

PREVIEW COPY

Claudia McCants

Broken Angel



Guiding Light Press
Jacksonville Florida

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Preface

The people and events described herein are fictional. Any resemblance to any living person or situation is purely coincidental. Sabal Palm Island and Sea Turtle Beach exist only in my mind, and are loosely based on the barrier islands of Northeast, Florida.

*The golden moments in the stream
of life rush past us and we see
nothing but sand; the angels come
to visit us, and we only know them
when they are gone.*

George Eliot (1819-1880)

Prologue

Lenore walked into the warehouse and locked the door behind her. Inside, the building was dark and gloomy like a cold empty cavern. It felt different at night when nobody else was working. Even her footsteps echoed as she walked.

She turned on the overhead lights but they did little to alleviate the knots in her stomach. She dreaded what she had to do next, but it had to be done. She felt nauseous.

She fished her cell phone from her purse. “Marlene,” she said out loud, and the phone automatically dialed the correct number. After four rings, an answering machine picked up.

This is Marlene. Sorry to miss you. Leave a message and I’ll call back.

“Hey, Sis, it’s me. If you’re screening calls, please pick up. I’m in a jam and I need to talk to you tonight.”

She listened a few seconds only to hear continued silence.

“I guess you’re really not there.”

She thought a few more moments, considering her options.

“Call me back. I’m not sure where I’ll be, so try my cell when you get home.”

She switched on a gooseneck lamp at her station and began to set up her tools beside the marvering pad—tweezers, rods, rod cutter, holding fingers, glass shears,

flameworkeing pliers, and a scoring knife. It was hard to concentrate. Her temples throbbed with an awful headache that had been tormenting her for hours.

She reached back into her purse, took out a plastic zip-lock bag and tossed two dry white tablets into her mouth.

How had she been wrangled into this predicament?

Just before she fired the torch, she saw headlights flash through the window beside Marlene's workbench. She took several deep breaths and tried to calm her racing heart as she walked across the room.

She unlocked the latch and opened the door to greet her visitor.

"Oh!" she said, feeling a bit startled. I wasn't expecting you."

Thursday, March 16, 2000

8:00 p.m.

Lenore's long blonde hair draped gracefully over her evening gown like liquid gold. The last time I had seen her in that black crepe dress was just a few months before, at a company function—a cocktail party to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Crest Glass. She was an effervescent young woman that evening as she worked the room, graciously visiting with each of our valued by-invitation-only guests.

In death her face was expressionless. As she rested in the expensive rose-draped casket, I felt the need to touch her. She was stone cold. A statue. But she was still my sister.

I leaned forward and whispered, "What a stupid way to die."

"She looks serene, doesn't she?" my matronly great aunt said almost as sweetly as the lilac perfume she wore. I barely knew Aunt Geertie, yet she was telling me that my sister was at peace.

"Yes, she does." What else could I say?

She dabbed her eyes with a pink embroidered hanky, squeezed my arm, and hobbled away toward my mother.

I scanned the room. Many of the same people who had

been at Crest's celebratory bash were at the wake: my family, assorted relatives, employees, clients, friends and a few people who were strangers to me. This time their faces were somber. There were even some dignitaries in attendance. The mayors of Sea Turtle Beach, Fernandina, and nearby Jacksonville were cloistered in a corner, and Florida's favorite native son, Senator Winston Wythe, was holding court in the foyer. I recognized him from a recent photo in the local newspaper that showed him at the *Concours d'Elegance* at Amelia Island, a stylish auto exhibition that features classic and vintage automobiles. The show had ended on Sunday, but I figured he stayed over to do some campaigning for the impending November election. Our banker, Thomas French, stood so close to the senator that I thought they would both topple over.

If it had been me lying in that coffin, Lenore would have been performing her normal hostess duties and consoling each guest. But I'm not Lenore, and to tell you the truth, I didn't care how they handled their grief. I didn't even know how I felt. Mostly I was numb, but on some level I was mad at Lenore for dying and at myself for not being home when she'd called.

Suddenly my mother was at my side. "She looks good, doesn't she?"

"She's dead, Mama. Or haven't you noticed?" I regretted the words as soon as they tumbled out of my mouth, but I couldn't help myself. Nothing would make Lenore come back, and small talk at the casket wasn't my strong point. Mama's pain reflected back to me from her glistening eyes and I was sickened by my indiscretion. In truth, Lenore did look peaceful. Then I realized why my mother and aunt had

made their comments about Lenore's appearance. It was a safety mechanism. All they had to do was imagine Lenore sleeping so they didn't have to confront reality. I could do that too. Or could I?

I studied her expressionless face.

Nope. What remained of my sister was a lifeless corpse. She wasn't going to wake up and make some miraculous recovery. But I decided my mother and my aunt were right. Lenore looked exceptional that evening. No contusions or lacerations were visible. If her complexion was discolored, the mortician had disguised it with cosmetics. That struck me as funny because Lenore rarely wore makeup, and even then only a little lipstick to dress her up for a special event, like a cocktail party...or a funeral. I stroked her silky smooth hair and told her, "You're beautiful, Sis."

My mother eased closer. "You need a break. Get some fresh air, Marlene." She touched my shoulder and added, "In fact, go home."

I didn't argue. Mama was right. I needed to get away and I couldn't escape from the funeral home fast enough. I said a silent goodbye to Lenore as I whisked out of the parking lot in my Jeep.

It was a perfect evening to ride with the Wrangler's top off. The night air was pleasantly brisk and the winter sky was clear and studded with a blanket of sparkling stars. There were better ways to pay tribute to my sister than to stand by her dead body and weep. I decided then that I wouldn't attend her funeral. I popped in a CD by Lenore's favorite Jacksonville band, *Lynard Skynard*, lit a cigarette, and whisked through the night singing the lyrics to Freebird until my throat hurt.



I woke up around noon the next day. Somebody was pounding on my front door. I knew who it was. I slipped on my robe and walked, zombie-like, to the living room. Daddy was bound to be upset with me for missing the memorial service.

He marched into my house, demanding, “Where were you? And why didn’t you answer the phone?” He knew where I’d been because I was still in my pajamas. He also knows I turn the ringer off when I’m dead tired. It was his typical way of inviting me into an argument. I was expected to explain or make excuses so that he could rage on about how I had embarrassed the family yet again. Under the circumstances, I decided to let him vent and walked back into my bedroom without uttering a word of apology.

I hid my head under the covers. Eventually, he realized I wasn’t listening. He sat on my bed and touched my hand. “Are you okay?”

“I’ve been better,” I grumbled. “Are you angry with me?”

“Frustrated is more like it.”

“Mama?”

“You know your mother can never stay mad at you.”

“So she is upset with me.”

He patted my hand. “Not angry, Marlene. She’s worried. Have you been drinking?”

I shook my head. I knew he didn’t believe me. “You always ask me that, Daddy. It would be nice to think you’re pulling for me instead of waiting for me to screw up.”

He stared at me blankly.

I am the first of three children. My brother, Matthew,

came in between Lenore and me. He's the kind of son a father can be proud of, and my father has always been proudest of Matt. Lenore was my mother's prize. As the oldest, I'm the kid they expected the most of, and I'm also their biggest failure. I have been sober for a long time but my father still waits for me to relapse. I'm sorry that he still stays on edge when I'm around him, but I do understand. At least I try to understand, which is what I wished he would do for me. I felt the urge to shake him to get a response, but I knew we had reached an impasse.

He removed his suit jacket, loosened his tie, and walked into the kitchen where I joined him. He prepared a pot of steaming hot coffee, making it strong, the way he always served it to me when I was recovering from a hangover. We sipped cup after cup of the strong brew in silence. "Shouldn't you be home with Mama?" I knew he was missing the buffet that her Women's Guild was catering at the church hall following the service.

He winked. "I go where I'm needed."

I hugged him. "Thanks, Daddy." I was pleased that my father had come to keep me company, probably at Mama's request. That he stayed, despite my foul mood, was a tribute to his fortitude and his love for me.

We sat together on the living room sofa and leafed through my collection of photo albums. The more I looked at snapshots of my sister, the angrier I got. I resented that she had been snatched away from us. I studied my father as he admired a photo of Lenore. At 62, he was still handsome even though he was no longer the strapping young man shown wrestling with three young kids in our family pictures. He was dressed in a proper church suit—black trousers and

charcoal wool jacket with a fashionable silk jacquard tie, but his weary face betrayed his age. I felt sorry for him and I felt sorry for me. “I love you, Daddy,” I soothed, brushing a lock of gray hair away from his glassy eyes.

I didn’t anticipate his tears. His body began to shake against mine and I listened to his sobs as he wailed in protest of the death of his youngest child.

“I should have attended the service,” I apologized as I fought the urge to explain that I’d sat up most of the night, crying until I had no more tears. The black dress I had selected to wear was still hanging in the closet.

I felt guilty for expecting too much from him. Realizing that, I gave into my frustration and held my crying father nestled within my comforting arms.



The Terhunes are glass artisans. Glassblowing has been our family’s hallmark for six generations, since before my ancestors migrated from Europe to North America. Like my brother and me, Lenore was a professional glassblower. Our father passed the trade to us, just as he had inherited the craft from Papa Henry. We apprenticed in Daddy’s studio before going away to various schools to perfect our skills, and all of us continued to work in the family business after graduation.

Crest Glass Studios is located in a large nondescript warehouse complex on Sabal Palm Island. It’s where our family spends most days. Mama manages a small but elite gallery in Old Towne, the trendy part of Sea Turtle Beach. My father oversees the rest of us—a total of 56 employees. Although we are a small company, our creations are shipped

to exclusive stores and our glass is exhibited worldwide. Crest Glassware is also a permanent feature of the White House collection. My father is somewhat pompous about that accomplishment.

There are two kinds of glassblowing at our establishment. Larger glass manufacturers often specialize in one form, but Crest Glass is renowned for both.

One form of glassblowing is called lampworking. It involves working with glass rods and a torch. That was Lenore's specialty. Matt is the chief gaffer in the larger workroom located in our second warehouse. He labors in front of a fiery furnace, blowing hot blobs of liquid into vases, pitchers, art pieces and enormous chandeliers that hang from ceilings in renowned hotels, museums and even cathedrals. I'm trained in both techniques. Sometimes I helped Matt's team, but most days I was stationed with a torch at the bench beside my sister. The two of us were the Custom Glass Department. Everything we blew was made to order.

We were closed for business on the day of Lenore's funeral, yet I went to work that afternoon. It was the first time our factory had been shut down in its fifty-plus-year history. I guess Daddy figured nobody would feel like working. Lenore had a lot of friends.

Glasswork isn't just a job. It is part of who we are. I always tell people that liquid glass flows through Terhune veins. For me, glass working can be a way to meditate and escape from the rest of the world.

I sat on my stool and surveyed the cavernous building. Its emptiness only depressed me more. I could almost feel my sister prodding me. *You know you'll feel better behind the*

torch. I slid a safety shield over my eyes and lit the burner, which usually fires me up. That day, I wasn't inspired. I glanced over at Lenore's workbench. It was as dismally empty as I felt inside, but I still sensed her presence lingering. I kept hearing her say. *Do it!* I shut off the fire and screamed at the top of my lungs, "Leave me alone!" My words echoed off the walls. I rested my head on the cold marving table and moaned, "Please don't leave me alone. How will I ever work again without you beside me?"

A few minutes later, Tony shouted from the outside yard. "Marlene, unlock this place and let me in!" Tony is a good friend of mine. He works as a bit gatherer on Matt's team. He's also the unfortunate guy who discovered Lenore's body early Monday morning when he'd gone into work to fire up the furnace.

I unlatched the door. "What are you doing here?"

He sat on Lenore's stool. "Same as you." Tony rubbed the metal bench surface reverently and closed his eyes for a moment. "Did yelling help?"

I was a little embarrassed. "Not much."

He shook his head. "I can't believe she's gone."

Tony Gilman is a large man, but that day he seemed to shrink as he slouched against the countertop. I felt the depth of his sorrow. Grief weighed so heavily on me that my heart ached. I stared at the floor and emptied my mind. I didn't want to think.

That's when I saw something sparkling. Tiny pieces of glass were scattered like snowflakes beneath Lenore's bench. I gazed at the shiny flecks on the cement floor and Tony stooped down to pick up a fractured angel's wing, still intact. Suddenly a vision of Lenore holding the crystalline figurine

entered my mind.

Tony fetched a broom and swept the residual glass dust from beneath our feet, gathering the larger pieces of broken glass. I emptied my lunch into a trash can, placed the fragments into the brown paper sack, and stashed it away into my canvas tote bag.

Tony picked up a scrap of paper.

“What’s that?”

He crumbled it up. “Just trash.”

“Let me see.” I held out my hand.

He handed me the paper and I spread it out before me. It was a prep list from the floor beneath Lenore’s bench. While he continued to sweep, I tallied it up and arrived at a total of 525 sea shells, crystal flowers, bees, ladybugs, doves, hearts and 250 assorted swizzle sticks—some clear glass, some hand-painted. At the bottom of the list it said, ‘lots and lots of butterflies.’

“It’s an order.”

“Who’s it for?”

I shrugged. There wasn’t a name or address on the form. Instead, there was just the alphanumeric number the front office encodes a purchase order with when a customer asks to remain anonymous. I was astounded that Lenore hadn’t told me about the enormous project. We always tackled large tasks together. I searched our department, including all of the shelves and boxes where we store our creations until a job is complete. There wasn’t a flower, bee or ladybug in sight. Apparently she had started the angel first, which puzzled me since we save the larger pieces until last to avoid the possibility of breakage.

I combed through Lenore’s file folders, hoping to find

artwork for the project. I required detailed drawings to show me what the client had in mind, knowing that I would finish the order by myself. Finding nothing, I was discouraged. I didn't even know the deadline. "I can't believe this," I groaned. "I won't be able to get started until Monday."

Tony shook his head in disbelief. "What are you talking about? You're in mourning. Cut yourself a break."

I pivoted to face him. "I need something to keep my mind busy."

He took my arm and guided me to the door. "Let's get out of here."

The remainder of the evening, Tony chauffeured me around in his vintage Karman Ghia. We enjoyed two chocolate double-dips from the Twisted Treat, a cute little frozen custard stand that is housed in a building that looks like an ice cream cone. Afterward, we threaded our way through the streets of the historic district, admiring quaint antique shops along Middle Avenue, and the bed and breakfast inns hidden in quiet neighborhoods nearby. Tourists sat on porch verandas of grand antebellum homes, rocking lazily in wooden chairs.

As we rounded a corner, McGregor's Pub was overflowing with St. Patrick's Day patrons. It was the first time in years that I wasn't sitting in there on a barstool with a mug of frothy beer pressed to my lips. I wondered how anybody could celebrate on the day when Lenore was put to final rest.

A few minutes later we parked and the two of us quietly strolled along the shores of Sea Turtle Beach. I took off my shoes and waded in the gentle evening surf. Ten brown pelicans skimmed the top of the water.

It was a calming moment, but my heart still ached.
Tony was right. No amount of work—not even a sunset stroll—could take away the pain or make me feel better.

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Saturday, March 18

3:30 a.m.

Saturday morning started with a thunderstorm and a blinding migraine. A few years earlier, it would have been from drinking too much alcohol, but my Lenore headache was due to lack of sleep. I kept analyzing scenarios, trying to get a fix on why she'd died.

I checked my clock. It was only 3:37.

Before I went to the living room, I stopped in the kitchen and washed down a couple of extra-strength aspirin with a swig of cold milk. Then I sat in my favorite leather recliner with a wet cloth plastered against my forehead. Except for the sound of rain splattering against the windows and an occasional rumble of thunder, the house was silent.

What was it Tony had said? I concentrated until his words came back to me. "Lenore's head was resting on her arms like she was asleep...but she was dead."

No wonder my temples throbbed. Tony had found my sister slumped against her workbench, overcome by noxious fumes spewing from the lamp burner near her head. My beloved sister had taken a nap and slipped away into another world. Why didn't she go home if she was sick or tired? She should have known better.

The first rule of glassblowing is caution. Blowing glass can be dangerous, so glass factories, like ours, always have safety rules, procedures and equipment. Every glassblower takes extra precautions to protect self from harm, but accidents can still happen.

That's what Daddy called Lenore's death—an accident.

I wasn't buying it.

I was certain Lenore would never do something as stupid as falling asleep at her bench, and I knew she would have turned on the fans to ensure proper ventilation while she worked. The more I thought about it, the more my head pounded, and the more I contemplated the possibility that Lenore had committed suicide.

What had she wanted to tell me?

Eventually, I drifted into a fitful sleep that lasted less than an hour. When I woke up, I showered, dressed and hit the road.

I was in line for the St. John's Ferry before 5:30. There were only three cars in front of me, one behind me, each of us parked in the dark with our motors running and our headlights on, waiting for the first crossing of the day. The rain had slowed to a drizzle and the morning fog was disappearing. The gentle rhythm of my windshield wipers lulled me into a tranquility I hadn't experienced during the night.

I scrunched down in my seat and managed to claim another twenty minutes of rest before a scruffy little man in a yellow slicker banged on my window. "Wake up, Missy! It's time to leave!" My heart raced and pounded in my chest, an unsettling reminder of all those mornings when my mother had yelled for me to get ready for school.

I followed the other cars up the ramp as the boat's diesel engine roared to life for the 6:10 crossing from Ft. George Island to Mayport Village. The trip takes just eight minutes but I still got out of my car and stood by the railing, admiring a river that has been traversed through the centuries by everything from dugout canoes to aircraft carriers. The mist cooled my face and I finally felt awake, even though I had only slept a total of three hours.

I was starved. I stopped at a little food mart in Mayport and purchased a six-pack of sodas—the kind with lots of sugar and caffeine—and a few items to make breakfast at Lenore's place. I was sure there weren't any groceries in the pantry. Lenore's car knew the way to every fast food restaurant between St. Augustine and Brunswick, Georgia. That always irritated me because she was the perpetually thin sister. I gain five pounds every time I smell grease.

The neighborhood was quiet except for a mockingbird's pleasant daybreak song coming from a nearby date palm. I used my own key and slipped into Lenore's townhouse unnoticed. Mayport Naval Air Station's weekend employees were already at their posts. The rest of the world was either sleeping in late or watching cartoons.

I had lived there when I was married to Steve, but after our divorce, my sister had taken over the lease. I purchased a house that was located just a few minutes away from work. She had welcomed the chance to live on the other side of the river, away from my parents' watchful gaze, especially since living close to a naval base provided her with plenty of dates.

That made me sad for many reasons. Missed opportunities. Dying young.

The apartment was sparsely furnished. The focal point of

the living room was a framed Patrick Nagel serigraph of an exotic woman with a hibiscus in her hair. Beneath the artwork, a small television sat on a pine tray table with a few bright red throw pillows tossed on the floor in front of it. There was very little furniture except for a faded denim futon chair left over from Lenore's dorm days at the University of Florida in Gainesville, and four bright red plastic crates stacked beside the patio door, each brimming with tattered paperback books. Lenore was an avid reader. She also loved plants. The walls were lined with an abundance of split-leaf philodendron, lush tropical ferns, baskets of Christmas cactus still in bloom, and a corn plant that was taller than me. There wasn't even a lamp.

I stumbled into the kitchen to unload my sack of groceries. When I flipped the light switch up, a fluorescent ceiling fixture flickered and hummed before it illuminated both rooms so brightly that I had to squint. As expected, her refrigerator was almost empty. I found an unopened pack of cheddar cheese, a plastic container of mustard, a jar of baby dills, and a frozen candy bar in the freezer that I immediately claimed. Typical Lenore cuisine.

I had planned to pack up her belongings to save my parents from the ordeal, but there wasn't much to do. I ran the vacuum through every room, spritzed and cleaned the sinks and tub, and thought about Lenore. That was the real reason I was there—to be closer to the essence of my best friend. I needed to be surrounded by her possessions—things she had left behind. I watered her indoor garden, tending to the plants as if they were my kin.

The towels in her linen closet were stacked neatly and undisturbed. I selected a fresh pillowcase to fill with a few

items from her bedroom, including her Bible, an inlaid shell jewelry box, a tattered address book, and a self-help book she had been reading before her death. On the bottom of the closet floor was a large cardboard container cluttered with rolls of toilet tissue, combs, brushes, sprays, lotions and a box of feminine napkins. I picked out a few items and put them beside the entry door to take with me.

I crawled into her bed around nine o'clock, wrapped myself in our grandmother's hand-stitched quilt, and napped with the spirit of my beloved sister watching over me.



People often said Lenore and I looked like twins: same hazel eyes, same honey blonde hair, same fair complexion and freckled nose. Sometimes we even sounded alike. The only difference was our age and the extra thirty or so pounds I sometimes pack around my hips. When I'm sober I tend to chunk up, but friends still remarked about our similarities and that sometimes caused confusion. Like that morning.

I awoke about two hours later when the mattress moved and I felt a strong, warm hand grabbing my shoulder. A deep voice announced, "Time to get out of the rack!" I rose up and hit the intruder in the stomach with my elbow, following with a punch in the face and a robust shove off the mattress. I recognized my assailant when I had him pinned to the floor. It was Steve, and even though my former husband had trained me in self-defense, I'd managed to catch him off guard...the same way he had just caught me off guard. Seeing his face rendered me temporarily speechless.

Frozen in amazement, he stared up at me. "Marlene!

What are you doing here?”

I stumbled off his body. “Me? You’re lucky I didn’t kill you!” As if I could really hurt a 6 foot 2 inch, 225 pound Navy guy who works out at the gym every day.

He rubbed his left eye. “You pack a powerful wallop, woman!”

There was a time when I would have been ecstatic to see Steve come home after six months at sea.

“What are you doing in my sister’s apartment?”

He rolled over on his stomach and groaned. “If you’d paid attention to the news, you would know Big John is back.”

That didn’t answer my question. “Why are you here?”

“Lenore invited me to stay with her.”

“How’d you get in? Do you still have a key?”

He ignored me and glanced around. “Where is she anyway?”

“She’s dead. Now get out of here!”

I would have stormed out of the room, but I realized I was standing in front of him in my bra and panties. I slipped on my jeans and blouse and tried to seem impervious to his presence.

He sprung to his feet. “Did you just say dead?”

“She killed herself.” I left him in the bedroom to brew over that dose of reality while I tried to figure out if my ex-husband had been sleeping with my sister.

Steve stayed in the bedroom. I could hear his sobs and began to feel guilty for acting vicious yet again.

Three years after our separation, I still tried to keep him at a distance to shield me from his penetrating gray-blue eyes. My parents adore him. So did Lenore. And although I

would never admit it out loud, I still cared deeply for him. A lump lodged in my throat and I fought an anxiety attack as my heart rate sped up. I hated that I had sabotaged our relationship, and I still took out my frustrations on him. All I knew that day was that I didn't want him there. I wanted to be by myself, even if Lenore had invited him back into my life.

I busied myself in the kitchen by throwing together an omelet with the eggs, cheese and salsa I had purchased at dawn. "Come have breakfast!" I shouted when the toast popped up. I figured I might as well feed him before I kicked him out the door. I heard the water running in the bathroom and a few minutes later he appeared recovered, apparently refreshed by a cold splash in the sink. For the first time, I realized he was dressed in his whites.

Breakfast was good but the silence was awful. "How long have you been here?"

"I just got back this morning. Lenore was supposed to greet me when I got off the ship. When she didn't show up, I hitched a ride with a buddy who lives down the street."

"You know I'm not talking about when you got back in port. How long have you been living with my sister?"

"Since you and I divorced, off and on. Six months at sea got me out of her way, but when I was in town, I'd crash here until I shipped out again. I helped her pay the rent and a few bills." He said it without a bit of discomfort or shame.

I was amazed. As a kid, Lenore could never keep a secret, yet she had managed to hide Steve's presence from me for almost two years. I could have been angry with her, but remembering how many times she'd told me, "Steve's a good guy, Marlene." I figured she had fostered the connection with

my ex-husband just in case I ever realized my mistake. Unless they were sleeping together, which presented a whole different scenario I didn't want to consider, and that possibility increased my anxiety level.

"She killed herself?"

I just stared at him.

He pleaded, "Tell me you're lying."

When I didn't respond, Steve grabbed his sea bags, slapped a key on the table in front of me and walked out without saying another word.

I felt a ton of emotions weighing me down. I was sad about my sister, glad to see Steve, mad that he was in Lenore's apartment, and on top of it all, so much guilt about ruining his day that tears welled in my eyes and spilled down my cheeks.

I'm sure it wasn't the kind of homecoming that he had expected.



I live in a region called Florida's First Coast. At least that's what the politicians and newscasters tell us when they hype the area in the media. No matter what you call it Northeast Florida is a great place to live. The biggest town in our area is Jacksonville with a population of more than 800,000 inhabitants. It covers 840 square miles, which makes it one of the largest cities in the nation.

The St. John's River flows northward through the center of town and empties into the Atlantic Ocean. The Timucua Indians already lived here when the French landed at the mouth of the river in the mid 1500's, close to where the ferry

crosses. Pirates, bandits, and runaway slaves roamed its shores. Some parts of the area are still as unspoiled as they were hundreds of years ago.

That's why I adore Sabal Palm Island. You won't find a major hotel chain, high rise condominium, or golf course on Sea Turtle Beach. Our small secluded barrier island—with the Atlantic Ocean on the eastern shoreline and marshland to the west—is still undiscovered except for a few people who on occasion stray off the main thoroughfare and amble into our picturesque community. Those lucky families often revisit, year after year, enjoying our uncrowded beaches and acres of thick coastal forests. It is hallowed ground—pristine untouched wilderness.

My parents' house is a sturdy 90-year-old waterfront dwelling that would look just as perfect on a sprawling farm with its white clapboard siding, tin roof, and wrap-around porches. The lush azalea bushes surrounding it were in full bloom with abundant pink and purple blossoms.

I found my father in the backyard resting in the shade, his hammock stretched between two ancient Live Oak trees. Their twisted branches were draped in Spanish moss. Daddy's face was hidden beneath a fishing magazine. I checked for fire ants, kicked away a few acorns, and sat on the leaf-covered ground beside him. He snored softly as I watched him sleep.

The Intracoastal Waterway kept me company. It was a chilly March afternoon. A beautiful white Egret flew out of a rookery in a cedar by the marsh and swooped into the sawgrass where it easily plucked a brim from the brackish water. A flock of Canada geese squawked overhead. I felt like I was in a Norman Rockwell painting, Florida style.

My father stretched and moaned. "How long have you been here?"

"About ten minutes."

"That long?" He rubbed his eyes and chuckled. "Guess I needed my beauty rest. Have you seen your mother?"

"Not yet."

"She went inside to make me lunch just before I dozed off." He raised himself on his elbow and looked back at the house. "Ah, there's my gorgeous bride!" On cue, my mother came down the wood chip path with two bagged lunches and a small red cooler that she placed by my feet.

Mama looks like my late grandmother. She still pin curls her hair every night to create what she calls finger waves, a style reminiscent of the 1950's. Except for a strand of silvered hair on the left side of her forehead, she's still a stunning brunette. That day, she wore slacks and a rust-colored cardigan sweater that matched her lipstick perfectly. My father sat up and smiled, admiring her as if she was still the 16-year-old cheerleader he had courted and married.

"I saw you from the kitchen window." She gave me a kiss on the cheek. "I imagine you're here to go fishing." Now that I'm sober, I cast a line when I'm down in the dumps.

"And I imagine you'll soon be at a shopping mall," I teased back. When my mother is depressed, she shops.

She looked at my father. "Are you going fishing, Mason?"

He glanced at the skiff and back at her. It took him an instant to decide. "No, Darlin'," he drawled like a true southern gentleman. "I promised to spend the afternoon with you." He winked at me and slid out of the hammock. "You don't mind, do you?"

The prospect of spending time alone with my favorite rod

was appealing. “Not at all. Go have fun with Mama.”

As he walked toward the house, hand-in-hand with my mother, he called over his shoulder. “Will you still be here when we get back?”

“Do you want me to be?”

He waved as they went through the back door. “Catch us some fish!”



By the time my parents departed I had already consumed my bologna sandwich, my father’s shaved ham sandwich, and both cream sodas.

It was still early in the afternoon. I studied the wetlands and wondered how many fish I could bring in but I didn’t move. Instead, I stayed in the hammock with my leg lazily draped over the side, rocking myself, and considering still another nap. I stared at the sky. It was magnificent—Robin’s egg blue with white puffy clouds stacked all the way to heaven.

Where are the angels? I heard Lenore’s voice as clearly as the day she asked me that question on a flight to Baltimore for a visit with our Aunt Sarah. It was the first flight for my little sister. I can still see her nose smudge on the window. *If we can’t see angels, how do we know they exist?*

When I was just thirteen, I, too, was mystified by the question she posed but I responded easily. “There are just some things you know in here.” I’d patted my chest just above my heart and she had beamed, obviously delighted with my explanation.

On that beautiful Saturday afternoon, as I reclined

beneath a glorious Florida sky thinking about my sister, I realized I had been right. My eyes misted. I knew what I had to do, and it wasn't fishing for anything the river had to offer. I turned on my stomach and considered my parents' empty house. They would be gone for at least three hours.

I raced inside and dashed upstairs, giving my old room a cursory glance. My mother had remodeled it into a den, and Matt's former habitat had been converted into a sewing room. But a few doors down the hall my sister's room remained untouched. It had been a shrine since the day she'd left for college.

I trembled as I walked inside. There was a shelf of knick-knacks, including the first piece of glass Lenore had made—a paperweight. A curio cabinet in the corner showcased her porcelain doll collection. Photos covered the wall: a few of me, one of Matt, and twenty-or-so snapshots of Mama, Daddy and assorted friends were thumb-tacked to a bulletin board. There were pictures of Lenore the cheerleader, Lenore proudly holding up her diploma, and Lenore with Jonathan Lucas, her high school boyfriend, at the prom. I hadn't thought about him for years, but now he was in the headlines.

A search of her closet and dresser didn't reveal anything that might hint at why she had been depressed. Granted, she hadn't lived in the house for several years, but I sensed there was a clue in her room. I found a few tattered letters and greeting cards that I stashed away in my purse.

A car door slammed outside and I sprinted down the steps, arriving in the foyer just as Matt opened the front door.

He looked up the tall staircase. "Find anything?"

"Excuse me?"

He smiled. “Just joking. Where’s Dad?”

“Shopping with Mama.”

“Figures.”

I followed him into the rustic farmhouse kitchen at the end of the hallway. The *Home Sweet Home* plaque over the deep soapstone sink had been hand-painted by my mother in an arts and crafts class, but that’s not what made me feel cozy in the recently remodeled room. That mood came from the imaginative mind of my sister. Lenore had dedicated immeasurable hours, literally months, working with our mother, an architect, and a contractor to create a laid-back atmosphere.

They had asked me to contribute my ideas to the project, but I had rejected the invitation, as usual, preferring to isolate myself from family affairs. I saw the room for the first time that afternoon. My arms tingled and my face flushed as Lenore’s passion, wisdom and ingenuity were displayed before my eyes. I wished I could tell her how much I admired her design.

The vaulted ceiling was constructed from knotty pine planks. Above my head, a stunning brass chandelier with six daffodil lights was suspended from a thick hand-hewn beam. My brother was busy searching the pantry for a snack and barely noticed the elaborate light, even though he and his team had produced it.

I walked across vintage dark wood floors to examine pewter hardware on the distressed black cabinetry. A white stone countertop and a restored 1890’s stove added to the old-fashioned motif. Tangerine colored walls made the room feel warm and inviting. The only hint of a more modern era was the refrigerator my father had insisted upon, a stainless

steel commercial-sized monstrosity.

Matt opened both doors and stared inside. “Why do they always have boring food? Boiled eggs, raw carrots, celery, pickles. Salad stuff. No leftovers.”

“You hate Mama’s leftovers.”

“I was hoping Dad cooked last night.”

We both laughed.

I peeked through the window at the dock and the empty boat.

“What are you doing here?” He reached into the pantry and took out a can of sardines. “Fish calling your name?”

“Yeah, but I’m ignoring them. Why are you here?”

“I came over to discuss business. The folks have been loading up the Prevost and they’re heading out. I’ll be in charge for awhile.”

My parents have visited 49 states in their enormous motor home, so that didn’t surprise me. Under duress, my father takes to the road in his elaborate house on wheels. “When are they coming back?”

He placed the tiny oil-soaked fish between two pieces of bread, covered them with mustard, and took two giant bites of his sandwich. He mumbled, “In a week, maybe two.”

“Probably a month, knowing them.”

He shoved the last bite into his mouth before preparing a second one. “Dad wants you to go with them.”

“No, thanks.”

He stuffed three more huge bites in his mouth, “You should go, Marlene.”

I poured a glass of milk and slid it to him across the counter. “That’s out of the question. I’d be crazy to put them or me through that.”

He swallowed hard. “He’s giving you time off from work, with pay.”

What could I say to get out of a trip to who-knows-where with Mason and Trudy Terhune? I had to think of an excuse fast. “When do they plan to leave?”

Matt gave me one of those ‘I know what you’re thinking’ looks.

“Tomorrow morning.” He chuckled.

My parents are the champions of avoiding uncomfortable situations. They stick together, stay busy, steer clear of conversations that make them feel uneasy, and shed their tears privately. I was sure my father was already fretting over crying in front of me. My mother, on the other hand, controls her emotions with a prescription.

The prospect of being confined in close quarters with them sounded exhausting, especially when I knew that talking about Lenore would be taboo. And since I don’t drink anymore, I figured I had to get out of Sea Turtle Beach as fast as possible. I grabbed my purse and headed for the front door. “Tell them I said to have a good time and I’m sorry about dinner. I’m out of here. I’ll see you at work on Monday.”

Matt laughed so hard I thought he’d choke on the carrots he’d pilfered from the refrigerator. “We’ll see about that. You know Dad has ways to track you down.”

I trotted to my car and sat in the driveway, motor purring, as I deliberated my destination. I needed to hide for just one day in order to avoid an uncomfortable situation with my father. The only reason he could want me to accompany them was to keep tabs on me. He was afraid I would drink to forget about my sister’s death.

I didn't need a babysitter, I didn't want liquor, and I would never forget Lenore. I turned right and headed northbound, feeling confident my father would never find me in Georgia.



Amy is one of my favorite people in the world. She may be Steve's older sister, but she's the closest thing to a sister that I have left. When I divorced Steve, I didn't divorce Amy. I called her from my mobile phone and she said, "Sure, come right up!" Twenty minutes later, I pulled to her curb and she ran outside to give me a welcoming hug.

Behind her, Steve stood in the doorway.

I felt like a doe standing in the headlights with a car speeding toward me. I wanted to sprint but I was glued to the pavement. I glanced at Amy, then Steve, and then back at Amy again. Why hadn't I figured he would be at her house? He turned away and his sister snared my arm to guide me inside. "He'll be fine," she assured me. But when we went into the living room, Steve was gone...again. Chasing him away was getting to be a habit.

She disappeared into the kitchen and reappeared a few moments later with a cold glass of southern sweet tea—the kind that sets your teeth on edge. Yummy! We settled in the living room, comfortably talking like we had for so many years. They'd been discussing Lenore before I arrived, and she picked up the conversation where they'd left off. "I can't believe your sister committed suicide."

"Actually, that hasn't been proven yet."

Steve reappeared. He had a real shiner, thanks to me.

“What? You said—”

“I know what I said, but I misspoke.”

“You lied.”

“No. I just said what I think may have happened.”

Steve dropped onto the couch and slammed his head against the back cushion. “What did happen, Marlene?” The emphasis he placed on my name made it apparent he was very annoyed.

“They found her at her workstation. She fell asleep with the burner on and was asphyxiated from oxygen deprivation.”

“No way! She wasn’t that stupid!” Steve jumped up and paced the room. “What about the exhaust fans?”

“They were off.”

“Was she sick?”

“I’m not sure.”

“And you buried her?”

I nodded.

He leaned forward. “Without an autopsy?”

“They performed one.”

“What were the results?”

Steve watched me intently and I suddenly felt stupid. I took a sip of my drink and stared at the television. Amy noticed and switched on the evening news. Her brother stood up and turned it back off, standing in front of the screen to get my attention.

“What were the results?” he repeated. His head cocked and his arms folded over his chest.

I looked at him and announced clearly, “I don’t know.”

Amy sat on the edge of the sofa beside me and took my hand protectively in hers. “Leave her alone. Can’t you see

she's grieving?"

He threw his hands up in the air and marched down the hall to the guest bedroom. "That's right, Amy! Be like the rest of her family. Poor, poor Marlene. We have to shield her from everything because she's so fragile. All I can say is you'd better hide the booze."

"Steve!" Amy stood up to defend me but he slammed the door behind him, leaving both of us reeling from his angry outburst.

I gathered my purse to leave. "I should go."

Amy pressed me back into my seat. "Stay. He's just upset, like the rest of us."



Most of my time at Amy's house was spent on the sofa where I considered Steve's words.

He was right but not about the liquor. I had promised Lenore I would never touch another drop and I meant that, but he was absolutely on target about my family's penchant for protecting me. He had also introduced me to another line of thought that I hadn't previously considered. What did my parents know that they weren't telling me, and what were the results of the autopsy?

I was profoundly depressed, consumed with guilt for missing her telephone call, and becoming more agitated every minute. I had run to Georgia to avoid my parents, but my mind was so full of uncertainty about the circumstances of Lenore's death that I was losing sleep.

Amy came out of her bedroom Sunday morning, looking adorable in a swingy matte jersey dress. "I'm going to catch

the first sermon. Would you like to go to church with me?”

“Nah,” I said through a yawn. “Maybe another time.”

I figured she needed an excuse to escape from Steve and me for a few hours of peace. Not that we had been fighting. He had managed to avoid me by sneaking in and out of the house while I catnapped. I felt sorry for Amy. She’d been tiptoeing around both of us like she was walking barefoot on crushed coquina. Living with both of us for two days was more than any person could be expected to cope with, even imperturbable Amy. It was an awkward situation for her, but for me it was better than a land cruise to nowhere with my parents.

“Are you sure you won’t change your mind?” She stood there studying me, waiting for an answer I wasn’t ready to give. “Well, then I’ll see you in a few hours.”

Balanced precariously on stiletto heels, Amy descended the steps to the sidewalk cautiously. I stood in the doorway, watching her shoulder-length auburn hair bounce as she walked away from the house. Too quickly, she disappeared around the corner and out of sight.

It had been years since I’d attended my own church on Sabal Palm Island. Steve and I had married there, and I wondered if he had found another church—perhaps the one Amy attended. Church had been my mainstay in life, the place you’d always find me bright and early every Sunday since I was just a babe in my mother’s arms. But I had forsaken my church prior to our divorce, and that thought disturbed me. I pushed it down into the place where I store hurtful memories.

It was just 10:35. If Steve hadn’t snuck out earlier in the morning, he was still locked behind closed doors.

I felt abandoned with the whole day looming ahead of me. More time to think. More time to fret.

I settled into a comfy wicker chair on the front porch with a fresh copy of the Florida Times-Union. It had been two weeks since I had picked up a newspaper. Nothing in particular caught my eye. The world was conducting business as usual without Lenore. How sad.

I flipped through page by page, barely reading a word until I came to the obituaries. As I skimmed through the names—all people who would be sorely missed by their families and friends—I realized I was not alone in my grief but I imagined they all knew why their loved-ones had died. Was I being selfish in my grief? Did I have the right to pepper my family with questions, or should I just shut up and accept the undeniable truth without delving into the ifs and whys?

That's when I heard the rhythmic beat of a basketball approaching. I turned to see Freddie walking toward the house. "I'm happy to see you today." I was pleased to see the tall, lean pre-teen climb the stairs effortlessly, still bouncing the ball with every step. I needed a dose of his smile and energy that day.

"My mother is visiting some lady she knows from her job." Freddie's house was located several miles away, near King's Bay Submarine Base, but I'd met his family a few years before when they were neighbors of one of my Jacksonville friends. Kids sure do grow up fast, and at 11-years-old, he already towered above me. "Amy called Mom last night and told her about your sister." His charming smile faded and he looked pensive as he drew closer to me. "I'm really sorry, Marlene."

“So you came here just to see me?” I already knew the answer.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You’re a good friend, Freddie. I’m happy to see you.”

He blushed.

I pointed to his basketball. “Are you any good?”

“Of course!” He bounced it three times. “I’m getting better every day. You wanna play a game with me?”

I laughed. “Oh, no...I prefer the comfort of this chair.”

He bounced the ball a few more times, looking introspective. “Amy said you’ve been depressed.”

“I’m okay.” I tried to sound convincing.

He spun the ball between his fingers. “I would be devastated if I lost my parents or my sister.”

Looking at my fingers, I admitted, “I am sad, but oddly enough, I haven’t cried yet. I can’t figure that out. It’s natural to cry. Why can’t I?”

Freddie crouched beside me, his basketball held between his knees. “Maybe you’re afraid that if you cry, you’ll have to admit to yourself that she’s gone.”

I looked down at his hands holding mine. “I don’t want to let her go.”

He stood up. “You can’t lose her. Lenore is in here.” He placed his hand just above his heart. “And she’s in here.” He pointed to his head. “And she’s with God, and God can see and hear anything...so maybe she can too. Maybe she is watching us talk about her.”

I felt better just hearing him say those words. “Maybe I should stop asking questions, Freddie. She’s gone and I can’t do anything about that.”

He touched my shoulder. “I may argue with my sister,

but I would do anything to help her. That's what families are about—loving and protecting each other. I'm sure you'll do what you have to do to find peace."

A horn tooted and I looked up to see his mother's car in the driveway. She shouted, "I'm sorry I have to kidnap him so fast, but we have to get back to our house to prepare for a picnic later today!"

He walked down the porch steps. At the bottom, he stopped and dribbled the ball a few more times. Then he turned to me. "Remember, families stick together even when they're apart."

A tear trickled down my cheek. Out of the mouths of babes comes wisdom.

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