

A woman in a red dress with gold buttons and a pink sash is shown from the chest down, holding a white rose. The background is a warm, golden glow. Below her, a large, multi-story house with a porch is visible, set on a green lawn with a brick path leading to it. The overall scene is bathed in a soft, golden light.

A SOUND
AMONG *the* TREES

A NOVEL

SUSAN
MEISSNER

Author of *The Shape of Mercy* and *Lady in Waiting*

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There's a sound among the forest trees, away, boys,
Away to the battlefield, hurrah!
Hear its thunders from the mountain, no delay, boys.
We'll gird on the sword and shield.
Shall we falter on the threshold of our fame, boys?

FANNY CROSBY, 1861

PART ONE

The Garden

The bride stood in a circle of Virginia sunlight, her narrow heels clicking on Holly Oak's patio stones as she greeted strangers in the receiving line. Her wedding dress was a simple A-line, strapless, with a gauzy skirt of white that breezed about her knees like lacy curtains at an open window. She had pulled her unveiled brunette curls into a loose arrangement dotted with tiny flowers that she'd kept alive on her flight from Phoenix. Her only jewelry was a white topaz pendant at her throat and the band of platinum on her left ring finger. Tall, slender, and tanned from the famed and relentless Arizona sun, hers was a girl-next-door-look: pretty but not quite beautiful. Adelaide thought it odd that Marielle held no bouquet.

From the parlor window Adelaide watched as her grandson-in-law, resplendent in a black tuxedo next to his bride, bent toward the guests and greeted them by name, saying, "This is Marielle." An explanation seemed ready to spring from his lips each time he shook the hand of someone who had known Sara, her deceased granddaughter. His first wife. Carson stood inches from Marielle, touching her elbow every so often, perhaps to assure himself that after four years a widower he had indeed patently and finally moved on from grief.

Smatterings of conversations wafted about on the May breeze and into the parlor as received guests strolled toward trays of sweet tea and champagne. Adelaide heard snippets from her place at the window. Hudson and Brette, her great-grandchildren, had moved away from the snaking line of

gray suits and pastel dresses within minutes of the first guests' arrival and were now studying the flower-festooned gift table under the window ledge, touching the bows, fingering the silvery white wrappings. Above the children, an old oak's youngest branches shimmied to the tunes a string quartet produced from the gazebo beyond the receiving line.

Adelaide raised a teacup to her lips and sipped the last of its contents, allowing the lemony warmth to linger at the back of her throat. She had spent the better part of the morning readying the garden for Carson and Marielle's wedding reception, plucking spent geranium blossoms, ordering the catering staff about, and straightening the rented linen table cloths. She needed to join the party now that it had begun. The Blue-Haired Old Ladies would be wondering where she was.

Her friends had been the first to arrive, coming through the garden gate on the south side of the house at five minutes before the hour. She'd watched as Carson introduced them to Marielle, witnessed how they cocked their necks in blue-headed unison to sweetly scrutinize her grandson-in-law's new wife, and heard their welcoming remarks through the open window.

Deloris gushed about how lovely Marielle's wedding dress was and what, pray tell, was the name of that divine purple flower she had in her hair?

Pearl invited Marielle to her bridge club next Tuesday afternoon and asked her if she believed in ghosts.

Maxine asked her how Carson and she had met—though Adelaide had told her weeks ago that Carson met Marielle on the Internet—and why on earth Arizona didn't like daylight-saving time.

Marielle had smiled, sweet and knowing—like the kindergarten teacher who finds the bluntness of five-year-olds endearing—and answered the many questions.

Mojave asters. She didn't know how to play bridge. She'd never encountered a ghost so she couldn't really say but most likely not. She and

Carson met online. There's no need to save what one has an abundance of.

Carson had cupped her elbow in his hand, and his thumb caressed the inside of her arm while she spoke.

Adelaide swiftly set the cup down on the table by the window, whisking away the remembered tenderness of that same caress on Sara's arm.

Carson had every right to remarry.

Sara had been dead for four years.

She turned from the bridal tableau outside and inhaled deeply the gardenia-scented air in the parlor. Unbidden thoughts of her granddaughter sitting with her in that very room gently nudged her. Sara at six cutting out paper dolls. Memorizing multiplication tables at age eight. Sewing brass buttons onto gray wool coats at eleven. Sara reciting a poem for English Lit at sixteen, comparing college acceptance letters at eighteen, sharing a chance letter from her estranged mother at nineteen, showing Adelaide her engagement ring at twenty-four. Coming back home to Holly Oak with Carson when Hudson was born. Nursing Brette in that armchair by the fireplace. Leaning against the door frame and telling Adelaide that she was expecting her third child.

Right there Sara had done those things while Adelaide sat at the long table in the center of the room, empty now but usually awash in yards of stiff Confederate gray, glistening gold braid, and tiny piles of brass buttons—the shining elements of officer reenactment uniforms before they see war.

Adelaide ran her fingers along the table's polished surface, the warm wood as old as the house itself. Carson had come to her just a few months ago while she sat at that table piecing together a sharpshooter's forest green jacket. He had taken a chair across from her as Adelaide pinned a collar, and he'd said he needed to tell her something.

He'd met someone.

When she'd said nothing, he added, "It's been four years, Adelaide."

“I know how long it’s been.” The pins made a tiny plucking sound as their pointed ends pricked the fabric.

“She lives in Phoenix.”

“You’ve never been to Phoenix.”

“Mimi.” He said the name Sara had given her gently, as a father might. A tender reprimand. He waited until she looked up at him. “I don’t think Sara would want me to live the rest of my life alone. I really don’t. And I don’t think she would want Hudson and Brette not to have a mother.”

“Those children have a mother.”

“You know what I mean. They need to be mothered. I’m gone all day at work. I only have the weekends with them. And you won’t always be here. You’re a wonderful great-grandmother, but they need someone to mother them, Mimi.”

She pulled the pin cushion closer to her and swallowed. “I know they do.”

He leaned forward in his chair. “And I...I miss having someone to share my life with. I miss the companionship. I miss being in love. I miss having someone love me.”

Adelaide smoothed the pieces of the collar. “So. You are in love?”

He had taken a moment to answer. “Yes. I think I am.”

Carson hadn’t brought anyone home to the house, and he hadn’t been on any dates. But he had lately spent many nights after the children were in bed in his study—the old drawing room—with the door closed. When she’d pass by, Adelaide would hear the low bass notes of his voice as he spoke softly into his phone. She knew that gentle sound. She had heard it before, years ago when Sara and Carson would sit in the study and talk about their day. His voice, deep and resonant. Hers, soft and melodic.

“Are you going to marry her?”

Carson had laughed. “Don’t you even want to know her name?”

She had not cared at that moment about a name. The specter of being

alone in Holly Oak shoved itself forward in her mind. If he remarried, he'd likely move out and take the children with him. "Are you taking the children? Are you leaving Holly Oak?"

"Adelaide—"

"Will you be leaving?"

Several seconds of silence had hung suspended between them. Carson and Sara had moved into Holly Oak ten years earlier to care for Adelaide after heart surgery and had simply stayed. Ownership of Holly Oak had been Sara's birthright and was now Hudson and Brette's future inheritance. Carson stayed on after Sara died because, in her grief, Adelaide asked him to, and in his grief, Carson said yes.

"Will you be leaving?" she asked again.

"Would you want me to leave?" He sounded unsure.

"You would stay?"

Carson had sat back in his chair. "I don't know if it's a good idea to take Hudson and Brette out of the only home they've known. They've already had to deal with more than any kid should."

"So you would marry this woman and bring her here. To this house."

Carson had hesitated only a moment. "Yes."

She knew without asking that they were not talking solely about the effects moving would have on a ten-year-old boy and a six-year-old girl. They were talking about the strange biology of their grief. Sara had been taken from them both, and Holly Oak nurtured their common sorrow in the most kind and savage of ways. Happy memories were one way of keeping someone attached to a house and its people. Grief was the other. Surely Carson knew this. An inner nudging prompted her to consider asking him what his new bride would want.

"What is her name?" she asked instead.

And he answered, "Marielle..."

The present rushed back in around her as the parlor door opened and

a boy stood in the doorway, eyes wide. Adelaide took a step back from the table. She had seen this child arrive earlier that day with his parents when she was still puttering about in the garden. Members of Marielle's family. She had not met them yet.

The boy wore a black button-down vest and a scarlet bow tie that pointed to eight o'clock. Most of his hair had been slicked into obedience. Most of it.

"Wait. This isn't a bathroom," he announced.

Adelaide composed herself. "No. It is not. The bathroom is the second door on the left. Not the first."

The boy looked over his shoulder. "I think someone's in there. The door's closed."

"Then I suppose you will have to wait."

The boy cast a glance about the parlor and then looked back at Adelaide. "So are you the old lady who lives in this house?"

She stiffened. "This is indeed my house. Who are you?"

"I'm Kirby. I live in Santa Fe. That's in New Mexico."

"Kirby. Your parents named you Kirby."

"Not curb-y like the street. Kirby. With a K."

Adelaide moved toward the boy and the parlor door. She put her hand on the handle as if to close it behind her. But he stood unmoving in the doorway, oblivious.

"So this house was here before the Civil War? It's that old?" he asked.

"Yes."

The boy took a step inside the room. "There's an old lady outside who says it's haunted."

"You shouldn't believe everything you hear."

"I don't. I don't believe in that stuff."

She made another attempt to close the door. The boy seemed not to notice.

“So you make Civil War uniforms in here? My aunt says you do. But I don’t see any.”

“And who might your aunt be?”

“Marielle. You know, the bride. ’Course she’s not a real bride now. They were married last weekend in Arizona. I went to the wedding.” He cocked his head. “You weren’t there.”

“No.”

“Didn’t they invite you?”

“Of course, they invited me. Perhaps we should join everyone in the garden. Have you met my great-grandson, Hudson? He’s probably your age.”

The boy didn’t move. “I met him in Arizona. But he’s not my age. He’s ten. And I’m nearly twelve. My mom said old people are sometimes afraid of airplanes. Are you afraid of airplanes?”

“Shall we?” Adelaide motioned them away from the room.

Kirby took a hesitant step back into the hallway. “So do you make Civil War uniforms in that room?”

“I do.”

“I’m just wondering why you do that. That war has been over for a long time. The North won.”

“Yes. Here we go.” She closed the door and they now stood in the hall. The air in the hall seemed stiff. Unmoving.

“Do you make them for museums or something? Because that seems dumb to me. Museums are supposed to have the real thing. Not copies of the real thing. Don’t museums here have real Civil War uniforms?”

“Yes. . .they do. Perhaps you would like to use the bathroom at the top of the stairs?” Adelaide felt as if the walls were pressing in now, listening. It was a familiar feeling.

“I can wait,” Kirby answered. “So if you don’t make them for museums, why do you make them?”

People were moving about the lower level of the house, in and out of the large patio doors off the main dining room. Caterers were bustling between the kitchen and the garden, and attendants at the front door were helping people with their gifts and cards for the newlyweds. No one appeared to be looking for the boy.

“I make them for reenactments.”

“For what?”

“Reenactments. It’s like pretend. People wear them for pretend. They pretend they are in the Civil War, and they wear them. Surely you know what pretend is.” Adelaide headed for the patio doors and the clean air outside the house.

The boy followed her. “But why do they do that?”

“Because...I suppose because you learn things by experience that you can’t learn just by reading about it in a history book.”

“Huh?”

Adelaide stepped aside as a caterer swept past them with a tray of sliced ham.

“They do it for fun,” she continued a second later. The outside air was just steps away.

“Yeah, but everybody knows how it ends. You can’t pretend that part. The North won. Everybody knows that. What’s the fun in pretending if you can’t pretend what you want?”

“Who says you can’t pretend what you want?” Adelaide stepped across the threshold, caressing the door frame as she walked past it, her eyes scanning the garden for her Blue-Haired Old Ladies.

Two

Marielle sank into a white padded folding chair and kicked off one open-toed pump. She plunged her bare foot into the succulent grass and let the coolness soothe the skin on the balls of her feet. Behind her the quartet was playing a racing tune that made her think of birds in flight. Guests were seated in chairs all around, on the grass and the stone patio, eating off glass plates and sipping drinks. The lilt of their subtle Southern accents lifted above the music as her brother, Chad, spoke to her from across the table.

“Wow. Quite the party,” he said.

Marielle settled back in the chair. “This is how it’s done in the South. Or so I’ve been told.”

Chad smiled. “How what is done?”

“A proper garden party.” Marielle waved toward the buffet tables and gloved catering staff. “Carson thinks all this finery is Adelaide’s way of making up for not being at the wedding last week. I would’ve been fine with tapas on paper plates. But she wanted elegance.”

Chad’s smile widened. “Do they even know what tapas are here?”

Marielle kicked off her other shoe. “I told Adelaide that Carson and I had the rehearsal dinner in Phoenix at a tapas bar, and she thought I said topless bar.”

Her brother tossed his head back and laughed. Marielle joined him.

“Funny, right?” Marielle said. “Oh, and this morning I asked her if

the local grocery store here has cilantro, and she told me she's never seen any label from a place called Salon Trowe."

"You sure you're ready for this?" Chad said, laughing harder.

"It's a little late to have *that* conversation again, don't you think? Have you noticed what I'm wearing?" She grabbed a fold of wedding dress above her knee and fluffed it upward. The gentle fabric fell away like water when she let go.

"I suppose you're right about that." His smile, half its weight now, graced just one side of his mouth.

Marielle cast a glance about her. Carson was several yards away, talking to a man from his office in DC. Hudson and Brette were far off in the lower part of the garden with her and Chad's parents. Adelaide was eating a piece of cake at a table on the edge of the garden, surrounded by her elderly friends, all wearing Easter-colored polyester. "You're still happy for me, though, right?"

Chad raised his champagne flute. "Of course, I'm happy for you."

She watched him take a sip and place his glass back on the table.

"I really do know what I'm doing," she said.

"I thought you didn't want to have this conversation again."

"I don't."

"Fine, then let's not have it."

"Just because we're not having it doesn't mean I don't know what you're thinking. I have a right to be happy with someone. I'm thirty-four, in case you've forgotten. You still had zits when you married Lisa."

He grinned. "I did not still have zits."

"You were twenty-three. You still had zits."

"Hey, I totally agree. Not about the zits; about you having the right to be happy with someone. If you've met your soul mate in Carson, then I'm genuinely happy for you. Really."

Mariel crossed her arms across the tabletop. "But there you go. You said 'if.' You don't think I have."

Chad cocked his head. He opened his mouth, then shut it.

They were quiet for a moment. One of the tiny asters in Marielle's hair fluttered to the table. She gently slid it back into her hair.

Chad stroked the stem of his glass. When he spoke again, his voice was tender. "Look. I really like Carson. And his kids. And if you're totally fine living in the same house where he lived with his first wife, then more power to you. Just please tell me you're not sleeping in the bedroom she slept in."

"Not that it's any of your business, but no, we're not. We're sleeping in a room Sara never spent any time in."

Chad crinkled an eyebrow. "Okay, well, that just doesn't seem possible. She grew up in this house, right? You told me her mother practically abandoned her and Adelaide raised her here. This house is big, but it's not that big."

Marielle's gaze rose involuntarily to the gabled windows of Holly Oak's second floor. All the bedroom windows looked the same from that part of the garden. A long exhale escaped her lungs. "It's big enough."

Chad paused a moment before continuing. "You know, Carson seems like a nice guy, Elle. He seems like the kind of guy who would understand if you wanted to have your own place."

Marielle lowered her eyes to meet her brother's gaze, "Carson would have moved us into our own place if I had insisted. I didn't insist. This has been the kids' only home. I didn't want to do that to them."

Chad's forehead wrinkled in puzzlement. "Do what to them? You and I moved four times when we were kids. It's not the end of the world."

"This is their home."

Her brother leaned back in his chair. "Yeah, but any house can be a home if you're with the people you love and who love you. I'm sure I read that on a poster somewhere."

Marielle shook her head, and another aster fell from her curls. "Well, I don't live my life on poster philosophy. I'm sure you don't either."

Chad nodded, but his thoughts were unreadable. She couldn't tell what he was agreeing to.

"I didn't insist," she continued in a gentler tone. "I could've, but I didn't. This is a lovely house. A beautiful house."

"Adelaide's house."

"And she's going to be ninety on her next birthday. In the not so distant future it will be Hudson and Brette's house."

"I suppose."

Marielle huffed a breath past a quick smile. "What's to suppose? She's old. She's frail..."

"She doesn't look frail to me. I'm surprised she didn't come to the wedding—"

"She likes staying close to the house. And she's going to be *ninety*, Chad!"

Her brother raised his glass and drained the last of his champagne. He nodded as he swallowed. "You're right. It's a beautiful house." He set the glass down.

Marielle narrowed her eyes. "What?"

"What do you mean, what?"

"What else are you not saying?"

"I'm out of champagne."

"Coward."

He smiled. An easy, relaxed smile. Different than the ones from the last few minutes. She waited.

"Funny that you would call me a coward, Elle. Because I think you are very brave."

"Ha ha. So very funny."

He lifted his glass toward a passing waiter who held a tray of champagne flutes. "It's true. You are brave. You fell in love with a guy you met online and dated for just four months, and now you're living in his dead

wife's house with the grandmother who raised her and mothering her children, and you've moved far away from the desert and everything that's familiar. And you're okay with all of it." The waiter handed Chad a new glass, and he saluted her with it.

The gesture felt like an unexpected jab from a trusted ally. She flinched from surprise and the tender sting of her brother's candor. "That was low," she murmured. "You'd say that to a girl in her wedding dress?"

Chad set the glass down and reached across the table for her hands. "Hey, I wasn't being sarcastic. I meant every word. You are brave. Braver than me. I'm in awe, actually. It's a compliment, Elle. I promise you."

"Yeah, well, that's not what it felt like—"

"I'm totally serious. I'm the coward. And you're the brave one." He released her hands.

"Tell that to Mom and Dad. That's not what they think. Or my friends back in Phoenix. They think I married Carson because I was desperate."

"No, they don't."

"They do. They just won't say it. But they do. I see Mom looking at me and looking at Carson and these two stepgrandchildren I've thrown into her lap, and I know she worries I'd grown desperate and that's why I married Carson. And I'm pretty sure Adelaide thinks it too, and she barely knows me."

"Marielle."

He waited until she looked up at him.

"You know what I think?" he asked. "I think you need to stop wondering what everyone else thinks. You love him. He loves you. That's all that matters, right? Love is enough. I *know* I saw that on a poster somewhere. Love and cilantro. I will make sure to send you some seeds so you can grow your own."

Marielle smiled as the tense moment evaporated. "And serrano peppers, too."

“Want to change the subject?” Chad asked.

“Absolutely.”

“Kirby tells me there’s a cannonball buried in the stonework on the north side of the house. Compliments of the Yankees.”

“Oh right. The cannonball. I’ll get Carson, and he can show it to you. I suppose Kirby told you the house is haunted, too?”

“By a ghost named Susannah. A spy, I hear. A spy for the Union.” Chad rose from his chair.

“A spy? Who’d you hear that from?” Marielle slipped her shoes back on her feet and stood.

Chad motioned with his head toward Adelaide’s table. “One of Adelaide’s cronies over there.”

Marielle turned toward the table at the edge of the sun-drenched garden. Adelaide lifted her head at that moment and met her gaze. The two women regarded each other from across the patio. Marielle tipped her head in a silent greeting, and Adelaide slowly returned the nod.

As she and Chad moved away from the table, an aster fluttered from her hair and landed on the grass by her feet.