

The House on Persimmon Road

by

Jackie Weger

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Chapter One

THIS WAS IT. The house on Persimmon Road. She had followed the hand-drawn map without error. Justine let her hands slide from the steering wheel to rest in her lap. The house stood amid ancient moss-draped trees and knee-high weeds. One glance told her that far from the magical and glowing description the agent had sent, this place was only going to add

to her burdens. Damn it! And he had made it sound so grand.

“Spacious great room, huge kitchen, wraparound porch in Alabama’s rich delta land. Just needs a little elbow grease.”

Elbow grease! Wrecking ball was more like it.

She could sense the other four occupants in the station wagon were growing restless: her mother, her mother-in-law, and her children, Pip and Judy Ann. No one was saying a word.

Not good. Justine would have sighed, but she didn't want to show her own trepidation and disappointment lest she open herself up to a litany of "I told you so's."

Judy Ann leaned into the front seat. "Listen, Mommy, let's just go back to Virginia and live where we did. I don't like it here."

Justine forced a smile. "We can't do that, sweetie. This is our new home."

“I don’t like it!”

“Give it a chance, darling.

We haven’t even gotten out of the car! Look! There’s a squirrel. Go make friends.”

“I’ve seen squirrels before.”

“Not in your own front yard, you haven’t. Don’t turn pouty yet, sweetie. Give it a few hours. Okay?”

Weeks ago, when life had her up against a rough wall, Justine heard about this house and felt she had been given a

sign. She'd had a premonition that the move and the house would be the central focus of a new start for all of them, that things were finally going to change for the better. She gave an inward shrug. It wasn't the first time she had read a situation wrong. Or a person. If there had been a laugh left in her now, Justine would've bellowed at her own stupidity. The only thing left to her was to make the best of a poor

situation. At least she was getting darn good at that. "Well, everybody out," she said, forcing cheer.

"Who did you say told you about this place?"

Justine gave a small laugh. "I could've predicted you'd ask that, Mother. I really could."

"Well, who, then?"

"Just a friend I worked with once. Her grandparents used to lease it during hunting season. She spent Christmas with them

one year."

"You must have done something terrible to her," injected Agnes, who was sitting in the back seat very much under protest.

Justine sighed with a forbearance she had learned over time. Agnes Hale had been part and parcel of her household for more than twelve years and very often required as much, if not more, attention than the children. As the family's senior

member, Agnes felt her place was in the front seat at all times. That Pauline had beat her to it today left no room for appeasement. Sitting ramrod straight between the children, Agnes had been derisive and nitpicking since they'd driven away from the motel earlier that morning.

“The house can't be as awful as it appears, Mother Hale.”

“It looks pretty bad from

here," said eleven-year-old Pip.

"It looks spooky to me," added Judy Ann.

"It's just all the shade around the house." Justine spoke soothingly, knowing the eight-year-old was easily upset. Judy Ann was a child who needed a secure anchor in life; she thrived on sameness. Changes in routine frightened her. Justine had found it necessary to present a calm facade in front of Judy Ann even

when she herself pulsed with insecurity and anxiety. Like now.

“Look at those grand old trees, darling. It’s lovely here. And that porch—it wraps all the way around the house, just as the agent said. Imagine sitting there on summer evenings in rocking chairs, watching the sun go down—”

Agnes Hale thumped her walking cane on Justine’s shoulder. “Imagine the chiggers and mosquitoes, maybe even

bats.”

Justine held her tongue. Agnes had never in her life seen a bat outside the horror movies she was addicted to on late-night television.

“Now Agnes,” cooed Pauline in defense of her only daughter. “Justine is doing the best she can under the circumstances. Let’s not fault her too soon. If this property is the best she could do, we’ll manage just fine.”

“My mother, my champion,”

Justine said, knowing full well her mother's support was thinly given, wouldn't last, and was voiced chiefly to antagonize Agnes. "How about all of you hold off on the criticism until we've seen the interior, then you can let loose. I was told there are lovely fireplaces in every room."

"We didn't mean to criticize you, dear." Pauline cut a look at her archenemy. "Did we, Agnes?"

"I certainly didn't. I can't speak for you, of course."

Justine opened her door to let in a breeze, then began rummaging through her purse.

Pauline arched her eyebrow. "Don't tell me—you've lost the key."

"I wasn't sent a key, Mother. I'm looking for the two little bombs I made last night. I thought I'd let you and Mother Hale each have one, just a little something to occupy your time."

Justine found the crumpled pack of cigarettes, dug one out, lit it, and inhaled deeply.

Agnes poked her daughter-in-law's shoulder. "You know, Justine, I think it's precisely those kinds of remarks that made Philip leave you. Not to mention your smoking. Such a filthy habit."

Pauline smirked. "He left you, too, Agnes."

"Well, of course. A man has to cut the umbilical cord

sometime!"

"Aged forty is *cutting* it a bit thin, don't you think?"

"Enough!" Justine said, grinding the cigarette in the ashtray. "Everybody out! Right this minute, and not another word. Pip, you let down the tailgate and unload the suitcases. Judy Ann, go with Mother Hale to the porch steps. Both of you can sit there in the shade. Mother, you come with me. We'll inspect the house. We

need to have an idea of the layout to tell the movers where to put the furniture.”

“If they can find the place,” said Agnes, sotto voce, refusing to budge. She hugged to her thin chest the straw bag in which she kept her treasures: contest newsletters, postcards, stamps, pens, and pencils.

Justine dispensed one of her looks. “They had the same map we did.”

“Sorry,” the old woman

uttered with a little toss of her head, which had the effect of making the apology meaningless.

Ignoring the sense of dismay that was overtaking her, Justine got out of the car and stretched. “Just smell that Alabama air! It’s going to be good for us here. I can feel it. Think positive everybody. Look how big that house is. We can each have our own room. Why, it seems to go on forever.”

"I don't want my own room," said Judy Ann. "I wanna sleep with Gram like I always have."

"Well, okay," Justine said to keep the peace. "But only until the newness wears off the house."

"Newness wore off that house about two hundred years ago," said Pauline, delivering her opinion with a delicate sniff of disapproval.

"I don't mind that it's old, Mother. It's nice to know

there're a few things in this world that last. There's a stained-glass transom over the door. That's unusual, don't you think?"

"You don't want to know what's running through my mind right now, so don't ask me what I think."

"But, you'll tell me...all in good time?"

Pauline issued an aristocratic snort. "Philip ruined you. You used to be such a

sweet child.”

“I used to be a lot of things. The past is finished. Let’s leave it alone.”

“You can’t go on forever keeping your emotions bottled up, you know.”

“Mother, my emotions at the moment are focused on coping with the present.”

Justine turned away and faced the house. The agent’s letter had made her picture a once elegant home fallen on

hard times—sort of like herself. Not that she had ever been elegant in the exacting sense of that word. But she sure knew about falling on hard times. The greatest appeal about the old house had been the price of the lease. It was cheap enough that she could assure all of them a roof over their heads for a year or more while she got a computer programing business up and running.

Thinking of work, the goals

she had set, made Justine's stomach tighten. She could do it. She had to—failure was not an option. She brushed aside the inner dread before it overwhelmed her and gave her attention to details of the house. The porches leaned, the roof was patched, the screened door was off, propped against the wall. Windows were wide and tall, bracketed on each side by faded green shutters. Had she arrived at dusk she might have

thought it sinister because of the way it was secluded so, in shade and shrub and weed.

But it was a brightly lit June morning: birds chattered, flies buzzed, and squirrels abounded. Now that she was out of the car and looking at it head on, the house, for all its exterior faults, looked as if it were welcoming them.

Pauline locked her arm through her daughter's as they walked up the crooked stone

path.

"Now, Justine. Philip's leaving was not your fault. You shouldn't think that. Just be thankful he cut a deuce while you're still young. If you're pleasing and appealing, you can always get another husband."

"Oh, I'm sure I can, Mother. Just think what I have to offer. A smart-aleck eleven-year-old son, a frightened eight-year-old daughter...stretch marks. My mother lives with me, not to

mention my ex-mother-in-law. I'll just tell the first man who throws himself at me that I got Agnes in the divorce settlement and you as my inheritance. He'd be so thrilled, he'd swoon."

"Men don't swoon, dear. That was Victorian women. I only meant you ought to lose five pounds. Don't be such a cynic. If a new man comes into your life, why, Agnes and I will just fade into the woodwork."

"You and Agnes, fading?"

Justine laughed. "That'll be the day."

"I do expect that my stay with you will only be temporary, until—"

"I've heard that rant before. Agnes said it more than twelve years ago."

"Put her in a nursing home."

"Mother! I couldn't do that—to either of you—ever."

"Of course, not me, I still have my wits about me."

"So does Agnes."

"That's debatable."

"Mother...you *promised*."

"I said I would be kind to her face. I didn't make any promises about behind her back."

Justine sucked in a breath. It was fruitless to continue the conversation. Her mother had tunnel vision when it came to Agnes.

They climbed the porch steps. Pauline tried the doorknob. "Locked."

Justine cupped her hands

and peered through a windowpane into a wide hall.
“I’m sure the key must be around somewhere.”

“Are you sure you weren’t supposed to pick up the key from the estate agent?”

“Positive. Maybe the back door is open. I’ll go around.”

The windows along the side of the house were huge, with many panes and the look of French doors, but no handles were evident. Justine pushed,

but the only thing they gave back was a full-color reflection of herself. She stepped away for a better view.

She brushed hair the color of ripened wheat from her forehead, then touched under her eyes with her fingertips. No lines to speak of yet. A miracle, considering her disrupted life and the hassles of the past months. Young. *Pfffft*. Thirty-six didn't feel young. Anyway, every woman knew aging started in

the arms.

She held her arms out. That's where the flab started. You could almost judge a woman's age by how long she wore her sleeves. No matter how ageless the face, after the age of thirty, one could add a year for every inch of sleeve. Justine flapped her arms, studying the tender undersides in the glass. Small miracles still abounded. Her's didn't jiggle... yet.

Another reflection suddenly mingled with her own. It was brown-haired and dark-eyed, with features sharpened one notch past handsome, and it wore a mustache. The reflection was grinning.

Mortified, Justine lowered her arms and spun about. The man was standing in a straggly bed of blooming jonquils as if he had just sprung up through the earth among them, an aberration of nature. His

expression was that of a somnolent wolf, yet she was conscious that in that one lazy glance he was assessing her clothes, calculating her age and weight, and had probably guessed what she ate for breakfast.

“Don’t stop on account of me,” he said, and went back to grinning.

“Who’re you, the local Peeping Tom?”

A gleam leaped into his

eyes. "Come now. Be nice. And if you're wondering, you'll do."

"I wasn't wondering. I was —never mind what I was doing. This is private property. You're trespassing, unless—" Her heart sank. "Are you the estate agent?"

"Nope, your nearest neighbor. That is, I am if you're Mrs Justine Hale." He held up a set of keys and dangled them. "For the house. Jim Kessler dropped them by, asked me to

see that you got them. I heard car doors slam. Figured it was you."

Justine was at once uneasy. The man was made of rough material, a man who used brawn to do his job. She suspected his work kept him out of doors since he was well tanned for so early in the summer. A ditch-digger or a farmer. Most assuredly a jackass, sneaking up on her like that. And she could tell right off he was the kind of man she

didn't like. He had the look of a man who hoarded superiority like a Scrooge hoards pennies.

Still, the admiring way he was looking at her kept her sharp, standing straight, tummy in, and shoulders back.

"Tucker Highsmith," he said, and it was a real drawl, so that Justine knew at once that he was generations and genes full of Alabama. He gave a mock bow, "At your service."

Justine latched on to his

innuendo and wondered just how much of her background the estate agent had passed on to Tucker Highsmith. She had not said much, beyond the fact of how many members her family numbered, but Kessler *had* called her references. Who knew what one of them had let slip? Divorcees, she had learned to her dismay, were considered fair game for a roving eye.

Poker stiff, she said, "Thank you for bringing the keys."

Stepping to the edge of the porch, she held out her hand. He dropped them into her palm. They were huge, rusty, and old-fashioned.

“Justine! Oh, there you are,” Pauline said, as she came round the house. She beamed a smile at Tucker. “Why, hello there.”

“Mother, this is Tucker Highsmith, our neighbor. He’s brought our keys. My mother, Mrs Gates.”

“Just call me Pauline,

everyone does.”

Tucker smiled warmly. “Nice to meet you.”

“And...so nice to meet you.”

Justine dismissed Tucker Highsmith with a “thank you”, grabbed her mother’s arm and ushered her toward the front of the house without a backward glance. “That was disgusting, Mother. You practically drooled.”

“He’s quite attractive. I love men who don’t part their hair,

when they have any, that is. Goodness, Mr Highsmith didn't look the kind of man one trifles with, did he? He reminds me of somebody, but I can't think who."

"You can't judge a man by the way he parts his hair. And, you've never met a man of Tucker Highsmith's ilk in your life, unless it was a gardener."

"Oh, no dear, our gardeners were always ethnic. Gardening is a talent. As far as how I judge

a man, by his hair or otherwise, I did pretty well sizing up your father. He never left me to go off to some godforsaken island just so he could shave his head and wear saffron robes like—”

“That’s enough, Mother.”

“Well, I did try to talk you out of marrying Philip, didn’t I? He was always so stodgy.”

“I loved him, Mother. Can’t you understand that?”

“Actually, no. I always thought you married him

because he was the first man you slept with. If only you had studied European art or the romance languages—but no—with you it was math and computers. Subjects like that do not put you in the path of sexy, interesting men.”

“I don’t believe we’re having this conversation.”

“There you go again, Justine. Making me feel guilty. I feel such a headache coming on.”

"You timed it just right.

There's the moving van. Do you think you can hold off on headaches until we get settled?"

Pauline sighed. "One can only hope."

"I don't have the luxury of hope. I have to deal in realities."

"Mr Highsmith looked real enough to me. He isn't married, you know."

"What are you now, a seer?" Justine handed her mother the keys. "Go unlock the

door. I'll direct the movers."

"His shirt had laundry creases. No woman in her right mind sends wash 'n' wear shirts to a commercial laundry. So he's single."

"Mother," said Justine, vexed, "I'm still reeling from the effects of one failed marriage. I'm not interested in putting myself through that a second time."

"Yes, but you *thought* you were happily married. And

people who've been happily married always—”

“Save your convoluted philosophy for the children, Mother. They understand it better than I do.”

“Justine, dear,” Pauline said, placing a restraining hand on her daughter’s arm. “You need a man. I never thought I’d live to see the day I’d believe in that old adage, but in your case it’s true. You’re better at life when coupled.”

“Coupled?”

Pauline wiggled her eyebrows. “You know what I mean. I just want you to know, I won’t stand in your way. In fact, I intend to encourage you.”

Justine turned away quickly. Hot tears came up behind her eyes. Even her own mother was doing it! Thinking, suggesting, that she could not make it in life without a man.

It was true that she had leaned heavily on Philip. But he

had encouraged her to depend entirely upon him; he wanted it, insisted! Now, of course she saw through that. It was his way of proving to himself that he was a man above others.

In the end all he had proven was that he couldn't bear up under the responsibility of a mortgage, two children, work—a classic case of biting off more than he could chew. He overloaded. His circuits went haywire. He was hoisted on his

own petard. When he had crumbled, her entire world had crumbled along with his.

Thinking of Philip caused a churning hurt and anger in Justine's stomach.

If only it had been another woman.

Or even another man!

She could've battled that and won!

But how does a woman fight a man who has decided to abandon his family in favor of

becoming a monk so he could wear saffron robes, chant "om", and go live in Southeast Asia?

There wasn't a single article in any magazine that told a woman how to cope with that! Impotency, herpes, how to argue effectively—all topics well covered. One thing those women's rags never delved into was revenge. How could they miss that a woman needed revenge, craved it! Justine sniffed. She got back at them.

She had canceled all of her subscriptions, except Martha Stewart—but only until the subscription ran out. The satisfaction had lasted only moments.

While her world collapsed, she had tried not to think or feel, pretending strength and calm she had not really possessed. She was still pretending.

She knew the score. She was only accountable to her dreams in the dark lonely

recesses of the bed she no longer shared with anyone.

Pauline's words threaded their way far into Justine's brain: "You're better at life when coupled."

Deep down in her soul Justine knew she was a woman who thrived on loving and being loved, a woman who longed to be held, enclosed in strong arms, partnered in life and safe from the outer world. But a stubbornness that was entirely

Justine Hale kept her from admitting it, to herself—or anyone else.

She lifted her hand to greet the movers and the image of Tucker Highsmith's lazy sardonic grin crossed her mind's eye. She blinked, erasing his features.



Lottie Roberts was beside herself with excitement. Inside

the old house she flitted from one window to the next, anxious for the new tenants to come inside and unpack. It was always wonderful to peek in drawers, handle the untold and modern treasures people brought with them. She hoped they had a television. Lottie adored television.

The previous tenants used to eat lunch accompanied by the *Tennessee Ernie Ford Show with Molly Bee*. To this day she

could still hum a few bars of "Sixteen Tons." And in the afternoon she had watched *Edge of Night and Dark Shadows*. Lottie liked electric can openers too. Tucker Highsmith had one. The whirring sound reminded her of *The Green Hornet* on radio. *The Green Hornet* used to give her goose bumps.

At least, she imagined she erupted in goose bumps. It was terrible not to have any flesh.

She had form, but it wasn't anything a body could actually see—not that she hadn't attempted to extend herself. She had. Dozens of times. She had tried everything she could think of from mustard packs and herb teas to strengthening jelly...until the barley ran out.

Thus far, nothing had worked.

Not even the family Bible had been of help and she had spent hundreds of hours scouring it, especially John 11:1-12 to see

how Lazarus had done it.

Unfortunately Lazarus had the help of a higher nature. Being in the situation she was, sort of betwixt and between, Lottie didn't think it behooved her to draw attention to herself from *that* quarter.

Not that she thought even for a minute that she'd sinned enough to be thrust into Eternal Fire, but you never knew. There had been that incident with the Union soldier, howsoever, she

hadn't realized God was on their side until the North had won the war, and by then it was too late to undo the deed.

Of course, she never missed saying her prayers, God-fearing woman that she was. She just never asked for anything, most especially for an end to her condition, seeing as with Him it could go either way. Early on, she'd figured it best just to manage getting back on her own.

Anyway, doing for herself had always been her long suit. She reckoned that being strong willed was simply bred into her.

That had always been a thing said of her. Folks from miles around used to joke about it. "You got a mule that won't pull a plow," they said, "let it spend a day with Lottie Roberts. Once the fool animal sees what true balkiness is, it'll be so shamed, it'll harness itself to the plow and bellow for the farmer to step

into the traces."

Lottie was counting on her will and determination to see her through. Only thing was, once extended and fleshed out again, she would have to know enough of the modern world to get by.

Some modern things frightened her. Automobiles, for instance. You had to be closed up in them and they went so fast. She'd gone off with a tenant once, in a 1917 Oakland, if she recollects right. She had

felt certain she was going to be killed twice over. Her heart—or the region where she imagined her heart to be—had lunged and pounded so hard she'd thought the rattling might give her presence away.

She had been building up her courage to try it again when another war started and the tenant had gone off to fight.

Like her own Elmer, the tenant had never returned. Lottie sighed. She missed Elmer

something fierce.

Oh, it had been so long since the old house had had tenants. And this bunch looked a mixed bag. Surely, among them was one who would be her friend.

The front door pushed open with a bang and a boy came barreling into the house. He raced down the hall, banging open doors.

Lottie bristled and shot up to the ceiling, out of harm's way.

That's one scamp needs

manners taught!

Next through the door was a slender, elegantly clad woman with silver hair shaped into a perfectly rendered chignon. Lottie surmised the woman was about her own age. Well, not her age now, but before.

A blonde-haired girl hesitated on the threshold until she was given a push by an elderly woman with a cane. Lottie gasped.

The old lady was dressed in

various shades of purple and mauve and had tightly permed curls. *Purple* permed curls.

Lottie had never seen hair like it. Trailing cobwebs, she moved down from the ceiling and whirled about the old woman for a better look. She wanted to touch the hair, but didn't dare. The woman hobbled into the parlor and sat in a fiddle-back chair.

Lottie plopped down on the matching stool and stared. She

spared a glance for a younger woman who came in and began inspecting the room, but it was the purple hair that kept her enthralled.

“I swear! It’s cold in here,” complained Agnes. “And look.” She shuddered, pointing at Lottie. “Dust and spider webs are literally falling from the ceiling!”

“You don’t exercise enough, Mother Hale,” suggested Justine. Stepping into the wide

hall was like stepping into a dusty, cool fortress. "I think it's quite pleasant. And the agent was right about spaciousness—this house is huge."

Agnes snorted. "I guess I know cold when I feel cold. Pip, dear," she said, as he came racing into the room, "open those French doors, and let in some of that nice warm breeze."

"Mom," he said breathlessly. "There's no bathroom."

"Of course there's a

bathroom."

It's on a corner of the back porch, said Lottie, trying to be helpful. It's a good bathroom. The same tenant who owned the Oakland installed it.

No one paid Lottie any mind. That was another problem with being in the state she was in, she thought with a twinge of disgust. No one could hear her. The only way she had of getting a body's attention was to mingle with the other's aura and sort of

make suggestions. Sometimes that worked and sometimes not.

"I looked in every room, Mom. Ask Judy Ann, if you don't believe me."

"There're all sorts of nooks and crannies in the house, darling, you just missed it, is all."

"He didn't," announced Pauline, arriving on Pip's heels. "I couldn't find it myself. I'm in a terrible fix, too."

"Are you?" Agnes smiled wickedly, voice full of sly hope.

"Diarrhea?"

Pauline scowled at Agnes.

Justine threw up her hands.

"Please, you two, save your energy for unpacking. The movers are bringing in the beds. Mother, can you hold on? I'll locate the pot in a minute."

"No, I can't hold on. I begged you to stop at that last gas station, remember? But no—"

Justine sighed. "All right. It's your bedstead they're bringing in, Mother Hale. Tell them which

room.”

Agnes beamed and moved with alacrity, cane bouncing. Pauline protested. “She’ll pick the finest room for herself!”

“Which is it to be, Mother, mover guidance or an accident in your pants?”

“The bathroom. But I must say, you’ve become exceedingly vulgar.”

“I don’t know how else to protect myself.”

“From what?”

"If you have to ask..." warned Justine, patience growing thin as a taut wire.

"If only your father were alive," began Pauline, but the fierce gleam in her daughter's eyes caused her to stop in midsentence.

Lottie had taken in the whole of the conversation, observing Pauline's air of disdain and Agnes's peevishness. The outcome settled it in her mind that the one called Justine

suffered a peck of trouble at the hands of the two old biddies.

Since the house was Lottie's own, she thought it did behoove her to rise to hostess duties. She left her perch on the stool and hovered near Justine.

With Pauline following, Justine went off down the wide hall. She couldn't say how she knew the bathroom was on the back porch. She just seemed to know. She put it down to an obscure, perverse intuition.

"Oh, dear!" said Pauline.

"At least it's not in the backyard."

It used to be, said Lottie. *Miserable that was, too, on a cold blustery day.*

"Look at the tub," Pauline insisted. "A bear could bathe in it."

The huge, claw-footed, high-sided affair was constructed of iron and porcelain, draped with cobwebs and years of dust. Its bottom was filled with

windblown debris of leaves and moss.

Pauline took a tentative step closer.

"It looks like a bear *has* bathed in it! And that toilet ..." she said of the monstrosity of iron, her voice trailing off in justifiable dismay.

"It's nothing a little Comet cleanser won't cure," Justine said succinctly and closed the door upon her mother's expression of distaste.

Seeing the set of Justine's mouth as she turned, Lottie surmised that the bathroom was not considered up to snuff. That had been the complaint from more than one prospective tenant. Lottie couldn't understand it. All one had to do was turn a valve and water shot out. Some folk were downright unappreciative. Mayhap they ought to spend washdays at the working end of a pump handle. A spigot would look mighty good

after that!

Justine lingered a moment on the back porch, part of which was enclosed by tattered strips of latticed wood. She had a view to the rear of the yard where a number of sheds leaned precariously into one another, casualties of the elements ...of life. She, too, was a casualty, but unlike the sheds she had no other support to lean upon. And she was supposed to be the glue that held them all together.

Dear God, but she had never felt so vulnerable, so lost, so unable to cope.

“We’re bringing in the fridge, ma’am,” one of the movers called out to her. “The other lady said you’d tell us where to put it.”

“Yes, I’ll be right there.”

She gave a last brief glance at the backyard. She could see no other dwellings. How nearby, she wondered, did her neighbor Tucker Highsmith live?

Then, catching her train of thought, Justine moved purposefully back into the house.

