

One

Defiance, Texas, December 1977

When Hap swift-kicks me in my stomach, the last thing I see is the retreat of one well-polished pastor's shoe. Mama always said you could tell the value of a man by the shine of his shoes. How he treated them reflected how he treated his women, she believed.

"If you can find a man with polished shoes, Louise," she told me, "then you'll find the world."

The world I find today is a dirt-embedded yellow linoleum floor, no longer reverberating from rushing kids preparing for school. I can't even remember what brought on the kick, what inciting words I said to deserve Hap's rage. I try to stand, but the world twirls around me, nearly the same feeling I get when I drink a little too much, though not nearly as sweet, not as beautiful an escape.

I re-taste my breakfast, then swallow it again. I'm terribly good at swallowing things these days — particularly secrets. The children gulp down their share, too. If the church body would dethrone Hap from his

pulpited pedestal and truly look him square in the eyes they'd see these secrets, but no one bothers — not even the elders and deacons who actually know more than they let on. So we ingest secrets like gravel, our stomachs distended in the effort, never really feeling fed or alive.

But this is not my only secret. A few months ago, someone killed my son Jed's best friend, Daisy Chance. A waif of a girl, thirteen and gangly, and the love of Jed's life, though he wouldn't say such things. And as sure as I know the streets of Defiance, Texas, I know who killed her. Hap believes I'm slow; he doesn't understand the real Ouisie Pepper. When I'm holding my head in our curtained bedroom, convulsing under the spasm of another headache, I think, and remember the man in the woods.

You want to know, don't you?

You want to know what kind of person would strangle a sweet teenage girl. Isn't it ironic that a woman - people pass on the street, nod politely to and gossip about, actually knows Defiance's most horrible secret? But I'm not telling. Not yet. Don't fret yourself, though, I'm pretty sure Daisy will be the only one taken.

I steady myself at the kitchen sink, washing cereal bowls one by one. I scrub in circles, round and round until they squeak beneath my sponge. And I watch the winter from my window. It's not a cruel winter, not terribly chilly as you might expect this season. But this is Texas after all, prone to doing its own thing. As I settle myself into the day's plain mediocrity, the wind musters strength, bending trees, ripping browning leaves from stark branches. There are no clouds shifting in the wind, no birds protesting. It's a silent torrent, threatening to

unhinge everything anchored down. Leaves spiral to the ground, but I can't hear them. And even if I could, I couldn't stop their demise.

In the quiet of my afternoon, a knock at my front door ends the day's silence.

I open it to Emory Chance, face afluster, eyes telling a story I cannot understand.

"Can you be married to a dead man?" she asks.

"Let's sit on the porch," I tell her.

She slides slender hands down the legs of her blue jeans. "He was fixin' to marry me. He asked me once." She reveals a simple gold ring, the ring she's shown me several times this week — a symbol of her confusion and a testimony to her grief.

I look at Emory, her blonde hair so much like Daisy's, though the past months have made her old, with tiny lines that crease around her downturned mouth. She smells of smoke, but her eyes don't hold fire anymore. It's a strange thing to me, and should be to you, that Emory has recently become my closest friend on this earth, because standing in our midst is that terrible truth of her affair with my husband.

I wonder if Hap still loves her, still sees the beauty beneath the lines, behind the smoke. Or maybe it was plain, undecorated lust.

"I said no." She sighs then, like she's letting out every hurt she's ever felt into the cool Defiance air. She owes her every breath to a man named Hixon, who rescued her from herself, hauling her from a burning church, though I'm sure she scratched and scraped at the earth as he pulled her from the fire's destruction.

She wanted to die.

And he, saint that he was, wanted to marry her.

“You said no. Now you regret it. I say give it to - Jesus. He keeps our grief. Holds it.” The words feel like sandpaper on my tongue, the abrasive shaving my taste buds.

Head in her hands, she grapples her skull with thin fingers. “He loved Jesus so much. Me, I’m restless. Loving folks, Jesus in particular, doesn’t come easily for me. Religion feels more like a trap.”

“Jesus said the truth will set you free.” The word *truth* slips out of my mouth like preferred vocabulary, like I’m accustomed to telling the truth with every sentence. But me saying “truth” is its own lie.

“Freedom.” She says the word like it’s Moon Pies on a high unreachable shelf of the Piggly Wiggly.

“He will bring it, but it’s never easy to grasp or understand. God gives His freedom and love like a mystery.”

Emory hushes in and out. I know because I see her breath turn to mist. She looks at me. “Do you ever feel you deserve love like that?”

“No,” I say. I don’t deserve anything but rage. Certainly not affection. They say folks define their relationship to God with how their daddy treated them, but my daddy was benevolent. It’s Hap I see in the Trinity now.

She stares at me, examines my face. “Has he been at you again?”

I shake my head, hoping tears won’t bother my eyelids. Hap is adept at hurting me so it doesn’t show now that the elders and deacons got a sneak peek into his “home issues.” He kicks me in the gut like he did this morning, below my ribcage. I see myself crumpled on the kitchen floor, grabbing at breath.

“Ouisie?”

I shake my head. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not the marrying type.” Emory holds herself. She shivers too. She pets her gold ring. “I loved him,” she whispers — the quietest declaration of love I’ve heard, yet the loudest. “But I never told him. And now he’ll be scattered atop the earth with so many unspoken words hovering above the ground.”

With those hopeless words filling the space between us, Hap pulls into the driveway. My heart grows colder than the December afternoon. Emory gives me a frightened look as Hap opens the door to his Chevy, a smile etched into his pastor face. “Well,” he says. “Look here.”

“I’ll see you later.” Emory haunts each stair, barely touching the risers.

Hap approaches her, puts up his hand. “What’s that?” He points at the gold ring on her left index finger.

“Hixon asked her to marry him.” I raise my voice when I say it, then cough, hoping he won’t notice.

Hap stiffens. His teeth leave his smile, replaced by a tight-lipped grin. He sighs. “That’s one I never pictured, to tell you the truth. Coffee and cream mixed together in Defiance, Texas? It’s not the Almighty’s plan.”

Emory stops, turns and looks Hap square in the face. “I always thought cream tendered the coffee. The coffee’s the better for it, wouldn’t you say? Or do you like yours black?”

Hap keeps his smile, shoves his hands into his dress pants pockets. “You know folks around here don’t like the races mixing.”

“Since when have I cared about what Defiance thinks,

Hap Pepper?” Words that only a woman not married to Hap could say. I wonder if he’s enamored with her sass. Oh dear Lord, I hope not.

“There are norms, Emory. Societal standards that keep a town running smoothly. I’m just saying you and Hixon would’ve been in for some ugly behavior.”

Emory laughs. “I’m touched by your concern.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” His biceps twitch beneath his white pressed shirt. I suck in my breath. I want to say something, anything, to diffuse Hap, but the fuse has been lit, and I hear its crackling spark. The sizzling burns my voice clear away.

“I best be going.” Emory turns, seemingly unaware of what she’s ignited.

Hap grabs her arm.

She jerks it away. “You make your point well.” She briskly walks away before I can beg her to stay.

We are left to stand on the cold porch, anger roaring between us like a campfire baptized with gasoline. Sissy will be home soon. Hap won’t have time to take his fury out on me in the next seven minutes, so he looks at me with those secret-holding eyes. I capture a snapshot of his gaze for later examination in my memory, for one of those days the headache plagues me, because for a moment I see the hint of the man I first married, the reason I stay and don’t run one thousand miles away.

“I’m hungry.” He swallows.

“I’ll make us a snack.” I open the door, feel the warmth of our house, and thank God for Hap’s hunger and Sissy’s imminent arrival. That’s enough grace for me today. And I guess I don’t deserve much more.

In the kitchen, I watch Hap’s Adam’s apple move up and down his neck, note his broad shoulders, his bur-

gundy patterned tie, the way his pants belt at the waist
precisely at hole number three, how his pant legs kiss
perfectly shined shoes.

Her shoes enticed the man.

The rough leather straps crudely tacked to the bottom of an old rubber tire that'd been annihilated for the sake of sandals.

He watched her tanned feet from the underbrush, the way her toes struggled to keep the too-large sandals anchored there. Something in that moment, the snap of a twig or the trigger of a grenade, ignited him to reach through the humid air. Forced his strong grip around the girl's ankle.

She screamed.

But the man silenced her with a firm palm around her mouth and nose. Her chest rose and fell to the sound of birds in the sky above him, circling as if they knew. She wrestled and twisted before her eyes blanked and lolled back into her head. When Death limped her, he laid her on the green earth, taking off each sandal like a trophy.

He left her there, staring at the sky, at the birds, at the world. While he walked one thousand paces away holding two rubber-soled sandals.