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The Persuasiveness of Point of View

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## Abstract

An obsession with the point of view, POV, as a craft element, drove the impetus of this research. The artist's statement highlights a love affair with escapism through the written word in fiction. The critical paper reviews evidence of the persuasiveness of point of view, POV, as a critical craft element as seen in the nuances of POV in *The Notebook* by Nicholas Sparks, *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, and *A Time to Dance* by Karen Kingsbury and in first-person testimony in journalism. While some research into POV exists for literary classics, like *Pride and Prejudice*, this thesis shows the evidence of the persuasiveness of POV to warrant formal academic research into how each type of POV can be used to entertain and engage specific audiences. The creative manuscript will leverage the styles of POV referenced in the study to deliver a later-in-life romance, *Pearls for Persephone*.

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To my chair, “Doc” Dr. Andrew L. Smith, who pushed me to produce work worthy of bearing the Liberty University name in classwork and this final thesis.

To my reader, Dr. Amanda J. Dunnagan who challenged me to articulate my concepts into a written academic paper.

I am honored to have been a part of the MFA in Creative Writing program at Liberty University where I have been challenged to improve my craft and honor God in all I say and do.

## Abbreviations

POV – Point of View

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## Artist Statement

In 1971, *Sesame Street* published a book written by Jon Stone and illustrated by Michael Smollin. *The Monster at the End of This Book: Starring Lovable, Furry Old Grover*, is the first book I can remember reading. I was born in 1982 to a poor couple from the foothills of Western North Carolina. As a child, I spoke little until the age of four, according to my parents, but I spent many hours, sitting wherever I could, flipping through books of all kinds. Emerging myself in fiction and non-fiction became a natural passion. *Grover* warned me and begged me not to turn the page, but I wanted more time with him, so I read through the book quickly, laughing all the way. I knew the story by heart because the adventure touched my heart, even as a little boy who struggled to speak.

By the time I was eighteen years old, my family had moved homes over twenty times. As a child, with each move, I was drawn deeper into stories that could take me elsewhere to enjoy adventures beyond those I was fearful of during those relocations. I remember the Pizza Hut's BOOK IT! Reading program. Our county and school librarians knew me on a first-name basis. During the fourth grade, we moved multiple times that year, but I still read over one hundred and fifty titles. I poured over astronomy books, any chapter book my parents would let me borrow, and dozens of choose-your-own-adventure books, but my appetite for turning pages through new stories was insatiable. Thankfully, I found *The Hardy Boy* mystery series and read every book our county could interlibrary exchange. I even read *The Nancy Drew* series. I was made fun of for reading "books for girls," by some of the fourth and fifth-grade bullies. I ignored them until they took a book out of my hand, and then I gave the principal a reason to call my mother and the football coach a reason to call my dad. Nobody messed with my books after that, until we moved a few weeks later to a new school.

The first book I threw across the room was *Where the Red Fern Grows*, by Wilson Rawls. We were living on the side of a mountain on a small nine-acre farm, bordered by a two-hundred-acre horse ranch and a three-hundred-acre cattle farm. It was cold, snow dusting our small block farmhouse. I was seated on the floor next to the vent where the heat would blow into the old patch-made quilt I had cloaked about me, trying to stay warm through the winter. As I turned the pages with trembling fingers, tears streamed down my rosy, red cheeks over the fictitious death of Old Dan, a redbone hunting dog. I threw the book against the wall. With my recent stint as a baseball catcher, I must have thrown that paperback with power because the noise woke my mother and father. I received a swift spanking for not taking care of borrowed property. My father did not understand why I was crying over a book. I thought I was crazy, but it turned out to be I just had a heart touched by a book. I discovered I had immersed myself in the adventures of others, but was becoming aware of the emotions that could be stirred by a carefully crafted collection of words. As the fourth grade ended, I began writing short stories in notebooks I kept to myself. If the library was running out of adventures, I would create my own. I just had the issue of dyslexia to overcome. The words on the page were sometimes missing, upside down, or turned around, and phonetically, I struggled with how words should sound. I had learned to read paragraphs multiple times to try to pick up on what I missed in the first and second passes. I thought this was how everyone else reads.

I struggled with middle school and high school. I became drawn to sports and martial arts yet maintained a light reading schedule of one or two books a month beyond my assigned readings from school and church. Tom Clancy's *Patriot Games* challenged my vocabulary and learning disability, but technothrillers entertained my intellectual mind and imagination. I hated how close the lines of text were in many of the paperbacks, so I switched to large print when I



could. *Jurassic Park*, by Michael Crichton, captured my attention and kept me re-reading paragraphs to push through the story. When I saw the film adaptation, I truly knew the book was better, even though I loved the film. I tried my hand at writing thrillers and science fiction for school assignments. The short works of fiction I would turn in were graded harshly as being too mature for my age. My creative sensibilities may have not impressed my English teachers, however they caught the attention of our church media pastor, who allowed me to do everything from writing sketches to church plays, as well as work on the production team. By the age of sixteen, I was working two jobs while attending high school during the day and college courses two or three nights a week while volunteering for our church production team. Reading had fallen by the wayside, but my newfound love of media allowed me a creative expression beyond the page.

Twelve years after high school, I was working as a creative director for a marketing agency. Every week I was writing scripts and producing web and television commercials and corporate media content. I took a leap of faith in 2013 and started my own production company, producing similar content, while also working various crew positions from production assistant to 1st assistant camera operator to director for network shows on TBN, indie films on HBO, and even acting in a few select scenes. As I began reading again in my spare time, I learned about NaNoWriMo, National Novel Writing Month, a non-profit that provides an online community and tools to help writers produce a fifty-thousand-word novel in November. My wife and I had two small children but had experienced three miscarriages. I was not coping properly. While in therapy, I was encouraged by my therapist to write to cope. I wanted to heal by helping others. I chose the loss of my former girlfriend to cancer as inspiration for a novel to work through my lingering pain. The sixty-five-thousand-word novel took more than one month to write, it took

three years, but I found an artistic expression that brought healing, excitement, and possibly a career. At least, if the heart problems would let me live long enough to realize the dream of being a successful author.

In May 2011, I died in North Georgia. The first Georgia state trooper on the scene saw my body half in the cab and half on the hood of a Chevy truck that had plowed underneath a forklift that was still hanging from the back of a loaded flatbed trailer and eighteen-wheeler. The Georgia second state trooper poked me in the back, and I tried to fight them both. While the assumption of my death was exaggerated, the reality of my injuries still bothers me to this day. I had crushed the steering column through the firewall with my chest and while I did not have any broken bones; I had heart damage. My enlarged heart and tachycardia are reminders that God spared me but allowed this accident to change my direction in life. I had asked Jesus to forgive me for my sins and make me a Christian on August 27th, 1989. I was sitting on a couch in our church fellowship hall during a linger-longer, where church people lingered after a service to eat and fellowship when our pastor talked to me about what I had asked him about during the altar call that night. I knew Jesus was real, but I had not accepted his death, burial, and resurrection for my sins. I was eating homemade chocolate chip cookies when I got saved. There was bliss in every bite that night.

My father became a Christian shortly after I did. He and my mother left a world of drugs, parties, and their affiliations with a motorcycle club. My father would later become a bi-vocational pastor/missionary and utility construction manager. As I entered my twenties and became a young man, my faith became my own. When my pregnant wife held my face in her hands as the hospital was scanning my internal injuries, I thanked God he had saved me again

and allowed me to remain on earth for more time with my family and to serve him. There was bliss in my pain.

The injuries from my wreck forced me to leave the production world in 2018. Turns out Executive Producers do not like it when you pass out on set. After years of physical therapy and effective medication, I learned to function the best I could. I used my skills as best I could and worked in the Software-as-a-Service SaaS field. I found new books to satisfy my reading appetite and tried to create short stories on my own. These were modest attempts at best. I knew how to sell a product and write scripts to convert seekers into customers. I wanted to write full-length novels, not just short stories, and even non-fiction as well, but I was struggling through the scattered writing advice on YouTube and the internet. I connected with a few strong online writing communities, including an author group on Facebook called, *20booksto50k*, which started the largest independently published author conference in the world, now called *Author Nation*. Through this group, I could story edit and copy edit for several successful authors. I struggle with my creative writing, often spending too much time developing complex plots for too many stories at one time. After multiple layoffs and being turned down from positions at multiple start-ups for not having a complete bachelor's degree, I began praying about going back to college. Then, the world shut down during Covid-19 in 2020 and I saw an opportunity at Liberty University. After attending several colleges as a younger man, I had completed many credit hours but did not hold a completed degree. Liberty University accepted enough transfer credit hours for me to finish a Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies degree in one year. When I finished my undergrad, I was offered positions at several corporate companies but accepted a position as an Academic Advisor at Liberty University where I would work remotely and receive some education benefits to pursue a Master of Fine Art in Creative Writing.

The lingering injuries from my wreck still affect me. Sometimes I still fall asleep at the keyboard when my heart gets out of rhythm or I must stop writing because my arms, hands, and neck are numb. Challenges remind me of my humanity. Last week I sat on the carpet with our three-year-old daughter as she turned the pages, searching for the monster at the end of the story. Her laughter took my breath away as I tried to sound like *Grover*. As time dedicated to assignments becomes an opportunity to produce original stories, I reflect on my journey through the MFA program as time well spent. I want my children to laugh. I want readers and fans to immerse themselves in creative worlds from my imagination. I aim to build a storytelling company of my own that will rival Disney. I'm not the mouse and I might be the monster at the end of my stories, but I am a monster on a mission.

My creative process starts with either a hook or bait. An idea will entice me like a worm on a hook to a largemouth bass in during the Spring spawn or a scene or phrase will hook me and command my cerebrum. I keep a digital notepad in my iPhone and on Google Docs where I can add to ideas. I have tried to be a panster, but free-writing has left me naked and lost usually far from my original premise. I have learned if I have an outline, backstory, and character sheets, I can create a compelling work of fiction or non-fiction. The outline serves as a basic blueprint. I allow myself to create versions of my stories that may not follow the original outline, but I force my muse to follow the plan, at first. For example, a new young adult literary role-playing genre series I am creating, *Lavender Thorne and the Real Reality*, was supposed to be about a twelve-year-old who discovers she has magical abilities all on her own in a modern-day urban Atlanta, Georgia. The original 25k-word novella felt too much like the third-person omniscient mashup of *Harry Potter-Spiderman*. It was full of teen angst and ongoing discoveries. In fiction and non-fiction, if there are enough similar stories published, a genre is recognized so I believe there is

still room where this original concept could fit; however after getting feedback from my twelve- and thirteen-year-old daughters, much like the feedback from classmates during the writing workshops required for the MFA program, I received feedback that led me to change the genre slightly where the lead character realizes the world is a video game. I'll save the *Harry Potter-Spiderman* idea under my young adult book ideas for a future story and allow the new version of *Lavender Throne* to develop. After graduation, I plan to self-publish my fiction and non-fiction work to build a fan base. I may pursue a traditional publishing deal in the future, but I am confident in the current self-publishing marketplace trends because of courses I have been taking outside of the MFA program. Time will tell.

When I originally read about the Liberty Way, I felt juxtaposed between religious boundaries and creative expression. The Holy Bible is God's revelation of himself to us. The bible is filled with fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and songs that illustrate our human condition and God's position throughout time. As a believer and a writer, I have come to accept I am not called to write additional stories for the Bible. My work may mirror scripture in that I have the freedom to create stories that reflect a struggling humanity, but I must remain steadfast in writing for a purpose. I can write under multiple pen names for specific audiences, children, young adults, non-fiction readers, and beyond as a servant, using my gifts, education, and ability to edify God through my art. Having experienced the Liberty Way through the MFA program, I understand where the guideposts are and how to navigate creative prose with a God-given purpose.

### **Process**

My process is to allow my muse to pour scenes onto the digital page while simultaneously allowing my logical brain to organize the evolving outline and layer the plots. I

have found I drift from outlines I plan too far in advance and give up on projects that I only work on when I feel inspired. I find myself at peace with operating at the crossroads of being a discovery writer who loves to outline. Rather than fight these two methods, I embrace each of them. I have found throughout my courses in the MFA program here at Liberty that my left analytical brain can organize as my right creative mind breathes life into new ideas. I find the beginning of creating a new story is still the most difficult step in my personal writing process. While plotting fiction, crafting characters, and weaving together plots that pop I allow myself to draft scenes out of order.

Through graduate school, I have learned writing is rewriting and I embrace each revision. I found I had developed a habit of avoiding writing longer projects because I was unfamiliar with how to develop full-length, fifty to one hundred-thousand-length novels. I long to make a living from my words, but I know my prose will find its purpose to entertain readers and generate profits if I intentionally construct quality manuscripts. I am working on developing an outline for the manuscript that will showcase a character-driven plot with biblical values. Persephone will learn that her own sacrificial love for her sister is what Miles had offered her in his own way, but she was too focused on her own view of marriage and her limited faith in others to allow a relationship to develop with Miles ten years earlier.

The three-act structure for this novel will first focus on Persephone Bordeaux questioning her life choices as she prepares for a wedding to a doctor. She will experience the pain of producing pearls from the difficulties in her life when she calls her ex-fiancé, Miles Anderson. She will wrestle with marrying her ideal man vs the man who she can't get off her mind. In the second act, Persephone will be torn between moving forward with her wedding to John Noble or leaving him for Miles. In the third act, she will be faced with canceling her wedding, rejecting

her fiancé, and giving Miles a second chance or finding closure from their relationship so she can move on in life. The climax will be that John continues to prepare for their wedding, even though he suspects Persephone is talking to her ex-fiancé because he knows she is working through past feelings. John will be the reliable man she has always wanted.

## **Vision**

My vision for *Pearls for Persephone* is to lay the foundation for a women's fiction romance series that focuses on marriage and relationship issues for couples later in life. I appreciate how Author Karen Kingsbury includes a Reader Study Guide at the end of her books. I too, plan on including a similar guide, one that could be used by book clubs as well as by church study groups. This idea came from when my wife and I served for five years as lay leaders in a marriage enrichment ministry called Re|Engage, based on the Re|Engage marriage resources provided by Watermark Church and marriagehelp.com. We noticed that couples who learned how their spouses communicate individually tended to experience the most progress in their relationships and work through marriage and life issues in unity. The tropes in this story are a long-lost love, how marriage is more than emotion, and an enemy-to-lovers arc, that will end in a happily ever after. I want to build a pen name dedicated to publishing women's fiction with romantic elements that will include Reader Study Guides for fans to discuss relational, marital, and parental issues from a biblical perspective.

## **Literary Context**

*Pearls for Persephone* is a novella in the Women's fiction romance genre. I love reading books by authors who write detail-heavy novels with strong, sometimes flawed lead characters, and complex plots. Authors like Tom Clancy, Nicholas Sparks, Tolkien, etc. Persephone

Bordeaux represents a self-made lead character who is questioning her life choices a week before she is to marry a wealthy doctor. Persephone was forced into adulthood as a young woman when her parents died in a car accident, and she takes on the responsibility of raising her young sister, Symphony. Then, she again takes on the responsibility of helping another when her little sister, when her brother-in-law dies of a heart attack, Persephone puts her personal life on pause to help Symphony raise her three young children and ultimately remarry. Now, in her mid-forties, one week before her wedding a severe thunderstorm and waterspout causes damage in Charleston, including the bridal shop where her wedding dress was ruined. The blue heels she custom ordered are too tight for her to wear and her family's pearl necklace with a sapphire pendant is missing. Dr. Noble, her fiancé had been too busy at the hospital to help plan anything at the wedding. The turmoil causes her so much anguish she questions her engagement and seeks out Miles, the man she could have married years earlier when she didn't give herself a chance at love. Miles' mistake happened years ago when he reenlisted in the Army just before he proposed to Persephone. Persephone needed to stay in Charleston with her sister after her brother-in-law passed away. Miles decided to re-enlist without discussing it with his long-time girlfriend. Persephone's mistake was when she negatively interpreted Miles' decision to re-enlist as if he were implying that he wanted to leave her and Charleston when she wanted to be with him, but also wanted to help her sister. Dr. Noble's mistake is neglecting the woman he loves who desperately needs his time and attention. One of the men has been preparing for the future while the other wants to live in the past. Persephone must choose between the man she could have married and the man she should marry.



## Significance of the Topic as a Christian Scholar

POV matters to readers. How readers experience stories is first realized through POV. The topic of the creative paper will be the marriage covenant. My lead male character, Dr. John Noble will serve as the representation of Jesus as the bridegroom who is sacrificing and preparing a home and future for his bride. *Pearls for Persephone* will be a creative reflection of Jesus as the bridegroom who comes for the church as Messiah in a way that was unexpected by the religious leaders of the day. Persephone, the female lead will serve as a bride preparing for her wedding even in the midst of doubt. I fully understand I am not writing a new book of the Bible; however, my work can be influenced by the Holy Spirit and by scripture.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord *does* the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife *see* that she respects *her* husband. (*New King James Version*, Eph. 5:25-33)

In *Pearls for Persephone*, the necklace will serve as a representation of life's trails being turned into something precious and how marriage is about the feeling and the lifelong habit of showing our spouses love, just as Christ loved us.

## Critical Theory Paper - The Persuasiveness of Point of View

Perspective in storytelling is the unseen guide authors use to direct readers through fiction and writers' leverage in non-fiction. This perspective, (POV), is unique to individual characters, narrators, and authors. POV is the first craft element authors use to persuade readers in fiction and in non-fiction. POV is more than a vantage point from which readers perceive narrative and prose but also a vehicle to direct emotional outcomes. In *Stein on Writing*, the author defines POV as, “the character whose eyes are observing what happens, the perspective from which a scene or story is written.” This is the critical beginning of storytelling. Not character, not plot, but POV. POV is the unseen artistic tool experienced writers deploy to direct the drama in fiction and create emotional resonance within their stories. POV has become a rhetorical device capable of eliciting specific responses from audiences. Examples of POV as a rhetorical device are found in many classic, contemporary, and small-market novels and in non-fiction. Sol Stein would elaborate POV further:

Without a firm grasp of point of view, no writer of fiction is free to exercise his talent fully. Each point of view available to the writer influences the emotions of the reader differently. Since affecting the emotions of the reader is the primary job of fiction, deciding on point of view is important. (Stein p.129)

While there are several types of POV, authors should carefully consider each option available to them and their intended effect on their ideal reader audience. The three main POVs, according to Stein, are first-person, third-person, and omniscient. He gives short examples to illustrate each POV:

I saw this, I did that. – It's the first-person point of view.... He saw this, he did that...

The simplest way of understanding third-person is that it is the same as first-person except that you have substituted "he" for "she" or "I." (Stein p.130) These examples are easy to understand and easy for readers to follow. Omniscient, or when multiple points of view are shared together with a reader. Stein illustrates this point with "Kevin looked longingly at Mary, hoping she would notice him. She not only noticed him, she wished he would take her in his arms. Mary's mother, watching from the window, thought they were a perfect match. (Stein p.131)

Third-person POV has multiple versions, including Third-person omniscient, third-person objective, and third-person limited.

1. Third-person omniscient. The author tells the reader what every character is thinking and feeling while also describing what is going on around them, whether the characters themselves perceive or understand this or not. The author's view is god-like, the word omniscient meaning all-seeing.
2. Third-person objective. The author observes the characters purely from the outside. A character may speak, gesture, act, but there is no description of their inner thoughts or emotions. The nature of their interior world may be deduced by the reader, but the writer does not presume to directly enter their psyche or describe it.
3. Third-person limited or intimate. These two terms for much the same approach give another sense of how the different forms of third-person POV can result in different relationships to story and character on the part of the reader. When an author tells a story from the POV of a particular character without stepping outside their frame of reference but does not use the subjective narrator, the I, employing instead the she or

he, this is said to be the third-person limited or intimate POV. The reader knows what the character knows, feels what they feel, knows how they think, and is not privileged with any wider, god-like vision. (Markham p.87)

When writers leverage specific POVs, they can create specific experiences that fit their intended audience and genre. Thrillers and mystery novels may feel limited in scope if the use of first-person POV is implemented. Romance and women's fiction may feel ungenuine and not intimate if the third-person objective is used. Fantasy novels with multiple third-person POVs create a broader world for readers to experience. While some genres may favor specific POVs, some POVs may have limited use.

Second-person POV is rarely used. Stein actually discourages writers from using second person POV:

You saw this, you did that... Forget it. Second person is used so rarely that I suggest just shelving it... the storyteller is seeking to involve the reader in the story as if he were a character. The fact is that the reader is quite prepared to be involved emotionally in the story not as himself, but through identification with one of more of the characters. (Stein, p.130)

After understanding the various forms of POV, a study of how POV is used reveals methods to entertain and persuade audiences. Where Sol Stein defines POVs and encourages authors to use POV to their advantage, a journalistic study of non-fiction provides evidence that POV is persuasive.

The Impact of Testimony Journalism on Audience Engagement; An Experimental Investigation of the Effects of Point of View, the academic findings varied from agreeable to contradictory. The study concluded the degree to which an audience was persuaded warrants additional research; however, evidence that an audience was persuaded by POV was found to be true in multiple instances. The first-person and third-person POV testimonies were found to be persuasive.

The mediating effect of identification has been suggested as an explanation for the persuasive effect of point of view. The rationale is that telling the story from the protagonist's point of view makes it easier to identify with the character, which, in turn, fosters changes in attitudes. The studies that examined this hypothesis tell a more complicated story. While some research indeed documented the expected effect of POV on identification (e.g., Igartua and Rodríguez-Contreras Citation 2020), many other studies did not find a significant effect (e.g., Kim and Lee Citation2018; Ma and Nan Citation2018; Nan, Futerfas, and Ma Citation2017). Still other studies reported the expected effect only with regard to an in-group character, not an out-group character (Kaufman and Libby Citation2012; Kim et al. Citation2020). These contradicting findings might imply that POV does not directly affect identification, but that there is a primary path that mediates the pathway between POV and identification, consequently leading to attitude change and persuasion. (Or et al.)

*Readers' responses to shifts in point of view: An empirical study* by Yaxiao Cui found further research and experiments about reader responses to POV and the effects of POV are

needed. However, multiple studies on POV by other researchers do show a range of reader responses.

Studies have shown that narrative point of view can affect several aspects of reader response, such as the recall of story elements (László, 1986), the appreciation of a story (Dixon et al., 1993) and empathy towards characters (Bray, 2007a; Dixon and Bortolussi, 1996). Experimental studies have also explored how readers interpret narrative point of view. For instance, Sotirova (2006) and Bray (2007b) investigate whether readers ascribe narrative viewpoint to the narrator, to a character or to both for texts written in free indirect style, a narrative mode which is characterised by the fusion of features of direct and indirect discourse. The results of their studies show that reader responses vary, and thus no definitive conclusion can be made regarding the interpretation of narrative viewpoint in the mode of free indirect style. Their experimental data does not cover texts which involve character viewpoint shifts, but the various responses in their results indicate the potential challenge posed to readers by a narrative text that presents narrative point of view in a complex way. (Cui 2017)

The importance of POV was first made famous by Percy Lubbock in 1921, in *The Craft of Fiction*. Other scholars have further studied Lubbock's scholarly research into novels and their craft elements.

Percy Lubbock, a famous British literary critic, established his position in the field of novel theory research with the publication of the book *The Craft of Fiction* in 1921.

According to Lubbock, "The whole intricate question of method, in the craft of fiction, I

take to be governed by the question of the point of view—the question of the relation in which the narrator stands to the story.” (Lubbock p.251)

This distance is a critical craft element in fiction and in non-fiction that delivers varying levels of engagement. Women’s fiction can be more than a simple emotional journey about two people falling in love and experiencing the throes of life. This distance can persuade readers to become emotionally invested in the story arc of specific characters.

How POV is used in fiction and non-fiction and its effects on audience engagement need further study as past reviews have focused on literary classics and little on modern contemporary fiction. Mary Beth Tegan published the essay, *Training the Picturesque Eye: The Point of Views in Jane Austen’s Persuasion*, in *The Eighteenth Century Journal*. Her work reviews Jane Austen’s deliberate use of POV to persuade audiences as she shifts viewpoints.

Much has been made of Austen’s unparalleled facility with narrative point of view, and as the roving eye in the picturesque passage demonstrates, the perspectives of character and commentator are traversed quite freely in Austen’s work through focalization and free indirect style. (Tegan p.45)

The first craft element she wields to persuade readers is POV. In numerous novels Jane Austen consistently uses third-person POV, sometimes referred to as narrative POV, to distance and draw readers to specific characters and unique details intentionally.

In *The Notebook*, by Nicholas Sparks’, the author uses multiple POVs to allow the reader to experience the narrative throughout the adult lives of the two main characters, Noah Calhoun and Allie Hamilton. The novel explores their teenage love affair and culmination in marriage.



The novel begins and revisits the two leads in the later stages of their lives as Allie is suffering from dementia and Noah reads from a special notebook. Sparks' use of multiple POVs throughout multiple characters' lifetimes builds what could have been series arcs into a more in-depth single novel. There are consistent uses of an intimate first-person POV of the lead characters in the later stages of life, with the majority of the storytelling through flashbacks of their love affair through a third-person POV. *The Notebook* opens in the first chapter with a first-person POV from Noah's perspective, as he is an old man:

Who am I? And how, I wonder, will this story end? The sun has come up and I am sitting by a window that is foggy with the breath of a life gone by. I'm a sight this morning: two shirts, heavy pants, a scarf wrapped twice around my neck and tucked into a thick sweater knitted by my daughter thirty birthdays ago. (Sparks p.1)

Sparks' rhetoric and use of first-person POV persuade readers to admire an elderly man as he recalls his youth while reading daily to his wife. The first-person POV allows readers to ask themselves the same questions Noah shares. Sparks does not simply tell readers what Noah is thinking but also shows them a scene that allows them to experience the character's contemplation. While this passage showcases Sparks' rhetoric painting vivid imagery for the readers, it is the POV that allows this vantage point. Readers are persuaded to admire an introspective character in a romantic setting late in life. Readers are put in a position to view Noah's setting, while "listening to his thoughts." This creates a level of intimacy with the character, the scene, and the foreshadowing thoughts through POV.

In the Romance genre, there is an expectation of the couple having a "happily ever after." While in women's fiction, there tends to be a deeper exploration of events, emotions, and drama

that may not end on such a high note. Readers drawn in by a book's cover art and a well-written intriguing blurb already expect the story arc before they have read the first chapter. From the onset of *The Notebook*, before any other characters are introduced, the author uses the first-person POV to draw readers into the narrative and introduce questions that readers will expect to be revealed in later chapters. Nicholas Sparks uses carefully distributed prose when using first-person POV as Noah. This poetic language is accentuated by the personal intimacy that first-person person first-person POV allows. Nicholas Sparks leverages genre tropes when he leads his storytelling through the intentional use of POV to persuade readers toward specific characters.

Chapter two opens, mirroring some of the same words, details, and tone as the first chapter, but from a third-person POV. The prose is less poetic and more informative, creating a distance between the reader and the character.

It was early October 1946, and Noah Calhoun watched the fading sun sink lower from the wrap-around porch of his plantation-style home. He liked to sit here in the evenings, especially after working hard all day, and let his thoughts wander without conscious direction. (Sparks p.6)

The past tense third-person POV pulls readers deeper into the narrative allowing them to experience the setting in 1946, the lead character, and other characters. The tone and singular perspective from the first chapter opens to the world in 1946, allowing other plot lines to develop without confusing the reader about the main story of Noah and Allie.

When the first and second chapters shift from first-person to third-person POV, readers can follow the tone and plot lines through the opening paragraphs, referencing multiple elements in different ways. Both chapters open with a reference to the sun, while the first chapter opens with a sunrise and the second chapter with a sunset. The lead character is sitting in both chapters. In the first chapter, Noah is wrapped up physically. In the second chapter, the house has a wrap-around porch. In both chapters, Noah is thinking. The clever use of first-person and third-person POV allows readers to gain an intimate emotional experience with Noah from inside his head and heart as well as from his home. While style and clever use of the English language is evident throughout the novel, the use of POV allows other craft elements to be used to create a dramatic experience for an audience. Readers are persuaded through POV to admire Noah as a romantic lead before reading about his romantic journey with Allie.

Where Sparks uses POV to draw readers to specific characters across a wide timeline, Jane Austen masterfully demonstrates how to leverage POV to create narrative expectations in *Pride and Prejudice*. She uses a shifting third-person POV going from a neutral omniscient narrator to an influential character POV, often in the same chapter. This method of storytelling persuades readers toward the author and narrating characters POV.

Austen's fiction calls into question the powers, and even the existence of the 'omniscient narrator'. Her style exhibits instead a constant shifting between centres of subjectivity, represented in a variety of stylistic ways, rather than the dominance of a single overarching, 'total and mediating point of view.' (Bray, 2018)

Jane Austen shifts POV from the viewpoint of Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. Culturally, she draws readers to her lead, a marginalized female character during the British

Georgian era. The societal expectations at the time were manipulated to allow a socially proper woman to express a plethora of emotions and ideas that often would not have been spoken about publicly. This inner dialogue is presented through a shifting third-person POV that influences readers about her views. In the excerpt below, we see this rhetorical method used to persuade readers to share Elizabeth Bennet's views on Mr. Darcy.

Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien, and the report which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year. The gentlemen pronounced him to be a fine figure of a man, the ladies declared he was much handsomer than Mr. Bingley, and he was looked at with great admiration for about half the evening, till his manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity.... (Austen p.13)

Jane Austen uses third-person omniscient to draw readers' attention to Mr. Darcy to show what he appears to be to others and who he reveals himself to be during the party. The position of third-person omniscient POV allows her to transition through multiple POVs in a single paragraph without losing the plot or confusing the reader. In the very next scene, she juxtaposes two characters through her masterful use of third-person POV.

Mr. Bingley had soon made himself acquainted with all the principal people in the room; he was lively and unreserved, danced every dance, was angry that the ball closed so early, and talked of giving one himself at Netherfield. Such amiable qualities must speak for themselves. What a contrast between him and his friend! Mr. Darcy danced only once with Mrs. Hurst and once with Miss Bingley, declined being introduced to any other lady,

and spent the rest of the evening in walking about the room, speaking occasionally to one of his own party. His character was decided... (Austen p. 13-14)

Through the use of a third-person-omniscient POV, Jane Austen introduces two unique characters, Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy, within two consecutive paragraphs in chapter three. She shares the opinions of other non-descript characters in the scene, along with dramatic details that give readers a sense of who each of the characters are and the narrator's opinions of each character. In this example, third person omniscient POV allows the author to clearly distinguish principal characters while progressing the plot without breaking readers' train of consciousness. In this example, the author is not shifting POVs from character to character too quickly, as Stein pointed out, but uses POVs to contrast Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy, such as how Mr. Bingley danced every dance and was social, while Mr. Darcy danced little and was anti-social. The author is not neutral in her writing position, but openly biased. While using the third person POV, Jane Austen gives readers an intimate experience by sharing Elizabeth Bennet's feelings and opinions throughout her novel. Austen can tell and show her story to readers using POV to tell more than can be shown from a neutral position.

*The Notebook* and *Pride and Prejudice* are wildly popular historical romances that fit well within the women's fiction genre because each storyline is about more than simply a love story with an expected happy ending but rather multiple plots that characters experience individually while simultaneously progressing through a romantic relationship. Each author can leverage different POVs to create an entertaining emotional experience for readers. Details within a scene may be experienced differently by characters through the effective use of different points of view. Generations of readers have been persuaded to share and accept the emotional

journey present by Sparks use of multiple POVs across time in *The Notebook* and Austen's use of a shifting POV in *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

POVs are clear to readers when they are consistent through a singular work of fiction. This consistency builds a literary tempo readers can subconsciously follow while enjoying a story. *The Notebook* and *Pride and Prejudice* are women's fiction novels with major romantic plot lines that use either a POV that may change from chapter to chapter or a consistent POV throughout a novel. In *A Time to Dance*, by Karen Kingsbury, readers are introduced to a women's fiction novel with a divorce plot line and multiple character POVs. Jane Austen's *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice* are literary classics. Nicholas Sparks' *The Notebook* is a contemporary commercial success. Karen Kingsbury's women's fiction novel, *A Time to Dance*, has been successful in the Christian fiction genre. The religious tones in her work are presented through the use of dual third person POVs. The author takes readers on an emotional journey of a couple and family facing the destructive force of divorce and ultimate reconciliation through their daughters' wedding. The author uses third person omniscient POV for much of the novel, yet uses the first person within chapters to show the individual thoughts and emotions of her main characters, Abby and John Reynolds. She can move beyond expected religious reactions and persuade readers to see the genuine human emotions and thoughts of her characters facing multiple relationship issues that are often marginalized by religious communities by revealing internal thoughts and emotions through the creative use of POV. She shows readers the external and internal character arcs and major plot points by showing multiple character's POVs both externally and internally.

The realization was suffocating, and she pulled her hand from the water, frozen in that stooped position at the end of the pier. *God, forgive me. What have I done? I could have believed him. Instead, I convinced myself he was a cheater, a liar. And I treated him that way for years. Dear God... what kind of woman am I?* (Kingsbury p. 307)

The character put her hand in the water at the end of the pier, external POV, and the character prayed for forgiveness while questioning her own judgement, internal POV. Readers are easily able to follow what is taking place both externally and internally. Kingsbury portrays powerful thematic elements through first person POV by dedicating this point of view to internal dialogue. Third-person POV still allows multiple characters' perspectives to be experienced across numerous settings in the novel. Within the genre of women's fiction, and through the masterful use of multiple points of view, Karen Kingsbury is able to explore the sub-genre of divorce in a way that shares biblical truth with readers through a fictitious narrative.

In the journal article, *Point of View in Narrative*, as published in the *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, Suhair Al-Alami describes POV as;

Point of view can refer to two things: a point of view in a discussion is an opinion; the way one judges an issue. In narrative, however, a point of view is the narrator's position in the description of characters and events. Simpson (2010, p. 294) thinks that point of view embraces the angle of narrating in fiction. Point of view is important because it filters everything in a narrative. It determines the amount of information the narrator shares with the reader. It can also influence the degree to which the reader can identify with the protagonist. (Al-Alami, 2016; 2013)

Al-Alami's study showed that POV is both informational for readers and influential or persuasive. POV is the first filter through which a story is delivered. POV does affect readers and may persuade them as well.

The mutual understanding of what constitutes genre fiction continues to evolve. Genres and sub-genres allow for organization for the purpose of selling and marketing fiction. Genre fiction offers multiple examples of various POVs being deployed as the first craft element to persuade readers.

The phrase "genre fiction" was used from the late nineteenth century onwards to refer to regional or local-color fiction (compare genre painting). The earliest use of the phrase "genre fiction" to mean unambiguously "commercial fiction that comes in subgenre categories" that I have been able to locate in full-text database searches is from 1966, when Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest speak of science fiction and "other kinds of genre fiction, the detective story, perhaps the espionage thriller." Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest, eds., *Spectrum V: A Science Fiction Anthology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), 10–11. "Genre fiction" and a now-rarer synonym, "category fiction," are found in wider use (for example, in *Publishers' Weekly*) from the 1970s on." (Goldstone 2023)

While little academic research can be found about Nicholas Sparks' use of POV as a craft element in genre fiction, the intimacy created across his characters' adult lifetimes through the use of first and third-person POV is clearly seen in *The Notebook*. Jane Austen adds playful prose and her influential personal opinion through a not-too-distant third-person omniscience POV in *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice*. Karen Kingsbury is also a highly successful genre



fiction author, yet modern academia has published little about her writing style. Karen Kingsbury delivers palpable tension through interweaving first and third person POV throughout her narratives revealing historical details and internal thoughts and emotions of key characters.

Journalists are able to deliver engaging news through the intentional use of POV.

While in *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen shifted POV to allow readers primarily into the mind of a single character, Elizabeth Bennet, and Nicholas Sparks used POV to shift between timelines in *The Notebook*, Karen Kingsbury uses POV to shift readers between the external and internal plot lines of multiple characters. The degree of persuasion of POV in each of these examples should be studied, but the evidence that POV persuades audiences in these novels is evident. Fiction and non-fiction become personal when authors are intentional and clever with their use of POV. While other writing craft elements are often lauded in scholarly study, all writing begins with POV, and further continuous research into how readers are persuaded by POV in fiction and non-fiction would prove beneficial to the writing community.

## Creative Manuscript

*Pearls for Persephone*

## Chapter 1

*Sunday Suffering*

Sometimes a broken heart is the best place to start a marriage. Our years together would not have happened had I embraced what was familiar instead of the unknown. As I dress for breakfast, I look upon the Atlantic Ocean at the first rays of sunlight on the salty sea. I love this view. The first streaks of orange and red fight off the last of the night shadows early on a quiet Sunday morning. Darkness is the absence of light. The stars and the moon fade away as the true source of their light, the sun, breaks the horizon. I found a way to shine a light into the darkest parts of my past before we took our vows. I'm still thankful for the pain, the exposure, and the forgiveness. Charleston, South Carolina, has been my home for eighty-three years. I love waking up to this view every morning. I wonder how many more mornings I have left.

"Thank you, God, for another sunrise," I whisper as shrimp boats and cargo ships move through navy and gray waters against the swirling wind-churning white caps in the three-to-five-foot seas. I say another soft prayer for the shrimpers and sailors on the sea. The tide is high and the waves pound the sand with salty slaps of salt water and foam. An elderly couple, probably not much older than me actually, walks along the beach below our home, hand in hand, as a golden retriever bounces around them with glee, chasing off cawing seagulls. Time together is more precious than time apart. I could not have spent time in this home with the love of my life if the sands of time had not polished my past pain into pearls.

“Coffee or milk, dear!” bellows my from my beau below.

“Both my love.” I know he is making a mess in the kitchen to make a masterpiece for breakfast. He can cook. We can dine together. I can clean.

“Come to the table. We must not be late for service.” The tension in his voice is subtle but present. He is more accurate than a Rolex watch.

“A lady is not late; she arrives in her own time.” I am the one who needs a bit of tension to keep time or I will drift with the day.

“Tell that to Pastor Paul, my darling Persephone.” I know he’s not wrong, but I will keep him waiting for a few more seconds. I finish the last bit of pre-make-up before breakfast. A lady must keep her husband wanting, not waiting. I slip into a white satin robe, tousle my matching white hair, and descend the 100-year-old walnut staircase to breakfast. I walk down the hall on the third floor, touching door handles and frames to steady my walk. Every time I touch a door, I stir a memory of our family within these walls. Our home is fit for a family of six or more, but the two of us are not yet ready to leave our memories here. I love our walls adorned with framed photos of those we love. Time meanders with me as I allow the emotions to wash my mind with scenes throughout our lives. The picture frames are windows into our history and provide a way for a seasoned lady to travel through time. I brace myself on the last banister, stopping at the bottom of the stairs, at first to give my heart a moment to find the right rhythm and then to stare at the man I’ve loved most of my adult life. He makes his way to me, fully aware of my weakening condition. Heart disease is another pearl in my life. I’ve had to slow down a bit. I’m not a lady who enjoys being the weaker sex, but I accept his strong hand and allow him to lead us to our breakfast nook where we can chit-chat about life while we plan our day. He squeezes

my hand three times, and I do the same before he pulls my chair out for me. *I love you. I love you.* The squeezes are our way of showing what is sometimes hard to say. Sometimes words get in the way of what our hearts try to say when body language can say it best.

Some of us learn through reading and listening to the lessons taught by academics who dare share their knowledge with willing and wailing students. Others, myself included, fail to take to heart words of wisdom and tend to learn through mistakes, often epic mistakes. It's not too important in how you learn, but that you learn. I was a miserable student who needed to be taught lessons repeatedly. Thankfully, life is a wonderfully difficult teacher.

Traditions have a way of binding the present with the past. We honor the practices of those who have gone before us. Every tradition has a beginning. Traditions, like our sunrise Sunday breakfast before church, prayers before a meal, and pearls worn by a bride on her wedding day.

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"Oh, Lord! Are you testing me? This day can't get any worse! I can't handle something else going wrong."

A red suede lace-up round high-heeled pump pumps the gas, but the Cadillac refuses to move. The transmission spins and smokes in protest. Exasperated and alone, Persephone pulls the car to the side of the road overlooking the Charleston coastline as midday traffic passes her with looks of frustration. She turns her face as her blonde shoulder-length bob hides the tears falling onto her white silk blouse. She rubs her hands on her navy designer jeans to calm down. For a woman so well put together, her day has fallen apart. Her eyes fell on the dress bag and shoe box in the backseat. Tears stream down her face as her waterproof mascara fails to hold her

flawless makeup in place. Sky blue heels that are too tight for her to wear and too custom for her to order another pair in time and a designer wedding dress, ripped from neckline to waistline, soiled beyond repair, by a leaking roof from the thunderstorm and waterspout that destroyed so much of her beloved city the week before. On the floor, a black leather necklace case lays open and empty. Everything had been perfectly planned. If the day had gone like she preferred to plan the rest of her life, she would be a month away from the perfect wedding. Forty-two years on this earth had given her plenty of time to plan her perfect day. But she knew perfect plans can fall apart because of unseen forces outside of her control. Which was why her first wedding was a disaster and her second wedding needed to be perfect. It was perfectly ruined. Something borrowed. Her family pearl necklace with the sapphire pendant is missing. Something blue. Her blue shoes. The blue shoes that did not fit. And something new. Her magnificent dress. The torn and soiled gown was beyond repair. She sends a text message to her fiancé' who leaves her on read and the red on her face matches the fire burning inside her. Dr. John Boone might be in the middle of a life-changing surgery to help another person walk again, but she needed him to help her walk through finalizing their wedding planning. *The good book may say it rains on the just and the unjust, but today, Lord, I wish it would just stop raining on me.*

“Excuse me.”

She jumps as a handsome Charleson Police Officer barely old enough to shave taps her window. Persephone takes a tissue from her console to wipe the tears and running mascara from her face before rolling down her window.

“I’m sorry. I’m having a tumultuous day. Something is wrong with my transmission, my wedding dress is ruined, and my shoes don’t fit, the pearls are missing, and my fiancé can’t or won’t...”

The tears fall on silk, lace, and denim as the stunned new beat cop tries to find words. They told him at the Academy that some women, and men, might try to cry to get out of a ticket, but he had never seen a meltdown like this before.

Persephone wipes her eyes as the Officer directs local traffic and vacationers to keep moving as the palmettos palms wave in the humid sea breeze.

“License and registration... Do you have a wrecker coming? Please take your time, Madam.” The young officer tried a bit of sympathy.

Officer Tate continued to wave traffic by as the broken bride-to-be passed her license and the registration for the broken Escalade. While being a southern lady from the deep south, she hardly thought forty-two years young was old enough to be called Madam. The word stung ever so slightly as she waited for her credentials to be run through the county and federal databases. She took out her makeup kit from her Chanel purse and repaired the mess she had made of her face. Her mother and father would not have been pleased; God rest their souls. She was especially displeased that her fiancé’ had done little to nothing to help with planning their wedding, except pay for it. Dr. Boone was too busy replacing the knees of grannies who wanted to stay on the go and athletes looking for second chances at on-the-field glory. She was just as busy running her accounting firm. They both worked fifty-plus hours a week. For the last six months, he spent more and more time at the hospital and was barely available for church, let alone date nights. She wondered if his rotations were easier for him than their relationship. She wanted his time, his attention, his company, but he wanted her on his schedule.

\*Ding - (Text Notification)

(Never Call Miles Anderson) I know I’m too late, but I would like to see you again.

Persephone stared at the message before her screen faded to black. Not now. His timing was never perfect. He had been sending messages for months since he found out she was engaged.

\*Ding - (Text Notification)

(Never Call Miles Anderson) I feel like you need me. Do you feel it too?

*Darn him. Darn him and his... his instincts. Miles left me. He left when I needed him the most. He had his chance. No, don't text him back. Not now. Not when you are vulnerable.*

She didn't need Miles to add to her awful day. She didn't need John to fix her dress or buy her shoes. She wanted him to offer to help her and to be present when she needed him. The only evidence John had spent time with her was the five-carat cushion cut diamond set in platinum on her finger. The only times Miles had helped were every time she needed him until he had left her before their wedding day ever arrived. God and country had called Miles and he had answered. Would he answer her now?

"Is the car in gear or in park, Mrs. Bordeaux? I noticed your brake lights were still on." Officer Tate smiled politely as he waited on the polished lady to return her registration to her glove box and license to her wallet.

"Of course, it's in park... it's Miss Bordeaux... and actually, it is in gear. My heavens." She let her foot off the brake and the white SUV barely rolled forward as she lightly pressed the accelerator.

"It probably is the transmission. Please put the vehicle in the park. I would like to get you somewhere safer. Have you called a tow truck?" *I know who I could call. And he would answer*

*and come for me. And right now, I kind of want him to.* Persephone pulled her phone from the center console mount to make a call she had avoided for five years.

“I have not. Forgive me, Officer Tate. Allow me to make a few phone calls, please. And thank you for stopping. I appreciate your time and your duty.” *Then why was I so hard on Miles when he had done his duty?*

“Allow me to make one other call first. I thought I had a warranty. Maybe the dealer can come.” Persephone dials the Cadillac Dealership. She always buys an extended warranty. After a heated exchange with a familiar finance manager, Persephone was nearing a breaking point.

“Miss. Bordeaux, at 116,689 miles, I’m afraid your truck is out of factory warranty. I see here you also declined to pay for an extended warranty over 100,000 miles. We would be happy to look at your vehicle or if you would like to trade it as-is...”

“No. No. No. Mr. Richmond. I’ve purchased several vehicles from you all, and just, just stop. I paid for... an extended warranty on...”

Persephone’s mind drifted back fifteen years ago to when she became a guardian before she had any children of her own, when her parents had died in a car accident. Persephone had accepted custody of her young sister, Symphony, who she had become more of a mother figure to than a big sister, despite their twelve-year age difference. She completed an undergrad in Finance and Accounting, and then a Master of Accounting, all while working full time and raising her younger sister. She even helped Symphony go to college to become an RN before she became pregnant at twenty years old. Symphony’s boyfriend, Frank, was a skinny, blue-collar shrimper. Hardly the kind of guy she would have picked for Symphony, but Frank loved her little sister. They had three children before Frank had unexpectedly died of a heart attack just after their tenth



wedding anniversary. Aunt Persephone was always there for Symphony and the kids. When Persephone wasn't at her office, she was helping shuttle her nephew and nieces, Frankie, Melody, and Carol, across Charleston while Symphony pulled overtime at the same hospital where her fiancé worked. The only reason she had met John was because Symphony had introduced them at a hospital fundraising event 3 years ago. When Frank died, he had some life insurance, but not enough for a single woman to raise three small children on her own. When Symphony needed a safe vehicle 5 years ago, Persephone bought her a minivan with an extended warranty. The dealer had given her a great deal on her Cadillac at the same time. To save money, she had declined the extended warranty on her SUV because she never planned to keep it this long, but she had other priorities over car shopping.

“Miss Bordeaux. We would be happy to earn your business...”

“Thank you for your time. In due time. Right now, I need to make another call. Thank you.” Persephone politely ended the conversation as best a flustered Southern lady could. She had another conversation in her head. *Never Call Miles Anderson. I did not call him at first, but he has been texting me. A lot. And leaving voicemails. Since he retired from the Army nearly one year ago, he has been reaching out to me. I have never returned a single call. I'm engaged to someone else. This is fine. He's a great mechanic. She needs a mechanic to fix her car. It's timing, maybe God's timing.* She had saved the initial warning to remind herself not to call and get his or her hopes up. He had left her to sign up for his last few years in the Army when she had needed him the most. Frankie had passed away. She was trying to help Symphony keep it together and raise her children. Persephone had been devastated to lose Miles, but she had chosen to stay with her sister when Miles had decided to stay in the Army. There were other places in Charleston she could call to have her SUV repaired, but she had wanted to call him for

years. What if he was married and now had children of his own? *If he was married. Why had he been texting her?* What was broken needed mending, the car, and their personal connection. *You need to talk to him and tell him you are done. He will never have a chance with you. John is your future and Miles is your past.* Miles had broken her heart when he showed her his re-enlistment paperwork. He had asked her to go, but knew she would stay for her family. Now he was asking for her attention when she had said yes to starting a new family with John. Nothing was going according to plan today. Miles could help her Cadillac move again, and maybe then they could both move on.

“I didn’t want to call, but I need you. My car, my Cadillac, needs you. And so, I need to see you. Can you come, now?” *Why am I stumbling over my words like a teenager? Pull up your big girl panties. You are a grown woman.* Five years. Five years later and he answered her on the first ring.

“And...” The gravel in his voice gave her chills. *How did he know? He always did this, reading her mind when she tried to imply what she wanted.*

“and... yes, I’m engaged, Miles. My wedding is a week away. Before I... I just need to... and my shoes don’t fit... and my dress is ruined... my necklace... and now my car is broken... You can say no. If you do, I will call someone else. I just thought of you.” *Are these tears? I am so ashamed of myself that I should stop talking to myself. Hang up. End it.* What was she saying? It was the stress. She never should have dialed his number or said his name. Who keeps their Ex’s number?

“I’ve waited five years for you to call me back. Where are you? I’ll be there.” He would, wouldn’t he? Miles did not have orders to follow. He was his own boss and she knew he would come to get her. *I want him to come get me.* The guilt hit her hard, so the tears came easily.

Taps on her window let her know Officer Tate was back. He seemed less polite and more direct.

“Miss Bordeaux. Have you reached someone to come get your car? If not, I’ll need to call a wrecker from the department. We must remove your vehicle from the side of the road.”

“He’s coming. My fiancé is coming to get me.” The words fell from her lips like when Lucifer fell from grace. Miles had been her fiancé. He was not her current fiancé. *What have I done?*

## Chapter 2

*Sunset of Regret*

“Do not say a word to me.” Persephone was furious to be sitting in the passenger seat of a rollback trailer truck next to her ex-fiancé. This was not the day she had planned. The smell of diesel and regret filled the air between them. *Am I dreaming, or is he really sitting right next to me?*

“Okay.” Miles let the word linger on his lips, knowing this would drive Persephone crazy. He intentionally took the long way back to his shop.

He hadn’t shaved in days or had a proper haircut in months. She secretly liked this rough look over his clean-shaven face, not that she was going to share it with him. She had monitored his social media profiles when he re-enlisted. He spent his last 4 years of Army service between a last tour in Afghanistan and in San Jose, Ca. He retired after twenty-one years of service to take over his family’s repair shop after his father passed. *He would probably still be in the Army if his father hadn’t passed away. His father’s shop is the real reason he came back to Charleston, not to be with me. Is he wearing cologne? Oh, he smells nice. He’s up to something. At least he came today. He even came the first time I called.*

“Did you detail your truck just to come pick me up? The interior looks brand new. The only vehicles you keep clean are your hot rods. You may be one of the best mechanics in South Carolina, but you are, or were, allergic to keeping your work trucks clean.” Persephone bobbed up and down in as the roll-back glided through traffic with her Escalade strapped in place.

“Am I supposed to answer your rhetorical question or are you planning on having a conversation with yourself for the next twenty miles? We both know you are more than capable

of doing all the talking.” Miles pushed more of her buttons. This was fun. He missed making her mad, even if he was playing around. *She looks spectacular, even if she is huffy and mad.*

“A year of sending me texts and leaving me voicemails and this is how you talk to me?!?” Persephone crossed her legs away from him and turned to look out the passenger window. *Why am I in this truck?*

“Yes, this is how I treat you when I am trying to make you smile. You’re having a bad day. I’m just trying to make it a little better.” Miles slowed at a stoplight, keeping his eyes in front of himself trying not to get his hopes up. *She hasn’t changed a bit. Still stubborn. Which only makes her hotter.*

“Let’s just get to the shop. I can, can, call Symphony, or a friend to come get me. I’ll collect my things and you will repair my car and I’ll pay you for it. Then, that’s it. Our need for one another will be finished.” *There, put it out in the open. Set boundaries with him. If he left before, he would leave again. Why did he leave when I needed him the most? Fixing my broken car now will not repair what’s broken between us. I never should have called you Miles Lee Anderson.*

“Stay here. This won’t take long.” Miles pulls the truck into his parking lot, taking time to lower the trailer and roll her SUV into a parking spot beside a broken-down F-150. *What was I expecting from her? A warm embrace and picking up where we left off. This was worse than my first divorce. She should have come with me to California.*

After her Cadillac was rolled into place, she gathered her bags, ripped dress, blue shoes, and the “Better than Alright Automotive Sales and Service” was twice the size she remembered. They must have bought the closed Buffett next door and expanded. They had 50 cars for sale,

some late models, but over 30 classic cars, mostly hot rods. Miles parked his rollback next to a black 1969 Ford Mustang Mach 1.

“I’ll be back in a minute. I need to drop my keys with Carl, then we can pull back around and get your things. Call whoever is going to come to rescue you. You can wait in the lobby until they get here.” Miles kept his tone even. There was no point in dragging this out. She called because he owned a repair shop. Miles disappeared under a half-garage door.

Persephone made her way to the lobby, taking her time to look at the polished metal and chrome in the parking lot. This Mustang looked better than when it was brand new in 1969. She had always been a car girl. *Maybe he has learned to take care of the things he cared about.*

The lobby of the shop was completely different than she remembered. The former had mismatched chairs and fifty-year-old photos from the drag strip. Now, brand new chairs sat in straight rows across a black-and-white checkered flag tile floor. She placed her bags on a loveseat and checked her phone. A few missed calls from work. Several voicemails from her wedding venue. A couple of text messages from Symphony. She was working overtime again. Persephone called John, but once again was sent directly to voicemail. Persephone sent text messages to a few friends. Really, they were more people she knew. Ladies from her small group at church. A few friends from college. Within ten minutes, she received answers, and no one was available. She would be on her own for the rest of the evening.

“Here is your work order, Miss Bordeaux. And the rest of your keys. We will call you after we diagnose your vehicle.” A young man only twenty stood before her. He was in a black company shirt with the name “Vince” embroidered in white.

“Thank you, Vince. Tell me, where is Miles?” Persephone could tell the younger man was attracted to her. She watched as he swallowed hard and fought to collect himself.

“Mr. Anderson left about five minutes ago. He told me not to lock up the shop until you had someone pick you up.” As the words crossed his lips, he could see this was not the answer his customer wanted to hear. The fury on her face vanished quickly.

“Did he? Thank you, Vince. Pardon me while I make a few phone calls. I won’t keep you.” Vince turned and disappeared back into the shop, leaving her with a few other customers in the lobby. She took her time dialing, preparing herself to speak.

Miles was in third gear, headed toward the beach to clear his head. He was trying to enjoy the sound of American muscle when his phone rang a special ringtone. He stopped at a fruit stand and shut the motor down to call back.

“Where do you think you are going?” Persephone deliberately stated every syllable with the distinction of a TESL teacher. Her pump tapped a tone of its own on the tile floor.

“To the beach. You were not too happy to see me. Fine. We can keep this professional. Do you have someone picking you up?” Miles was at his limit. He had been calling. He hoped she would be rational and want to have a conversation like adults who had been together for years. If she didn’t want him to be around, he would leave. It was easier to go than to keep fighting.

“No one is available. I’m asking, will you just take me home?” *What was he thinking, leaving like that? When did he start listening to what I wanted, anyway?*

Miles took his time picking out a watermelon, a few peaches, and some tomatoes. He paid the farmer in cash and placed his box in the trunk before answering her.

“I’ll take you home. I just don’t want to fight. It’s been almost 5 years since I saw your face in person and not just every night in my dreams. I’ll be back in twenty minutes.” Miles ended the call before she could say a word. He turned the key to make his horses sing, then dropped the clutch to race back to her.

Ten minutes after he left her speechless, which was no small feat, Miles pulled into the parking lot. His mechanics were about to leave for the day, although the sales side of the business still had several customers at sunset. He had changed into a black button-up shirt. Miles walked in, picked up her bags, held the door for her, gave a nod to Vince, opened his car door for her after placing her things in his backseat, then came around to the driver's side and got in. They were ten minutes down the road, riding in silence.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have gotten your hopes up by calling. I’m engaged.”

Persephone was trying to have a mature conversation. She had let her emotions get the best of her and called her former fiancé to rescue her.

Miles held up his hand. He shook his head no, keeping his eyes on the road, both hands on the wheel, unless he needed to shift gears. She let him drive. This was sacred to him. He was making a decision. She needed to give him time. She watched as the sky burst into shades of orange, pink, and purple.

“Give me an hour. Dinner. Time to talk. Before you marry him have one more dinner with me.” Miles let out his words as he brought the car to a stop at a red light. A Honda Accord stopped to their left with a ten-year-old boy in the back seat. His mouth was open, looking at the black Mustang shaking at the light, cementing his dream car in his mind. Miles noticed the kid



scoping out his car, and he revved the engine, cementing in the young man's mind the moment forever.

Miles turned and looked deep into Persephone's blue eyes. He hadn't looked at her like that in years. The memories in her mind moved her lips before her heart could stop her.

"Yes." She couldn't tell him no. Not after a year of messages. Not after that look in his eyes. For the first time in a long time, she let someone else take control. Even if he was just taking her to dinner, she was the one being taken care of.

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The Bistro on Dune Avenue was a French café they had been to dozens of times before when they were dating. Miles knew exactly what he was doing. The ambiance of a 19th-century French café was warm and inviting. Vintage portraits and lithographs adorned the walls. Miles led them to a private room at the back of the café. A single table for two had replaced the large family tables that normally filled this space.

"Miles, did you plan this?" Romance training was not standard Army training, so where had Miles learned how to do any of this? He pulled her chair for out of her. *Who is this man and what else about him has changed?*

The waitress quickly served water, bread, fresh butter, and tomato bisque. She couldn't take her eyes off Persephone's engagement ring. Miles served Persephone bread, then took a piece for himself. The silence was deafening.

“You have a beautiful ring.” The younger twenty-something was sincere and sweet. Persephone wanted to explain that the man across from her had not given her the ring she was wearing.

“Thank you. And your name?” Desperate to change the subject.

“Nicole. Mr. Anderson has already selected a menu for y’all tonight. Do either of you have any special requests?”

“No. We do not. Thank you.” Miles answered the young woman, but did not take his eyes off Persephone. After Nicole had left the room, they ate in silence for a few moments before Miles spoke up.

“I’m sorry I left you. I hate the fact the ring you are wearing is from another man. If I could turn back time, I would give everything I have for us to still be together.” Miles spoke into the space between them, almost trying to manifest the words. He rested his gaze on Persephone, waiting for a response to his barren soul.

*He couldn’t, not after all this time. Not now.* Five years ago, he made a choice.

Persephone looked back at him with a million words to say, but not a single word crossed her lips. She took his right hand with her left and felt relief washing over them both, but guilt boiling inside of her. She was getting what she had always wanted from the man she wanted years ago, but she was betrothed to someone else. The sparkling diamond was only the reason she closed her eyes.

“I thought that the best way to help you, us, and Symphony and her kids, was to take the promotion and the raise and re-up for my last four years of active duty. I made a choice and hoped you would follow me.” Miles fights to find the words he’s rehearsed in his mind for half a

decade. He takes bites of the bisque, forcing his tongue to manage the soup instead of releasing a flood of words with pent-up feelings.

“Stop. Just stop.” Persephone pulls her hand back, placing her left hand in her right hand on her lap, covering the ring. *Not like this. Not now. It’s too late.*

“If you two are finished with the bisque, I can take these. Would you like the wine now, Mr. Anderson?” Nicole spoke in a whisper. Unsure if this beautiful romantic dinner was going as planned.

“No wine, Nicole. I can’t have wine, Miles.” Persephone did not need the alcohol to relax any more of her emotions. *I need my wits about me.*

“Oh! Congratulations! I’m four months along myself!” Nicole rubbed her belly before clearing the table and making her way back to the kitchen.

Miles sat upright in his chair. Stunned. Stunned was the word.

“Can we go? Now? Please. I need to walk.” Persephone stood up quickly from the table, leaving Miles alone in the private room.

Miles finished his glass of water, then Persephone’s water as well. He takes three hundred dollars from his wallet and places them beneath his empty glass. *I could use the wine.*

Outside, he turns down the sidewalk, following his instincts where Persephone is likely going. A few hundred feet down behind the café he sees her leaning on a railing watching the last of the light give way to the night. Miles gingerly approaches the woman he loved and left with his mind reeling, heart racing, and words escaping.

“I had no idea. When are you due?” Miles couldn’t congratulate her. Not like this. He intended tonight to be his first chance to win her back. He was operationally ready to challenge another man to win her back, but not a baby. Not again.

Persephone doesn’t speak. She’s between tears and a tirade. She instead tries to time her breathing as she watches the light fade to grey as the stars come out over the Atlantic. The wind on her face helps her fight back tears. Too many emotions for one day. Too many emotional days for this decade.

“I’m sorry. I should have said Congratulations first. I wasn’t expecting... this. I have been trying for a year to get you to pick up the phone or answer a text message. Kids are great!” Miles rubs his hands together. Trying not to yell, complain, or ruin whatever moment they had in the café.

“I am not expecting, Miles. But we were, once, and when I lost it, you proposed a few weeks later not too far from her. I’m not pregnant now. How could I be? I hardly ever see John. He’s always working. Nicole was sweet. I’m sure to her and everyone else in the café tonight we look like we belong together, because why would a woman engaged to someone else be on a date with her ex-fiancé at their former favorite restaurant? I was thirty-seven when you left me. I was still young enough to have children. I’m forty-two years old now. Do you know what they call a pregnancy past forty, Miles? Geriatric. Do you know how high-risk geriatric pregnancies are? For the mother and the baby? You took so much from me, from us. What you were trying to do in the restaurant should have happened five years ago. You could have picked up the phone or taken leave and met me face to face and apologized to me. I’ve wanted to forgive you for years and now, I don’t know what I want. We live in the same city. When you retired, you could have come to my office, to my church, to my sister’s house, but you didn’t. I’m so stupid. I shouldn’t

have called you today. I'm sorry I ruined your expectations." The tears rolling down her face and falling to the sidewalk were a familiar sight to Miles. He had this same stricken, tearful look when he informed her he was leaving for California. She looked at him with disdain when she touched her belly, remembering the night she lost who they had created. Persephone was shocked when his arms wrapped around her and even more surprised when she let him hold her one last time. She needed to be held as she let this pain leave her body. She was not the only one who lost their child. He never said how he felt, but as he held her, she knew the pain was still raw within him after the simple misunderstanding with their naïve but sweet waitress tonight.

"I can't say the right words I owe you, but I will spend my lifetime showing you how I feel about you if you let me. I was younger back then. I had already been divorced once. I didn't know how to love you, especially after we lost it. I didn't know how to be a husband, let alone a father. I thought you would stay with me, not stay with your sister. I..." Persephone breaks free from his embrace.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Persephone pushed him away, taking a tissue from her purse to wipe her face, staring at him with disdain.

"You know. Even after we got engaged, you spent more and more time with Symphony and her kids after the miscarriage. You were distancing yourself from me before my orders changed." Miles knew getting defensive was not in his best interest, but he had felt this way for years. *I'm right, and she knows I'm right.*

Persephone walked further away from him and closer to the sea, listening to the waves lap at the shore. She took in a breath of sea air. The salt and the moisture rejuvenated her spirit. Miles walked up to her in silence.

“Miles, yes, I pulled away. You were terrified of being a father and relieved when that responsibility was no longer your future. And I have always taken care of Symphony and her kids. I needed to be loved after losing our baby. She was there for me in ways you couldn’t be. You’re the one who signed those papers and left.” *Was that too much? No. He deserves this. He really deserved this five years ago, but she would let her fury hit him like a hurricane.*

“No. I didn’t know how to be a father or a husband, for that matter. And yes, I was relieved. My old man hadn’t given me much of an example of how to be a father when I was growing up. He changed when my mom died when I was thirteen. I was there to hand him tools and take a punch when he was drunk and angry. That’s why I joined the Army straight out of high school. You knew that about me. I was the guy who could make you have fun when I was on leave, even when you just wanted to work. You captivated me. You were and still are, a stunning woman. I did not know why you were with me. When you showed me the pregnancy test, of course, I freaked out, but I never expected you would choose to stay here. Not with what all we had been through together. I’m sorry I couldn’t give you what you needed. I’m sorry I wasn’t enough. I’m sorry I didn’t know who to give you what you needed. And I will hate myself for the rest of my life for leaving you.” The truth flowed from Miles too quickly. His emotional dams were bursting. He flooded the air with all his heart had held since they drifted apart.

“I forgave you years ago, Miles. That’s the only way I could date John. I couldn’t love myself or someone else while hating you. But then the messages started. Why all the voicemails and messages? You didn’t come to me back then, but why did you not come and find me when you moved back to Charleston? I would have forgiven you face-to-face if that’s what this is about. Is that what this is all about, Miles? A plea for forgiveness and a fresh start? I can’t just be brought to humility and then drawn into your arms in ecstasy.” Persephone was drowning. They

were both lost in a sea of pain. She was looking for a lifeline. Something to cling on to. He was offering her a new future with him, but she wanted him to fix their past. She just wasn't sure anyone could repair what their past storms had swept away.

"I still love you. I never stopped loving you. I didn't leave you because of a miscarriage. I didn't leave you because I stopped loving you. I left to find a way to love you better. I left because I thought you would take my lead and come with me. You stayed. Your staying was your way of leaving. We can't change what we did, but we can change what we will do. Don't decide tonight, but I want you to marry me. I've never stopped wanting you to marry me. I'm here. I'm back. I'm not going anywhere. The doctor may love you now, but I loved you first. Let me love you again. That's my message and I will tell you every day for the rest of our lives if you let me." Miles did not know the man who was speaking like this. He was a mechanic who fixed broken machines, not a poet who waxed on about poetic things, but the truth was he had always loved her. His words were close to mending a broken heart.

"Thank you. I needed to hear you say all of that." *This is too much, but it's what I wanted five years ago.*

Persephone took in every word. She needed to hear all of this from him. Five years ago would have been best but tonight would give her soul rest. She didn't hate him, but their breakup was still an unhealed wound. The miscarriage happened. It just happened. Life often happens outside of our control. She wanted, no, she needed to be in control, but she was not in control tonight. She had accepted his proposal once before; would she leave John for Miles? John was a good man. He was just absent. They lived in the same city but saw less and less of each other. John was kind to her family. He was a staple in the community. John had been a workaholic before dating Persephone. He felt God gave him the will and the skill to heal others, and he

enjoyed his work and his time with Persephone. Deep down, she knew how John felt about her. It was his lack of presence lately that left her unsatisfied. Persephone and John had a wedding to salvage. Persephone and Miles had a past to overcome.

“Take your time.” Miles took her hand, walking her back to the car. He could tell she was overwhelmed. He was too. The tide of their emotions needed to subside before asking any more of her. As she and Miles walked, the sand on the wind stung her face. There was a storm brewing in the dark over the water just offshore. She shielded her eyes with her arm. Miles used his body to block the gusts as best he could. *It still feels good to be near him.*

Miles dropped Persephone off at Symphony’s house. She noticed John’s red Porsche Cayenne GTS in the driveway, instantly feeling guilty.

“I’ll call you, ok?” Persephone whispered the words as Miles pulled away without speaking, just letting the growl of his exhaust express his emotions.

Her nephew and nieces were still awake when the dark horse pulled out of the driveway. She took in the signs of life inside. Dirty kitchen with leftover pizza and plates in the sink. A messy living room with shoes and toys strewn about. They could clean in the morning. The house was still standing, despite the destructive force of a fifteen-year-old boy, and thirteen- and ten-year-old girls. John was not inside. Bittersweet relief washed over Persephone.

“Aunt Persephone. Who’s the man with the cool car?” Carol asked her with the innocence of a ten-year-old.

“Oh, he’s someone I used to know. My car broke down and he brought me home. Now off to bed.” Persephone smiled and rubbed her fingers through her niece’s blonde hair.



“Future Uncle John left Santa’s sleigh outside for you. He put the keys on top of the fridge.” Carol’s voice was sweet. She loved riding in Uncle John’s fast cars, especially the one he asked her to nickname when he bought it last Christmas.

“He’s so thoughtful. I needed a car to drive, didn’t I?” Persephone tried to hide her guilt while answering her niece.

“Yes. Hey, where were you? You usually only work this late during tax season?” Melody’s tone was accusatory, yet sincere in the perfect teen angst tone.

“Trying to plan a wedding. Ok. Time for bed y’all.” *Who’s wedding will I attend is still in question.* After their groans and protests, her nephew and nieces fell fast asleep. As the home grew quiet, Persephone gave in to the urge to clean the kitchen. As her hands worked, her mind was flooded with the events of the day. She and Miles had history, but did they have a future? John was who she was preparing to be with, but was he preparing to be with her? *God, my heart is drowning. Miles wants to love me like he should have all along. John’s car is here, but John isn’t.*

## Chapter 3

*Monday Misery*

“Dr. Noble, Symphony is here to see you. Shall I let her in?” Ann whispered, Dr. Noble’s sixty-year-old personal assistant. She was the guard that protected the three partners at Noble, Stern, & Weinberger Orthopedists. She knew that Dr. Noble needed his sleep after a 24-hour shift, but she also knew his fiancé’s sister would not show up unannounced without a reason. John raised his long arm above his head and held up three fingers. Ann knew Dr. Noble was one of less than 10% of the population that could function on less than five hours of sleep. She disappeared, turning the handle to close the door as gently as possible.

Dr. John Noble sat up on his couch after taking a nap. He brushed his chestnut brown hair with his hands behind his ears and squeezed the bridge of his nose with his fingers. Normally he conducted 2-4 procedures a day, besides rounds at his clinical practice, but to prepare for taking a two-week vacation for his wedding and honeymoon, he was operating 6 to 7 days a week. His partners were finally ready to bring on new orthopedic surgeons into their growing practice, but not until Dr. Noble was available for supervision. John glanced at his phone. *8:07 am. I must have slept here last night. I need to go home and shower before the 11:15 ACL repair with that, running back from the Panthers. 13 missed calls and 15 text messages from Persephone!* A former starting pitcher for the University of South Carolina Gamecocks. John had breezed through the pre-med program before declining to be drafted in the 7<sup>th</sup> round by the Oakland Athletics but opted instead to pursue medical school at Vanderbilt University. He had three Tommy John surgeries before he completed his senior year, which drew his interest in Orthopedic medicine. John was a highly sought after surgeon in athletic circles. He had the luxury of drawing high-paying clients to his beloved Charleston. When he wasn’t operating, he

was fishing or playing golf. Family was something he was not used to, but he loved Persephone and she loved her little sister. Per his mantra, John would do the right thing, the most efficient way he saw fit.

“Dr. Noble, Symphony. I’ll have fresh coffee and water in five minutes, sir.” Ann held the door for Symphony to step in. She was still in her scrubs from the night before. Ann had heard the OBGYN was quite busy. Hopefully, everything was ok.

After Ann leaves, Symphony gives John a quick hug. At six foot five, he towered over his five-foot-two soon-to-be sister-in-law. She takes a seat in a fine chrome and tan leather chair opposite John from the couch.

“I know you need sleep, John. I hate to barge in like this. Did you receive any of the messages?” Symphony seemed nervous, like something was wrong. She quickly re-twisted her long black hair into a ponytail.

“I have not read all of them. I was in between surgeries yesterday and most of the night. Is everything alright?” John unlocked the screen saver on his phone to read messages.

“Several things happened yesterday you need to know about, John.” Symphony said softly, trying to redirect John’s attention from his phone to no avail. She would normally call him Dr. Noble while at work; however they were soon to be family, maybe, and he had insisted to be addressed by his first name when they were in private conversation.

“Something about needing new shoes that fit better, replacing a dress, and finding the family necklace. Oh, and her car broke down. Is that about it?” *Shoes and dresses could be purchased, rushed if need be. We have the money. Cars could be replaced, even ordered from their phone if need be. Like how I ordered the new Land Rover Defender 110 last month. But the*

*necklace. That would take some searching.* What devastated Persephone barely bothered John. He saw problems as a necessary part of life. Work around or through what one can or if need be, cut out what shouldn't be there.

“Yes. About that. She and I have been talking via text. She was really upset yesterday.” Symphony was politely interrupted by Ann bringing a platter with water, coffee, protein bars, and fruit. *Just say it when Ann leaves.*

“Her transmission just blew up. I told her we needed to replace that vehicle years ago, but you know how she is. I dropped off the Porsche for her to drive when she didn't answer her phone. Should I call her now?” John takes a careful sip of coffee, decaf, just enough to wake him up, but not too much to give him shaking hands. He selects an apple and a vanilla protein bar to start breakfast. *I probably have time to hit the gym, shower, see Persephone, and then be back in time for the eleven o'clock appointment.*

“John. Her car can be replaced. We have another problem.” Symphony really wanted a cup of coffee, a proper cup, not this half-calf nonsense John drank. *I could actually go for a stronger drink.*

“I already have a wedding present for her. I've sent payments to the venue, the photographer, the video crew, the caterer, the DJ, the florist...” John was thinking out loud, mainly having a conversation with himself. Symphony speaks up when John takes a bite of a Honey Crisp apple.

“I sold it.” Symphony looks guilty, sick, heartbroken, and on the verge of tears all at the same time. Years of guilt wash over her. She never thought she would confess her family crimes to her future brother-in-law.

“You sold what?” John stated bluntly, setting the apple on the coffee table between them. His manner was direct, face void of emotion. John was a realist.

“I had no choice. Miles had left Persephone heartbroken and miserable. She swore she was never getting married. The insurance money was gone after Frank died. I couldn’t ask her for more money. I had thousands of dollars in old family jewelry that no one was ever going to wear. My girls were too young to care about family heirlooms... I was so stupid. She has the empty jewelry box with her. She knows something is wrong.” The tears fell down Symphony’s face. Her voice decrescendos into silence. *I’ll lose Persephone now. It truly will be just me and the kids. She’ll never forgive me.*

John allows the tone of the room, the gentle hum of the computers, and the light wafting of the air conditioner to be the only sounds permeating the room. Symphony wipes the tears from her eyes, too ashamed to look at John’s face. Dreading sharing this news with her sister. A symbol of love her family has cherished for more than one hundred years is gone, because she was too desperate to keep her family together on her own. The blue sapphire and polished pearls stressed the feminine beauty, southern grace, and sacred vows of her family’s brides for generations. John gave her the space she needed to process what had been hidden.

“Life happens. You chose to do what was best for you and your family at the time. Persephone can forgive you. And I can purchase a new necklace.” John’s words were soft, sincere, and albeit a bit ignorant.

“John, the necklace cannot be replaced. Where will you find French Polynesian pearls and a sapphire pendant from India, gifts to our great, great grandfather for his bravery in the First World War. I can’t...” Symphony sobbed in rhythm with her broken, beating heart. Her life had

been a series of disasters her sister had cleaned up. Only this time, she caused the disaster by trying to do too much on her own. *I just wanted to prove that I could handle my life without anyone helping me. My reluctance to accept her charity will ruin my sister's wedding. I wish Frank was here to hold me.*

Wisdom and medical prowess were wells deep within John's mind and heart. He gave his life to helping others regain theirs. He rose and retrieved a tissue box from his office closet, one with a print of the beach, dunes, and the sea. Symphony took the box as if it were the cherished family heirloom she had recklessly sold. *Life would be easier as a forty-five-year-old bachelor, but my life is unfathomably better with Persephone in it.*

"Who did you sell the necklace to? Where did you sell it?" John took a seat, sipping coffee. This was not an emotional process. For him, the search was a task to be calculated and executed with skill. He simply needed to know where to begin. He pulled a leather-bound journal from the coffee table and prepared to take notes. *Less than thirty days to find a necklace that was sold five years ago.*

"I sold the necklace to Townsquare Jewelers. They paid the full appraisal amount. I think the owner's name is Harry... Do we tell Persephone?" Symphony's confession released a small amount of guilt. At least her future brother-in-law knew her sins. Symphony's phone began to buzz. She looked at the text message. "WHERE ARE YOU? – P"

"Let me speak with the jeweler. You take Persephone out to find a new dress and shoes. She has enough to worry about." John rose to gather his things to leave, allowing Symphony to leave first. Symphony left dragging a burden. John left on a mission.

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“Thank God you’re here. We are all dressed. Our first dress appointment is at 10:45 am at Monroe’s Bridal Boutique. Are you going to change quickly?” Persephone met Symphony at the front door. Symphony did not meet her gaze.

“I need a shower and food. Then we can leave. It’s not even 9 am yet. We have time.” Symphony walked upstairs to clean up.

“Why do you need another dress, Persephone? Mom said you looked like a princess in the dress you already got?” Carol asked with the sincerity of a ten-year-old. She had paused eating eggs and grits with buttered toast. She was still innocent as a child should be, yet she was close to becoming a young woman.

“The storm messed up the shop and her dress. It’s cool. Aunt Persephone has plenty of money to buy a new one.” Quipped Melody. The sass of thirteen was on full display as she continued to scroll through Pinterest on her phone while eating a spoonful of frosted flakes.

“Melody. Mind your manners, young lady. Yes, I have the means to purchase a new dress, but a wedding dress is a gown of honor. A lady should wear a dress that highlights her God-given features and draws the attention of the man she intends to spend the rest of her life with. My dress had the perfect amount of lace, pearls, fit, and form, with a low cut back and beautiful train. Designer dresses like that are not sold off the shelf. I’ve never seen anything like it. Take smaller bites, lest you choke. And you know there are no electronics at the table.” Most of what Persephone had said was missed completely by Melody, until Persephone snatched the phone from her grip. The protest was short-lived because they knew to obey Aunt Persephone. Carol was listening.

“Your dress had a choo-choo train?” She blurted out, then giggled at the thought of a train circling a bride and groom. The three of them shared a friendly laugh.

“When we get to the dress shop, I’ll show you the trains on the dresses,” Persephone reassured Carol. Carol was now more excited to go shopping, especially if there were trains to play with.

“Is mom home? I need to ask her something.” Frankie came thundering down the stairs. He had developed the habit of half-running everywhere around the house. His thundering footsteps echoed through the house.

“She is. She is taking a shower. Stop running through the house. Come, eat. I need to make a call.” Persephone ushered the lumbering fifteen-year-old into the kitchen. He was almost six feet tall, but still lean, like his father, Frank, had been. The six eggs, four pieces of bacon, and two pieces of toast, all covered in red eye gravy, would be his first breakfast. Persephone excused herself from the kitchen, placing Melody’s phone in her back pocket, then taking her own phone out to make the call.

She turned on the porch fan before stepping out onto the hardwood facing the cul-de-sac. The humidity was thick as breakfast gravy. The neighborhood Symphony lived in was quaint and relatively new. She took a seat in a white rocking chair and then dialed John.

“It’s good to hear your voice. I’m sorry I’ve been so busy.” The Bluetooth in his Mercedes G Wagon worked flawlessly.

“It’s... fine. Yesterday was awful. I needed you and couldn’t reach you.” Persephone wanted to yell at him, but she knew how busy he had been. *Still, he has been distancing himself. Maybe he’s having second thoughts, too.*



“I was called in to assist on a spinal late yesterday or I would have been available. The surgery took several hours longer than expected, but I feel we made the right decisions yesterday. Still, you know if something urgent happens, call Ann. She’ll get a message to me as quickly as she can.” Guilt crept up on Persephone. Shoes that didn’t fit, and a ripped dress would probably not have seemed important enough for Ann to interrupt a life-changing spinal surgery. *Ann would have made personal arrangements for the broken-down car.*

“I’m taking care of everything. You have enough to do.” She didn’t mean to sound so cold. The stress was bringing out the worst in her. *I always feel the responsibility to take care of everything for everyone. I have a hard time asking for help, but I asked John for help, and he was too busy to answer the phone. Busy for the right reason is still too busy.*

“What can I do? You have my attention.” John wanted to tell Persephone what he would do, but she needed her space. Being single late in life meant the two of them liked their independence. While waiting for her response, John turned his truck into a public parking lot near Charleston Town Square with the historic jewelry store just in sight.

“Nothing new. Just make sure you and your best man have your suits ready. I’ll be staying with Symphony and the kids for a couple of days. She’s working doubles to take extra time off for the wedding. It will just be easier if I stay with her to get everything ready in time for the wedding.” Persephone didn’t want to go home. Their townhome felt like an apartment complex where they passed each other between shifts. Not until she sorted things out. Her heart wanted everything, all at once. Even though it was unrealistic. *I can’t let him see me. He’ll know something is wrong.*

“Okay. If that’s what you want to do. Are we going to take you out car shopping this week or would you like me to rent one?” John tried to hide the frustration in her voice. She had been avoiding him, almost resenting him for no reason, for the last couple of months. She had a way of demanding attention from a distance. *Is this wedding stress or something more?*

“John. I’ve got it covered. I’ll call you later.” Persephone ended the call before John had a chance to respond. She walked inside to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of sweet iced tea. *I can’t be with him right now. I just can’t. I need time.*

“I’m ready to go. Oh, what did you do?” Symphony read Persephone like a good book. Symphony stopped halfway in the kitchen. The stress in the room was palpable. Persephone was sipping iced tea, wishing it was Long Island Iced Tea. And Persephone was not a day drinker.

“Can we talk about it on the way?” Persephone knew what she was about to share would command Symphony’s attention for the rest of the day.

“We can talk about it now, outside. Let’s go.” The walk to the porch was timid, like walking on new ice over an old pond in early winter somewhere far north of Charleston. Persephone sat in a rocking chair and forced herself to become entranced with a neighbor planting monkey grass along the sidewalk to their front door.

“Perennials would look so much better than the monkey grass.” Persephone’s taste in landscaping was far from what she really needed to discuss.

“Are you going to join the landscaper next door, or are you going to talk to me? What’s going on with you?” Symphony was not accustomed to playing the part of the big sister. This role was not suited for someone with her personality. She preferred to take care of people who needed the help. Persephone needed no one.

“I don’t know if I should share. I don’t know what you’ll think of me.” Persephone sipped on her tea, still looking off in the distance. She was trying to save face. What she had done and what she was feeling was completely out of character for her. She was a proud Southern woman. She was not proud of stirring up an old relationship with an ex-boyfriend. *Just tell her. She knows how it feels to belonged to be loved by someone who left. That’s awful, Persephone! Frank didn’t choose to have a heart attack. Pull yourself together.*

“When my car broke down. I called him to come pick me up.” Persephone turned her body more toward her sister, who was pacing on the porch. The creaking boards and summer breeze were ominous tones against the padding of Symphony’s feet marching back and forth.

“You called HIM!” Symphony’s crescendo gave the landscaping neighbor pause. Symphony was picking up her pace as she spoke. She was trying to hold back her emotions and let Persephone explain herself.

“He repairs broken cars. It seemed logical at the time.”

“Liar! It was an excuse to finally return the call of the man whose number you should have blocked ages ago. He already broke your heart once before. You are engaged to a doctor! A doctor Persephone! Do you know how many women would love to be in the position you are in? You are going to ruin your second wedding by chasing after an old flame that doesn’t know to leave the past in the past!” Symphony was in a rapid accelerando now. She simply could not contain herself. She had helped her sister pick up the pieces of her life when she was struggling to raise three kids on her own after Frank died. *What are you doing right now?*

“Maybe I should have left with him years ago. He came back to Charleston. I would have come back with him.” Persephone’s voice was broken, sounding small, guilty, the ritardando of a sad song. *Do I still love Miles?*

“If you left with him, you would be divorced. He spent most of his time overseas on deployments. You would have been miserable, lonely, angry. Just like you are now. You can’t stand being lonely, yet you force the people who care about you to leave you alone.” Symphony spat words at her sister in rapid fire. She deserved the lashing her younger sister was giving her.

“You don’t know that! We could have been happy!” Persephone was grasping at lies that were lost in the winds of her emotions. *I will always love a part of him.*

“He proposed out of guilt when you lost the baby.” Symphony came to an abrupt rest in her relenting. *I didn’t mean to sound this mean.*

“I did everything I could to keep it. He did everything he could to keep me. The proposal was a band to tie me to him.” Persephone took her sister’s voice of truth like an arrow to the heart. The truth was piercing.

“No. You don’t get to wallow in your guilt. As an OBGYN RN, a widow, and as your sister, you know I understand completely what happened. That is not what I mean, Persephone! He proposed to you out of guilt! You were dating a soldier who never wanted to settle. This is what you told me five years ago when he left. What’s changed? Was he lying then, or are you lying to yourself now?” Symphony wanted to embrace her sister. She knew the agony Persephone had lived through. The guilt of becoming pregnant out of wedlock. The humility to prepare for their lives to change when welcoming a newborn. Then the devastation of losing a child she never got to hold in her arms but had held in her womb.

Persephone stood to her feet. She was done speaking for the day. She simply took her empty glass of tea inside. The two faced each other like gladiators sparing in the colosseum using words like weapons.

“Aunt Persephone, do you think I look as pretty as you?” Carol was wearing a white lace Easter dress that was adorned with yellow Easter lilies. The smile and hope on her face, the longing of a child to hear adoration from someone they loved, broke the battle on the porch.

“No.” Persephone was crying. Her heart was breaking. She couldn’t find the rest of her words.

“What?” Carol began to tear up. She hadn’t meant to upset her aunt. Not today. But telling a ten-year-old girl she wasn’t as pretty was cruel, even for the bride-to-be.

“PERSPEHONE!” Symphony had never thought about killing her sister, but she had had enough.

“You look stunning! I think you look more lovely than I will ever be. Come hug me.” Persephone spoke with tears slowly falling from her eyes. Carol embraced her with warmth only innocence and true love can share. Symphony hugged them both. Persephone let the frustration she was feeling toward her sister go, as did Symphony. *If I still love Miles, why do I feel so guilty? If I’m so in love with John, why am I having second thoughts?*

## Chapter 4

*Tuesday Tears*

“I have an update on your vehicle, Miss Bordeaux. Three to four weeks for a remanufactured transmission. The normal cost with a 3-year/36-month warranty is \$8,999.00; however Mr. Anderson said there will be no charge.” Vince cleared his throat after sharing the good news.

“No. Absolutely not. I am not some love-stricken pitiful poor ex-girlfriend he can win me over with his pocketbook. Do I make myself clear?” Persephone was fuming at the offer.

Vince thought long and hard about how to answer her. She was a tough lady, turning down free labor and repair work. He did what his mother had told him and stuck to the truth.

“No, Miss Bordeaux. I am not clear. Do you want Mr. Anderson to pay you to repair your vehicle?” Vince was as steady as a banjo string during a bluegrass festival.

Persephone stopped trying to pull the lace-up strings on the back of the wedding gown she was trying on. Vince was caught in the middle of an old lover's quarrel. She shouldn't take it out on him, even if he was a man.

“Vince. Thank you for being honest with me. I will call Mr. Anderson myself. I expect a call with an exact date when the work will be finished. Do I make myself clear, sir?” With a last jump and lunge, she pulls the dress closed. This dress had been made for a young woman who did not like to breathe.

“Yes, Miss Bordeaux. Have a wonderful day.” Vince let out a long sigh. Of all the customers he dealt with, dealing with his boss's ex' was wearing on his nerves.

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Ann stepped into Dr. Noble's office after politely knocking three times out of rhythm, knowing the out-of-place noise would break her boss's attention free from whatever he was working on.

"Dr. Noble. Coach Michaels is here to see you. He brought wedding gifts. He's offered to take you to lunch." Ann knows how Dr. Noble will answer before she asks. She still asks, like any priceless assistant would.

"Let him in Ann. Do you want us to bring you back anything?" Dr. Noble finishes his patient's notes without looking at Ann. The sound may have captured his attention, but his patient came first.

"No, sir. I'll take the gifts to your car, if you like." Ann already had her hand on the door handle, waiting to return to her desk.

"I'll take care of it, Ann. Thank you. I'll bring back a slice of cheesecake from the steakhouse." Ann leaves quickly and quietly, happy her boss remembers her love of fresh cheesecake.

Coach Michaels enters John's office like a bear walking after a kill dragging a wheeled cooler long enough they could both fit inside.

"What are you dragging?" John hugs his buddy, admiring the new cooler on the office floor. Coach hands him an envelope.

“Go on, go on. This can’t wait until we’re on the golf course. You are gonna get a kick out of this!” Coach slaps John on the back, his hand taking up a third of John’s back. Coach stands, waiting for John to read the good news.

“The South Carolina Blue Marlin Championship. What did you do Clint?” John can’t believe what he’s holding in his hands.

“I signed us up! Marcus, Greg, me, and you chasing the big blues buddy. The tournament is next May and you’re on the reel.” The Coach is beaming, knowing how much his former starting picture loves deep sea fishing.

“If the tournament isn’t until May, why did you bring me a cooler today?” The thought of being out on the open water reeling in a sea monster overtakes John’s normal stoic demeanor.

“Well, we have to warm up, don’t we? So, I bought a new boat. I’ll dock it here in Charleston and we can go out often as we want.” Coach helps himself to a bottle of water on John’s coffee table.

“The new contract from the Gamecocks must be one for the record books if you already bought the boat.” John takes a seat on his couch, opposite his former head coach and friend.

“I’ve already bought a new place here, too. Bringing home a national championship pays dividends, my friend. Enough about me. You excited about Myrtle Beach? You know, I think I got shot at beating you with my new clubs.” The laughter erupting from Coach spreads to John.

“That championship was sweet. And yes, you always have a shot, but if you’re the one holding the clubs, it will be a long shot to beat me on a golf course.” John put the envelope in his top desk drawer.



“You say that, but I almost beat you at Pinehurst last summer.” Coach eggs his buddy on.

“I spotted you 10 strokes, and you still took a half dozen mulligans. Stick to baseball, Coach.” John sits down in his office chair, the high of seeing an old friend wearing off.

“What’s wrong with you? Sad we can’t go fishing today?” Coach flips from Jubilee to focus the instant he reads the look on John’s face.

“Things are stressful between Persephone and I.” John’s flat tone returns.

“Of course they are. You’re getting married. All three of my weddings were stressful. You set a record of being single for 45 years of your life. You never settle, and Persephone is an amazing woman. Not to mention smoking hot. You’ve built a successful practice. She’s built a successful accounting firm. Two kingdoms are merging. What did you expect?” Coach leans forward, trying to coach up his former starting pitcher.

“That’s the problem. She’s distant. I expected her to be upset that her dress was ruined and her shoes did not fit. It’s like she’s pulling away from me.” John’s voice trails off, not wanting to say what else might cause him concern.

“Ha! You’ve been single far too long. A wedding dress is ruined and you “expect her to be upset” about it. My first wife would have burned down the bridal shop that let her dress get ruined and gave her the wrong-sized shoes. Women plan their wedding from the time they are little girls. Do you honestly expect a lady as precise as she is would be calm and melancholy, like you, when two key components to her wedding plans are taken off the table?” The coach was up on his feet, really coaching John. It was like they were in a tie-ball game years earlier when the Coach needed a few more innings out of his starter.

“No. I understand the importance of her dress and shoes. There’s more. She’s been receiving messages, but not answering them. I first noticed messages from her ex-fiance on her phone about four months ago. She was in the shower when your phone went off. It was still unlocked because she was streaming a song list to our shower speakers. I thought it was her sister or one of her girlfriends sending her a message. We’ve never had trust issues before. It was an old photograph of her and her ex on the pier with the question, “Meet me tonight?” John shook his head, closing his eyes, his nearly photographic memory recalling each message in order.

“You were spying on your girlfriend’s phone?” Coach leans back, uncertain where this conversation was headed.

“I wasn’t spying. She left the phone unlocked. Anyway, there were messages going months back from him to her, but she had not responded to any of his messages, at least on the apps I checked.” John felt more uneasy, voicing the concern he had been hiding for months.

John continued, “She’s been staying at her sister’s this week. I know they’re close, but I can’t shake the feeling she’s hiding something.” *She has to be seeing him, answering those messages, somehow. In person, most likely.*

The Coach sits on the edge of the couch, facing his friend. “That would burn my biscuits, too. Well, have you hired a pi?”

“A what?” John was too deep in his thoughts to comprehend the coach's inference.

“A private investigator. I’ve got the number of a great agency. We hired them after ex-wife number two tried to go for way more alimony than she’s worth. I could prove she had been cheating on me and was deep in gambling debt. ESPN ran with the story after my PI leaked the

news. Saved me big time in court. I even got primary custody of the kids. I hated to do it, but she was making decisions that were hurting our family.” The Coach rubs his palms together as if washing his hands.

“I’ve chosen to give her space. If she is cheating, the truth will come out. I just can’t imagine taking it this far. A week before our wedding.” John grabs his phone and keys, standing to leave.

“Don’t you worry. I’ll text Jullian to see how quickly they can get on this.” Coach pulls out his phone, ready to begin an investigation.

“I appreciate it Clint, but no, not yet. She’ll tell me if something’s wrong. I know her. I will keep the plans we have made. I’ve made big moves for us she does not know about. It would be a shame if she were to ruin it.” John looks at pictures on his phone.

“I’d use the private investigation, but this is your first wedding. You can make your own mistakes. Tell me you’ve at least prepared a prenup.” The Coach takes the door handle, waiting for John’s response.

“No prenup. I’m all in. I’m a surgeon, I take educated risks. She’s worth the risk to me.” John’s jaw was set. He was committed. Coach Michaels knew John had made a choice. The two men leave John’s office and the long cooler behind.

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Persephone waddled out of her dressing room into the open viewing area to search for assistance to help her out of the torture wrap she was wearing. Carol tried to pull the strings

down, but they were stuck. Melody was staring at a young adult novel on her eReader, and Frankie was falling in love with the twenty-something-year-old red-headed fashion assistant Amanda.

“All me Persephone. These samples can be a chore to take off.” Amanda quickly undid the lock latch and helped Persephone back into her dressing area.

“That dress is far from what should highlight Aunt Persephone’s figure, don’t you think?” Frankie tried to sound intelligent in front of the spectacular college beauty.

“Well said. You have great taste.” Amanda stroked her finger nails on Frankie’s cheek under his ear before sauntering off to grab a new batch of dresses to try on.

“What did you say and where is my son?” Symphony shook her head as she walked into Persephone’s dressing room.

“That’s sixteen. Sixteen dresses and nothing even close to what I want.” Persephone took a sip of complimentary champagne. “This is a pleasant touch.”

“It’s your fifth glass. I’m glad I’m driving. Can you not decide, because you can’t find a replacement dress or because you are having second thoughts about who you should marry?” Symphony takes three of the dresses from Amanda. Then helped Persephone try on the next dress. Amanda shows a look of concern. Brides second-guessing their engagement was a regular topic of conversation in these dressing rooms, but a middle-aged bride having to purchase a second wedding dress was rare. She would have to hustle for this commission.

“Both. It’s both. I don’t know what to do?” Persephone falls into a leather loveseat without spilling her drink, admiring two of the dresses she had yet to try on.

“You had a four-year-long relationship with Miles before he proposed. Half of that time, he was deployed. I think the only reason you stayed together that long was because of the amount of time you had to be apart from one another. It was exciting, and hot, to be with him, without having to be with him all the time.” Symphony shared the words Persephone had shared with her after she and Miles broke up the last time, they were together. She wasn’t sure if five drinks in Persephone was still paying attention.

“I like these two. They look close to the first dress I bought from her. I never got around to buying a dress when I was engaged to Miles. And now he’s trying to buy me off by repairing my car.” Persephone finishes the last of her fifth glass and begins trying on a new gown. She stumbles standing up before trying on the next gown.

“Buying you off? How so?” Symphony was caught between keeping up with Persephone’s past and making plans for her present. Amanda brought two more glasses into the dressing area, but not before Symphony waved her off and mouthed the word water. *Persephone only drinks when she is feeling out of control.*

Outside is the viewing area. Frankie tries to catch Amanda’s attention. “I’ll have one.”

“Not today. Not for at least four more years. How old are you, stud?” Amanda let the question roll off her tongue.

Frankie enjoyed being called a stud. He did not need the liquid courage, he just needed to hear sweet words from a beautiful woman. “I’m old enough to ask you out.”

“No, you’re not. You’re fifteen! She’s way too old for you, Frankie. She’s got to be like twenty-something!” Carol ruined the mood just by sharing her honest opinion. Carol laughed and switched seats, slightly confused at the variety of uncomfortable seats in the viewing area.

“Look me up in five years Frankie.” Amanda grinned and made her way back to the sales office to grab water for the bride and maid of honor.

“What are you doing? I’m trying here?” Frankie held up his hands. It was tough being the only male in the family.

“Uh, stud is it? It looks like you were trying to get a young woman arrested because news flash, you are minor and she’s an adult. Ugh, such a male thing to do.” Melody never took her eyes from her ereader, but the jabs at her brother stung.

Frankie gave up for the day. He took a Bridal magazine and a seat facing the window. *I’ll be back to look her up in five years. I’ve never been called a stud before.*

Persephone strides into the viewing area as Symphony takes pictures of the train and the back of the dress. The white satin mermaid dress wrapped around Persephone before gracefully spilling out into a lace train in the shape of a Magnolia flower around her. *I like this dress more than the first.* Carol is gleaming at her aunt. Melody smiles politely, then returns to her story. Frankie turns in his chair, watching Amanda's hair bounce as he enters the viewing area.

“Is this the dress?” Amanda knew the look in Persephone’s eyes, but she had to hear Persephone say.

“Can you have my dress ready in less than a week?” Persephone said flatly.

“We can. This designer is a Charleston local. We’ll make initial measurements today; you can try on your gown in two weeks. A small rush fee will be necessary to have the dress fitted in time for the wedding.” Amanda smiled politely. She knew Persephone was out of options and

from the looks of the giant ring on her finger, spending over ten thousand on a designer wedding dress should not be a problem.

Persephone walked around the viewing area, the alcohol aiding her sway, her imagination running away with her. She stopped again in front of the mirror with her eyes closed. She found the dress. Now who was she going to marry?

“Yes. This is my dress!” All the women celebrated, even Melody. Frankie lost interest when Amanda began taking measurements of Aunt Persephone. Symphony forces her sister to drink water. Persephone’s phone rings as Amanda takes the final measurements.

*Never call Miles Anderson* displayed on Persephone’s caller id. *Now, I have to address this.*

“Amanda, if you will take a look at the final fit for my lovely bridal party, I’m going to change and get some fresh air.” Persephone makes her way to her changing area without waiting for a response. Symphony follows her sister to help her out of the wedding gown.

“It must be nice having a fiancé call to check on you from time to time,” Amanda mentions half-heartedly as she makes detailed notes for the designer.

Persephone is surprised by the innocent comment. *Yes, it would be nice.*

“That wasn’t John calling, was it?” Symphony carefully whispered the words so that just the two of them could hear.

“No, it’s Miles. It must be about the car. I’ll give him a quick call while I get some air. The champagne has gotten the best of me.” Persephone dresses quickly without trying to engage in further conversation with Symphony.

Outside, Persephone walks down the block to a coffee shop, ordering an Americano with an extra shot of espresso, before taking a seat outside to call Miles. She lets the coffee cool while she rings her past.

“I would appreciate it if you would not berate my staff. Yell at me if you want. You were ok at that before.” Miles grunted in his frustration, choosing to stop talking rather than go on about how upset his best assistant manager was after being yelled at by his boss' ex-girlfriend. Persephone sips from her coffee, choosing to hold her tongue, even though the alcohol in her system begs her to make a scene and unload her emotions on Miles. She couldn't help feeling uncomfortable speaking to her ex after selecting her wedding dress, but she was chasing something she couldn't see and wasn't sure what she was feeling, but knew she needed to keep searching.

“Miles, I will apologize to the young man, but you should know I am not some single woman who needs your charity. I am a business owner and have the means to handle my own bills. Thank you very much. You'll not win me again by trying to buy me off.” *What did I just say? Do I want him to win me again?*

“I know you are not a woman to be bought off. I know you are into time together and not just stuff. My intentions were pure. I figured I owed you more than a few grand after all the stress I put you through when we split up. So I want to make things up to you, starting tonight. Let me take you out to Edisto Beach. I'll bring a picnic. We can just talk. Get it all out. And spend some much-needed time together. I've missed you.” Miles meant every word. He had been missing her.



Persephone has an incoming call from John. She stares at her phone. For a moment, she wishes she could just merge the calls and merge both men she loved. John for his practicality and Miles for his danger. She sends John to voicemail, taking a moment to make sure his call is over, before responding to Miles.

“I am not some young girl you can make out with on the beach, Miles Anderson. I don’t want to just relieve our past. I want to see if we have a future. I can’t live through you leaving me again.” Persephone knew she needed to settle this, or she would always wonder if they were truly meant to be together.

“I didn’t leave you. You stayed, but I came back. Let’s not do this now. Tonight. Please?” Miles knew better than to try to argue with a woman with a broken heart.

“I don’t know. I’ll text you in an hour. I must get back to make sure everyone’s dresses fit properly.” Persephone knew how ridiculous these words had to be coming from her mouth, but she truly had just told an ex-fiancé she would message him about continuing their affair after she made sure her bridal party was prepared for her wedding to her real fiancé.

“I’ll be ready at 5pm. You can message me anytime you want. My calendar is cleared for you.” Miles hung up the phone before she could respond. He knew she would be mad. He was going to be ready for a date before she was. He also knew he would continue to find ways to keep her interested.

Persephone took her time walking back to the boutique. Her heart was racing, somehow broken and elated at the same time. She tried calling John, but was again sent directly to voicemail. She didn’t bother leaving a message. *I’m done leaving messages. If I am important to him, he can be the one to call me.*

## Chapter 5

*Wednesday Wanting*

The fine oak and brass finishings of the historical jewelry store. Near the center of the store, a young man was seated looking through the jeweler's loupe at a one-carat engagement ring. His hand was trembling, making the examination of the few flaws in the precious stone nearly impossible. He was barely listening to the pretty brunette describe the color, cut, clarity, and carat weight of the center stone. He knew he was holding the ring that would change his future forever. Across the store, a short elderly jeweler was helping a woman a decade younger select a fine watch for her husband's retirement. Dr. Noble shifts in his leather seat in the private viewing area with the store owner.

"Dr. Noble. This is highly irregular. In fifty years of serving the Charleston community, I rarely have been called upon to locate a previously sold item. Based on the many pictures of this heirloom and given enough time to source the materials. I could recreate this necklace for you in 3-4 weeks." Mr. Goldstein's weather face carried a sincere look of honesty. He was pleading with a respectable client, who was asking for an unreasonable request.

"Irregular is not impossible. I only ask that you express to your client the importance of this family heirloom. I could pay for a new necklace, but you and I both know the importance of family, heritage, and legacy. I will gladly pay to purchase the original, as well as the creation of a replacement for your client, but I must have the original. The original in two weeks." Dr. Noble keeps his poise. This negotiation was more than a business transaction. His years in the operating theater had taught him precision matters. Mr. Goldstein was a family man who valued his

reputation and family equally. Profiting from resaling a former item and form the creation of a new product was attractive to the most scrupulous sales professional.

“Dr. Noble, let me sell you a fine watch as well to remember the time you convinced me to risk losing a wealthy client for an old family piece.” Mr. Goldstein only half meant he wanted to sell Dr. Noble a watch. He ran his hand over his beard several times. This was a tall order from a tall man.

“You have a client to track down, Mr. Goldstein. The clock is ticking. I must go.” Dr. Noble stood quickly, shaking the shop owner's hand before he realized the client was leaving.

“Dr. Noble, I meant no offense. Sir, please. The clients who purchased the necklace do not sell their assets. I will present your offer; however I cannot guarantee your satisfaction. You have my word.” Mr. Goldstein walked to the door and unlocked it.

“I have faith in your abilities to close this deal in person, Mr. Goldstein. Your fee should increase the faster you close.” Dr. Noble shook the salesman's hand, harder than a surgeon normally would.

“Gott helf mir. God help me. Agreed.” Mr. Goldstein looks up at Dr. Noble as they shake hands. *In another life, instead of medicine, he would make a good businessman.*

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John unlocks the door to his and Persephone's townhouse. Persephone had purchased this place years before she and John were together. The townhouse was a mile from Symphony's. His house was closer to the hospital, but further away from Symphony and the kids. The air was

absent of warmth or the scent of a woman. She's been gone for several days at least. He takes a few minutes to unload the dishwasher and wipe down the sink. The place barely looked lived in. Every book was in place. The couch looked showroom new. How long had it been since they had dinner here together, eight or nine months? John leaves to fetch boxes of the things she had left at his house. She had sent him a text message to bring over what he could find. She had not made up her mind on where they would live together after they married. Unbenounst to Persephone, John had sold his house a few weeks ago. He had sold most of his furniture, storing a few items in a climate-controlled storage unit until they could move into a new, larger home. John leaves the boxes in the spare bedroom. On his second trip to his vehicle, he retrieves a bouquet of five dozen roses, which he leaves on her kitchen counter. The aroma of fresh flowers fills the main living area. John is careful to place the grand gesture of love in the perfect position for her to see it the next time she walks in the door. Months ago, she had become more guarded in their pre-marital counseling with their pastor. Guarded was her default position. Pending nuptials can draw any number of emotions from men or women. Persephone seemed to want John's help, but her personal space at the same time. She was being indecisive, especially this close to the wedding. He writes a note, leaving it leaning against the red and white bouquet. He was leaving for a golf trip to Myrtle Beach with his bachelor party in the morning. John wanted to see her before he left, but she was not answering her phone. As he locks the door, he can't help but wonder if he should have done more.

"Hi." John smiled, listening to a familiar voice.

"Yes, I can meet you in the morning before I leave." John hangs up his phone, opens his contacts, and stops before selecting Persephone's number. *No, I'll let her call me. She has enough on her plate. She will call after she sorts through her emotions.*

John's Uber driver pulls up in a silver Camry, taking him toward the beach. John reads messages from his bachelor's party, responding to them all on the short drive.

"Drop me off just up at the private beach sign. I want to take a walk on the beach before dinner. Wait here for a few minutes, I'll pay you for your time." John points out the tall sign at the edge of large dunes.

The private island was home to just a few families, leaving the beach quiet, save a few crabs along the edge of the water. John stares at pictures on his phone of the first beach picnic he took her on. It was so windy her blonde hair was everywhere. Persephone thought she looked unlady like. John was captivated by her. She was intelligent, breathtaking, mature yet playful, a family woman, and a business owner. They complimented each other so well. They shared values and philosophies about life, but she was less a career professional and more focused on work-life balance. In the time they had been dating, she regularly interrupted his workaholic tendencies with weekend cruises, drives to the mountains, and dinner dates at new restaurants. She kept the immediate plans while he liked to plan big events, like the trip to Nappa Valley they had taken the year before. He had three grand surprises prepared for her. If she would be around to receive them was up to her. *God, I can't understand what she is feeling, but you do. I trust you, but right now, I don't trust her.*

## Chapter 6

*Thursday Thoughts*

“Come on. I have something I want you to see Don’t fall. Don’t fall!” Miles exclaimed as he led a blindfolded Persephone to a picnic setup on Edisto Beach, their favorite place to take evening walks. Persephone’s grunting and constant peaceful protesting showed her irritation with the blindfold.

“Is this necessary? Where are you trying to lead me? What’s the point in all of this? If I step on a jellyfish or a crab, so help me Miles Anderson...” The game that was so clearly entertaining Miles was frustrating to Persephone.

“Why don’t you just trust me? We’re almost there?” Miles's tone was playful. He loved to be coy.

“Ouch!” Persephone stepped on a broken seashell. *He never pays close attention to me.*

“You’ll be fine. I suppose right here is close enough.” Miles stops, taking the blindfold from Persephone, allowing her to run her hand through her long blonde hair. Behind Miles to his left is a picnic on a beach blanket, and to his right is a spectacular spring sunset awash with orange, red, pink, and purple, with fluffs of white clouds peppered amongst a sky fading from blue to black.

“In seven years, we have never had a picnic on the beach. You don’t like sand in your food. You said it reminds you too much of your deployments.” Persephone was sincere. She wanted their time together to be something they both enjoyed, not just something he endured for her sake.

“Well, I have food. We can get sand in, but it can wait. I know I’ve waited long enough to do this.” Miles gets down on one knee, pulling a small red box from his back pocket. His eyes connect with Persephone’s soul. He looks excited and scared. He’s not breathing, but trying to talk.

“Miles...” The trembling in Persephone’s hands moves to her feet, making it hard to stand still. Seven years of dating between Miles’ deployments and military duty and Persephone’s loyalty to Symphony in the years after Frank had passed. Just days after they found out they were expecting. The butterflies in her stomach remind her there are three of them on the beach together. *Are you excited or am I nervous?*

“Marry me, Persephone.” Miles opens the box, revealing a beautiful princess-cut solitary diamond on a gold band. The box is shaking in his hand.

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Persephone stepped out of John’s red Porsche within a short walking distance of the public entrance to Edisto Beach, where Miles had asked her to meet him. She looked back at John’s car. *He brought me his car without hesitation. I should just drive away, but I have to chase after these feelings.* The wind was calm, but the heat was still strong at six thirty in the evening. She squeezed her Coach clutch, trying to calm her trembling hands. *I’m here again, but I am not fully present. Why do you always make me nervous, Miles?*

He had arrived early. She could see a canopy surrounded by led tiki torches and two white beach chairs set up on a bamboo beach blanket. Miles was walking along the shore in dark trunks, and a half-buttoned white dress shirt barefoot. He would forever be the beach bum. As she drew closer, he turned around, his hair dancing in the wind. The military had been hard on

his body, but beneath that weathered exterior, he was still playful at heart. She always liked how carefree he was about life. He was meticulous about his tools and tasks, but his time with her was always loose and free.

“Nice dress. Did you buy that one today too?” Miles shouted above the waves and wind.

“I did not. Don’t you recognize it? I wore this dress the last time you brought me here.”

Persephone jabbed at Miles. He did not respect her engagement and did not remember this dress. A white and blue water-colored linen gown that buttoned in the middle to keep from flying up in the wind.

They met at the canopy. Miles took her by the shoulders, kissing her on the cheek before helping her take a seat. Was this courtship or just a date? Why did Miles have her meet him here? Persephone eyed the chardonnay in the cooler, along with two platters, a fruit and vegetable tray, and a meat and cheese platter that had clearly been picked up from a big box store. Persephone could feel butterflies in her stomach. She wasn’t as nervous as she should be on a date with her ex-fiancé. She was bothered by the fact he wasn’t as nervous as she expected him to be. *Are we supposed to pick up where we left off over five years ago?*

“Stop thinking, just be in the moment.” Miles opens the individually wrapped Chardonnays, breaking the ice with his comment and the law with each glass.

“Never. My mind is always in motion, you know that.” Persephone took the glass and took a sip. *I’ve drunk more alcohol today than I have all year.*

“What would you like first?” Miles takes both platters out of the cooler, revealing cheesecake bites hidden beneath the ice as well.



“Miles, you shouldn’t have spent so much time preparing dinner.” Persephone allowed herself to laugh out loud.

“I’m a mechanic, not a chef. You used to be high maintenance, but I’m taking a chance you didn’t come out here tonight for a fine meal.” Miles put the food back in the cooler, taking in more wine than he probably should have. They both took a moment to enjoy the sunset as shades of navy were overtaking the blue and the other vibrant colors were fading to night. As they finish the small individual servings of wine, Persephone decides to ease into Miles. She takes his hand and they walk toward the setting sun.

“The last time we were on this beach, you proposed. I was pregnant, terrified, and hopelessly in love with you. After we lost the baby, I grew bitter toward you. I shouldn’t have. Pregnancies are hard and miscarriages happen. I thought by pushing you away, the pain of losing our child would go away. It never did. I’m sorry I blamed you for that. It wasn’t fair. It was cruel of me.” The words came easily, as if she had prepared them long ago. The truth often flows easiest from an honest heart to an open heart.

“Thank you. I needed to hear this.” Miles kept walking, but turned his face toward the beach, away from the sun and away from Persephone. He had been bitter for a long time after she refused his affection after the miscarriage. Miles was surprised at how quickly he forgave her. He was taught to repair the machines of war, but he only wanted peace with Persephone. He still loved part of her, even if she had changed since they were apart. Her forgiveness built a bridge they both could cross to one another. *Is it too late for them to be together?*

“I used Symphony as a shield to block you from getting any closer to me, especially after we lost the baby. You knew I would always be there for my sister and her kids. Losing our baby

meant they were the only genuine family I felt I had left. You had proposed, more out of obligation than love.” Persephone’s words tasted bitter in her mouth.

“The first five years we dated; it was easy. You wanted to go out, but not be tied down, because you had family obligations. When you moved in with Symphony, I knew we could date for a long time. You didn’t want to settle down. You already had a family. I liked being the fun guy to take you out when I was home on leave. We were not exclusive, and we made it work.” Miles would have preferred for their relationship to stay this way forever. He was serious about his work but felt more casual relationships were far easier to maintain than the countless divorces he had seen in the military.

“True. I was at a time in my life when settling down with someone meant I would be leaving Symphony to fend for herself. It took years for her to cope with Frank’s death, then to become an RN and finally earn enough seniority to work a schedule where she could take care of her three kids. A lot of good men were interested in Symphony, but unfortunately none of them wanted to date a mother of three kids. She needed Persephone. Persephone never considered the time she spent helping her sister as time wasted. She had a balanced life. She could work, help her sister, and date Miles when they both had free time. Eventually, her heart wanted marriage, but she knew Miles was not the type to settle down. Not until he felt he had to.

The orange and red sunset is a sliver on the skyline against a dark sea. A thumbnail moon and a few stars appeared as night overtook the day. The ringing from Persephone’s phone inside her sling bag broke the moment they were sharing. She released Miles’ hand to see who was calling her. Miles saw the caller ID and Persephone sent John to voicemail, taking Miles’s right hand with her left, the hand with John’s engagement ring.

“I can’t give you the same life he can, but I can give you the best life I know how. Why don’t we go to Paris and get married? We can come back to Charleston to start over, just the two of us.” Miles lets the words hang in the air. The ring on her hand was a reminder that her heart belonged to another man. Miles had never met John. He was probably a good person. *John, I loved her first. I’ve never stopped loving her. She needs to know that now. May the best man win.*

“What about children, Miles? If I say yes, end my relationship with John, go to Paris, and marry you. When we return to Charleston, what about a family?” Persephone meant what she was saying. *I need to know exactly the kind of future he wants.* Persephone stops their walk, turning to face Miles as the last rays of sunshine glow in her eyes.

“We may have settled our past tonight, but that does not mean we have agreed on a future. I need to know what you want, Miles.” Persephone holds both of his hands. The calluses rub against her thin, soft fingers.

“Can we start with just us? Not us and other people. Persephone, you have always had attachments. I didn’t mind your sister and her kids at first. We could keep things casual for a long time. We had a lot of fun. You didn’t have time to settle. I didn’t want to settle down. I want us to be like we were back then. Just us. Now, you’ve said it yourself: Symphony is established. Good for her. You were an amazing sister when she needed you. Now, I’m back. I’m not asking you to leave your family. But I’m not asking to start a family with you. I think we need time just to be together. Is that too much to ask?” Miles let go of her hands, not wanting to touch the ring any longer. He was pleading with her. The woman he loved always had a way of making him crazy.

“Miles. That casual time of our lives is over. My entire purpose in marrying John is to be with him and start a family. We started a family before we were ready. Then when Frank died,

leaving Symphony and his kids before they were ready for him to leave. I needed you. You could have stayed here, in Charleston, with me, with all of us, if you loved me enough. If you wanted to marry me, you would have stayed. And yes! I still want a family of my own. I love Symphony, Carol, Melody, and Frankie and I loved the man Frank was when he was with Symphony. But I want a family of my own. Yes, that starts with a good husband, but I still want children, even if I have to adopt. I have enough love to give an entire family and I will not be with someone who does not want to share our love with children.” Persephone couldn’t help but cry. She probably sounded like a crazy person. All this pain from five years rushed over like a tsunami, expected and overwhelming.

“I had no other way of making money. I was close to retirement. You could have come with me. We could have done something for Symphony. No, no! I did not feel responsible for her. Life happens. It’s hard and sometimes dark. Like the friends I served with that are no longer here. Their families had to learn to move on. She could have moved on faster if you would not have coddled her. Symphony still needs to move on. She’s a grown woman. Let her decide for herself. And no. I don’t know if I want children. It’s hard enough taking care of myself. I want what we had. We can have it again. If you’ll just come with me, you’ll see.” The fervor in Miles’s voice was clear. He wanted her to be with him. Where didn’t matter in the past and didn’t matter in their present? *Kids! I’m asking her to elope with me and she wants to plan on having a family as soon as we get back together.*

“You could have stayed and worked with your father. You knew he didn’t have long to live. The cancer was eating him alive. Symphony didn’t just need me to send her money, Miles. She needed time to go to work, time to cry when the kids were asleep, time to study to try to improve their lives. I became a mother, a sister, an aunt, and a best friend. And she was there for

me. I felt so guilty we had conceived a child out of wedlock. I was devastated. We never held our child in our arms. You didn't know how to handle the pain, so pulling away was not entirely my fault. Your last contract was a convenient truth to hide our culpable lie. I needed you to hold me and help me when life was out of control. I stayed, you left. How do we pick up where we left off when you left before, when I needed you the most?" Persephone knew this was a lot to lay at his feet, but if he truly meant he wanted her, he would need to commit from the beginning. He couldn't be the man who was just here for a good time. He has never changed. Miles wants what we once had. He doesn't realize you can't recreate a memory. The last two dates. His old Mustang. He is trying to recreate what was, not what is. *Life is lived in the present, not the past.*

"My old man was fine with me serving our country. He never knew we were expecting a baby. Before I re-upped the last time, he told me some women never settle on what they want because they keep changing their minds about what they want. You used to want me. All of me. My cars, my attitude. We never discussed children. Even now, you are not planning your life with me or John. You have expectations that no man can measure up to because you are making things up as you go, or probably because you are too controlling to share how you truly feel." Miles stalks closer to Persephone. In the darkness after sunset, he wants to kiss her and scream. In that order. She was never satisfied. Always planning.

"Do not kiss me, Miles Anderson. No. I will not get lost in your arms like we used to when we would fight." Persephone makes her way back to the canopy to collect her shoes. He would never grow up. She still loved him, so she forgave him. She loved him in the past tense, not the present. They could date for years, and his feelings wouldn't change. He just wanted his life, his way, with a fun woman to share it with. He was serious about them eloping, but he was not about to live a serious life for a family.

“So, that’s it then. You are going to leave me on the beach wondering why you’re not leaving for Paris with me tomorrow. You always wanted a grand gesture. I’m making that move. You don’t have to marry me in Paris, but we can start over with this trip. Do things that you always wanted to do. I have trips planned to the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre Museum. I listened to where you wanted to go when we were together and now I have the means to take you to all the places you wanted to go.” Miles pulls two first-class tickets from his back pocket. He hands one to Persephone. The shock on her face was not the expression he wanted to see.

“You already bought the tickets! No! I can’t. We were together. We are not together now. I’m getting married to someone else. I loved you with all my heart, but we were not meant to be together. Thank you for the last couple of dates. I needed to know if we had a chance. I know now what I didn’t understand five years ago. I’m too much for you, Miles. I’ll pray you find someone to have fun with. You want to play. Lavish trips are what you want. I need responsibilities. I love that about John, even if I never get to see him. Take this ticket and take someone else. Thank you for what we had. I’ll cherish it forever. I want what you can’t give. You want what I won’t give. Fix my car and let me go. We shouldn’t fight like we did back then. We need to release each other to move on. Bye, Miles.” Persephone hugs Miles, putting the ticket he gave her into his back pocket. She kissed him on the cheek last time and turned to walk away. Forgiveness, then letting go, was the best present he ever gave her.

“If you love him, why did you call me? Why did you come to me when your plans fell apart? Why have you gone out with me twice? You’re still in love with me. You hated when I left and I did, too. I’m sorry I signed away my life and left you. I can’t take that back. I thought I was doing what was best for us. If you talk to me, I’ll listen. If you don’t want Paris, we can start

over again in Charleston. If you were a machine, I could fix what was broken. If he won't make time for you, I will. Let me love you." Miles

"Why now! If you've felt this strongly, why all the voicemails and text messages? You know where I live, where I work, where my sister lives, where she works. You didn't come to find me when you moved back to Charleston. The messages were expected when you were deployed, but your presence would have captured my attention if you ever showed your face." Persephone hated she was crying almost as much as admitting what she had felt out loud.

"You were dating a doctor. I found out through your sister when one of my guys and his wife had their first kid. You weren't expecting me to show up. I drove by your place and your office dozens of times wanting to show up and ask you to take this from me again." Miles pulls the familiar red box from his pocket. His eyes flash like lightning between the engagement box and his ex-fiance. Persephone's face turns to stone, the red box a ghost from her past, both endearing and frightening.

"You still have the ring? Persephone looked at John's ring on her hand. She was shaking. Miles was saying what she wanted to hear. Could they start over? Could she move past just forgiving him?

Miles puts the box in her right hand, pulling her closer to him. He lifts her chin with an index finger, looking through her eyes, into her soul.

"You have a decision to make. I'm not making it for you. I may be late, but I'm here. Take the ring. You come to me after you've made your final decision." Miles wipes away Persephone's tears, fighting the urge to kiss her.

Persephone closes her eyes and kisses him, quick, but deep. She gasps for air as she pushes him away without another word, taking the ring with her. Her lips felt familiar and warm.

Miles watches his past run away wondering about their future. The wind blew sand across his body, causing him to turn away. He takes a knee, taking out another illegal drink, before settling into a chair to watch the waves. She didn't want to relive their past. He wanted to start a new future. Nothing he could say would have stopped her from running away that night. *What else can I do?*



## Chapter 7

*Two Rings*

Persephone parks John's Porsche in her parking spot, the red standing out amongst the silver, white, and grey vehicles in the parking deck at her complex. He was often the tallest man in the room. His cars stood out among others. Yet he rarely tried to draw attention to himself. The neighborhood was quiet. She opened the door to the dark condo, as the motion light in the foie came on. After placing her purse on her kitchen counter, she lit candles and pulled a bottle of wine from the bottle cooler. As she opened a drawer searching for the wine opener, her eyes took in the stunning, massive bouquet of roses wrapped in two gold ribbons. The aroma of fresh flowers and the clean kitchen filled her with guilt. Instead of opening the note, she takes her wine and glass to her patio. *This is all too much. Why now? Why not before plans were made and new dresses were bought and a wedding date was just a couple days away?*

After her second glass of wine, she retrieves the note. Opening it in the soft warm glow, she reads these handwritten lines.

Soon

Two will become one

Miss me, until you can kiss me

John

PS—I sold my house.

“What?” Guilt. Like high tide during a storm washed over Persephone. This man did not know she had been out with her ex, more than once, chasing old feelings. She had not asked him to sell his place, but she was adamant she wanted to live closer to her sister. She had been so stubborn with him. *Why didn't he tell me he was selling his home? Why are we keeping secrets from each other? What kind of person am I?*

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“Symphony, mom and baby girl are both sleeping in 690. Dad's still up from all the coffee from the last 23 hours of labor. I've sent for some milk to help him sleep. Its two am. Why are you working tonight?” Tracy asked Symphony as she hustled past her.

“Hey, Tracy. My sister's wedding is this weekend. I'm working some extra shifts to take more time off for the weekend. Right now, I'm heading to 600. The new dad is having a hard time with the twins. We need to remind him how to lay out the diapers with the wings open before putting them on the boys. I'll add some notes to their file for the morning shift.” Symphony checks the computer in the nurses' station before going to check on her family in room 600 when her phone vibrates.

“Hey, Sis. It's early. Is everything, ok?” Symphony moves from the station to the supply room, grabbing two sets of extra diapers, wipes, and formula for the twins. She checks the inventory out with the electronic scanner, double-checking each patient's chart.

“I kissed him. I mean, he kissed me back after because he proposed, again. The same place he proposed to me the first time.” Persephone’s confession was whispered as if she were confessing sins to her priest.

“That’s sweet. You two needed some time together on John’s boat. So, he took you out near Dewee’s Island, again? I can’t talk long. Remember, I’m working a double tonight.” Symphony was too wrapped up in her work to hear the pain in her sister’s voice.

“Miles. Miles proposed tonight. At the beach. The same place he did five years ago. We kissed. Symphony! I have two engagement rings!” Persephone had John’s ring on her left hand and Miles's ring on her right hand.

“You did what!?!” Symphony dropped half her supplies trying to put them on a cart.

“I’m torn. I love John. He’s so good to me. I know that. But he works all the time. And Miles. You know all about Miles. We have history together. I think I love them both Symphony. I didn’t think I still loved Miles, but I do. And now, I don’t know what to do. Miles wants me to go to Paris with him tomorrow. John is leaving for his bachelor party tomorrow. We are supposed to be getting together for our bachelorette party tomorrow afternoon. I have a wedding this weekend.” Persephone is pacing her living room. Frantic and falling apart at the same time.

Anger stirred in Symphony like she had not felt before. She had always looked up to Persephone. She had always needed her big sister, but now she needed Symphony. Persephone was about to let old feelings and cheap drinks make decisions she would live with for the rest of her life.

“You sound like you’ve been drinking. Now is not the time for making permanent decisions. Take some time. Drink some coffee. John loves you. Miles loved you. You stayed with me when I needed you, but you could have gone to Miles long before he moved back to

Charleston. And when he came back, if you truly still loved him, you could have gone to him long before now. Why now? Why tonight? Is Miles just now realizing what he had with you? Do you really want to be with someone who takes years to know your value? John has been working a lot to... No, I can't. I've said too much." Symphony lowered her voice. She finished putting the supplies on the cart and began moving quietly down the hall to tend to her patients. Persephone was too absorbed in her thoughts to catch Symphony's slip-up.

"I was finished waiting for Miles. I had moved on. I dated a couple of men before you introduced me to John. I would not go after Miles, not after he left. What do you know about John that I don't? I need to know Symphony?" Persephone pleads with her little sister. The emotions and the wine forced her to fall off her couch onto the floor.

"What was that noise? Are you alright?" Symphony heard a thud when her sister hit the floor.

"I'm ok. I fell off the couch." Persephone lays down, rubbing her hip where she fell.

"I have to go. You need either coffee or sleep. I'll call you tomorrow morning when I get off work." Symphony ends the call before knocking on Room 600. The new dad is trying to change twin number two as an arch of pee hits dad in the chest before peeing on twin number one. *Two is a lot to handle.*

## Chapter 8

*Frantic Friday*

Persephone's eyes squint as the sunlight shines through her open patio glass door nearly blinding her. She sits up on the couch, looking around the room. She never went to bed. Her cell phone is at 1%, with dozens of messages and missed calls from her sister. 12:33 pm. She slept all morning. The pain in her head matches the pain in her heart. She gets up, locks the door, then plugs her phone in to charge. After retreating to the kitchen to pour out what little remained in the wine bottle from the night before and make a pot of coffee. The smell of fresh roses and dark roast fills the air in her home. *I'm never drinking again. I need to pull myself together. The ringing in my head may kill me yet. The ringing. The rings? Where is Miles's ring?*

"Where is it?" Persephone exclaimed. After a frantic ten-minute search, she finds the red box on the kitchen counter beside her purse. As she sets the purse back on the counter, she realizes she has both rings on the ring finger of her left hand. *I must choose one.*

Her phone vibrates on the counter. *No wonder I didn't hear it.*

"Oh my, Lord! 15 calls. Fifteen. I've barely been able to sleep after pulling a double because I'm worried about you. What happened?" Symphony is pacing in her bedroom, furious at her sister hadn't called her back sooner.

"I'm so sorry. I had way too much to drink. I forgot to charge my phone. I just made coffee." Her list of sins spills out as she confesses to her kid sister.

"STOP! TWO ENGAGEMENT RINGS!" Symphony instantly covers her mouth after shouting at the phone, not wanting her kids to hear her.

“No shouting, please.” Persephone pulls the phone away from her ear, knowing she deserves the pain.

“Do you love him?” Symphony flatly asks her oldest sister.

“Who?” Persephone answers back.

“Exactly! I don’t believe you right now!” Symphony retreats from her bedroom to her bathroom, passing by a family photo from the beach when Frank was still alive. She touches his face before closing the bathroom door behind her.

“I know. I’m a terrible person, but I have to know I am marrying the right person for me.”

“No, you do not!”

“What do you mean, “No?” Of course I do. I have to know I’m marrying the best person for me.”

“You marry the person you can’t live without. People change throughout their lives. The man you marry will not be the same person in five, ten, twenty, or fifty years. You will not be the same person throughout your marriage, either. You do not marry the one who’s best for you, because at some point, his best will not be enough, and guess what, your best will not be good enough for him. Honoring your vows to one another will be what keeps you together.”  
Symphony began cleaning her bathroom mirror while she on the phone.

“I don’t know.” Persephone whines, agonizing over the truth her little sister is telling her.

“I do know. You may be my big sister, but I’ve been with a man I couldn’t live without. Frank was not perfect, but he was perfect for me. We fought, especially when I found out I was

pregnant, but he stayed. He wouldn't let me pull away. When I lost control, he was rock solid. He and I both changed over time, but we were committed to one another from the beginning."

"Frank was smitten the first time he met you, I saw it in his eyes. Long before you were pregnant, he knew he wanted you."

"I didn't know that then. I loved him, but I didn't know how to love him the way he needed. Relationships are not about happiness. They are about sacrifice." Symphony lets her words ring in Persephone's ears as she scrubs a stubborn makeup mark on her mirror.

"Miles wants to start over, but he truly wants to pick up where we left off. We were great together when it was just the two of us, but he had such a hard time being a part of a family. He came from a rough family. He and I were good together. So good that he kept the ring, Symphony. I'm wearing it now." Persephone's eyes go back and forth from ring to ring, her left hand getting heavier the longer she wears both rings.

"Miles will always love you. You broke his heart, remember. You also forgot I told you to go with him, but you used me as an excuse. You weren't ready to marry him. You stayed because you wanted to stay." Symphony puts the glass cleaner away and washes her hands.

"I did not. You needed me. Sure, you wanted independence, but you weren't ready. You needed help with Carol, Melody, and Frankie. I accepted his proposal." Persephone's tone grows cold, trying to hide her hurt.

"When Frank died, Carol was five, Melody was eight, and Frankie was ten. I had help from the girls at work and the ladies at the church. Don't get me wrong. I love the fact you stayed with me. But I told you to go with Miles. Do you remember what you told me?"

Symphony began to organize her makeup drawer, starting with the nail polish, as she prepares to lecture her big sister.

“I remember telling you I would never leave you.” Persephone finishes her coffee and begins cleaning up her living room from the night before.

“Liar. You said you would never leave Charleston and you said you would always be here for me and the kids. You said Miles wanted you to be a lonely base wife, but he didn’t want to be a husband who stayed home. You stayed here because you did not want to be lonely in a marriage with a man who didn’t want to be alone but wouldn’t put himself in a position to be at home with you. You knew he had commitment issues. You also knew you liked dating but realized each of you had very different views about marriage. You choose to stay for yourself and there’s nothing wrong with that.” Symphony decides against the dark-to-light organization and reverses how her nail polish was arranged in the drawer.

“Yes, you had help. And I did not want to leave Charleston. And I had other doubts. You knew that. Miles knew how to be a soldier, to take orders, and how to have fun when he wasn’t in uniform. I wanted him to be a husband, but he wasn’t ready. I fit neatly into John’s life, but is that enough? He’s ready to be a husband, but am I ready to be his wife? He does things sometimes that drive me crazy.” Persephone finishes cleaning the kitchen, moving on to their bedroom. The room where she and John seemed to pass by one another these days. She notices the spare bedroom door has been closed and opens it to find dozens of boxes.

“Men aren’t perfect. Frank wasn’t. I still love that man, but I know we had good times and bad times. We had to learn to communicate. You and Miles know how to have easy times and easy conversations. You and Miles were good at dating. You and John were good at your



relationship until you started having doubts. What has John done that's driving you crazy?"

Symphony says matter-of-factly, trying to talk sense into her sister.

"He sold his house. We hadn't agreed on our living arrangements after the wedding, but he sold his house without telling me anything. He made a major life choice without my consent."

Persephone lets the words leave her mouth, but regrets admitting these feelings out loud.

"Do you think he would consent to what you've been up to this week?" Symphony's remark hit them both hard.

"No. We are talking about him. I don't know what to say about Miles yet. Did you know John was selling his house and moving only part of his things to my home?" Persephone looked through a few of them, seeing mainly the things she had left at John's. She hadn't considered if he might have second thoughts. The enormous bouquet was not the kind of thing John normally did. He was not one to show off.

"What boxes? No, I did not know he sold his house, but it was his house. You two aren't married yet. He probably should have mentioned to you he was selling it, but you have become indecisive about the wedding looming. Talk to him about it. Ask him to discuss major decisions like this with you in detail in the future." Symphony appreciated the change in conversation. Her sister's drama was almost too much, and she was getting sleepy.

"You're right. I'm just so used to making my own choices without anyone else's input." Persephone's confession was sincere, but left a bitter taste in her mouth.

"You're a control freak. You always have been, but you have met your match. John has invited you to be a part of his life. All of it. It sounds like Miles wants to play. Are you trying to

be in your twenties again, or are you ready to be a grown woman?" Symphony takes a break from cleaning, hoping her sister is absorbing her advice.

"I had moved several things to his place while we were dating, but we had a fight a few weeks ago when I would not make up my mind about moving into his house. I didn't want to be so far away from you and the kids and my office. We still haven't discussed where we're going to live when we get back from our honeymoon. He left me a huge bouquet of roses and a note saying he missed me and he sold his house. I guess he decided we'll be living at the townhouse, but I don't like the fact we didn't discuss it first. I love the note, the flowers, even these boxes, but I feel left out of the decision making process." Persephone goes back to the enormous bouquet, finding a second note in the envelope. She must have been too tipsy to realize the second piece of paper the night before.

"It's not like John made the decision completely without you. It sounds like the two of you had a discussion about where to live. You did not give him a firm commitment on where to live, so he made a commitment to you by selling his property. Am I missing something? You've waited half of your life for someone to be willing to be a part of your life. John's not the type to keep secrets, right?" *Or was he.* Symphony realizes John had not told Persephone about the missing necklace. What secrets was he keeping?

"I didn't realize he might have given me what I've always wanted. I'm so lost right now." Persephone's tone was hurt and upset.

"You are engaged to a man, Persephone. It was his property. He's been single for a long time. He makes a living making quick, intelligent decisions. When you couldn't make your mind up about seeing him for the first time, he came to your office for lunch after asking me what you

like to eat. He never asked me or you what kind of engagement ring you wanted. He knew what you liked because he paid attention to you. You became so indecisive through this entire process, that he's made several decisions you hadn't realized." Symphony crawls back into bed, ready to end the conversation. She did not want her exhaustion cause her to mention the missing necklace.

"Yes. I appreciated him making the first move. We had a nice lunch together in my office, where I could maintain some sense of control. I didn't know he hadn't asked you about what types of rings I liked. What other decisions has he made that I haven't been able to make for the two of us?" Persephone's mind is blank, too blind to see beyond her wants to realize where John has met her needs.

"Do you think he knows about Miles?" Symphony's tone was direct. She was intentionally leading Persephone to discuss what she was avoiding. Persephone had turned into a selfish bridezilla. She had her reasons, but the decisions she was making had the dangerous potential to hurt a lot of people. Persephone was on a quest to find her happiness and not how she could join her life with someone else. On her voyage searching for treasure, she was stealing from both of these men to satisfy her cravings. Piracy has a price.

"No. How could he? Would he have sold his place if he thought I was going to choose Miles? Would he have started moving in if he knew I was seeing my ex-fiancé? Unless, do you think he's been spying on me?" Persephone's panic-stricken thoughts race through her mind too quickly to be deciphered.

"I don't know, but I'm done for now. I need more sleep after pulling a double. Figure it out. You have a choice between a fun guy and a great man. I will not decide for you, but I know

who I would choose if I were you. Marriage either makes you holy or full of holes. You have to learn to fill each other up and pray God holds you together when you two have done all you can do. If you go into the marriage expecting the man to make you happy, you will feel empty, because a man can't make you happy. God can make you happy. You are running out of time to decide. Stop drinking and pray about it. I'll call you when I wake up for your bachelorette party.” Symphony ended the call before Persephone could speak, leaving her sister to unpack her feelings and memories.

## Chapter 9

*Friday Fights*

TPC Myrtle Beach glistens in the early morning dew as golfers from around the world arrive just after 8 am to play the pristine course. The College Baseball National Champion Head Coach Michaels was one of the select few. John, Coach Michaels, Marcus, and Greg were playing the course, just a day after the PGA Boeing Palmetto Championship.

“All the phones in the briefcase.” Coach Michaels barked the order as the bachelors gathered around the rear of a rented Suburban. All the men comply, not willing to challenge the best man.

“First things first, have a good time. Second, don’t get too drunk to walk in the wedding, which is Sunday. Now, let’s go hit some range balls. We’re playing 36 holes today! The pot is a hundred dollars a hole. The groom wins half, and the winner gets half to give to the groom for the casino tonight!” Coach Michaels, ever the amped leader, leads the group into the clubhouse.

The men check in at the pro shop and go through the dining area for a fine Southern buffet breakfast of bacon, sausage, biscuits, gravy, grits, eggs, fried potatoes, and fresh fruit. After the men finish their meal, a club attendant approaches the table, holding a square box.

“Dr. Noble, my name is Jessica Pearson. I’m the membership director here at TPC Myrtle Beach. We want to congratulate you on your upcoming wedding. As you know, we were honored to once again host the PGA Boeing Palmetto Championship. South Carolina’s own Dustin Johnson won the event. He was kind enough to sign the glove he wore on Sunday when he won by three strokes. We would like to present you with this memento.” Jessica opens the white box, revealing a glass case and with the glove on a glass hand.

“Thank you so much. I hated I missed the event this year, I’ve been so busy at the hospital. Thank you, Jessica.” John is embarrassed to be the one receiving gifts.

“You’re gonna need more than a signed glove by a real winner to beat me today, doc!” Lucas breaks the ice challenging his former college roommate, as always.

“Greg, you’ve played golf with Dustin before in charity pro-ams. Have you stolen any of Dustin’s gloves?” Marcus joins in on the banter at the plastic surgeon.

“Yep. And I’m wearing his jock strap now too. You’re all going down,” Greg quips right back at the successful Biscuit Barn entrepreneur.

The men make their way to their golf carts already prepared with their carts and supplied with snacks, coolers of ice and cold drinks. They follow the GPS to the driving range. There is a section in the middle roped off just for them with a club pro standing watch.

“Gentleman. My name is Wendy. I’m the head pro here at TPC Myrtle Beach. Congratulations on your wedding, Dr. Noble.” She smiles professionally at her clients. The two single men are paying full attention to the golf model.

“Thank you, Wendy. I was just planning on warming up. Are we receiving a lesson?” John looks back and forth at his buddies, with his eyes resting on the grinning coach.

“What did you do?” John knows when his ball coach is up to something.

“Nothing illegal, as far as the NCAA is concerned. If anyone asks, it was all Greg’s idea.” Coach laughs at his own joke.

“It is my idea. Rather than call on some of your clients to show off their new knees and elbows, I asked Wendy, one of my clients, to give John a special lesson before we take our

money from him. You look great Wendy.” Greg walks past John, finding his spot on the driving range.

“If you fellas don’t mind watching, I’m going to tee it up for our groom.” Wendy tees up a golf ball for John, showing her short skirt just to him.

Before she can stand back up, John is halfway to the gold cart, fuming. His crew is right behind him. Greg sprints to catch up to John, who is now twenty yards from the offended model.

“Slow down, man. I thought bringing her out here would be fun. You’re a doctor. What’s wrong with admiring anatomy?” Greg tries to keep pace with his much taller friend.

John stops at this cart, taking a drink of orange juice, before turning to address his shorter friends.

“I said no strippers,” John speaks in an even tone through gritted teeth.

“She’s not a stripper, exactly. She does everything on the internet as far as I know.”

Greg’s annoyance at his buddy’s disapproval showed all over his face.

“I for one, would not call her a stripper, but she is not what I expected to see on the golf course, ever.” Marcus looks at his friends, before taking glances back at Wendy, who is walking toward the group.

“I thought you said they would be cool?” Wendy’s voice was louder than necessary.

“I was wrong. I apologize Wendy. Thank you for coming out. I’ve already paid you for your time.” Greg walks toward Wendy, but she holds up her hand.

“I had more of a show for you, but clearly, whoever you plan to marry is a special lady. She’s really lucky. You’re one of the good ones.” Wendy waves off Greg, before leaving the men

standing by their carts. She had never had a client turn down one of her dances. This man had left her before she got started. What was that all about? *He didn't belittle me. His eyes belong to someone else.* She wiped a tear from her cheek before walking to her car alone, questioning where she was in life. *I thought love like that wasn't real. I want a man like that.* In her car, she checked her daily balance from her online content, turning the ringer back on so that she could hear the chime of the payments going off every few minutes. The sound of getting rich was subtle next to the sound of her loneliness.

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Persephone walked into her spare bedroom to decide which boxes to take to the living room to begin sorting. She's shocked to find so many of John's things in her spare bedroom. All his wall art, his bathroom décor, his library, along with what she assumed was all of his winter clothes. Had he decided he was moving in with her after the wedding? *Why would he bring all the things I left at his house if he wasn't planning on moving in with me?* The confusion would only be settled if she could just speak to John. She tried to dial his number, knowing he was on the golf course with his friends, but the call went straight to voicemail. Frustrated, she labels the current box, the Engagement Year Memory Box. She places a bookmark from the Tree Top Bookstore in Aspen where they vacationed last winter inside of the box.. *He is Here*, by John Brandon Keever she picked up to read at the airport on their way home. She wraps the book in a *Hike Faster, I hear a Fiddle and smell Apple Fritters* t-shirt she bought at The Apple Festival when they went to Hendersonville last fall. Persephone holds a picture frame of little Carol on top of John's shoulder, putting the Star of David on top of her Christmas tree. Looking hard at the picture, she can just see the black ring box almost hidden behind the Charleston Santa Claus



in shorts Christmas Ornament. As she takes her time moving through the memories, she discovers a fine wooden oak box with the words *Open After Vows*.

“John, what have you done?” Persephone delicately opened the brass locks. Inside are pictures from their time together, mementos from trips, and at the bottom of the oak box, she opens a false bottom and discovers a single hidden note. *The List for Life*. John had written everything Persephone had told him she liked and what she wanted out of life. *She likes fine French food, classical music, sailing on the Atlantic, sunsets and sunrises at the beach, a home to house her family and their future family. Time to be together.*

“He listens to everything I say, but he says so little. What a delicious mystery.” Persephone continues to the next page where John lists what he thought he needed to do to give her what she wanted, *learn to cook and speak French, ask Dave at the Music Supply Center to order Classical Records she might like, buy a sailboat, learn to sail, or maybe charter one, time off to go to the beach, sell my house, add another surgeon to staff to free up more time...*

“John, please forgive me. God, forgive my wandering heart.” She puts the note back in the bottom of the box. Everything she ever wanted she had, she just needed to search in the right places. She rose from her seat, dressed, and left her home on a mission.

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Persephone pulls up to the garage. John’s black Mustang is parked out back. She walks inside, much to the dismay of Vince.

“Miss Bordeaux, we weren’t expecting you. Your transmission is on back order. I promise we will call as soon as...” Vince was talking fast, trying to deliver proper customer service and think of a way to warn his boss his lady was there.

Miles walks from the shop floor, working through a parts order with another staff member. When he sees Persephone, he stumbles slightly, stopping to try and read her face.

“You didn’t call before you came over.”

“I never should have called Miles. Can we talk in your office?”

Miles turns to the side, inviting her to walk to his office. Inside, seated, they each wait for the other to break the ice. Miles makes the first vocal sound.

“So, you’ve decided then.”

“Yes. Just today.”

“I don’t want our story to end, not like this. Come to Paris. I’ll change your mind.”

“My mind is not what changed. It was my heart. Miles, we were together for a season. We were good together when we were younger people. That season has passed. I hope you find someone to play with. I’ve been ready to have a family of my own. You don’t want that, do you?” Persephone leaned forward, trying to look into his eyes. He spins his chair around with his back toward her.

“Your heart should belong to me.” The bitterness in Miles's voice is dark and menacing.

“It did, but now it doesn’t. Our lives are a collection of choices, the good and the bad. Thank you for the time we had together. I know we needed closure, not to start over. We’ll always have our memories, but you and I do not have a future.” Persephone was trying to let down Miles as easily as she could, but he would likely not go down easily. He turned back around, his face frantically trying to convince her to agree with his words.

“Thank you for calling me back. I can fix us. Give us one more month together, we need more time. I can never be just a friend.” The pain in his chest was worse than the first time he left. This time, he had tried too little, too late. He knew there was probably nothing he could say that would change her heart. He could feel her slipping away.

Persephone laid his ring in front of him. She stood, out of words, waiting for a response. She didn’t want to fight. Not now. They took turns staring at the ring and glancing at each other. Miles was refusing to speak.

“No.” Persephone’s voice was a soft, but firm, whisper.

“No?” Miles growled the word back at her. He was on the verge of rage and tears. The soft pleading looks in his eyes were gone. A storm was brewing. She had seen this expression before.

“No. I choose John.” Persephone did not want to cry. She did not want Miles to get his hopes up. *Stiff back, stiff lips. Hold it together. I’ve cried enough tears over this man.*

Miles stared at her in disbelief. He thought she was coming back to him. He thought he had won her over. The ring on the desk shattered the lie he had sold himself. She had told him her choice, but the ring on the desk spoke louder than words.

“You’ve made this mistake before. I should have stopped sending you messages a long time ago. I knew I wasn’t good enough for you, but I can’t see you and not be with you. I can’t do that.” Miles stood, struggling to find words.

“Don’t be like this. You gave me a choice. I’ve made my choice.” Persephone was fighting not to pace the room. She wanted to scream or cry, but she held her tone.

“Fine. We’re done. I’ll drop your Cadillac off at Corey’s Transmission Shop. I don’t want it here while you are on your honeymoon with him instead of in Paris with me.” Miles looked at her as if he were giving her an ultimatum.

“Ok. If that’s how you feel.” Persephone wanted to reach out and hug him, but she knew better than to find herself in his arms again. He might never let her go.

“It’s done then. Bye, Persephone.” Miles left the ring on the desk and Persephone alone in his office. He stormed out of the building on the way to his car. Tire smoke filled the air from his Mustang as he peeled out of the parking lot. Persephone watched him dangerously miss hitting a family in a minivan as he tore across the highway. *He’ll always be a dark horse looking for someone to run with him.*

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Friday evening at Palmetto Springs Spa, Persephone, Symphony, and Melody are joined by their long-time friends and fellow bridesmaids June and November Hicks. Everyone enjoys the champagne, except thirteen-year-old Melody, who suffers through a Sprite. The ladies first enjoy the natural warm thermal springs.

“No men, a hot bath, light snacks, and strange flute music. Oh, we should come here more often.” June Hicks stretches in the warm water, eyes closed beneath slices of cucumber.

“I like weird music. The guy who brought our water at the sushi place was nice to look at.” Melody crunches on a slice of cucumber, not realizing what she said in front of her mother.

“He was nice to look at. I liked his red hair and freckles. My husband has freckles.”

November agreed with Melody.

“He had to be at least eighteen years old!” Symphony exclaimed. The surrealness of her daughter becoming a young woman was astounding her more each day.

“Relax, Symphony. She’s almost fourteen.” June knows Symphony will not relax, but is too comfortable in the water to care.

Melody shifts uncomfortably in the bath. Persephone gives her a wink.

“Anyway, are you ready for your big day?” November plays with a few of the strands of her jet-black hair while sipping the strawberry-infused Champagne.

“I heard you nearly called it off.” June removes the cucumbers from her eyes, waiting to hear the gossip.

“Who told you?” Persephone spoke before realizing it was a trap.

“I knew it! You were right Symphony.” June shrieks, grabbing a grape and refilling her glass.

Persephone looks exasperated at Symphony. Symphony looks back at her in frustration.

“You are the only one of use to have been proposed to three times! You had two engagement rings for half of this week!” Symphony blurts out, splashing Persephone.

“Yes. It’s true.” Persephone looks at her friends and family, then sulks at the corner of the spa pool.

“What did you do Aunt Persephone?” Melody sips on her Sprite, slightly confused, but fully intrigued at the turn of conversation.

Persephone explains the week’s events, including the breakup with Miles a few hours earlier. When she’s finished talking, the women sip their drinks, uncertain what to say next.

“I can’t even keep a man longer than three years. I’ve been divorced twice. You had two studs clamoring over you. What are you doing to these men?” June’s implication goes over Melody’s head but gets a stern look from Symphony.

“Miles and I had a past. We were pregnant at one point, but I lost the baby. He’s been sending me messages for years, but I’ve ignored them until my car broke down and my wedding plans fell apart. I had to know if he and I had a future. We do not. He wanted to relive our past in the present. We want very different things. He’s a good man, just not the man for me.” Persephone sipped her Champagne. *Talking about this out loud makes me sound like a shellfish-crazy woman.*

“I’m glad you saw Miles, Aunt Persephone.” Melody chimes in.

“You are?” Persephone is as shocked as the other women to hear Melody’s statement.

“Now you know. He’s been blowing up your DMs and trying to steal you from Uncle John, and that’s not cool. You’re a grown woman. You deserve to know who’s ready to be your forever and not just here for a good time. Right?” Melody’s wisdom lands heavily on the rest of the bridal party.

Persephone nods in agreement with her niece before giving her a big hug. November swims over to Persephone’s former place in the spa.

“So, what will Dr. Noble think about you finding out you and Miles are officially over?”

June’s bluntness was cautionary, not accusatory.

“I don’t know. He’s in Myrtle playing golf, or I would have told him already. We are supposed to meet for lunch tomorrow before the wedding rehearsal dinner on Saturday night. I suppose I have to tell him before Symphony does.” Persephone shoots a look at her sister.

“You better tell him. He needs to know you are a hot commodity.” November slurs her words as she finishes the last of her Champagne.

“Nothing happened. It’s not cheating if you let your ex down. The timing was bad, but it’s over now. You have a fabulous new dress, new shoes, and a glorious wedding planned. The doctor loves you.” June tries encouraging Persephone instead of being too harsh.

“John loves you. He told me this week. You should talk to him tomorrow before the dinner to give him time to process. He’s a calculating man. He’ll understand you wanted to be certain. I’m sorry I told them. I called June and November to see if there was some way we could help you avoid making the biggest mistake of your life. You thought Miles felt safe, but he was just your past. Your past was familiar, but not your future. John’s your future... I’m not the big sister you are.” Symphony’s voice was soft.

“You’re forgiven.” Persephone hugs Symphony. June and November hug them. Melody reluctantly joins the hugging.

“Will there be any cute boys at the wedding?” Melody asks her aunt. The group breaks out in laughter as Symphony splashes her daughter.

## Chapter 10

*Saturday Sunrise*

“Dr. Noble. Your request was the most difficult. I may have lost a client for life.” Mr. Goldstein was in no hurry to open the black leather jewelry box on the desk in the private viewing area.

“I do not take your efforts for granted my friend. You have been paid for your service and gained a new client.” Dr. Noble met the businessman’s stare, unwavering.

“The family who accepted the replacement I made for them was most pleased with my work, but they were more interested in the man who would search and pay so much for his bride’s family heirloom. This act of love astounded them. I kept your name a secret, of course.” Mr. Goldstein seemed pleased to have kept Dr. Noble’s name a secret.

“He who finds a wife, finds a good thing, and...” Dr. Noble began quoting Proverbs 18:22.

“and obtains favor from the Lord.” Mr. Goldstein finishes the verse. *Noble, this family name suits this man.*

The leather jewelry case is turned to face John. The skilled hands of the surgeon hold the one-hundred-year-old necklace, glancing at the stamp and markings, ensuring it’s not a replica. John’s eyes glimmer with the shine from the sapphire and pearls.

“Mr. Goldstein, I apologize for the late invitation, but I am inviting you and your bride to join me at my wedding on Sunday. You would be a most honored guest.” John smiles at his new friend.



“I would be most honored, Dr. Noble. Will you deliver the necklace to her on your wedding day, or do you have a surprise in mind?” Mr. Goldstein shows his enjoyment in wedding traditions and surprises.

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“Where are we going?” Persephone asks John as he pulls his Porsche onto Dewees Island Ferry.

“You’ll see.” John smiles at his bride. After they park on the ferryboat, they make their way to the upper deck, taking in the sights of Charleston.

“I thought we were going out to dinner. Are we going somewhere new?” Persephone slips her arm into John’s, wrapping herself in his embrace.

John kisses her neck but doesn’t speak a word. He looks at her, kisses her, then looks out at the water as a shrimp boat trudges through calm seas a thousand yards to their starboard. Just before the arrival at Dewee’s Island, John blindfolds Persephone in the passenger seat. He drives them down Pelican Flight Drive, the beachfront road on the island. The windows are down, their hair is blowing in the breeze.

“I’m sorry I sold my place without telling you. I know that had to have bothered you.” John’s words are true but sincere.

“Yes, it bothered me, but I trust you. We can live in my townhouse. Your home was your place to sell, your decision.” Persephone turns her head toward John with the blindfold still on.

“Have you made your decision, Persephone?” John asks directly.

“What decision?” Persephone’s confusion was sincere.

“Have you decided who you’re going to marry, me or Miles?” John parks the Porsche in front of a gate to a private home.

Persephone drags the blindfold off her face. She was too stunned to speak. Her mouth felt dry and her words failed to cross her lips. She was confused. She expected to be the one to break the news to John after dinner, not on the way, and she did not expect him to know already.

“I choose you. I’m here with you. How did you know about Miles? Did Symphony tell you?” Persephone was failing at being defensive. This conversation felt wrong just the day before their wedding.

“I told her. Miles has been sending you messages for a long time, but you have never responded to any of them. And before you start, you should know I have not been spying on you. More than once, you’ve left your phone unlocked after Miles has sent you a message. I checked your phone, more than once, thinking Symphony or one of the kids were trying to reach you, and that’s when I saw the messages. I should have asked you about them when I first noticed. I’m sorry I waited this long to ask.” John’s confession was genuine, Persephone knew that.

“I can’t be upset with you. I should have told him off long before now. It was nice to see his messages. I enjoyed knowing he cared about me if we didn’t work out. You work so much, and I don’t want to be alone. I never meant to hurt you, but I needed to see if I still felt about him the way he said he felt about me. I don’t. What he and I shared was not a foundation for a marriage. Miles and I were good at dating before we met. He wanted to live in the past and party now like we used to before. I want different things. I don’t love him. I love you. I want to build a family with you.” Persephone barely makes eye contact with John. She confessed the dates she

had with Miles. The more she spoke, the more ashamed she felt. John remained silent, letting her confess. He got out of the driver's seat to unlock the massive gate. He drives to a beach house that is undergoing renovations in silence. *This conversation is harder than I could have imagined.*

“The two of you have a history together. Nothing can change that. I promise I will work on a better schedule. I understand you needed closure. I see you are still wearing the engagement ring I gave you. My question is, are you ready to marry me?” John parks next to the house. He lifts Persephone’s chin with a gentle touch, looking deep into her soul.

“Yes.” Persephone whispers. *Stop crying, you silly woman.*

“You were not deciding between your past and your future. You were ending an old story before beginning our new store. Get out. I want to show you a few things.”

John leads her to the back of his vehicle, showing her a black leather jewelry box. Persephone’s words fail her. She looks at John in confusion.

“I’m going to share something with you that your sister will never know, but you need to know.” John looks at Persephone for a response. Persephone nods her head in agreement.

“You made the correct choice to stay in Charleston before we met, even when Symphony told you she was fine. She was not. In her distress, she sold what’s inside this box. She was desperate and didn’t want to come to you for help, because you were both in pain. I feel she would have told you about this necklace had you not spent time with Miles this week? Do not be angry with your sister. She knows this necklace was made to be worn at a wedding. She asked me to find it. The jeweler who bought it from her was able to get it for you.” John opens the box, revealing the Bordeaux family pearl necklace with a sapphire pendant. John gently slides her hair

off her neck, adorning her with the family necklace, then puts his large arms around her. He kisses the top of her head before she turns around to kiss him on the lips.

“I didn’t know. Thank you.” John wraps Persephone in his arms, holding her as the breeze washes over their bodies. Persephone can hear John’s heartbeat. The aroma of his skin intoxicates her. *How could I have ever thought about anyone else?*

“Do you know where we are?” John’s tone was calm but playful.

“Yes, it’s the Bordeaux house. It’s so much larger in person. I’ve never been here. Our great-grandparents sold the property because of a family illness before I was born.” Persephone had always wanted to visit this estate on a private island in the Atlantic. The two of them walk hand in hand around to the back of the property, facing the sea.

“You would mention this house every time we go out on my boat. I bought this for you as a wedding present; although it is a larger place now that I’ve added on it.” John, showing a playful smile. Persephone is shocked at what she lays her eyes on next.

“John, what did you do?” Persephone points at the porch with the name *Bordeaux-Noble* engraved on the main beam supporting the deck.

“I sold my house to buy your family’s estate. The original home was small for our family, so I have extended the south end of the home. There’s plenty of room for Symphony and the kids in the extension. The primary living area is large enough for us and our future children. The new playground will be installed while we are on our honeymoon. I can’t decide if we should add a pool here or not. We can discuss it. I’ve saved the interior design decisions so you can add your personal touch. Welcome home.” Persephone jumps into John’s arms, kissing him on the face and neck. He wasn’t expecting to be tackled. They collapse onto the grass in each other’s arms.

“I will spend a lifetime making this estate our home.” Persephone kisses John.

“Good. Let’s start a day early.” John kisses Persephone back, ecstatic at her reactions to the first two surprises.

“What do you mean, a day early?” Persephone and John stand. She takes his hand, waiting for another surprise.

“Well, a storm is supposed to roll through Charleston Sunday, so I’ve asked the venue if we can marry today after rehearsal. I’ve already informed our guests, the pastor, the caterers, what have you. Everyone is waiting for us. We can have a sunset wedding this afternoon and start our life here tonight. Miss Persephone Bordeaux, you are glowing with those pearls around your neck in front of our forever home. Will you marry me?” John pulls Persephone close with one hand low on her back and one hand in her hair and on her neck.

“Yes. Dr. John Noble. I will marry you.” Tears of joy ran down her face. Everything she wanted and more was given to her because of the love John showed her, despite her reckless decisions this week. He had given her more than she deserved. She would spend her life doing the same. Their marriage was not just about feeling happy, it was about the two of them pouring love into one another throughout a lifetime. *Thank you, God, for turning the sands of time and the pain in my life into precious pearls.*

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