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## GRAVE SECRET

### Chapter One

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“All right,” said the straw-haired woman in the denim jacket. “Do your thing.” Her accent made the words sound more like, “Dew yore thang.” Her hawk-like face was eager, the anticipatory look of someone who is ready to taste an unknown food.

We were standing on a wind-swept field some miles south of the interstate that runs between Texarkana and Dallas. A car zoomed by on the narrow two-lane blacktop. It was the only other car I’d seen since I’d followed Lizzie Joyce’s gleaming black Chevy Kodiak pickup out to the Pioneer Rest graveyard, which lay outside the tiny town of Clear Creek.

When our little handful of people fell silent, the whistle of the wind scouring the rolling hill was the only sound in the landscape.

There wasn’t a fence around the little cemetery. It had been cleared, but not recently. This was an old cemetery, as Texas cemeteries go, established when the live oak in the middle of the graveyard had been only a small tree. A flock of birds was cackling in the oak’s branches. Since we were in north Texas, there was grass, but in February it wasn’t green. Though the temperature was in the fifties today, the wind was colder than I’d counted on. I zipped up my jacket. I noticed that Lizzie Joyce wasn’t wearing one.

The people who lived hereabouts were tough and pragmatic, including the thirtyish blonde who’d invited me here. She was lean and muscular, and she must have tugged up her jeans by greasing her legs. I couldn’t imagine how she mounted a horse. But her boots were well-worn, and so was her hat, and if I’d read her belt buckle correctly, she was the previous year’s county-wide barrel riding champion. Lizzie Joyce was the real deal.

She also had more money in her bank account than I would ever earn in my life. The diamonds on her hand flashed in the bright sunlight as she waved toward the piece of ground dedicated to the dead. Ms. Joyce wanted me to get the show on the road.

I prepared to dew mah thang. Since Lizzie was paying me big bucks for this, she wanted to get the most out of it. She’d invited her little entourage, which consisted of her boyfriend, her younger sister, and her brother, who looked as though he’d rather be anywhere else but in Pioneer Rest cemetery.

My brother was leaning against our car, and he wasn’t going to stir. Until I’d done my job, Tolliver wouldn’t pay attention to anything but me.

I still thought of him as my brother, though I was trying to catch myself when I called him that out loud. We had a much different relationship, now.

We'd met the Joyces that morning for the first time. We'd driven down the long winding driveway leading between wide fenced-in fields, following the excellent directions Lizzie had sent to our laptop.

The house at the end of the driveway was very large and very beautiful, but it wasn't pretentious. It was a house for people who worked hard. The Latina who'd answered the door had been wearing nice pants and a blouse, not any kind of uniform, and she'd referred to her boss as "Lizzie," not "Ms. Joyce." Since every day on a ranch or farm is a working day, I hadn't been surprised to see that the big house felt pretty empty, and the only glimpses I caught of other people had been distant ones. As the housekeeper led us through the house, I'd seen a Jeep coming up one of the tracks that ran between the huge fields in the rear of the house.

Lizzie Joyce and her sister Kate had been waiting in the gun room. I was sure they called it the den, or the family room, or something else to indicate it was where they gathered to watch television and play board games, or whatever really rich people did with their evenings when they lived way the hell out in the sticks. But to me, it was the gun room. There were weapons and animal heads all over, and the décor was supposed to imply this was a rustic hunting lodge. Since the house had been built by the Joyce grandfather, it reflected his taste, I guessed, but they could have changed it if they'd objected. He'd been dead for a while.

Lizzie Joyce had looked like the pictures I'd seen of her, but the impression was strictly practical. She was a working woman. Her sister Kate, called Katie, was a scaled down version of her big sister; shorter, younger, less seasoned. But she seemed just as confident and hard. Maybe being brought up with gobs of money did that to you.

The gun room had a wall of French doors leading out onto a wide brick porch. There were urns that would be filled with flowers in the spring, but it wasn't time yet. The temperatures dipped below freezing sometimes at night. I noticed that the Joyces had left their rocking chairs outside during the winter, and I wondered what it would be like to sit out on the roofed brick porch in the morning in the summer, drinking coffee and looking out over all that land.

The Jeep came to a stop at the foot of the gentle slope leading up to the back porch, and two men climbed out and came in.

"Harper, this is the manager of RJ Ranch, Chip Moseley. And this is our brother, Drexell."

Tolliver and I shook hands with the men.

The manager was rugged, weathered, and skeptical, green-eyed and brown-haired, and he was as ready to leave as the brother. Both of them were only here because Lizzie wanted them to be. Chip Moseley gave Lizzie a casual kiss on the cheek, and I realized he was her man as well as her manager. That might be awkward.

The brother, Drexell, was the youngest of the Joyces and the most anonymous looking. Lizzie and Katie both had a certain hawk-nosed flamboyance, but Drexell's round face was still a bit babyish. He didn't meet my eyes as his sisters had.

I had a niggling feeling that I'd seen both men somewhere before. Since the huge Joyce ranch wasn't too far from Texarkana, and I'd grown up there, it wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that I'd met Chip and Drexell -- but the last thing I wanted to do was bring up my previous life. I hadn't always been the mysterious woman who could find bodies because she'd been fried by lightning.

“I’m so glad you could find time to come here,” Lizzie said.

“My sister likes to collect the unusual,” Katie told Tolliver. She definitely had her eye on him.

“Harper is one of a kind,” he said, and he glanced at me. He looked a little amused.

“Well, you better give Lizzie a good show for her money,” Chip said, his weathered, handsome face giving me a big dose of warning. I looked at him more closely. I didn’t want to be seen showing interest in someone else’s honey, but there was something for me in Chip Moseley, something that spoke to my special talent. He was moving and breathing, which normally meant disqualification.

My business is with the dead.

Since Lizzie Joyce had found a website that followed my travels, she apparently hadn’t been able to rest until she thought of a job for me to do. She’d finally decided she wanted to know what had killed her grandfather, who’d been found far away from the main ranch house, collapsed by the side of his Jeep. Rich Joyce had a skull injury, and the presumption was that he’d slipped and fallen when he was getting into or out of his ride; or maybe the Jeep had hit a rock and tossed him sideways, cracking his skull against the Jeep’s frame, though no evidence of such an impact had been found. Anyhow, the Jeep’s ignition had been switched off, and Rich Joyce had been dead, and no one else was within miles; so his death had been attributed to heart failure, and he’d been put in the ground years ago. Since Rich’s only son and his son’s wife had died in a car accident some years before, his three grandchildren had inherited, though not equally. Lizzie was legally in charge of the family’s fortunes now, Tolliver’s research had indicated, but the other two had shares that were slightly less than a third apiece; just enough to keep Lizzie in the driver’s seat. Easy to tell who Rich Joyce had trusted.

I wondered if Rich Joyce had ever known his granddaughter had a streak of mysticism, or maybe simply a love of the unusual. That was why Lizzie had led us to Pioneer Rest Cemetery, and why I was standing waiting for her to give me the go-ahead.

Hard-headed Lizzie wanted value for her money, so she wasn’t going to lead me directly to the grave which was her grandfather’s. She hadn’t even told me the purpose of my search until I’d gotten out of my car thirty minutes before. Of course, I could wander around to read all the headstones until I found one with appropriate dates. There weren’t that many Joyces under the dirt and rocks. But I’d spin this out, give her some freebies, because she hadn’t flinched at my fee.

I’d taken off my shoes for the reading, though I had to watch where I put my feet. There are thorns hidden in the grass in Texas, no matter how pretty it looks. I cast a final glance across the panorama of rolling ground and trees and emptiness. This little cemetery might as well have been on the moon, the landscape was such a contrast from the thick clustering housing developments and settled communities we’d seen as we drove to our last job in North Carolina. We’d ended up in a small town, but it hadn’t had the isolated feel that I got from the landscape here. There’d always been the awareness that another settlement was within a few minutes’ drive.

At least it wasn’t as cold here, and at least we could be almost certain there wouldn’t be any snow. My feet stung in the chilly air, but nowhere near as much as my whole body had ached in freezing, wet, North Carolina.

The Joyces were buried close to the live oak. I could see a large boulder that had been chiseled smooth on one side, and the name JOYCE was carved in it in huge letters. It would have looked willfully naïve to have ignored that clue. I stopped at the first grave I reached in that plot, though was clearly not the one I'd come to read. But what the hell, I had to start sometime. The tombstone read, "Sarah, Beloved Wife of Paul Joyce." I took a deep breath, and I stepped on top of it. The connection with the bones beneath my feet was electric and immediate. Sarah was waiting, like all of them, the long-time dead and the recently dead, those buried neatly in graves and those tossed aside like debris. I sent that extra sense I had down into the ground. Connected. Learned.

"Woman in her sixties, aneurysm," I said. I opened my eyes and stepped to the next grave. This was an older one, much older. "Hiram Joyce," I said. I stood there, trying to get a firm fix on the few remaining bones in the ground under my feet. "Blood poisoning," I said finally. I walked to the next one, rested for a moment until the buzzing impelled me; that was the call of the bones, the remains. They wanted me to know about them, what had killed them, what their final moments had been like. I looked at the headstone. No point in reinventing the wheel.

This was not a Joyce, though the burial was within the family plot. The date was eight years and a few months before. The carved name was "Mariah Parish." Though I sensed the two men, who'd been standing under the scanty shade of a twisted tree, were standing much straighter, I was too intent on the connection to wonder about that.

"Oh," I said, softly. The wind whooshed past, lifting my short dark hair and teasing it. "Oh, poor thing."

"What?" asked Lizzie, her harsh voice sounding simply confused. "That's my grandfather's caregiver. She had a burst appendix or something."

"She had a hemorrhage, bled out after childbirth," I said. I put two and two together and glanced over at the two men. Drexell had actually taken a step closer. Chip Moseley was stunned; he was also furious, whether because the information was a shock to him, or because I'd said it out loud. But whatever they were feeling, it was too late for Mariah. I looked away and stepped over to the right grave, the one I'd been brought to read. It was the biggest headstone in the plot, a double one. Richard Joyce's wife had predeceased him by ten years. Her name had been Cindilynn, and I discovered she'd been killed by breast cancer. I said so out loud, and I glimpsed Kate and Lizzie look at each other and nod. I stepped to the ground just adjacent, Rich Joyce's side of the headstone. Rich had died eight years ago, not long after his housekeeper. I cocked my head as I listened to Richard's bones.

He'd seen something that startled him. I got that, but it took me a few seconds to understand that he'd stopped the Jeep and gotten out because he'd seen someone he knew.

I didn't have a picture of that person in my head. It's not like I'm watching a movie. It's like being inside the person for a moment or two, thinking the person's thoughts, feeling his emotions, in the last seconds of the person's life. So I understood from Rich Joyce that he'd stopped because he'd seen someone. I didn't go through the process of recognizing that person and reasoning that I should stop because he was standing there. As Rich Joyce, I turned off the Jeep, stepped out, and then the snake came flying through the air, the rattlesnake, giving me (Rich Joyce) such a shock that my (his) heart stopped working properly. So hot no water can't reach phone ohmygod to end like this and then it had all gone black. With my eyes closed to see that scene more clearly, that scene visible only to me, I related what was happening.

When I opened my eyes, the four people in the Joyce party were staring at me as if I'd developed stigmata. Sometimes it grabs people that way, even when they've asked me there to do exactly what I just did.

I creep people out, or they're fascinated with me (not always in a healthy way) . . . or both. However, the fascination thing wasn't going to be a problem today. The boyfriend was looking at me as if I were wearing a straightjacket, and the three Joyces were gaping. Everyone was silent.

"So now you know," I said briskly.

"You could've made that up," Lizzie said. "There was someone there? How'd that happen? No one has said they were there. Are you saying someone threw a rattlesnake at Granddaddy? And that gave him a heart attack, and that someone just left him? And you're saying Mariah had a baby? I didn't hire you to tell me lies!"

Okay, that pissed me off. I took a deep breath. From the corner of my eye, I noticed Tolliver had started over to me, the beginnings of alarm evident on his face. Behind them all, Chip Moseley was standing with one hand braced on the Jeep, doubled over. I realized he was in pain, and I knew he wouldn't thank me if I drew attention to him.

"You brought me here to do this," I said. I spread my hands. "There is nothing you can verify, even if you dug your grandfather up. I warned you that might be the case. Of course, you can find out about Mariah Parish, if you really are concerned. There should be a birth record, or some paper trace."

"That's true," Lizzie said. Her face was more thoughtful than repulsed now. "But aside from the issue of what happened to Mariah's baby, if she really had one, it makes me sick that someone would do that to Granddaddy. If you're telling us the truth."

"Believe me, don't believe me. That's up to you. Did you know about his heart condition?"

"No, he wasn't one for doctors. But he'd had a stroke already. And the last time he went in for a checkup, he came back looking worried." She'd thought about this many times since her grandfather's death, it was obvious.

"He had a cell phone in his Jeep, right?" I said.

"Yeah," she said. "He did."

"He was trying to reach it." Some last moments are more informative than others.

I glanced quickly in Tolliver's direction, and then away. The tension was leaving his shoulders. I thought we were going to be okay.

"You believe this stuff?" Chip asked the sisters incredulously. He'd recovered from whatever had ailed him, and he was standing at Lizzie's side. He looked at her as if he'd never seen her before, when I knew from our research that he'd been her escort for the past six years.

Lizzie was too confident to be hurried. She appeared to be thinking hard as she got out a cigarette and lit it. Finally, she tilted her face up to him. "Yes, I believe it."

“Shi-it,” Kate Joyce said, and pulled off her cowboy hat. She slapped it against her lean thigh. “You’ll be wanting to bring in that John Edward, next.”

Lizzie shot her sister a look that was not fond. Drexell said, “I think she made all of this up, you ask me.”

We had gotten a deposit from Lizzie. We were coming to Texas anyway, but we sure wouldn’t have stopped if we hadn’t gotten the up-front money. Clients this rich, oddly enough, often change their mind. Poorer people don’t. So, though we’d already deposited the first check from RJ Ranch, the balance was due, and a blind man could tell the whole Joyce party was dubious about what I’d accomplished. Before I could get a good start on worrying about it, Lizzie pulled a folded and creased check from her hip pocket and handed it to Tolliver, who’d gotten close enough to slide his arm around me. I was a little shaky. This hadn’t been as hard as some readings, because he’d only had a second’s surge of fear before he passed over, but direct contact with the dead is draining.

“Need candy?” he asked.

I nodded. He got a Werther’s Original out of his pocket and unwrapped it. I opened my mouth and he popped it in. Golden buttery goodness.

“I thought he was your brother,” Kate Joyce said, inclining her head toward Tolliver. Though I knew she had to be in her late twenties, there were more years of experience than that in the way she walked and spoke. I wondered if this was the result of being brought up rich but practical in Texas, or if life in the Joyce household had had other sources of stress.

“He is,” I said.

“Looks more like your boyfriend.” Drexell sniggered.

“I’m her stepbrother and her boyfriend, Drex,” Tolliver said pleasantly. “We’ll be on the road. Thanks for asking us to help you with your problem.” He nodded at them all. He’s less than six feet, but not by much, and he’s thin, but he has a set of shoulders on him.

I love him more than anything.

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The sound of the shower woke me up. We see the inside of so many motel rooms that sometimes I have to spend a second or two recalling where the particular motel room is located. This was one of those mornings.

Texas. After we’d left the Joyces, we had driven most of the previous afternoon to reach this motel off the interstate in Garland, outside of Dallas. This wasn’t a business trip; it was personal.

I had that consciousness when I opened my eyes, that grim awareness that I was thinking too much about the old, bad times. Whenever we visit my aunt and her husband outside of Dallas, the bad memories resurface.

It’s not the fault of the state.

When I'm close to my little sisters, I start remembering the broken trailer in Texarkana, the one where Tolliver and I lived with his father, my mother, his brother, my sister, and our two mutual sibs, who were practically babies at the time that household dissolved.

The delicately balanced deception we older kids had maintained for several years had collapsed when my older sister Cameron vanished. Our unpleasant home life had been exposed to public view, and our little sisters had been taken away. Tolliver had gone to live with his brother Mark, and I'd gone to a foster home.

The two little girls didn't even remember Cameron. I'd asked them the last time we saw them. The girls live with Aunt Iona and Uncle Hank, who don't like us to visit. We do, though; Mariella and Grace (called Gracie) are our sisters, and we want them to remember they have family.

I propped up on one elbow to watch Tolliver drying himself off. He'd left the bathroom door open while he showered, because otherwise the mirror became too foggy for him to use while he shaved.

We don't look unlike; we're both thin and dark-haired. Our hair's even about the same length. His eyes are brown; mine are dark gray. But Tolliver's complexion is pitted and scarred from acne, because his dad didn't think of sending him to a dermatologist. His face is narrower, and he often has a mustache. He hates wearing anything besides jeans and shirts, but I like to dress up a bit more, and since I'm the "talent," it's more or less expected. Tolliver is my manager, my consultant, my main support, my companion, and for the past few weeks he's been my lover.

He turned to look at me, saw I was watching. He smiled, and dropped the towel.

"Come here," I said.

He was quick to oblige.

"Want to go for a run?" I asked, an hour later. "You can take another shower afterward, with me. So you won't waste water."

We had our running clothes on in no time, and took off after we'd stretched. Tolliver's faster than I am. Most often, he pulls away for the last half-mile or so, and today was no exception.

We'd been pleased to find such a good place to run. Our hotel was on the access road right off the interstate. It was flanked by other hotels and motels, restaurants and gas stations, the usual assortment of services for road warriors. But to the rear of the hotel, we'd found one of those "business parks": two curving streets with careful, still-small plantings in the flowerbeds in front of the one-story buildings, each with a parking area. A median ran down the middle of these two streets, wide enough to support a planting of crepe myrtles. There were sidewalks, too, to give the place an inviting and friendly look. Since it was late Friday afternoon, the traffic was minimal among the rows of rectangular buildings chopped up into characterless entities like "Great Systems, Inc." and "Genesis Distributors," which might conduct business of any sort. Each block was marked off by a driveway running between the buildings, a narrow thing that must lead to a parking lot in back for the employees. There were almost no cars parked in front; customers were gone, the last employees were leaving for the weekend.

In such a place, the last thing I expected to encounter was a dead man. I was thinking of the ache in my right leg, which has flared up from time to time ever since the lightning ran down that side, so I was didn't hear his bones calling me at first.

They're everywhere, of course, dead people. I don't hear only the modern dead. I feel the ancient dead, too; even, very rarely, the faint, faint echo of a trace of people who walked the earth before there was writing. But this guy I was connecting with here in the Dallas suburbs was very fresh. I ran in place for a moment.

I couldn't be sure unless I got closer to the body, but I was thinking this one felt like a suicide by gun. I pinpointed his location -- he was in the back part of an office called "Designated Engineering." I shook off his overwhelming misery. I've had practice. Pity him? He'd gotten to choose. If I pitied everyone I met who'd crossed over, I'd be weeping continuously.

No, I wasn't spending my time on emotion. I was trying to decide what to do. I could leave him where he was, and that was my first impulse. The first person to come into Designated Engineering the next day would get a rude shock, if the guy's family didn't send the police to check his office tonight when he didn't come home.

It seemed harsh, leaving him overnight. However, I didn't want to get involved in a long explanation to the police.

Running in place was getting old. I had to make up my mind.

Though I can't agonize over every dead person I find, I don't want to lose my humanity, either.

I looked around for inspiration. I found it in the rocks bordering the ho-hum flowerbed at the entrance door. I pulled out the largest rock I could handle and hefted it. After a little experimentation, I decided I could throw it one handed. I glanced up and down the street; no cars in sight, and no one on foot. Standing a safe distance back, I took a balanced stance and let the rock fly. I had to retrieve the rock and repeat this action three tries before the glass shattered and an alarm began to go off. I took off running. I had to take a metaphorical hat off to the police. I had barely reached the hotel parking lot when I saw the patrol car turning off the access road and speeding by the hotel to cruise into the business park.

An hour later, I was telling Tolliver what had happened while I put on my makeup. I'd had a long shower, and sure enough, he'd jumped in again to "help you wash your hair."

I was leaning my clean self over the sink to peer into the mirror to apply my eye liner. Though I was only twenty-five, I had to get closer to the mirror now, and I just knew the next time I had an exam, my eye doctor was going to tell me I needed glasses. I'd never considered myself vain, but every time I pictured myself wearing glasses, I felt a pang. Maybe contact lenses? But the thought of sticking anything in my eyes made me shudder.

Every time I thought about this, I worried about the money correcting my vision might cost. We were saving every cent we could to make the down payment on the house we were hoping to buy here in the Dallas area. St. Louis was more centrally located from a business point of view, but we could see our sisters more often if Dallas was our home base. Probably Iona and Hank wouldn't care for that, and they might throw a lot of obstacles in our way. They'd formally adopted the girls. But maybe we could persuade them that the girls would benefit from seeing us as much as we would from seeing them.

Tolliver came into the bathroom and paused to kiss my shoulder. I smiled as my eyes met his in the mirror.

"Police activity down the street," he said. "You know anything about that?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," I said, feeling guilty. I hadn't taken the time to explain to Tolliver before I'd gotten in the shower, and he'd distracted me after that. Now I told Tolliver about the dead man, and I explained about the rock and the window.

"The cops have found him by now, so you did the right thing. I have to say, I wish you'd just left him," Tolliver said.

Pretty much what I'd expected him to say; he was always cautious about being pulled into any situation that we hadn't been paid to deal with. Since I was watching him in the mirror, I saw the subtle changes in his stance that said he was going to switch the subject, and he was going to talk about something serious.

"Do you ever think maybe we should just let go?" Tolliver said.

"Let go?" I finished my right eye and held my mascara wand to the lashes of my left eye. "Let go of what?"

"Mariella and Gracie."

I turned to face him. "I don't understand what you're asking," I told him, though I was very much afraid that I did.

"Maybe we should only visit once a year. Just send Christmas presents and birthday presents the rest of the time."

I was shocked. "Why would we do that?" Wasn't the whole purpose of saving every cent we could so that we could become a bigger part of their lives, not a smaller?

"We're confusing them." Tolliver stepped a little closer and put his hand on my shoulder. "The girls may have their problems, but they're doing better with Iona than they would with us. We can't take care of them. We travel too much. Iona and Hank are responsible people, and they don't use alcohol or drugs. They take the girls to church, they make sure they're in school."

"Are you serious?" I said, though I'd never known Tolliver to be facetious about family topics. I felt blindsided. "You know I've never thought we should take the girls away, even if we could legally manage it. You seriously think we should keep even our visits to a minimum? See them even less?"

“I do,” he said.

“Explain.”

“When we show up – well, to start with, we come here so . . . irregularly, and we never stay long. We take them out, we try to show them things they don’t get to see, we try to interest them in things that’re not part of their daily life -- and then we vanish, leaving their – well, their ‘parents,’ to deal with the result.”

“The result? What result? We’re the bad fairies, or something?” I was trying very hard not to get angry.

“Iona told me last time – you remember, you took them to the movies -- that it usually took her and Hank a week to get the girls back into their routine after one of our visits.”

“But . . .” I didn’t know where to start. I shook my head, as if that would arrange my thoughts in order. “We’re supposed to do things for Iona’s convenience? We’re the girls’ brother and sister. We love them. They need to know the whole world isn’t like Iona and Hank.” My voice rose.

Tolliver sat down on the bathtub’s side. “Harper, Iona and Hank are raising them. They didn’t have to take the girls in, and we still wouldn’t have gotten them if Iona and Hank hadn’t volunteered. I can almost guarantee that the court would have kept Mariella and Gracie in a foster home rather than giving them to us. We’re lucky Iona and Hank were willing to give it a shot. They’re older than most parents of kids that age. They’re strict because they’re scared the girls will turn out like your mom, or my dad. But they adopted the girls. They’re the parents.”

I opened my mouth, closed it. It was like a dam had broken in Tolliver’s head, and I was hearing thoughts I’d never heard before pouring straight out of his mouth.

“Sure, they’re limited in their thinking,” he said. “But they’re the ones who have to cope with Gracie and Mariella, day after day. They go to the teacher conferences, they go to the meetings with the principal, they take the girls to get their shots and they take them to the doctor when they’re sick. They enforce the bedtimes and the study times. They buy the clothes. They’ll get the braces.” He shrugged. “All that stuff. We can’t do that.”

“So what do you think we ought to do? Instead of what we’re doing?” I stepped out of the bathroom and sat down on the edge of the unmade bed. He followed, sat beside me. I braced my hands on my knees. I tried not to cry. “You think we should abandon our sisters? Almost the only family we’ve got?” I didn’t count Tolliver’s father, who’d been in the wind since he’d been released from jail.

Tolliver squatted in front of me. “I think maybe we should come for Thanksgiving and Christmas, or Easter, or the girls’ birthdays . . . expected times. Arranged way in advance. At the most, twice a year. I think we should be more careful what we say in front of the girls. Gracie told Iona that you said she was too rigid. Except Gracie said ‘frigid.’”

I tried not to smile, but I couldn’t help it. “Okay, you’re right about that. Badmouthing the people who take care of the girls, that’s not cool. I thought I was being so careful.”

“You try,” he said, and he smiled just a little. “It’s the expression on your face rather than your words . . . most of the time.”

“Okay, I get your point. But I thought we would become closer to them, if we moved here. Maybe break down some walls between Iona and Hank and us. We’d see the girls more often, and the situation would get more relaxed. Maybe the girls could spend the weekend with us sometimes? Surely Iona and Hank want to be by themselves, from time to time.”

Tolliver countered this scenario with his own issue. “Do you really think Iona will be able to accept us? Now that we’re together?”

I fell silent. The fact that we’d become a couple would shock my aunt and her husband, and that was putting it mildly. I could understand that point of view, even. After all, Tolliver and I had grown up together in our teen years. We’d lived in the same house. My mother had been married to his father. I’d been introducing him as my brother for years. Sometimes I still referred to him as my brother, because it was the habit of years and because we’d shared an upbringing. Though we weren’t blood relations at all, there was a certain ick factor in our sexual relationship, to an outsider point of view. We’d be fools not to recognize that.

“I don’t know,” I said, simply to be argumentative. “They might just accept it.” I was lying.

“You’re lying,” Tolliver said. “You know both Hank and Iona are going to go ballistic.”

When Iona went ballistic, God got mad. If Iona thought something was morally questionable, God thought so, too. And God, as channeled through Iona, ruled that household.

“But we can’t conceal from them what we are to each other,” I said helplessly.

“We shouldn’t, and we won’t. We’ll just have to see what happens.”

I tried to change the subject, because I had to think over everything we’d just said. “When will we see Mark?” Mark Lang was Tolliver’s older brother.

“We’re supposed to meet him at the Texas Road House tomorrow night.”

“Oh, good.” I managed a smile, though I’m sure it was a weak one. I’d always liked Mark, though I’d never been as close to him as I’d been to Tolliver. He’d protected all of us as much as he was able. We didn’t manage to see Mark every visit to Texas, so I was glad he’d found the time to have supper with us. “So this evening we’re invited to Iona’s for a brief visit? And we’ll just see what happens. We have no plan?”

“We have no plan,” Tolliver confirmed, and we smiled at each other.

I tried to keep hold of the smile when we got into the car to drive over to the small house in Garland where our sisters lived. Though the weather was clear and bright, I wasn’t seeing blue skies ahead.

Iona Gorham (nee Howe) had based her character on being anti-Laurel. Laurel Howe Connelly Lang, my mother, had been Iona’s only sibling, and older than Iona by almost ten years. In my mother’s teen years and through her twenties, before her drug addiction, she had been fairly attractive, popular, and party-loving. She had also made great grades, and she’d gone to law school. She’d married a man she’d met there, my dad, Cliff Connelly. My mother had been a little wild – well, more than a little -- but she’d also been a high achiever.

To compete and contrast, Iona had gone the sweet-and-religious route.

Looking at Iona's face when she answered the door, I wondered when the sweetness had turned sour. Iona had always looked disappointed. Yet today, she seemed a little less sour than usual, and I wondered why. Usually, the arrival of Tolliver and me would make her look like she'd sucked a lemon. I tried to remember how old Iona was, and decided that she must be a little less than forty.

"Well, come on in," my aunt said, and stepped back into her living room.

I always felt like we were invited to enter only grudgingly, that Iona would have loved to shut the door in our face. I'm five foot seven, and my aunt is shorter than I am. Iona is pleasantly rounded, and her hair is graying in a pretty way, as though her light brown hair was simply fading a little. Her eyes are dark gray, like mine.

"How are you?" Tolliver asked pleasantly.

"I'm feeling wonderful," Iona said, and our mouths fell open at the same moment. We'd never heard Iona say anything remotely like that. "Hank's arthritis is acting up," she continued, oblivious to our reaction, "but he can get up and go to work, thank God." Iona worked at Sam's Club part-time, and Hank was the manager of the meat department at a Wal-Mart Supercenter.

"How have the girls been doing in school?" I asked, my standard fall-back question. I was still trying not to look at Tolliver, because I knew he was just as floored as I was. Iona was preceding us into the kitchen, where we usually had our conversations. Iona saved the living room for real company.

"Mariella's been doing pretty good. She's a middle-of-the-road type student," Iona said. "Gracie, they always say she's a little behind where she ought to be. You two want some coffee? I've got the pot on."

"That would be great," I said. "I take it black."

"I remember," she said with a sharp edge to her voice, as if I'd accused her of being a bad hostess. That sounded more like the Iona I knew, and I felt a little more comfortable.

"And I take mine with some sugar," Tolliver said. While her back was to us, he looked at me and raised his eyebrows. Something was up with Iona.

In short order, a mug was in front of him, and a sugar bowl, and a spoon and napkin. I was served second, and I got the plain mug. Iona poured herself some coffee, too, and settled herself in the chair closest to the coffee pot in a way that indicated she was really, really, tired. For a minute or two, she didn't speak. She seemed to be thinking hard about something. The table was round, and there was a pile of mail in the middle. I automatically scanned it: phone bill, cable bill, a handwritten letter protruding from its envelope. The handwriting looked sort of familiar in an unpleasant way.

"I'm wore out," Iona said. "I been on my feet at work for six hours straight." Iona was wearing a T shirt and khakis and sneakers. Clothes had never a priority for her, the way they had been for my mother, until she'd stopped caring about anything at all but the drugs and where they'd come from next. I felt an unexpected flash of sympathy for Iona.

“That’s hard on the body,” I said, but she wasn’t listening.

“Here come the girls,” she said, and then my ears caught what hers had already registered; the sound of footsteps outside the garage door.

Our sisters burst into the room and tossed their backpacks against the wall right under a coat rack. They hung their jackets on the coat rack, and took their shoes off to park beside the backpacks. I wondered how long it had taken Iona to establish those habits.

The next second, I was taken up with examining my sisters. They’ve always changed when I see them. It takes me a minute to absorb it. Mariella is twelve years old now, and Gracie is almost three years younger.

The girls were surprised to see us, but not startled. I didn’t know if Iona had even warned them we were stopping by to see them. Mariella and Gracie hugged us dutifully, but without enthusiasm. I wasn’t surprised at that, given how Iona had tried hard to get the girls to regard us as unnecessary and maybe even bad. And since they didn’t remember Cameron, I knew their memories of the trailer had to be faint or nonexistent.

For their sakes, I hoped so.

Mariella was starting to look more like a girl and less like a sack of flour. She had brown hair and eyes, and was square-built like her father. Gracie had always been small for her age, and she’d always been quieter than Mariella. She kissed me voluntarily, which was a first.

It’s always hard to get comfortable with our sisters. It’s uphill work, re-establishing a bond that had always been tenuous. They sat at the table with us and their “mother,” and they answered questions, and they acted pleased with their little presents. We always got them a book apiece to encourage them to read, a pastime that wasn’t the norm in the Gorham household. But we generally got them something else too, something cute to wear in their hair, or little trinkets; something frivolous. It was hard not to light up like a Christmas tree when Mariella said, “Oh, I read the other two books this lady wrote! Thanks!” I kept my “You’re welcome,” down to a pleased smile.

Gracie didn’t speak, but she smiled at us. That was the more significant because she’s not a smiley girl. She doesn’t look a thing like Mariella; but then, my sister and I hadn’t looked alike, either. Gracie looks like a little elf; she has greenish eyes, long wispy pale hair, an aggressive little nose, and a cupid’s bow mouth.

Maybe I’m not a kid person. I find Gracie more interesting than Mariella, though this confession sounds simply cold. For all I know, real mothers have secret favorites, too. I’m pretty sure I don’t show this partiality. I’m waiting for Mariella to do something that interests me, and I was delighted that she’d been happy about the book. If Mariella turned out to be a reader, I’d find a way to connect with her. Gracie had been so sick, when I’d been sick. It had been the unstable taking care of the weak; I’d been laid low by being struck by lightning, and Gracie had had chronic chest and breathing problems.

“Are you a bad woman, Aunt Harper?” Gracie asked. The question came completely out of the blue.

This ‘aunt’ business had originated with Iona, who’d thought we were so much older than our sisters that they ought to address us with respect. But that wasn’t why I was so dumbfounded. “I try not to be bad,” I said, to buy some time until I found out what had prompted that question.

Iona made herself mighty busy with her coffee, stirring it with a spoon over and over. I could feel my mouth clamp down in anger, and I was trying to keep the bitter words inside. After a moment, it became clear Iona was going to act like she wasn't involved in the conversation, so I went on. "I try to be honest with the people I work for," I said. "I believe in God." (Not the same God Iona worshipped, apparently.) "I work hard and I pay my taxes. I'm the best person I can be." And this was all true.

"Because if you take money from people and you can't really do what you say you can do, that's bad, right?" Gracie said.

"It sure is," Tolliver said. "That's called fraud. And it's something Harper and I would never, never, do." His dark eyes drilled holes in Iona. Gracie looked at her adopted mother too. I was sure they were seeing two different people.

Iona was still not meeting our eyes, still stirring the damn coffee.

Hank came in the garage door then, which was good timing. Hank was a big man, with a broad high-complexioned face and thinning blond hair. He'd been very handsome when he was younger, and he was a good-looking man still, now that he'd reached forty. His waist was barely thicker than it had been when he and Iona had married.

"Harper, Tolliver! Good to see you! We don't see ya'll enough."

Liar.

He kissed the top of Gracie's head and chucked Mariella under the chin. "Hey, you two!" he said to the girls. "Mariella, how was that spelling test today?"

Mariella said, "Hey, Daddy! I got eight out of ten right."

"That's my girl," Hank said. He was pouring some Coca Cola out of a two-liter bottle. He chunked a few ice cubes into the glass and pulled up a folding chair that stood beside the refrigerator. "Gracie, did you have a good time in chorus today?"

"We sang good," she said. She seemed relieved to be on familiar conversational ground.

If Hank had noticed the tense atmosphere in the tiny kitchen, he didn't comment on it.

"How are you two doing?" he asked me. "Find any good bodies lately?" Hank had always talked about our livelihood as if it were a big joke.

I smiled back faintly. "A few," I said. Evidently, Hank didn't read the newspapers or watch the news on television. I'd been mentioned more often than I wanted to be in the past month.

"Where you travelled to?" Hank also thought it was amusing that Tolliver and I were always on the road pursuing this strange living of ours. Hank had been out of Texas when he was in the Army, but that was the extent of his travelling experience.

“We were in the mountains of North Carolina,” Tolliver said. He paused to see if either Iona or Hank would pick up on the reference to our last, most notorious, case.

Nope.

“Then we went to another job between here and Texarkana, in Clear Creek. Now here we are in Garland to see you all.”

“Any big news in the corpse-finding business?” Again with the teasing smile.

“We have other news,” Tolliver said, irritated by Hank’s facetiousness. This happened every time. Every damn time. I looked at Tolliver, saw the intent way his eyes were focused on Hank.

Ah-oh, I thought.

“You found you a girlfriend and you’re going to settle down!” Hank said jocularly, since Tolliver’s lack of a steady girlfriend had long been the subject of many pointed jokes from both Iona and her husband.

“As a matter of fact, I have,” Tolliver said, and the smile on his face made me close my eyes. It was bright and hard.

“Well, listen to that, girls! Your uncle Tolliver has got himself a girl! Who is she, Tol?”

My brother hated it when someone abbreviated his name.

“Harper,” Tolliver said. He reached across the table and took my hand. And we waited.

“Your . . .” Iona almost said ‘sister,’ but recalled the word in time. “But . . . you two?” She looked from me to Tolliver. “That’s just not right,” she said hesitantly. “You two . . .”

“Are not related,” I said, smiling brightly at my aunt.

The girls were looking from one adult to another, confused.

“You’re my sister,” Mariella said suddenly.

“Yep,” I said, smiling at her.

“Tolliver is my brother,” she said clearly.

“Also true. But we’re not related to each other. You understand that, right? I had a different mom and dad from Tolliver.”

“So,” said Gracie, “You gonna get married?” She looked pleased. Confused, but pleased.

Tolliver looked across the table at me. His smile gentled. “I hope so,” he said.

“Oh, boy! Can I be in the wedding?” Mariella said. “My friend Brianna was in her sister’s wedding. Can I wear a long dress? Can I get my hair done? Brianna’s mom let her wear lipstick. Can I wear lipstick, Mom?”

“Mariella, we may not have a big wedding,” I said, since I could guarantee that wasn’t going to happen. “We may just go to a justice of the peace. So it might not be in a church, and I wouldn’t wear a long white dress.”

“But whatever we do, you can be there, and you can wear whatever you want,” Tolliver said.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake!” Iona said, sounding thoroughly disgusted. “You two got no business getting married! And if you do, which God forbid, Mariella and Gracie sure wouldn’t be there!”

“Why not?” Tolliver asked, in that dangerous voice. “They’re our family.”

“It just ain’t right,” Hank said, his face serious, giving us the correct and final verdict on our relationship. “You two was raised too close for comfort.”

“We’re not related by blood,” I said, “and we’ll get married when we want to.” Then I realized I’d been sucked into the argument much further than I’d counted on. Tolliver was grinning at me. I closed my eyes.

Apparently Tolliver had just proposed and I had just accepted.

“Well,” said Iona, her lips pursed in the old Iona way, “we got us some news, too.”

“Oh, what is it?” I was willing to be interested. I was willing to dispel the angry atmosphere that had made my sisters so unhappy. I made myself smile at my aunt to show a decent anticipation.

“Hank and I are gonna have a baby,” Iona said. “The girls will have a little brother or sister.”

After a long moment of intense struggle not to blurt, “After all these years?” I managed to say, “Oh, what great news! Girls, aren’t you excited?”

Tolliver’s hand found mine under the table and gripped it hard. We’d never considered that Iona and Hank might have a baby of their own, and speaking for myself, I’d never been curious about why they didn’t have any. In fact, I’d just regarded the two as inconvenient irritants who got in our way when we wanted to see our sisters. However, they were mighty convenient when it came to doing the day-to-day care for those two little girls, who were no walk in the park to deal with.

In a flash of clarity, I realized all this, and I knew we couldn’t possibly interfere with Iona and Hank’s relationship with the girls now. I looked into Mariella’s face and saw the uncertainty there. Neither she nor Gracie needed any other problems to handle at the moment. The girls were trying to feel happy about the baby, but they’d been thrown for a serious loop.

I could sympathize.

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