

Beneath the Splendor

Jami Taylor

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Chapter One

Young Mary had only known Mrs. Elizabeth Carawan for a month when she left her mother's side in Craven County to be a servant in the Carawan household. They traveled by boat up Pamlico Sound along the green shores of North Carolina under the warm summer sun. An occasional faint breeze swept across the still waters, but it was never enough to cool the air around them, much less disturb the wide straw bonnet on Mrs. Carawan's head. Still, she persistently tugged and tightened its yellow bow under her chin anyway.

The mad-dog call of a blue heron standing amid the reeds sounded more like a warning than a welcome on their way into Rose Bay where Mrs. Carawan's husband waited on the dock, the warped and weathered planks beneath his boots. He was pleased to see his wife and held out his hand to help her navigate down the boat's narrow ramp as he greeted her. "Welcome home, Mrs. Carawan. I am glad to see that you had a safe journey."

She was painfully polite in her reply. "You needn't have come. You could have sent Sawyer or simply had Seth come on his own."

At the mention of his name, Reverend Carawan's most trusted slave Seth tilted his broad tan hat in Mrs. Carawan's direction and began unloading luggage from the boat and loading into the back of the green-and-black carriage, all while pretending not to hear the Reverend admonish his wife for making such a remark.

"Don't be ridiculous, my dear. I couldn't possibly send anyone in my place." He then explained that his nephew Sawyer had already returned to work on the farm in Swan Quarter earlier that day anyway. "Besides," he added, "it would have been unsuitable to send someone in my place to retrieve you after you've been away for so long. Is it too difficult to imagine that I wanted to greet you myself after feeling your absence so deeply? It is not an imposition, and you mustn't suggest otherwise."

He looked at his wife with such intensity that Mary envied her for it, but no look of admiration crossed Mrs. Carawan's face. She gave no indication at all that she was pleased to see him as well or that she cared one iota for his attention.

What a terribly cold wife she must be not to show him any affection in return, Mary thought. After all, Mrs. Carawan was a rather plain woman with

dull brown hair and nothing notable about her features or figure. How could she not be delighted to come home to such a husband? He was confident and dashing with a clean-shaven face and a generous smile. His eyes were bright blue, a shade so light they were impossible not to notice, and his thick dark hair was stylishly swept to one side beneath his silk hat. He was tall, considerably more so than other men, and his broad shoulders were expertly fitted into his tailored summer coat. Mary was captivated.

When he finally noticed her standing there, gawking at him, he tipped his hat and bowed his head in a gentlemanly fashion and said to her, "Good day to you, young miss." He couldn't resist feeling a little playful at the sight of her innocent wonder. "I am Reverend Carawan. And who might you be?"

She deserved no such formality from a man like him, not only a gentleman but a man of God, though he didn't seem the sort, and a small giggle escaped her lips. Mrs. Carawan shot her a severe look of disapproval, so she swallowed her silliness and stood there awkwardly in her faded gray dress and worn shoes, looking much younger than her twelve years. She nervously tugged at her blonde hair and attempted to speak, but her mouth was too dry to mutter anything audible. Her cheeks flushed, and this amused him even more.

"Her name is Mary," Mrs. Carawan answered for her. "She is the daughter of Cousin Cora's housekeeper. She has been allowed to work in the house alongside her mother, but now she has come to attend to me. I did not send a letter to you in advance about hiring her, and I apologize for it, but the decision to bring her was made only hours before my departure." She guided Mary to stand in front of her husband so he could inspect her and added quietly, "Cousin Cora felt it would be best for the girl to make her own way now, and I'm happy to say that she has some experience caring for children as well."

Reverend Carawan had been smiling, but upon the mention of children, his lips drew into a harsh thin line and his jaw tightened. He stood there for a moment glaring at his wife with increasing aggravation, and at first, Mrs. Carawan's posture stiffened in defiance, but she eventually diverted her eyes away from his and said nothing more about it.

Mary had never heard of Carawan children mentioned before and had no idea how many she would be expected to care for or how many bed linens she would be expected to wash. In all honesty, she had more experience with the latter. She looked down at her raw hands, the sting of the washboard still fresh on her cracked knuckles. Mrs. Cora Wallace had five children, and Mary had

been expected to clean up after all of them. This wasn't quite the same as *looking* after them, as Mrs. Carawan had implied.

She was tempted to ask the Reverend and Mrs. Carawan how many children they had, but she was in no position to ask, and even if she had been, it was obviously not the time to do so. Reverend Carawan still glared harshly at his wife, and Mary thought he must be extremely displeased with her for having hired a white girl without consulting him first. When Mr. Wallace had agreed to hire Mary's mother with her in tow instead of buying a negro woman, Mrs. Wallace had called him a fool right in front of them. "This woman and her child will end up costing us more," she had said. Mary's mother told her that she didn't blame Mrs. Wallace one bit because she was right, but she was thankful for the chance to work just the same.

"Is that all of the luggage?" Reverend Carawan asked Seth.

"Yes, sir," Seth answered, holding the carriage door open. He did not look in the Reverend's direction.

Reverend Carawan once again offered a hand to his wife. His previous charm returned as he helped her into the carriage and the tension between them lessened. Even Mrs. Carawan's posture eased a bit. No one spoke of Mary's expected duties again, and Reverend Carawan commanded Seth to urge the horses forward.

"It's a beautiful day, Seth," Reverend Carawan called out. "Let's ride up to Lake Mattamuskeet, so we can survey our little piece of heaven that is Rose Bay along the way."

"Yes, sir," Seth replied from his seat at the front of the carriage. He cracked the whip, and they were off.

Mrs. Carawan wrung her gloved hands impatiently and pursed her lips. She was irritated again. The thought of an addition being made to her already-long journey did not please her. She tried to explain how she was tired and just wanted to go directly home, but Reverend Carawan would not hear of it. He was dressed for a leisurely excursion. It was a lovely day, and with Mary being new to the area, they had a perfect reason to ride up the public road before going home.

"Don't you want Mary to see Rose Bay, now that she'll be living here with us? Aren't you proud of the life I have provided for you?"

He never stopped smiling, but something in his tone silenced his wife immediately. She looked away as he spoke. It was evident that his words weren't forming into any real meaning for her; she simply heard his voice grinding along with the carriage wheels as they dug into the dirt beneath them.

"Don't be upset, my dearest," he said. "I'm not angry. I only want to enjoy a pleasant ride with my wife."

She said nothing.

Aware that he was unable to appease her, he chose to continue as if there had been no quarrel between them. He happily announced the landmarks to Mary as they drove past them, including the small estates of neighbors that lived not too far from the bay.

When he proudly pointed to his home, Pine Manor, a surge of excitement filled Mary. In contrast to the busy streets of the Wallace home in Craven, the Carawan home had no immediate neighbors. It was a bright white manor standing majestic and pristine amid a sprawling green field, a gloriously romantic landscape like the paintings in Mrs. Wallace's parlor.

Mary had dreamed of living in such a place many times over and could picture herself gliding around a dance floor and taking long walks in a garden in the arms of a fine gentleman, but the words her mother had often said crept into her thoughts. *"You better learn it now, girl. There are those whose life is handed to them on a silver platter, but that's not you. That's not us. We were meant to work for everything we have, and don't you forget it."*

It hadn't pleased her mother to say it, but Mary knew she was expected to understand and accept it. The world would never be hers for the taking, and there was no reason to waste time wishing for things to be different. But nothing her mother said kept her from desiring a different life. Mary dreamed of splendor.

The songs of cicadas rang loudly as the carriage rolled by acres of fields and farms. On one side, the land was covered in white specks of cotton stretched to the blue horizon, open and wide, and on the other, rows of bright lemon-yellow tobacco leaves waved their tiny bouquet caps toward the sun.

Reverend Carawan nodded to a neighbor now and again, beaming from his tufted black leather seat.

The farther they went along, the fewer people they came across. The seemingly endless fields eventually gave way to clusters of trees and overgrown grass where an odd-looking building stood in isolation, too narrow in the front for anything but a slim red door beneath a steeply pitched roof. A large cast-iron bell suspended from it.

"That's our local schoolhouse," Reverend Carawan explained to Mary. "I helped to have a school instituted not long after establishing myself here, and our schoolteacher Mr. West holds a permanent position in Rose Bay, unlike the surrounding counties. The children here receive a fine education." And then he

winked and said, "Not as fine as the education they learn from my sermons, of course."

He smiled so wide that his eyes crinkled at the corners, and Mary's cheeks flushed red again as they continued on their way, enjoying the smell of earth and salt marsh emanating from the warm breeze until it abruptly stilled. As they drove through the woods, the shade of towering trees grew thicker and darker until one tree was barely distinguishable from another, all but two pines near the road that wound together in a determined embrace.

Reverend Carawan noticed Mary's fascination with them and had Seth stop the carriage. "They are known as the Twisted Pines," he said, gesturing toward them. "They mark the end of my property line in Rose Bay. Everything from here back to the house on this side of the public road is mine. We don't know what could have made them grow in such a way." Then he leaned closer to Mary and in a low voice said, "But I've heard it said that they watch over young lovers."

Mrs. Carawan was quick to disapprove, so he apologized for any impropriety on his part, but the grin he flashed at Mary said he wasn't sorry at all.

Mary did her best to ignore them both as she was used to having done with Mr. and Mrs. Wallace and continued to admire the pines. Exposed roots spread across the ground like fingers digging into the dirt, and two individual trunks repeatedly wrapped around each other toward the heavens where their thin branches united and eventually vanished into the green canopy above.

One of the horses whinnied and shook his head, and only then did Mary notice the cicadas had grown eerily silent. Despite the shade, the air felt heavy and moist. All was quiet until the carriage started up again, and then only the clapping of horses' hooves and the turning of wheels could be heard on the path through the dense woods.

A few miles down the road and around the bend, a clearing emerged. A stark-white egret waded among the tall marsh grass that surrounded the water Reverend Carawan called Lake Mattamuskeet. The still waters stretched out before them, deep green sheets of algae floating across a vast reflection of blue-and-pink sky. Trees peppered the shoreline in the distance and birds swirled overhead. A small ferryboat bobbed lightly in the water, tethered to the end of a long, battered deck.

One could get lost in the beauty of this place, but it was getting late and the time had come to turn around and make their way back down the same road towards home.

As they rode past the schoolhouse again, the day's session was ending, and children were leaving with books and slates in hand. They were happy to be free from school but lingered a little longer than necessary in the schoolyard, knowing their evening chores waited for them before dinner. Mr. West was an older man with slick gray hair. He stood just outside of the red door and waved in the direction of the carriage, so Reverend Carawan acknowledged him with a nod.

Mrs. Carawan seemed fascinated with the children, watching them as they ran and played. She waved and spoke to them when they approached, making them promise to work hard in their studies and be helpful and good at home. Their smiling replies to her showed a genuine fondness, and it was evident that this wasn't the first time she had stopped to dote on them. One of the little girls asked for a kiss on the cheek, which Mrs. Carawan gleefully provided.

When it was time to go, Mrs. Carawan's expression instantly turned melancholy. This didn't go unnoticed by her husband. He placed his hand on hers, but she moved away from him and shifted uncomfortably in her seat. She was tired, she reminded him. She had said so when they had first arrived home from Craven.

Not another word was said as they rode past the workers in the fields, laboring under a cloudless sky. Cows grazed near a white picket fence that ran alongside the road in front of the Carawan estate, and the sound of cicadas filled the air again.

Seth pulled the horses to a stop and proceeded to take Mrs. Carawan's luggage into the house. The wind blew softly over the wide porch, sweeping small pink flowers from a nearby crepe myrtle over the bright white floorboards that creaked under Seth's feet as he navigated his way through the front door.

Mrs. Carawan expressed her desire to enjoy a brief walk so she could stretch her legs after such a long journey. She asked Mary to accompany her. They walked quietly along the fence near the road, down which Mrs. Carawan gazed longingly. Perhaps she was looking to see if any children would walk by while they were there. She reached down and ran her fingertips across the grass, searching carefully. Finally, she plucked a dark green blade out, long and fat, and held it to her mouth between her thumbs. Her pink lips formed into a small kiss, and she blew into the blade. A high-pitched whistle rang out.

Mary had never seen anyone do that before. How wonderful, she thought.

"Go ahead," Mrs. Carawan said to her. "You try it."

Mary picked her own blade, but try as she might, she could not make it whistle.

Mrs. Carawan tried to show her several times over, but each time Mary failed. This amused Mrs. Carawan. She threw her head back and laughed with her nose crinkled and her cheeks flushed pink. The sky, yellow and rose from the setting sun, glistened behind her, and for the first time, Mary realized just how lovely she was. Plain as Mrs. Carawan might seem at first, her beauty radiated from within when caught in a moment of joy.

Mary hoped she would find happiness in her new home after all, but there was one thing noticeably absent as she surveyed her surroundings. Despite Mrs. Carawan having mentioned children, there were no children to be found, save for a few stone lambs in the family plot under a large elm tree.

Chapter Two

Over the years, Mary watched as Mrs. Carawan desperately tried to please her husband when he was in no mood to be pleased. She had grown to love her mistress and hated to see her despair, but it was Reverend Carawan who had her adoration. In truth, she was besotted with him. In the seven years she had worked for the Carawan family, he had never failed to show her kindness. She could see that Mrs. Carawan suffered in the marriage, but so did he, and she felt sorry for them both.

"I look dreadful," Mrs. Carawan said as Mary stood behind her and placed a sapphire-studded comb in her carefully curled hair. "I'm in no condition to host a dinner party this evening."

"I think you look stunning," Mary said, though she knew very well that Mrs. Carawan looked tired and pale. The endless strain of a barren marriage had aged her. Her eyes had dulled, and her hair had grayed too soon.

"The Masons have already arrived, I gather?" Mrs. Carawan asked, pinching and rubbing her cheeks in front of the mirror, hoping to arouse a hint of color.

"Yes, ma'am. They arrived first, but others soon followed."

Mrs. Carawan looked unsettled. She was running late, which was entirely inappropriate, but she had been so ill earlier that afternoon it had been necessary for her to rest before getting ready.

Mary helped her slip on her satin gloves and continued to assure her of how beautiful she looked as she buttoned them.

"You do not speak the truth, but it is done with a pure heart, so I thank you for it," Mrs. Carawan said. "Come down after the guests leave. I will have Cook save some dessert for you."

Afterward, Mary could think of little else besides the sweet treat. Even the stifling heat that penetrated the night did not deter her desire for it. At nineteen years of age, she still loved when Mrs. Carawan promised her something special, and just as she had done since arriving in Rose Bay at the tender age of twelve, she sat in great anticipation near the top of the stairs while listening to the Carawans entertain their guests.

Mrs. Carawan played the piano for them at the encouragement of her husband. She played beautifully. Mary had often desired to practice under her tutelage, but she never summoned the nerve to ask. It was too mortifying to think that Mrs. Carawan might recoil from such an impertinence and feel obligated to put her back in her place. It was best not to ask at all. Their implied friendship was a delicate balance to maintain and consisted mostly of Mrs. Carawan speaking to her as a friend when she desired it and Mary remembering that she was never to assume any familiarity.

The guests clapped enthusiastically when Mrs. Carawan's playing concluded. Mary couldn't see the parlor from where she sat, but she imagined Mrs. Carawan standing in her beautiful pink gown and curtsying in reply, blushing while thanking her guests for their appreciation of her talent.

Mary dreamt of being allowed to attend a party, and perhaps being asked to play as well. She often practiced when alone, and even though she wasn't as accomplished as Mrs. Carawan, she liked to think she played well enough. However, she wouldn't be able to wear her ladies-maid dress if she were to attend a party such as this. She would have to wear something stunning, like another one of Mrs. Carawan's evening dresses – the one Miss Edna Moore had made for her, powder-blue with layers of white lace down the sleeves. That one would do nicely. Miss Edna was a free colored woman and was known in Rose Bay and throughout all of Hyde County for her skills as a seamstress. If Mary had a dress made by her, it would be beautiful indeed. She would wear white silk gloves with it and play something sweet but sad on the piano, something that would make the men think of love and the women cry.

"What are you doing?" Reverend Carawan asked, appearing at the bottom of the stairs and startling her. He leaned on the banister and smiled at having caught her in a daydream. The deep blue of his tailcoat brightened the blue in his eyes, which glinted mischievously in the dancing light of the candelabras. Her embarrassment amused him. "Mrs. Carawan mentioned putting aside some dessert for you this evening," he said.

He was holding a delicate dessert glass filled with strawberries and cream, and Mary's awkwardness was immediately replaced with pure joy. She had not had strawberries and cream in what seemed like forever and bounded down the stairs in childlike anticipation.

But just as she reached him, he took a spoonful into his mouth.

"It's good," he said, swallowing a luscious strawberry. "Would you like some?"

He licked the spoon right in front of her and quietly chuckled.

She felt foolish thinking the dessert had been for her. It was cruel of him to mislead her. She did her best not to pout and turned to walk back up the stairs, but he caught her by the arm and held her there.

“Don’t be angry. I’m just teasing you.” He pulled her closer, holding a spoonful of cream up to her mouth. “Try it. It’s delicious.”

A lull in the chattering from the parlor made her nervous, but the Reverend assured her that the guests and his wife were still preoccupied. A burst of laughter and a jubilant tune from the piano soon proved him right. She tried to take the spoon, but he refused to give it up.

“If you want some, you’ll have to let me feed it to you,” he goaded her.

For an instant, she was reminded of when Mr. Wallace had crept into her room the night before she left Craven County. The smell of whiskey had lingered on his breath as he whispered in the dark, *“I can’t find your mother, so you’ll have to do.”*

Nothing had happened. Her mother had discovered him there. Mary could still remember the fire-iron tapping against her mother’s skirt and the anger in her voice when she said, *“She’s too young and not part of our agreement. You will never have her. Never.”*

Perhaps Mary should be as afraid now as she had been then, but Reverend Carawan was nothing like fat old Mr. Wallace. He was beautiful and clever... and persistent.

She considered walking away, but the air was warm and stifling, and the sweet smell of strawberries and cream lingered in the heaviness of it. When she finally relinquished, he dripped the cream slowly into her mouth and spread it across her parted lips. Some rolled down her chin, and the moment she used her fingers to catch it, he grabbed her arm and wrapped his lips around her fingertips. Her heart pounded, her breathing quickened, and goosebumps covered her arms. This was the man of her dreams standing before her, twirling his tongue softly around her fingertips. If only he would ask her to dance, she would surely be lost to him, but dreams never last for long and the sound of footsteps coming toward them filled her with shame.

“How long do you plan to deprive our guests of your company?” Mrs. Carawan asked her husband.

“I had no intention of depriving anyone of my company,” Reverend Carawan answered, licking his fingers. “I was simply bringing the dessert to Mary, as you intended.”

“How kind of you,” she said politely, but her tone was sharp. “However, our guests require your attention. The men have begun a heated debate

regarding President Van Buren and the Whigs, and the ladies and I are in no mood to hear about their qualms concerning the stability of the Union. Besides, I had already asked Cook to set some dessert aside for Mary to enjoy after our company departs for the evening. Neither of us needed to feel compelled to bring it to the girl during our party. I merely mentioned it to you earlier in passing conversation. It was not a request you were meant to fulfill."

The Reverend could have said that Cook gave it to him to bring to Mary, but that would have been too obvious a lie. Cook never said anything to anyone. Not a word. Not even to Seth.

Their forced formality created a tension as burdensome as the heat, but Mrs. Carawan was genuinely polite when she bid Mary good night. Perhaps she had not seen anything and was just disappointed by her husband's absence when guests were present. That was what Mary hoped anyway as she hurried to her room, leaving the dessert behind. Her desire for it had vanished completely.

The sound of Seth shouting throughout the house late the next morning awoke Mary with a start. She saw nothing outside of her window or in the hallway when she creaked open her door to peer out, at least not until Reverend Carawan burst from his bedroom. He ran past her, hastily putting on his waistcoat atop an untucked shirt.

"Get dressed, Mary. I may need you," he commanded.

Mary did as she was told, scolding herself for taking too long to untie the knotted ribbons in her corset. She shouldn't have thrown it so carelessly on the chair the night before.

By the time she had dressed, the house had fallen quiet and there was no sign of Reverend Carawan or Seth anywhere. She should have checked on Mrs. Carawan as she would normally have done, but the Reverend had said that he needed her, and she wanted to be ready.

The morning air was almost unbearably hot. She could only imagine what it would feel like by that afternoon. She pulled back the summer lace curtains in each of the downstairs rooms and opened the windows.

A rider was approaching from the public road, so Mary headed outside and down the path to the white gate where she could see that it was Reverend Carawan returning. His black horse glistened in the early morning sun from

having been ridden hard, and even though it still snorted from its previous efforts, its pace was now slow and steady.

Reverend Carawan was cradling a young girl; her legs dangled listlessly over the side of his horse. Seth took the reins and wiped the heavy perspiration from his brow. Reverend Carawan descended from his saddle in one quick motion, never disturbing the child in his arms.

"What has happened to her?" Mary asked, rushing to his side.

"She had a seizure in school this morning and slammed her head against the floor. They have been unable to awaken her," he explained. "The schoolmaster said the child has no history of seizures to his knowledge, but I have sent for Dr. Woodbury to learn more. Until then, we must look after her."

"And her mother? Does she know?"

"Her mother is dead, and her father has yet to be found this morning." His tone was bitter and filled with unspoken accusations. "This is why the schoolmaster sent for me." He then turned and said to Seth, "Go to Paul's Store and see if you can find the drunkard Mr. Slade there and bring him back here. Tell the men I sent you, and if anyone gives you grief, be sure to tell them they will answer to me." His voice quickly shifted from authoritative to compassionate when he said to Mary, "Please come with me."

With the young girl still in his arms, he bounded up the stairs and into the house and carefully placed her on the bed in the downstairs guest room. "Get her undressed and cleaned up before tucking her into bed. Place a cool cloth on her forehead and speak to her to see if you can rouse her. Her name is Faith. We do not want her to sleep. She must wake up and stay awake for the remainder of the day and night. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Mary said. "I will not leave her side."

"You will not be expected to care for her on your own. I will look after her as well. We will take turns. You needn't be completely responsible."

"I haven't seen to Mrs. Carawan yet. She will want to know about the child." Mary was certain Mrs. Carawan would want to oversee caring for the girl.

"Mrs. Carawan is not feeling well. It is best not to disturb her yet. You may look in on her this afternoon to see if she requires anything from you." He moved to within inches of Mary's face and looked directly into her eyes. "Until then, I need you, Mary."

He said "*I need you, Mary*" with such conviction that Mary's knees weakened beneath her. The memory of his mouth around her fingers the night before trembled through her. Afraid to look at him again for fear of revealing

how she really felt about him, she concentrated her attentions on the child, but when he left quietly without saying another word, her longing was so strong it felt as though her heart were being strangled in her chest.

A stream of hours can be so inconsistent, seeming to last a few moments or an eternity in equal measures of time depending on the situation. On this occasion, every hour felt like the end of a long day that ticked into the next without rest. Still, Mary did not leave the child's side. Poor little Faith found it difficult to speak. The words only formed into broken sounds. Pain and aggravation often overcame her. She cried, and at times, Mary cried with her. Through guesses and nods, Mary managed to learn that she was eight years old and liked going to school more than anything else.

Dr. Woodbury visited and examined Faith through the round lenses of his spectacles that sat high on the bridge of his long nose. He believed Faith had received a severe blow to the head prior to having a seizure at school. It was his opinion that the first injury may have been what caused the seizure. He shaved part of her head and bled the site of her wounds, recommending that she not be moved for at least one night. He also ordered rest for her, but quietly expressed his doubts about any hope of recovery. The Reverend did not agree. He insisted that Faith be kept awake for the remainder of the day. Greater forces could be called upon to heal her, he believed.

Once the doctor and Reverend Carawan left the room, all was quiet again. Faith's lips were pale, and even though she shivered, her skin felt hot to the touch. Mary searched the corner cabinet for one of the heavier blankets that had been stored away for the summer. She shook one out, the smell of cedar spilling out into the room, and after spreading it over Faith, she tucked it around her to provide as much warmth as possible. When she went to close the cabinet door, she noticed a stack of books in the back. Sharing a story seemed like a pleasant way to pass the time and help Faith stay awake. More than ever, Mary wished she had learned to read. She slid the books out all at once, and they were heavy in her arms. One by one, she flipped through them. She had seen many like them before at the Wallace home, but was never allowed in the room when their tutor came. They were children's books kept in immaculate condition. Her heart sank at the thought of Mrs. Carawan or the Reverend buying books for children who had never lived to see them, and she hesitated to take them from where they had long been buried behind blankets and linens,

but there was one that must have been looked over many times. The binding was bent, and the first page had been torn, making it seem less sacred somehow. However, it was mostly words and didn't have enough pictures, so Mary set it aside and examined another one with pictures of birds. There was a raven and an owl, and even a robin holding a bow and arrow that seemed the best choice. She lit the lamp on the table and settled into the chair near Faith and told stories about the birds as she turned the colorful pages.

She had made up quite a few stories by the time Seth returned with Mr. Slade, who was complaining loudly outside on his way up to the house. When Faith heard her father, she began to cry, howl, and babble incoherently. The look on her face was one of terror. Mary tried to calm her, but the child was inconsolable, so she ran for help and found the Reverend standing at the open front door with his back straight and his arms flexed at his sides. When he stepped out onto the porch, Mary followed him, but Seth removed his hat and motioned for her to move away quickly from the men.

"Do you know why I had you brought here?" Reverend Carawan asked Mr. Slade, his eyes dark, his jaw clenched.

Mr. Slade staggered as though the floorboards were shifting beneath his feet. "Damn fool of a girl got herself into some trouble at school. I'm here to take her home."

"Did you hit your daughter? Did you? Hard enough in the head for her to lose consciousness?"

"I don't see how that's any of your business. I see to my own child as I see fit," Mr. Slade answered. He should have stopped there, but he was too intoxicated to quit talking when he should have. "I won't have her asking me where I've been or what I've been doing. I'm the father. I don't answer to her. She answers to me. Come asking me to account for myself. Hell yes, I hit her. Right upside the head, and then she got sick on the floor, so I hit her again. And what do you know of it? You ain't got any children--"

The force of Reverend Carawan's punch to Mr. Slade's face sent him reeling backward off the porch. He landed hard on the dirt path, right beside the lavender zinnias.

"Go home and get sober. Your daughter stays with me until I decide whether to send her home again. Meanwhile, I expect to see you in church on Sunday – and every Sunday after that. You will repent for your sins and allow the Lord to show you a different way... the right way. Children are a blessing, and you would do well to remember that."

"I think you broke my nose!" Mr. Slade cried out, blood oozing down his face.

"Good. It will heal crooked, and every time you look in a mirror, it will remind you of the crooked path you once chose to follow. But from this point forward, you will do right by that child or so help me God, I will break every bone in your body."

No one helped Mr. Slade get up nor offered him any assistance when he couldn't get the white gate at the end of the path to open. Even after he fell several times on the road, Seth was told to leave him be and Mary was instructed to go back inside.

"We've seen enough of him for today," Reverend Carawan said, following closely behind Mary and insisting on sitting with Faith for the remainder of the day and through the night.

When he saw the book that Mary had been sharing with her, he said nothing but lovingly placed it back into the cabinet with the other books tucked neatly under another folded blanket. He then took a seat near Faith. She reached out her little hand, and he took it in his own as he began to read from his Bible instead, his voice low and soothing.

"Then were there brought unto him little children, that he should put hands on them, and pray and the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, 'Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.' And he laid hands on them and departed thence."

Chapter Three

When Reverend Carawan awoke to the sound of a sweet little voice asking for something to eat, his joy filled the entire house. He thanked God for answering his prayers and called for Mary to join him in witnessing the miracle. But it was evident the girl had suffered irreversible damage. She vomited within moments of eating, and her speech quickly declined into a barely audible slur. Dr. Woodbury was summoned again, and though his prognosis was a more positive one than before, he was adamant that Faith would never again function independently. The damage to her brain was severe, and no amount of praying would change that fact. She would need constant care.

The doctor was still talking when the Reverend abruptly walked out of the room and left the house. He could be heard requesting the saddling of his horse from outside of the open windows. Dr. Woodbury, perplexed by the Reverend's sudden departure, looked down from his round spectacles to Mary for an explanation. She had none to give him. When she heard Mrs. Carawan calling for her, she was glad for the opportunity to excuse herself, but had no more left the room when she realized Mrs. Carawan might benefit from seeing Dr. Woodbury since she had been so unwell for days. She asked him to wait and rushed upstairs.

"No," Mrs. Carawan said when she approached her sitting near the window. "I do not need a doctor. I'll be fine. I would like something to eat, though. And I'm cold. Has the weather finally taken a turn?"

Beads of perspiration decorated Mary's skin. It was far too warm for Mrs. Carawan to think it otherwise unless she was terribly ill, but she would not admit to feeling poorly and insisted the doctor be sent on his way.

"Where has the Reverend gone?" she asked, staring out the window.

"I don't know," Mary said, placing a shawl around Mrs. Carawan's shoulders. "He never said a word. He just left."

"Yes," Mrs. Carawan said shivering. "I watched him ride away. Send for Miss Edna. I need to see her before he returns."

Mary couldn't imagine why Mrs. Carawan would need a seamstress, being that she was barely able to stand, much less get dressed, but Mary did what she was told.

It was twilight and the silhouette of the Reverend's stallion against the crimson-and-violet horizon was followed closely by a beleaguered mare pulling a cart. The grating of its ill-fitted wheels intruded upon the familiar evening sounds of crickets and frogs and the cooing and clacking of marsh hens.

Mary watched and waited for them to approach. A warm breeze drifting across the porch offered little comfort from the sweltering heat that refused to retreat with the sun. How she longed for the reprieve of autumn.

"Get the child dressed," he said to Mary, sliding from his horse. "She leaves tonight with her grandmother."

An elderly woman took his hand and carefully descended from the cart. Her shoes were worn and the lines on her face were deep, but her smile was kind. "Take me to my granddaughter," she said. "I wish to see her."

It was a relief to see how loving Mrs. Smith was with Faith. A granddaughter she had never met from a daughter she had lost the day Faith was born. It had not taken long for Reverend Carawan to find her in a small house on Jack's Neck, and even less time for her to gather what she owned in preparation for her move to Hyde County. She would live in the Slade home and see to it that Mr. Slade set his life on the right path. If not, Reverend Carawan would be notified, and the matter would be dealt with accordingly. Everything had been arranged in the span of a day.

But exhausted irritability emanated from Reverend Carawan rather than satisfaction. He inquired as to Faith's condition but did not ask about his wife's. He wanted to know if there had been any visitors, but since she had been asked not to say anything, she did not mention that Miss Edna had spent most of the day alone in the room with Mrs. Carawan. She hadn't been allowed to enter the room, but since she had been busy taking care of Faith, she was relieved Mrs. Carawan had someone looking after her.

Mary was disappointed when the Reverend retreated to his room for the night, even though she had no right to expect anything more. It was just that his return home had somehow felt as if it belonged to her. She had not waited on the porch out of curiosity for where he had been, but for him alone. Knowing he had not come home for her did not lessen the heartache she felt

from his indifference toward her. She waited before following him up the stairs, the desire to seek his attention burning shamefully beneath her skin. It would be best not to see him again until the feeling could be repressed, but Mrs. Carawan would need help getting ready for bed, so Mary reluctantly made her way to their bedroom door. The voices she heard through it, however, stopped her from knocking.

"I know we have nothing to fear this time. I just know it." Mrs. Carawan was pleading with him.

"You have promised me children before," he said. "So many times, you have promised me. So many times, you have told me that it will be fine. Yet here we are. Just the two of us. The nursery stands empty while the number of graves in our family plot continues to grow. After all this time, I still do not have an heir to my name."

"I'll take better care of myself this time. I'll get more rest." Mrs. Carawan sounded desperate. "Was I right to tell you? Are you happy?"

"I am doubtful."

"You will be happier once the child is born. We will be happier," Mrs. Carawan said, sounding almost convinced of it herself.

Footsteps crossing the room caused Mary to back farther into the upstairs hallway. She didn't want to be caught eavesdropping.

"Are you leaving? Now? Tonight?" Mrs. Carawan asked.

"Yes," Reverend Carawan said. "I have a prior engagement."

Reverend Carawan was not leaving on business. He was so unfortunate in his marriage, he often turned to other women. This was a widely known secret, although no one ever dared to discuss it, much less confront him about it. As long as his infidelities remained discreet, there was no reason to bring public humiliation to Mrs. Carawan or her family. She probably knew as well; nonetheless, he made his excuses as to why he must leave for the night.

Mary's heart sank as she listened. There was a disgraceful consolation knowing he was unhappy with Mrs. Carawan. Thinking of him happy in someone else's arms made her sick. What a wretched woman she was to think such things.

"Please don't go. We can make things right again if only you are willing," Mrs. Carawan begged.

"You accuse me of being the reason for our troubles?" There was anger in his voice now.

"I'm only saying that you need to be here..." She didn't finish. There was a brief scuffle, after which she wept.

"I'll leave you to think on that some more. And while you are at it, maybe you should learn to show your husband a little more respect. It is not your job to teach me what is needed in our marriage." Then he quoted from the Bible, "'I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.'"

After he stormed out of the house, Mary went to Mrs. Carawan. It wasn't Mary's place to speak on intimate matters, and any attempt to do so would be reprehensible. She said nothing about the argument but went about getting Mrs. Carawan ready for bed, as was their usual routine.

"It isn't his fault, you know." Mrs. Carawan's voice broke when she spoke. "His mother was cruel to him, and he suffers terribly from what some call black moods. He grows dark inside and doesn't know his own temper."

Mary simply nodded and continued to brush her mistress's hair, watched closely by Mrs. Carawan in the reflection of her dressing table's mirror.

"I am not discouraged." Mrs. Carawan wrapped her wounded pride around words of advice. "Marriage can be a challenge, but it's also a woman's honor and privilege, especially for women of my standing. Obviously, it would be difficult for someone in your position to marry well. You know how it is."

Mrs. Carawan's comments were an obvious slight against her, and for the first time since arriving in Rose Bay, Mary felt alone and homesick, betrayed by someone she loved and admired. She tried to calm her hurt feelings by counting the brushstrokes as she ran the soft bristles through Mrs. Carawan's hair.

Mary didn't respond, but Mrs. Carawan continued belittling her. "I've seen the way he looks at you," she said, glaring up at Mary through the mirror. "And even the way you look at him at times." Her tone was increasingly vicious. "Stupid girl. You are young and vibrant, but you could never be good enough for him. You have no family. You come from nothing, and he would treat you no better than dirt on his boots. He would shake you off at the door."

Mary knew exactly what she meant. She wasn't the sort of girl men like Reverend Carawan treated with respect, much less married. She didn't come from an upstanding family like Mrs. Carawan did. She was considered a servant first and a woman second. Words spoken long ago by her mother echoed in her mind, "*We were meant to work for everything we have and don't you forget it.*" She felt like she was falling into a dark well and her cheeks burned, but Mrs. Carawan wasn't finished.

"I think it might be best if we reconsider your employment here. You need to leave. It's for your own good. I'll speak to Reverend Carawan when he returns. I'm sure he can find something more fitting for you elsewhere."

Mary struggled to hold back her tears as she helped Mrs. Carawan into her nightgown. But even as she sniffled and wiped her eyes, Mrs. Carawan did not apologize nor say anything to ease the pain her words had inflicted. There was nothing to indicate that she regretted her words, and Mary did her best to scrape and claw her way back up the well, breaking the silence between them.

"Please, I have done nothing wrong. Please let me stay with you. I have nowhere else to go." Mary stuttered as she begged, reaching out to Mrs. Carawan in hopes of rekindling their bond.

Mrs. Carawan pushed her away and scolded her, but then she clutched at her belly and cried out.

"What is it?" Mary asked, taking her mistress by the arm and trying to steady her. "Are you not well?"

Mrs. Carawan tried to answer, but before she could say a word, she doubled over in agony again. This time she fell to her knees.

Mary had witnessed poor Mrs. Carawan lose children, unborn and stillborn, more times than she cared to count, but the sorrow she felt for her each time never diminished. Even though Mary had feelings for the Reverend, her love for Mrs. Carawan remained steadfast. Even now after Mrs. Carawan had been so mean, Mary hated to see her suffer.

With much effort, she managed to get Mrs. Carawan on the bed, placing pillows behind her head and pouring a glass of water from the pitcher on the nearby table. Mrs. Carawan was able to take a few sips, but the pain grew too great, and she cried out in agony.

"Should I send Seth for Dr. Woodbury?" Mary asked, dabbing her sweat-drenched forehead.

"No," Mrs. Carawan said. "If we call the doctor, the Reverend will know something is wrong. And he mustn't know. We must have faith that this is nothing and the pain will pass."

But it didn't pass, and Mrs. Carawan writhed on the bed. As the pain grew, so did her delirium. She rambled about fear and loss, death and danger. None of it was entirely coherent to Mary, but Mrs. Carawan knew that the death of another baby would enrage her husband. She was in danger, and she was frightened.

As the night progressed, pain dissolved into blood and tears when Mrs. Carawan lost the child she had been carrying.

"Don't tell the Reverend. Not yet," she said to Mary.

"But how will you keep it from him?" Mary worried that lying to Reverend Carawan could only make things worse. "Sooner or later, he will know that you

are no longer with child. Wouldn't it be better to tell him now, before he finds out for himself and accuses you of trying to deceive him?"

Mrs. Carawan didn't answer and did her best to wipe her tears.

Mary didn't press the matter. She carefully washed the blood from Mrs. Carawan's thighs, rinsed and wrung out the cloth in a basin beside the bed, and lightly wiped and scrubbed until all traces of blood were gone from Mrs. Carawan's skin. She removed the bloody sheets from beneath her and bundled them with the stained nightgown on the floor. A clean gown was put on, slipping it over her head and helping her slide her arms into the sleeves. Her hair, damp with sweat, was quickly braided and placed over the shoulder. A fresh sheet was laid out beneath her by gently moving her legs and rolling her sore body forward and back again. This motion caused Mrs. Carawan to whimper slightly, but otherwise, she remained numbingly quiet. Mary left the remainder of the mattress exposed in order not to disturb her further. She would be able to make the bed properly once Mrs. Carawan was able to stand again, but for now, she just wanted her to rest.

"I'll wash these now and do my best to remove any trace of your loss."

Mary gathered the bloody sheets and gown in her arms.

"Just burn them," Mrs. Carawan bitterly commanded as Mary walked out of the room.

Reverend Carawan returned home the following afternoon, much earlier than anticipated, and began calling for his wife the moment he entered the front door. He continued to call for her as he walked through the house.

Mrs. Carawan didn't answer. She gripped and twisted the sheets at her chest.

"Should I tell him where to find you?" Mary asked.

"No, he'll find me soon enough." She sent Mary from the room and waited to face him alone.

He bounded up the steps, meeting Mary just outside the door.

"What is it? Tell me," he demanded. "What has happened?"

"It isn't my place. Truly it isn't." She hated that Mrs. Carawan had such terrible news for him.

"The laundry on the lines has dried, Mary. Go see to it," he said.

"Yes, sir." She immediately regretted not burning the bedding as Mrs. Carawan had requested. The stains had not come out, and the Reverend had

obviously seen them. She quickly made her way down the stairs to fetch and burn them, even though it was too late. The damage had been done.

Reverend Carawan entered the bedroom and slowly closed the door behind him.

“Why are you in bed, Elizabeth? What has happened?” Reverend Carawan already knew, but he wanted to hear her say the words.

His wife didn’t want to answer him. She had heard him send Mary outside and knew they were alone in the house. There was more irritation in his voice than compassion, and she was frightened. He persisted, though, and she didn’t want to provoke him. The news alone would be bad enough to make him angry. She finally broke down and told him.

Seeing her in a convalescent state did nothing to quell his fury. He could not stand the sight of her, and the veins in his neck tightened as he shouted at her, “For nine years you have been my wife and not produced a living child. For nine years, you have given me nothing but endless blood and dead children.”

“One child lived,” Mrs. Carawan insisted. “We must hold onto that. If we keep trying, we may yet have another like him.”

He knew she must be descending into madness to mention William, his child who had not lived to see his fourth year.

“I should never have stayed married to you,” he said. “My brother wanted you, and I should have let him have you.”

“No, you are wrong.” Mrs. Carawan slid out of bed and made her way to him, using nearby furniture to steady herself. “Your brother Greene never tried to seduce me. He loved you. He wanted you to be happy. He wanted us to be happy.”

“But we aren’t happy, are we? I have no children, no direct heirs to my name – only a sniveling nephew waiting to inherit.”

It was true that his nephew, Sawyer, would get everything if he failed to have children. Sawyer had been left in his care after being orphaned, but Reverend Carawan did not consider him a child when he arrived at the age of thirteen. He immediately had him put to work on his land in Swan Quarter. He never considered him family, and at that time, he still had hope for children of his own. That hope was quickly fading.

He turned from the window to face his wife, and she knew from the blank stare in his eyes that his mood had blackened so fiercely that it was blinding. He looked at her, but he didn't see her. She tried to back away, but it was too late. He swung only once, but with enough force to knock her to the floor, and then he shouted, "Get up! I said, get up!"

But she didn't move.

The anger felt numbing to him, a taste of blood lined his mouth. He couldn't believe Mrs. Carawan wasn't obeying him. "Get up," he said again.

Still, she didn't move from where she had fallen on the floor. She couldn't move.

He was going to make her get up – force her to bend to his will - but before he had a chance to grab her, the room grew dark and cold. A small drop of blood under the bed grew larger. It stretched out like fingers that gripped at the stained oak floor and dragged a thick, murky mass behind it until it had grown into a long and shadowy figure standing before him.

At first, Reverend Carawan couldn't believe what he was seeing. He shut his eyes and waited. When he looked again, it was hovering over him. Hollow eyes stared at him from behind a veil of black lace draped over a pallid face. It moaned long and low, caught somewhere between this world and the next. It shoved a cold decaying finger into his chest and forced him to his knees. He could feel its sharp nail cutting into his skin.

His childhood flashed before him. He had always been reprimanded for doing something terrible, saying something unholy, showing disregard for God's law. He wondered if this frightful apparition standing before him was someone familiar.

"Mother?" he asked, cowering before it, terrified.

But the spirit did not answer him.

"If that is indeed you, Mother, you must know that you do not frighten me. Not anymore. Never again." He lied through his trembling mouth and remembered one of the last things his mother had ever said to him, "*You have the devil in your bones, boy.*" He heard those words repeated as she beat him with a nail-studded board that ripped into his skin with every blow. Maybe he had deserved it, maybe he hadn't, but he'd laid her out on the ground for it just the same.

Moving to within inches of his face, the spirit's veil swept across him. A sweet pungent smell filled the air and a bitter taste lingered on his tongue. It did not feel like his mother. It was something else entirely. A shiver ran

through him, and his hairs stood on end, but then his fear turned to rage. Heat bristled beneath his skin and he braced in defiance.

"Whatever you are, whoever you are, go away and leave me alone."

In response, the spirit screeched with a voice so high and piercing it shook the windowpanes, and icy white air billowed over the Reverend. He squeezed his eyes shut and covered his ears, and in an instant, there was silence.

Light returned to the room, and everything was as it had been before, warm and clear. Reverend Carawan ran his sweaty hands through his hair and wiped tears from his eyes. Mrs. Carawan was leaning against the dresser, watching him. She was trembling. Blood marred the side of her face and matted her hair.

"Did you see...?" He started to ask if she had seen the spirit as well, but she hadn't seen anything. The look of terror on her face was for him alone.

His head throbbed. Surely, the apparition must have been a figment of his imagination, probably from too much whisky or tainted tobacco from the whore's house the night before. That was the only rational explanation. He stood up and tried to clear his mind. He drank water directly from the pitcher on the table until the last drop was gone. He widened an open window in search of less-stifling air, shooing away a crow that had landed on the sill just outside.

It was time to reconsider his wife. She came from a good family, and they could destroy everything he had ever worked for if they rallied against him, so he would need to be careful. He breathed deeply and settled into a quiet determination. He would need to stay focused on what had to be done.

"Come now," he said calmly. "Let's not quarrel anymore."

His tone meant nothing to her, as she had experienced violence behind that calm voice before. She held her arm up defensively as he reached for her, but he simply scooped her up from the floor and carried her back to bed.

"I'm sorry," she broke down at that point, weeping, but she wasn't apologizing to him. Instead, she spoke out of sorrow for another child lost and for the miserable life she had been given. She had wanted something better.

The bed weighed down as he curled against her, wrapping his arms around her, hot and constricting. How different it could have been for them both if he had loved her as promised. How sad it was that a lifetime of fear, anger, and regret now filled them both.

Reverend Carawan lay beside her, holding her in his arms until she drifted to sleep, and as he did, he thought of nothing but how to be rid of her.

End of Sample