

## CHAPTER 18

The hobo waited until the waxing crescent moon had lowered itself into the indigo horizon and the lichen-covered rocks reflected only starlight. He eased into the root cellar, the newly oiled hinges moving noiselessly. He pulled a matchbook from his pockets, then used the meager flame to light a wickered lamp. He walked directly to an old cedar-lined trunk that the Wesley family had not had time to notice. When he opened it, floral-scented perfume wafted from the numerous letters and assailed his senses, and in his mind's eye, he could see the swoops and swirls of her carefully penned letters full of love and longing, dreams and desires. He remembered being starstruck when he saw her for the first time, the dark waves of her short hair caught in the breeze as she crossed the courthouse steps. Even after all this time, he was still in awe that she had chosen him.

He recalled that her fealty during the Great Crisis had been unbroken by anything she'd heard or anything he'd said. He'd asked her father for her hand in marriage only after he'd done all that he could to prove himself worthy. He could feel her gentle kisses at the chapel by the lake where they married, hear her genteel laugh in the realtor's office after they decided to purchase their first home. He could still taste the tears shed from her emerald eyes when their son had been born, healthy and robust. The hobo remembered walking

into their quaint and serene home a year later, finding the front door glass shattered, furniture thrown askew, the love of his life laying on the floor of the kitchen, her face badly bruised, her regal neck broken. In his son's highchair, tucked under the remnants of a small birthday cake, was a typed note, absent of any signature. No, that salty taste wasn't a memory. Fresh tears fell from his eyes now in the dank root cellar, a quarter of a century later. "I wish you were here, Glennis," he whispered softly, with only the sodden bricks to hear him.

With a snuffle, the hobo wiped away his tears with his shirt sleeve. He recalled what MC Hammond said to him during their brief phone call— "Legal counsel requires you to bring two papers to the annual review of your case. Both dated April 21st." There were only two papers in the entire trunk that met those criteria—one was his only child's birth certificate; the other was the note left in place of his son. Maybe after all this time, MC finally has a lead, he thought. After shuffling through legal briefs bound by rotting rubber bands, the yellowed folder that held his military record, pushing aside the photo album with its pages stuck together, the paperwork was quickly found at last. He knew I'd have to come back to Dogwood for these. That's just downright mean.

The lamp was quickly extinguished, leaving in absolute darkness the small wraith-like child who secretly witnessed the plumage. The root cellar was quickly exited and locked again. The hobo hastily returned to the shadows behind the magnolia tree, stopping just long enough to pull a haunted quilt from the Wesley's laundry line.