

STRENGTH IN SILVER
A NOVEL IN PROGRESS

by

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ABSTRACT

RAYMOND SCOTT SEABROOK. *Strength in Silver*.
(Under the direction of BRYN CHANCELLOR, M.F.A.)

Preliminary chapters to a historic novel, *Strength in Silver* follows the lives of three women of the same family over the course of more than one hundred years. Their stories are set against the backdrops of the American Civil War, Women's Suffrage and ERA. They each start their stories in different parts of North Carolina from the mountains to the country to the city. Not only are the three linked in heritage, but by a stolen box of silverware and the unfathomable tale that goes along with it as well. Each of these women face the hardships of not only their respective lives, but the times that surround, shape and guide them. They reveal how strength can be an inherent thing, but also how personal and social struggle can reinforce that fortitude to do things that in other circumstances may not be considered.

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the three women who provided me the inspiration with which to write it: my great-grandmother, Florence Deese, my grandmother, Ruby Deese Siket and my mother, Barbara. I wish to also dedicate it to other women in my life who awe me with their strength: my sister, my niece, my aunt, my cousin and my two Beths.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION	vii
CHAPTER ONE: OLIVIA—1853	1
CHAPTER TWO: OLLIE—1919	23
CHAPTER THREE: LIV—1978	48
WORKS CITED	72
WORKS CONSULTED	73

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

When contemplating ideas for my thesis, I knew I wanted to write a humanistic story about people and their lives. I toyed with expanding some short pieces I had written for creative writing seminars in both undergraduate and graduate level classes, but none of them felt like a good place to start. Then in late 2018 my mother started to get sick frequently with bouts of bronchitis, sinusitis, and the common cold. The thought came to me to write about a woman who faces several illnesses or multiple women who struggle with the same disease. As I have no background in medicine and wasn't a good science student, I let go of that idea, but the notion of multiple women kept circling around my mind.

Years ago, in my youth, I read a book about three women of different generations entitled *Galveston* by Suzanne Morris. Their stories have stayed with me for more than thirty years and were reawakened in me in the spring of 2019 while attending a creative writing workshop with Professor Bryn Chancellor. In this class we were to write three short stories, each from one of the three literary perspectives: first, second and third person. Some in the class wrote each of their three submissions based on the same idea. I chose to write individual pieces, but all the while the niggling voices of Morris's characters played in my creative mind space. The carpetbag and the lies that plagued the three women in her novel rooted in my brain as an idea to emulate.

At first, I had thought to write one woman's story from each of the three points of view and quickly realized the difficulty that may present to the reader, not to mention, the challenge for me as an author. I went back to Morris's idea of having three women loosely linked by location, Galveston; a lie that continues to threaten to surface and ruin

each of them; and the carpetbag, an object found by the last character that sends her to discover the truth that “may lead you to the answers of questions that have consumed you all your life” (Morris 290). I wanted to take this same idea of an inanimate object, the story connected to it, and the passing of both from one woman to the next to bridge my characters’ stories.

My thesis follows Morris’s structure, dividing section by characters’ names and the year each of their stories start for the reader. I found this structure allows each character’s story to be told in full without overlapping characters or jumping back and forth between stories. I toyed with moving from character to character as Michael Cunningham does in his work *The Hours*, but opted for Morris’s more linear structure.

I did, however, emulate how Cunningham links his characters through an inanimate object, in his case, Virginia Woolf’s novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*. This helped me to find interesting ways to make the box of silverware that gets handed down through the generations of my characters have a similar feel. At this stage in my novel, I have not decided whether the reader will get to hear the full story of the box or just nods to it and hints about it through the three sections of my story. At this point, I am leaning towards having the third character, Liv, divulge the entire story and find a way to “right” it as Willa, Morris’s character, does.

The basis for my characters and their tales sprang from a book my great uncle wrote chronicling the history and life and times of the maternal side of my family. History has always held a fascination for me, be it personal or social. This pseudo biographic tale of my great-grandmother, my grandmother, and my mother worked as a skeleton on which to apply the skin of the novel I have started as my thesis. I pulled away

from the biographical and chose to base the strength of my three characters on my relatives, but situate them in times through which my relatives lived. My great-grandmother did not live through the American Civil War, but was a second generation native born Scot in the United States and knew the struggles of her parents in that time period. Though she had been dead for more than thirty years, I pulled from my great-uncle's book to try to bring authenticity to the times in which my first character, Olivia, lived.

In stepping away from a biographic approach and situating my characters in important historic times in America, I wanted to portray history within my novel through the effect it could have on my characters. I wanted to find times in which women were affected by challenges and pushed for change from within to depict how my female characters may benefit, struggle or even suffer. A helpful example is Charles Dickens *Hard Times*. His portrayal of the characters and the times in which they live have helped me to put moments of pain, suffering and enduring spirit into my characters.

Other novels I have looked to for character and location stem from a Southern womens writers seminar I took in the spring of 2019 with Dr. Paula Eckard. We started with Eudora Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings*, a series of essays has been invaluable to me in finding description of my characters, locales. In her chapter entitled "Learning to See" she recalls a family road trip. She points out that when writing it is important to see what you can and can't see: "Crossing a river...crossing a state line—especially crossing the line you couldn't see but knew was there, between the South and the North—you could draw a breath and feel the difference" (Welty 44). I took this to mean that as a writer I needed to show the reader, not tell them, what couldn't be seen; a breeze, a smell,

a state line. I have returned to *One Writer's Beginnings* time and again to help me write through some of my descriptive passages.

Lee Smith has also been an invaluable resource for me to write women as women, not as a man might write women. In her books, *Oral History* and *Saving Grace*, she sets her mostly female characters in southern Appalachia. My first character arrives in America in 1853 from Scotland through New York harbor on her way to my fiction town of Grassy Gap between Boone and Blowing Rock, both in the mountains of North Carolina. I wanted my characters stories to unfold in places that I could write about from experience and in locales that I had read about in other's works. My second character, Ollie, starts her story in the rural south of Union County, North Carolina. This is where my great-grandmother started her family on a sharecropping farm and where my grandmother grew up. My last character, Liv, grows up in Charlotte, but her story is mainly set in a historic home in Concord. These are all locations that I have spent time and felt that I could write about with some authenticity.

Moving from the inspiration and emulation of other writers to the craft elements of my thesis, I would like to focus on my main goal: to write in all three perspectives about three different women who are not only linked through family, but also by a stolen box of silverware and the story attached to it.

Anne Lamott in her craft book *Bird by Bird* talks about looking at characters as having “an emotional acre that they tend, or don't tend...” (Lamott, 45). Having never lived during the 1860s, the 1920s nor the 1960s, I knew I had to “tend” my characters' acres with a thorough rake. She further writes that a writer must ask themselves “how they stand, what they carry in their pockets or purses, what happens in their faces and to

their posture when they are thinking, or bored, or afraid.” (Lamott, 45). Combining these two complicated issues of character, I felt I needed to do some in-depth research into each of my characters’ “times”.

With Olivia, my introductory character, I needed to know of the clothes of the 1850s, the travelling conditions aboard ships, immigration formalities, modes of land transportation, the landscapes of Scotland and America. As I could only write from research I had done to place Olivia in her time, I felt it would be best for her story to be told in the third person. She could make the observations of the things and people around her for the audience. I could use the “continuum of possible narrators” (LaPlante 196). Olivia’s third person perspective gives the reader a view from Olivia as she sees, hears, feels and thinks, but also as she perceives and can in some ways act as an omniscient narrator, though limited to her own perceptions.

As I began to realize that it was not enough to portray the period correctly, I needed to look at the motivations behind my character’s actions and how this could be visible to the reader. I gave Olivia a posture of standing up straight, square-shouldering through the humiliations and petty indiscretions perpetrated on her person. I wanted the reader to recognize through her the need to remain erect and solid in her stance that she had the strength from within to do what she felt was her duty to family.

Following this same line of thought to my second character, Ollie, I wanted to show a sense of her strength to be in her thoughts. I tried to write her as tending her acre in a method of escape, to leave her acre and to show that she had no qualms about her looks and her ability to make her escape happen, to move onto a better acre. I needed Ollie to have a vulnerability as well. I used her indirect “I” by way of the second-person

point of view to try to illuminate this internal struggle to the reader. She sees herself as she wants others to see her in the telling, but there are moments she is introspective, both in the negative towards her feelings of farm life and positive in the way she shows internal emotion to those that she loves and will miss. Combining two of LaPlante's explanations of the second person as "an inverted form of first person" (LaPlante 194) and "an active character in the story" (LaPlante 195), I tried to allow Ollie to speak to herself as the active character and allow the reader to identify with her through the inverted "I" as Ollie tends to show herself through a disconnected first person.

Placing my last character, Liv, in the first-person point of view, I felt compelled to bring the reader in closer, since Liv's story will ultimately lead to the resolution to all three characters stories. With that in mind, I felt that using her character as "a narrator who is *directly* involved in the story, someone who is intimately and obviously affected by what is happening" (LaPlante 191) would allow a certain latitude to move in close on the action and at times pull the reader out a bit to give distance to the story.

As Liv's story starts with the death of her husband and her realization that she needs to start to heal and move on, I wanted to initially keep her physicality both weak and unkempt, yet verging on the idea that she has no other choice than to move on, to be strong. A lot of Liv's story is told in retrospect. I felt that the exposition in her section would work better if the reader kept getting glimpses into the Liv she was before David, her husband, who she was with him and who she will have to become after him.

All three of the characters have involvements or attachments to men, but I felt that the absence of David's actual character on the page would allow Liv to reflect on her life before, with and without him.

In keeping with my line of trying to have each of these three women see themselves and the world and times around them while learning, growing or changing because of their respective circumstances, I found it a challenge to subtly let them change or grow. Bret Anthony Johnston wrote in an article for *Glimmer Train's Writers Ask* entitled "What the World Looks Like to a Hammer" that "our characters' attentions define their priorities, and those priorities reveal what our characters love and loathe, what our characters know and need" (*Glimmer Train* 1). While in the few short pages of my thesis I have but touched on some of the surrounding social issues facing my characters, I felt that I needed to have a bit of outside influence on them to ground them in who they are, be moved by the things and people around them, but in quiet, almost subconscious ways that the reader may see, but the character may or may not.

Olivia, for example, began and remains for me a stalwart character who will change little through the course of her story. Things happen to her, but like many people of times past, they tended to "roll with the punches" and "pick themselves up by the bootstraps". Olivia is one of these characters. Ollie, more rebellious and, less realistic may be able to be changed more obviously by the circumstances, people and times that populate her story, yet I want her to remain a headstrong "bull in a china shop". Liv, for me as author and creator, seemed the character who would be most easily and transparently changed by her circumstances. She is the more modern of the three women and in many ways I fought not to have too many options available to her to make her difficult situation easier to bear. I felt she would become a better, more believable character if in a certain ways she, too, had to be like Olivia and "make the best of a bad situation" by herself for the most part.

As I progress in the writing, editing and revising of this novel-in-progress, my aims are many. First, I wish to bring more external characterization to each of the three characters. I would like to have each of them have something physically that defines them for the reader. I have alluded to Olivia having lost hearing in one ear during the shoot-out on the train, but I feel that there is a way that I can connect that to her in a more prevalent manner. I question to what extent this ends up affecting her. Does she miss hearing important things because of this disability? Could this ultimately lead to her complete deafness and if I were to put this upon her, does it change the point of her story? For Ollie, as an anti-prohibitionist, I could give her an affected permanent slur due to overconsumption, but again with Olivia, I fear altering her real story. I would like to bring her physical beauty more into play, but I don't want to drift into a trope, a stereotyped Blanche DuBois figure. As for Liv, her story is going to lead her into the male-dominated workforce of the late 1970s and I have played with the idea that she becomes so intimidated initially that her posture begins to change, that she becomes so unsure of herself professionally that she physically begins to bend in on herself.

Secondly, I want to add in more description to the places and people that inhabit all three of their stories. Having looked back at what I have written, I see places where there tends to be a little too much exposition that lacks some of the "show" the story and leans towards simply "telling" the story.

Thirdly, I feel that the dialogue in some places feels a little forced and not germane to the story. I think that I could find better, more important places to insert dialogue that again will "show" the story, rather than "tell" it. The biggest places where I see opportunity for dialogue that would propel the story is in Liv's story. Though she has

no one to talk to, being in the house alone, incorporating more side characters into her story would allow her to speak some of her memories of David, as opposed to having me as the author continue to show them in flashbacks.

Lastly, and much of this remains to be written, I have done extensive research into Civil War battles fought in the North Carolina mountains, farming techniques of the turn-of-the-century in the American South, and the history on Liv's home. I have found much information on the political scene in North Carolina during the Civil War era, the 1920s, Federation Gertie and Alice Paul and integration of Charlotte area schools. Gloria Steinem, Betty Freidan and Kate Millett have provided much to my education of the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. As stated earlier, I don't wish to write a historical novel based on social events of the last 150 years in the South, but I do want to use Civil Rights, Women's Suffrage, ERA and the like to mold who these women are, who they become and why they are changed by the social landscape of America for their times. I want to continue to write their stories as realistic portrayals of strong Southern women and not write a fictionalized social history.

CHAPTER ONE: OLIVIA—1853

The waters pounded against the hull the of *The Empress* as she sailed across the Atlantic with 456 passengers who had left their homeland in search of life in the prosperous land of the free. With her two stacks angled against the sweeping north wind and her bow cutting through the icy waters of the North Atlantic, she kept good time despite the flow of melting ice from the Greenland peninsula and the Arctic reef. The ship swayed with each swell that rammed her hull and kept the steerage passengers in a near constant state of seasickness.

Olivia stood among them. Though she did not enjoy the comforts of the upper classes, she had found a small outdoor passageway where she could place her hands on the rail, be infused by the brine of the sea and let her auburn hair fly free in the gales that galloped past. She could look out on this starboard side of the ship and lean out to look East at where her homeland shrank in the distance and to the West where the rest of her life remained to unfold.

She reflected on the day she and her closest friend Siobhan had embarked. They had been amazed at the size of the ship. Always a bit stoic, Olivia refused to be daunted by its enormity. Siobhan had joked that the whole of Balmoral could fit inside it.

They had both been impressed with the fashionable ladies boarding in their long dresses and their silk hats with fresh flowers pressed into the bands. The men all looked so dapper dressed in twill and tweed suits, bowlers perched on their oiled heads. For Olivia and Siobhan there were no wooden crates and trunks to be hauled on board by mules or hired hands. The two marched with the rest their single carpetbags in hand.

The accommodations in the lower decks lacked any of the heat or comfort that the above 3rd and 2nd class cabins enjoyed. The 1st class passengers none knew the conditions of the lower decks. None wanted to believe that life below deck could be a constant battle of malaria, scurvy, dysentery and rats. The poor that travelled under the stairs huddled together in warmth and solidarity.

Siobhan had begun to cough a bit. Olivia believed it to be a touch of steamers lung, neither of them having been subject to long periods of steam heat and limited exposure to the sun and fresh air. Unlike the other women in steerage, Olivia refused to give into the screams and fits of fainting upon seeing the rats that would scurry through the passageways.

The rooms that housed those unable to pay for the privilege of stoked iron stoves and chamber pots bunched together in six by six cabins with bunkbeds, four to a cabin. They did not enjoy a porthole or a planked walkway to stroll upon. As strangers, they huddled together in their meager quarters and took of the little bread and cheese provided to them.

They met as country men and women in their small confines. Some still holding onto their Catholic beliefs, some fleeing the Church of England, some heading for more than they had left behind. The Williamite Wars had left some orphaned, some starving, some with only enough to escape.

The cold crept into their bones as they slept. Lack of proper hot food and the infestation of the rats, the droppings, the young boys who kept them as pets, the cooking of them, the eating of them led to the scurvy.

In one of these cramped oceanic hovels, Siobhan, a girl of only sixteen begun to worsen. She lay feverish, yellow and vomiting. Poor Siobhan had always been so vibrant and full of life that Olivia couldn't believe how sick she had gotten and how fast. The iron frame of the bottom bunk clutched in her hand as she heaved again and again into the coal bucket lent to the inhabitants by a charitable steward. A damp cloth ripped from the bottom of a nightdress by her friend, dipped in the cold water that seeped into the room some evenings moistened her burning forehead.

The whitewashed walls, the thin cotton sheets on the beds gave little comfort to one who had travelled so far for a chance with her friend to start anew. The other occupants, not unlike the dying girl and her friend, had boarded with the hope of leaving less to find more. Yet, they differed. Each night the two would don their nightdresses, rub on the ruby colored beads around their necks, bless Mother Mary and say, just before rising, "The lass won't last 'til morning'." Then the pair would climb into their bunks in the same gowns as the other two, though sewn with tight-stitched Victorian lace at the hem and the wrists. Disdain in their eyes, disdain in the other's eyes, the night would end each and every night in the same way.

The two friends, Olivia and Siobhan, in the beginning tried to befriend the other two girls, such as they were. On meeting the first night of their travel, Siobhan offered a little bit of the lamb she had saved crossing the valley to meet the ship with Olivia to the other girls, but they turned their noses up. Olivia, knowing what it meant to be congenial, ignored the slight. Siobhan, on the other hand, always ready to get her back up pronounced that the other girls had no good in them and should have no good go into them such as her lamb.

Olivia did not want to let on to Siobhan that she only preferred her mother's lamb made with the fresh mint from the low shadowy stretches of land just below her beloved Grampian Mountains. Just thinking of them now took her to them in her mind. Early spring had always been her favorite time in the valley. Her home, the Dee River Valley, nestled at the base of the Grampians. Her mind meandered to the fog that hung in the little crags rolling over their rocks to tumble with a gentle ease down the side of the mountain like the steam that rose out of the wooden bowls filled with her mother's lamb stew then settled across the plank table. The heather, dwarf cornel and avens lining the lower edge of the hills blew their mossy and sweet fragrance across the river into the open windows of the two-room shack where she had grown up.

There had been nine of them in the beginning with Olivia dead in the middle. Olivia remembered how it seemed that Ma would state with simplicity each spring while pulling potatoes from the ground that another little one was on the way. That was life on the Dee River, Olivia knew. She knew too that her Ma thought that life was not for her. It had been her mother's urging that she make this trip. Still, Olivia knew she would miss home and her siblings.

Sean and Sileas the twins had come first to their parents in their youth, followed by Alana who never made it out of the crib God rest her, then Morag who Mama had called Princess as that was the meaning of her name in the old Gaelic. After Olivia, there had been Kathleen, who had been stillborn and white as a sheet according to Mama, then Baird the laughing boy as Olivia loved to call him for he had always been such a delightful and lighthearted child, then Galvanus and last little Catriona, Kitty Cat.

The twins ran off and became rogue parish priests with the Relief Church and Morrie as Olivia had called her, married a blacksmith from a neighboring village on her fourteenth birthday. That left Olivia at home to watch after the remaining children. Baird, Galvanus and Kitty Cat were her charge until she began working as an out scullery maid at the castle. Because her mother had been a lady's maid in residence until she married Olivia's father, Olivia had been guaranteed a position at the castle.

Moments alone below deck when the two other girls were out of the cabin, with Siobhan wailing and in and out of consciousness, Olivia pondered the rightfulness of her decision to leave all that she had known to venture to a new place, a new set of circumstances, a new life. She reflected on her mother's words. In her heart of hearts, she knew she would come to regret leaving. It was her mother's insistence that drove her to this. Olivia had always been the steadfast daughter. In the rare time did she think of herself. Her siblings would be alright with their grandmother up on the mountain. Her father would not be long gone behind her mother. Pausing to grab bits and pieces of the glimpse of what her life would no doubt become in the shadow of the Grampians, the lost castle and its job, the endless caring for the little ones and Da, Olivia felt her mother move in heart, her mind, her spirit.

Siobhan wracked herself out of sleep with the cough that would not subside. Then, in a flash drifted back into fever ridden sleep. Olivia thought about her own state of health.

She had not had her monthly purge since boarding or for the three weeks that had passed since boarding, since Seamus. Olivia remembered trying to count back the days to that night with him. She had been clean for more than a week on that night she met him

in the stables. There could be no chance that she had miscalculated. She knew almost to the day when the sugar peas would bloom and the cockleshells would blossom. She had a fastidious conscience about all things natural. There could be no possibility that she had not worked out her monthly timing to be with him. She had acquiesced only when she knew that she would never see him again and that she could start her new life a woman.

She knew that her dalliance with him had been impetuous. Seeking to find justification in her mind, she knew that she had wanted to become a woman before departing her homeland. She bore the brunt of regret that she had never told him she was leaving. She ruminated over the hurt he must have felt to find her gone. Her thoughts drifted to that last night.

The horse brayed in the cold, its breath pluming intermittent clouds of fog that blew against Olivia's face in the cool night air as she and the mare plodded through the damp forest dodging low hanging branches of wisteria towards the castle. Seamus waited. Olivia, just cresting womanhood, her flow having only come on that year, shivered. Her thoughts lingered in her mind like the steam of the brood's exhalations in the stillness in front of her. Wisps of oats, grass and millet infusing her nostrils like an ale in the pub led her on towards the stables of Balmoral Castle. Seamus waited. The crackling of twigs under Old Katie's hooves were the only sounds that Olivia could hear. Gone were the hoots of the barn owl, the nightingale, lovers bird of sin. Seamus waited.

November nights in the valley lay low with fog and mystery. Heather clung to the ground beneath the horse's unshod hooves. The chill of the wind flowing like an ocean to overcome her and the mare at any moment lay like the shroud of death that would soon

cover her mother. Olivia knew in heart that what she rode toward may very well be the end of her, but soon she would be leaving all that she had known.

Her beloved Grampians where she had spent her youth collecting the flowers that clung to the sides of rocky faces she knew like the back of her hand would become no more than a memory for her to cling to in later years. In less than a day's time she would leave all that had been home to her, everyone that remained, less her two older brothers, would be left to fend for themselves.

She asked herself, why?

Seamus waited.

When her mother had become too old to serve the remaining Scottish Royal Family, Olivia, by legacy had been allowed to work as an out under scullery maid without the formal interview others would have had to face. Her mother had worked her way up to lady-in-waiting to the last of the unmarried cousins to the remaining heir. They had all married off and left the last Duke of Balmoral. Olivia and Siobhan worked as scullery maids for HRH, Sir Robert Gordon the last surviving heir to Balmoral who died in 1847. They had only been ten years old.

Siobhan came awake and called to her. Olivia climbed down from the top bunk and knelt beside her dipping the rag into the bucket of lukewarm water to ease her fever. Whatever ravaged Siobhan led her into wild ramblings of stories of sneaking into Sir Robert's bedroom, the last Duke of Aberdeenshire. She swore she carried his child. This being impossible as he had been dead for nearly six years. She spoke of a gift, a box of silverware and how she would one day be the lady of Balmoral. Then, she would fall back into fitful slumber. Olivia wondered if she, too, were with child.

The slapping of the water against the ship felt like the condemnation of God. Siobhan's illness, the rude girls in the cabin with them, the constant sleep interruption bore down on Olivia like a weight she had never known. Rumors on board buoyed her spirits that in two days' time the ship would dock in New York harbor. But Siobhan didn't make it through the night. She died in her sleep, drowned in her own blood.

The day *The Empress* pulled into port; Olivia found herself bent over the bucket on the floor retching in a way she had never felt before in her life. She would have thought she had been suffering seasickness, but at this last leg of her three month journey, she knew the truth. She was with child.

Once the heaving passed, Olivia began to gather her belongings and Siobhan's. Each had only brought one carpetbag filled with a few shifts and shirts and skirts along with their uniforms from the castle. As she pulled the linens from the beds, she discovered a hard object between the rope and straw of Siobhan's bed. Wrapped in a stretch of pink linen Olivia discover a dark wooden box, rectangular in shape and shined to a bright sheen. She removed the box from its shroud and opened it.

Siobhan had not been blubbering gibberish in her fevered state. The velvet lining held silver serving pieces. Olivia had known that several of the staff had taken little things that may not be missed, but an entire box of royal silverware. Olivia pulled a cake knife from its soft home and noticed an ornate swirling G engraved on the handle. G. Gordon. Sir Robert Gordon. She jammed the knife back into the velvet and slammed the lid shut. She knew she couldn't leave it, but to take it with her seemed wrong, too. Questions pummeled her brain. Had Siobhan taken the silverware? Had she lain with Sir Robert? Was this a gift? Had she and Sir Robert been discovered and the silverware was

some sort of payment to leave and keep quiet? Is this why Siobhan had been so insistent to make the voyage with her?

Logic took over and Olivia rewrapped the box and shoved it into her carpetbag. With her bag over her left shoulder, Siobhan's over her right, Olivia made her way up the stairs from steerage to the gangplank that led down to the harbor. A porter, a steward and two midshipmen carried Siobhan's body down ahead of her. She had been wrapped in muslin stored in the hull for sail repair, packed with lye to cover the odor of her decay and tied with rope. Olivia couldn't bring herself to cry. The shock of her death, the discovery of the silverware and the remainder of her journey to her uncle's farm in the mountains of someplace called North Carolina kept her determined to remain calm and focused.

The sun shone across a multitude of faces disembarking into the harbor. The first and second class passengers seemed to sail off the ship into waiting carriages and cars, a fascination to Olivia as she had never seen an automobile before this day. The travelers from third class and steerage were shepherded into long cattle shoots to go through inspection stations. Health officials combed through their hair searching for lice and the men were escorted into a separate shed and checked for social diseases. Olivia had no idea what a social disease was or why only men were checked for it.

After having her head, armpits and legs combed through, Olivia heard a man calling for immigrants, felons, single women and children. As she fell into the third category, she walked with purpose towards the shouting man. Signs taped to tables instructed passengers as to which line they should cue, but as Olivia couldn't read, she

followed the other women to one of the areas where a wiry man sat in a shaded area of the harbor with papers on his table and two policemen standing at the ends of the table. When Olivia's turn came to stand before the man, she stepped up with her shoulders firm and her chin cocked out.

“Name?”

“Olivia”

“Family name?”

“I am from the Dee river valley of Scotland, sir.”

“What is your father's family name?”

“My father is a Dee. We have been in the Dee for generations, sir.”

“And your mother?”

“We are all Dees.”

“Fine. Olivia Deese.”

He stamped two papers, gave one to another man behind him and one to Olivia.

“Take this to the immigration office inside the harbor.”

Olivia, not to appear intimidated by the process, took her paper and again followed another woman into the busy harbor building. After a couple hours of processing and explaining about Siobhan, Olivia left the harbor to find her way to the train station. Her Ma and Da had given her a little money to exchange for the train fare and she had a letter from Uncle Frank explaining how to get to Weldon, North Carolina. He had written that the train went no further and that she would meet a man named Gladden at the Weldon station who would get her to Greensboro. He would meet her there on October 12th, 1853. Four more days and she would at last be with family again.

The train's uncomfortable wooden benches did nothing to ease the soreness that had taken up in the small of Olivia's back. She remembered her mother's constant complaints against the weight of her younger siblings each time one of them took up residence in her mother's womb, but she knew it was too soon for that. Her bosom had taken on some heft and she'd had to let it out a bit. She relegated herself to the situation. She began to concoct stories to tell Uncle Frank about her condition. She wouldn't allow her mind to roam over the accusations and recriminations he would be sure to fling at her. As her resolve began to falter at the ugly scene that may occur upon meeting Uncle Frank, the train lurched to a stop somewhere north of Virginia and two men in dark suits came into the car where Olivia sat.

Across the aisle and one row back sat a woman not much older than Olivia with a boy of about five perched on her lap. Olivia had nodded to her when she boarded with what appeared to be her son at the second stop after leaving New York. They exchanged brief pleasantries and settled into an easy silence. Now, Olivia noticed the woman took off her earrings and wedding band and placed them in the little green clutch she carried.

The men were covered in dirt with frayed cuffs and collarless shirts. Neither of them had a close relationship with a razor and Olivia got a good whiff of corn liquor as the shorter of the two took the bench behind her, the taller the bench in front of her. Just after they sat, the porter came along to punch tickets and Olivia entertained the thought of moving to another car. As she rose to retrieve the bags in the rack above her head, the taller turned to her in attempt to engage her in conversation.

He stood as she stood and shook the dirt off his hat as he fumbled an introduction.

"The name's Graelin, Mitch Graelin."

“Yes.”

“Yes, ain’t you got a name yourself?”

His grin looked like a piano keyboard missing most of the white keys and the black keys chipped. Spittle slung down his chin as he spoke. He raised one hand from holding the brim of his railroad cap, wiped his mouth with the back of the hand and nodded and winked. Movement behind Olivia caught her attention. Shorter had reached into the rack holding her belongings and grabbed her carpetbag. He turned to make his way from the car. Olivia started to give chase when taller grasped her wrist and pulled her to him.

“Porter,” Olivia shouted, “Someone, help!”

The small boy lurched from his mother’s lap thinking this game meant he might become a train robber. His smudged face and freckles reminded Olivia of her brothers when they played out in the yard that led down to the river. They chased one another up and down the moss covered embankment making out to be the rebels leading Scotland away from the Church of England, away from the royalist and freedom fighters.

An instinct hit her as the child collided with shorter sending him to his back and the bag sliding across the planks in her direction. She thought to pull one of the moves her brother Sean had taught her. She stepped firmly down on Mitch’s leather boot at the arch causing him to wince in pain and release her. She flew to the floor, slid over the dingy oak floor and grasped her case by its frayed woolen strap. Shorter scrambled to his feet and began to make his way to her just as the porter, two men in brown striped suits and the engineer stepped into the car. Shorter stepped back towards the door separating this car from the next.

“Well, well if it ain’t the Graelin boys.” One of the suited men moved towards Mitch.

“Robie, you know what happens when dapper dandies try and take us, don’t you?”

Robie, the shorter, nodded, dropped to his knees and pulled a knife from his boot. Mitch swung his right arm around behind him and brandished a pistol. The stretch of the train car pulled like taffy in Olivia’s mind. At one end, stood the porter, engineer and the other two men. Halfway between them and Olivia stood Mitch and Robie hung the same distance at the other end of the car. The little boy had clamored back into his mother’s lap who hid his face in her bosom.

The next movement in the carriage of the now stopped train came from one brown suit whipping a pistol from his shoulder holster, then the second brown suit followed. The engineer cocked a rifle he’d had hidden behind him. The porter stepped into the floor space of the empty seat at the head of the car.

“Little lady, I’m going to need you to take a seat.” One of the suits waved her to a bench with the tip of his pistol.

“Oh, no you don’t.” Mitch lunged for her.

Olivia heard a loud bang as she threw herself to the floor. Mitch fell upon her crushing her weight against the planks. She held onto the handle of her bag with everything she had. She could hear Robie cry out, the little boy whimper against his mother’s breast and the faint cawing of blackbirds taking flight outside. Sounds became muffled and there was a scurrying of feet near her left ear, but from her right she heard nothing but an internal ringing as if the gun continued to fire over and over in succession.

She smelled Mitch's breath, felt it on her neck and fought to keep the bilge from rising up in her throat. His weight on her kept her from taking deep breaths and she sensed the light around her dimming in the corners of her now closed eyes. She drifted into unconsciousness like a leaf falling from the tree. With unbearable slowness her mind fled from the scene.

She could see Ma and Da hauling the skiff against the flaxen sheaves of wheat behind the cabin. She could feel the heft of Siobhan's body on her back. She could smell the over-ripened potatoes lying in the dying yellow field near the river. Somewhere little Kitty Cat wailed for more milk from Ma.

Hands held her shoulders against the hard wood of the bench and cool water sprinkled on her face. Blinking, she looked down to see that her bag rested in her lap. The iron smell of dried blood permeated her nose. As she reached one shaking hand up to see if it was she who was bleeding, the gentle voice of a man whispered in her ear.

"Ma'am, you're fine. Where y'all heading'? We just south of Petersburg. Do you have pain anywhere?"

Olivia fought to find sight. One of the men in brown hung over the back of the bench in front of her. The mother of the little boy dabbed her forehead with water. Olivia found her voice

"What happened?"

"The Graelin boys been terrorizing the trains since they started running. Today, me and my partner put an end to it."

"I can't hear out of my right ear."

“Ma’am, the eldest Graelin, Mitch fired on us after he grabbed you. His pistol was right close to the side of your head. That, coupled with the tumble you took up under him, I reckon it’s put you in a right state.”

The rest of the story laid out much as Olivia had thought. Mitch was dead and Robie injured. Robie was in jail and the two men in brown were Virginia Marshalls assigned to patrol the trains. The engineer suffered a flesh wound and the porter passed out at the first shot. The incident had delayed Olivia by more than two hours and she knew she had to meet Mr. Gladden in Weldon.

“Is there a way to get a message to someone at the end of the line. I’m to meet...a friend...to take me on the rest of my way?” Olivia thought better of mentioning that she had plans to meet a man she’d never met when she disembarked. So far, this journey had been more than she had imagined and she didn’t want it complicated further.

“Ma’am there’s a telegraph office in just about every station we stop by. Begging your pardon, but my name is Marshall Gallagher, Wilmont Gallagher. My partner’s hopping off at Stony Creek, but I’m going all out to Weldon. We can wire your friend in Stony Creek and I’ll see you to Weldon.”

“Olivia Deese.” She took his proffered hand and he tugged gently on her three middle fingers, an odd sensation for Olivia. “I mean to say that I am to go on to my uncle’s spread outside of Boone, I believe it is, and a friend of his is to meet me in Weldon, but I fear I will miss meeting this friend.”

“Boone! Whew, that’s a haul Miss Deese. Two to three days by wagon. This rail don’t connect to the tracks running to Raleigh and beyond that it’s mostly foothills and

then on into the mountains. We best let the porter know y'all be needing to get off for a spell at Stony Creek to send a wire."

With that, Marshall Gallagher took his leave to speak to the porter. Olivia and the mother made mutual introductions. Mrs. Fiona O'Shaughnessy and her playful son, Malcolm, were heading to someplace called Wilkesboro and she, too, aimed to meet up with a wagon train in Weldon. However, they would only be travelling as far as Raleigh by wagon. She offered to send word as well that there had been a delay.

"What's the name of the party you're to meet?"

Again, Olivia felt apprehension. She leaned in so as to whisper to Mrs. O'Shaughnessy.

"I've not had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of this friend of my uncle's, Mr. Gladden." The blush rose up on her cheeks as she tried to keep her composure. Ma had told her to treat everyone and every situation as if she were still laying coals in the hearths at Balmoral.

"Oh, I see. That's to be between you and me. I'll speak to the porter. Come, Malcolm."

The remainder of the rail ride, Olivia spent entertaining young Malcolm and making conversation with his mother. She had come over with her husband four years ago from a small village outside of Dublin to set up a homestead with relatives in the foothills of North Carolina. She claimed there were many Scotch and Irish in the foothills and mountains of North Carolina. She spoke of bluish-green fields as far as the eye could see, good soil for growing and cold, snowy winters. She made it sound so much like home, Olivia began to feel her anxiety lessen.

The last hours of this leg of her journey passed with ease chatting with Fiona. She watched pine trees, scrub oaks and willows drift by out the window. She enjoyed the early evening breeze blowing the loose strands of her hair about her neck. She smelled the distance brine of the sea somewhere out there to the east. She listened to the larks and whippoorwills make their nighttime song. Across the aisle, she glanced the half-moon of the setting sun in its oranges, pinks and reds out beyond the mountains.

The porter entered the car to announce their arrival to Weldon.

Olivia clamored off the car onto the platform. Once more, she had both bags strapped to her shoulders. She followed the porter to the mail car where they had stored Siobhan's body. She was lain on the platform to await the wagon.

Olivia returned to Fiona's side to seek out the wagons. Word had reached Fiona's brother-in-law who'd come to retrieve her and little Malcolm. They would go together to locate Mr. Gladden. All Olivia knew about him was that he was in his 50s and would be driving two horses and a commodious trap with cover.

Fiona introduced her brother-in-law and got Malcolm laid down in the wagon. The three of them walked between the other four or five wagons gathered there. Neither believed there to be a Mr. Gladden among them. These were all young men, some barely more than boys.

Harlan O'Shaughnessy called out, "Mr. Gladden. Is there a Gladden here?"

A tall lanky man-boy with a handful of whiskers on his ruddy face jumped down from a wagon capped in a sepia cover.

"Daniel Harley. My neighbor, Mr. Gladden, his rheumatism is actin' up again and they sent me."

Olivia looked to Fiona as Fiona looked this Daniel up and down. He couldn't have been more than fourteen. Olivia could see in Fiona's eyes the doubt. His woolen britches frayed just below the knee, the bristling red hairs on his chin and down the sides of his face made his youth so much more apparent. He smelled of horseflesh and earth, his teeth were no more than those of a child waiting for the drop of the last eyetooth to complete the change from kid to adolescent. His eyes bore out of a moon face speckled with a fine dusting of freckles, twinkling greenish-blue in the fading light and nary a wrinkle on his milk white brow. The amber and roan of his heavy brows cast a faint cloud over his prodigious forehead.

Olivia stole a glance at his hands now cupped like Adam's leaf in front of his groin. Bits of dirt clung beneath the nails, the knuckles lined and hardened showed that he knew his way around a hard day's work. On the outside of his left thumb a callous grew, weathered, hard and angry in its redness. Olivia thought of the days that her older brothers would come in from the back field, hands cracked and bleeding from tilling the soil. She thought too of Seamus's hands, leathery from working the horses, being a farrier for Balmoral and its tenants, how crinkled the joint between his thumb and forefinger looked just after he had re-shoed Sir's prize stallion.

Fiona came to her rescue.

"This is Olivia Deese, Master Harley." Olivia didn't understand why she called him master. Perhaps it meant to show a sign of respect or dignity to a new acquaintance. Perhaps introductions were made in this way in America. In Olivia's mind, it was not like the meetings that went on at the castle, but less like at home.

“I am Mrs. O’Shaughnessy. Ms. Deese and I have travelled together and were expecting a Mr. Gladden. Please explain yourself further than Mr. Gladden’s ailments and your substitution. I refuse flat out to allow my companion to climb in with a stranger without some more information.”

Olivia stood tall next to Fiona. She thought of Siobhan and her natural way of standing up to men, women, animals and children. Holding back the tears yet again for her lost friend and as always, Olivia refused to be shook by the situation. She had come this far and meant to go on. For all she knew by now her Ma had met her maker and Da had sent the young’uns off to Granny in the hills of Scotland.

“Ma’am, my Mama’s kin to Mr. Gladden on her Daddy’s side. She’s an Ashe by birth, but through marriage to the Gladdens we’re all related. I live up in the holler past Grassy Gap nearer Blowing Rock with my folks and brothers and sisters. I had been down from the holler to Greensboro where Mr. Gladden lives to retrieve some supplies, pick up the post and such and well, frankly Ma’am, he was pretty down in the mouth and didn’t look like he ought to be heading down on such a hard road much less to do a turnabout and head back up the hills only to turn back and head back down.”

“Son, you hardly look old enough to be on such a mission. And why, pray tell, do you think I would let a young woman climb into that trap and allow you to carry her away without so much as a letter of endorsement from this Mr. Gladden?”

Olivia straightened her shoulders, hefted the two carpetbags and pronounced, “Mrs. O’Shaughnessy, you have been a Godsend to me. Let us direct this young man to the platform and see if he can rally some able-bodied men to retrieve my other...parcel.” She felt the guilt of referring to Siobhan’s body as a parcel, but if she were to get to

Uncle Frank, she had but one choice: load up her bags, see if he were respectable enough to contend with a corpse and do what she must to get to Boone, or Grassy Gap or wherever God and her Ma had intended her to end up.

Fiona left with the instruction that Olivia were to wait with Mr. Harley until she could procure her husband's brother and some others to bring the parcel to his wagon. With a voice like the royals at Balmoral, Fiona commanded that Mr. Harley proceed to the end of the platform of the rail station and await further instruction. For a moment in Olivia's heart and mind, Siobhan herself stood and gave the directive.

Olivia smelled the lamb from the ship, she felt the cold arm of her friend in that dank cabin on the ship, she recalled the brine and for a moment she swayed. Her balance uneven, her feet firm on the dirt, she tasted the bile in the back of her throat. She dropped her arms to her sides and let the bags fall beside her onto the gravel and blackened ground. She felt that something wasn't right within her. The cramps came like the waves that slammed the ship on the passage. The heaves reminiscent of her dead friend.

Her hands went to her knees as she bent over the strange soil under her feet. A long deep breath pulled in the stench of burnt coal, the pungent smell of the pines surrounding her and she felt a movement in her gut. She tried to squelch down the rumbling.

Head between her knees, the gasps coming less and less labored, she felt the blood rise, her heart stabilized, her abdomen calmed and she unswallowed the bread, cheese and fruit she had shared on the train with Fiona and Malcolm. She thought that perhaps that which Seamus had given her held fast.

She heard footfalls coming from the station. With the hem of her skirt she wiped her mouth and chin, pinched her cheeks to color them and looked around for a pump or pail as she needed water. Fortunately, it turned out to be Fiona come to tell her that Siobhan had been placed in Mr. Harley's wagon. Olivia didn't understand that Fiona had figured out her predicament having birthed a son herself and being in the family way, too. She led Olivia to the end of the wagon she would travel in to offer her some of the water she'd jugged for the ride to Raleigh.

She pronounced Mr. Harley a suitable companion for her journey having sought out two other men in the group who vouched for him. He indeed came from Blowing Rock, was related to Mr. Gladden and the wagon he drove belonged to Mr. Gladden.

"This, of course, means you'll be changing wagons in Greensboro, but Mr. Harley assures me that his rig is as large and comfortable as Mr. Gladden's. He explained that one of his horses had lost a shoe and its knee had begun to swell. To have waited for the blacksmith and applied liniment to the injured horse would have delayed him further. I think he is to be trusted."

"Fiona, I thank you for your kindness."

At that moment, Fiona reached up and removed the small gold hoops from her ears. She placed one into the green velvet clutch she carried and placed the other in Olivia's hand. "Sometimes women sense things about other women. Put this on your finger. It may divert any unwanted attention should you encounter any rascals on the way and keep Mr. Harley from thinking those thoughts that young men tend to entertain."

She reached back into her bag and produced a small bit of paper.

“I want you to write to me the minute you arrive at your Uncle’s stead. I get into town once a week to go to the mercantile and check the post. I’ll be looking out for word from you.”

Before Olivia could refuse, Fiona took her into her arms. The two stood for a moment in the cooling evening, horses whinnying around them. Olivia felt she had made a friend, found a sister.

CHAPTER TWO: OLLIE—1919

You just can't stand to know that in a few hours you are going to be the center of attention at last. Knowing that in less than three hours you are going to be the belle of the ball albeit at your MawMaw Olivia's house out on the dirt road just up from the three-roomed house where you grew up. You love being Ollie, wild and free to be yourself. At last, you have reached the benchmark of womanhood at fifteen and soon to be turned out at sixteen.

Your younger sister, Florence, stitched you the most beautiful sack dress all in yellow with white polka-dots and a white satin sash to tie under your hips. You don't even care where she came upon the satin. With what she had left over, she fashioned a braided yellow and white tie for your head festooned with white and yellow chicken feathers from MawMaw's henhouse.

Things on MawMaw's farm don't seem so provincial as you stand in front of Mama's standing mirror. Mama's brothers and sisters will grant you anything on this the day that you become a woman.

You know that more than two years ago with cousin Boo, a cousin by marriage, you came close to becoming a woman. Everyone called him Boo because he was always trying to scare everybody. His wife, Emmy, couldn't perform her wifely duties so he had come looking for you. And in the hayloft at MawMaw's you let him play a bit with your chest and pry his fingers into your crook, but you knew better than to let it go further than that. After all, you are cousins and there is a great big old world waiting for you out there, far from the dirt, animals, and groping cousins of Union County. You knew you should

have felt guilty or dirty, but you also knew that it was just a little fun with an older cousin and you would need the knowledge later.

Mama yells from the backyard for you to “git your tail in gear, cause MawMaw don ask for ya to be at the house an hour early.” Mama’s Scottish accent, a leftover from MawMaw, seeps into her speech every now and again.

“Yes ma’am, we aim to please,” you throw back at her while you sponge a bit of stolen rouge on your cheeks and lips, then shake a bit of white flour on your cleavage to cool the hot sun beating down from the attic window that sheds light on the backroom where you and your four sisters sleep. You are even too excited to know that after today’s soiree, you will have leave to find work, or a man, or both.

You stand once more in front of the mirror. Flo has sewn a perfect straight line dress-skirt that holds to your perky breast and leaves the rest to imagination. The hem hovers just above your knees and with your auburn hair, jade green eyes, the daisy color of the fabric, you just know that you are every bit a woman as any woman can be.

Your brother Frank hollers that he “ain’t got no time to be a hanging for you, Ollie, git it on down here so I can fetch to MawMaw’s.”

You stand for one last moment to admire your beauty, simple as it may be, you still stand a good bit shy of six feet, you see your bosom pressing out against the fabric of your sweet sixteen *ensemble*, a word you learned looking through the magazines at Mr. Rucker’s Mercantile and Feedstore and you know that there could not be anything that MawMaw could say to you to ruin this, what you prayed, would be your last day on the farm. You know that the big city of Charlotte awaits you and no dissuading from

MawMaw will change your plan to leave little Union for the bigger and better city just up ahead.

Frank lets you off in the roundabout that half encircles MawMaw's front garden of bougainvillea, roses and jonquils that fight the summer heat to stand tall. The handcrafted cement birdbath stands moss covered and dry to the bone in the center of the roundabout. You remember how much joy it gave you to come to MawMaw's and fill the bath from the well in the back of the house, how MawMaw taught you to knead yeast into flour, add salt and set it in the cellar to rise. Without notice, a melancholy comes over you for all that MawMaw has been to you. You feel a bit of remorse in not visiting her more often, but a young girl has other things on her mind, you tell yourself.

The heady scents of the dying flowers reach their tendrils up your nose and for a brief moment, you think to yourself this may be the last time you see MawMaw alone. You laugh and shake your head. MawMaw may be old but nowhere near death. You'll have many more visits with her. You think back to the times that you and MawMaw peeled apples on the front porch, snapped peas and beans, chased a stray possum from the front garden. MawMaw from the old country as most folks around here call her remains a force to be reckoned with to any who cross her.

You step into the back screen door expecting to find MawMaw bent over the wood burning stove making your favorite roast lamb and mint jelly that her mother made for her long ago in the foothills of the mountains that you never remember the name of. You smell the food cooking but MawMaw's not sitting in the wooden slatted chair by the potbelly.

"MawMaw come see here how your Ollie is dolled up today."

There comes no response and you wander into the dining room just off the kitchen and you find MawMaw crying, a shiny wooden box in her lap, her hand outlining a little piece of metal attached on the top of it with gentle strokes. A single ray of sun streams across her wrinkled brow and her head is tilted at a little angle towards the ceiling as if she listens to music playing somewhere that only she can hear. You stop with a start and realize you have never seen MawMaw cry, not even at a funeral.

With a hesitation that you can't name, you take a tentative step closer when the floorboard in front of the newly built washroom squeaks beneath your feet. You stop cold when MawMaw turns to look at you. It is as if she doesn't see the flapper dress, the sash or the feathers in your hair. She just stares at you for a moment, then her hand lifts from the box in her lap and she crooks her finger at you.

“Darlin’ it’s time I told you something, something very important that you can never share with another living’ soul.”

After she shared the story, you heard Great-uncle John Peter driving up in his old Model T pickup. JP was one of a kind. He was the eternal bachelor and you believed that he knew everything there was to know in the world. JP had been the one to teach you to saddle a horse and to ride like a man. You stand from the couch where MawMaw seems still lost in her memory and go to the picture window at the front of the house. You love to watch JP walk. His swagger comes naturally and doesn't have that put-on look that the boys in school.

You think about school and whether or not you'll finish one day. You're turning sixteen and the law says you don't have to go anymore if you don't want. Besides, you

know that you want to get out of the country and see the world. Suddenly, JP sweeps in the door, grabs you around the waist and lifts you off the floor.

“Happy sweet sixteen, sweet girl! Lawd, I can’t believe you’re sixteen. Seems like yesterday I had you up in saddle in front of me not a tooth in your head pulling the reins on old Samson. Now here you are all growed up and looking like a woman.”

You love JP. You think about how many times you wished you had met a boy like him in school or at church. He had a life force, that’s what you’d call it, that shined out like the sun. You couldn’t recall ever having seen him in a fit or angry with another soul. His yellow hair and clear blue eyes fit right into the sunny disposition and no-nonsense way he had about him. You knew he would keep the party going for hours if nobody stopped him, but you didn’t want your party going on too long. You had plans.

As all of your local relatives pile into MawMaw Olivia’s front room for your party, you look at their worn overalls, tattered shirts and decades old house dresses and realize how much you can’t wait to get off of the farm, away from the dirt, animals and manure. Yet, something else tears at your heart as you think of the story MawMaw told you about the silverware and what she endured during her first years in America in Grassy Gap. You think too of your sisters, especially Flo, Uncle JP and even your one friend, Bev. These few people remain for you a link to what you want to believe is the good that could hold you here forever. But you know that they are not enough. MawMaw’s hardships are not enough. The story of the silverware is not enough.

MawMaw hollers for everyone to gather around her big oak table.

Your party takes on the feel of a Sunday dinner after church. The women ferry bowls and platters from the kitchen, MawMaw hovers, supervising the placement of each item and

the males take their usual spots at the table. Fried green tomatoes, your favorite, sit stacked and wrapped in one of MawMaw's handsewn dish towels, cornbread, hoe cake, green beans, ham, corn, fried okra, squash and zucchini round out the meal. The smell of hot liquified lard, drying sweat and sweet face powder hang over the entire house. You feel the smallness of it all pressing down on you.

What had started as your special day has shifted to routine. The conversations around the table repeat across the same topics as an echo down the valley of a mountain. The heat from the kitchen creeps into the dining room stealing the cross breeze that cooled the room just moments ago. You hear the complaints of the county water board wanting to run lines into the county farms and pull them off the free wells that were dug a generation ago, the aging horses that are gonna have to be put down soon and the expense of replacing them. You feel like you are going to explode at the gathering at random to shut up, but one of your great aunts leans down to feed a scrap of fatback to her aging hound dog beneath the table and you see the sideboard laden with packages wrapped in brown paper, pretty linens and hand colored wax paper.

All the gifts, most probably handmade, remind you that you are loved by this family.

After everyone has had their fill, MawMaw and the aunts and sisters clear the table. The men retire to the front porch to chew tobacco, whittle and sneak sips of moonshine. Uncle JP had told you once that the revenuers had been making midnight raids on some of the local farmers and their stills. He told you that Prohibition would never last. "No matter how much them Christian politician holler about the evils of liquor, you just know they hitting the hooch behind them close doors where they make all

them decisions about what's best for the rest of us." It had been his opinions that had gotten you to thinking about the 19th amendment being pushed for ratification. Though you were only just 16 and it was only 1919, you felt a calling to stand with the others in the suffrage movement. You believed women had every right to stand and cast their ballot along with men. You felt with your entire being that being a woman meant you should have the same rights as a man.

Just remembering the things that Uncle JP had said put you in the mind that you wanted one last conversation with him before you and Zeke stole off for the big city. You amble out onto the porch with as much nonchalance as you can. Grandpa and Frank, Jr. are in the side yard with their heads together under the bonnet of the pickup, Uncle JP sits in Grandpa's rocker with a Mason jar between his legs and few neighbor farmers have found their way over to MawMaw Olivia's front porch for a nip or two. As the screen door slams behind you and Uncle JP tries to hide the jar under the rocker, you notice Bev Martin trotting up the gravel road on her old paint Sonny, side saddle as always, a basket across her lap.

You and Bev have been friends for years and though you know she has come to wish you many returns of the day, you'd just as soon she not be there to interrupt what you hoped would be a heated debate with Uncle JP. He stood in opposition with vehemence against Prohibition and just as staunchly against women getting the vote. What some may view as arguing, you and Uncle JP understood each other enough to know that you and he enjoyed going rounds about hot political issues. Those verbal volleys would be one of the things you would miss most about JP.

Bev sauntered up and with expert precision sidled down basket in hand and with an almost manly gait walked over to you. She presented the basket to you with one hand and with the other extended it to you like a man greeting another man. You grasped her hand in yours and shook a three beat. Bev gave you that half grin that belied her shy side, turned and threw herself back up on Sonny. Before she pulled the reins to turn him around, she shouted, “Happy 16th! Don’t go doing anything stupid like running off with one of them Stegall boys! Ha!”

Your face went red and you could have killed her. That was the thing about Bev. You could trust her to speak her mind even if she appeared not to have a lick of sense in her head. She could call you out without being downright ornery about it. You smiled after a minute at her audacity. You would miss her, too.

“At least a Stegall boy would ask me to run off,” you countered at the last minute before she got out of earshot. She simply raised a hand, waved and disappeared in a cloud of red clay dust.

“What in tarnation was that all about?”

“Oh, Uncle JP, Bev’s just having a little fun with me on my special day. What have you heard from our esteemed Governor Craig or his little buddy Alderman McRae about bringing on full Prohibition for our lovely county?” You knew this would be the kind of opening to get him going and you noticed the sleight of hand with the jar.

“Now L’il Bit today ain’t the day to be having one of our full outs on the misappropriations of our beloved elected officials. You tell me the truth now. None of them Stegall boys pining’ after you are they? They a raucous bunch you best steer clear of.”

“Uncle you know I got better sense than that.”

You knew you needed to get him off the subject of Zeke Stegall.

“What about what President Wilson says about suffrage strengthening white supremacy? You think he really believes that’s what we want?”

“L’il Bit today ain’t...”

“And stop calling me Little Bit. You know that today of all days, I am more than a little bit. I am a woman.”

You knew that saying that would cause a whoop of laughter to go up from the men. Before so much as a guffaw could be uttered, MawMaw called from the house that it was time for cake and presents. Your attempt to engage Uncle JP one last time in a battle of wits would not be.

As you bent to retrieve the basket Bev had brought you noticed something cardboard sticking out from under the gingham cloth that hid the contents of the old egg collecting wicker basket. You pause for a moment and peek into the basket to discover to your shock one thing you never in a million years thought Bev would bring to you on your birthday or any other day for that matter. There beneath the blue and white checkered material were two French letters. You knew that Bev had an uncle fighting in Europe in the war and you guessed he must have sent them to Bev’s little brother William. But you had no idea that Bev would know you were even thinking about going all the way with Zeke. A girl from school that everyone called “loose” had been heard bragging about the Rhythm Method and that a girl could mix baking soda and Pepsi-Cola to douche with afterward to prevent pregnancy, but you couldn’t believe that someone

like Bev would know about lambskins for the boy. And French Letters to boot. You were definitely not L'il Bit anymore.

You tucked the letters under a jar of real face powder and two handmade lye candles, swept the basket onto your arm and headed back into the house hoping the shock, and the relief, didn't show on your face.

The presents from the family tended toward what you had expected. Flo had told you that your new dress was her gift, but you found a delicate string of white and yellow glass beads strung on fishing twine to match your dress in a folded piece of pink colored wax paper. Mama and Daddy had each given you a silver dollar, Elizabeth and Phyllis had stitched two matching washcloths for your hope chest and the remainder of the gifts were homemade soaps, rosewater and hair combs. You save Uncle JP's gift for last. With the care of handling a fallen bird from a nest, you pull the brown paper from its sealing wax to find a brown leather wallet, just like the one he carries. You know this is his way of telling you that you should have everything a man has, his way of saying you as a woman deserve the vote.

You leave the party at MawMaw's with the pounding of two opposing thoughts. You feel that you have no choice but to continue with the plan you set in place three days ago. Three days ago, all your thoughts were consumed with the plan. Zeke Stegall would be picking you up before the sun comes up tomorrow to head to Charlotte. The other idea, the stunt in your step, is that MawMaw has shared with you something that only you and she know. She confided that even Mama and Daddy didn't know the story of the silverware box. How can you leave her now knowing what you know about her grandmother? The story lodges itself in your heart like the pit of a peach that MawMaw

might carve out without a thought. In your mind you see her withered hands dripping juice on a warm spring morning, the succulent sweet smell of fleshy peaches run up in your memory, they drown your brain in all that she means. Safety, allowance to flaunt a bit and freedom squeeze your heart, juicing you by way of her. You see the peels in her handmade bowl on the cracking boards of the porch.

You remember the times that you would shell pecans with her on the bleached gray front porch of her little house, the times that she showed you how to hand stitch embroidery on a dish towel to make it look like the ones you've seen in the mercantile or when she warned you about what boys will want to do with you.

Looking down at your gorgeous hand-sewn party dress, the flecks of white on yellow like the daisies that are her favorite, you argue with yourself. Go, don't go. In a flash, ten years disappear in your recollection and you sit filthy in the dirt of her front garden, digging with a tiny spade, helping her plant the daisies that you watched grow and tore petals from to see if 'he loves me, he loves me not'. No more than a forgotten Valentine card from the first year you went to the county school and met Bev Martin, you can't remember who you wanted to love you, or not.

An image of sitting with your tatty worn boots swinging over the planks of the county school floor out off of White Store Road, you remember meeting Bev. Like you, she came from a farming family, though they lived on the other side of the highway and they had riding horses, Bev became your immediate friend. Her hair cascaded down her back in one long umber and dulled yellow braid that reached to the end of her shift, her dungarees soiled brown with the mud of mucking the stalls and smelling of oats, hay and rainwater. You thought she had that perfect blend of wholesomeness and solidity, unlike

you with your waifish thinness and false self-assuredness. The two of you shared a long oak table of a desk and sensed that each of you resided in a kindred spirit that had been separated generations long since passed.

Bev's unconcern with those around the two of you at the other desks, her attentiveness to the teacher, Ms. Teresa, as she insisted she be called and her calm demeanor at the age of six so impressed you she snuck into who you thought you wanted to be. Bev didn't brook any foolishness even when the silly boys would try to steal an apple out of your lunch pail or pull at your half-hearted braid, she would step in and defend you, and when necessary pull a punch. Bev never backed down. You tagged to her early on when she defended you. She became the older sister you didn't have and the one you knew you couldn't be to yours.

Thinking of Bev now with the decision you needed to make about tomorrow, you wished you had been a better friend to her when things went awry with her farm and her mother. The ripples of the theft shimmied through all the farming families in Union. You had just turned eleven when word broke that someone had set fire to the horse stables over on Goldie's Lair Farm, Bev's farm.

MawMaw had come running down the lane to tell Mama and Daddy that someone had set fire to their farm. Back then there were no volunteer fire departments and folks were left to their own buckets and hauling to put out a blaze. The Goldie Farm, just across the highway from MawMaw's place, could be reached by running a few hundred yards, yet MawMaw knew how close you and Bev had grown. She had been in the know of the other problem facing the Martins. A chicken farm just down the highway kept trying to encroach on the Martin's place.

MawMaw had a well, we had a well and Daddy had two tractors and a Ford Model pickup. You knew if MawMaw showed after the sun went down, something must be amiss. You remember Frank waking you, yelling to wake the girls and to start grabbing buckets. You could hear Daddy's Ford being cranked, Mama pumping the water fast and hard out back and Frank starting one of the tractors. Then, the thing that turned your school friendship with Bev into a true friendship, you ran to the other tractor, cranked it and hitched the wheat trowel to it like you had been doing it all your life.

You grabbed Florence and your two younger sisters and heaved them into the drag bucket. You ran to the pump as Mama pumped and pumped. Your best friend's farm may be burnt to the ground, but not if you and yours could help it.

The flames inched at a foot high towards the horse barn when you, MawMaw, Daddy, Frank and the rest pulled onto the Martin's land. Up ahead, behind the field of corn, you could just make out Bev running to their pumphouse with her younger brother, the awful William, the worst of the hair pullers in school, dragging behind her with his overalls falling from his scrawny shoulders, his straw hair flailing out behind him like a fire itself.

Then the thought came to you. William took pride in his little anarchies. There had been the time you had seen him out behind the general store chasing strays with a stick, the time you heard him in the cloakroom of the schoolhouse with Delores Abernathy playing "you show me yours and I'll show you mine" and then, of course, the time he tried to corner you in the back of the cornfield. You waited until he had his pants down to slap him, shove him over and run like the dickens back to MawMaw Olivia's. It

seemed to you that Bev and Grannie Olivia were the ones you always ran to when things got rough.

With running to them in your mind, you began to think about your plans with Zeke and running away with him. Zeke had been hanging around the general store listening to the old-timers discuss The War, President Wilson and the changes happening in the county and the country and you knew he wanted to head to Charlotte or Raleigh to see what was really happening. Since the death of Archduke Ferdinand and America's entry into battle, the revenueurs turning up in Union county and a visit from "Federation Gertie" Weil to collect signatures on her petition to endorse the right for women to vote, you knew that he had gotten fired up and in turn fired you up.

Last night he really got you fired up and you showed him just how much. You had been sneaking around with Zeke for a few weeks now and although he didn't have the finesse you expected he would with women, you still felt like a woman with him. You didn't bristle when it was over too soon or when he rolled over on the blanket to light a cigarette and he didn't offer you one. You just stood in all your creamy white nakedness, walked around him so he could get a good look from all sides and bent over with your tail-end high in the air to retrieve a butt from the pack of Chesterfields lying in the dewy grass. You had thought that would get him going again, but he simply began one of his well-rehearsed speeches on the libertine way in which Gertrude Weil has swooped into town, met up with the Aldermen and stood right up on the platform at the 4H clubhouse to espouse the limitations of the elected men in their well installed offices.

Sometimes you wondered which side his bread was buttered on when it came to his political views. You agreed with him most times when he railed against the electoral

college and the “good ole boy” network of power brokers, but recently he seemed to have been veering off into rebellion and vigilantism as a form of government. Not that his stances ever sidetracked you from his tall, lanky good looks or the way his hips swaggered when he walked. For you, Zeke simply oozed sex appeal like Walter Long in that movie you read about President Wilson watching in the White House, the one you had seen the picture of the poster in the paper taken outside the Belvedere Theatre in Charlotte.

You thought too of how his moods could seem to change with the wind. One minute he might take your hand and kiss the inside of your palm, gaze into your eyes with longing and profess his undying love, while the next he’d tangle himself up in a world that you couldn’t reach. He would ramble about cousins visiting from Lumberton and being locked in the hayloft naked with them. Other times his anger at the world in general would set you in mind of the aunt on Granddad’s side of the family that they sent away to the home in Broughton a few years ago who claimed she was Cleopatra and that Marc Antony and Caesar had killed themselves over her.

Whatever his mood, you secretly knew that he represented a means to an end. Things on the farm maintained a bucolic, provincial existence. You wanted more than plowing, harvests and animal smells. You wanted more than dirt and gravel. You wanted more than well water and handmade dresses. You wanted the world and if Zeke Stegall pulled you as far as Charlotte or Raleigh, you’d go. If he became too wishy-washy, you’d just wash your hands of him, latch on to someone else and see more than North Carolina. You’d see New York, Paris, Greece.

Uncle JP came back into the house and noticed the dreamy look on your face, but before you would give him the opportunity to rib you, you threw your arms around him and thanked him for the wallet with a peck on the cheek. He whispered into your ear to be a good girl and told you to look inside the wallet when you got home. Curiosity nibbled at you. You knew better than to look now. You'd do it out back on the stoop when everyone was getting ready for bed.

Looking back to the party when most everyone had left and MawMaw Olivia's house pealed with the sounds of her bent over the farm sink in the kitchen washing the last of the dishes, you wished you had snuck back in and to watch her for a few moments. You wanted to see the lacey curtains in their faded greens and yellows billowing in the late afternoon breeze, sun streaking through the open window over the sink. You wanted to one last time wrap yourself in the security and warmth of her embrace, but you knew that you and she had said all there was to be said when she gave you the box of silverware and she pulled from you the promise of confidentiality.

You, instead, looked around the front room. The divan sagging in the middle where one too many overweight aunts had crowded just a few hours ago, the doily covered arms of the chair Grandpa sat in each evening to read the paper, then the Bible, the scarred square oak table in the center of the room with wilting daisies bending down to slumber over the edge of the chipped white vase with the little churrasco rosebuds inlaid in it all cried out to you to run before you too were too worn to remain. As the tears welled up in your eyes, you hollered out to MawMaw that you loved her and thanked her for the party as you run out the door and down the rocky road that led back to your family's home.

You knew inside the girls would be turning down beds, the boys would be bent over the washtub out back rinsing off before getting down to their boxers to climb into bed and that Mama and Daddy would be in the parlor listening to the wireless just before they readied themselves for bed. Like Grandpa, they would read some scripture that Daddy would declare right for the day, the season or the need of the family and neighbors. Usually, he read from Psalms, Proverbs or the Book of Mark, as he said it was in those books where the Lord's real kernels lie.

The entire walk home the tears fell with silent disdain, mocking you. You had planned this for so long that the enormity of leaving grated at your heart like the plow tearing up the earth in the back forty. You repeated like a litany the reasons you wouldn't stay. The sameness of each day, the heat of the summers like the one coming, the flatness of the land and its people, the stench of the cows, the chickens, the pigs and the loneliness that bore itself out of being surrounded by brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles and cousins that never seemed to want more, complacent in the routine of farm life all wrapped around your neck like a noose and you knew that you might very well die from it. The constant presence of the repressive nature that is farm life choked the very air from your lungs sometimes.

You thought of the articles you'd read from *Vogue*, *The American* and even *National Geographic* that showed you that greater outer world. You pictured yourself at movie premieres in Hollywood, standing by the Grand Canyon or the Eiffel Tower and climbing the pyramids of Egypt.

You stopped. Your stubbed-heel patent leather pumps were covered in the red North Carolina clay dirt, just as your britches had been for so many years while you

scrubbed out chicken pans, sprinkled corn for the hens and went to the well time and time again to bring water to Daddy, Grandpa and Uncle JP as they eked out their existence.

You wished in your heart that JP knew where you were off to and would pull up stakes to go with you. No, you would not let your heart break for those lifeless souls buckled to the earth. You knew that you should go. You would be a voice for women. You could be another “Federation Gertie.” You are, will be, “Federation Ollie.”

Your mind turned to the day she swept into town.

Gertrude Weil wore an organdy white dress with lace trim, a sunhat bedecked with ostrich plumes at the 4-H clubhouse. She had come from money, from New York, from education and a “good” family. She knew things that you wanted to know. You and Bev had snuck off from the schoolhouse that day to go hear what she had to say. You knew that Zeke would be there. Bev had told you to be wary of him. You had laughed her off, telling her that it would take more man than Zeke to make a woman out of her. Bev had smartly replied that you didn’t know what a mole could stuff in a hole about men. You would miss her.

Standing there with the sun blistering the earth, you stood shoulder to shoulder with Bev, Zeke standing behind you with his hand between your cheeks and the stench of farm sweat dousing the air like a late night rain. You nudged Bev and reminded her of the time the two of you had tricked the old widow Blevins into giving the two of you a ride in her wagon up to Monroe to see the debutantes strolled out across the lawn of the Monroe Country Club.

Back then, the debs offered themselves out to the gentry of Union County society on the last Friday of May. School might have still been in session, but these privileged

progeny of the upper crust were allowed to promenade in their best white lace and silk to be shown out to the up-and-coming sons of gentility of Monroe.

Gertie looked like one of them, but she held to her voice and not her upbringing. Those clowns in their virginal dresses would have been no match to the voice of Gertie. You had always laughed at the notion that rich married rich. You knew you came from farm stock and it burned in you to be more, better, higher. Sure, maybe Zeke provided the exit, maybe he might become a politician and change things for women, but Gertrude Weil had him in spades. Maybe, you knew in your heart, that Bev had all of them in spades.

Stock still, standing there more than halfway between the comfort and confession of MawMaw Ollie and what you called home, a twister started to form off in the distance above the Morgan place. You heard the rumbling of a freight train. MawMaw always said, "Girl, you hear a train rumbling out here in the flatland of Union County, one of two things is about to happen. First, it's a tornado a-comin' or you 'bout to get run down by a train and there ain't no trains running out here off Edwards Road."

You bent down, unbuckled the ankle straps of your shoes, looped them in your left hand while holding tight to the basket from Bev and the box and ran like the dickens towards home. MawMaw was right, there ain't no trains running anywhere near here. As you came into the yard of home, Mama and Daddy stood stock still on the planks that made up the front porch. Candlelight flickered from inside. Mama ran to you and snatched you up. The box dropped from under your arm. Mama bent to pick it up and before you could think to do otherwise, you smacked her hand away, dropped Bev's basket and grabbed the box close to your chest.

“Girl, whatcha got there? That wont one of your gifts at MawMaw’s.”

“Mama, now ain’t the time, grab that basket. We gotta git in the house.”

You knew you’d rather Mama find the French letters than the box. MawMaw all but made you sign it in blood never to tell.

“Daddy’s opened up the cellar. Forget the house, girl, we gotta get under.”

The last thing you can remember is Mama running with Bev’s basket on her arm and her hand latched to yours like death was chasing you. The two of you steer around the side of the house running like the dickens to the cellar door. Daddy, braced against the double doors with his legs spread as wide as they would go, is waving at the two of you. Your mind races, thinking about how to explain to your family the mahogany box you clutch to your chest and you begin to think about Zeke.

Your plan to escape the horrid life that is the farm is going up in a twist in your mind. You shudder to think that all you have left in the world at this minute lives in a chicken egg basket given to you by your only friend, the dress made by Flo, your family and a story living inside a rectangle of wood clutched to your chest that you have vowed never to tell. Oh, MawMaw, what were you thinking to put this on me and ruin my plan? In a pause, the screeching simmers. The air feels cool on your bare legs. You and Mama reach the cellar door. She hands the basket to Daddy as she shimmies through his legs down the steps into the root cellar. Now, Daddy has the basket. You try to pull the box into your body, there is no time to hide it. You think. If you leave it beneath the cinder blocks by the cellar door, maybe it won’t blow away. You know you can’t leave it. You have promised that you will keep it with you always. Oh, MawMaw, be safe you think and you curse her for what she has told you.

Somewhere off in the distance, you hear someone ringing the bell at the clubhouse. It is a warning to all the farms that a tornado is coming. You know that is either William, Bev's brother or one of Zeke's brothers or Zeke himself tolling to warn the others. In your heart, you hope Will stands in the whirling wind and will get swept away. You pray Zeke has found safety so that the two of you can sneak away soon. Daddy grabs the box out of your clenched fists and throws it down the steps into the cellar. He pushes you threw his legs. With one last grab, he pulls one door down and the other gets pulled by the wind. You watch as he his lifted into the air and sucked away. Time stands still. The rumbling like a train whispers from the distance. A slight shake trembles beneath your feet.

You hear Mama calming Flo, Elizabeth and Phyllis.

"It's gonna be alright. Y'all just squeeze into me a little more and I'll sing you the mockingbird song.

You hear the boys lighting oil lamps and candles.

Somehow you have pulled the other door closed and latched the hasps together to keep them secure. In silence, you prayed for Daddy, you prayed for him to be okay. Mama would never survive it otherwise.

You sit at the top step, your head against the boards.

You make your decision.

You may never return.

Daddy, who only got blown over to the backside of MawMaw's in the twister, had his shoulder in a sling. Mama was tending to his broken shoulder while they listened to the evening sermon on the wireless.

Yet the night seemed still. The cows were lowing in the field. The hens were snoring their strange rattling hum. The sows and boars grunted in slumber. You had packed your party dress, the ruby-red sateen gown that Mama had worn to the Halloween Jamboree at the 4-H, the stubbed heels, everything from Bev's basket that you found after the storm. And beneath it all in the cardboard valise from Mama and Daddy's honeymoon to Wilmington, the silverware box. You stole some powder from Mama's glass trinket on her dresser.

You reached out the front window of the sleeping room and placed your clutch bag, the suitcase and the basket on the front porch. Zeke would amble by in a few hours to collect everything. You would feign sleep for a bit and then slip through the open window to meet him down Edwards Road by White Store Road.

The aftermath of the tornado turned out to be minimal, but your resolve remained sturdy and fast. You had said a prayer that Daddy survived, you knew in your heart that you'd never want harm to come to him. You had heard from the Morgan's that their place stood strong and that MawMaw had made it under the cinderblocks that her house rested on and came out unscathed. She did have Uncle JP ride down to tell you that she was okay, but that the ringing in her right ear had returned like the devil on a mission.

The story, MawMaw's story, rang in your ears. You set a place in your heart and mind to one day go to MawMaw's "home in the hills" as she called it while telling you the tale. But, first you had to go, to get away from the farm. You think that maybe MawMaw had to get away. You think about all she had told you about her getting away. Too much for you to know about your grandmother, you turned back to your life, your plan.

In a few hours Zeke would tap on the porch post as a signal that the time to leave had come. You fretted in the bed beside Flo.

You knew that there were things you would miss about the farm. You loved the smell of a fresh pone of cornbread on Sunday afternoons after church made in Mama's cast iron skillet on the wood-burning stove, the welcoming chirrup of the crickets on a late summer evening that warned of an oncoming rain and the feel of the freshly washed sheets on the beds in their flowered air dried scent. You would miss braiding Flo's hair for services, Phyllis and Elizabeth arguing over whose apple pie would win the ribbon at the 4-H competition and Mama and Daddy lingering over the dinner table lost in their shared memories. You would miss MawMaw.

You knew you'd not sleep so you stole into the kitchen to pack a basket for the ride off the farm. There were leftover fried green tomatoes, hoeecake, and jars upon jars of pickled veggies. You hoped that Zeke would want to stop along the rough cut gravel and dirt road that would lead you to Charlotte for something more than a snack, but you put prudence of eating ahead of a quickie in the grass on the side of the road.

You took the food and reached through the open window to place it beside the valise and Bev's basket when Flo tugged on your nightshirt beneath which you wore one of your simple white cotton dresses.

"Sissy, what are you doing up? Did you have another of your spells?"

Poor Flo, so innocent worrying about you gave your heart pause. You resisted the tug at your heart for leaving her, making her the oldest once you left.

You cupped her face in your hands, fought back the tears and kissed her full on the mouth.

“Yea, honey, I’m havin’ one of my spells. I’m gonna step out on the porch, sit in Daddy’s rocker and breath in some good farm smells. Maybe, it’ll calm my nerves. You go on back to bed.”

“Ollie, I love you. I don’t think I could ever love someone like I love you.”

“Florence Marie Deese, you are my angel. No matter where I go, what I do you will always be my baby, the first one to come after me, the one I will love like no other.” Before you could stop them, the drops fell.

“Ollie, you ain’t gonna leave me ever are you?”

You lied. You looked her straight in the face, those tiny eyes so green like your own, held back the tears, thought of MawMaw Olivia and told her, that no, you would never leave her. For an infinitesimal time, she held your heart and you thought to change your mind.

You understood that Phyllis and Elizabeth as loving sisters would bring Flo through you leaving. Mama and Daddy would explain away why you left. In their way, the boys would rally to lift her spirits.

Without thinking, you hoisted her into your arms, situated her back in the other bed and tucked her between your sisters.

“Hush little baby, don’t say a word, Ollie’s gonna buy you a mockingbird...”

Flo drifted off before you could finish the verse.

For a few moments, you walked the rooms of the house in your stocking feet. The quiet of it setting you on edge. All of you, your sisters and brothers had been born in this house. This longhouse bore eleven children and some managed to survive, grow and live here. Your thoughts went to MawMaw and all she had told you. The uncles and aunts you

would never know buried up on a hill in the mountains. Her friend, Siobhan, buried among them. An owl hooted somewhere in the distance and you paused. Was it a harbinger of things to come?

Hanging like dried laundry the smell of dinner still pierced the air in these five rooms. Grease, cornmeal ground just today and the lingering metallic of the cast iron pan dripping in the sink tickled the all too familiar wisps in your nose of life here . A breeze like any other that wafted from the front windows to the back screen door most days heightened the hairs on your arms.

Again, the hoot of the owl.

Again, the heft of the story.

Again, the decision.

He would be signaling soon.

You stepped from the front room into the dining room. Smaller than MawMaw's, less intimidating, you brushed your hand across the now bare oak table, the lace cloth stored away in the sideboard, in the way that MawMaw had stroked the silverware box. You tried to imagine her life as it had been when she arrived here some 66 years ago. Then it dawned on you. MawMaw had lived more than 80 years, most of them in the mountains of North Carolina. She left her home, came to a foreign country to raise boys that weren't her own, all but watched them die, buried them, buried some of her own children, her best friend, and ended up here to raise her remaining child.

The strength that your grandmother had crashed down on you as you realized you wanted to push for women like her.

CHAPTER THREE: LIV—1978

Somewhere between that ethereal web of deep sleep and dreamily wakening where all things that can be interpreted to be real and fantasy, life and what could be, I found myself easing back into the conscious world of my existence. Something akin to bacon frying, rain tapping on a tin roof and bodily warmth of someone else in the bed aroused me from that wonderous place of escape that is sleep. At first, I could not mentally grasp that which pulled me from my sonorous slumber, as if the real world and that which my mind conjured mingled to keep me from arousing into reality. I wanted to remain in that strange and imperfect world where I heard the gentle beat of rain falling, the stir of a spoon in a bowl, the lulling snore of a partner and the taste of lips on mine. I did not want to wake. I knew what lay before me and I prayed to enjoy the bits and pieces of what was left of sleep. It was that last morsel of effervescent sway between sleep, dream and reality that held me for a few moments longer.

As my mind began to tumble back into the abyss of the unconscious I could feel the sunshine on my face, smell the wisteria just coming into bloom and feel the touch of David's hand on my shoulder.

“Look, this is where I want to grow old with you.”

I turned to see him standing on the sidewalk across the street from me pointing at the split foyer two-story colonial in a modest state of disrepair that would become our home for the next seventeen years. The home in which I now slumbered.

It had been on a warm spring day and we had decided to go on one of what David lovingly referred to as our dream-finding trips. It might have been a walking tour of antique and thrift stores, a drive up to Morrow Mountain or a walk around the

neighborhood. He had always found innocent little ways to surprise me and keep our relationship from growing stagnant or mundane. This was one of those ways he did this.

I heard a beep-beeping somewhere in the recesses of my mind and could not discern its origin. My mind wanted it to be the sound of a child on a tricycle behind us on the sidewalk, but I sensed it was coming from the world outside my head. I felt a warmth across my face and knew it must be the sun streaming through the front window. The noise came from a garbage truck out there on Union Street. Monday, trash day.

I opened my eyes and for the hundredth time in the last six weeks I rolled over to check to see if I had been dreaming some other dream and David would be lying there beside me. Just like every other day since May 13th, he was gone. He had died on a Friday. Friday the 13th. That's what my life had become since the cancer ate up all it could of David's insides and left me with nothing but loneliness, debt and a house too big for one person—a nightmare that started on Friday the 13th.

It had started in earnest months before with David feeling more tired than usual. His appetite had decreased a bit, but I had written that off to the fact that he had been made General Manager of the swank new bistro in the SouthPark area and had been working close to 65 hours a week.

Before that, David had left his family's restaurant in Concord and been hired on as a bar manager at Bistro 174 a few days shy of our 5th anniversary. I had been working part-time at the library in the mornings and part-time in the afternoons for one of those national chain after-school care places for busy working adults to dump their kids. David and I had been talking about starting a family, but he insisted there needed to be more

money in the bank, more money coming in and a place to, as he always referred to children, put the little rascals. That's when we had found the house.

I wanted to lie back and return to the dream of that day, but the racket of the garbage truck and the blinding sun forced me to face what I hadn't been wanting to face. I knew that I was running out of time to sort through David's things, decide what could be donated, what needed to be stored and go through his desk in the office. I knew, too, that the garage, or carriage house as it had been called in its glory days, needed working through. We had periodically placed so much stuff in there that it neared bursting. All of it needed going through and dispersal.

I flung the covers off, rolled back to my side of the bed and took the bottle of Valium from the nightstand. My water glass was empty, so I grabbed that with the other hand and headed into the bathroom. This had been my way of life for a while now. I would pop a Valium, chase it with water and vegetate my day away. I stepped up to the gilt framed mirror over the antique ebony vanity David had found in an out of the way place of Corban Avenue and took the first long look at myself in weeks.

The dark rings beneath my eyes told their own tale, the extra inches of my ratted brown hair confirmed the story. The hollows in my cheeks provided the denouement. I twisted the cap off the Valium, tipped the bottle over the drain and let them pour out. I turned on the cold tap, let it run until all the pills disappeared and filled my hands with chilly water to splash on my face. I knew the time had come to quit feeling sorry for myself and take hold of the challenges that awaited me.

I brushed my teeth, tried to run a comb through my hair to no avail, so I wrapped into a scraggly bun atop my head and took to stripping the bed. First things first, I

thought. If I wash the bed linens then I'll have to make the bed before I can get back into it. I mentally put that down as the last thing I would get done today. The first thing to put on the list as I heard the garbage truck trundled down the street was to clear out the garage. If I could make enough headway in there, I could always use it as a bungalow to live in while I sought a buyer for the house.

I stepped into the garage and my eyes fell at an instant on Granny Ollie's box of silverware. It held service for 12, a total of 108 pieces, not including the serving pieces. Granny had sat for hours every Saturday morning polishing each piece until it shone. The box was lined in burgundy velvet with gold embroidery in the lid naming the manufacturer. On the outside of the mahogany box a small black and brass plate had been riveted in the center of the lid with the date June 9, 1932 emblazoned on it. It too shined bright in the bit of sunlight that filtered through the small dormer in the roof of the garage.

I remembered the first time I ever saw that burnished wooden box being pulled from the oak sideboard in Granny's dining room. It had been a warm spring morning back in 1963 just days shy of my 13th birthday. I had gone to spend the weekend with Granny for my birthday. It had been a tradition from then on for me to go and spend some time with Granny around Easter every year. Sometimes it would be near my birthday, sometimes not depending on the calendar, but regardless, Granny would pull out the box and set to shining its contents on that same weekend every year.

I can still recall the yellow tulips, sunny white daisies and faded pink roses that clamored for space in her front garden. It had always been so fragrant and if I closed my eyes I could still smell their scents even today.

On this first occasion of seeing Granny slide the box from its home with reverence, I became curious. How many Sundays had Mama and me come here to have supper at the long oak table in Granny's dining room with cousins, great-aunts and uncles, I wondered? And of all those after church Sunday dinners, why had this been the first time I noticed the silverware box. Usually, all the utensils came from the drawer beside the sink in the kitchen, the sink that back then still had the handpump. The coffee cups hung from screws beneath the cupboard where the plates were kept.

I remember I had opened my mouth to ask Granny where the box had come from when I saw her hand glide with longing over the little brass plate on the lid and a tear came to her eye. She turned to look at me and called me over to sit by her. She said she had a story to tell me, a story from a long time ago that had much importance. She said that her grandmother, our namesake, Olivia, had brought this box from Scotland more than a hundred years ago.

A niggling thought tried to creep into my brain about what to do with the silverware. Then the other thoughts crowded around it. David's hospital bills lay on the kitchen table unpaid, the mortgage was a month past due and the refrigerator seemed to echo every time I opened it in its emptiness. I began to wonder how much the silverware might fetch if I could find someone to sell it to. I realized I couldn't do it myself and I had no idea how to go about finding a fence. I think that's what I heard it called on that detective show with the actor with the parrot on his shoulder.

Then I remembered the box of Daddy's things from his office. Mom had given them to me to hold onto until she could figure out what needed to be kept and what could be tossed in the trash. He had died just a few months before David. Somewhere in the

back fog-covered part of my brain, I remembered Dad had said that he received a letter from an insurance company out of Raleigh inquiring about some long-lost heirloom from Scotland. Surely, it couldn't have been about the silverware. Now I had to think where I had put Dad's stuff.

Looking around the cluttered garage, boxes upon boxes, trunks and crates stacked five high, old suitcases, bags of clothes to go to Goodwill and assorted other detritus, I began to think I may never find this one box that may or may not squash my plan for solvency. Having at last pulled myself from the self-imposed prison of my bed for the last six weeks, I became a woman possessed. I ripped through trunks filled with old linens, plastic milk crates collected from the restaurants where David had worked filled with collectible beer steins and souvenir plates, bags of polyester pantsuits from my Mary Tyler Moore era and boxes containing everything from scrapbooks to old tax returns. One of the scrapbooks covered in beige moiré held my wedding photos.

I paused for a moment and sat on the old wicker chair that had sat on the front porch from the first day that David and I moved into our fixer-upper until sometime last fall when the rattan had begun to unravel and David on one of his better days had moved it into the garage to repair. Of course, there were the other little projects that he had planned to take care strewn around the garage. The cracked terra cotta planter that used to sit by the mailbox full of zinnias and petunias each spring, the hanging porch swing that we had found by the side of the road on one of our dream walks that David wanted to paint and hang on the sunporch at the back of the house and the brass sconces we discovered at the White Owl antique store out off highway 49 that needed rewiring—all stood testament to the fact that he was gone and all of these items would likely end up at

the dump. All these once or to be beautiful little touches to our lives were lost to me, just like David.

The tears sprang up before I knew what had happened and I sat in the rickety chair thumbing through the professional photos from that lovely day in June 1961. At first I had argued with David about his choice of the Mel Torme powder blue tuxedo, but looking at his smiling face, his brown hair, the natural auburn highlights glistening in the summer sun on the lawn at the Ritchie Hill House just down the street from our dream house, he seemed the picture of the happy groom and so handsome. His tall, lanky frame and crooked smile broke my heart all over again as I imagined what our children would look like had we had any. They would have had my freckles, we used to joke, and his sense of adventure. They would have been tall like him but creamy skinned like me. I flipped a few more pages when an envelope I couldn't recall fell from the album and onto the floor. Written on the front in David's unmistakable childlike scratch were the words: "To my Liv, my love."

My hands shook as I retrieved the letter from the dusty floor. I ran my hand across the script several times, a fear inside me of what the envelope might contain. I knew that David had left a will, such as it was, with a pittance left to me as between the two of us we had a lot of love but not much else. I feared that inside I'd find something I had overlooked, some bill from the florist for the funeral flowers, an outstanding payment on his car that sat idle in driveway or an invoice for something extravagant that he had purchased for me or the house just before he was unable to do that kind of thing near the end. I thought to myself how like David that would be, to leave me some small surprise to find after he had gone.

Towards the end, we both knew that there was next to nothing more that the doctors could do. David hadn't wanted to try any of the new experimental treatments for the cancer that had eaten up so much of his body. We couldn't afford to travel abroad in hopes of finding some miracle cure in Germany or Denmark. In the end, David had decided he wanted to die at home, in our home, the one he had found on that spring day.

I turned the letter over and as always, he had simply tucked the back flap into the envelope unsealed. Something deep in my heart caused me to pause. I thought back to one of David's last days. He had slept fitfully and I had been up and down the stairs retrieving odd little things for him. He had wanted the TV guide so he could finish the crossword puzzle, saying that he hated to leave things undone, all evidence in the garage to the contrary. Then, it was the copy of the Beatles "Abbey Road" that he wanted to hear one more time on the old Victrola that stood in the corner of our bedroom with its curved horn reaching out above the turntable, and after that he wanted the afghan from the back of the couch, the one that Granny Ollie had knitted God knows when. I knew then that his mind was going and that the morphine would soon be his only solace. Tears dropped from both my cheeks and splattered on the back of the envelope.

I stuck a fingernail under the lip of the flap and pulled it back. I tilted the envelope back a bit to look inside, irrationally afraid that something may jump out at me. I could see that within was folded with uneven creases what appeared to be a single piece of lined notebook paper. With the carefulness an Egyptologist might remove a scarab from a mummy's finger, I lifted the paper from its home. The paper remained as white as if it had just been torn from a composition book that day. It hadn't yellowed or begun to crinkle. I started to gently unfold it when I felt a slight weight within its folds. I placed

my legs together to make a makeshift table on which to place this missive. As I disengaged the folds, the heft that I felt was a tiny manila-colored envelope with NCNB, our bank's name, stamped across it.

I couldn't decide whether to open the smaller packet or read the letter. I knew without doubt that just like the outside, the writing on the page belonged to David. I pulled the flap back from the tan pocket, turned it upside down when a small brass key and a receipt fell into my lap. The handwritten receipt showed a different lettering than that of the note. The lettering in block print revealed the name of Zellerbach Jewelers with two entries: "2-1/2 carat diamonds" and "resizing." With the suddenness of a summer storm, I remembered David taking my engagement ring to be re-sized after I had lost some weight with the struggle of the onset of the cancer. I had forgotten that David had wanted to be sure I didn't lose the ring like the weight in the horror of trying to care for him as his body was ravaged. He had said that I had been trying to do too much between work, the house and him. He had kept telling me to slow down and not to worry. Like that had been possible. Wrapped up in cashing in his insurance to cover medications, hospital bills and the mortgage, barely supplemented by my meager income, I had poo-pooed the idea of spending even a few dollars on resizing my ring. I had told him a stretch of Scotch tape wrapped around the band would hold it to my finger. David had laughed and said that we couldn't be living in one of the oldest homes in Concord in the historic district and have me walking around with tape on my finger.

I paused at the itemized diamonds. If we could barely be scraping by a few months ago, how had he managed to pay to add a carat's worth of stones to my ring?

Setting the key and receipt to the side, I turned the page over to read what David had to tell from the grave. With a deep breath I began to read:

“My dear Liv, my life began when I met you. Now, my life is ending. I wish I could be there with you during this time and all that you are facing. I have taken your father’s letter. It is in the safe deposit box. I left the silverware. When you told me the story, I did a little digging. Liv, you have to return the silverware. I know you. I know you are thinking it’s the solution to the debt I left you. It’s not. Be the levelheaded woman I met and fell in love with and do the right thing. Do this one last thing for me, for you and for your Grannies. You know it’s the right thing to do. My love will always be with you and I’ll be waiting for you. Love, David.”

At that moment, I realized that David had done his best to keep me on track. He had done these two wonderful, thoughtful things for me. I wanted in my heart to keep our house, our home, but he had released me from a burden too great for me to bear without him.

Before I could gather my thoughts enough to start to imagine retrieving my ring from Zellerbach’s or Dad’s insurance paper from the safe deposit box, I turned back to the wedding album. Somewhere in the back of my mind I remembered tucking some of the papers about the house into the back cover of the book. Our wedding had been a small affair and there were several empty plastic sleeves in the album. David had pulled hydrangea and begonia leaves from the plants around the front porch of the Ritchie House to dry in the clear matte sleeves. He had pulled a hand-full of grass from the yard, one of the engraved napkins from the dozen tables around the parquet dance floor and one of the matchbooks by the front door to fill another. And on and on it went. He said

that we would fill our life in the same way, we would take what others took for granted or overlooked and make those things special. He said we could add importance to the unimportant, significance to the mundane and beauty to the leftover and forgotten.

He had been the same way when we met. Mom had once told me how she and Dad met. It had always seemed a trite story that happened time and again to people of her generation. She had worked in the high school office one hour a week instead of going to class as a job training program, Dad's family had transferred to the area and he was the new kid in school. Their eyes met over the registrar's desk and it was love at first sight. David and I met in a whole other way. I think that all bad things happen to lead to good things. Of course, it's easy to look back at things as simply good or bad. I tended to be a challenge as an infant, or so I'm told, more into young adulthood and like most I pushed the envelope as a teenager. Mom and I had not been seeing eye-to-eye on my long hair, my pacifist outlook and my experimentation with marijuana, so I took a liberty trip. I packed up and headed to Myrtle Beach for the summer between my junior and senior years of high school.

The summer of 1957 witnessed Myrtle Beach's first designation as a city, the opening of the Ocean Drive Pavilion and being featured on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*. Friends from school planned to head down the next year for graduation, but I needed to break away from the opposition of the failed attempt to integrate the Charlotte High Schools. Dorothy Counts, one of the first blacks to go to an all-white school was short-lived at Harding High and the city seemed too conservative to embrace what the rest of the country had heralded as one of the greatest strides in equality. The

civil rights movement had barely gotten underway and I believed it to be a move in the right direction, but Mom and Dad in their square 50s thinking didn't understand.

I arrived on a balmy Friday evening with a single bag of jeans, capri pants and ponchos. I rejected the circle skirts, the sheath tea-length dresses with matching gloves and handbag. I watched what the kids were wearing on American Bandstand and the criminals and thugs on Dragnet sported. My apparel led the debates between me and Mom about what a girl should be wearing and what my jeans and turtlenecks said about the kind of girl others thought I might be. I wasn't, of course, but there was no telling her that, so off I went.

I had taken Greyhound from Charlotte to Myrtle Beach. I got off the bus and headed north towards highway 17 and The Pad, a shag club where my cousin Lisa had bragged she once danced the first year they had opened a few years back. She'd also been the one to tell me about the Walker Motel.

Lisa and I had only been a couple of years apart and as kids our mothers, sisters, would bring us together to play. As we grew into teenagers, we began to hang out with different kinds of people at school. She had always aspired to the popular crowd like the cheerleaders and football players. I tended to be more artistically inclined and hung around the theater and band geeks.

The first place I headed was the Walker motel to secure a room for a week. Lisa had bragged that she lost her virginity there to a local beach boy, but who knew for sure. She had always been prone to tall tales. She told me she thought I could get a job for the summer as a cocktail waitress or one of the featured box dancers at The Pad. I had long legs and could keep up with the best of the shaggers. I had long blond hair and a good

figure. I thought I'd be a shoe-in. They laughed me out the door and I ended up with a job selling popcorn on the boardwalk.

It had been after a six-day, 50 hour week of walking up and down the boardwalk, the sidewalk and through the four ride pavilion that I decided to take a night off and sit on the beach to contemplate my place in the cosmos. I settled myself on one of my ponchos on the cool sand just after midnight with a bottle of Cheerwine. The waves did their hypnotic best to lull me to sleep. I tilted my head back and pondered the stars. I remembered that I had wished that I had packed my journal to log my adventures when I heard what sounded like a trio of very off-key crooners trying to match Johnny Mathis' rich tones of "Chances Are."

I turned my head to see three blue jean and T-shirt clad guys carrying pails ambling up the beach warbling off key. Something in my brain conjured up the Three Stooges. One of the guys weighed in the neighborhood of 300 with shaggy orange hair, one sported a greasy black pseudo pompadour and could have fit into my size 2 capris, but it was this last one that seemed not to fit. He stood a good six feet with loose, wavy auburn hair, jeans rolled up to his knees and an easy gait that even the sand could not hamper. His broad shoulders stretched the white cotton of his T across a flat, teenage chest.

"Hey look a mermaid!" Carrot-top pointed at me.

"That's no mermaid. That's a girl," Pompadour added.

"No, that's a vision, a mirage, a hallucination. Nothing like that exists in our world."

I remembered that “vision” and “exists” came out a little slurred and I began to get a little scared. I started to scramble up as they approached. I grabbed my poncho and flung it out in front of me as if to ward them off and make an escape. Roger, the heavysset one mimicked a formal bow with the sweep of his hand as if removing a hat, “Friar Tuck, at your service.

The thinner, shorter one hopped from one foot to the other then kicked his heels together, “I am the sprite Puck, madam.”

“And I am, of course Adonis.”

I thought they were probably harmless. I knew that three guys walking the beach claiming to be Chaucer, Shakespeare and mythological characters must be somewhat educated and just like me were probably on a liberty trip.

Roger spoke next. “Question: when do they turn this thing off?”

I couldn't help but chuckle. Jack, pompadour, imitated a slight bow and swept his arm in an arc encompassing the full stretch of beach and the ocean and said in a veiled British accent, “Who knows, who cares, why bother.”

I shifted to meet the third one's eyes and he swiveled his feet in the sand, planted his feet a good two feet apart to face the sea and threw over his shoulder, “If m'lady would care for a dip...” and extended his left hand out backward toward me.

“I don't even know you and I don't have a swimsuit.”

“Gentlemen, if you please.” He gestured with both palms in an upward swinging motion.

Roger and Jack grabbed my elbows, tried to lift me off my feet, but I threw my poncho at them and a raucous game of “Monkey in the Middle” ensued as they tossed my

poncho between the three of them. I kept making stabs at grabbing it back and it became a funny four way “keep away” as I got hold of it for a while and David, Roger and I put Jack in the role of “monkey”. Our short-loved game brought us close to the water’s edge. David stepped up behind me, wrapped his arms around my waist and carried me out into the water. Fully dressed, we plunged into the waist-high salty spray. Before I could react physically to what had happened, I laughed out loud. David laughed. Roger and Jack retreated to the boardwalk.

“Who do you think you are?,” I tried to utter with some incredulity.

“David Lee Reed. And who do you think you are?”

All I could do was laugh. I wanted to be angry that my clothes were wet, that I had been man handled and that this guy appeared to take absolutely nothing seriously, but all I could do was laugh. David laughed with me. His throaty chuckle shook his chest and shoulders. His damp hair wafted in the gentle breeze that blew across the ripples of the Atlantic.

“I think I am Olivia Deese McAllister, but at this moment, I can’t be sure.”

“That sounds like a married name.”

“Deese is a family name. Olivia is my grandmother’s name.” I didn’t understand at that moment why I opened up to him with no hesitation.

“So, you are a thief and have left your poor grandmother nameless.”

Again, I could only laugh.

David and I spent every one of the remaining four days of his graduation trip together, along with Roger and Jack. David would carry an extra tray of popcorn and follow me on my route through the Pavilion, up and down the boardwalk and into the

arcades. Roger and Jack would stay in the background allowing David and I time to get to know each other.

Looking back at those four days, I suppose I knew I had fallen in love with David. He never proclaimed his feelings for me in that half-week, but something inside me understood that he too had fallen. It had been the night before he left to go back to Concord to work in his family's restaurant that he asked Roger and Jack to find something else to do while he worked the last hours of my popcorn trade with me. I couldn't remember everything that we shared over the previous three days, but that night, I knew. He asked me about my plans after high school, if I had a boyfriend, if I was going back to Charlotte or staying at the beach. He probed me for my future, our future.

My shift ended at midnight and he asked me to walk on the beach where we first met. We stepped down off the boardwalk and there in the sand where the words "Would you be mine?" spelled out in seashells. I realized what his buddies had been doing during those last hours of my shift. There were two aluminum folding chairs set in the sand, a small bonfire burning and a bucket of Schaefer beer on ice. David, in all his dramatic flair, knelt down on one knee in the sand. He bowed his head, took a deep breath and did his best rendition of "Chances Are."

Once he finished, he looked up at me and with quiet bravado asked, "Liv, will you be mine?"

The phone rang and broke me from the memories of more than 20 years ago. The sound startled me so that the photo album slipped from my lap onto the carpet remnant that covered the oil stain where David's beloved old 64 Galaxie slowly died in disrepair. Just one more leftover from our past that he never got to finish. A tear traced its way

down my left cheek as I reminisced all that he left and never finished. The day the wrecker came to tow the heap from the carriage house, David insisted that I lift him from the bed, put him in the wheelchair and roll him to the window so he could watch our first purchase as husband and wife be torn from our lives.

That night on the beach after Roger and Jack took their leave, I confided in David the story of the silverware. Cross-legged in the sand he sat in rapture as I recounted the tale to him. I told him how my Granny Ollie had sworn me to secrecy about its origin, how her MawMaw Olivia procured the same promise from her.

In my mind I could hear the surf crash against the sand as I told him how my great-great-grandmother came into possession of a stolen box of royal silverware.

In the distance, the phone continued to ring.

I was lost in the memory.

“You must understand that no one, no one can ever know that I have told you this,”

David looked out at the ocean. As I stared at his profile, I could see his eyes squint.

“Someday, years from now, you and I will travel to the Dee River Valley and make a wrong right, but first you must answer the question in the sand.”

“Yes, I will be yours,” I answered him that balmy summer eve, “on the provision that you understand that I will go to college, I will be a working woman and not some barefoot and pregnant housemaid to you.”

“M'lady, I would have it no other way, but what a novel way to start our betrothal than with a fortune in silver?”

Clang and jingle the princess handset screamed at me from the house. With shrill insistence, the phone badgered itself into the happy and secure place of the beginning of my past with him. Damn it, it rang and rang.

I looked down to find the papers I had wanted to find in our wedding pictorial scattered on the lime and sherbet shag. I gathered them up, rested them atop the box of my father's papers and ran to the backdoor to stop the infernal shout of the phone.

"Hello?"

"Liv, its Lisa. I have found a job for you if you are willing to re-enter the land of the living. Gary's boss's secretary has just told him she is pregnant. Oops, sorry. Anyway, he needs someone to start next week. It may only be temporary, but you are up to your eyeballs in debt. You need to work."

"Lisa, I have just today started to try and sort out what I can of this mess. I love you for thinking of me, but I'm gonna need to do some organizing here."

"Liv, as the older and wiser, I need to tell you that you are facing a world of shit that you are not going to be able to get out from under. You need to..."

"Lisa! Stop mothering me. Go back to your own kids and husband and leave me to deal with...well...what I have to deal with! I will call you in a day or two, but right now I don't need you on my back."

A pause stretched across the line. I could hear the buzz of the telephone line echoing between us. Lisa had always thought she needed to mother me. I loved and hated her for it. Our mothers were sisters and Lisa, being older, tended to be so conservative as our mothers had been. I didn't miss the "oops" in her language. Being barren and widowed laid on me like the cloak of death.

“Liv, when you’re ready, call Gary’s office and ask to speak to Barbara. She handles the interviewing of all the new girls to the office. Call me when you can. The twins are whining, I gotta go. Love and kisses.”

I dismissed the call and went back to the garage. I stood looking at the detritus. I had to find a way to build from the wreckage. I bent to retrieve the historical papers regarding the house.

414 Union Street had been abandoned the summer David and I wed. He’d gone to the hall of records a few weeks before to look into buying the place. It had been part of the expansion to extend the historical district of Concord. In its inception, the property had been a part of the second expansion in the early 1900s to create a well-to-do tree-lined boulevard of stately homes. My home, our home, had been the Weddington House in its heyday. David had said that part of the draw to the home for him had been that when built in 1921, it was owned by the manager of the local funeral parlor. He joked that perhaps the dead has been laid out in the front room.

I thought about 1921. Granny Ollie would have been 18 in 1921. I thought about the silverware. I thought about David’s note.

I gathered up the documents I needed, took David’s note, the receipt and key and started to head back into the house. Then, I paused and realized I had forgotten that I still needed to find the box of Dad’s papers. It niggled at the back of my brain about the insurance company contacting him about the silverware.

After a bit of searching I found the box and hauled it along with the other items into the breakfast nook just inside the backdoor. I pulled the lid from Dad’s box and

swept the hospital bills, the overdue utility bills and the mortgage papers into it. I needed to tackle one thing at a time and finding those correspondences rose to the top of the list. I found a brown collapsible accordion file folder in the bottom of the box and began to sift through its contents. Forever the meticulous fussbudget, Dad had labelled everything according to importance. At the front were copies of his will, mortgage, car title and such. With growing impatience, I filtered through dental records, prescription receipts, bank statements, cancelled checks until at last I came to a separate manila folder scrawled in his near indecipherable hand, "Silverware."

I pulled the folder from its home and slid the box to the side. Within I found several mimeographed carbons of letters from a Collins, Little and Day, Attorneys at Law firm located in New York. The first of these bore the date June 5th, 1958, less than a month after my 18th birthday. I thought it strange that their contact had started with my father after I had had become of age. The missive began with the usual legalese of the day, "To Whom it May Concern," "We have been retained," etc. The general information contained in that first letter seemed to explain that a Centennial Celebration had been planned for Balmoral Castle and that in the process of an extensive inventory it had been discovered that a set of silverware could not be accounted for.

My heart fell to my toes. I thought David's letter had been a farewell to me and his last attempt to play on my conscience. He, to my knowledge, had been the only person to know the full story of the silverware outside of me, Granny Ollie and MawMaw Olivia. It sank in that he had read through this file and meant for me to undo what had been done, that he had taken a letter from this box, this file and put in safe keeping at the bank.

I felt the panic grow. An impulse coursed through me to run back to the bathroom upstairs, wrench the pipes apart and seek my solace of the last weeks in Valium and oblivion.

I stood for a moment, took a few deep breaths and sat back down to continue to read. The letters went on to say that two maids had disappeared from Aberdeenshire in 1853 along with a liveryman two days before the castle was to be taken over by an estate set up in the names of some cousins of the last surviving heir, a one Sir Robert Gordon, 2nd Duke of Aberdeen. There was mention of a visit by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert shortly thereafter and that land transfer had gone to the British Kingdom. Further, it mentioned that the three years between Sir Robert's demise and reconstruction of the castle inventories had been done and the discrepancy had not been known at the time of the transfer or rebuilding. It stated that my father had been linked through research of immigration documents processed at New York harbor in 1853 showing generational lineage to a one "Olivia Deese" arriving in 1853 travelling aboard *The Empress*.

Again, I stood. This time I bent at the waist, placed my hands on my now shaking knees and hyperventilated. My hands slid from my knees onto the hex rosette inlaid tile floor of the kitchen that David and I had spent nearly a year replacing. The individual black tiles that made up the rosettes superimposed themselves onto the six-sided white tiles that encompassed them in the gilded grout we had used. There before my eyes reversed x-ray images of Black-Eyed Susans rose and fell. Their black middle now white and all of their pretty petals not yellow, but black. They swayed before me as if in dance to gentle spring breeze. I felt something cold on my neck, refreshing, calming, needed.

I came out of my haze to find myself prostrate on the floor with her in all of her eighty years cross-legged on the floor beside me ministering to me with a cool damp cloth on my neck. I thought of Granny Ollie and how she never had that sense of immediacy. Sure, she doted on Daddy, but she always seemed to be a bit lost in her own world.

Bethany, our neighbor from across the back fence had seen me lugging the box from the carriage house along with the other things into the house. At David's first diagnosis, she had been a Godsend. She had brought over casseroles, offered to clean, run errands and even had her nephew, Michael, tend to the lawn and flowerbeds as David declined and I hadn't the strength nor the wherewithal to be bothered with yard maintenance. There had been days on end that between changing sheets, laundering them and fetching up and down the stairs for David, I would find a chilled glass of lemonade or Chardonnay on the counter with a single daisy and some little note encouraging me to find a little time for myself.

However, being nosey by nature, she had sat on her back porch to watch me this day through the screen door rifling the papers.

The scent of Avon's Timeless permeated the room and the welcoming hints of a fresh washed dog. Bethany had a mutt named Tiger that never failed to greet me or David at the back fence. For all the years we had lived here, Bethany and Tiger stood as guardians to us. I could feel a hairless whip lashing against my buttocks and a wet tongue licking around the edges of my Espadrilles where my toes made for good fodder for an aging canine who at a good eighty pounds still thought himself a lapdog.

“Tiger, you stop that now!”

Tiger, now almost completely deaf, continued his thorough cleaning of my feet.

“Bethany, I don’t know what happened.”

“Girl, you carried all that stuff in here, sat down here at the table and like a flash of lightning, you rose up, bent over and fell to the floor.”

I knew what had happened. Granny’s story to me, the story she had heard from MawMaw Olivia, rang in my ears and I had seen part of it on legal papers. The box and its history visited another one of the Deese girls. Here I had lost a husband, standing at the precipice of losing my home, our home, and the enormity of it hit me all again. Just a few hours ago I had woken to find that I needed to get my head out of my ass, pull myself up by my bootstraps and get on with the rest of my life without David and the rest of my life looked to be a dark tunnel, a labyrinth filled with pockets of uncertainty. I grasped the reality of what life with Telex and fax machines might mean for me. Granny and MawMaw didn’t face my reality. No one from an insurance company or a group of lawyers might come looking for them or the box. But this was a different age.

In my mind the possibility of ridding myself of the box morphed into a distinct act. I questioned myself about the hows and ways of selling it off, what it might mean to me to be able to keep David’s beloved house, my beloved home and the means that I may go about making it happen.

“Honey, you’re shaking. Should I get you a glass of water or something stronger?”

Bethany, God bless her, my one anchor to the real world.

“No, no, I think I need to gather these things up and take them to David’s office and start organizing. Ms. Bethany, you are the salt of the earth for checking on me, but I

need to start making some headway here. I'll call or holler over the fence if I should need anything else."

"Darlin' you're in over your head and I can see that. Now, I know it ain't none of my business, but we could sort through this together quicker than you can on your own." I paused. Mom had never been this free with her time with me. Granny Ollie had left me with the story to hold onto. I had broken her trust and told David, but he was gone. To let someone else into the story could be a double-edge sword. Knowing the load I faced, I toyed with the idea of bringing my octogenarian neighbor into the fold.

No! Granny Ollie would have my hide if anyone else were to discover the truth of the silverware.

Though I had finally gotten myself out of the sweat soaked bed, made myself somewhat presentable, ventured into the garage to start making a way out of the mess I had put myself in, gotten rid of my narcotic crutch, I would be damned if I betrayed the gift, the secret, the legend of what my Granny and MawMaw had left me.

"Ms. Bethany, I so love you for wanting to help but I put this pot on the back burner for long enough. I do not intend to allow it to boil over any longer. I must, I need to put my ducks in a row and lead them out to the pond, as my Granny used to say." With that, I swept her out onto the back porch and across the yard to her own home with Tiger following her towards the gate.

I knew I needed to read the rest of the papers.

I trundled up the stairs, bypassing David's office and took the file carton to the bedroom.

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