

SUSAN  
MEISSNER

Author of *The Shape of Mercy*

# white picket fences

a novel

*“...a beautiful yet haunting portrayal of what lies beneath a seemingly perfect suburban family.”*

—**Mary DeMuth**, author of *Daisy Chain*



Praise for  
*White Picket Fences*

“I loved looking into the heart of this family whose life looks perfect only from the outside. Meissner’s characters are so real, so haunted by the past, and so in denial for reasons of self-defense that you will be swept away till the final page. You’ll find it hard not to wonder, as one of the elderly characters did, if remembering is a choice that takes courage.”

—JULIE L. CANNON, author of *Truelove and Homegrown Tomatoes*, *Mater Biscuit*, *Those Pearly Gates*, and *The Romance Readers’ Book Club*

“To step into a Susan Meissner book is to be blessed by a craftsman’s tender touch. In Susan’s hands, we move carefully into compassion, entering the ordinary lives of people who could be our neighbors, ourselves, each doing what we can to staunch the pain of memory. This book opens a gate in the white picket fences of our lives, helping transform memory and secrets so we are no longer held hostage by the past. Beautifully written by a keen observer of the human condition, *White Picket Fences* will keep you reading into the night and make you sigh with satisfaction at the end.”

—JANE KIRKPATRICK, award-winning author  
of *A Flickering Light*

“This compelling story with its wonderful cast of characters offers hope to all of us who live less-than-perfect lives behind our white picket fences. Susan Meissner skillfully weaves together parallel storylines to show how healing can come when we risk sharing our secret pain with others.”

—LYNN AUSTIN, author of *Until We Reach Home*

“Susan Meissner just keeps getting better and better. This novel is a deftly woven portrayal of family and friendships, of secrets and sacrifices, one that tiptoes beyond the white picket fence to look at what happens when people stop talking to one another.”

—SIRI MITCHELL, author of *Love's Pursuit*

“Poetic prose and a ‘can’t put it down’ plot make *White Picket Fences* a great read. It’s a thought-provoking look into a dysfunctional family that thinks it’s functional and how an outsider can serve as a means of grace. Caution: be ready to lose a few hours of sleep!”

—ELIZABETH MUSSER, missionary and author  
of *The Swan House*, *The Dwelling Place*, *Searching for Eternity*, and *Words Unspoken*

“*White Picket Fences* is a beautiful yet haunting portrayal of what lies beneath a seemingly perfect suburban family. Susan Meissner’s powerful storytelling woos the reader into the lives of flawed, needy characters, making us ache with them, rejoice with them. Meissner deftly weaves old and new, producing a seamless, satisfying, and enduring story.”

—MARY E. DEMUTH, author of *Daisy Chain*  
and *A Slow Burn*

“Writing as incandescent as pure flame. Susan Meissner delivers again with a family story that wraps you up and stays with you long after the last page.”

—JAMES SCOTT BELL, best-selling author  
of *Deceived* and *Try Fear*

BOOKS BY SUSAN MEISSNER

*The Shape of Mercy*

*Blue Heart Blessed*

Rachael Flynn Mysteries

*Widows and Orphans*

*Sticks and Stones*

*Days and Hours*

*A Seahorse in the Thames*

*In All Deep Places*

*The Remedy for Regret*

*A Window to the World*

*Why the Sky Is Blue*

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It is necessity and not pleasure  
that compels us.

—DANTE, *The Inferno*

## one

The chilled air inside the Tucson funeral chapel suppressed the punishing heat outside. Amanda shivered as she took a seat on the cool metal chair. She leaned over and whispered to her husband in the chair next to her. “A sweater in Arizona in September?”

He nodded casually, apparently unfazed by the abrupt temperature change from scorching to polar. Neil had worn a suit, though she told him she didn’t think he had to, and she envied his long sleeves. He quietly cleared his throat, opened the program he’d been handed when they walked in, and began to read the obituary of the woman whose casket sat several feet away—the woman neither of them had ever met.

A generous waft of newly refrigerated air spilled from the vent above her head, and Amanda instinctively turned to her niece on her other side. The teenager’s arms were bare under a flamingo-hued halter dress. Amanda wondered if the foster mother had given Tally any advice at all on what she might want to wear to her grandmother’s funeral. Amanda again turned to her husband.

“I think we should’ve come yesterday.” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

Neil looked up from the program. “It wouldn’t have changed

anything,” he replied gently. “Besides, we got here as quick as we could. It’s not your fault you didn’t know she was here. Your brother should’ve told you.”

Neil reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze. Amanda looked down and noticed a thin line of wood stain under one of his fingernails, evidence that he had cleaned up from his latest woodworking project in a hurry. Neil turned back to the program, and Amanda looked over at her niece.

“You doing okay?” She hesitated, then placed an arm around Tally’s shoulders.

The girl flinched and glanced at Amanda’s arm before turning back to face the casket. The sixteen-year-old shrugged. “I didn’t really know my grandma.” The words were laced with casual regret, as if she knew people were supposed to know their grandparents, but what could she do about that now? Amanda intuitively pulled Tally closer. The girl stiffened at first and then relaxed, reminding Amanda that Tally barely knew her either.

Amanda hadn’t seen her niece in nearly a decade. A handful of phone calls over the last few years, including one from a Texas jail and one from a château in Switzerland, had confirmed that Bart was still alive and that he still had Tally. Bart tended to contact her only in desperate times. And most of the time he didn’t recognize his own desperation.

She had always felt like the older sister when it came to Bart, the one who watched out for him, the one who tried to keep him out of trouble, the one their parents expected more from. It had always amazed her that Bart was just fine with that arrangement. She had been in junior high when he left home at seven-

teen, and he'd come home only twice in the years before she graduated from high school. Bart missed their parents' quiet divorce. Missed their mother's remarriage to an Australian man who had no intention of living anywhere but Melbourne. Missed her wedding to Neil and the births of her two children. Missed their father's last agonizing days of pancreatic cancer. In thirty years Bart had missed just about everything, including all opportunities for his family to get to know Tally.

The opening notes of the organist's ballpark rendition of "Shall We Gather at the River?" startled her, and she barely heard the buzz of her husband's vibrating cell phone. Neil pulled the phone out of his suit pocket. "It's a text from Delcey," he said. "She wants to know if she can sleep over at Mallory's house tonight. They want to go to the beach."

Amanda crinkled an eyebrow at the thought of her daughter not being home when they flew back to San Diego. "Tonight?"

Neil looked at her. "Maybe it's a good idea."

"No. Not tonight, Neil. She can go to the beach but she should be home tonight. Don't you think?"

"I guess."

"Which beach? How's she getting there?"

"Encinitas. Chase said he'd take her," Neil said, looking at the tiny screen on his phone.

Amanda wondered for a moment how Chase would feel about making the thirty-two-mile round trip to the beach. With Delcey out of the house, Chase would have the place to himself until she and Neil returned that evening. Their quiet seventeen-year-old probably couldn't wait to get his chatty younger sister

out of the house. It hadn't passed her notice that her children were the same ages she and Bart had been when Bart left home. Chase's introspective nature and stark Teutonic features were similar to Bart's, but beyond that he was nothing like her brother. And Delcey thankfully did not have to mother Chase like she'd mothered Bart. "Tell her she needs to be home by six thirty," Amanda said. "I want her to be at the house when we get back tonight."

Neil punched in the message on the tiny keyboard. He nodded to the funeral program as he sent the message. "Did you know Virginia was a nurse in Vietnam? In the Army Reserves. She was in Saigon when it fell." He cocked his head as if waiting for a response and slipped the phone back in his pocket.

"I...I didn't know that," Amanda whispered back, pulling her thoughts back to the funeral chapel.

"She had medals from the army." Tally's head was turned toward Amanda, resting at an angle—like she had been a silent and interested part of the just-finished conversation about Delcey. "I saw them on the wall in her bedroom. But I didn't get a chance to ask her about them."

"I'm sorry, Tally." Amanda stroked the child's shoulder.

"I don't think my dad knew that about her. That she was in Vietnam. They didn't get along, actually. My dad and Grandma. She blames him for what happened to my mom." Tally swung her head back to face the front. "But you probably already know that."

Amanda opened her mouth but said nothing in response. Tally's mother, Janet, whom Bart hadn't even been married to, had died of an overdose of sleeping pills when Tally was an infant. Janet was alone when it happened. Alone by choice. Bart

was nowhere around. She was about to tell Tally that Bart had never said much to her about Virginia, which was true, but a minister with a white checkerboard square at his throat and a tiny black book in his hands had come to stand next to Tally. Amanda closed her mouth.

“Is there anything you would like to say during the service, Tallulah?” the minister asked.

“Me?” Tally’s voice was edged with astonishment. “Um. No. No, I don’t want to say anything.”

He patted her arm. “I understand,” he soothed. “This is a very difficult time. My prayers are with you, child.” The minister smiled, turned to the next row of chairs, and approached a woman whom Amanda had met outside the funeral home ten minutes earlier. Virginia’s only surviving child, Jill. Janet’s younger sister. Tally’s other aunt.

Amanda watched as the minister bent down to speak to her. The woman wore a charcoal gray suit, with a silky burgundy scarf frothing at her neck and black stilettos on her petite feet. She had flown in from Miami that morning, probably having made the funeral arrangements by the iPhone she now held in her left hand. Jill shook her head. Jill’s husband and twin teenage sons shook their heads as well. Amanda couldn’t remember which twin was which.

Tally also appeared to be watching the exchange of hushed words between her aunt and the minister. Amanda leaned in. “Do you know your aunt Jill and your cousins very well?”

“I met them once,” Tally whispered back. “When I was four. My dad and I were in Tucson the same time they were. I don’t remember them, though.”

Amanda gently touched the girl's arm. "Not many people can remember things that happened when they were that little."

"I remember your kids, though."

This surprised Amanda, though she knew it shouldn't. Tally was eight the last time Bart had swung through San Diego on his way to somewhere else. Certainly old enough to remember at least a little of that trip. But it wasn't Tally's words that had surprised her. It was the tone. It was hopeful, like Tally was relieved she had memories of her California cousins. And they appeared to be good ones. "I'm glad to hear that," Amanda said. "Chase remembers you too. Delcey was too little. But she likes the idea of having a girl cousin."

Amanda was about to tell her niece that Chase and Delcey had wanted to be here at the funeral today, which wasn't completely true, but the organ music stopped at that moment. The minister stepped onto the carpeted platform next to the casket. Amanda took a quick peek over her shoulder to see how many others had gathered at the chapel to say good-bye to Virginia Kolander. Thirty or so people sat in the chairs behind her. As she turned to face the front, Amanda noted that Tally's outlandishly fuchsia dress and matching streaks in her hair offered the only speck of rainbow in the tiny sea of gray and black shoulders. The girl's ankle tattoo, a ruby-throated hummingbird with its wings extended, was the only divot of extraordinary in a lineup of charcoal pant legs and nude-toned hosiery. Tally crossed her legs and Amanda involuntarily tensed. The movement gave the illusion that the hummingbird was now poised for a beautiful escape, that it was peeling away from Tally's skin and about to take flight. Amanda pulled her gaze away and exhaled softly, remem-

bering that Bart confessed to buying that tattoo with money Amanda had sent him for car repairs.

The minister cleared his throat to speak, but he paused as the door at the back of the chapel opened. Every head turned to follow the latecomer inside. The dark-haired woman held an iced coffee in one hand and a briefcase in the other. Her white button-down blouse clung to moist skin.

“That’s Nancy. My social worker,” Tally said, toneless. “She’s the one who called you.”

The social worker hurried inside, mouthing the word *sorry*. She declined a chair offered by the funeral director, choosing to stand against the back wall instead. She tipped her head toward Tally and then smiled at Amanda as she pushed a pair of sunglasses up on her head.

Amanda nodded to the woman she’d met over the phone two days earlier, the same woman who told her that Bart Bachmann was missing—somewhere in Warsaw, they thought—and that his daughter Tallulah was homeless.

The minister had made a joke about his name when he'd introduced himself to Tally before the funeral began. She'd been standing in the foyer with her aunt and uncle as heat shimmered off the stained glass. He told her his name was Reverend Holly and that he was one letter short of being holy. Tally had smiled out of politeness, and he said she favored her grandmother when she grinned. "It's going to be okay, Tallulah," he said, before he moved away to talk to the funeral director.

She wondered how he could know something like that about someone he had just met. Tally shifted her weight on the chair as Reverend Holly began to pray from the podium. At the movement, Amanda gently removed her arm from around Tally's shoulders. Tally hadn't meant to hint that she wanted the arm off, though it had unnerved her some having it there. She looked up at Amanda, but her eyes were closed. So were the eyes of her uncle.

Tally studied them, using the precious seconds that she wasn't under any scrutiny to stare at the couple who had agreed to take her home with them until her father returned from Europe. Her aunt Amanda had her father's gray eyes, the single dimple, the ashy brown hair. She had a gentle voice and an easy smile. She was a reading teacher. Neil was taller than her father

and quiet; he wore rimless glasses and very shiny shoes. He was a financial planner, whatever that was. Bart told her once that her uncle Neil was the calmest, most mind-numbing wet blanket he'd ever met and that sweet Amanda was just like him, though not as wet. She had asked him if that meant they weren't nice people, and he'd said it meant they were as delightful and daring as doorknobs.

She wished now that she had asked, "But are they *nice*?" Because now it mattered. With her dad off treasure hunting in Poland and no way of reaching him, it would've been smart to have asked. All she had to go on was the memory of one visit to the Janvier house when she was eight and the hour she had just spent with them.

Amanda and Neil had come to the foster home that morning to pick her up in their rental car rather than having the foster parents or Nancy bring her to the chapel. Evelyn, the foster mother, had told her that was a very nice thing for them to do. Tally responded that she really didn't know her aunt and uncle that well. And Evelyn said, "But they're your family," as if those four words were the answer to all life's problems.

Nancy, the social worker who'd come for her when the hospital realized she planned to hitchhike home to an empty house the day Virginia died, said going to stay with the Janviers was a very good arrangement. "It's always better to be with family," Nancy said. "Trust me on this."

"But my dad won't know I'm in San Diego," Tally countered. "I think I should be able to stay in my grandmother's house until he comes back."

Nancy told her the county couldn't let a minor stay alone.

And besides, the house belonged to Virginia's daughter Jill now, and she planned to sell it.

"But my dad said he'd be back in a few weeks. He's coming back to Tucson for me. I need to be here," Tally said.

"Well, Tally, if we could reach your father, we'd tell him your grandmother has died and that you're waiting for him at your aunt and uncle's in San Diego. The fact is, we can't reach him. No one knows where he is. Isn't that right?"

"I told you he's in Warsaw."

"But you don't know where, you don't have a phone number where we can reach him, and you don't even know why he went there. That's what you told me."

"I know what I told you," Tally said quietly. "It's nobody's business why he's there. And I *don't* know where he is. He's going to call me at my grandmá's. That's what he said. And now I won't be there when he calls."

"But you also said he was going to contact you when he got there. He's been there more than a week, Tally. No call."

The minister said her name at that moment, and Tally jerked her head up. She remembered conversation with Nancy flitted away. She wasn't aware that Reverend Holly had finished praying and was now giving the eulogy. "You filled Virginia's last days with delight and purpose, Tallulah," he said. "Virginia often spoke of you to me and how much she missed watching you grow up. I know it meant a great deal to her to have you here these last few days. You were a brave girl, and I know you did everything you could to save her."

Tally blinked. She had lived with Virginia Kolander a total of eleven days, the full extent of their personal experience with each other. Her connection to Virginia had been casually sutured over the years, with only a shoebox of faded photographs and scattered birthday cards stuffed with flannel-soft five-dollar bills. She'd visited her grandmother when she was four, but she had no memory of it.

Her father never wanted to come to Arizona when it was time to move on. Tally knew why, though she never let on to him that she did. She'd twice overheard her father tell the play-by-play of his falling out with Virginia Kolander: five years ago to the underwear model whose penthouse they shared during those six magical months in Manhattan, and a few years later in Dallas when he warbled it to the owner of Luigi's Pizzeria the winter they lived in its basement and beer was cheap.

According to her grandmother, Bart should've intervened when Janet's postpartum depression ballooned into despair. Her father had argued it was pretty tough to intervene, considering he and Janet weren't married or even living in the same house.

*"She was sick,"* her grandmother had said.

*"I didn't know it,"* her father replied.

*"You should have been there for her!"*

*"Well, maybe you should've been."*

*"She didn't want to see me!"*

*"She didn't want to see me either, Virginia."*

*"Because she was sick!"*

*"I ain't no doctor."*

Her father had been a little on the intoxicated side both

times he told this story, and Tally wasn't entirely sure how much of it was true.

Except that it sounded true. When he was sober, her father had half a dozen stories explaining the heavenly whereabouts of Tally's mother. All good ones. He only told the sad story of her mother's overdosing on sleeping pills when he'd swallowed enough alcohol to loosen his tongue and when he believed Tally was nowhere within earshot. His favorite explanation was that Tally's mother was really a fairy princess who left her on his doorstep so he'd have someone to make him chili and Rice Krispies treats.

When her father announced he was taking her to Arizona to live with Grandma Virgie while he took care of some business in Poland, she asked if she couldn't just stay with their friends Carrie and Joe, considering his opinion of her grandmother had never been that high. But her father replied he'd unfortunately burned a bridge with Carrie and Joe that still smoldered and made people's eyes water. After a two-day drive from Texas and the tense first day at her grandmother's house, her dad left with a nod to Virginia, a kiss on Tally's cheek, and a whispered promise that he'd buy her a red Corvette when he found the gold and diamonds his father had hidden from the Nazis.

Tally's gaze now fell on the piano-brown casket in front of her. The minister said Tally'd been brave. That wasn't true. She'd been scared out of her mind when she came home from the second day of school to find a hot teakettle with no water left in it

glowing on the stove and her grandmother collapsed on the kitchen floor, her skin cold and gray and her eyes unmoving.

Tally's fingers trembled as she dialed 911. Her voice quavered as she gave her name and address.

"Is your grandmother breathing?" the woman said.

"I don't know," Tally answered, though she knew her grandmother most certainly was not breathing. "Maybe."

"It's all right, honey. The paramedics are on their way. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Tally, are you alone?"

She had looked at her grandmother's lifeless eyes staring back at her. They were the eyes of a stranger.

"Yes. I'm alone."

The minister's cottony voice again plucked her back to the chapel. He was giving a benediction. The closing prayer. "Amen." The minister closed his little black book.

Aunt Jill shoved her handkerchief in her pocket and stood up. Men came from the back of the room to prepare the casket for its journey to the family plot in Ohio. Nancy stepped away from the wall and reached into her purse for her cell phone. A man seated behind Tally asked the person next to him if there was going to be coffee and at least cookies, and several chairs made soft scraping noises as the handful of people rose to their feet. Amanda reached for Tally's hand and squeezed it.

Tally's eyes were dry.