



Into the Garden of
**Gethsemane,
Georgia**

Laraine Herring





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INTO THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE, GEORGIA

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Author's Note

Into the Garden of Gethsemane, Georgia arrived after a conversation with my husband about the end of life.

“Wouldn’t it be great,” I said, “if my characters came for me at the end?”

That question led to more questions and soon Mrs. Abigail Fisher’s voice began to whisper to me, and it turned out she wasn’t in particularly good standing with the characters she’d written. One of them, in fact, had come back from the cutting room floor for revenge.

What next? How does an author make things right with the characters and stories she’s been charged to carry?

This thread pulled me into an attempt to dramatize the creative process. I wanted to show the sticky and often obsessive relationships a writer has with her characters, and I wanted to show what happens when those characters take on lives of their own and demand their own endings.

I hope this story is more than a ghost story and a mother-daughter story. I hope it speaks to you about the profound and necessary power of the act of writing and storytelling to change the writer’s life as well as the reader’s. Our stories do indeed create our lives.

I’d like to thank my fearless first readers: Gayle Brandeis, Michaela Carter and Arvin Loudermilk for their input on the manuscript, and Keith Haynes for listening to the story over and over again. Thanks to The Concentrium for designing the book and for all their countless efforts of support for my work and career for over twenty years.

Each of you helps make my stories better.

You have betrayed and sold out the talent that was granted you...

That talent is now officially withdrawn.

Enjoy your dirty money.

You will never have anything else.

You will never write another sentence above the level of *In Cold Blood*.

—William S. Burroughs, letter to Truman Capote 1970

From her perch on the dusty bookshelves, Pistachio Simmons, the almost-heroine of the mega-bestseller, *The Garden of Gethsemane, Georgia*, watched her author and creator, the South's Esteemed First Lady of Letters, Mrs. Abigail Fisher, sleeping alone. She peered over the cracked spine of her should-have-been book-home, shaking off the memory of the day she had been brutally cut from the narrative with a swipe of a red fountain pen.

Pistachio was surprised by the condition of the house. Over the years the walls had fallen almost in on themselves, but her creator, the author Mrs. Abigail Fisher, did not realize it. To her, the columns still shone a pristine white, the spiral staircase always a shining mahogany, the windows one pane after the other of glistening, glimmering possibility.

Pistachio watched her creator shift beneath the sheets. She was certain she had no idea she was being watched. It would be easier than Pistachio had dared to hope to slide between the half-mast eyelids until Mrs. Abigail Fisher could no longer deny her existence, could no longer not pay attention. She had waited almost thirty-seven years for this moment. She could wait a few more days.

"Sleep well, Abbey," she said, kissing the top of Mrs. Abigail Fisher's thinning hair. Mrs. Abigail Fisher brushed away a fly buzzing around her head.

The gold sticker, *National Book Award Finalist*, shimmered on the spine of the story that should have been her home. The sticker

had once looked rich and thick, but now it had dulled and peeled at the corners; years of humidity had weakened the color. She hadn't given thought to how she might return to the pages, slip back into the letters and spaces, rest her head again on the pillow of a comma; she only knew she had to find a way to wrap herself again into the quilt of the narrative.

The letters of Pistachio's own rejected scenes cascaded from the peaks of her shoulders, and she felt an empowerment in simply standing on her own. No one else's words imprisoning her. No one else's story arc dictating what she could or could not do. There was a curve in her spine, a flexibility she didn't know was there until she pushed her way out of the paragraphs and onto the shelf's edge. She opened and closed her mouth, letting her tongue wash over her lips. What would she say if the words were her own? Where would she go if her own feet walked in the direction of her own choosing?

There had been letters, of course, written on her mother's rose-scented stationery in her shaking hand, but Elise Fisher had ignored them, at first on purpose and later from habit. The letters were designed, Elise was certain of it, to press all her buttons, to elicit the responses that her mother, the author Mrs. Abigail Fisher, hoped for, ever the writer, ever the story-crafter. They began innocuously enough with the passive guilt-inducing "It's been so long since I've seen you" lines and escalating to "I feel there is someone else in the house," to finally "Daughter, I think I am afraid," all crafted with precision and an intimate knowledge of the weaknesses of the sole audience member: Elise.

She sent letters because she could control, down to the pick of punctuation, the message she wanted to convey. And more importantly, she could avoid any deflection or reflection that might arise should face-to-face contact occur. The telephone was out of the question, the price of long-distance ludicrous. Elise had never been able to convince her that calling plans had changed.

Elise saved her mother's letters in a shoe box, thinking one day a university might want her papers. At the very least, an eBay buyer might relieve her of them, giving her some small compensation for being the failed daughter of the esteemed writer.

"Maybe she really is afraid," Elise's fiancée, Henry Wakefield, said one night after a light dinner of mozzarella and garden tomatoes.

"My mother? Afraid?" Elise could not picture her stoic mother

afraid of anything.

“It’s possible.”

“It’s not possible. My mother is impenetrable.”

This was the point in the conversation when Henry would try to soften her, sometimes by tickling, sometimes by kissing, sometimes by reading poetry from her collected works of Blake. She knew he thought she overreacted to her mother. She knew he thought she was in part to blame for the distance between them. But he had no idea, only his cobbled-together stories of idyllic mothers and daughters and his own close relationship with his late may-she-rest-in-forever-peace mother to show him what was possible. Elise loved that about him, that he had a mother and a family that liked each other, chose to spend time with each other, even helped each other. She loved his belief that everyone was good somehow, even though she knew that wasn’t true, especially about her.

The letters arrived daily for several weeks, the last one with the all-capitals closing: “Daughter, please come home. Sincerely, Your Mother Mrs. Abigail Fisher.” Then there was silence, the mailbox an empty mouth. Henry thought she should call, but Elise knew this was the dramatic pause in the story arc. This was the place where the questions had been expertly tossed into play and she, the reader, was left with only the burning desire to find out what happened next. Elise had long ago learned to suppress that desire, having finally learned that the questions were never answered, no matter how she might have begged.

The call from the Chatham County Fire Department was an unexpected plot element, though.

“Ma’am, she almost burned the whole house down,” said the man on the other end of the line, a John or a Gene or a Jerry. He must have taken Elise’s silence for shock. “Don’t worry. Your mother is all

right. We've got a social worker with her right now. But you have to go home. She can't stay there alone anymore. She could have burned the street down."

Elise slipped into character. "Of course. I'll drive down right away. Of course. Thank you very much for calling."

John or Gene or Jerry was obviously relieved by Elise's appropriate response. "We'll keep an eye out until then," he said. "And ma'am?"

"Yes?"

"Have you been home lately?"

"Well, not in awhile," she said, trying to remember whether the last time she went home was seven or eight years ago. "Why?"

"I just want you to be ready. She—your mother—she's not in good shape. The house is—well, it'd just be great if you could come home right away."

"I'll leave first thing." Elise pushed back down the knot forming in her stomach. She had managed to avoid going home for so long.

"Thank you, ma'am. Have a nice evening. I'm sorry for the call."

"Thank you. Good evening."

When Henry came home from work she'd almost finished the bottle of Raven's Wood Cabernet. "She set the house on fire, Henry. That was more than I gave her credit for."

Henry put his Sheriff's hat on the kitchen table—a frayed centerpiece—slid his standard-issue .40 caliber pistol out of his holster and emptied the ammunition. "I can come with you." He put the gun in the lockbox.

"No you can't." Elise tapped the top of his hat. "Besides, she wouldn't let you up the stairs."

"Probably not."

"Probably?"

“OK. Not.”

“Not.”

“I’ll be home on Tuesday. We can go get the marriage license then.”

“Promise?”

“Of course.” She poured him the last of the bottle. “Drink with me, my love. Just a little bit left.”

“I can come with you.”

“So you said. Go to work. Feed the cat. I’ll be home soon.”

“What are you going to do with her?”

Elise softened, stood to kiss his chin-dimple, the part of his face she’d first fallen in love with. “I don’t know.”

“Why don’t we go look at Oz,” he said.

This was what she loved about Henry. He said the goofiest, most perfect thing at the most perfect time. She needed to remember that more, when she was wondering why she was with him, which was usually due only to her crazy self-absorption caused most recently by too much time on her hands since the charter school where she’d been teaching art history and literature to tenth graders had cut her position to half-time. There just weren’t enough tenth graders anymore. Families had left what was already a sparsely populated area in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina and headed east to Charlotte or Raleigh to try and find work; the more adventurous went west to Nevada, Utah or Oregon.

“It’s late,” she said.

“Yes, but the moon is full. I’ll bet we can see the bricks.”

The now-defunct Land of Oz Theme Park was located a town away in Beech Mountain. Apparently, it had been quite the experience for children in the 1970s, complete with balloon rides, a simulated tornado in Dorothy’s house, and of course a walk through

the poppy fields past the Wicked Witch's house on the way to the Emerald City. Elise hadn't known the remains were there when she took the job in Boone a decade ago. She wanted to get away from Georgia any way she could, and the first job opportunity that came along for a forty-something woman whose only job up until that point was daughter and personal assistant to Mrs. Abigail Fisher was in Boone at the Blue Ridge Academy for Girls. Elise never even Googled the town before she loaded up her Accord and headed northwest from Savannah.

The theme park still held a fall party each October, and the first year Elise was in North Carolina, she spotted the flier at the co-op. She thought it would be hokey, and it was, but it was also an explosion of story and color, and she found herself genuinely smiling at the earnestness of the cast members who'd returned and the zeal with which the people who attended slipped back into their childhoods. Anyone could see the path of yellow bricks didn't go very far; that the Wicked Witch's cave was not in fact filled with Flying Monkeys; that Dorothy was very far away from fifteen years old, but it didn't matter. The dream of what could be at the end of that yellow 44,000-brick path still sustained wonder.

"We can't trespass," she said. "You're a cop!"

"No trespassing, cross my heart," said Henry. "We'll just go to the overlook."

She didn't really need to pack much. She told herself she'd only be gone three days—long enough to clean out the house and get her mother established in an assisted living facility. She was aware of the callousness of her thoughts, but she couldn't help herself.

"OK," she said. "But you drive. Flash the lights. Use the siren. Make us seem important."

He grabbed her hand. "You know that's against the rules." He

kissed her index finger. "But tonight, we'll go for it."

"Really?" Henry never broke the rules. Not about eating salad with the salad fork and soup with the soup spoon and most certainly not about anything to do with his job. He had walked the perfect line since his reassignment to "the boonies" as he called it. "You must be worried."

"I always worry," he said. "And whenever you talk to your mother, it takes me a month to bring you back to normal."

They got in the squad car and buckled in. Elise held her finger over the siren switch. "Can I do it?"

He nodded just enough. The siren shrieked, giving her the cover she needed to release her own scream, which she disguised as laughter so Henry wouldn't know the depth of her own fear. She didn't know how to present herself if she were afraid. It would be messy, blubbery, maybe even dangerous. After a few minutes, she flipped the siren off.

"Had enough?" asked Henry.

"Started to hurt my ears."

"The night's too pretty to yell at it like that," he said.

It was an hour's drive to the old Oz Park, and the drive felt a bit spooky in the almost-dark. The autumn moon would not be full until the next evening, but it was the pumpkin color Elise loved. It made her think of Charlie Brown and all the life encompassed in his very simple lines and curves. She'd been in this area almost a decade and still she marveled at the beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains, even as the night shadows sketched a darker edge along the tree line. These mountains spoke to her in a way the porches and wide columns of Savannah never did. She wanted to walk through the historic parks of Savannah, stroll along the river and feel like she was walking with the happy ghosts of her ancestors, but she

knew it was a trick. She knew the basements were rotted in many of the manicured houses. Too much damp and darkness will crumble anything, no matter how solid it once was.

“I don’t know what to say,” she said after awhile, because she thought she should give him something on this last night together.

“You might want to save your voice for home.”

“There’s nothing I can say anymore, Henry. You know she hears what she wants to hear.”

“Maybe.” He pulled into a gravel turn-off and killed the headlights. “Ready to walk?”

She took his hand and they climbed a weakly marked path. “I think this is trespassing,” she tried to joke. The overlook they were walking to was where they’d first met. An overzealous neighbor who’d been watching too many 48-hour Mystery shows thought she was a serial killer and called the police. When Henry found her, she’d been sitting cross-legged on a boulder, looking out into the pre-dawn fog.

“That never stopped you before.”

“Well, I am my mother’s daughter.”

He lifted her onto the boulder and then climbed up beside her. The oaks and pines around them shivered in the evening chill. Leaves had begun falling, making the path and the boulder slippery, but Elise knew where to place her feet, where to rest her back so she could peer down over the ski-lift line and find a glimpse of the yellow brick road.

“Is it too dark?” asked Henry.

“It glistens in the moonlight,” she said. “I have no idea why. Part of the magic of Oz I guess.”

“Look there,” said Henry. “I think I see part of the witch’s castle.” He traced the peak of her shoulders with his fingertips.

“Remember how big her nose was?” she asked. “In the movie. I thought she was horrifying.” She giggled. “She reminded me of my mother. I even checked her closet for flying monkeys once.”

“You did not.”

“I did.” Elise remembered it had been just after her sister, Courtney Lynn, had died. Her father had been gone for only a few days and her mother hadn’t let herself believe that any of it had happened. The house hadn’t yet taken on its layers of dust and gray shadows, grimy windows and overgrown gardens. She hadn’t yet begun to be afraid of what was at the top of the stairs hidden in her mother’s bedroom. She was only afraid of what she believed was there, and only in that little girl way of turning every bump in the bedclothes into a monster-in-waiting.

“And what did you find?” asked Henry.

She’d found stacks and stacks of yellowing notebooks, the pages eaten by moths and silverfish. She thought she recognized her mother’s looped and curlicued handwriting, but she couldn’t bring herself to touch them or remove them from their dark place in the closet. The arm of a winter sweater slipped off the hangar, landing on her head. She started to scream but was afraid of being caught in her mother’s forbidden things, so she swallowed the shout and hurried away from the closet, leaving the sweater on the floor on top of the Sunday pumps. She closed the bedroom door quickly behind her, but the dust from the notebooks lingered on her fingers long after she scurried down the mahogany staircase to the safety of the living room. “Nothing much,” she said. “No monkeys anyway!”

Outlines of bats’ wings flapped against the moon as the bats dove and swooped for insects. She loved the angles their wings made, just like the images of angels in the stained glass windows of her childhood church.

“Where do you think they go in the daytime?” she asked.

“Who?”

“The bats.”

“Somewhere dark, I guess. Lots of caves and old mines around here.”

She let herself sink back into him, his arms wrapped around her in the dark. He pressed his lips against the back of her neck. She wanted to turn and lay everything out on this boulder on this night looking out at the ruins of the witch’s castle. But not bad enough.

“I’m going to miss you,” he said.

“Me too.” She reached behind her and pulled him closer. “I’ll be home before you know it. Savannah’s less than a day’s drive.”

“You can’t clean out that house in three days.”

She could. She would. She’d already called for a temporary dumpster to be set up in front of the house. How long could it take to pitch one item after another until the only things left were those that were stuck to the walls or buried under the floorboards? She would not be one of those people who held every object, turned it over and over, and then told a story about it. Her legs twitched. She was ready to burn down whatever her mother had left alone.

“Don’t worry,” she said, knowing he would and knowing she was glad of it. “Be happy it isn’t you!”

He squeezed her shoulders. She knew he hated when she deflected away from whatever serious direction he was trying to take the conversation, but at least up until now, he’d played along, taking whatever she could give to him, lacking though it may be. He inhaled and she was afraid he’d finally say the words that would make her let him in. She didn’t know what those words were. Over the four years they’d been together, she’d felt him getting closer, sneaking in under her edges, climbing over her walls.

“Shh,” she said. “Let’s just look at the moon. Imagine the cackle of the Wicked Witch. Can you hear her? She thinks she’s going to get Dorothy, but she never really does.”

He laughed. “I never hear her.”

“Close your eyes and listen with your imagination.”

“You know I don’t hear things like you do. You tell me. Describe to me what you hear.”

Elise closed her eyes, the scratchboard of the night sky still hovering behind her lids. This was her favorite part. “Well, first there’s the whoosh of air as she flies by us on her bicycle. She’s got Toto with her and he’s barking and barking and barking hoping Dorothy will come find him, but she can’t hear him. There’s this huge tornado and she’s never been in one before and it turns the whole house upside down. All she can hear is her own heart and the breaking of glass. The witch, though, she thinks she’s won. She knows Dorothy will come looking for her dog and when that happens, well, you know what happens then. But right now, she’s laughing, and it’s deep and rich and full of every possible hope a witch can have.”

“What do you think a witch hopes for?” whispered Henry.

Elise opened her eyes just enough to see her fingers balled into fists on her lap. “She wishes someone would follow her,” she said, surprised at the pressure of her fists, the hot lump in her throat. “She hopes one day someone will be brave enough to scale all the obstacles and flying monkeys and pyrotechnics and help her get her castle back. She’s not sure anymore quite how it got to be the way it is.”

Pistachio surveyed the damage. Blackened walls. Some melted Tupperware. A heavy smoke smell that she rather relished. Nothing too dreadful. At least not from her perspective. She'd been aiming for a little less smoke and a lot more fire, but she reasoned these things would take some time to fine-tune. She'd been so stiff for so many years, folded in on herself in a corner of the closet, feet behind ears, wrists under hips, jaw hanging open like a pelican's hoping for something nourishing to leap in. To be fair, and Pistachio was very keen on making sure things were fair, she hadn't intended to start an actual fire that required outside assistance. The last thing she wanted was someone from the dimensional world poking in and around Mrs. Abigail Fisher's home. But it had happened, and she was going to have to deal with the consequences since she was not sure how to put things back the way they were.

She had felt liberated, pushing herself free from the mildewed notebooks where she'd been relegated for seven presidential administrations. Not to mention fifteen other books that Mrs. Abigail Fisher had birthed and sent forth into the world to mingle with readers and critics, teachers and book club groups, and more recently, gatherings on-line of people who were able to place images of the book covers on their virtual shelves and rate their merit. The world had become even more remarkable, and Pistachio had been shut out from it.

She remembered the first slice. She hadn't been able to bring her-

self to pull open her blouse to see the scar, but she could feel it still vibrating, especially when she coughed. Mrs. Abigail Fisher wrote with a nibbed pen, and when she slashed its indigo ink across Pistachio's first paragraph, it cut her almost in half. It was so fast, so deliberate, so cruel. She'd been just about to say something important, having figured out how to turn her thoughts into the squiggles on the page, but the cut occurred mid-breath, leaving her choking, trying to hold her two halves together.

When Elise left for Savannah, Henry was sitting in the wicker chair on the porch drinking coffee. The thin daily paper was open on his lap, their gray cat, Smeek, staring at him from the porch's railing. She loved how Henry took up the whole space of the chair, even though his frame was thin. He was tall, all angles and straight lines, and when he crossed one leg over the other to prop the paper up, his legs reminded her of a butterfly's wings, opening and closing in the breeze. She loved how no matter how late he was, no matter how cold it was, unless there was an emergency call from the station, he kept to the same morning routine—three cups of Maxwell House, the entire paper front to back, and a short conversation with the cat, which Elise had learned to pay attention to for clues into Henry's world.

“So it's time,” he said, keeping the paper open.

“I want to make sure I can get a good start today. The dumpster should have gotten there already.”

“What about the garden?”

He hadn't turned around, so she couldn't see his expression. She inhaled and tried not to waver her voice. “It's past first frost now,” she said. “We don't need to worry about our garden right now.”

“Not ours. Hers. All that brush. Overgrown trees, some fallen trees I bet. There'll be snakes and spiders and probably fire ants and all sorts of things. Are you at least bringing gloves?”

She hadn't thought about gloves. Hadn't thought about the garden

at all, at least not while she was awake. “I don’t think I’m really going to worry about that. The most important thing is to get Mother settled. We’ll be able to take care of the yard later.”

He still didn’t turn around. “Whatever you think is best. I’m sure it’s getting to be an eyesore for the neighbors.”

There was no doubt about that. Even years ago, when Elise left the house for what she had imagined then was the final time, the garden had taken on epic proportions, especially the honeysuckle plant that stood, literally stood, not wrapped or crawled or crept like a vine is supposed to do, on its own, taller than a sapling pine, its branches of yellow-white blossoms stretching over a mile in all directions. It encroached on two other people’s properties, and Elise had hired someone to cut it back, but the next day, the plant was back again, fuller and more fragrant than before. Fortunately, the two neighbors had opted to try to work the honeysuckle into their own landscaping rather than deal again with the reclusive Mrs. Abigail Fisher. She couldn’t imagine what the plant looked like now.

“Maybe once we get Mother moved out,” she said. “You and I can go back and get everything fixed up and ready to sell.”

“Recession’s a good time to try and sell a crazy old run down Southern house,” he joked.

“Well, we could slap a plaque on it and hold tours. Come one come all! See the rooms where the great Mrs. Abigail Fisher, the South’s Leading Lady of Letters, created her masterworks. Behold, the kitchen where she drank her tea. The bed where she slept all by herself, needing no one but her writing to keep her warm throughout the night.”

“That’s not a half-bad idea. Savannah’s full of tours.”

“What’ll we call her house? Every good Southern house has a name.”

“I don’t know. I’ll think about it when you’re gone.” He finally stood up and turned to face her. Smeek leapt into his chair. “Don’t get a speeding ticket.”

She wrapped his arms around his neck. “If I do, I’ll just tear it up, tell them my man is a big-time Sheriff, maybe bat my eyes a little.”

“You know that doesn’t actually work.”

“Not for women who look like me, anyway.”

“I think you’re beautiful.”

“I know.” She kissed his ear, his cheek, and finally, his lips. “I do.”

She watched him for as long as she could in her rear view mirror as she drove down the hill away from the house. He’d put his hat on, and the farther away she got, the more the hat looked like part of a too-big costume; he was only a boy playing dress-up. When she could no longer see him on the porch, paper folded under his arm, she slipped her sunglasses on and picked up speed.

Although she wasn’t looking forward to her destination, she was looking forward to a long solo car trip. Being in the car alone made her feel invisible in the best of all possible ways. She could, though never did, deviate from the expected course. She could stop at a roadside stand for peach ice cream or vinegary North Carolina barbecue. She could listen to the same song over and over for hundreds of miles, but most importantly, no one knew exactly where she was. She didn’t have a smartphone with GPS; her dumbphone that only texted and made phone calls had served her for an unexpected number of years. She was hurtling through the in-between space in a metal and plastic pod at seventy miles per hour. It was the closest thing to flying on the ground.

This time, though, her CD player wasn’t working right and kept

spitting the CDs back into the front seat. She didn't want to listen to the radio and hear the ads or the news, even the kinder, gentler news from NPR. So that left her in silence, the wind of her inhale and exhale, the pop of her gum, the shifting of her body in the seat her only company until she reached the South Carolina border and saw the pigtailed girl holding up a cardboard sign that misspelled Savannah as *Savvana*. Elise drove past her for a quarter mile, then turned around in a two-pump Texaco station. Henry would be furious. She heard him in her head shouting all the dangers of picking up hitchhikers, even the ones that don't look like serial killers. "The good ones don't look like murderers," he said. "If they scared everyone away how could they kill anyone?" Elise always figured people got snuck up on in alleys or budget motel parking lots and swept into dark blue windowless vans. Henry assured her that more frequently, victims went willingly, "even laughing" to the one who will kill them.

But a little girl? *She could be a front for her uncle who's waiting just on the other side of the shoulder behind that grove of trees*, she heard in her head. Stop it, Henry. She's just a little girl. This was a rural part of the country and the recession had hit it hard. The South hadn't manufactured much in years, but as tourism had slowed and airfares had climbed and the drought, even in the swampy south, stretched on another year, crops that could always be counted on—corn, tobacco, cotton—were suffering. Childhood was anything but idyllic in these communities. Just the other day, Elise had read about a seven year old boy who hung his little sister from a tree down in the Florida panhandle. She'd ridden his bike. They arrested the boy in the middle of the night, but then what were they supposed to do?

When she pulled up beside the girl, she saw the layers of red clay

on her skin from sleeping outside. Her blonde hair was stringy and sweat-packed. Elise couldn't get a sense of her age. She looked both five and fifty, if that were possible. Her body was small, but she held herself with a confident presence that caught Elise's attention. Her eyes were a vivid blue, almost purple, and when Elise rolled down her window the girl held up a battered green teddy bear with a chewed right ear and said proudly, "This is Mama Bear and she take care of me."

Elise unlocked the passenger door. "Pleased to meet you, Mama Bear. And what's your name?"

The girl shook her head, pulled the bear close. "You a stranger."

Elise's defenses folded; Henry's voice in her head warning of an ambush by marauding gypsies with axes and body bags no longer a whisper.

"I could be your friend." As the words slipped past her lips, she knew she'd gone to the predator script. She smiled wider, wanting to reassure the girl she wasn't stranger-danger. The girl stared back, unblinking.

"I'm Katrina," she said.

"After the hurricane?"

Katrina shook her head. "I'm older than the hurricane. Everybody just thinks I'm not because I'm little." She pouted a little, her lower lip turned under. "I never even been to New Orleans."

The wind picked up, twirling some of the newly fallen leaves into brilliant red and orange pinwheels. Elise forgot to look for axes and killers. "But you want to go to Savannah," she said.

Katrina nodded. "My mama there. She been asleep for a long time, but she waking up now."

"She is? How do you know?"

Katrina held up the bear. "Mama Bear, she tell me stories when

it's dark. That's how I know everything I know." She pointed to the ear. "I get so excited I chew on her ear sometime but she don't mind. She say she only need one ear to tell me what she hearing."

Elise turned off the engine. "That's a very special bear."

Katrina looked at her as if she were an idiot. "She just a bear."

"Are you hungry?"

"No. I ate."

Elise was puzzled, but the girl did look well-nourished. Just dirty. And alone on a state highway on a school day. "I'm going to Savannah to see my mother too." She tried to make it sound like a good thing—like every girl wanted to go be with her mother. "Do you want me to take you to your mama?"

Katrina held Mama Bear's snout to her ear. She closed her eyes as she listened, shaking her head, then nodding. "She say it's OK to go with you. But we have to stop at McDonald's."

"I thought you weren't hungry?"

"Mama Bear hungry."

Katrina pulled the seat belt around her waist. She was too small for the shoulder strap to fit comfortably, so she just lifted it off. She slipped Mama Bear between the seat belt and her belly.

"What's your name?" asked Katrina as Elise started up the car.

"Oh! I'm sorry. I'm Elise."

"That a good name," she said, and closed her eyes, her thin fingers resting on the frayed head of Mama Bear.

Elise made one stop at a McDonald's with a PlayPlace, but Katrina didn't want to climb on the plastic slides or jump on the bouncing balls. She just wanted a Quarter Pounder with cheese and a small chocolate shake, which she shared with Mama Bear, even though she ended up eating the whole thing herself. Katrina chewed with her mouth closed, ate slowly, chewing each bite at least ten times, and used the paper napkin. Elise had made her wash her hands, which Katrina did willingly, after first whispering *hello* to the water, but the red stains on her hands and arms, which she thought had been mud and dirt, wouldn't come off. They didn't look like bruises. They didn't look like bloodstains or finger paint stains or anything other than the red clay dirt of North Carolina. But it wouldn't wash off. Katrina endured Elise's second and third soapings and scourings with the rough brown paper towels, but by the fourth time, she pulled her hands away.

"It's just how I am," she said. "You can't wash color off you."

Elise stopped mid-scrub. She was surprised how tightly her hands were gripping Katrina, how intent she was at cleaning her up. "I'm sorry. I didn't think it was your skin. I just thought it was a lot of dirt that got caked on." She wanted to lift up the girl's shirt and see if the stains carried on through the rest of her body, but she knew she'd crossed way too many boundaries already in the short time they'd been together. "I just didn't want you to eat your hamburger with dirty hands."

“I know,” Katrina said. “It’s just been enough washing now.”

Elise was grateful no one had come into the public bathroom while she’d been at work. From a distance, the stains might look like bruising, and to a stranger, it would be easy to suspect that Elise had been the one who’d inflicted them. She couldn’t be sure what Katrina would say if someone asked her about them. She ran her own hands under the lukewarm water one more time before leading Katrina into the restaurant. She tried to gauge whether or not the patrons, many clad in Clemson T-shirts, were staring at them underneath their baseball caps and thick round sunglasses, but she couldn’t tell. Maybe they thought she and Katrina were mother and daughter. There’d be no reason not to. They’re not even thinking about you at all, Elise thought. You’re just another random person in another random McDonald’s convenient to a freeway. Katrina was in deep conversation with Mama Bear, speaking in a language other than English. Her face was a kaleidoscope of expressions, mostly smiles peppered with the occasional shocked ‘o’. After she finished her conversation with the bear, she reached for Elise’s hand as they stood in line to order.

In the car, the two were quiet. Elise began to wonder if she were kidnapping someone’s child, and now that she’d crossed the state line, she was no doubt committing multiple felonies. Henry would know. But Henry wouldn’t have stopped to pick the child up. He would have done whatever the rule book said to do. Call social services. Call child protective services. Call somebody who makes out more forms and has more rule books and who might send the girl to a place where the caregiver wouldn’t stop trying to scrub the clay stains off her thin young skin. Henry absolutely wouldn’t have taken her across the state line to some imaginary destination. *What are you going to do now?* She heard him say. *Now you’ve got a*

little girl in your car. What possible explanation is going to work for that?

She wished the CD player would stop spitting the discs back out. She wanted to hear her father's CD. Well, it wasn't really her father's, but he was on it, playing his saxophone with Miles Davis on quite a few of the live recordings. She found out about that by accident. Her father had left them when Elise was seven. He'd called and sent Christmas and birthday cards, and during her twelfth summer, she went to stay with him and a new woman in Chicago for three weeks. But then she didn't hear much after that, and her mother never offered a thing. One day she'd been flipping through some record albums and saw her father's name, *Phillip Fisher - Saxophone*, on the back, on a recording by another group she'd never heard of before or since: *The South Side*. She brought the record to her mother.

"Is this Daddy?"

Mrs. Abigail Fisher had put down the calligraphy-style pen she liked to write with and took the album cover from Elise's hands. She brought it to her nose and inhaled. "That was many many years ago," she said, which was much more than Elise had expected her to say. "I used to love this record."

"Can I have it?" Elise said too quickly.

The familiar window shade descended over her mother's eyes. "I don't need it anymore," she said coldly. "Yes, daughter. You can have it. And yes, this was your father. His music took him."

From that point on, Elise scoured record stores looking for anything her father might have played on, hoping that she could learn something about him from the arrangements of notes, the type of musician he chose to work with, the venue—anything at all that would bring him somehow into her body. She played the record too many times. The grooves wore out and eventually it was unplayable,

and not too long after that record players went away. They're available again, hipster-cool, in lime green, lemon and orange colors, so she bought one for their bedroom, and every few months she conducts a random eBay search for *The South Side Jazz Quartet: Lady Luck*, looks through the music on Amazon, flips through stacks of records at garage sales and antique stores, but she'd never seen that album again. The cover was a deep forest green, the type simple, white block letters. Sometimes the album cover floats through her dreams like a screen saver, bouncing from one side of her mind to the other, holding her in place.

Katrina wasn't sleeping. Her blue eyes took in everything in the car—the automatic window button, the sun visors, the cup holders, the crumpled fast food bags on the floor, the occasional stray ketchup packet. She'd look at something in the car and then follow with her fingers, delicately tracing its edges until she was satisfied.

"Sorry the car is a mess," Elise said.

Katrina shrugged. She stretched her arm toward the steering wheel, but because she was buckled in, couldn't reach.

Elise smiled. "You want to drive?"

"How else you going to know where to take me?"

"I thought I would take you to my mother's house and—" *and what?* "And then we could get some rest and in the morning you could show me where your mama lives. It's going to be dark by the time we get to Savannah."

Katrina stroked Mama Bear's remaining green ear, pressed her lips together and nodded. "My mama waiting."

"We could call her. I have a cell phone you could use."

"She don't have a phone. I tell Mama Bear and she'll tell mama."

Elise remembered other children's mothers would sew tags into their offspring's clothes with their name, address, and phone number

in case they wandered off. Her own mother never did that of course (*What child of mine doesn't have enough sense to get herself back home if she walks away from it?*) She knew the kids with the tags were embarrassed by them, but Elise always saw the perfect stitching and the block print letters as fingerprints of love.

Katrina put the Miles Davis CD in.

"It's not working, honey," said Elise.

But the CD player didn't eject its disk and the opening bars of her father's saxophone filled the car.

"He plays nice," said Katrina, and closed her eyes.