



The Secrets We Keep

a short story

a bonus backstory to accompany *The Scars We Choose*, Book Two

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Chapter 1 *The Investigator*

Waverly Hall, Georgia, Summer 2014

WHILE DADDY AND JAMES WERE fishing at a lake over in Alabama a couple of days ago, a private investigator showed up at the house, a briefcase in his grasp. Apparently, Daddy'd hired the guy not long after I'd slipped in a dinner table conversation and mentioned Mama's phone call down in Florida. Even after my parents' divorce has long been stamped and filed, he still loves the woman. And I get it. I really do.

I invited the investigator inside and Ms. Blossom brought him a glass of sun tea. Before the man would give me any information, I had to confirm my identity and sign a full disclosure authorization form my father'd had him draft. "You're the only person Mr. Waverly trusted with my findings," he said.

"Thank goodness for that," I sighed, relieved to have been there to intercept whatever the so-called findings were and determine the best way to inform my father.

As it turned out, Valerie wasn't wrong. Mama and Xavier were spotted on a cruise ship in Alaska. The PI said the date range was back in June of last year, the very week after she'd called me the first time. And, what's more, he tracked her car from Portland all the way back here to Georgia—Augusta, to be exact, which tracks. The last time I'd heard, that's where Xavier McCobb lived, so although I can't imagine my mother driving cross-country, it makes sense that she would go with him there. "But here's an interesting discovery," the investigator said, his tea glass raised high as if to toast me. "Just a couple of weeks ago I followed Mrs. Waverly to Talbotton, Georgia."

"That's my mother's hometown," I told him.

"That's what your father confirmed," the guy agreed, sipping his tea. "But what's curious is, according to Mr. Waverly, your mother hadn't visited her home in more than thirty-five years."

"Why now?" I asked. "Surely she wouldn't have gone to visit her parents—even if they'd died. The only time I can remember her even mentioning them, she didn't have anything nice to say."

“Well, then, your father’ll just have to ask her,” the guy added, opening his briefcase and pulling out a manila envelope.

Mama has a secret, I immediately thought, what with my recent experience with envelopes and the secrets they keep.

“What’s this?” I asked, taking the packet and resting it in my lap.

The PI didn’t immediately answer, snapping closed and latching his case. “I followed your mother from Fred Frye’s place... the address is written on the other side...” He paused, nudging his chin in the direction of my lap. I flipped over the yellowed packet, finding a Talbotton address scrawled in slanted, all-caps lettering at one corner. “From there, she went to a luxury car dealership down in Columbus. That’s where I stopped her, and that’s where she made the comment that she was done with Georgia once and for all. Said she was headed far away where no man, not me, your father, or Xavier McCobb could find her. I asked her if she would consider a conversation with Mr. Waverly and she asked me whether I was stupid or deaf.”

“That sounds like her,” I sighed. “What’s in the envelope?”

“Pictures and map printouts, you know, findings from my investigation,” he answered, grabbing his briefcase handle and standing. “My work on this case is complete.”

Appreciative of his honesty, and relieved to have triaged the findings before Daddy’s heart was broken all over again, I walked the investigator to the door. I thanked him, promising to handover the envelope to my father. And I intend to do exactly that, but first, I’m headed to the Talbotton address.

AS PER USUAL, WHEN I have a lot on my mind, my bed may as well be a pin cushion. Last night was no different, what with my gymnastics performance of trying to sleep. I tossed and turned until there was no other choice but to open my internet app and tumble down a rabbit hole of searching for “Fred Frye.” After scrolling past all the people-finder sites and scammy clickbait ads, I landed on an obituary: Gladys Louise Frye died more than a decade ago. She was survived by her husband, Fred Frye, of Talbotton, Georgia. No one else is listed.

This morning, I woke with my phone wedged between my chin and my chest. After peeling myself from the bed, I headed downstairs for coffee. Three sips in, and I’m convinced I can do this. I can make the trip out to meet my long-lost grandfather and potentially confront my mother.

Why? I want to know why she called me back in the spring and didn’t say anything. I also want to understand why she’s always been so damned angry, I really do. I want to arrive at a place where I can forgive her. The older I get the more she peeks through. Scary. But some stories just are. And hers is one I need to know. For my own sanity and peace.

And also, Daddy needs closure. The divorce wasn't good enough. She'd called me, I'd accidentally told him about it, and now he also wants to know why. And when he finds out that she's left Xavier McCobb, too, he'll have a shit-ton of questions. Even if nothing comes of his efforts, I'm sure Daddy wants my mother to see that he's capable of making big changes and doing hard things. He wasn't a waste of time. He's deserving of sticking around for.

Never was there a prettier summer day than today to make a trip scarier than being born to Faye Waverly on Halloween. The cloudless sky is the exact shade of cornflower as my Gramma Nell's Blue Willow Room bedding and the azalea bushes look like the inside of her jewelry box. I think of the word—her word—that helped propel me toward making my own big changes and doing my own hard things: audacious.

After thirty-eight years, I have the audacity to just pop up on Fred Frye's front porch. Contrary to Mama's account of having grown up "dirt poor," the house located at the address on the back of the PI's envelope is a modest Cape Cod, painted gray with white trimming and situated in a cozy, manicured neighborhood just off Talbotton's downtown strip. I find it hard to believe the neighborhood has changed at all in the last four decades, much less having gone from the slums to an American storybook. But then I'm reminded of how good my mother is at exaggeration and this sleepy street tracks with her definition of "dirt poor."

The woman across the street stops sweeping her porch long enough to wave. I return the gesture, keeping my posture straight and my movements intentional while advancing the steps. From the porch, I can hear the low droning of a blues tune. Recognizing Lou Donaldson's whiney saxophone, I smile. I don't know anyone who can listen to this music and "hide behind a Bible," as Mama'd put it. I ring the doorbell, but just in case there are too many coats of paint over the thing for the button to still work, I open the screen and give the door a knock.

A few seconds pass before I hear a voice from the other side. "Comin'!" the person says before whipping open the door fast enough to send a draft through my hair and shake the panes of the flanking windows. Donaldson's *Autumn Nocturne* eases out onto the porch, like hot butter sliding over a stack of pancakes.

The man standing before me is old, really old, like Pinkie Perideaux-old. He's in his nineties, eighties at the very least. Not much taller than me, the man has the kind of thin frame that comes with genetics and not with poor nutrition or age. Although he's nearly bald on top, the tone of his remaining gray hair leaves me to believe he was once a ginger. His skin is pale and freckles compete with age spots for real estate up his arms. Conscious of my ogling, I take a step backwards before speaking. "Good morning," I breathe, fidgeting with the strap of my pocketbook. "Are you Fred Frye, by chance?"

"Yes, ma'am," the man spats, his voice shaky but chipper. His eyes widen as he takes in my face. I recognize the look of trying to uncover familiar details; I also recognize the shock of reconciling the bright white vitiligo patches that now cover my eyes and splatter down my face and neck. He teeters slightly where he's standing, placing his free hand over the door's frame. I glance at it and notice similar white stains stretching from his fingers up his wrists. Like someone dipped his arms in bleach. "Who's calling?"

“I apologize for showing up unannounced, sir,” I start. “I’m Scarlett Rose, and I’m searching for my mother. I believe you might know where she is...”

“Rose?” the man chirps, interrupting me, his watery eyes glittering as they bounce around my features. He pulls his heavy, black-rimmed glasses from his face and polishes them with his thumb and the hem of his faded plaid shirt.

“Yes, sir,” I confirm. “My last name used to be Waverly.”

The old man’s forehead crinkles as his brow climbs for his balding head. He returns his glasses to his nose, his jaw trembling, his thin lips parting as if to speak. When he doesn’t, I feel ashamed to have shocked him, regretful that I ever entertained this ridiculous goose chase. He swallows, taking a step backwards and scratching his forehead. The music stops, replaced by the staticky sound of vinyl rotating. Before long, there’s a click, followed by silence.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Frye,” I say, squirming with guilt. I turn slightly and point my thumb over my shoulder. “I shouldn’t have just shown up like this. I’ll go...”

“Naw, now wait a minute,” he argues, his drawl similar to my father’s. “You say yer Roy Waverly’s girl?”

I nod eagerly, grateful that he’s made the connection. “Yes, sir. And Faye is my mother.”

“Ah huh,” he breathes, his mouth hanging open and his eyes widened by his thick lenses. They dart all over the place. “Faye’s my daughter,” he says, his voice a breeze. The words seem foreign to him, given his tone and grimace. As if he hasn’t tasted them in years.

“Yes, sir,” I comment, rummaging in my purse for my wallet. I pull out my ID and shove it toward the man. This is the twenty-first century. Retired people aren’t just watching the news and the weather anymore; they’re binging true crime, fully suspicious of strangers knocking at the door. The man’s eyes shift to my license and back. I put it away. “Daddy and I are looking for her. We have reason to believe she was here not long ago...” My statement sounds more like a question.

A moment of quiet hovers over the porch, so thick and heavy that it feels like all of summertime has gathered in one spot. Birds chirp in the woods between his house and the next. I take a step backwards, preparing to apologize one final time before leaving, but the man opens the door wide, backing up and inviting me in.

Chapter 2

The Photograph

Talbotton, Georgia, Summer 2014

THE INSIDE OF MR. FRYE’S house is just as tidy as the porch, and just as fresh-smelling, what with the lingering twang of pine. Two matching armchairs bookend a console stereo, wooden with trimming crisscrossing the front meshed speakers. The top is open, revealing a turntable and 8-track player. A painting hangs above it, a Currier and Ives knockoff, if I had to guess, and a small, cross-stitched plaque hangs beside what I reckon is the doorway to the kitchen. *Love covers a multitude of sins*, the delicate font reads. Against the wall just below the frame sits a small wood table. It supports a worn leather Bible resting beside a short, bulbous lamp.

“Care for some tea?” the old man asks, his arm extended in the direction of the kitchen. “Glass of water?”

“Tea would be great,” I answer. “Thank you.”

He nods, cutting his eyes toward the chair closest to the opposite side of the room. “Have a seat. Make yerself at home.”

I perch on the edge of the armchair and hold my pocketbook in my lap. The room’s small windows are framed by faded blue drapes, the kind hooked into those fussy metal contraptions that let you open the curtains with the tug of a looping cord. Before Grandpa Chappy died and Mama gutted the Big House with her redecorating, all the windows in the house donned the very same type of curtains.

The tinkle of ice cubes spills into the room from the kitchen, followed by the opening and closing of a refrigerator. Mr. Frye’s shadow enters the room first, followed by his shaky hand grasping a glass of iced tea. Taking a closer look at the man’s hand, I recognize my own, his fingers long and slim just like mine. Knowing that vitiligo can be genetic, I finally understand where my condition comes from. I wonder if when my mother looked at my own patchy skin, she’d ever thought of her father.

“Thank you,” I say as I take the outstretched glass. I take a sip, the liquid cold and sweet, just like kind of tea Gramma Nell used to make.

“Ever’body used to fuss o’er Lipton. Couldn’t keep the shelves stocked fast enough.” The man pauses as he lowers himself into the opposite chair. He speaks to my glass. “That’s Luzianne. Only the smartest customers bought it. Tetley was too strong.” He pokes out his tongue and his shoulders mimic a shivered chill.

Although I’ve only been here less than fifteen minutes, I’m having a hard time finding a single detail about this endearing man that even my own mother wouldn’t warm to. There are also so many similarities: she has his small frame, his nose, lips. Without gawking too obviously,

I can see that I have his hands, chin, and ears. “You ran an A&P store,” I say, raising my glass. “My father worked for you.”

He nods his head slowly, his gaze lingering through one of the windows. “That’s right,” he murmurs, his hand sliding into the pocket of his dress slacks and retrieving a handkerchief. He brings the white square to his nose. “Best years of my life.”

Having already barged into this man’s life without warning, I feel that rushing into a conversation about the whereabouts of his estranged daughter could turn awkward. All I know about my mother’s life before she met my father is the story he’d recently shared and the ambiguous comments she’d made that afternoon on the beach. I think of the best way to proceed. “Daddy told me how much he enjoyed working there.”

“How’s he doin’?” the man asks, smiling behind his handkerchief. His eyes fan at their corners, happy eyes accustomed to smiling. “Ol’ ‘Big Roy,’ as I used to call ‘im.”

“He’s doing great,” I answer, exhaling. “Now, that is.”

“Oh?” Mr. Frye folds his hanky and returns it to his pocket. “What happened to ‘im?”

I lean forward, setting my tea glass on the rug beside my chair, and then lowering my pocketbook over the opposite side. I smooth my hands down my thighs before giving the man an abridged version of the story Daddy shared with me when I’d first arrived at the Big House last year, and how my mother’d presumably left because she’d thought he was broke and permanently disabled. “He’s doing very well now,” I conclude. “Lost a bunch of weight and his back has completely healed...”

“Praise the Lord,” the man interjects.

I smile. “But it still doesn’t help the fact that she left him. He still loves her. They’d spent a lot of years together...”

Mr. Frye nods slowly, his interest on the rug. “I can understand that.”

“Me, too,” I add, “but that’s also what hurt him so deeply. And recently I learned that she’s left Xavier, too. I have to protect him. She can’t come back and do this to him all over again. And, so, I need to find her before he does. I want to be the one to ask her all of the questions he’s spent sleepless nights worrying over.”

“What about you?” he asks, dragging his eyes to meet mine. They play hopscotch with my patchy skin. “How do you an’ her get along?”

Sarcasm is a bully, pushing its way from my lungs through involuntary laughter. “We don’t,” I say, shaking my head, glad that my neck does such a good job at keeping it on my shoulders. “I haven’t seen her in over fifteen years.”

“Why so long?” Although I would imagine he can relate to being estranged by Faye Waverly, his expression indicates confusion.

“She was cruel.” I sit back in my chair, folding my arms over my chest, protecting my heart from perceived judgement. “I’m old enough now to know that she was miserable and she hated herself. But I didn’t understand that back then. All those years she was so mean to me. I was only a child.” My voice starts quivering. I don’t want start sobbing in this man’s living room. It’s odd enough that I’m even sitting here in the first place. “And for the life of me I can’t understand

why she was so miserable. You know? She had everything she ever wanted. Daddy not only provided for her, but he doted on her.”

Silence consumes the room once more and I find myself at a loss for words. I swipe at a tear threatening to escape down my face. I’ve stopped wearing concealer, so I’m not worried about it streaking. I just don’t want to cry about my mother. Ever again.

After a moment, the man leans forward, as if to rise from his seat. I follow suit, reaching for my glass as I stand. He glances at me, waving his hand and motioning for me to sit. “Gone take that there glass to the kitchen,” he says, his words halting as he reaches for the tea glass. He clears his throat, running a finger inside the collar of his undershirt. “An’ when I come back, I’m gone tell yeh somethin’ I ain’t ever told a soul.”

UNTIL THIS POINT IN MY life, I’ve been perfectly happy with my career as a graphic designer. After Ms. Pinkie’s ritual, however, everyone who comes within three yards of me seems to feel inclined to spill their guts. It’s as if I’ve missed my calling as a counselor. Perhaps I should’ve been a doctor after all. Mama would have loved it had I become a psychotherapist. “Shrink-schmink,” I can hear her chide.

Yet and still, here I am, just a plain ol’ artist who wants nothing more than to help my father settle things with my mother once and for all.

Before I do, however, it would seem I’m still a therapist.

“You know what it’s like fer yer mother to reject yeh,” Mr. Frye whispers, walking back into the den and sitting in his seat. His thin lips quiver and he’s pulled out his hanky again. “That’s partly what happened to Faye. My wife wasn’t kind to her. God rest her soul, she didn’t have patience.” He halts, clapping his mouth shut and folding his lips inward. He looks me directly in the eye. “But that was my fault.”

I prepare myself for the man to admit something, anything, to support my mother’s accusations that he’d been a terrible father, and why he’d “hidden behind his Bible.” And he does, but what he tells me is even more shocking than were he to have admitted to being too harsh or unfair, or abusive, even.

Mr. Frye’s hands grip his chair’s armrests. He gazes at me for a beat, his lingering pause warming my cheeks. “Faye heard through a friend of the church that I was tryin’ to reach ‘er,” he says, finally, and I exhale with relief. The old man swallows hard and clears his throat, his chin sagging to his chest and his eyes toward the rug underfoot. “Her mama’d just died. Left ‘er some money. Faye come and got it, then left.”

That Mama would balk at estrangement long enough to show up and collect money doesn’t surprise me. Not one bit. The part of Mr. Frye’s statement that’s puzzling, however, is the fact that Gladys Frye has been dead over a decade. Ten years doesn’t count as having *just died*. Why

would her father only now tell her about some money her mother'd left her? And given the generation, why was the money hers and not hers and her husband's?

"But, Mr. Frye," I breathe, crossing my legs and leaning forward. "I saw Mrs. Frye's obituary..."

The man interrupts me, his stare boring through the floor. "Gladys wasn't Faye's mother."

I wait. I don't know what he means, so it's all I can do. The man straightens his back and tilts to one side of his chair. He reaches in his back pocket and pulls out his wallet. His hands quaking, he opens the billfold, running a finger behind a small stack of bills. From behind what looks like the inner lining between the leather and his cash, he pulls out a rectangular card, a little larger than a business card. He spans his arm, passing it over to me. I remember hiding Julian's letter in a similar fashion inside my messenger bag.

When I take it, I see that it's not a card but a photo, an old black and white. The edges are yellowed and tattered, and some of the ink has pooled at one corner. I've seen photos like this of Grandpa Chappy and Gramma Nell when they were courting.

The photo is of a woman, a Black woman, to be specific, who appears to be standing in front of a white car on a city street. The woman is smiling, her face turned away from the camera, her hands clasped in front of her woolen stole. She's stunning, and I find myself unable to keep from touching the photo. She wears a black dress and matching hat with a pearl choker. Because Mr. Frye has kept this photo inside his wallet, I wonder if the car is his. The city in the background clearly *not* Talbotton, I wonder where the photo was taken.

"That's Vernetta," the old man wheezes, the weight of what sounds like grief threatening his words. I look from the photo to his face, his eyes brimming with tears. "I ain't proud of it, but the truth is the truth..." He looks at me, a tear falling fast to his lap.

Glancing back at the photo, and bringing it closer to my face, I get a better look at the woman's eyes. They're large, round. Pretty. They look like my mother's. A burst of adrenaline rocks my chest and I nearly drop the photo. My wind escapes through my open mouth and I grasp onto the chair's arm. "Mr. Frye, is this..."

The old man chokes, gasping, as if it burns to speak. "That's Faye's mother."

Chapter 3

A Little Fairy Doll

Talbotton, Georgia, 1958 - 1959

IN 1958, THE GREAT ATLANTIC & Pacific Tea Company, also known as A&P, visited Talbotton, Georgia from all the way in New York City, offering Fred Frye a nice sum of money to let them buy his grocery store and turn it into one of their supermarkets. After a tour of the property and a bunch of bigwig talk, Fred agreed, on two conditions. “I get to run the place how I see fit,” he said, holding up one finger before adding the second, “and every customer walks through the front entrance. No matter...”

“We’re progressive, Mr. Frye,” one of the suited men asserted, reaching to shake Fred’s hand. “And you’ve got a deal.”

As timing would have it, within a week of A&P’s takeover, Vernetta Coleman walked through the back door and inquired about the open secretary position posted in the front window.

The first thing Fred explained to the young woman was that the back door was for deliveries only and that she should walk through the front door like everyone else. “But, sir, I’m Black,” she told him, her purse clutched tightly beneath her arm, her gloved hands wringing in circles.

“Don’t make no difference to me,” Fred answered. “Everyone bleeds red, everyone’s money is green, and I’m the boss.”

Calvin Coleman, a meek man with a quiet way about him, had moved with his wife from Mississippi to his cousin’s house about three miles on the outskirts of town. The home was small and situated on the perimeter of a peach orchard where the cousin worked and where Calvin was also hired.

Having no children to look after, Vernetta sought employment as a means of passing the time and helping her husband save for a place of their own. After they were settled, she figured, maybe they could even adopt a baby. It was obvious, after more than eight years of marriage, Vernetta wasn’t able to have a child of her own.

Back in Mississippi, Vernetta’d done bookkeeping and other administrative work for a small local pharmacy. She’d had a pleasant demeanor, with a proclivity for handling money and organizing the shopping area to make it easier for customers to find what they were looking for when they’d stopped in to pick up their prescriptions. The pharmacist and his wife were sad to see her leave but gave her a warm sendoff complete with a cake, a small cash gift, and a glowing letter of recommendation.

Within weeks of starting her new job as Fred Frye’s secretary, Vernetta began turning the place around, entirely reorganizing his office and filing cabinet and helping him adapt to the new A&P standards and policies. Although the outwardly rigid man balked at a few of the young woman’s recommendations for his inventory, he soon began trusting her suggestions, like

keeping cigarettes behind a glass case so kids couldn't dart in from the street and steal packs of Lucky Stripe faster than he could chase after them with a broomstick. What took longer to get used to, however, was overlooking Vernetta's smiles and chuckles when he'd argued against her ideas. "Puttin' a basket of bananas over by the Nilla Wafers don't mean we movin' all of produce into the aisles," she sighed, her smile wide and her voice a song. "It means we sell more of both."

Fred warmed to Vernetta, her vivacious energy seemingly awakening new perspective, reminding him of when he was younger and had grandiose ideas his father wouldn't entertain. Having the woman around felt different, not because she was Black but because the only other woman in Fred's life was his wife, Gladys. Gladys Frye's sensibilities were so delicate, she barely (if ever) left their house, calling Fred several times a day worrying about something she'd heard on the news or determined that she needed him to bring home more Milk of Magnesia because her stomach was giving her the fits again.

Similar to Fred's situation, Vernetta and her husband, Calvin, couldn't be more different. Calvin Coleman may have been a quiet, humble man during the day and when they were around people, but in the evenings after she'd walked home, Vernetta would often find her husband drunk as a skunk, nearly toppling over in the straw-backed chair on his cousin's front porch. Although Calvin was reserved when he was sober, he became enraged when he was drunk, often threatening Vernetta before passing out on the porch or in the middle of the living room floor. Vernetta would step over him and continue along her way, refusing to be affected by his foolishness.

Getting to and from work was hard, because Vernetta'd had to walk several miles a day, but the more Calvin drank, the longer she would stay behind after her shift, helping Fred count inventory or clean the floors. The third or fourth evening she'd remained at the store after dark, Fred became concerned. It wasn't safe for a young Black woman to be caught by the wrong white people out walking so late. He'd also seen her rubbing her feet when she'd changed in and out of her walking shoes before and after her shift. "If ya don't mind me askin'," he posed one night well after the sun had set, "shouldn't you be home by now, you know, fixin' supper an' such?"

Vernetta looked up from where she sat pricing macaroni boxes, the tagging gun pointed toward the lights overhead. "The bus don't run after eight," she answered, sitting up straight and grimacing, her hand running down the small of her back.

"Can't yer husband come git yeh?" Fred responded, shoving his clipboard beneath his arm and hanging his hands on his narrow hips.

Vernetta considered Fred for a moment, her eyes hazy. She lowered her head and the pricing gun, marking a box and then returning it to the shelf. "Ain't fit to drive."

Fred grunted, pulling his attention from the young woman and scanning his brightly lit store. He looked in the direction of the front windows, darkened by night, a streetlight glowing over the emptied parking spaces by the curb. "Finish up that case," he said, before turning for his office. "Then I'm gone give yeh a ride home."

For the first few nights he'd offered, Vernetta tried to refuse Fred's rides home, stating that she didn't want to inconvenience him or worry Mrs. Frye even more than the woman already suffered. Fred waved off the comments, more concerned about his secretary's safety than his wife's nerves. He imagined that if he never came home again, Gladys wouldn't waste any time finding something else to fret about.

After the first week he'd given her rides, Vernetta started chatting cheerfully about the goings on of the day, the customers who'd asked the silliest questions and the kids who'd hovered over by the cigarette case before buying handfuls of penny candy while avoiding eye contact. Her voice was a smile, her laughter filling the car with more joy than Fred'd felt in as long as he could remember. Eventually, Vernetta'd pulled a few words out of him, and he'd found himself sharing stories about the years he'd spent picking cotton when he was a youngster, his parents sharecropping alongside several other families in the area. Then he was drafted to Korea, his brothers and sisters old enough to take over the farm work.

He didn't talk much about Korea, and he was grateful that Vernetta didn't press. He was just glad to have someone to talk to. Someone who'd listened. It got lonely always keeping his thoughts to himself, his memories buried deep. Having Vernetta around was like being allowed a breath of fresh air after years of being suffocated.

Likewise, when Fred learned that, like Gladys, Vernetta wasn't able to have children, he didn't press, changing the subject instead to the latest news he'd heard on the TV set in his office. The work Dr. King was doing for civil rights was especially interesting to Fred, and Vernetta found it difficult to hide her surprise. "Everyone bleeds red," he'd whispered, glancing from the road to her face, a nervous smile pulling at the corner of his mouth.

Although he'd had to be careful with whom he'd spoken about such matters as equal rights, the issue with poll taxes, and the Black vote, Fred meant what he said. If God loved everyone equally, he didn't see any good reason to not love them, too.

One evening, when Vernetta was helping Fred run his monthly reports, she sustained a paper cut from the adding machine tape that nearly hit a vein. There was so much blood that Fred rushed her back to the stockroom where he'd kept a first aid kit. As he bandaged up her finger, the two sitting knee to knee, his hands shook, beads of sweat dotting his forehead. It wasn't the blood that unnerved him—he'd seen enough of that overseas. His breath quickened with the lingering scent of Vernetta's perfume. She smelled like roses, his favorite flower. He'd noticed her scent before, when she'd walked past, or when she was sitting beside him in his car, but he'd had to push the notion far from his mind. It wasn't appropriate to be thinking about another woman. Yet and still, sitting closer to her than he'd ever been, he'd lost all concept of what was suitable, holding her hand in his long after he'd finished taping it. Vernetta rested her other hand over his, and when he lifted his head, he found her doe eyes, his entire body trembling. She smiled and he was overcome by her beauty. All reasoning and judgement cast aside, he succumbed to his jolting heart and as she leaned forward, he met her lips, returning her tender kiss.

Whereas the few intimate encounters he'd had with Glady had been awkward, timid at best, holding Vernetta in his arms made him feel feral, hungry for her affection. The sounds she'd made, her skin against his, her kisses sweet like honey, caused him to forget all reasoning. Happy. He'd never felt so happy as he had when she'd smiled up at him, tears trickling down toward her ears, her hand touching his face. Afterwards, as they laid together on a quilt stretched over the cold, stockroom floor, his body quivered. And as Vernetta cried softly into his chest, he rocked her, assuring her that everything would be okay and that no matter what anyone else thought of what they'd done, what he felt for her was pure. "I wish things were different," he whispered, his pale cheek pressed against her soft, dark hair.

In the weeks that followed, both Fred and Vernetta were careful not to allow their eyes to linger any longer than what was expected for conversation. Although they never talked about what was happening afterhours back in the stockroom, he'd wanted her to know that what he felt was more than just physical. The expression on her face when Vernetta walked in one morning to a dozen red roses on the cigarette counter just outside her front office door was enough to light the entire supermarket. "Took yer advice," Fred explained, his eyes focused on the clipboard in his hand and his words hushed. He looked at the flowers, speaking in their direction. "The floral department might sell more if we showcase the best ones up here." He glanced around the store, winking at Vernetta before carrying on with his day.

Although Fred made Vernetta feel happier than she'd been her entire life, she fretted about their secret afterhours rendezvous. They were being unfaithful to their spouses, and the consequences they'd both suffer should they be discovered were simply unfathomable.

On the other hand, what Vernetta didn't concern herself with was the weight she'd gradually started collecting. There were always homemade pies and other goodies brought in by vendors; it was no wonder she'd gained a few pounds. Her periods stopping, however, raised an entirely different red flag. *How could this be?* The young woman wondered as she stared at her reflection in the A&P's employees bathroom mirror. She rested her hand over her thickening midriff, equally elated and terrified.

The baby was so small that Vernetta was able to hide her pregnancy. Because both she and Calvin had known she couldn't have children, Calvin thought she was just getting fat. He made no comment about the weight gain, which relieved Vernetta to the point of tears when he wasn't looking. When he was looking, however, he was drinking so much that he could barely see, passing out long before he could make a full sentence.

At the sound of Vernetta dropping a glass jar one morning before the store had opened, Fred rushed from the butcher area, finding the woman doubled over in her small storefront office. The linoleum was littered with glass shards and pickles. He pointed at the cashier and bagger, telling them to mind the store while he was gone, and then rushed Vernetta to the county hospital.

Fred wasn't out in the hallway long before he heard the baby's cries. "You're her employer?" a hovering nurse asked, her white hat tall and stiff. Fred ran his hand down his face, nodding in agreement. "Does she have a husband?" the lady added, and Fred nodded once more, confirming that Mr. Coleman was out in the orchard but that he'd been trusted to see about

Vernetta in his absence. It was a lie, boldface and slippery, but it was the only sensible explanation for why he was there and not the young woman's spouse.

The baby was tiny, her eyes too large for her little face. Her lips looked like a rosebud, her skin olive and her chin the same as his own. Standing at the room's opened doorway, Fred's hands clutching onto his hat, he watched Vernetta gazing down at the child. "She looks like a little fairy doll," the woman cried. "I'd like to call her 'Faye.'"

Fred glanced over at the nurse's desk before shaking his head and stepping into the room. Before he could speak, Vernetta pulled a hand from beneath the pink bundle and lifted a finger to her lips. Whispering so low that Fred had no choice but to take another step closer to her bed, the young woman made him promise that he would listen to her and try to understand what she was about to ask of him. With the dipping of his brow and a nudge of his chin, he agreed, his knees giving way to the weight of what he'd known Vernetta was about to say.

There was no feasible way Vernetta could bring another man's baby home to her unsuspecting husband. It would be cruel, and she feared Calvin would beat her and throw her out if he discovered that the baby was so light because she was of mixed race. "I'll have no place to go," she cried softly, glancing from Fred down to their child. "I want you to take her," Vernetta gasped, pausing to swallow and exhale, her cheeks wet with tears. "You and Gladys raise her," she continued. "That way, she'll have a chance at a good life. She deserves a chance."

That night, after closing up the supermarket and driving out to Calvin Coleman's place, Fred found the man sitting on his front porch. He took off his hat, explaining that Mrs. Coleman had suffered a fainting spell and that he'd carried her to the hospital. Calvin nodded and waved his hand, his other gripping a moonshine jug. He set the jug on the porch, rising from his chair to shake Fred's hand when he stumbled sideways. Fred caught the man, dropping his hat and keys, and then helping him into the house where he rested him down onto the living room sofa and covered him with a crocheted blanket.

Chapter 4

All These Years

Talbotton, Georgia, Summer 2014

I HAVE SO MANY QUESTIONS that not a single word is able to wrench itself from the tangle in my throat. All these years, all the many times when I'd fought my mother about her racist comments and her bigoted ways of thinking, enduring her judgement of Ruby, succumbing to her wrath when I'd fallen in love with Julian. All these years she'd had a perfectly tanned complexion, never wanting or needing to get out in the sun, spending a fortune on keeping her naturally curly hair—its texture just like mine—straightened and coiffed. All these years my mother has been biracial. My mother, Faye Waverly, whose own birth mother was Black. “Did she know?” I ask Mr. Frye, shaking the photo, my joints shuddering, my chest void of breath. “My mother? Did she know this was her mother?”

The old man nodded his head. “She knew, eventually.”

“And what about Gladys? Your wife?” I add. “How did she respond when you brought...”

“How do yeh think she responded?” Mr. Frye snapped, glaring at me as though the question was absurd, which it was.

I think back to when I was a little girl and consider how my own father would've felt had Mama brought home another man's baby. Then I think about what Vernetta must have endured in deciding to let another woman raise her child. “Was Vernetta...”

“Heartbroken. The best she could do was babysit,” the man answers. He knows my question. “But I brought in photos often, and when Gladys needed more formula, I'd insisted that she bring the baby with her to pick it up.”

The silence that settles over the living room is palpable, the old man worn down by its weight. Recalling his story, it's clear that he loved Vernetta Coleman. Considering the fact that she just passed away, it's also clear that he has lost the love of his life. Although Julian is still in North Carolina for several more months, at least I know he isn't dead. I hand the photo back.

“I loved her, Vernetta,” Mr. Frye whispers, taking the photo and smiling. He swipes away a tear. “An' she loved me. It was just...”

“You couldn't be together,” I answer for him, my bones recognizing his pain.

He shakes his head, looking me in the eye. “No ma'am.” His chin trembles and he fishes for his wallet, returning the photo to the security of its lining. “We sure couldn't.”

I tread lightly around the next question on my Nosy List. “So, you say Mama eventually knew that she was half Black,” I say, the words unrecognizable to my ears. “And she didn't only just learn this when she came for the money?”

“Naw, she's always known,” he breathes, propping his elbows on his chair. He taps his fingertips together, the gesture reminding me of Dr. White. “We never spoke about it outside the

house. But inside, Gladys made sure Faye knew she was different. And I didn't say nothin'. Didn't do nothin' to protect her. Bein' picked at by the other kids because she looked different than us, and havin' to always pretend like she, all of us, didn't see the stares or hear the whispers, it was too much on her. She was ashamed. Mad at me fer what I'd done." The old man's shoulders slump and he reaches his handkerchief to his glistening eyes. "It's all my fault," he cries. "I should've talked to her 'bout it, should've protected her when Gladys was so nasty to her. Callin' her names, makin' fun of her hair." Fred looks at me, his chin jumping. "She had every right to be scorned, Gladys did, but when the harrasin' went from only at home to everywhere Faye went, I just ignored it. Didn't do anything to help. That's when Faye stopped givin' 'Netta the time of day. Pretended like she wasn't even there. Looked straight through her when she spoke to her. Broke 'Netta's heart all over again."

When Mr. Frye stands from his chair, I know the conversation has taken its course. I gather my purse and do the same. There's nothing else to expect this man to say. The best thing for him now is for me to leave him to grieve. But before I do, I turn to shake his hand, the summer heat warming my arms as we step out onto the front porch. The old man looks down at my hand and lifts both of his. Careful not to crush his thin frame, I fold him in a hug. "I'm sorry we had to meet under these circumstances," I say over his shoulder.

Mr. Frye pulls away, steadying himself with his hands on my shoulders. "I am, too. But it sure is good to meet yeh, finally. You're a pretty girl," he adds, pulling his hands away and backing up to rest against the opened front door. "Just like yer mama."

"And my grandmama," I add, my chest full and my smile sad.

He nods, his Adam's apple rising. "Come see me again, hear? An' brang that ol' Roy Waverly with yeh."

As I back out of my grandfather's driveway, dazed by the outcome of my trip, I think of my mother. The whole drive back to the Big House, I think of her, replaying her father's story over and over again in my mind. Mama kept a doozy of a secret, one that I would've never known had I not insisted on trying to understand her better. For Daddy's sake.

Now that I know, I don't know how to feel about my mother. Angry? How dare she treat me the way she had—the way her stepmother'd treated her—when all this time she'd known she was Black? Should I feel sad? That she'd had such a troubled life, even enduring bullying just like I had? Bewildered? Understanding? Sorry? Should I feel sorry for her?

That's it. I feel sorry for Faye Waverly.

But I don't feel sorry for her because she'd chosen to keep such a secret. I feel sorry for her because of her shame in keeping it. All these years.

The end.

Also by A. Lee Hughes

A Bright Light

Always Remember November

The Heartbreak Bucket List

The Missing Lamb

The Scars We Choose, Book One

The Scars We Choose, Book Two



About the Author

In her more than thirty years as a storyteller and visual designer, Amanda “Mandy” Hughes has written and designed over a dozen works of upmarket, literary, and women’s fiction under pen names A. Lee Hughes and Mandy Lee.

Mandy is the founder of Haint Blue Publishing Company, LLC, an editing and design service that helps indie writers grow in their craft and achieve their self-publishing goals. Although she earned a Bachelor and Master of Science in Psychology, she has yet to figure out her family, much less herself.

When she’s not writing, Mandy loves going to the movies, theater, traveling, nature walks, birdwatching, margarita-making, and binge-watching *The Office*. She is a tarot enthusiast who uses the cards to promote wellness and enhance creativity. She lives in Georgia with her husband and four boys, two of whom are furrer than the others (but not by much). Visit her website at haintbluecreative.com and follow her on Instagram @haintbluecreative.