

CHAPTER ONE

BETH

WHY DO all the bad things happen at night? Things that go *bump* never rear their ugly heads in the bright of day. No. They wait. They wait and wait. When evening's shadows have given way to the cloak of midnight, they make noises, jarring even the soundest of sleepers from their rest. Like boyfriends who swear they love you—*oh, how they love you*. Come night, they disappear, never to return. Or, to return, but no longer the love of your life.

Then everything—*everything*—in your life turns upside down.

Just as it had years before. And as it was about to do that Tuesday in early November 1962.

Night came. And something went *bump*. Well, not exactly *bump*. But close enough to change everything.



Mother and Daddy were not home that night. They'd left for an extended vacation in Europe two months before, leaving me somewhat alone in the house. Molly—Mother's full-time maid and my part-time assistant—had prepared supper for me before she left for home. Fussing the whole time, of course. Molly always fussed. But that was Molly, and I'd loved her my whole life for being exactly who she was. Both she

and her husband, Moses, had worked for the family since before my “unusually timed birth,” as she called it, and would, they declared, as long as “the good Lord allowed.”

That night I planned to eat my dinner—roast beef with sweet carrots and onions and little red potatoes swimming in butter—from a TV tray in the den. True to form, before Moses picked her up in their “used but ain’t it clean as a whistle” Impala, Molly complained about the where of my dining.

“You got a kitchen table right here that, far as I can see, is perfect for eating at,” she muttered as I gathered my dinner plate and utensils from the kitchen counter. “And never you mind you got a dining room table long as a ship. But do you use nary one? No, you do not.”

I waltzed with a light shake of my head down the hallway of the impressive Victorian that sat back proudly from North Main Street in the charming, if not at times stifling, town of Bynum, Georgia.

“Oh, Molly,” I said firmly as I pulled the television knob, all set to watch a couple of my favorite shows—*The Huntley-Brinkley Report* and *Laramie*. “It makes no sense to sit at a table all by myself.” I placed my plate on the TV tray. “I’m not Queen Elizabeth.” I turned to her scowling, smooth-as-satin face, crossed my arms, and continued. “I’m going to watch my shows. I’m going to turn out the lights, head upstairs, soak in a nice bubble bath, read a few chapters of my book, and go to bed.”

Molly tossed her head from side to side, disapproval dripping from pouty lips. “Makes no sense to me,” she said. “Not one bitta sense.”

“Eating in front of the television?” I asked, as if I didn’t know exactly where the conversation headed.

“Here you are . . .” She raised her arms and then dropped them dramatically. “One of the purdiest young ladies in the South, and you’re sitting here all alone with that one-eyed monster. Spending your time watching someone else’s life, and most of that made-up. Now . . .” She moved to the sofa, where she fluffed one of Mother’s overstuffed down pillows. “The way I see things, you ought to be asking Mister Harry over for dinner one night—”

MISS BETH BETTENCOURT

I raised a hand to stop her. “Harold Lippincott means nothing romantically to me other than as an escort to the occasional social event, and you know it.” Not to mention that any encouragement whatsoever from me would have him down on one knee in three months flat. A year later, after bridal teas and showers and dinners galore, I’d have the life-long displeasure of sporting the name Elizabeth Rose Bettencourt Lippincott. Even by Southern standards, that moniker seemed too much of a cross to bear. Thoughts of my embossed stationery alone gave me cause to shudder.

Never mind my tombstone.

“Well, if not him, then there ought to be some young man around here—”

I placed my hands on Molly’s shoulders, turned her toward the hallway, and gave a gentle shove before linking my arm with hers. “If there is, he’s not made his presence known.” We started toward the kitchen. “Now, Moses just pulled into the driveway, so get, Molly-Mae, before I—” I raised my brow in one of my pretend dares.

Molly raised hers right back. “Before you what, Miss Priss?”

I raised my chin and teased, “Before I fire you.”

“Like you would,” she sassed.

“I will.” I allowed my voice to rise on the last word. “Then I’ll have to call Mother and tell her that her sweet Molly-Mae has been let go, and you know what will happen next.” I drew on my best Southern-sweet voice to sound more like Scarlett O’Hara than Vivien Leigh ever dreamed. “Her vacation will be ruined, and she’ll come back home, furious with me.”

“She’ll come back and rehire me. That’s what she’ll do.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Molly grabbed her red patent leather purse and the sweater she’d placed on the kitchen counter near the back door. “Well, at least you make sure you lock all the doors and windas.” She turned to leave.

I followed behind her. “I will not lock them all. The weather is divine for sleeping with the windows wide open and under a mound of covers, which is what I intend to do.” I pointed toward the backyard beyond the

door. "Now you, sweet Molly, go home and eat *suppa* with Moses, and be sure to give him a great big kiss for me, you hear?"

"Humph," Molly said. "That man's been more trouble than he's worth lately, what with him being down in the back and all. These days, I gotta take care of you, me, and him, not to mention that pile of young'uns in your kindergarten. Y'all enough to wear a body down."

I brushed my hands across her narrow shoulders, concern for my beloved friend gripping my heart. "Are you all right, Molly?"

"Never you mind about me," she said, shrugging into the cashmere sweater Mother had given her on her birthday. "Like I said, I got a lot on my plate."

I leaned over and kissed her cheek, not caring one whit about the social protocol that dictated against such things. "I love you, sweet Molly."

She patted my cheek. "Go on and eat," she said. "'Fore your suppa gets cold."

No sooner had the back door rattled shut than the front doorbell chimed, sending reverberations through the house and hurrying me to see who might be calling.

I opened the right side of the double front doors with the required jerk to a telegram courier standing about halfway across the front porch, looking up. He whistled in appreciation of the spindles surrounding the haint-blue ceiling as I pushed open the screen. "Now, that's some wood-working," he said. "Right pretty."

"Yes, it is," I said. "And that color has kept every ghost at bay since we moved here." I forced a smile. "Do you have something for me?"

The young man skipped over to the door and pulled the telegram from his uniform pocket. "Miss Beth Bettencourt?"

"I am."

"Then this is for you," he declared as though he'd written it himself.

I reached into the hidden pocket of my full-skirted dress and pulled out a dime. "Here you are."

He thanked me, then trotted down the steps, whistling a nondescript tune.

I returned to the foyer that ran shotgun through the house and

MISS BETH BETTENCOURT

opened the telegram. The light-pink paper had been typed on, stamped, and numbered. My gaze dropped beneath the block letters *WESTERN UNION* to read a message from half a world away.

HOTEL LE BLEU, PARIS FRANCE
MISS BETH BETTENCOURT
352 NORTH MAIN
BYNUM, GEORGIA
ARRIVED HERE FROM ROME TODAY. ONLY TWO
BLOCKS FROM THE LOUVRE.
DELICIOUS FOOD. MOMMY DOING WELL.
DADDY

I smiled at my father's use of the name I'd called my mother as a young child. Not once had he heard me use such an endearment in over twenty years, but when speaking of her in moments of tenderness, he dipped back to past references.

"Good for them." I laid the paper on the foyer table to share with Molly before heading to the den for my suppa.



I went upstairs at nine o'clock with *Laramie's* Robert Fuller on my mind, ran a bath, then slid into a claw-foot tub full of honeysuckle-scented bubbles. I'd told Molly I planned to read, but after the last two days of teaching twelve kindergarten children, fatigue won out. Instead, I closed my eyes and allowed the hot water to soothe away the notion of my parents in Paris.

And why they'd gone to Europe in the first place.

When my skin had pinked and the tips of my toes and fingers had puckered, I pulled the plug, reached for a plush towel, and dried myself as the water gurgled into parts unknown. Minutes later, pajama-clad and fresh-faced, I slid the bottom window up and felt cool air escape through the screen and into my bedroom. After climbing into bed and

securing the pillows around me, I set the clock's alarm for 6:00 a.m. My body had grown languid with the bath and the scent of honeysuckle and the breeze billowing my white eyelet priscillas. I slid until my head nestled into the pillows, stretched one arm to turn out the light, and closed my eyes.



I woke to the sound of snoring.

Deep and rhythmic. A man's snore. At first, I thought I dreamt it. I blinked to allow my eyes to adjust to the semidarkness, then looked toward my open bedroom door.

The interruption came from somewhere within the house. Specifically, down the hall.

Whoever—or whatever—it came from, I couldn't be sure. Nor could I be certain as to which room it originated from. I only knew that *it* and *me* did not belong in the same house.

I eased out of bed and managed to find my slippers, then stepped over to the door. I glanced into the hall. The table lamp I left burning during the night—the one at the top of the staircase—illuminated the doors leading to the bedrooms.

Mother and Daddy's at the far end.

A guest bedroom.

Elise's old room.

A second guest room.

I held my breath while opening my closet door. When it groaned as though I'd woken it, I stopped. Waited. The snoring continued. I swung the door open quickly to avoid the prolonged squeak of the hinges, reached for the robe hanging on the hook near the top, then slipped into it and tied the sash.

The snoring continued. Louder now, as though it anticipated my coming to seek it out.

I tiptoed into the hallway, pausing at Elise's door. Waited. The snoring stopped, and again I held my breath.

MISS BETH BETTENCOURT

The snoring resumed.

I stepped into Elise's room—a room I hardly acknowledged, much less walked into—then to the closet, opening it only partially. I slipped in, closed the door, flung my hand around until it caught the overhead light string, and pulled. The brightness nearly blinded me, and I immediately yanked on the string again. But the dark didn't keep me from knowing that somewhere on the shelf, her old baseball bat lay forgotten.

Except by me.

I stood on my tiptoes, feeling my way with splayed fingers until they met a hatbox. I slid it over, caught hold of the bat with my fingertips, and rolled it forward. A minute later, with the sun-faded Louisville Slugger gripped in one hand, I left Elise's room and inched toward the second guest room. Peered in. Held my breath once more as I looked toward the twin bed farthest from the door, perfectly made in baby-pink chenille, a tiny heart-shaped pillow gracing the center.

I took a step and the floorboard creaked beneath my movement. I flinched, then looked again into the room as the now-heavy breathing increased in sound, the rhythm slow and easy. My head tilted slightly. My eyes glanced toward the other twin, unmade and sliced down the middle by moonlight.

Oh, sweet Lord . . . a man—fair-haired and muscular—lay flat on his back beneath the linens, one arm flung haphazardly over his eyes, his mouth slightly parted. Sound asleep, as though he belonged there. As though he always had. Like a brother, who'd returned from college. Or a boyfriend, in town for a holiday.

I turned quietly and made my way down the stairs.

CHAPTER TWO

BETH

THE SNORING faded and disappeared as I closed the door to my father's private sanctuary. His den. The room where Daddy entertained his gentleman callers. Where they puffed on thick cigars and sipped on homemade lemonade or strong cups of coffee.

Daddy was a teetotaler. "Won't have that demon in my house," he'd barked more than once. "And I won't have it in my body."

The black Bakelite phone on Daddy's oversized desk perched near the far-right corner, angled for easy reaching. I picked up the receiver, stuck my finger in the hole marked OPTR, and dragged it as far as it would go. It clicked back into place, echoing in the quiet of the room. I glanced at the ceiling.

"Operator," a voice greeted me.

"Operator." I kept my voice slightly above a whisper. "Please get Chief Lippincott."

"That office is closed," she said, as though I wouldn't have known it by the common sense God had given me.

"Yes, Operator. I am aware of the time. Would you ring his home, please?"

"Is this an emergency?"

I glanced heavenward again. "There is a strange man sleeping in my

MISS BETH BETTENCOURT

guest bedroom. So I would have to say that, indeed, it is an emergency. Let the chief know Beth Bettencourt is calling, if you would be so kind.”

A pause met my announcement, followed by “Of course, Miss Bettencourt. I’ll ring him now.”

Chief Lippincott—one of my father’s oldest friends—answered on the second ring. I pictured him easily. Barrel-chested. Half rising in the bed, wearing a pair of striped cotton pajamas. His wife asleep, her hair in curlers and a pink cap with lace frilled around the edges. “What is it?” he barked at the operator.

“Beth Bettencourt has an emergency,” she said. “Go ahead. The chief is on the line.”

Mattress springs squeaked against the chief’s weight as he adjusted himself. “Beth?” he asked, fully alert now.

“Is that Beth Bettencourt?” Miss Hilda mumbled from beside him.

“Chief,” I said, amazed at the calmness with which I spoke. “I woke up a few minutes ago to the sound of snoring coming from one of the guest bedrooms. When I looked, I found a man sleeping there. He seems harmless, but—”

“You say a man is sleeping in your house?”

Miss Hilda spoke from beyond the line before I could answer. “A *man* is sleeping at the Bettencourts’?” I imagined her sitting up by now, eyes wide and mouth gaped open.

I took a deep breath and let it go. Gracious. Such drama. “Yes, but I don’t think he means any harm, and I’m not afraid—”

Fumbling came from the other end of the line. “Has he hurt you in any way?”

“No.” I laid the bat on Daddy’s desk as though having gotten it in the first place was completely unnecessary. “And, as I said, I don’t think he means any har—”

“Where are you now?”

“Daddy’s den.”

“Do you have one of your daddy’s shotguns nearby?”

I glanced toward the gun cabinet, fully stocked, but—knowing

Daddy—only one of them loaded. All I had to do was figure out which one. Not that I would. “I hardly think—”

“If you can get one and get yourself outside, do it. I’ll be there in two shakes.”

The line disconnected. I frowned as I replaced the receiver, then retrieved the bat. “Goodness.” I should have stood over the bed, bat in hand, and demanded the man wake up and tell me what he was doing in my house.

But I had not, and now I had to deal with the consequences.

Silence met me when I returned to the hallway. Funny how in the face of a stranger sleeping in one’s house, the lack of noise becomes more deafening than its presence. I crept toward the foyer, both hands clasping the bat’s grip. As I neared the staircase, the snoring resumed, and I breathed out in relief.

Keeping my attention upward, I reached the double front doors, then frowned. The required jerk to open them could wake my unannounced visitor. For a moment I thought of going back through the house and out the back door. But further concerns of creaking boards stopped me. I decided to go with the door that offered the quickest exit.

I laid the bat against the left door, turned the key then the thick brass knob until it met its end. I raised up on the knob, hoping to eliminate sticking, and pulled. Remarkably, the door opened without a rattle of protest. I retrieved the bat, pushed the screen open slowly, and stepped onto the porch.

The night’s air had turned cold. Moist. I tucked my arms and the bat across my chest, and headed down the steps, grateful for my slippers. I walked between the boxwoods, down the cement walkway, and straight to the sidewalk that stretched along North Main. Realizing I stood dressed only in a gown and robe, I inched closer to the shadows of a dogwood. Less than a minute later, a light from an oncoming car flickered from the direction of Bynum’s quaint two-block downtown area, joining the illumination of the streetlamps to dispel the darkness. It passed by the house without slowing.

I shivered. Not from the cold as much as from the notion that upstairs,

MISS BETH BETTENCOURT

in our guest room, a man slept, completely unaware that his deep slumber would shortly come to an end. That his next nap would be on the cot in a jail cell. That tomorrow's breakfast would be two slices of burnt toast and a tepid cup of weak coffee. No cream. No sugar.

I glanced at my bedroom window, still open, and wished I'd not called the chief at all. That I'd let the man sleep through the night. And then tomorrow, when Molly arrived, I'd let the chips fall where they may. It dawned on me then: How had this stranger managed to find his way into my home?

A glance at the front door reminded me that I'd unlocked the door to walk out. That, earlier, I'd locked it after receiving the telegram from Daddy, but that I'd *not* locked the back door after Molly left for the day. I dropped the bat, raised the hem of my robe, and darted around the side of the house, leaping over tree roots by instinct and skirting around one of Mother's azalea bushes, which grew thick at the back corner of the house. I slowed when I reached the steps, climbed them, then entered the screened back porch.

The kitchen door had been left ajar and not by me. I clearly remembered closing it. Molly's admonishment to lock it. The front doorbell ringing . . . What I didn't remember was the pair of men's loafers placed neatly near the threshold.

I stepped out of the kitchen, then scurried through the same path I'd taken earlier in time to see Chief Lippincott pulling his squad car alongside the front curb. I took a few deep breaths, then willed myself to remain calm.

The chief hoisted himself from the car. Even at a distance, the squeak of his gun belt met my ears. I stepped onto the walkway, the chief meeting me. "You all right, Beth hon?" he asked.

"I'm fine," I said. Mainly because I was. "No harm done . . . He's . . ." I looked over my shoulder and toward the second-floor windows. "He's just *sleeping*, Chief."

"And you didn't recognize him?"

I retrieved the bat from where I'd dropped it. "Hardly."

The chief pulled his gun from the holster.

A vision of blood all over my mother's chenille and Molly's disdain at having to "get it out 'fore your mama gets back" caused me to jump. "I don't really think that's—"

"I want you to go stand by my car." He placed his hand on the small of my back and gave a light push. "Keep that bat in your hand now, you hear me?"

"Chief Lipp, I *really* don't think—"

"Go on, now."

I obeyed. Not because I thought I had anything to fear—the man hardly seemed dangerous—but because Molly would carry on for days if she heard I'd not obeyed the chief.

I walked to the far side of the car as Chief Lippincott entered the house, leaving the front door open. I crossed my arms, then glanced up one side of the azalea- and dogwood-lined street, where the dark silhouettes of homes rose from the shadows of towering oaks and pines. I looked to the other, where the brick-and-mortar buildings of our quaint town stood under a full moon. I glanced at my wristwatch.

Almost three thirty. Molly would be sashaying in the back door within hours.

Minutes later, a shuffling from the house drew my attention. I hurried to the front end of the car as the chief escorted the young man down the walkway. As expected, he wore only black socks and a pair of skivvies. His hands were cuffed behind his back, and one of my grandmother's knit afghans had been thrown haphazardly over one shoulder. His hair stood on end in some places, flipping over like a schoolgirl's bangs in others. "What did I—what did I do? I don't understand." Then, noticing me, he said, "Who are— Who is that?"

"Quiet'n up and get in the car," Chief Lippincott said.

I made my way around the city-issued vehicle, clutched the bat to the front of my body, then stepped nearer the front porch.

"But I didn't—I didn't *do* anything," the young man continued. "Nick said just come on in. If I can talk to—"

"In the car."

The chief closed the door behind my uninvited visitor and then came

up to the porch. The eyes of the young man met mine and locked, pleading with me as he tossed the hair from his face.

My heart dropped to my stomach. What had I done?

“Go on inside now, Beth.”

“But my grandmother’s . . .” The words slipped into the night air. I nodded, although I felt no relief whatsoever.

“And lock your doors tight. I’m sure Harry will want to talk to you in the morning.” He turned toward the street.

Well, wasn’t that the icing on the proverbial cake? I nodded again and forced myself to smile. As if it weren’t bad enough that a half-naked man had been carted off from our house, now Harold Lippincott would be calling as though he had some stake in all this.

As the car pulled away, I reentered the house, closed the door, and locked it, then flipped on a light and headed to the kitchen to lock the back door. I immediately went upstairs to the room where my uninvited houseguest had been sleeping, saw the general disorder of things, and stripped the bed of all linens, leaving them in a pile by the bed. I then went into the adjoining bath and stopped short. There, folded as neatly as if on display at a department store, was an army-issued uniform.

I took the clothes downstairs, setting them on the kitchen table. I opened the refrigerator, my eyes more on the uniform than on the pitcher of orange juice Molly had squeezed the day before. After retrieving a glass from the cabinet and pouring myself a drink, I approached the uniform for inspection. This man, last name Martin according to his name strip, was in the army. Or had been. Could he be a defector? Or had he been recently discharged? Honorably? Dishonorably?

A light scent of masculinity and aftershave drifted from the fabric. I inhaled deeply, then shook any such notion away.

Before leaving the room, I retrieved the stranger’s polished shoes by the doorway and placed them under one of the chairs shoved flush against the table. Soon enough, Molly would walk in, see the evidence of my night’s excitement, and the fussing would begin.

I would, of course, fuss back. And that would be that.

For me, anyway. But for the man—whose frightened and confused

EVA MARIE EVERSON

face now haunted me—the end would be nowhere in sight. Somehow, I felt guilty about the whole thing. Yet I had done nothing wrong.

“Tomorrow,” I said to the stillness of the room. Like Scarlett, tomorrow I’d act. Tomorrow I’d go to the courthouse and see what I could do about retrieving my grandmother’s hand-knit afghan. I’d find out what I could do for the young man with the pleading eyes and disheveled hair. Because something simply didn’t sit right in all this.

I left the kitchen by way of the back staircase, then returned to the guest bedroom to flip off the light. I spotted it then, a man’s wallet peeking out from under the dust ruffle. Again, as I reached for it, the scent of musk and wood rose to taunt me. To remind me.

I bit my lip, wondering how much further I should go in my exploration. Hadn’t I invaded this man’s life enough? Perhaps.

I took a deep breath and flipped open the wallet.