

Prelude



HIGHLANDS OF GUATEMALA

Sinister clouds hung over the mountain peaks like a faded gray curtain and obscured the volcanoes in the distance. David spent his last few minutes with Ovispo and Sarita while Dr. Morris hauled the gear to the back of the pickup. The truck bed had been loaded with medical supplies when they left Guatemala City six days ago, but three villages and seventy-eight patients later, they were left with only their personal duffel bags and a six-hour drive back to the city.

David knew what mountain storms could do in the tablelands, and he was anxious to get out of these mountains before the afternoon rains started. He couldn't afford to miss his flight back to Atlanta tomorrow.

He heard Josh slam the truck door. "Come on, David. I have your bag. It's best if we make it to Solola before the weather sets in. Say your goodbyes and let's get going."

Their final stop was here at El Tablon, a primitive village in the highlands of Guatemala. With the last of the medicine dispensed, their work was complete, and the villagers now gathered to see them off. David did not speak Cakchiquel, but speech was unnecessary to communicate the displeasure of parting.

Sarita, the tribal matriarch, wordlessly spoke for all the women

as she handed David a compactly folded bundle of white woven fabric secured with a handmade ribbon of braided thread. He untied the braid and unfolded the fabric in one brisk motion to reveal sprays of embroidered flowers around the hem of the cloth. Sarita had deliberately folded the piece to conceal the surprise and to protect the stitching.

For a tourist who collected the needlework of the Mayan artisans, this tablecloth was a work of art. For David, it was a gift of great sacrifice. He knew the sale of this piece in the city would have fed Sarita's village for a month. He held it to his face, inhaling the smell of smoke left from the open fire where the women gathered in the evenings to stitch by the firelight, just as women had done for centuries in this place.

"*Gracias. Gracias, Hermana Sarita.*" David hugged her and wanted to tell her how much this wedding present would mean to Caroline and how it would grace their table for years to come.

Sarita blushed at David's attention and smiled broadly, exposing her broken and decaying teeth.

He heard Josh calling again. "David Summers, if we don't get down this mountain, Caroline's trip to the airport to pick you up tomorrow will be in vain."

"I'm coming." David turned to six-year-old Blanca hiding in Sarita's shadow. Hatefully aimed bullets of rebels had robbed Blanca of her father three months before she was born, and an untreated infection sucked the life from her seventeen-year-old mother only days after Blanca's birth. Sarita and Ovispo's childless hut had become Blanca's home. Blanca's story—and countless other stories like hers—still ate at David and motivated his return to El Tablon with medical aid three times a year. She was his favorite village child, although he tried not to show it.

Blanca walked shyly toward him, head down and hands behind her back. He knelt and reached out to her. She lifted her head, fixing her brown eyes on his, and not a muscle in her face moved as she took his right hand and turned it palm up. She relaxed the

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fingers in her doll-like fist, and placed a small, cloth bag in David's palm. "*Carolina*," she whispered.

"For Caroline?"

"*Sí. Carolina.*"

Treasure in hand, David embraced her tightly. He could hear the truck's motor running and thunder rumbling through the mountains as he held her at arm's length, then blessed her with a kiss on her forehead, as was the Mayan tradition. At last he rose and stumbled back to the truck.

"One of these trips, you're going to decide this is home, Summers. Or maybe you'll just take Blanca home with you, now that you're getting married and she'd have a mother," Josh said.

Still clutching the small bag, David climbed into the truck, trying not to soil the tablecloth. "Maybe, but the decision's not mine alone."

"Hey, man. If you can persuade that beauty to marry the likes of you, surely you can persuade her to take in a Guatemalan orphan."

"Perhaps I could. Time will tell. But for now I'll settle for being a blissfully married professor."

Josh revved the engine, priming it for the bumpy ride along the ridge. He gave an inquiring glance at David.

"Do it. You know how the kids love it."

Josh blew his horn until he rounded the curve and they drove out of sight.

The ramshackle truck bounced over the rocks and gullies across the ridge. David scanned the patchwork quilt of small garden plots across the mountainsides. A year-round growing season kept these poor inhabitants in their staple corn and beans. Some patches were green and ready for harvest, and others lay dormant brown waiting to be planted. Although he daydreamed about living in this Land of Eternal Spring, he'd miss fall and winter.

"Those guys must have legs like mountain goats," David said as they passed farmers hoeing rows of corn.

"If they don't start home, they'll need webbed feet or hides like

elephants when that storm washes them down this mountain. The volcanic ash in this soil makes it slick before you can say 'slick.'"

David didn't need to turn around to know the sky was growing blacker. The mist had thickened, and he noticed Josh's frequent glances at the rearview mirror.

"Hey, what time is it?" Josh's fingers strummed the steering wheel.

"About four thirty. Why?"

"I was figuring. We have another hour along the ridge, then an hour to get down the mountain, and half an hour into Solola. I think we'd better stay the night there and drive into the city in the morning."

The sprinkles turned to rivulets down the dirty windshield.

"Sounds like a plan to me." David opened the drawstring bag in his palm and guided its contents onto the white tablecloth spread across his knees. A beaded bracelet. He held it up for Josh to see. "A bracelet for Caroline. This must have taken Blanca days to make. Hey, look! She worked Caroline's name into the beading."

In the few seconds that Josh glanced at the bracelet, the truck veered from the safe ruts. He jerked the steering wheel, nearly losing control of the vehicle. Last night's rain had made syrup of this narrow road. The altitude would have turned it to dust again by now had the morning brought sun instead of heavy mist and the promise of more rain.

"Whoa, that was close! Best to keep your eyes on this goat path," David said.

"Man, I'd prefer it if this truck bed was loaded right now. Would help hold us on the road. Guess I might as well slow down. The road's too slick, and we can't outrun this rain anyway. We should have left sooner."

"Sorry. My fault."

The drizzle turned into a battering assault on the cornfields and the jungle below. David could hardly see the hood ornament

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through the pelting rain. There was no break in the intensity for the next half hour as they traversed the ridge, leading to the turn that would start their sixty-five-hundred-foot descent down the mountain.

Riding through the jungle was always cool and dark, but the storm, showing no mercy, brought a menacing darkness and an unusual chill as they descended. David knew Josh's muscles must be tense from steering the hairpin turns. Water gushing through the crags on the hillsides had cut deep horizontal trenches across the ruts, which had all but disappeared.

"Boy, these super-sized philodendron leaves are a gift. They usually swat me in the face when I come down this mountain with my window down, but they're swiping my window now, and I'm glad," Josh said.

"Me too. That way we know we're not too close to this ledge I can't see over here."

The water bombarded the truck and drowned out their conversation. David sat quietly and fingered the yellows and reds and greens of the embroidered flowers on the tablecloth. Envisioning Caroline's delight put a secret smile on his face.

He glanced up.

"Josh, look out!"

The avalanche of water and mud gushed down the mountain-side just in front of them. As David instinctively tried to open his door to escape, the wall of watery debris hit them broadside. He saw the splintered limbs of an avocado tree crashing through the windshield, striking Josh as the truck plunged from the ledge. In less time than it took to inhale and exhale, the violent torrent surged through the shattered glass, washing away all life and hope.

The truck plummeted—the water's force tumbling it like a tin can, flipping it over and over and slamming it into trees until it became lodged. His battered body now helpless, David clutched the beaded bracelet as the current propelled him from the truck.

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The flood-waters ran blood-red as time lost its meaning and a quiet peace silenced the thunderous roars of the rushing water engulfing him. The last thing David saw was the white tablecloth floating away as the cold river ushered him into a warm tunnel of light.

Chapter One

Picture Windows

SIX YEARS LATER
MOSS POINT, GEORGIA

The pendulum clock in the studio struck two. Caroline wished it were six. Painful memories and the dread of another anniversary had robbed her of sleep. She should have been lying next to David, wisps of his breath brushing her neck like a moth's wings and an occasional audible sigh interrupting the night's hush. Instead, the night's silence shouted, "David is gone, and you are alone."

Six years of life without him. Six years of unanswered questions. Why, God, didn't You hold back one thunderstorm for one hour—or maybe even a few seconds? Why did David have to be in Guatemala on that ridge that morning? Why didn't I give in and go with him? He begged me to go. If I had, I wouldn't be lying here by myself still longing for him.

Tears of loneliness moistened her pillow. She untangled her feet from the crumpled sheet, rolled over, and sat on the edge of the bed, rubbing her eyes and pulling the scrunchie from her ponytail. Her thick, dark hair fell loose and free to her shoulders. Cradling her head in her hands, she stared at the floor and watched the moving shadows of the ceiling fan blades.

Why do I keep up this act, trying to make everyone think I'm fine, that I'm no longer grieving for David, that my music and my students

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make my life complete? They don't know that the music isn't really music anymore. They don't know the piano is where I hide. They think I have it all together. Why should they think otherwise? What would it help if they knew that my ordered, predictable life makes me feel safe? Not alive—just safe.

Caroline stood up, brushed her hair back with her fingers, and twined the scrunchie around her ponytail again. The full moon seeping through the studio windows created a luminescence, making lamplight unnecessary for her trip to the kitchen for a cup of tea. She filled the kettle and turned to look out the window into the cottage garden. The air was still. Not even the plumes on the ornamental grass moved. She stood, twirling the string of the tea bag around her finger as she waited for the water to boil. Thinking herself the only mortal awake in Moss Point at such an hour, she longed for the familiar whistle of the teakettle to shatter the overwhelming silence.

That was her life: still and quiet.

She allowed the kettle to whistle two seconds before pouring the water over her tea bag and slumping over the sink to wait.

Waiting. That's what I do. I wait for the water to boil and for the tea to steep. I wait for the sun to rise. I wait for the summer. When will I quit waiting?

She pulled the tea bag from the cup and squeezed it against her spoon, then fumbled everything and dropped the spoon, splattering tea on the floor. She stared at it. Normally she would have wiped it up immediately. Tonight she didn't.

Teacup in hand, she wandered into the great room where her grand piano reigned in the alcove surrounded by three twelve-foot walls of glass. The painted wooden floor felt cool to her bare feet as she walked across the room. In April she often opened the French doors to the terrace, and the fragrance of spring's first roses drifted in on the sultry night air to mingle with the sounds from her piano before floating back out again. But not tonight. The doors remained closed as she sat at the piano, sipping tea and looking

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at the water garden. After a few minutes she set her cup down on the marble-topped table where she kept her appointment book and student files.

The moonlight's illumination of the keys was more than sufficient for her hands, so at home on the keyboard. Thoughts of David brought a familiar melody to her fingers: "David's Song," the most beautiful melody she ever conceived and yet never finished. She had written songs since childhood. She was trained to compose. She knew the fundamentals. When she'd begun this composition six years ago, the passionate rush of melody and lyrics had come together so quickly she could hardly record them fast enough. More than a song or a melody, this duet of voice and piano, capturing the essence of David and their passion, would have been her wedding gift to him.

It had been exactly three hundred and sixty-five days since she had allowed herself to play this melody. At least outside her head.

Caroline gazed out the window as she played its same notes over and over again. In six years she had not been able to get beyond this one unresolved phrase. Clenched fists finally replaced her nimble fingers, and a strident, dissonant pounding arrested the melody like David's death had halted her life.

At that moment, a shadow on the pond and a hasty movement across the water's edge caught her eye. She stepped to the window. The tea olives next to the glass still shuddered. Her discordant pounding must have startled some creature.

She turned to pick up her tea. Standing so near that the warmth from her cup fogged the pane, Caroline wondered how many more nights she would find herself here gazing through this glass. That was her life: looking through windows. Windows where she had glimpses of good things, then goodbyes.

Twenty-one years ago she'd stood in Ferngrove, looking out the picture window in her parents' living room, observing the delivery of her 1902 Hazelton Brothers piano: a seven-foot Victorian grand made of burl wood and accented with hand-carved scrolling.

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This piano had become her emotional vehicle, defining her and filling her hours. It had become her safest place. Her love affair with that instrument had charted the course of her life.

Nine years later, she'd stood at that same picture window as three movers, like pallbearers, removed her piano. The sale of it paid her college tuition. Often, over the years, she had imagined that piano, her first love, sitting in someone else's living room and responding to a stranger's touch. Even now she longed for the familiarity of those ivory keys.

Windows. She'd been standing at a picture window when she first saw David. He had stepped through the door—and quite unexpectedly into her heart—at her best friend's wedding.

Her pulse still quickened when she thought of watching him walk up the sidewalk of the Baker house.

Oh, David, we were so different, but we fit like the last two pieces of a puzzle. You were so full of life and so spontaneous. And your laugh . . . Your laugh could fill up a room. Me? I was more soulful, always analyzing things, and all I had to bring to a room was my music.

You lived on the edge. I lived safely behind my keyboard. You wanted to teach the world to think and ponder life and its meaning. I just wanted to instill a love of music in one student at a time. You were bold and adventurous, and I was cautious. And look where it got us. You're gone, and I'm alone. How could you just walk in and through my life like that?

She had said goodbye to him at the Atlanta airport six weeks before their wedding. Standing at the terminal window, she'd watched him board his plane for Guatemala. A week later, she had stood at the same window awaiting his arrival as planned. He didn't come. It was days before they knew what had happened. No David, no goodbye, no closure. Only days and nights of looking through windows, hoping he'd come walking up again.

Her own life had been swept into a deep gorge like David's vehicle, never to be recovered. Her faith told her he was in heaven,

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but her doubt asked, “Where is heaven? What’s it really like? Can he see me? Does he know how much I need him?”

Six years in this studio apartment of longtime family friends Sam and Angel Meadows had only numbed the pain. Coming to Moss Point and living at Twin Oaks provided privacy, a place to teach piano, and the nearness of two friends who had loved her all her life, but her wound was still fresh and deep, oozing with despair and loneliness. She kept it bandaged well so no one would notice.

But lately her life dangled like the dominant seventh chord or the unfinished scale she used to play at the end of her piano lesson as a prank on Mrs. Cummings, her childhood piano teacher. Countless times Caroline had run her fingers up the scale—*do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti . . .*—stopping just shy of the last *do*. She would run out the door and wait for Mrs. Cummings to play the last note of the scale. Mrs. Cummings always did. That was resolution, the kind Caroline longed for now.

The pendulum clock struck three. Her tea no longer fogged up the window, and the darkness remained. Memories absorbed her when she needed to think about her future. Nothing and no one would appear through this window to change the course of her life again. And important issues were converging in the next few days: her twenty-ninth birthday, the end of another year of piano teaching, and the deadline for a decision that could take her from Moss Point and from this studio that had become her glass cocoon.

She moved back to the piano, sat in the deafening silence, and remembered other windows and unfinished songs. *Oh, that morning would come and drown this darkness and the quiet that screams of my solitary existence.*

But for now it was still night. She was alone with her piano, and she looked through this window where the night lights danced on the pond’s surface amid the silhouettes of magnolia leaves.

She set her teacup down and started to “doodle,” conjuring up a melody to accompany the moonlight’s waltz across the water. She instinctively darkened the melody when she noticed a shadow

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moving at the water's edge and she heard the rustling tea olives outside her window. Nighttime shadows nor stirring shrubs frightened her, for playing her piano ushered her into another reality where she was safe.

Chapter Two

Breakfast with the Meadows

APRIL MORNINGS IN MOSS POINT, GEORGIA, WERE GOD'S peace offering for the long January nights and early March's blustery breezes. With a steaming cup of coffee in hand, Caroline sauntered through the garden and took her seat on the bench at the pond's edge. Fingers of morning light stretched through the weeping willow and played on the water. She measured each morning's unfurling of the fiddlehead ferns and watched the rosebuds swell until color peaked through the green cradles of leaves.

She sipped her coffee. *There really is life after a cold, dark winter. Wish there could be a million April mornings. The irises will disappear in June, and the roses will wilt in July's blistering sun. The ferns will curl crispy brown in August. Then it'll be winter again.*

Caroline returned to the kitchen for her second cup. The phone rang, and before the receiver ever reached her ear, she heard, "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy when—"

She didn't let him finish. "Good morning, Sam."

"Good morning, Sam? How'd you know it was me?"

"There are only two people in the world who'd be singing to me at seven o'clock in the morning. One's my daddy, and he's a tenor who can sing. That leaves you, my friend."

"Well, if you're going to be that way, I won't tell you that Angel is flipping flapjacks over here, and yours are almost ready. The

bacon's crisp, the maple syrup's heating, and how do you want your eggs?"

"I'll pass on the eggs this morning, but I can't resist Angel's pancakes. Give me five minutes to get presentable. Oh, and, Sam, I'll bring my coffee, and tell Angel I'll bring her a cup too. She doesn't like that swamp water you drink any more than I do."

Sam broke into song again. "You'll never know, dear, how much I love you—"

"Five minutes, Sam!"

The morning sun, blasting through the east windows, spotlighted tea stains on the floor in front of the sink. A reminder of last night's restlessness. She knelt to wipe the stains with a damp sponge. These pine floors were from the elementary schoolhouse Sam had attended seventy-five years ago. He'd acquired the yellow pine before the building was demolished and used it to build this art studio for Angel for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Floors, walls, ceilings, doors—everything but the twelve-foot walls of glass was white. The studio had been Angel's unblemished canvas where she painted until a few years before Caroline moved in. Now Caroline, grateful to call it home and her piano studio, kept it spotless like her mama had taught her.

A short hallway led to the bathroom. She brushed her long, wavy dark hair, inherited from her father, and pulled it away from her face into a ponytail. Gray sweats were fine for her trip to the big house. They'd be having breakfast on the back screened porch, and it was still cool.

She returned to the kitchen, poured coffee into a carafe, grabbed her own cup, and started over. It was this stone path, laid thirty years ago and worn smooth by Angel's trips to the studio, that led to the main house about a hundred yards away. Just this winding through the garden usually lifted Caroline's spirits, but her sleepless night had taken the spring out of her step.

She climbed the steps and opened the screen door with her one

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available finger, angling her body through the doorway as she heard Sam's trumpetlike voice from the kitchen.

"Caroline, don't—"

"I know, Sam. Don't slam the door. You tell me that every time I come in. It would have taken you less time to get the spring on the door fixed."

Angel's "Amen!" came from the kitchen.

Caroline set the coffee down on the white wicker table already set for breakfast. Sam, holding the platter of crisp bacon in one hand and a pitcher of warm maple syrup in the other, came through the kitchen door. He leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. "I always liked my women short. Makes me feel so tall." At eighty-four, Sam was still a solidly strong man with a six-foot-two-inch frame that had not yet given in to the weight of his years. Balding with only a few wrinkles in his tanned face, he could easily pass for mid-sixties. In his youth he had been an athlete, and he'd continued his workouts at the YMCA on almost a daily basis up until a few months ago. Now his morning jogs had turned into afternoon walks, and his workouts were in the garden.

Caroline stepped into the kitchen and pecked Angel on the cheek. "Angel, you are a wonder woman, flipping pancakes with one hand and eggs over easy with the other."

"Yep, don't know if it's my cookin' or something else that keeps Sam around." Angel winked at Caroline. "Thought he might decide to dump me for Evelyn Masters when my waistline disappeared and I traded in my belted slacks for floral muumuus."

"Sam crossed Evelyn off his list sixty years ago. Oh, he just thinks of you as his floating flower garden."

"Guess that's better than a floral fire hydrant." Angel flipped another pancake.

Caroline giggled. "I'd say it's those quick brown eyes and that feisty disposition of yours that keep him around. Here, let me help you."

"Gladly, my dear. Put that spatula to those pancakes. I'll do the

rest. You know how Sam is about his eggs. Did you bring me some coffee?"

"Would I show up for breakfast without it? Still can't figure how Sam drinks that stuff."

"He's been doing it for years, and it's too late to change him now." Angel patted Sam's eggs with paper towel to remove the grease as Caroline put the last pancakes on the platter. She followed Angel step for step out the kitchen doorway onto the porch.

Sam seated them both and proceeded with the blessing. With oratorical voice and King James English, he prayed as though God was high in His heavens and might have trouble hearing him.

Their food—and possibly the neighbors' too—blessed, Angel looked at Caroline. "Oh, honey! I always said when God was passing out eyes, His basket was empty when He got to you, and He just decided to put in sapphires instead. So tell me, sweetie, why are those pools of blue surrounded by pink this morning?"

"Just a bit of trouble sleeping last night." Caroline took some butter and passed it to Sam.

"I know you. Normal people have nightmares, but you have 'songmares.' Too many tunes echoing in your head again?"

"Not only can you put pancakes, eggs, and bacon all hot on the table at the same time, now you're into mind reading." Caroline hoped that Angel wouldn't require further explanation.

"If she can read minds, then I'm in for some trouble," Sam said.

"You've been in trouble for the last sixty years, but right now I want to hear from Blue Eyes over here."

"You mean a song? Or what?" Caroline skirted the issue again.

"I mean 'what.'"

Caroline stared at her plate, stirring the melted butter into the syrup. "Well, it's an anniversary of sorts. Six years today David didn't return home from Guatemala. The what-might-have-beens always steal my sleep."

Sam dabbed his mouth with his napkin. "So that's why we didn't see you all day yesterday."

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Caroline jumped at the chance to change the subject. “You did see me yesterday, Sam. I played for Ross Abner’s funeral and sat there trying to figure out whose eulogy you were giving. You couldn’t have been talking about the man in the casket, dressed in his bowling shirt with his bowling ball beside him.”

“Sam’s been here so long he’s done more eulogies than all the preachers in town. He’s got a file drawer full of them. Just reaches in, pulls one out, and hopes it fits. You know Sam—he won’t speak ill of the living, much less the dead, even if they do deserve it.”

Butter and maple syrup oozed from the short stack as Caroline cut into the pancakes. She paused before taking a bite. “That was another thing I couldn’t understand. I heard GiGi Nelson say you put Ross in jail three times. Why in the world would the family ask you to do the eulogy?”

“So you heard it from old GiGi, did you?” Sam put his knife down so hard it jarred his plate. “She thinks everybody in town calls her GiGi because she’s cute. I guess I’ll let the truth be known when I deliver her eulogy, if I live long enough. And by the way, whoever saw a cute orange-haired prune?”

“Sam, I just got through telling Caroline you wouldn’t speak ill of anybody, living or dead.”

“Well, I didn’t think it was ill or gossip if I’m just telling the truth. Besides, GiGi’s not just anybody. And to answer your question, Miss Caroline, no, I did not put old Ross in jail three times. He put himself in jail. When you break a man’s jaw with your elbow, shoot your neighbor’s dog lying on her back porch, and get caught for driving under the influence as many times as Ross did, the jury tends to find you guilty of something. I just told them which thing it was this time. How about passing the syrup pitcher?”

“Seems you knew as much about Ross Abner as anyone else in town, and his family hedged their bets you wouldn’t mention most of it.”

Sam drained the syrup pitcher. “There’s some good in most everybody. But for some, like ol’ Ross, you just have to look maybe

a little harder . . . like how hard I'm looking for the last drop of maple syrup in this pitcher. Angel, are you rationing this syrup with that last can of macadamia nuts you thought I didn't know about?"

"Sam Meadows, that sugar must have already gone to your head. *You* poured the syrup in the pitcher this morning. And, no, I am not rationing the macadamia nuts." Angel turned and whispered to Caroline, "Guess I'll have to find a new hiding place."

As they finished breakfast, two men dressed in overalls and plaid shirts and carrying homemade toolboxes approached the screened door. They stood side by side at attention as though awaiting orders. Sam looked at his watch, got up from the table, and greeted them with a booming voice. "Good morning, gentlemen. You're right on time."

Angel leaned over and quietly said to Caroline, "After all these years, he still can't call them 'Ned and Fred' with a straight face."

Caroline had become fond of these identical twins who had proudly taken care of Twin Oaks for the last forty years. Ned and Fred were in their early sixties, still single, and living together at their old home place just outside town. There was a certain goodness and honest simplicity about them that made them vulnerable to a few reprehensible townspeople who took advantage of them on occasion.

The twins stood together on the doorsteps, but only Ned did the talking. "Good mornin' yourself, Mr. Sam. We're here just like you asked us. We come to fix the fence again. We keep thinkin' it's about time you got rid of that ol' thing and put in a new one. We kinda hate takin' your money for fixin' something that ought not to be fixed again."

"I hear you, Ned. But I'm determined that fence'll last as long as I do. Jake noticed when he was pruning the roses on the back side that some of the boards need replacing."

"Now, Mr. Sam, that's another thing. You know them climbin'

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roses ain't no good for wooden fences. You want us to take 'em down when we fix the fence?"

Caroline waited for what was coming.

Angel was the Pendergrass brothers' strongest advocate, but she had seen too often what they inflicted on her flowers. "Ned Pendergrass, if you cut one stem of anything that even looks like a climbing rose, I'll paint pink polka dots on that green truck of yours before you leave today."

Caroline watched Ned chortle and Fred gasp. She knew Angel was teasing about the paint job, but she imagined thoughts of pink polka dots on his papa's old Ford truck would indeed catapult Fred into panic mode. Fred, the silent twin who had a passion for anything with a motor, had kept the unmistakable truck's engine tuned up for the last three decades. He'd painted the truck a shiny pea green and proudly lettered the sign on both doors himself: *NED & FRED PENDERGRASS—WE CAN FIX ANYTHING*. The truck bed had long since rusted out, and Fred had designed and built a new one out of wood, using picket fencing for the side bodies. The tailgate resembled a garden gate but was adequate for keeping their tools from leaving a trail down Moss Point's avenues.

"Not to worry, Miss Angel," Ned said. "The only thing I might do is pick you one of them good-smellin' roses. But I know Mr. Sam would chase me off this property with that twenty-gauge shotgun of his if I come awalkin' up to this door with a rose for you—even if it was one of your roses to begin with."

"You're a smart man, Ned," Sam said. "I don't think I'd bother with those roses if I were you. Just go get what you need to do the job, and I'll pay you for your time and the materials at the end of the day."

As the twins started to their truck, Caroline said, "Oh, Ned?"

Ned and Fred both turned like mirror images of each other as the talking one said, "Yes, ma'am, Miss Caroline?"

"Best be careful if you're working in the area of the tea olives.

Phyllis Clark Nichols

There was some creature stirring around out there last night. I'd hate for you to scare up a raccoon, or worse yet, a skunk."

"Thank you for them words of wisdom, ma'am. You gonna be playin' that pretty music while we're workin'? We don't even bring our radio when we come to Mr. Sam's place. We like your music."

"Why, thank you, Ned. I'll be practicing later."

Angel got up from the table. "We'd best hurry. May'll be here before long. She's doing a good job of keeping up things around here even if she is like a drill sergeant about dust and grime. But she can't cook like Hattie. I know she's aiming for the job when Hattie retires, but I'm used to Hattie, and after forty years she's used to me."

Caroline asked, "When will Hattie be home?"

"She won't be back until early July. We gave her the vacation to see all of her kids. She deserves it." Angel began to clear the table. "Well, my dear, I hope you have some time to rest those pretty eyes before you start your teaching schedule today. I can just imagine that 'The Indian War Dance' and even 'Fur Elise' will make your eyes glaze over when you haven't had a good night's sleep."

"Oh, Angel, you just haven't heard Eric Morgan play 'The Indian War Dance.' According to his mother, he would thrill recital-hall audiences everywhere with his prodigious rendition of anything."

"It's Mrs. Morgan again, is it?" Sam pointed his index finger at Caroline. "Now, Miss Blue Eyes, you know I'm proud of you, but frankly, I cannot believe you're still taking her money for that boy's piano lessons."

"I know, Sam. Sometimes it really bothers me, but I've had two very straight conversations with her about Eric's lack of interest and talent. She simply won't hear it. She says, 'If you don't teach him, then I'll drive him over to Pine Hill for lessons.'"

"And you've decided to save her the gas money?"

"No, I've just decided to take her money and use it for my own gas. Speaking of gas money, I'm going to Fernwood this weekend."

Return of the Song

Mama arranged for me to meet with the family who bought my childhood piano. Daddy sold it to the Whitmans, and they gave it to their daughter when she married. Unfortunately, she moved to Atlanta, and the piano went with her.”

“Caroline, you have a fine piano,” Sam said. “And I enjoy sitting out here on the porch with my cup of coffee and listening to you play, especially on April mornings when your windows are open. Why in the world would you go looking for that old piano?”

Angel stood in the kitchen doorway. “Because she’s a determined woman, and you should know something by now about determined women. She wants her piano, and that’s that.”

“I’ve dreamed about it for years, and it’s time to start the quest and see where it leads. I’m afraid the trail is getting colder and the price tag’s getting higher. Daddy bought that piano for six hundred dollars and sold it nine years later to pay for my college education. It’s probably worth forty-five thousand now—way out of my range, but I just have to know where it is and who’s playing it.”

“You can’t always put a price tag on what’s yours,” Angel said. “Somebody else may own that piano, but it’ll always be yours, Caroline.”

Sam walked over to Caroline and took both her hands in his. “Little one, you’ve had two great loves in your young life: that old piano and your David. Lord knows I wish I could bring both of them back, but I can’t. Just be grateful you had them. Loving’s always worth the pain.” He hugged her and held her at arm’s length. “You think finding that old piano will bring your music back, but it won’t. You’re playing another piano now, and when the time’s right someone’s going to walk right up to you and pluck your heartstrings again. You just remember ol’ Sam said that, okay?”

Caroline choked back her tears and put on the smile she was accustomed to wearing. “You’re right. I have a very fine instrument, and I have some practicing to do this morning before the steady stream of students this afternoon.”

Caroline retrieved her carafe from the kitchen and headed

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toward the door. “Chat later.” She paused in her tracks. “I know, Sam—don’t slam the door.” With a last wave, she walked the stone path, careful not to bruise the creeping thyme growing between the stones. She spied the pair of cardinals in the forsythia bush. She paused to watch the lovebirds.

As she rounded the curve of the daylily bed, what she heard halted her steps. The sudden sound of her piano disturbed the morning’s silence.

Who’s playing my piano? She stood rigid, not even wanting to breathe or bat her eyes. That . . . That’s “David’s Song.”

Her thoughts tumbled. *This cannot be. No one’s ever heard that piece. I’ve never played it for anyone. It’s not written down or recorded. This isn’t possible.*

But there was no mistaking what she heard. The melody abruptly stopped . . . and then a pounding and the melody started again.

This is not happening. Should I go in . . . I have to know.

She resumed breathing and walking, but more slowly and deliberately. The hinges squeaked as she opened the garden gate. She tiptoed to the back door and turned the knob slowly to enter the kitchen, wishing she could see around walls.

She had taken two steps into the kitchen when the phone rang. Immediately the music stopped. She froze.

Oh, no, does he know I’m here? Maybe I shouldn’t go any farther. Maybe I should just scream or run. For only a second she deliberated, hands clenched, before she mentally shook her head. *No, I must see.*

She took a deep breath and two more steps. The phone continued to ring as she calculated every movement, slowly making her way through her kitchen into the great room.

“Wha—”

There was only the sudden slamming of the door to the terrace to assure her someone had been there.