

between

nowhere

& lost

a novel

alexandra christle

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Cover design: Mark Babcock

Alexandrachristle.com
abcnovels@gmail.com

CHAPTER ONE

Today

As I pushed the manila envelope across my lap, my gaze drifted to my hands. When had they become so gnarled, so spotted, so...*old*? Chatter filtered from the kitchen—my two sons, their wives and children always congregated there. Scents of garlic and onion escaped down the hall, along with the occasional faint sound of a spoon stirring a pot of spaghetti sauce.

Today was my eighty-fifth birthday. When my first-born son, who favored his father so much, and his wife, asked me what to prepare for my birthday dinner, with no hesitation I said, “Spaghetti. Dina’s spaghetti.” No one questioned the choice, because a year ago today I had lost her, my best friend for my entire adult life, to breast cancer.

Maybe that’s when these hands became old.

From the thick upholstered chair a few feet away, I heard a little cough. My oldest granddaughter stared at me expectantly, patiently, waiting for me to speak.

“Oh. Just lost in a moment, Jenny.” I pulled the envelope back and drew in a long breath, let it out. “Before you look at this, I have to explain.”

I started my story, focused on the mantel where a string of photos told only a portion of my life. My granddaughter, perhaps sensing this was to be a lengthy tale, pulled her legs up onto the chair and tucked them underneath her, as limber young people so often do.

I stared at the photos, then back into the recesses of my memories, wanting to be sure each detail was as accurate as possible.

It was time, as Dina would have said, to come clean.

Monday, January 17, 1966

T*he wind blew in from the south that day.* I remember, because it was unseasonably hot for January, even for South Carolina.

I fixed myself a glass of tea, debated about putting a shot of whiskey in it, but decided against it. Although Harold was gone on a business trip—again—it was, after all, only eleven a.m., so with today's newspaper and my copy of *Peyton Place* in hand, I sought the front porch to find some relief for my boredom.

After settling onto the porch swing, I read some news articles left unfinished during my morning coffee ritual. A sit-in was to take place at Mayfield Park on Thursday, to allow the Negroes access to the facilities—an issue of some import. An ideal way for me to silently voice my opinion and support, if I took care not to get myself arrested.

I skimmed another article or two, then set the paper aside and picked up my book, but it didn't hold my concentration for long—apparently sex and lies had become so foreign to me I simply couldn't

relate...or just wasn't in the mood. The rumble of Ted Moore's red tractor drew my attention to the road. His new wood-sided manure spreader attached to the back bounced and rattled as he passed. He saw me from his perch and his arm went up in acknowledgement. After raising my hand to return the gesture, my scrutiny switched to my lawn and made an absent sweep across it.

Winter had left its mark, in spite of the warm temperature. Trees stripped bare for the season made this untimely heat wave even more out of place. With weather this warm, the yard should be alive with bright yellow daffodils and brilliant red tulips, or at least the tips of emerging crocuses, signaling the arrival of spring. Instead, nothing but brittle, brown blades of grass and tired, barren plots of dirt lay in wait for resurrection, for triumph.

Children's laughter and playful screaming filtered across the expansive lawn, giving me a start. At the Coopers' house to the right of ours, the warm weather had brought the little ones out to play, taking turns on a tire swing. Tightness gripped my chest. I blinked rapidly and reopened my book to try again, reading, but still not absorbing, the words on the page while my mind wandered, dwelling on impossible notions. Being the youngest of six, it never occurred to me that my own family would not include children.

I sat there for a long time, swaying, the swing's rhythmic squeak having a hypnotic effect. When the yellow school bus stopped in front of my house and liberated its young prisoners, I closed my eyes in hope of avoiding the familiar despair.

It didn't work.

However, time refused to stop, and the sun moved to the front yard, creating a glare across the driveway. So I really heard, instead of saw him, when he stopped his car, got out, and started up the walk.

"I believe I may be lost," he said. A pleasant, masculine, deep voice floated through the warm air. With a bit of a northern accent. Not New York City or Boston—not that abrasive, but enough to pique my interest.

“I believe you are.” Strangers didn’t just appear from nowhere in Mayfield Village.

His face remained hidden in shadow, but I sensed a smile tug at his lips. Or maybe it was the slight chuckle that came from deep in his chest. He stopped at the bottom of the porch steps. “I was trying to find the Mayfield Hotel.”

“Well, then, I would say you are quite lost. The Mayfield Hotel is over in Mayfield.”

His brow knitted, as if I had said something inane, but it was the absolute truth.

“Isn’t this Mayfield?”

I made a great show of puckering my lips, eyes toward the sky, as if giving his question serious consideration. “No.” I gave my head a slight shake. “No. This is Mayfield Village.”

He expelled a short breath of air, moved his left foot up to the next step and placed his palm on his knee, leaning into it. “I don’t—”

“Although Mayfield and Mayfield Village are inextricably intertwined, we are, in fact, quite separate, geographically and politically—but not economically.”

His mouth clamped shut.

“Please. Have a seat.” I waved vaguely toward one of the rocking chairs. I probably should have been cautious, more reserved. Yet, something about him drew me out. He seemed...trustworthy. Besides, this was fun, and it had been a while since I’d had any fun. “Would you like some iced tea?”

He had straightened and started up the steps, but stopped to give me an odd look, as if my sudden hospitality surprised him. “No, thank you. Could you direct me to the hotel, though?”

I surveyed his face as he situated himself in a rocker. Dark hair with a few strands of gray interspersed, deep brown eyes that looked intelligent, if perhaps a bit tired—an affliction not unfamiliar to me. A faint scent of English Leather drifted across the porch, dispelling the lingering odors, real or imagined, of Ted’s farm machinery. I pushed off the deck board with my foot, setting the swing back

in motion. “You took a wrong turn at Highway Twenty-Eight. It’s a common mistake. Some teenagers playing a prank switched the signs around.”

His mouth twisted, his expression showing confusion. “This is January. Halloween was months ago. Why haven’t they been changed back?”

“They’ve been like that for seven or eight years now.”

“Seven or ei— and they haven’t been fixed?”

My shoulders ticked up in a slight shrug. “Everyone in these parts knows where Mayfield and Mayfield Village are. Not much need for signs.”

“What about visitors? People passing through?”

That caused me to chuckle. “No one passes through the Mayfields. We’re between—nowhere and lost. Somewhat like you,” I added. “We’re just here. There isn’t a road in any direction that doesn’t bypass us.” My mirth deflated as quickly as it had materialized, and I paused as my gaze drifted toward the road. “We’re invisible.”

A tiny ‘huh’ slipped out and he shook his head. “Maybe I’ll take that glass of tea after all.”

At that, I tried not to smile. The Mayfields could suck the pluck out of most anyone. I went inside, poured him some tea and refilled my own, then on a whim, put some chocolate chip cookies on a plate and set everything on a tray. When I returned to the screen door, he had moved and stood at the porch rail, looking over the yard. His position gave me a chance to observe him. He was too well-dressed for the warm afternoon—in dark gray suit pants and a white dress shirt. He wore a blue striped tie, loosely knotted at his neck. His clothes appeared tailored and expensive and fit his athletic frame impeccably. An unanticipated flutter spread through my chest.

My eyebrows shot up at my reaction and I pushed open the door with my arm.

His head faced a thick ancient magnolia at the left side of the yard that blocked the view between our house and our neighbors’.

Its low-hanging heavy branches never lost their leaves, and it was languid and apathetic, as if the heat of the south was too much for its own existence.

I hated that tree.

The gentleman on my porch seemed immersed in the lethargy brought about by the untimely heat wave. The bang of the screen door and my presence did break him from his apparent daydream, however, and I set the tray down on a table and handed him a glass, which had already collected beads of condensation around it. He thanked me and returned to the rocker, lifted the glass to drink. “Sweet.” He reached over to pick up a cookie.

Apparently my expression compelled him to explain.

“The tea.”

I studied him for a moment, considering his own accent. “You aren’t from the south.”

“Nope.” He glanced at me and his eyes twinkled. My heart flipped. “Nor are you.”

Caught in my own web. I cleared my throat. “Not originally, no.” I, too, had the ability to be evasive. Regardless, my investigative juices began to flow. He was—not ‘brooding’. ‘Contemplative’ perhaps? ‘Secretive’? Or maybe he was merely the quiet type. Nevertheless, he intrigued me.

He lifted his glass for another long swallow, staring over the rim at the yard. Our house was a little isolated. Set back from the road by about seventy-five yards, it sat on four acres with trees lining the sides. A freshly-painted white rail fence ran along the two-lane county highway to keep the yard from appearing too sprawling. The Cooper’s house to our right was clearly visible only in winter when the trees lost their leaves, and even then I only recognized them by sheer familiarity.

He set down his glass and picked up another cookie. “These are good.” After a moment, he said, “You have a beautiful home here. Very peaceful.”

I had never considered it as such and muttered a “thank you,”

not knowing what else to say. We sat in silence for a minute or two, until his attention fell upon my novel. I nearly choked on my tea. How inopportune—and not a little embarrassing. In fact, the slightest change in expression showed in his eyes. Was he laughing at me?

“Does Mayfield have any industry?”

His abrupt question shook me from my errant thoughts. Surely this sophisticated gentleman did not seek employment in a town like Mayfield. *And why should you care, Helen?* “A textile mill, but they’re not hiring.”

“No. I wouldn’t imagine they are.”

His comment seemed odd, and I made no secret of my observation of him.

His brown eyes glinted with a flash of amusement. “No one can find it. The signs are switched.”

I laughed. What a unique feeling. “Can I get you a refill?”

He stood. “No, I should be going. It’s almost four o’clock. Thank you for the tea and cookies, though.”

I pushed out of the swing and took his near-empty glass. “Turn left out of the drive and go back through the Village. Go straight through the stoplight. Mayfield is about four miles more down the road. The hotel is at the far end of downtown, on Main and Elm.”

He nodded and returned to his car. A bright yellow bumper sticker pegged it as a rental, probably from the airport in Columbia. If he had flown into the state it would explain his attire. He backed around with a wave, somewhat like a salute, drove to the road, turned left, and disappeared.

We hadn’t even introduced ourselves. With a vague hollowness, I dropped back onto the swing, deciding to have that shot of whisky after all—but the energy to get up eluded me.

Dark fell quickly and a chill in the air wakened me from my trance-like state before any motivation to go inside surfaced. I made myself the drink, then rummaged through the freezer’s contents in search of something for dinner. With Harold out of town, frozen

dinners had become my habit, since preparing a full meal for one seemed superfluous. I opted for the Banquet pot pie over the Swanson's TV dinner and pulled it out.

I placed the small metal tin on a cookie sheet and slid it into the oven, then cleaned up the kitchen a bit. My growling stomach reminded me it had little food all day, so I opened a can of sliced peaches and put some in a bowl, then sat at the kitchen table to nibble and wait for my dinner to cook. After one bite, I left the table to put on a record album, setting the needle in the groove until strains of a Mozart symphony filled the room. Sometimes I tired of sitting in silence and just needed a little proof that life still existed. I missed Harold. Though more often than not our evenings consisted of television and little conversation, having him nearby comforted me. Harold was a good man. A sigh escaped from my chest and I picked up the newspaper to work on the crossword puzzle.

10 Across – Mediterranean waters – Aegean Sea. A bit of a stretch, but it fit. 7 Down – Ennui – Boredom.

I thrust the paper and pencil across the table and pushed my chair back. Boredom. The answer should have been 'crossword puzzles.'

My wandering mind returned to the brief interlude this afternoon with the stranger. That episode had presented not only some proof of life, but a conspicuous escape from boredom. The rather handsome gentleman seemed intelligent and educated. What on earth had brought him to the Mayfields? Perhaps the mill, but he acted somewhat unfamiliar with it. Nevertheless, he had interjected some respite from my apathy.

An unexpected image of our lips touching flashed through my mind.

"Helen Hodges!" I spoke aloud and sat up in astonishment. What on earth was wrong with me—a married woman. I jumped up and pulled my dinner from the oven, let the tin slide onto a plate and plopped it on the table and myself in the chair with little ceremony.

I stabbed my fork through the crust, steam billowed from the tin and I snared a piece of chicken, shoved it in my mouth.

“Damn it!” It scalded my tongue, my eyes watered. I grabbed my glass and let an ice cube slip into my mouth, blinking back the tears.

Perhaps the trashy novels should take a back seat for a while, as they clearly were influencing my thoughts. My heavens, this was positively wanton. Besides, the man was gone, just passing through town. With that thought, I crunched on the remainder of the ice cube and my chest tightened.

Really, Helen. For heaven’s sake, it was a chance encounter with a stranger. That educated gentleman has no interest in you. Have your little fantasy if you must, and then leave it at that.

I drew a ragged breath. What if he had plans to move here?

DAVID JAMES DRUMMOND maneuvered the car down the drive and turned left, taking his time. With no plans for the evening beyond sitting in a motel room, he saw no need to rush. He had even brought Michener’s latest novel, *The Source*, with him on this trip, expecting his evenings to be a bit dull. The musings made his thoughts return to the woman on the porch. *Peyton Place*? Not what he would have expected from a small town southern woman, but then, with his guesswork, she admitted she wasn’t from the south, with a very appealing flush to her cheeks. In fact, with her dark hair and blue eyes, appealing didn’t come close to describing her. He shoved the thought from his mind and refocused on his surroundings.

As he drove down the main street of Mayfield Village, he slowed to survey what the tiny town had to offer. A Winn-Dixie—interesting name for a grocery store—a J.C. Penney catalog store,

some small businesses, a restaurant. The last block had some empty storefronts, broken up only by a hair salon, and then a roadside inn. Who would think a town this small would need a motel? The lot looked empty.

About two miles outside of Mayfield, a billboard directed visitors of Mayfield Textiles to turn right. *If that sign hasn't been switched out, too.* He passed a Red and White grocery at the town's outskirts, then cruised down Mayfield's ten-block downtown that boasted a Belk—he had seen those in North Carolina, the usual First National Bank, a movie theater—a quick glance at the marquis to check what was playing and all his mind conjured up was him with the woman, sitting in the back row, holding hands and—

Good God, Drummond. Don't you have more important things to think about on this trip?

The rest of the town's businesses became a mass of nothing until the imposing Mayfield Inn all but burst into his line of sight. The four-story red brick building set back from the street about a hundred feet and towered above the storefronts on the previous blocks. Not that it was that impressive—it was just out of place. He pulled into the circular drive and stopped, but didn't emerge from his car. The hotel looked pretty decent; yet, he hesitated. The woman from the Village popped into his mind. Again. He scowled. Damn if he hadn't even found out her name, not that it mattered. As interesting as she was, someone else thought so, too. The gold band on her left hand told that story.

He leaned back and tapped his fingers on the steering wheel for a full minute before throwing the gearshift into first and following the drive back to the street. He waited for a gap in the traffic, turned left, and followed the road back to Mayfield Village. The small motel outside town was no farther from the mill, and it looked clean enough. Plus, the AAA logo hanging under the Inn's own sign provided a positive endorsement for the accommodations.

Are those the only reasons? Annoyed, he pressed down on the accelerator, only slowing when the nose of a silver and black

Highway Patrol car edged into view. He had come to Mayfield for a specific purpose and had no business getting sidetracked, which included getting in trouble with the local law.

Five minutes later he pulled into the Village Inn and Efficiencies parking lot and wandered into the office. Framed photographs of cars and men covered the walls. Of course—Mayfield was only thirty miles or so from Darlington, where there was a NASCAR track. He never did understand the interest, but apparently it had strong roots. It explained the motel.

He moved up to the counter. Blue rheumy eyes peeked up at him from behind the ledge. An old man sat in an easy chair, watching a small black and white TV. “Help y’all?”

“I need a room for three nights, please. Do you have any vacancies?”

“Reckon so.” With agonizing slowness, he reached under the counter and pulled out a book, pushed himself to a standing position and turned the registry to face David. “Y’all alone?”

“Yes, it’s just me.” David took the proffered pen and filled in his information.

“I’ll put y’all on the back of that section over yonder”— he pointed a crooked finger toward a building behind David, —“away from the pool. Bit quieter on that side.”

A hint of smile crossed David’s face. The pool had been emptied for the season, quite possibly for years, but it was still a nice gesture. Only in the south. People were so...*hospitable*.

Like the woman at the house.

“Mmph.” He shoved the paperwork back toward the old man.

“Everything all right, there, son?”

“It’s fine. I’m just a little hungry. Is the restaurant across the street any good?”

“U-yup. You can get a right decent meal at Mama’s Kitchen. Make sure you get a piece of her pecan pie. If y’all ask real nice, she’ll put a dollop of ice cream on it for you. Just give her a little wink.” He chuckled.

“I’ll do that. Thanks. Do you want me to pay for the room now?”

The old man squinted at the paperwork, looking through, over, and under his glasses, apparently until he could focus. “Ain’t necess’ry, Mr...” he squinted some more. “James. Y’all can pay when you check out.” He handed David a key hanging from a small brass plate with an “eight” scratched onto it.

“Thank you, Mr...?”

“That’d be Parsons. Fred Parsons.”

He stuck out his thin wrinkled hand and David took it, surprised by the old man’s strong grip.

“Hope y’all enjoy your stay.”

David thanked him again and got back in his rental car with a smile. If you could get used to the slow pace, living in the south wouldn’t be so bad. The people couldn’t be more accommodating. A brief pang of guilt struck him for lying about his name, but he tamped it down. The name Drummond was too well known around Mayfield and he didn’t need to announce his presence here. The area residents would figure it out soon enough.

He drove his car around the office to the far side of the motel, had his choice of parking spots and pulled into the space in front of room eight. Hoisting his suitcase and briefcase from the trunk, he entered the room and made a quick assessment. Simple but clean with a double bed, small television sitting on the dresser and adequate lighting. A partition separated the sleeping area from the bathroom and tiny kitchenette that housed a compact refrigerator, sink and stovetop with two burners. The cabinet above held glassware and dishes, and the one below had a couple of pots and a drawer of various silverware and cooking utensils.

“All the comforts of home.” For a town the size of Mayfield Village, it wasn’t bad. He’d be comfortable here for a few days. A glance at his watch—not quite five o’clock.

A quick walk to that grocery store to pick up some instant coffee and cream, and maybe some club soda to mix with the bottle

of Imperial whiskey he had brought along, would stretch out his muscles from the long day.

He strolled down the street, looking across the way at Mama's Kitchen. Full parking lot—usually a good sign, especially this early in the evening. He wandered by a hardware store, nodding at a man locking up for the night. God help the poor husband whose wife decided she wanted that squeaky front door fixed *now*—but he bet a quick phone call would get the owner back down here to open up, just to sell the man a couple of screws.

Although his first visit to South Carolina, his prior trips to company holdings in North Carolina and Georgia had taught him that was just the way things worked down here. Still, something in this town seemed off to him, and he couldn't quite pinpoint what it was. Things were quiet, certainly, but he didn't expect the bustle of Philadelphia in a town this small.

He reached the Winn-Dixie and the thought slipped from his mind. He took his time strolling through the store, found the coffee and cream, added a package of Oreo cookies, and returned to his room to unpack. Now nearly six o'clock, he meandered over to Mama's, holding the door open for a departing couple before he stepped into another era. His peripheral vision noted some men sitting at a counter to his right, with a few booths lined up by the windows, and a larger dining area to his left. White Formica tabletops, red vinyl seats—the place wasn't fancy, but it was homey and looked spic and span.

All of that flowed through his subconscious, though, as his full attention honed in on a large sign prominently posted by the cash register, "Coloreds seated in rear."

That was it. In the short three hours he had been in the Mayfields, he had seen no Negroes. Apparently the Civil Rights Act hadn't caught on here. Not only did they not mingle with the whites, they stayed invisible.

"Help y'all? Got some spots at the counter, or you can take any seat in the dining room over yonder." An older woman, her graying

hair puffed up in a bouffant, swiped her hands across her apron. His money was on this one being the infamous Mama.

His reverie broken, he thanked her and moved toward the dining section. Might as well be comfortable and sit at a table. He recalled Fred Parsons's remark about the ice cream, and a smile touched the edges of his mouth. He imagined Fred gave Mama quite a few winks.

"Hey, there. Can I get y'all something to drink?" A young waitress appeared with a glass of water and set a menu on the table. "Ain't seen you in here before. If you need any help with what we got, just holler."

"Thanks. I'll take a cup of coffee to start."

When she returned, he placed his order and studied his surroundings. A man at one of the booths up front kept looking his way, his expression less than friendly. He spoke with his companions until one of them turned around to check David out. *Should have taken off my coat and tie. So much for the hospitable south.* His mind dismissed their scrutiny, however. In a couple of days they'd have a concrete reason to stare.

His scan of the diner continued. At the back, a partition split off a section of the room—it had just enough translucence for him to make out two colored men sitting behind it. Invisible. He took a deep breath. Segregation still existed in Philadelphia—they'd had their share of race riots—but the blatancy of posted signs wasn't so evident. This was a different world, and what that might mean for his trip here, he wasn't sure.

The appearance of his dinner interrupted his thoughts, and he dove in, finding the food just as good as Fred Parsons had promised. The blue plate special of meatloaf, potatoes with gravy and hot buttered rolls was better than—

Than what? Your mother's? You'll never know, will you? With furrowed brow, he shoveled the remainder of his meatloaf into his mouth just as Mama walked by and refilled his coffee cup. "You don't need to eat it so fast, there, honey. There's plenty of choices

for dessert.”

He tried to acknowledge her around his overstuffed mouth and finally washed the bite down with some coffee. There might be plenty more, but Mama might not be willing to serve him any after tonight.

Once the people of Mayfield and the Village found out who he was and why he was here, they might all be staring at him like the three men in the booth.

Right before they ran him out of town.

CHAPTER TWO

Tuesday morning, vague memories of yesterday haunted me. I dumped a small remainder of cream in a fresh cup of coffee and stirred it to a deeper brown than my preferences dictated. Since my pantry and refrigerator could likely compete with Old Mother Hubbard's, that afternoon I headed to Winn-Dixie and soon stood in the produce aisle, searching for something appealing.

"Little late for this, isn't it?"

I spun around. Heart hammering, I stuttered, "I'd, uh, stick with the citrus, personally."

The man who, uninvited, had taken up the recesses of my mind, picked up a cantaloupe and thumped it with his finger, then set it down.

"What are you doing here?" I hadn't meant to sound accusatory, but it was out now.

"Buying food. Even visitors need to eat."

"There's a store in Mayfield. Why are you in the Village?"

His face brightened. "That's an interesting story, actually. I was driving down First Street—by the way, is there a Second Street?"

I shook my head.

"Huh. Didn't think so. At any rate, I saw the Village Inn and Efficiencies. So, I thought, the people of Mayfield Village seem friendly enough, and as I'm going to be in the area for a few days, why not just stay here?"

The hair on the back of my neck tingled—a sensation foreign to

me for quite some time. “Oh, well, Fred keeps the Inn very clean.” I nearly rolled my eyes at myself. How utterly inarticulate—but he graciously smiled.

“It’s not a bad little place. Very comfortable. It has a AAA rating, you know, and it’s conveniently located with Mama’s Kitchen just across the street and of course, the race track in Darlington.”

I sensed he was teasing and serious at the same time. He would be an interesting man to know as he could keep one on one’s toes, so to speak. “You should try Mama’s pecan pie.”

“So I’ve been told. I’ll have to do that.”

I nodded, staring at those smiling eyes, and not being quite sure how to simply walk away, stayed with him as we moved along the aisle together, stopping every couple of feet to examine various fruits and vegetables. He hesitated by the grapes, but apparently decided against them and moved on.

I followed him like a baby duckling, without the distinctive waddle, I hoped, analyzing his eclectic choices. I still knew nothing about this man—not his age, his profession, why he had come to the Mayfields—not even his name, but here I stood, trying to guess which type of bread he would buy. White? Rye?

He picked up a loaf of Wonder bread.

I must have giggled or made some noise, because he said, “It’s what I grew up eating.”

“Oh! It wasn’t your bread. I was, umm, watching Barbara Mobley with her two-year-old.”

He peered down the aisle. “Seems quite a handful.”

“He’s active.” At this point, a normal person would ask, “Do you have any children, my nameless friend?” But I did not. This lack of information lent a mystical aura, a kind of romantic feeling of *laissez-faire* to our encounter. A slow burn began to work its way to my throat.

“Are you going to buy any groceries, or do you just come to the market to see what your neighbors are up to?” His twinkling brown eyes pervaded my senses. “Not that I don’t appreciate the company.”

The burn flashed into my face. I expect, had I been a rose, the Mayfield Horticultural Society would have dubbed me ‘Afternoon Blush.’ “I’m, umm, just here for some milk and eggs. They’re at the back of the store.”

The corners of his eyes creased with amusement. “Hmm. And I need some cheese. Shall we?” He held his hand out, palm up, in an old-fashioned gesture of etiquette.

I started down the aisle with purpose, thinking perhaps I could leave him behind. It wouldn’t do to give the women of the Mayfields something other than Barbara Mobley and her two-year-old a new topic of conversation. However, when I reached the dairy aisle, he was right there with me. He picked up a package of American cheese. As I lifted a quart of skim milk—white water, as Harold called it—I took inventory of this man’s cart. Cheese, white bread, a package of bologna, some Twinkies—when had he picked up those? Small jars of mayonnaise and mustard.

With the slightest smirk, he said, “I did a little shopping last night. I just needed something for lunch.”

If this stranger continued to predict my very thoughts, I might become unnerved, but for the moment, it merely created an inexplicable fascination. Still, the time had come to retreat. I grabbed a pint of cream and a carton of eggs and began to move my cart toward the cash registers. “I really must get home. It was nice seeing you again.”

His eyes had the most intriguing way of crinkling at the edges, as if he found amusement in my every word. Of course, that was foolish. He simply visited our town, passing through for whatever unknown reason, and would soon be nothing more than a hazy memory.

The notion made my stomach churn. Was there any Pepto Bismol left in the medicine cabinet?

I paid for my white water and eggs, knowing full well tomorrow would require another trip to pick up the rest of my grocery list. I stalled—it would be rude to abruptly leave him behind—and we exited the store together.

I started to turn toward the parking lot, but he stood still.

“I walked here.”

Of course he did. It was only two blocks. “Oh. Well, enjoy your...” What? Twinkies? Bologna? “...evening.”

“Thank you. You, too.” With that, he gave me another one of his salute-waves, and off he strolled down the street.

I watched his casual gait for a moment before shifting my paper bag to start the trek to my car, then heard his voice to my left.

“David. My name is David.”

I whirled around to find him facing me, made a quick survey of the parking lot to ensure none of the women of the Mayfields observed this undeniable tête-a-tête, but the only person in the lot was Billy, the stock boy, loading groceries into a car. I walked back several feet toward David. He, in turn, moved toward me.

“I’m Helen.”

He stuck out his hand and I reciprocated. To any casual observer, it surely appeared nothing more than a formal introduction. Except he held my hand for a second too long. There went that tingling at the back of my neck again. This time, it shot down my arm as well.

“Nice to meet you, Helen.”

Those eyes. I extricated my hand from his grasp and retreated a step. Just as I started to turn, my mouth opened and out came, “Would you like to have a break from Mama’s and come over for dinner tomorrow?”

As soon as the words spilled forth, my legs started to give way like a building hit by a wrecking ball. Only through sheer will—or shock—did I remain upright.

“That would be very nice.” He paused, most likely waiting for some details from me, which were not forthcoming. Hesitating, he then asked, “What time?”

“Oh, umm, six will be fine,” I squeaked, then turned and fled. What had I done? Clearly, I had taken leave of not just my senses, but every single brain cell in my addled head. What was I thinking? What would I say if Harold called during our intimate dinner? What

if he was a serial killer and Harold returned to find me mangled in our bed?

Or what if you decide to, for once, have a little joy in your life and you run away with the man? With that shockingly unacceptable thought, I floored the accelerator and nearly side-swiped Billy's line of collected carts as I tore out of the lot.

DAVID'S FACE BROKE out in a grin as he watched Helen all but run to her station wagon. Her blurted invitation to dinner appeared to have startled her more than it did him, and it surprised him a lot. Now he had something to look forward to—hopefully her cooking was as good as Mama's—her chocolate chip cookies certainly were. If not, so what? Her company would more than make up for any deficiency in culinary skills. He strolled back to his room with an extra jaunt in his step and put away his purchases, flipping the knob on the television midway through his task to provide a little background noise.

He glanced at his watch—too early for dinner, so he propped himself up in the bed and picked up the phone book, thumbing through it. With listings for the entire county, one would think it would have some weight to it, but it was still only one-half inch thick. He skipped to the yellow section and went to 'restaurants,' looking for some variety. Mayfield boasted a Chinese restaurant and a place called Hardee's—he saw that yesterday. It looked like a kind of hamburger place. That would suffice.

The book flopped open to the white pages and his gaze wandered down the column, then he grimaced and tossed it aside. Did he actually think "Helen" would just pop off the page? Without even knowing her last name?

His mind returned to their happenstance meeting at the

grocery store. To have spent no more than one combined hour with the woman, he had learned quite a bit about her. Like her love of children and the way her eyes lit up when she saw that little kid at the end of the aisle. Why didn't she have any children? Maybe her husband didn't want any. Shame. He had always thought it would be nice to have a child, but for a woman, the urge was even stronger.

You do have a child. Did you forget?

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and grabbed his keys, pushing the memory back into the deep hidden recess it had escaped from, returning to more pleasant thoughts of Helen. She couldn't be past about thirty. She was still young enough.

"Damn, Drummond. Give it a rest." The inordinate amount of time he was spending in thought over her might concern him if he let it continue. She was a diversion. Nothing more. A better focus would be sorting through his visit to Mayfield Textiles this morning.

The visit had gone neither better nor worse than expected. He had met with the plant's treasurer and superintendent, taken a covert look at the operations, and managed to keep his presence unnoticed by the workers. Things ran smoothly here—one of Drummond Corporation's best assets—and his intention was to keep it that way. With five hundred employees, it was the largest mill in Drummond's holdings. So large, in fact, on paper it was shown as its own corporation.

He shook his head. His intuition told him it was unlikely it would survive the wrath of David James Drummond, Sr. His father kept tight reins on his acquisitions, and Mayfield Textiles would have to learn that quickly, or find itself no longer in existence. A chance remained David could convince him otherwise; but historically, he'd had little luck having any substantive conversations with his father. He jiggled his keys through his fingers, thoughts drifting again to Helen.

What would happen to her in the event the mill closed? Her response to his question about local industry told him there were

no other large businesses in the area. Odds were her husband, whoever he was, was employed there—unless he owned one of the small businesses in town. Helen dressed simply, but well, and carried herself in a manner that bespoke education and a cultured background. She seemed a bit lost in this small town, truth be known. And in retrospect, it seemed unlikely she was a mill wife. It didn't fit. The man might be in management, but after his visit today, David didn't think that was the case. She wasn't Ralph Martin's wife, and he couldn't picture her as Pete Owens's, as uncouth as the plant superintendent was.

Besides, the guy was obviously not home. Surely she didn't invite him over for dinner with the idea of introducing him to her husband. Maybe he was in the military...David dismissed that idea. No base nearby.

Traveling salesman. That had to be it. He sold...encyclopedias or Fuller Brush. Or something.

His fingers wrapped around his keys, he headed out to his car. Cruising toward Mayfield, he couldn't seem to shake Helen from his mind. When the giant Hardee's sign appeared, he turned and pulled into a parking space. The place had a lane to drive through, but being unfamiliar with the menu, he opted to peruse it inside.

He left with a bag containing two hamburgers and some french fries. His suit and tie were making him choke. All he wanted was some dinner, a shower, and a few drinks. Tomorrow promised to be a bit more complicated than today.

And not just because of his business at the mill.

CHAPTER THREE

The next morning, my nerves on edge, I contemplated the notion of contacting David and begging off with an excuse of illness. However, that seemed inhospitable and decidedly rude. After offering an invitation, it became my duty to follow through. Plus, a part of me wanted to see this man again, in spite of my jitters.

So I spent the day in a bit of a tizzy, tidying up, preparing dinner, and trying on a half dozen different outfits. In a rational moment, I questioned exactly what my intent was, but unable to answer my own question, I pushed the thought aside.

The doorbell rang as I slid a tray of fruit and cheese into the refrigerator. I yanked off my apron, then smoothed the sides of my slim, plaid skirt. My high heels clicked across the wood floor on my way to open the door.

“Hi.” David stood with a bottle of wine—another indication of a mannerly upbringing.

“Hi, back.” I stepped aside to let him enter. An awkward hesitation followed, me with a stupid smile plastered on my face as he glanced around. His attention drifted to my music room at the left that housed a grand piano and some seating.

“A piano. Who plays?”

“I do, some.”

He nodded, then returned his gaze to me and stuck out his hand with the bottle in it. “I’m not sure what you’re cooking, but I brought some wine. It’s red.”

“Oh! Thank you,” I stuttered, as if I hadn’t noticed it. I took it and backed up a step, waving my hand for him to follow me to the kitchen.

“This is nice,” he said as we entered. “Dinner smells great.”

“I made some beef bourguignon.” Moving helped to hide my nervousness. My word, I was behaving like a teenager on a first date. Or a married woman having an affair. My face grew hot.

He gave me another one of those looks—amused—curious—
“May I sit?”

“Oh! Of course. How rude of me.” I motioned toward the table. He pulled out a chair and settled in quite comfortably. On another day, his apparent ease might have annoyed me. In fact, when Harold’s oldest brother stopped by unannounced and did the same, it truly exasperated me. I must confess, however, having this charming man in my kitchen provided a pleasant sensation. That right there should have set off a series of warning bells more deafening than the fire alarm at County High, but it did not. I believe I was becoming infatuated.

The table was situated at the rear of my kitchen, under a window. David sat on its left side, which put him in a position to watch me. I pulled the beef from the oven to add the mushrooms, and also slip in a tray of rolls. Then I dropped some noodles into the pot of boiling water on the stove and set the timer for ten minutes. As his scrutiny made me a bit self-conscious, I put him to work. I set the bottle of Beaujolais in front of him and plopped down a corkscrew. “Perhaps you could open the wine.”

Silently, he began twisting the curled metal into the cork, while I retrieved two wine glasses and surreptitiously inspected them for dust, having not used them recently. Satisfied with their state of cleanliness, I passed them to him, then pulled the fruit tray from the refrigerator, placed it in the middle of the table and joined him.

He poured the wine and handed a glass to me. In unison, we tilted the glasses we held toward each other in a semi-toast, and with that twinkle that was becoming so familiar to me, he said,

“To...the Mayfields.”

We sipped, glanced at each other, sipped again. He turned towards the window, but darkness had descended and only his reflection shone in the glass. I struggled, torn between continuing this reckless and romantic fantasy, and shattering it like an icicle on pavement by beginning the inquisition I had, so far, resisted.

Before I could break my resolve, he said, “How long have you been married?”

Fortunately, I had just finished swallowing a mouthful of wine, which was excellent, by the way, for had I not, I fear I would have spewed it across the table and stained his pale blue dress shirt. As it was, the heat rising up in my face most certainly rivaled the red of the vintage we drank. I cleared my throat and croaked, “Ten years.”

“No children.”

My stomach lurched. The heat seeped down my throat. He hadn’t posed it as a question. It was a statement, and to my utter despair, quite true. He plopped a cube of cheese into his mouth as he awaited my response.

“No, we haven’t any children—yet.” *Yet? Who was I kidding?*

“Is he in the military?”

The heat grew into a scorch. I sipped at my wine, and it worsened, spreading out from my throat into my chest and all but choking me. David watched me and I wanted to vomit. Had I struck him as a wife who would cheat on a husband who defended our country? Did I come across as that shallow? “No, he—”

The buzzer on the oven sounded, signaling the end of the first half in this odd basketball game. Or it merely reminded me that dinner was ready. Regardless, it offered the opportunity to avoid answering his question. “Excuse me.”

I flipped off the burner under the pot of noodles, opened the oven and pulled out the beef and rolls, then sensed him behind me. A warmth enveloped me—a heat not coming from the oven.

“Can I help?”

“Umm, there’s a butter dish in the fridge. Could you get that

out? You can put it on the table in the dining room.” While he did that and moved the wine and our glasses, I deftly transferred everything to appropriate serving dishes. Together, we carried the food and set it out.

He pulled out a chair for me to sit at the table’s end—Harold’s usual seat. It shouldn’t have surprised me, but it did. With my “thank you,” he sat at the side. I could have reached over with my left hand and held his right.

Of course, I did not.

We had an amiable meal, with inconsequential conversation about the weather and the Mayfields. Through dessert, a fudge bundt cake, I continued to regale him with stories about the townspeople, which judging by his laughter, amused him.

“Let me help you,” he said when we had emptied our plates and stood. My overactive imagination continued to entrench us in a romance novel, where the hero acted a perfect gentleman.

Or a perfect fantasy.

Harold certainly never treated me with this much deference. He wasn’t a bad man—he was just...Harold. A little old-fashioned, but not mean or cruel. I loved him dearly, but occasionally wondered if life would have been a little more exciting had I married someone a bit closer in age.

“Well!” I thought, and then realized it had slipped out verbally, as David viewed me expectantly.

Here came that flush again. I let out a small sigh. It was a wonder any blood remained in my body below my neckline. Needing to speak, I said, “Shall we go into the living room?”

David smiled and collected our wine glasses—he had refilled them, and briefly it occurred to me that I was already becoming quite uninhibited. Nonetheless, I allowed him to hand me the glass.

We entered the living room and he hesitated, perhaps waiting to see where I would sit. Harold’s easy chair seemed the safer choice. David sat at the end of the sofa closest to the chair. As he surveyed the room, I gave my decorating a quick, critical evaluation—a mix

of southern country and New England with its floral skirted sofa and striped chairs. A modified Queen Anne. I veered away from those stark modern lines so popular right now. Inwardly, I nodded my approval at the room as his gaze returned to me. He leaned back into the sofa and looked quite at home. “You know,” he began, “you’ve managed to tell me very little about yourself.”

Were my learned manners not so deeply ingrained, I would have retorted, “Nor have you.” Instead, I lifted my right shoulder ever so slightly and said, “It’s...I haven’t done much very interesting.”

He didn’t respond, but gave me a questioning look, forcing me to elaborate.

“I’m from Philadelphia.”

“Philadelphia?” His posture straightened a bit. “I...You still have family there?” He cocked his head and continued to watch me intently.

I sighed, it being difficult to dredge up stories about my history. Although not completely estranged from my family, we weren’t close. Some matters were best kept to oneself. “I went to Winthrop College in Rock Hill.”

“Ah. A teaching degree? What grade?”

“High school. History and English—but I’m not teaching any longer.”

His eyebrows lifted. “Why not?”

This was where it became difficult. “Harold—my husband—prefers if I don’t work.”

“I see.”

Such finality. As if, with that one statement, my entire life story opened up. I had to clarify. “I teach piano to a few young students, and help coach the girls’ basketball team at County High.”

His thoughtful expression brightened. “Did you play in school?”

“A little.” That wasn’t quite true. I was the leading scorer at my high school, but could hardly say that. It would sound like bragging.

He stood and wandered to the fireplace mantle. A row of pictures lined the wood ledge. He took one and turned it towards

me. “Looks like you played more than just a little.”

He had found the photo of my team with me in the middle, holding the State Championship trophy. I really needed to be more careful about what I put on display, but then, when had a strange man ever been in my living room?

“Well, I...” If I didn’t stop focusing on that twinkle in his eye, whatever semblance of composure remained in me would surely evaporate. “It was a long time ago.”

A kind of “Mm hmm” emitted from his throat, and he replaced the picture. He lingered for a moment, possibly scanning the rest of the photos, then picked up one of Harold with some other workers outside the mill. He spoke to me over his shoulder. “You never said what your husband does.”

The abrupt change in subject and a change in his tone unnerved me, since I had become so totally immersed in my reckless romantic fantasy. Reality is always so brutal. “He works at the mill.”

The slightest pause as he replaced the photo and turned. “What does he do?” He reclaimed his spot on the sofa.

“He’s a mill technician. I guess I should say ‘the’ mill technician. There’s only one. And last year he started working on the possibility of the mill joining TWUA—the textile workers union.”

Expressionless, he paused to take a sip of wine, then said, “He must know quite a bit. That’s pretty far up the ladder.”

“Do you know much about the textile industry?”

“Some.”

The slightest hint of coolness colored his tone, but I babbled on. “Harold started on the floor at fifteen—he’s worked in every department. He’s been there over thirty-three years.” Would that make David think me nearly fifty? Did I look that old? I was just thirty-five.

“Long time.” He glanced at the mantle. “Has he ever thought of doing anything else?”

That seemed an odd question, but I answered nevertheless. “I don’t really know. There’s never been any reason for him to consider

other options.” In truth, Harold never thought much beyond today. A sigh slipped out.

That twinkle. Damnation. I could get used to seeing that. Fortunately, my guest didn’t query me on the source of my angst. In need of something to say, I turned the tables on him. “Are you married?”

“No. Never been.”

That surprised me. He seemed, as my friend Dina would say, a catch. I pushed aside the thought, wanted to ask him his age, but of course, I couldn’t. The touch of gray at his temples made me guess perhaps forty-ish. Older than I, but not as old as Harold; at least I didn’t think so. “You’ve never mentioned where you’re from.” In fact, he hadn’t mentioned anything regarding his personal life. It struck me that he had manipulated the conversation quite deftly away from himself.

“Baltimore.”

This was like interrogating a child whom I had to prod for details. Before I could press him for more information, he stood.

“I should probably be going.”

“Oh, of course.” That was brusque. Was he in trouble with the law? Some sort of secret agent? Baltimore was close to Washington. Perhaps he worked for the FBI.

“We wouldn’t want the neighbors talking.”

Truly, once again, blood flowed to my face. That he had the same thought as I only hours ago was a bit disconcerting. It knocked my fantasies right from my head. I tried to smile, believing I needed to make some sort of acknowledgement to his statement. We walked to the door, but before I could escort him out, he wandered into the piano room and opened the lid. He plunked a few keys, then sat on the bench.

“Do you play?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Not really.” He started tapping out a discordant version of chopsticks.

I started to chuckle, but then his manner changed. His hands

moved up and down the keyboard with elegance as strains of Beethoven's Sonata Number Fourteen filled the small room. My heartbeat quickened as he played the mournful first movement. After a few seconds, I dropped onto my teacher's chair, entranced when his fingers began to fly across the keys in the fast third movement.

Beethoven titled it *Sonata Quasi una Fantasia*—"Almost a Fantasy"—and how appropriate that seemed. I sat, mesmerized, for fifteen minutes as David played through the entire piece without missing a single note. Chills ran from my neck down my arms while I watched him. The grace of his movements put me in awe.

When he finished, he didn't move for several seconds. Then he lowered the piano lid and slid across the bench. I remained speechless, staring at him. I blinked and finally managed, "Not really?"

For the briefest moment, an expression of sadness crossed his face, so fleeting I almost missed it. Then he gave me an embarrassed smile. "Not for a long time." He stood and I followed his lead.

I continued to study him, but his face had become impassive. Trying to veer his thoughts from whatever caused his pain, I said, "I'm impressed. That was superb."

"You're being kind."

"I am most assuredly not. It was executed perfectly."

"Technically, maybe, but it lacked heart."

"Is that what someone told you? Is that why you no longer play?"

He lifted his hands.

"Hmph. They were fools. You're gifted."

"What if I told you that's the only piece I can play?"

My eyebrows arched at that. "I wouldn't believe you."

He smiled then, and a tingle ran through my entire body. A picture of me in his arms shot through my mind like a dart.

"I really should get back to the motel."

I shook myself from the unsettling image. "Oh. Of course." I

escorted him to the front porch. His rental car sat in the drive, very near the spot where he parked two days ago when he plopped into my life.

Not that I could say he was *in* my life. This simple diversion had taken on an essence of its own.

He hesitated on the porch. “Thank you for dinner. It was delicious.”

“It was just—thank you.” I glanced down for a second, floundering for something more to say. “Perhaps we could do it again if you’re still in town.” There I went again. I was becoming positively incorrigible.

“I’d like that.”

We both stood awkwardly. I had another vision of him wrapping his arms around me, pulling me close, and kissing me lightly—then more intensely. My heart rate accelerated so much I feared he would hear it pounding inside my chest.

Instead, he moved down a step and said, “Well, good night.”

I lifted my hand in a small wave. “Good night.”

He ambled to his car, and shortly thereafter disappeared into the darkness.

I slumped onto the porch swing in somewhat of a dither. Had I actually envisioned enjoying the arms of another man? However brief or imagined, it was an infidelity. Poor Harold. How could I do this to my husband?

The thought became even more disturbing, though, when I realized how much I wanted it.

DAVID CLOSED THE car door gently and let out a long, low whistle before starting the engine. “Damn.” He lost little time heading back to the motel. The evening had been...far more than he expected.

And all he had done was lie to her. Not only with the dissembling about Baltimore, but also about never being married, which was... not really true. Or sort of true. The brief few days he was married to Marie were effectively squashed by his father. He had never met anyone since who held any romantic interest for him.

Until now.

Helen was a woman he could easily spend a lifetime with. She was intelligent, enjoyable to be with, and even had an interest in music and sports. How much more perfect could a match be? He cursed. Forty damn years old and when he finally met someone, she was married.

God was cruel.

He pulled up in front of his room and shut off the car, staring at the weathered brass "eight" on the red painted door. He was clearly off his rocker. Helen may not be entirely happy in her marriage, but she didn't strike him as the type to give up.

"Jumping the gun a little, aren't you, Drummond?" He threw open the door and slammed it shut, unconcerned about waking any other guests. Once inside, he locked the door, poured himself a healthy dose of whiskey and tossed it down his throat, wincing when the burn hit his stomach. Then he poured some more and added some club soda and ice, opened his package of Twinkies and flopped down in the room's easy chair.

What had gotten into him? He was Philadelphia's most eligible bachelor, so the society pages of the *Inquirer* claimed. He could have any woman in the city. The problem was, he didn't want any woman. At least not until he came to little Mayfield Village, South Carolina. Now he wanted a woman who belonged to someone else.

Father would have a heyday with that one.

He needed to forget about this little sidebar and get on with his business. Take care of these problems at the mill, go home, marry Vanessa Hildebrandt, have a kid and be done with it. Give Father his blasted heir. Scratch that... his *respectable* heir.

Why did that suddenly sound so unpalatable?

He pushed himself from the chair and went to the kitchenette, stared at the refrigerator door for a minute, then went to the bathroom and got ready for bed.

With one final “Damn,” he wound up his travel alarm and turned out the light. The last thing he saw was the thin stream of light slicing through the gap in the drapes...and an image of Helen’s husband floating in the darkness, whose first name she had volunteered, and he hadn’t required anything more.

Harold. Harold Hodges.