



The Sugar Queen

Sarah Addison Allen

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BANTAM BOOKS

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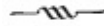
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For my dad, with all my love

Acknowledgments

Thanks to my mom for all the sweet tastes of my childhood. Andrea Cirillo, Kelly Harms and everyone at JRA, you're as comforting and refreshing as lemon cookies with frosting. Shaun Summers, Nita Taublib and everyone at Bantam, you're better than hot chocolate with marshmallows. Carolyn Mays and everyone at Hodder, you were the wonderful Tootsie Pop surprise. Daphne Aktesos I owe you more sugar than the world can hold for your time and input just when I needed it. Hershey Kisses for the loopy Duetters, a chocolate martini for Michelle Pittman and a Sky Bar for Heidi Hensley...your enduring friendship sustains me.



Everlasting Gobstoppers

When Josey woke up and saw the feathery frost on her windowpane, she smiled. Finally, it was cold enough to wear long coats and tights. It was cold enough for scarves and shirts worn in layers, like camouflage. It was cold enough for her lucky red cardigan, which she swore had a power of its own. She loved this time of year. Summer was tedious with the light dresses she pretended to be comfortable in while secretly sure she looked like a loaf of white bread wearing a belt. The cold was such a *relief*.

She went to the window. A fine sheen of sugary frost covered everything in sight, and white smoke rose from chimneys in the valley below the resort town. Excited, she opened the window, but the sash stuck midway and she had to pound it the rest of the way with the palm of her hand. It finally opened to a rush of sharp early November air that would have the town in a flurry of activity, anticipating the tourists the colder weather always brought to the high mountains of North Carolina.

She stuck her head out and took a deep breath. If she could eat the cold air, she would. She thought cold snaps were like cookies, like gingersnaps. In her mind they were made with white chocolate chunks and had a cool, brittle vanilla frosting. They melted like snow in her mouth, turning cream and warm.

Just before she ducked her head back inside, she looked down and noticed something strange.

There was a ladder propped against the house, directly underneath her window.

She leaned back in quickly and closed her window. She paused, then she locked it.

She turned and walked to her closet, distracted now. She hadn't heard anything strange last night. The tree trimmers from yesterday must have left the ladder. Yes. That had to be it. They'd probably propped it against the house and then completely forgotten about it.

She opened her closet door and reached up to pull the string that turned on the light.

Then she screamed and backed away, stopping only when she hit her desk and her lamp crashed to the floor.

"Oh for God's sake," the woman sitting on the floor of her closet said, "don't have a cow."

"Josey?" She heard her mother's voice in the hall, then the thud of her cane as she came closer.

"Please don't tell her I'm here," the woman in the closet said, with a strange sort of desperation. Despite the cold outside, she was wearing a cropped white shirt and tight dark blue jeans that sat low, revealing a tattoo of a broken heart on her hip. Her hair was bleached white-blond with about an inch

of silver-sprinkled dark roots showing. Her mascara had run and there were black streaks on her cheeks. She looked drip-dried, like she'd been walking in the rain, though there hadn't been rain for days. She smelled like cigarette smoke and river water.

Josey turned her head as her bedroom door began to open. Then, in a small act that changed everything, Josey reached over and pushed the closet door closed as her mother entered the room.

"Josey? What was that noise? Are you all right?" Margaret asked. She'd been a beautiful woman in her day, delicate and trim, blue-eyed and fair-haired. There was a certain power beautiful mothers held over their less beautiful daughters. Even at seventy-four, with a limp from a hip replacement, Margaret could still enter a room and fill it like perfume. Josey could never do that. The closest she ever came was the attention she used to receive when she pitched legendary fits in public when she was young. But that was making people look at her for all the wrong reasons.

"My lamp," Josey said. "It attacked me out of nowhere."

"Oh, well," Margaret said distantly, "leave it for the maid to clean. Hurry up and get dressed. My doctor's appointment is at nine."

"Yes, Mother."

Margaret closed the bedroom door. Josey waited until the clump of her cane faded away before she rushed to the closet door and opened it again.

Most locals knew who Della Lee was. She waitressed at a greasy spoon called Eat and Run, which was tucked far enough outside the town limits that the ski-crowd tourists didn't see it. She haunted bars at night. She was probably in her late thirties, maybe ten years older than Josey, and she was rough and flashy and did whatever she wanted—no reasonable explanation required.

"Della Lee Baker, what are you doing in my closet?"

"You shouldn't leave your window unlocked. Who knows who could get in?" Della Lee said, single-handedly debunking the long-held belief that if you dotted your windowsills and door thresholds with peppermint oil, no unwanted visitors would ever appear. For years Josey's mother had instructed every maid in their employ to anoint the house's casings with peppermint to keep the undesirable away. Their house now smelled like the winter holidays all year round.

Josey took a step back and pointed. "Get out."

"I can't."

"You most certainly can."

"I need a place to hide."

"I see. And of course this was the first place you thought of."

"Who would look for me here?"

Rough women had rough ways. Was Della Lee trying to tell her that she was in danger? "Okay, I'll bite. Who's looking for you, Della Lee?"

"Maybe no one. Maybe they haven't discovered I'm missing yet." Then, to Josey's surprise, Della Lee reached over to the false wall at the back of the narrow closet and slid it open. "And speaking of discoveries, look what I found."

Revealed now was the large secret space behind the closet. There were stacks of paperback romances, magazines and catalogs on the floor, but most of the secret closet was occupied by shelves

piled with food—packaged snacks, rows of sweets, towers of colas.

Josey's entire body suddenly burned with panic. She was supposed to be happy. And most of the time she supposed she was, in an awkward, sleepy kind of way. She'd never be the beauty her mother was, or have the personality of her late father. She was pale and plain and just this side of plump, and she accepted that. But food was a comfort. It filled in the hollow spaces. And it felt good to hide it because then she could enjoy it alone without worrying about what others thought, or about letting her mother down.

"I need to figure some things out first," Della Lee said, sliding the door back in place, her point made. She was letting Josey know that she knew her secret. *Don't reveal mine and I won't reveal yours.* "Then I'll be moving up north."

"You can't stay here. I'll give you some money. You can stay in a motel." Josey started to turn, to get her wallet, to get Della Lee away from her food. But then she stopped. "Wait. You're leaving Ball Slope?"

"Like you don't dream of leaving this stupid town," Della Lee said, leaning back on her hands.

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm a Cirrini."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't those travel magazines in your secret closet?"

Josey bristled. She pointed again. "Get out."

"It looks like I got here just in time. This is not the closet of a happy woman, Josey."

"At least I'm not hiding in it."

"I bet you do sometimes."

"Get out."

"No."

"That's it. I'm calling the police."

Della Lee laughed. She actually sat there and laughed at Josey. Her front teeth were a little crooked but it looked good on her, offbeat and sassy. She was the kind of woman who could get away with anything because she had no boundaries. "And what will you say? There's a woman in your closet. Come get her out? They might find your stash."

Josey thought about calling Della Lee's bluff. It would serve her right. It might even be worth everyone knowing about the food in her closet. But then her heart began to beat harder. Who was she kidding? It was embarrassing enough being such a sorry excuse for a Southern belle. Her weight, her unfortunate hair, her secret dreams of leaving her mother who needed her, of leaving and never looking back. Respectable daughters took care of their mothers. Respectable daughters did *not* hide enormous amounts of candy in their closets.

"So you stay, you don't tell anyone, is that it?"

"Sure," Della Lee said easily.

"That's blackmail."

"Add it to my list of sins."

"I don't think there's room left on that list," Josey said as she took a dress from its hanger. Then she closed the closet door on Della Lee.

She went to the bathroom down the hall to dress and to pull her very curly, licorice-black hair back

into a low ponytail. When she walked back to her bedroom, she stared at her closet door for a moment. It looked completely innocuous. The door and its casing were painted an antique white set against the pale blue of the room. The corner blocks at the top of the casing were hand-carved in a circular bull's eye pattern. The doorknob was white porcelain, shaped like a mushroom cap.

She took a deep breath and walked to it. Maybe she'd imagined the whole thing.

She opened the door.

"You should wear makeup," Della Lee said.

Josey reached up and grabbed her lucky red cardigan off the high shelf, then closed the door. She put the sweater on and closed her eyes. *Go away, go away, go away.*

She opened the door again.

"No, really. Mascara. Lip gloss. Something."

Josey sighed. The sweater was probably just rusty. It had been sitting there all summer, after all. Della Lee wouldn't be there when she got home. Good things happened when she wore this sweater. She'd had the best haircut she'd ever had while wearing it. When she'd slept in it once, it snowed for three days straight.

And she'd been wearing it the day she first met Adam.

She closed the door, paused with her hand on the knob, then opened it one last time.

"Eyeliner?" Della Lee said.

Josey turned and walked away.

The Cirrinis' new maid spoke very little English.

She was hired earlier in the year to help Margaret bathe after her hip replacement. But Helena could never quite grasp what was required of her. She would sit on the lowered toilet lid, her eyes averted anxiously wringing her hands while Margaret sat in the tub and played charades to get her to understand *soap*. So Josey ended up doing it.

She was hired to do the grocery shopping. But the first day she was sent off to the market with a grocery list, she spent two hours crying on the front porch, her tears falling into the flower pots where mysterious South American tropical flowers later sprouted without explanation. So Josey ended up doing that too.

Basically, Helena's duties now were light housekeeping, preparing meals and learning English by gossiping with Margaret. Her bedroom was on the first floor, and she anxiously popped her head out of her door every time Josey happened to venture downstairs after bedtime.

When Josey and Margaret arrived home from Margaret's doctor's appointment, Josey heard the vacuum cleaner humming upstairs. That was a good sign. If Helena was still doing housework, that meant she hadn't found Della Lee in the closet.

Josey helped her mother into her favorite chair in the sitting room, then she went upstairs, where Helena was vacuuming the runner in the hallway.

Josey approached Helena and tapped her on the shoulder to get her attention. She got her attention all right. Helena screamed and ran down the hall without even turning around to see who it was. The vacuum cleaner, still on, fell to the floor and started eating the fringe of the runner.

“Helena, wait!” Josey called, running after her. She caught up with her before she reached the corner at the end of the hall that led to the narrow kitchen staircase. “It’s okay! It’s just me!”

Helena stopped and turned. “Oldsey?” she said dubiously, like she’d expected someone else.

“Yes. It’s me. I didn’t mean to scare you. Are you okay?”

Helena put her hand to her heart, breathing heavily. She nodded and hurried back to the vacuum cleaner. She unplugged it, then knelt to pull the runner’s fringe from where it had wrapped around the vacuum’s beater bar.

Josey followed, saying, “Helena, did you, um, clean up the broken lamp in my bedroom?”

“I clean.” She stood and crossed herself, then she kissed the crucifix on her necklace. “Oldsey’s room strange today.”

“Strange? Did you see anything...unusual?”

“See, no. *Feel*. Cold in Oldsey’s room,” she said.

Josey sighed in relief. “Oh, I opened my window earlier, that’s all.” She smiled. “Don’t worry about vacuuming up here. Mother is downstairs in the sitting room.”

“Oldgret downstairs?”

“Yes. Margaret is downstairs.”

That would keep them both occupied and away from Josey’s room for a while. Margaret liked to watch Helena clean. And Helena, as far as she was able, liked to spread the latest gossip from the east side of town, which included the Catholic community center, a place Margaret found simply fascinating in a what-can-the-Baptists-do-that’s-better kind of way.

As Helena started wrapping the cord around the vacuum, Josey went to her bedroom. For breakfast she’d eaten what her mother always wanted, a modest bowl of rolled oats and blackberries. Her stomach growled as she stared at her closet. Her food was there. All her lovely food.

The secret closet was the closet in the adjoining room. That bedroom had a huge armoire in it, ridiculously heavy old Cirrini heirloom. It took up most of one wall and hid that closet. She’d found the door between the two closets by accident, when she would sit in her closet and eat candy she hid in her pockets when she was young. Back then she used to hide from her mother in the secret space just to worry her, but now she stocked it with magazines, paperback romances and sweets. Lots and lots of sweets. Moonpies and pecan rolls, Chick-O-Sticks and Cow Tales, Caramel Creams and Squirrel Nuts, Zippers, Red Hots and Bit-O-Honey, boxes upon boxes of Little Debbie snack cakes. The space had a comforting smell to it, like Halloween, like sugar and chocolate and crisp plastic wrappers.

Josey took off her coat and put it and her purse on the chaise, then went to the closet. She pulled her lucky cardigan tightly around her, made a wish, then opened the door.

“Did I just hear your maid call you and your mother Oldsey and Oldgret?” Della Lee asked, laughing.

Of course Della Lee found that funny. Some people liked to call Josey and her mother the Cirrini Sisters. Margaret had Josey late in life. Josey was only twenty-seven, so they were essentially calling her an old woman, but they were comparing her to Margaret, who was once the belle of Bald Slope. The woman married to the late, great Marco Cirrini. There were worse things to be called. Margaret didn’t like the nickname and discouraged it whenever possible. Margaret was small, fair and ethereal. Josey looked like a thick dark blob next to her. *Sisters?* Margaret would say. *We look nothing alike.*

Josey's shoulders dropped. "It's a wonder she didn't see you. You're going to get caught."

"It's just for a little while."

"Define 'a little while.'"

"However long it takes, I guess. Days? Weeks?"

"I hear the closets at the Holiday Inn are fabulous. You should try them."

"Ah, but they don't come with a built-in snack machine like this one," Della Lee said, and Josey had to accept that Della Lee, cocky, mascara-stained and stubborn, was going to stay in her closet until she decided to leave. "You're not going to argue?" Della Lee asked.

"Would it do any good?"

"It might make you feel better."

"There's only one thing that makes me feel better. Excuse me," Josey said as she leaned in and slid back the false wall.

Della Lee scooted quickly to a corner, more dramatically than Josey thought was necessary, as if afraid Josey might decide to touch her. Josey grabbed a red tin of Moravian cookies and a packet of Mallo Cups, then she went to her desk and sat. She opened the tin of cookies and started eating slowly, savoring each thin spice-and-molasses bite.

Della Lee watched her for a while, then she turned and sprawled out on the floor of the closet, staring up at Josey's clothes. She lifted one jeans-clad leg in the air to brush the clothes, and for the first time Josey noticed that Della Lee was wearing only one shoe. "So this is the life of Josey Cirrini," Della Lee finally said.

Josey focused on her cookie. "If you don't like it, you can leave."

"Is this really what you do all day? Don't you have friends?" Della Lee asked, shaking her head. "I didn't know your life was like this. I used to envy you when you were a kid. I thought you had everything."

Josey didn't know what to say to that. She couldn't imagine someone as beautiful as Della Lee envying her. Josey didn't have everything. She had only money. And she would give that away, then she would give everything else she had, every grain of sugar, for the one thing she wanted most in the world but would never have.

Suddenly her head tilted to one side.

Like magic, she felt him getting nearer, felt it like a pull in the pit of her stomach. It felt like hunger, but deeper, heavier. Like the best kind of expectation. Ice cream expectation. Chocolate expectation. Soft nougat pulling from a candy bar.

So the red sweater *did* still have some luck left in it.

"What's the matter?" Della Lee asked as Josey pushed back her chair and went to her window.

He was coming up the sidewalk. He was early today.

The Cirrini house was located in one of the oldest neighborhoods in town. When Marco Cirrini made his fortune with the Bald Slope Ski Resort, he bought a house in the neighborhood he'd always dreamed about living in, then promptly tore the house down. He built a large bright blue Victorian lady in its place. He said he wanted a house that would stand out even among the standouts. He wanted everyone who passed by the house to say, "Marco Cirrini lives there." All the houses in the

neighborhood were recessed except the Cirrini house, which was front and center, the eager look-alike house built by the son of poor Italian immigrants.

Adam would be at the door in no time.

Josey hurried out of the room.

Helena and Margaret were talking in the sitting room when Josey came down the stairs, slowing her pace to a walk. “The mail is here,” she called to them.

Margaret and Helena didn’t stop their conversation, which sounded something like this:

“Naomi O’Toole?”

“Yes, Oldgret.”

“*She* was there?”

“Yes, Oldgret.”

Josey opened the front door with its crazy colorful stained-glass panels, then she pushed open the screen, her eyes on the front porch steps, not wanting to miss a moment of him. The screen door abruptly stuck, hitting something soft. She realized, to her horror, she’d hit Adam Boswell with the door as he was putting the mail in the black-flapped mailbox hanging to the right.

“Whoa,” Adam said, smiling, “what’s your hurry, Josey?”

He was dressed in his cooler-weather uniform, the pants covering the scars on his right leg, the leg he favored. He was a good-looking, athletic man. His round face was always tan, golden, in fact, like something warm and bright was glowing inside of him. He had curly dark-blond hair he sometimes pushed back with a bandana tied around his head. He was in his thirties, and he had a secret. She didn’t know what it was, but she could tell.

Adam wasn’t from here, Josey knew that much. Three years ago he’d shown up on her doorstep with mail in hand, and her dreams had never been the same. Adventurous types flocked to Bald Slope and its famous steep ski runs. She’d always wondered if the slopes had brought him here, and if that was the reason he stayed. Though her mother sold the resort shortly after Marco died, it made Josey feel happy to think that she had something, however tenuous, to do with Adam being here.

He popped one of the ear buds from his iPod out of his ear when she just stood there and stared at him. “Josey, are you okay?”

She immediately felt herself blush. He was the only person in the world she was tongue-tied around and yet the only person she really wanted to talk to. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t know you were already here. You’re early today.”

“The mail was light. This is all I have for you,” he said, handing her the catalog he’d been about to put in the mailbox before she pummeled him with the screen door.

“Thank you.”

He looked at her for a moment. “You have something”—he pointed to her lips, then touched the corner of his own mouth—“right here.”

She immediately put her fingertips to her lips and felt the cookie crumbs there. She brushed them away, embarrassed. Oh yes, she was witty *and* clean.

“Beautiful day, isn’t it?” he said, taking a deep breath. The cool noon air was flavored with the mulchy scent of fallen leaves and the last of the hardiest flowers curling away for the winter. “I love

fall.”

Josey’s fingers froze on her lips, completely enchanted by him. “Me *too*.”

“It makes you want to do something, doesn’t it?” he said, grinning. “Like get out and...play trees.”

That made Josey laugh. Adam watched her as she laughed, and she didn’t know why. It was like she’d surprised him.

Adam finally said, “Well, I’ll see you later.”

“Right,” she said. “Bye, Adam.”

She held her breath, her own superstition, until he walked down the steps and crossed the street. As soon as he reached the other side, disappearing from her world, she went back in the house.

She walked into the sitting room, where Helena had set up the ironing board to press some of Margaret’s dresses.

“Only a catalog in the mail today,” Josey said. “I’m going to take it to my room, okay?”

“Wait,” Margaret said, squinty-eyed as she looked Josey over. “Were you wearing that sweater at the doctor’s office?”

Oh no. She meant to take it off when she came in. “Yes,” she said, then added quickly, “but I had my coat on over it.”

“Josey, I asked you to get rid of that sweater last year. It’s been washed so many times that it’s far too small for you.”

Josey tried to smile. “But I like it.”

“I’m just saying you need to find something that fits. I know you love your catalogs. Find something in a larger size. And red isn’t a good color on you. I could wear red when I was your age. But that’s because I was blond. Try white. Or black.”

“Yes, Mother.”

Josey turned and walked back out of the sitting room. She went up the stairs to her room, where she sat at her desk and stared at the wall. She tugged on the sweater self-consciously.

“So who is he?” Della Lee asked from the closet.

“Excuse me?”

“The man you ran out of here to see.”

Josey immediately sat up straighter. She put the catalog on the desk and opened it, startled. *How on earth did she know that?* “I don’t know what you mean.”

Della Lee was silent for a while as Josey ate cookies and pretended to look at the catalog. “It feels like he’s taken your heart, doesn’t it?” Della Lee finally said. “Like he’s reached in and pulled it from you. And I bet he smiles like he doesn’t know, like he doesn’t know he’s holding your heart in his hand and you’re *dying* from him.”

It was the truest, purest, saddest thing she had ever heard spoken. It was like hearing gospel for the first time, how it shocked you, how it made you afraid because you thought no one could see inside you. Josey leerily turned to look at Della Lee.

“You’re wondering how I know. Girls like us, when we love, it takes everything we have. Who

he?”

“Like I would tell you.”

Della Lee leaned forward. “I *swear* I won’t tell anyone,” she said seductively.

“Yes, and we both know how honest you are.”

“Fine. Tell me when you’re ready. I can help you, you know. Yes, that’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to help you.” Della Lee leaned back. Josey caught a whiff of tobacco and mud.

“You’re in no shape to help anyone. What happened to you, Della Lee? You still look like you’re wet.”

Della Lee looked down at her clothes, then she touched her hair, which was heavy and flat. “Oh, I forgot,” she said. “I took a little dip in the river.”

“You swam in the river at this time of year?” Josey asked incredulously.

“Seemed like a good idea at the time. The last stupid thing I did before I went up north.” Della Lee shrugged. “Like redemption, you know?”

“Redemption for what?”

“More than you could ever imagine. Listen, I want you to go to a sandwich shop on the first-floor rotunda of the courthouse. It’s across from the elevators. A woman named Chloe Finley owns the place, and you’ll love her. She makes a grilled tomato and three-cheese sandwich that will make your head spin it’s so good. Get me one, will you?”

Josey, stuck on the image of Della Lee in the cold Green Cove River, dunking herself in her own version of a baptism, was caught off guard by the sudden change of subject. “You want me to get you a sandwich right now?”

“Why not?”

“Because I have to eat lunch with my mother at twelve-thirty. Then I have to sit with her when our financial advisor comes by this afternoon. Then I have to get her into the bathtub this evening, then get her settled in bed.”

Unfazed, Della Lee said, “Tomorrow, then.”

“I take my mother for her manicure and pedicure tomorrow.”

“Thursday?”

“I have to take my mother to her ladies’ club meeting Thursday.”

“No wonder you have so many travel magazines. If you ever manage to get off this gerbil wheel, bet you’ll take off.”

“*I will not*,” Josey said, indignant, because respectable daughters stayed. Never mind that she dreamed of leaving every single day. “What if I like living like this? Did you ever think of that?”

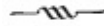
Della Lee snorted.

Josey put the lid back on the cookie tin and stood. She took it and the uneaten packet of Mallo Cup back to the closet. “You can eat anything you want back here. I’m not getting you a sandwich.”

“No, thanks. I’ll wait.”

“You’re going to be waiting a long time.”

She laughed. “Honey, I’ve got nothing but time.”



SweetTarts

For nearly a century, the town of Bald Slope barely sustained itself as a High Country summer getaway for the hot, wilted wealthy from North Carolina's Piedmont. The town slept like a winter beast during the cold months, summer houses and most downtown shops boarded up. Locals got by on vegetables they'd canned and money they'd made in the summer. By the time the last snow melted they were weak and hungry and couldn't wait for the summer residents to return.

Marco Cirrini had been skiing on the north face of Bald Slope Mountain since he was a boy, using the old skis his father brought with him from Italy. The Cirrinis had shown up out of nowhere, walking into town in the middle of winter, their hair shining like black coal in the snow. They never really fit in. Marco tried, though. He tried by leading groups of local boys up the mountain in the winter, showing them how to make their own skis and how to use them. He charged them pennies and jars of bean chutney and spiced red cabbage they would sneak out of their mothers' sparse pantries. When he was nineteen, he decided he could take this one step further. He could make great things happen in the winter in Bald Slope. Cocky, not afraid of hard work and handsome in that mysterious Mediterranean way that excluded him from mountain society, he gathered investors from as far away as Asheville and Charlotte to buy the land. He started construction on the lodge himself while the residents of the town scoffed. They were the sweet cream and potatoes and long-forgotten ballads of their English and Irish and Scottish ancestors, who settled the southern Appalachians. To their way of thinking, the way it had been was the way it should always be. They didn't want change. It took fifteen years, but the Bald Slope Ski Resort was finally completed and, much to everyone's surprise, it was an immediate success.

Change was good!

Stores didn't shut down for the winter anymore. Bed and-breakfasts and sports shops and restaurants sprouted up. Instead of closing up their houses for the winter, summer residents began to rent them out to skiers. Some summer residents even decided to move to Bald Slope permanently, moving into their vacation homes with their sleeping porches and shade trees, thus forming the high society in Bald Slope that existed today. Marco himself was welcomed into this year-round society. He was essentially responsible for its formation in the first place, after all. Finally it didn't matter where he came from. What mattered was that he'd saved Bald Slope by giving it a winter economy and he could do no wrong.

This town was finally his.

Josey stopped in front of a small yellow bungalow and compared the number on the mailbox to the address she'd copied out of the phone book that morning. This was it. She leaned into the steering wheel and peered out the windshield. The paint looked fresh, and the windows were clean. But Della Lee obviously hadn't tended to her small yard since summer. Garden gnomes and plastic flowers still lined the walkway to the porch, and there was a long plastic chair for sunbathing still in the yard, now covered with small red-black leaves that had fallen from the dogwood by the house.

She put the large gold Cadillac—her mother's idea—in park and cut the engine.

This blue-collar neighborhood was one Josey was faintly familiar with because her father would pass through it on their Sunday drives when Josey was a child. Josey lived for those drives. It was the only time in her entire childhood she ever felt calm. The rest of the time, she was locked in a constant power struggle with her mother, a struggle Josey couldn't even explain today. She had no idea why she'd been so mean as a child. She had no idea why she'd pitched such fits. Her mother certainly deserved better. But during those drives, Josey would relax while Marco talked. He knew everything about Bald Slope. He knew every neighborhood by heart. He was in his late sixties when Josey was born, and by that time he was an established figure in town, rich, silver-haired and swaggering. His father was a chimney sweep, and Marco dropped out of school in sixth grade to work with him. He used to tell Josey that he'd stand on rooftops when he was a boy and look at the houses and dream of owning the tallest house in the best neighborhood, where no one could look down on his roof, let alone look down on him.

Marco died when Josey was nine, and it felt like someone waking her up with a hard pinch. All she had left was her mother, and she'd been so terrible to her. That's when she decided, even if it took forever, she was going to make up to her mother every horrible thing she'd done. The day her father died was the first day Josey bit her tongue, the first day she took criticism and didn't fight back, and the day she began to realize how hard it was going to be to change the way people saw her as a child. Almost twenty years later, she was still trying.

Taking a deep breath, Josey got out of the car.

She'd caught a lucky break that day after taking her mother to the salon. Josey usually sat and waited for her, chatting with the older ladies, making sympathetic noises when they told her all about their sciatica and arthritis. But her mother reminded her that she had to pick up the peppermint oil Margaret had specially made by Nova Berry, the strange woman whose family ran the organic market. They were running low. And obviously not enough was being sprinkled on the thresholds of the house. That would certainly explain how Della Lee had managed to get in.

Josey went to pick up the oil, but Nova didn't have it ready yet. She said to come back in a few days, then she told Josey once again that red was a magic color for her, which Josey always liked to hear even though Nova probably only said it to get her to buy one of her red crocheted scarves or hats. After leaving the market, Josey only meant to drive by Della Lee's house. She didn't have time for this. Still...Della Lee had been in Josey's closet for two days now, and Josey was still no closer to figuring out why she was there, or how exactly to get her out without revealing Josey's secret stash to the world. Maybe Della Lee's house would give Josey something to bargain with. Maybe there was something in there Della Lee was hiding.

Nothing like a little breaking and entering to liven up a day.

The dogwood leaves crunched underfoot as Josey picked her way across the yard, trying not to look like she was sneaking around. When she reached the porch, she was surprised to find the door open.

even on this cool day. Did Della Lee have roommates?

She raised her hand to knock, then hesitated. Holding her fist in the air with indecision, she finally knocked once on the screen door.

No answer.

“Hello?” she called. Even from outside, she could smell the tight, hot, closed-in scent of the interior, like old linens left in a dryer for too long. The furnace was running on high.

Still no answer. It occurred to her that Della Lee might have left in a hurry, that she might have left the door open. Curiouser and curiouser.

She looked over her shoulder to see if anyone might be watching her, then she opened the screen door and entered.

The place was a mess. There were beer cans everywhere. There was a broken coffee mug on the floor and a stain of coffee on the far wall, as if the mug had been thrown. A chair was overturned.

She had taken only a few steps in, kicking a beer can and what looked to be the ripped-off sleeve of a woman's denim shirt, when she stopped short, her scalp tightening and her heart jumping against her rib cage like a startled cat.

There was a man sleeping on the couch.

She stood there for a few moments, paralyzed, afraid that she might have made enough noise to wake him.

He was, very clearly, not the kind of man you wanted to wake.

He didn't have a shirt on and his jeans were unzipped, one hand tucked halfway inside his fly. He had a smug smile on his lips like he knew, even in his sleep, that women all around him were dying from love because he'd taken their hearts and hidden them where they'd never find them.

His muscles indicated he spent a lot of time in a gym. His cheekbones were high and his hair was long and straight and dark. He smelled of alcohol and of something else, like if you took a match to a rosebush. It smelled good, but dark and smoky, and it made Josey feel heady, like she was losing herself in it somehow.

All at once she understood.

This was the reason Della Lee left.

She'd come here to get something on Della Lee, and look what she found. She took a step back, profoundly ashamed of herself. She should just get out of there. Pretend she didn't know.

But then something on an elemental level stopped her. She felt a connection to Della Lee at that moment, one she couldn't explain. She *felt* her here, felt her genuine, profound unhappiness, like it was her own. It felt so familiar, that belief that nothing was ever going to change so why try anymore?

Okay, so maybe letting Della Lee know that she knew might help. It might keep Della Lee from coming back to this...this *violence*.

She turned her head slightly, and she could see down a short hallway.

She took a few more slow steps backward, keeping her eyes on the man's face, watching for movement. She then turned and walked on the balls of her feet down the hallway, bypassing small piles of his dirty clothes. There were crooked photos on the wall of Della Lee as a child, with dark hair and eyes. Josey wondered when she started dyeing her hair blond. In one photo she was standing on

top of a jungle gym. In another she was diving into the public pool from the high dive. She looked like she was daring the world to hurt her.

Della Lee's bedroom at the end of the hall looked like something out of Josey's teenage dream. Back then Josey had politely asked her mother if she could hang a poster or two, if she could have some colorful curtains or a bedspread with hearts on it. Her mother had responded with disappointment. Why would Josey ask for something else, as if what she had wasn't good enough? The heavy oak bed, the antique desk and the sueded chaise in Josey's room were all Very Nice Things. Josey obviously did not appreciate Very Nice Things.

The walls in Della Lee's room were painted purple and there were sheer lavender curtains on the single window. A poster of a white Himalayan cat was taped on one wall, along with some pages torn out of fashion magazines. There was a white mirrored dresser that had makeup tubes and bottles littered across the surface. Some tote bags with names of cosmetic companies, like department store gifts with purchase, were stashed in the corner near the dresser.

Josey grabbed a few bags and slowly slid open the drawers until she found socks and panties and bras. She stuffed one bag full, then she put the makeup in another bag.

Her heart beating thickly, she went to the closet and took clothes off the hangers as quietly as possible. She knelt to get a few pairs of shoes. There were two very different sets of shoes: grease-and-food-stained sneakers that she obviously wore to work, and leather boots and strappy heels she probably wore out at night. Josey took two from each category. She was just about to stand when she noticed the cardboard box in the corner of the closet. It had sweaters stacked on top of it and PRIVATE written on the side in green marker.

She crawled to the box and slid the sweaters off. Inside the box were dozens of old spiral notebook bundles of letters and photographs. And a couple of old pieces of jewelry, sentimental but not expensive, were wrapped in yellowy tissue paper. There was a yearbook from Bald Slope High with Della Lee's name embossed on it. Her birth certificate was folded inside.

She suddenly heard some movement coming from the living room. She turned her head, brushing the coat that was hanging above her. One shoulder of the coat slipped off the hanger and it swayed precariously, a breath away from falling off altogether. She heard the man sigh and then the squeak of the springs on the old couch.

He was coming down the hall.

Her body felt tight, and her ears actually felt like they turned as she strained to hear what he was doing. It took a moment to realize that he was using the bathroom, which shared a wall with the closet.

The wire hanger was still swinging above her, squeaking slightly. If the coat slipped off, the hanger would hit the wall and he would hear. She watched it desperately, saying all sorts of prayers.

The commode flushed and he shuffled out into the hall. His steps were slow, sleepy.

The squeak of the couch springs again.

Silence.

Josey waited until her muscles were quivering with tension from keeping the same awkward position for so long, then she scooted out of the closet with the box. She stood stiffly and grabbed the tote bags. She went to the bedroom doorway and peered out before slowly walking down the hallway. She stopped just before the turn into the living room.

She could hear him breathing.

But was his breath shallow enough to indicate he was asleep again?

She screwed up her courage and took that final step into the living room.

Then she almost dropped everything she was carrying.

He was sitting up on the couch.

But then she saw that his head was resting back against the cushions. He'd fallen asleep sitting up.

There was a cigarette almost burned down to the filter in an ashtray on the coffee table in front of him.

Next to the ashtray there was a scuffed leather pocketbook with a shiny purple wallet sticking out of it.

with the initial *D* on it in white.

Della Lee would need her ID.

Josey was trembling as she took those few steps to the pocketbook. She had to lean down, box and tote bags and all, to get the wallet and slide it out.

Josey then backed quietly to the door, pushing open the screen with her butt, her eyes not leaving him until the last possible moment when she had to turn.

She tried to catch the screen door with her elbow so it wouldn't slap shut, but she was too late. It hit the casing with a bang.

She took off down the steps. It had been so hot inside the house that running in the chilly air outside

felt like falling into water. The damp hair at the base of her neck instantly turned cold and gave her

goosebumps. She stopped on the sidewalk and dropped Della Lee's things by the car. She fished her

keys out of her coat pocket and electronically opened the trunk with the device on her key chain,

exactly the same time the screen door to the bungalow slapped shut again and the beautiful long

haired man walked out onto the porch.

"Hello? What are you doing?" the man called out to her. His voice was melodic, and the air carried

it to her like a present. She actually stopped for a moment and turned to him. Seduction was his sixth

sense, and he knew he'd caught her.

"You," the man said, smiling with an edge as he walked down the steps toward her. With a beautiful

swing of his head, he tossed his long dark hair over his shoulder. "Were you just in my house?"

She heard the caw of a crow nearby, a portent of danger, and she gave a start. Snapping out of her

spell, she quickly threw the things into the trunk, then slammed the lid closed.

Josey hurried to the driver's side and got in. As she drove away in the largest, golddest Cadillac in

the entire Southeast, the man stood on the sidewalk and watched.

He was still there, his stare as dark as a gypsy curse, as she made the turn at the stop sign and sped

off.

After getting her mother settled in bed that night, the lotion that smelled like lemon tarts rubbed on

her small, pretty feet, her sleeping pill and water beside her on the nightstand, Josey crept down the

stairs and outside to the car. She was barefooted and her toes curled against the frosty pavement of the

driveway, but it was quieter this way.

Regardless, Helena stuck her head out of her bedroom doorway when Josey came back in with Della Lee's things.

"It's okay, Helena. Go back to bed."

She ducked her head back in.

Josey took the things up to her room, then she opened her closet door and set the box and bags in front of Della Lee.

"What is this?" Della Lee asked, surprised. She set aside one of Josey's well-thumbed travel magazines. She had washed her face since Josey had last seen her earlier that day, so the mascara streaks were gone. How she'd managed to do that without anyone noticing was a mystery. There weren't any washcloths smeared with makeup left behind, no sounds of water running hollow through the pipes from upstairs while Josey and her mother and Helena sat in the sitting room downstairs and watched television.

Josey smiled. She'd barely been able to contain herself all day, waiting for her mother to finally go to bed. "A surprise! I went to your house today."

"You did *what*?"

Josey went to her knees and opened one of the bags. "Look. I picked up some of your things. Here are some clothes and makeup and here's your wallet. And this box. It looked like the kind of thing you wouldn't want to leave behind."

Della Lee was shaking her head, slowly at first, then more and more quickly. "I wanted you to go home and make me a sandwich, not go to my house!"

"I did this so you wouldn't have to go back. Say thank you, you closet thief."

"Of course I'm not going back there!" she said. She scooted away from the things, farther into the shadows of the closet. "Josey, get rid of this stuff. Now! People can't know you have this."

"Shh! My mother will hear you," Josey said. "And I don't have it. It's yours. No one knows."

Della Lee's eyes went from Josey, to the box and bags, then back to Josey. "Was Julian still there?"

"The man with long hair? He was asleep on the couch with his hand halfway down his pants. Does he sleep like that all the time? If he had a nightmare, I bet he could really hurt himself."

"But you saw him," Della Lee said, seeing past Josey's too-casual assessment of him.

"I saw him."

"Then you understand."

Josey swallowed. "Yes."

"Bastard. I hate that he's still in my house. That was my mother's house. I wonder what's going to happen to it."

"Well," Josey said, "if you're really leaving, you can sell it."

Della Lee smiled, like there was a secret joke in there somewhere. "Sell it. Yes. That's what I'll do."

"I can help you."

Della Lee's smile faded. "You have to promise me not to do anything else like this, Josey. Don't go back there to him. Don't contact realtors. And don't tell anyone about me. *Promise!*"

“Okay, okay. I promise.”

“I can’t believe you would do this for me.” Della Lee reached out tentatively to touch the box, but she wasn’t sure it was real. When her fingers touched the cardboard, she gave a surprised laugh.

“When you go up north, you’re going to need your things.”

Della scooted the box toward her. It made a loud scraping noise against the hardwood floor. “Oh, get it,” she said as she lifted the lid. “You’re trying to get rid of me because I know about your sweets.”

“Well, there is that,” Josey said.

“Josey!” she heard her mother call from down the hall. Josey swung her head around.

“No one’s ever done anything like this for me. You know, maybe I *can* keep this stuff.” Della Lee suddenly grabbed the bags and brought them toward her, hugging them. “My stuff,” she said, laughing. “My stuff, my stuff, my stuff. I never thought I’d see it again. Could I have a little privacy here?”

Josey hesitated at first, then got to her feet.

“Close the door, will you? And don’t forget to go see Chloe at the courthouse and get me a sandwich,” Della Lee said as she brought a shirt out of one of the bags and put it to her face, inhaling. She frowned, then smelled the shirt again. “That’s strange. This doesn’t smell like I remembered.”

When Josey closed the door, Della Lee was taking out another shirt.

Josey shook her head, thinking, if Della Lee were a candy, she would be a SweetTart. Not the hard kind that broke your teeth, the chewy kind, the kind you had to work on and mull over, your eyes watering and your lips turning up into a smile you didn’t want to give.

“Josey!” Margaret called again.

Josey turned quickly and went to check on her mother.

Margaret liked to look at one particular photo after she took her sleeping pill, because sometimes it made her dream of him. She was thirty-one in the photo, but she looked much younger. She always had, until recently. When she looked in the mirror these days, she saw someone she didn’t recognize. She didn’t see the beautiful woman in the photo. She saw an old woman trying to be beautiful, her skin dry and her wrinkles like cracks. She looked like a very well-dressed winter apple.

Long ago, when she was a young woman, younger even than in the photo, she thought she would be happier here in Bald Slope than she was in Asheville. It meant she would be away from her family and their demands of her. She was only twenty-three when she married Marco, a match made by her father. Marco was almost twenty-four years her senior, but he was rich and charismatic and he had no interest in having children, so it could have been much, much worse. She got what she wanted, a life away from her family and no younger siblings to look after anymore, while her family got what they wanted, money. But Margaret didn’t realize how lonely she would be in this strange cool place with the Gothic arches of its downtown buildings and an entire culture devoted to bringing visitors to the town in order to survive. And it didn’t take long to understand that Marco only wanted a beautiful wife and the cachet of her old Southern family name. He didn’t want *her*. But when she was thirty-one, for one brief wonderful year, she wasn’t lonely. She was happy, for the first and only time she could ever remember.

The photo had been taken at a picnic social, and he wasn't supposed to be in the picture. He was caught by accident so close to her. She'd cut the photo in half years ago, when she thought cutting him out of her life was the right thing to do. But she could still see his hand in the photo, a young man's hand, just barely touching hers. The hand wasn't her husband's.

She could hear Josey moving around in her room. Josey was talking to herself, which was a new development, one Margaret wondered if she should be concerned about. Today Josey had taken entirely too long to fetch the peppermint oil, especially considering Nova Berry didn't even have it ready yet. Josey had been doing something else. The thought of Josey making a wider circle, or going outside this house, made Margaret feel uneasy. Margaret had given up everything for this life, for this house, for this money. Josey would too.

She heard some scuffling, like something being dragged across the floor in Josey's room.

"Josey!" she called, putting the photo under her pillow.

A minute passed with no response.

"Josey!" she called again.

Soon Josey tapped on Margaret's bedroom door and entered. Margaret knew she wasn't a good mother. But somehow, all the horrible things Josey did when she was young, all the treasures she broke, all the tantrums she threw, all the scratches and bruises she gave, would have been a little easier to forgive if she just didn't look so much like Marco. Marco, who would swoop in once a week to take Josey on a drive because Margaret forced him to. Where was he the rest of the time, when Josey was screaming or breaking the good china? The first nine years of Josey's life, Margaret could only stare at her daughter, at what an unattractive, spoiled child she was, and wonder if she was worth the punishment. She'd had Josey out of desperation and spite. So maybe Margaret got what she deserved. But Marco could do what he wanted, married or not, and he had no consequences to face. Men were thieves.

"Is something wrong, Mother? Do you need something?"

"What are you doing in your room? I heard a scraping sound."

"I was sitting at my desk," Josey said. "I pulled back the chair. I'll go to bed now. I won't make any more noise."

"All right," Margaret said. Josey started to turn. "Josey?"

"Yes, Mother?"

"Did you get rid of that sweater like I asked?"

"Yes, Mother."

"I wasn't trying to be mean the other day. It just doesn't look good on you."

"Yes, Mother," Josey said.

The truth was, that sweater, that color, looked good on her daughter. And every time she wore it, it hinted at something that scared Margaret.

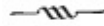
Josey was growing into her beauty.

Margaret watched Josey leave.

She used to be a beautiful woman, the most beautiful woman around.

She brought out the photo again.

But that was forever ago.



Rock Candy

Across town, early the next morning, Chloe Finley stared at the door of her apartment.

Her boyfriend Jake was on the other side of the door, outside in the hall.

She couldn't believe this was happening. She'd just kicked Jake out after he'd admitted he cheated on her.

Dazed, she turned around...and tripped over a book on the floor.

She looked down at it and sighed. She'd half expected this. Whether she liked it or not, books always appeared when she needed them. She'd stopped reading as much once she met Jake. And over the past five years, ever since moving in with him, books had come to her less and less frequently. When they did show up, she ignored them. After all, how did you explain such a thing? Books appearing all of a sudden? She was always afraid Jake would think she was crazy.

She could remember very clearly the first time it happened to her. Being an only child raised by her great-grandparents on a farm miles from town, she was bored a lot. When she ran out of books to read, it only got worse. She was walking by the creek along the wood line at the end of the property one day when she was twelve, feeling mopey and frustrated, when she saw a book propped up against a willow tree.

She walked over and picked it up. It was so new the spine creaked and popped when she opened it. It was a book on card tricks, full of fun things she could do with the deck of cards her great-grandmother kept in a drawer in the kitchen for her weekly canasta game.

She called out, asking if anyone was there. No one answered. She didn't see any harm in looking through the book, so she sat under the tree by the creek and read as much as she could before it got dark. She wanted to take it with her when her great-grandmother called her home, but she knew she couldn't. The owner of the book would surely want it back. So she reluctantly left it by the tree and ran home, trying to commit to memory everything she'd read.

After dinner, Chloe took the deck of cards out of the kitchen drawer and went to her bedroom to try some of the tricks. She tried for a while, but she couldn't get them right without following the pictures in the book. She sighed and gathered the cards she'd spread out on the floor. She stood, and that's when she saw the book, the same book she'd left by the creek, on her nightstand.

For a while after that, she thought her great-grandparents were surprising her with books. She'd find them on her bed, in her closet, in her favorite hideouts around the property. And they were always books she needed. Books on games or novels of adventure when she was bored. Books about growing

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