Blue." She flipped on the switch at the top of the stairs and illuminated the top few wooden steps in a

dull brownish glow. The creeping chill of the basement caused her to shiver as she descended the stairs that appeared one by one from the gloom. Her pulse quickened with the rhythm of the song, but when she stepped onto the dirt-covered floor, the music stopped. Josephine held her breath and waited, but the music didn't return.

She glanced around, looking for a source of the music. A radio? But who would have turned it on? Maybe the music hadn't come from the basement at all. She looked toward the ground-level rectangular window at the top of the wall. The glass, barely admitting dingy light, was splattered with mud and grass. Someone could have been walking by listening to music through their phone speakers. *In my backyard? Doubtful.* Who would be blasting jazz this time of day?

Josephine took one more glance around the shadowy space, rubbing her hands up and down her crossed arms, and noticed a sliver of pale light just beneath the bedframe propped against the wall in front of her. She bent over to peer beneath the frame and followed the straight line of light. Was the light coming from outside? *But isn't this wall butted against solid rock? How can sunlight come through? Unless that isn't a solid wall.*

Josephine grabbed the bedframe and heaved it out of the way. Running her finger along the crack at the bottom of the wall, she stopped when she reached the point where the light ended. Then she slid her finger vertically up the grimy wall, creating another line. She stretched as far as she could reach up the wall. A suspicion formed in her mind. *Is there a door here?* She scoffed at the absurdity. Why would there be a door in a solid rock wall?

But at about the position where a doorknob would be, her fingers moved over a papery texture. Josephine pulled out her cell phone and turned on its flashlight. Now she could see a dry

substance pasted over the doorknob area. The patch had been painted to match the basement's charcoal gray walls. A subtle vibration radiated up from the packed earth, bringing with it the sensation that a flowing current of energy moved beneath her.

Josephine grabbed a rusted screwdriver from an aluminum pail on the floor and stabbed it into the painted paper. As she suspected, the shaft busted through easily. Josephine tore away the rest of the brittle paper, revealing a hole with light on the other side. She gasped when the music started up again. She leaned her ear toward the wall. The music was coming from the other side of this hidden door.

After a few seconds of being shocked into stillness, Josephine swiped open her phone and texted her sister: Are you free? Right now? Her mind ran wild with possibilities about music playing in a room that had been sealed off. And *why* was the room sealed off? Part of her wanted to flee the basement, but another much more potent desire filled her with the need to know what was happening and how.

Katherine responded: Are you okay? What's up? I can make myself free.

Josephine's heart raced. She texted: I found something in the basement. Can you come over?

Three dots bounced. That sounds ominous. Can you be any more specific? Are we talking dead somethings or Monet paintings? Do I have time to eat breakfast?

Josephine called her sister. Katherine answered immediately. "I hope you're not calling because it's scary option number one."

"I found a door," Josephine said in a rush of words. When Katherine didn't respond, she added, "A secret door in the basement."

Katherine hummed in her throat. "Is your next sentence go-

ing to be that you've finally found a way into Narnia?"

"I'm serious."

"So am I," Katherine said.

Josephine explained how she'd found the door, including the mysterious light and music that was still playing. "What do you think? Do you want to come over? Should we open it? It could be nothing."

Katherine chuckled. "How can we *not* open it? But if this door takes us to Narnia, no guarantees that I'm coming back."

"Understood," Josephine said.

"See you in half an hour," Katherine said and ended the call.



LESS THAN HALF an hour later, Josephine and Katherine stood in the basement staring at the hidden door. The music had stopped almost as soon as Josephine hung up the phone, and it hadn't restarted, which caused Josephine to doubt her sanity. *What if I'm actually losing it and imagined the music? Is that a possibility? Do people hallucinate songs in their heads?* Even so, Josephine hadn't imagined the door that had been purposely hidden.

"Whatcha thinking? Abracadabra? A crowbar?" Katherine asked. She shuffled off through the basement looking for a tool.

Josephine grabbed a screwdriver and shoved it into the mechanism inside the space where the doorknob had once been attached. She wiggled around the tool and then pressed its flat head against the latch, which depressed when she applied force. She heard a confirmation click, and she looped her fingers inside the hole and tugged. The hidden door made a suctioning sound as it unsealed itself and opened just a crack. The unsealed room exhaled a rush of dank, musty air across Josephine's face.

Across the room, Katherine gasped. “How did you do that?” When Josephine held up the screwdriver, Katherine’s forehead wrinkled. “You know how to open doors with a screwdriver?”

“When we were renovating part of the Green Hills house, Nathan accidentally shut himself in our bedroom closet that didn’t have a doorknob yet.” Josephine shrugged. “So I Googled it before he lost his mind.”

“I’m not going to ask why he closed a door without a knob on it. I bet he lost his mind before you finished watching the how-to video,” Katherine joked as she crossed the room to her sister.

“Actually before I could pull up the video, but still I rescued him in less than five minutes. He was too frustrated to be grateful at the time, but later we laughed. The electrical was off in that part of the house, so the closet was extra-dark.”

Katherine snorted a laugh. “It must have been awful to be trapped in a cushy walk-in closet for five minutes.” She stood beside Josephine. “Smells dank, even more so than this basement.”

“Ready?” Josephine asked. Her heart pounded, and she reached for Katherine’s hand and squeezed. Then she used the screwdriver to wedge open the door enough to get her fingers around the edge of the cool wood. The tool clanged against the aluminum pail when Josephine dropped it. She opened the door slowly, unsure of what to expect. Her shoulders relaxed as soon as she saw the room had electricity running to it. “The lights are on in there.”

Josephine stepped over the threshold with Katherine right behind her. The dimly lit space smelled musky with an aging sent of tobacco and pine. The length and size of the long rectangular space stunned Josephine. Directly in front of them was a substantial wooden bar top at least twenty feet long. Beneath the dust and grime of years passing without use, she could still see

evidence of its lacquered finish that would have gleamed in the round pendant lights evenly spaced throughout the room.

Half a dozen round tables, each with four matching chairs, were positioned on the other side of the bar and down the length of the room. There were two additional areas, one with a partially closed door, and the other beyond a large opening in the wall near the back. From where she stood, Josephine wasn't sure what they contained. A tarnished silver mirror the length of the wall hung behind the bar top. Wooden shelves that Josephine assumed once held dozens of bottles were bare except for two lonely, empty liquor bottles, one rum and one brandy.

"Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle," Katherine said. "Is this a bar?"

Surprise laughter bubbled up Josephine's throat. "I think it's a speakeasy."

"No way!" Katherine said, walking to the long bar. Her bright-pink nail polish shined as she wrote her name in the dust with her finger. She smiled before wiping her hand against her jeans.

"What else would it be? It's a hidden bar in the basement of a historic home."

Katherine walked the length of the bar top, and Josephine pointed at an antique radio sitting on the end. "Maybe that's where the music was coming from." Relief flooded her. *I wasn't hallucinating!* Maybe the last grief-stricken eight months hadn't permanently broken her. Hope boosted her until Katherine lifted the radio's cord.

"Doubtful," her sister said. "It's not plugged in." The dropped cord slapped against the back of the bar. "Unless this place is haunted."

Shivers ran up Josephine's arms. If the radio wasn't the source

of the music, then what or who had beckoned her toward the hidden space?

Lines creased Katherine's forehead. "What's that look on your face? Are you afraid it *is* haunted? Because I don't believe in ghosts."

Ghosts weren't what spiked Josephine's fear. "Do you—do you think I made up the music? Imagined it? Am I . . . losing it?"

"Losing what?" Katherine asked. "Your mental clarity? No, Jo-Jo. Did you imagine the music? I don't know, but whether you did or not doesn't change the fact that you found a hidden door because of it. That's *something*."

Josephine nodded. "I don't think this place is haunted," she said. "But I've *felt* different ever since I moved in."

Katherine's serious expression transitioned into one of understanding. "That's called freedom. This house, your life, your next choices—all yours."

"Freedom," Josephine echoed, the shape of the words feeling strange, almost foreign, on her lips. "Feels like terror."

Katherine walked to her and slipped her hand into Josephine's, the way she used to do when they were little girls. "Sometimes they feel the same. Our perspective is what makes the difference."

Josephine's throat tightened, and she tried to clear it. "You don't know what it's like," she said, her voice almost a whisper. "Losing your anchor. Losing what makes you feel real and connected to the world. My whole life was wrapped up in Nathan. I don't even know what to *do* with myself now."

Katherine shook her head. "You're right, I don't know what it's like to lose my husband. But I know loss, Jo-Jo. I know what it's like to feel panicked when life shifts in a way you never expected, when you feel like the wind has been knocked out of you—"

Josephine rubbed her fingers across her collarbone. “When you feel like you have a hole shot right through you.”

“Exactly,” she said and squeezed Josephine’s hand.

“You say I’m free,” Josephine said, “and I am, but I’m also lost. What do I *do* with all this freedom?”

“Maybe it’s time to untangle *your life* from what Nathan created for your life. You are still your own person. You used to have dreams—”

Josephine’s laugh came out tight and sarcastic. “Dreams? You mean when I was a kid? I don’t even remember my dreams, Katybug.” She wiped at her wet cheeks, frustrated by her inability to talk about Nathan without crying. Sadness over losing her husband now faded beneath resentment. *If Nathan hadn’t expected me to do everything his way, then I’d be different now. I’d be stronger. I wouldn’t be this pathetic shadow of who I could have been.* But to blame everything on Nathan also fell short of the truth. Josephine had *agreed* to do everything his way. For years. And whose fault was that?

“You used to talk about working in public relations,” Katherine argued.

“I never finished college,” Josephine countered. “I’ve only been an office manager.”

Katherine released her sister’s hand and huffed. “So what? You worked in Nathan’s practice doing more than that. You’re the most overqualified office manager I know. You have plenty of work experience, and you’re smart and a quick learner. Plus, you’re beautiful. Don’t look at me like that. You’re not as solid as you have been, in my opinion, but you’ll get your healthy glow back.”

“You act like I might find a healthy glow in one of those cardboard boxes upstairs,” Josephine said, trying to joke but sound-

ing dejected.

Katherine ignored her self-deprecation. “You could work in PR or event planning. Lord knows you planned hundreds of parties for Nathan through the years. Or what about fundraising? You could find a nonprofit you support and help them with organizing events or write funding proposals and press releases. Or, worst-case scenario, you could come to work with me and sell houses.”

Josephine groaned. “Definitely worst case. I’d be a lousy salesperson.”

“You would be,” Katherine agreed, but she was smiling. “But I love you, and I’d take one for the team for you.”

Josephine couldn’t speak around the tightness closing her throat.

Katherine added, “You don’t have to decide anything right now.”

Josephine tried to remember who she was in college before she met Nathan and even before Seth, whom she’d only dated for a few months. Had she been excited about her future? Had she dreamed of having a career of her own? She could barely recall the young girl she’d been. Life before Nathan felt like it belonged to a woman she couldn’t resuscitate.

Katherine walked around the bar and toward the partially open door. She pushed it completely open, poked her head in, and looked around. “Bathrooms. His and hers.” Looking at Josephine, she asked, “Why would Grandma have a speakeasy?”

Josephine shook her head. “This probably wasn’t Grandma’s. Speakeasies came about in the 1920s during Prohibition, so this more likely belonged to our great-grandparents.” Katherine opened her phone and started typing. “Who are you texting?”

“Mama,” she answered.

Josephine walked the length of the speakeasy and peered into the second room. A sitting area held a few plush leather chairs, four booths, small end tables, and a grimy L-shaped dark-fabric sofa. Wall sconces lit the room in muted milky light. A small rectangle of paper wedged beneath a table leg caught her eye. Josephine tugged it free. She held what looked like a business card. The front of the faded card read *Club Belle Âme*. The back of the card announced Eleanor Baker's membership. The rest of the information was indecipherable, too smudged with dirt.

Katherine followed Josephine into the room. "Whatcha got there?"

She handed the card to her sister. "Someone's membership card to a club."

Katherine pulled out her phone and typed in a search for Club Belle Âme in Nashville, but it yielded no results. "Weird. Maybe it was an informal ladies club, something local, like gardening or volunteer work. Do you think Mama knows about this place?" Katherine asked.

"If she did, then Uncle Donnie would have, but since the door was still sealed up, I doubt it."

Katherine's phone started ringing. "It's Mama. I'll put her on speaker." Katherine held out the phone between them. "Hey, I'm here with Josephine *in the speakeasy*. You're on speaker."

"Hey, sweetheart," their mama said, and by the sound of her softening voice they knew she meant Josephine. "How are you doing?"

"Hey," Josephine said. She skipped right over her mom's question because she couldn't presently describe how she was in a way that wouldn't induce anxiety in her mother. Instead, Josephine asked, "Did you know there was a hidden speakeasy in the Carter Mansion?"

“Are you two pulling my leg? I’ve been in that basement hundreds of times during my life, and there’s nothing down there but junk.”

Katherine shared how they stumbled upon the secret door, leaving out the part about Josephine hearing mysterious music, and when Katherine finished the story, their mother exhaled loudly.

“Well, for goodness’ sake, I’m just as surprised as you are. But now that you mention it, I do remember a story about my grandma from when I was a kid. It wasn’t told directly to me, but I overheard it. I didn’t understand much of it at the time. I was so young. It was something about how my grandma once ran an illicit club that the police raided, and she was almost arrested.”

“Say what?” Katherine blurted. “We had a rebel in the family, and you’re just now mentioning it?”

“Honey, that was a lifetime ago, and I wouldn’t have known a speakeasy from a merry-go-round. You could always look it up and see if there are any records, but for all we know, it could have been a nonsense story.”

Josephine pulled her cell phone out of her pocket. She typed her great-grandmother’s name—Alma Grant—into the search engine and scrolled through the first page of hits. “Nothing for Alma Grant. Nothing scandalous at least.”

“No, no, you won’t find anything under Alma Grant,” her mama said. “Search for Alma Carter. Grant came from her second marriage. I think this would have happened, if it even did, before she married my grandfather.”

“Second marriage? This family keeps getting more and more interesting,” Katherine teased. “Although it makes sense that she was given the *Carter* Mansion as a wedding gift if she married a Carter. Find anything?” she asked, looking at Josephine.

Josephine scrolled through the new search, and her breath caught, hastening her pulse. “There’s an article about a raid on a speakeasy”—she looked at her sister—“At the Carter Mansion on October 9, 1927.”

“Well, I’ll be,” her mama said.

Josephine quickly read the short article. “Members of the Bureau of Prohibition, along with local police, raided the speakeasy, although they didn’t find Alma inside. Some people were taken in, but it doesn’t appear that anyone was officially jailed. Alma paid a hefty fine, though, since it was inside her house.” Josephine returned to the original search and scrolled through the remaining few articles that mentioned her great-grandmother. “The rest of the reports are the same.” She clicked off her phone and slid it back into her pocket.

Katherine frowned. “What happened to her first husband? It doesn’t mention him.”

“He died in World War I. Alma was a widow at twenty,” her mama said. “She didn’t marry my grandfather until she was in her late twenties, I think.”

Josephine pressed her hands against her chest. “Twenty?” As a thirty-five-year-old widow, Josephine hadn’t handled losing Nathan with any sort of grace, but did anyone handle losing a spouse well? At least Nathan had left her with enough money to ensure she’d never have to work again unless she wanted to. Josephine couldn’t imagine what it must have been like to be widowed in the 1920s, when women’s lives were much more oppressed and their choices were far more limited. “That poor woman. How heartbroken she must have been.”

“She obviously found a way to survive and not just survive but also prosper,” Katherine said. “She found a way to keep this mansion.”

Josephine nodded. “I’m having a hard time grasping that our great-grandma ran an illegal bar *in her house*. That’s outrageously bold.”

Katherine knocked her shoulder into her sister’s. “Family trait, boldness. We also exhibit signs of bravery and perseverance.” Josephine leaned her head against Katherine’s shoulder.

“Hey, girls, I gotta run,” her mama said. “I’m meeting Fran for brunch. Jo-Jo, call me, honey, when you have some time. And take pictures for me, but for heaven’s sake, don’t post anything online. I don’t want Donnie finding out what he missed. He probably would have tried to reopen the place.”

Katherine laughed, and they shared I love yous before she ended the call. Josephine noticed another door near the far back of the room. This door had a doorknob, but it was bolted three times from the inside. A small wooden peg stuck out from the door around eye level. Josephine grabbed the wooden peg, and it easily rocked to one side, revealing a peephole the size of a baseball. She pressed her eye against the hole and looked out into a small room with sunlight filtering into it.

Josephine unlocked the bolts, turned the handle, and tugged open the door. The opposite side of the door was smooth and didn’t have a doorknob or a handle. There was no way to open it from the outside. The door opened into a narrow, galley-style space full of old potting tables, gardening tools, and terra-cotta pots. It smelled of wet earth and mulch combined with an herbaceous aroma. Josephine took the few strides straight across the room and opened an unassuming wooden door with a rectangular window—the source of the sunlight—revealing stone stairs leading up to the ground-level backyard garden.

“I think you just found the secret way in,” Katherine said. “The patrons couldn’t have come in through the front door. That

would have been too conspicuous. But if they came through the garden, they could hide what they were doing easier.”

Josephine nodded. “And for anyone who didn’t know about the speakeasy, this room looked like a potting area for the garden.” She walked up the stone stairs and lingered in a patch of dappled sunlight pouring down through the mature oak and maple trees. “Who knows what else we’ll find hidden in this house?”

Katherine stood beside her, turning her face up toward the light like a sunflower. “I bet this is only the beginning of the secrets we’ll discover.”

