

# Wide Plank Porches

A Novel

Laura Frances



Lost Sock Publishing

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Lost Sock Publishing  
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For Shantel and Michele  
Thank you for introducing me to  
the One I'd been looking for my entire life.

I'm forever grateful.



## Chapter One

### Charlotte

According to my sister, Purdy, Mama ushered me into this world with a glass of chardonnay and a wistful sigh. I imagined it was more like a shot of liquor and an all-out hissy fit, if she was as much like me as everyone said. But, the Parkers had an image to protect and it trumped the truth every time.

Taken from me before I could imprint her face into my memory, I never heard Mama's story first hand. Her gentle ways faded into our family history before I had the chance to tell her I was in desperate need of someone like her, someone like me.

Parker women were known for three things: southern graces, storytelling, and sassiness. The second to some, would be called outright lying. The last being something outsiders seemed to find unusual for women with such a gentle upbringing. Outsiders of course, being Northerners—or Yankees rather, if none were in listening range—which all Parkers had been raised to despise, but I had married.

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The scent of magnolia and fresh cut grass placed me on alert as I pulled up to the guard gate at the Carolina Country Club. I longed to be in my own garden, planting the summer bulbs that had been delivered earlier in the week—a small remnant of the creative girl I used to be. Instead, I was doing my duty. Giving Purdy the attention she so readily demanded, so she would leave me alone to pursue my dream of opening my own flower shop. A dream I kept hidden from her.

The security guard nodded at me from inside the little window, “Good morning, Mrs. Johnston,” and pushed the button to lift the gate for my entry. Beyond the stacked stone walls that rolled from the gate post down to the grass, red buds nudged through their winter hiding spots and filled the trees that lined the drive. Rows of azaleas planted closely together created a blanket of pink and white beneath the trees. The beds then dipped to blue periwinkle flowers, hedged by monkey grass that overflowed to the curb.

The eighteenth green sat to my right, sculpted and bustling with golfers taking their turn at wrapping up a fine morning. A life of ease. One I supposedly shared but longed to be away from. Just the rules of it, of course. I didn’t mind the amenities. I turned onto the winding brick drive that followed the slight curve of the fairway, stopping at the valet.

I stepped out of the car and dangled my keys.

“Good day, Mrs. Johnston.” Reid Morley winked as he rushed to my side. He took the keys, holding them and my hand for an inappropriately long time. I glanced away. His white loafers were scuffed along the edges, something I’d been trained to note. I hated myself for doing so.

“Did your mama see those baskets I dropped by the house for the garden club?” Surely, all he needed was a reminder that I was his mother’s age. He was sixteen for goodness’ sake.

“Um. Yes ma’am. She did. Thanks.” His face reddened.

I nodded as he let my hand drop. From the front steps, I could hear Purdy’s shrill voice cackling with the other women inside. I

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sighed, then smiled a wide smile and pushed myself forward, into the lion's den.

"Well. Look who decided to show up." Purdy screeched across the room. She sat at the large back table, with a handful of other women. Her graying blonde hair was pulled into a tight bun, making her dour features even more severe than usual. The steel blue Parker eyes narrowed to penetrate me to the core. Purdy made her point then huffed as she turned to the group, resituating the linen napkin on her lap, and pulling down the hem of her Chanel jacket.

I made my way around the exquisitely decorated table, kissing and apologizing for my tardiness. The smell of expensive perfume mingled with the tantalizing scents of rack of lamb being prepared in the nearby kitchen. The ladies were overdressed as usual considering the club's recent policy of "coat optional." Enough Chanel, Prada, and Versace surrounded that table to start a small boutique. I was fully aware that each one of them prepared for today through painstaking hours—as they did each week. Dressing to perfection was competitive sport to this crowd.

I sat down and turned toward Purdy. "You know, that Mercedes you talked me into isn't the most reliable thing. I swear it almost died its seventh death coming out of the driveway."

All eyes turned to Purdy, gauging her reaction. "Oh, pooh. That thing's the best decision you've made in months. You look just precious driving it through town, Charlotte."

The other women nodded and hummed amongst themselves in agreement as I wondered why on earth my tardiness had been let off the hook. Purdy's gaze diverted to the entrance and I soon realized my reprieve. Maimie Cramer stood at the doorway, a look of reluctance overwhelming her impeccable ensemble. She smiled sweetly as she crossed the room, as if to beg for mercy, and took the last remaining seat—beside Purdy.

"I'm so sorry I'm late, girls," Maimie offered. "It's been the most unusual morning."

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“Oh, I should say so.” Purdy didn’t hesitate to go for the kill. “We’ve been worried sick about you and your family all week, Maimie. I couldn’t stand the wait to see you. How are things coming together after, you know, the news?”

Maimie fidgeted with her purse, moving it to the floor, then to her lap, and back again. “Oh, there’s no news, really. Justin and his college roommates got into a silly little mess, but you know how that goes. I’m sure it was blown way out of proportion around here.” Maimie’s eyes flitted around the table as if to avoid direct eye contact with Purdy.

“Well, now that’s not what I heard.” Purdy laughed, her gaze sweeping the table with eyebrows raised. “But, it’s not really my place to say. I’m just glad I don’t have grown children running amuck all over such a fine university campus and ruining my good name. Don’t you agree, ladies?”

The women at the table nodded their heads, as if on cue. I searched my mind for a way to change the subject. But, as always happened in moments of extreme awkwardness, my arsenal of small talk was empty.

Maimie straightened herself for the battle, “What, pray tell, did you hear, Purdy?” Her words were simply a dare to someone like my sister.

“I don’t think I’d better say.” Purdy raised her voice. “I mean, drug overdoses, stolen bank accounts. I wouldn’t want to spread any rumors. It’s a pathetic turn of fate for such a fine young man, Maimie. How do you even sleep at night, knowing what a wretched waste of time he’s been?” Purdy wiped her mouth with her napkin as if satisfied by a meal even though we’d yet to eat.

Maimie’s mouth fell open, while the rest of the table sucked in a breath. Purdy had crossed the line.

“Not that it’s your fault.” Purdy’s voice almost sang as she retreated a bit. “Of course not. All children are selfish parasites, just waiting to take advantage of their parent’s generosity.”

The ladies nodded in agreement like a row of ridiculous bobble head dolls wiggling to the vibration of someone else’s movement.

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“Some parent’s slack just allows them a quicker road than others,” Purdy said.

I jerked my head toward Purdy, furious at her little game. I wanted desperately to do something, but didn’t know what or how. I always felt so helpless around the Parkers and completely inept—a fact that got on my very last nerve. Why had Maimie come knowing what awaited her? But then again, not coming was often worse and could result in a much deeper wound.

Maimie took the napkin she’d laid in her lap and began refolding it. Some of the ladies had drawn their hands to their mouth in shock, as others watched with a smug smile. I wondered if they’d been thinking—but didn’t have the gall to say—the exact words that fell from Purdy’s hateful mouth.

I shifted in my seat. “Well, I think it’s just a small bump in the road for Justin, Maimie. You know, one of those college things. We’ve all been there. I’m sure you have it under control.”

Purdy’s head snapped in my direction. “Oh, you would think so.”

My stomach tightened at the judgmental look on Purdy’s face. Was the comment meant for Maimie or me? My mind wandered to my own daughter. Janie was finishing her sophomore year and returned home only a few days before for spring break. Had Janie ever been to the types of parties Justin was rumored to frequent? Did Purdy know something?

The waiter hovered around the table, filling water glasses and flirting with the attention-starved wives. Maimie’s eyes filled with tears as she lowered her gaze. I prayed she wouldn’t give Purdy the satisfaction of crying in front of the group.

Purdy’s hand reached across the table, as if a peace offering. “Oh, now. Don’t do that. Crying isn’t going to make it any better, Darlin’. You’ve got to buck up and get that boy in line. Besides, I’m sure you’re not the only one around here trying to hide something.” Purdy’s eyes scanned the table, looking for her next victim. They settled for a moment on me, then diverted to the larger group.

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Maimie's phone rang, a ring-tone I didn't recognize at first, but decided was one of those praise-and-worship songs. Purdy's lips drew into a tight line, annoyed at the fact that someone arrived at lunch without turning off her cell. A flurry of manicured hands dipped into their purses, double-checking that their ringers were off.

Maimie left the table, and crossed the dining room to the terrace. Purdy rolled her eyes and huffed.

I leaned toward my sister, "Really, Purdy. Do you have to be so obvious? Give her a break. None of us is perfect."

"It's just girl talk, Charlotte. Don't get your panties in a wad. She knew it was coming. It's what we do. I'm just keeping it interesting around this stuffy old place." Purdy winked at the ladies. Which of them would offer herself for sacrifice next week? She turned back to me. "And don't lecture me about perfection. I don't need a lesson in manners from you."

"I swear, if you weren't my sister . . ."

"You'd what? You should thank the good Lord I'm your sister, Charlotte. My goodness, if anyone needs a watch dog, it's you." Purdy flipped a stray hair to the side and laughed.

A snicker from the other side of the table alerted me to the sinister fact that I was being prepped as next week's victim. My mind raced with thoughts of what could be going on. Folding my napkin and placing it on my chair as I stood, I excused myself from the table. Then, instead of heading to the ladies room as I intended, I found myself at the valet stand watching Reid jump the fence border in what seemed a vain attempt to impress as he fetched my Mercedes.

As my door was held open, a couple entered the club for lunch and I could hear Purdy's voice boom from inside, "Well, good gracious. How long does a potty break take?"

I slid into the driver's seat and pushed the pedal to the floor. Glancing in my rear view mirror, I couldn't help but grin at the rubber mark I left along my escape route.

## Chapter Two

### Janie

I knew it was no biggie, but I couldn't stop pacing my room. Stopping every few feet to scribble my random thoughts on a piece of scrap paper, I knew I had to come up with the right way to tell Mama. Aunt Purdy had already informed me of the Sunday lunch coming up next weekend—as if—and I knew I had to take care of it before then. The least I could do was to make sure Mama knew first. But, it had to be just the right way—and super-fast.

It was risky, coming home with a secret like this in a town where women suspecting anything were like bloodhounds on a bone. Especially Purdy. I had to do it soon, maybe today. Like ripping off a Band-Aid—painful but necessary.

The smell of burning coffee drew me into the kitchen just as it did every morning for as long as I could remember. Mama could be so careless. Steam rose from the glass pot as I filled it full of water and liquid detergent to soak in the sink. It's a wonder the

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entire thing wasn't black by now. Funny how it was one of the smells that reminded me of home.

Mama's car idling in the driveway earlier that morning was a sure sign she would be occupied with her Monday lunch with the gaggle of hens she called friends. Why she put herself through such torture was beyond me. As I'd watched her drive off, all I could think was that she needed to get a backbone and learn to say no.

A flash of lime green caught my eye as my best friend, Jenn, rode past the house in her Corolla and parked along the street. Living just a few doors down, Purdy would hate seeing such a clunker out in front of the family home, in broad daylight. Not to mention the "devil music" she was blaring as loud as possible. I swear I think Jenn saved that song just for Purdy. I'd never heard her play it anywhere else. I was sure I would hear about it later.

Slipping the ragged piece of paper under my mattress, I pulled the hand-sewn quilt further down on one side so it wouldn't be noticed. I rushed down the back staircase and out onto the slate patio, which led into the garden. An old, crooked swing still hung from the tree house in the back corner near the shed.

Jenn and I spent our lives in my backyard, chasing fireflies, painting fingernails and toenails, and discussing boys. The worn seat on the faded white swing served as a reminder of the many times I'd comforted Jenn over her never-ending family problems. Between her parent's incessant fighting and Jenn's rebellious ways, the environment she lived in was intense. With no siblings, we were as close as sisters. Sisters who were total opposites, that is.

The old oak that witnessed life at the home since the war of Northern aggression—as my Grandpa Parker called it—seemed to lean in to the conversation as we shared. Its sturdy waist and outstretched arms were a comforting reminder of home, grounding me.

"I got here as quick as I could." Jenn's auburn hair blew in wavy lines across her face as she rushed toward the tree house swing. She lifted her hand to push the strands aside and shaded her chestnut colored eyes against the sun.

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A weak smile was all I could offer as my stomach churned and I suddenly felt nauseated at the smell of raw fertilizer coming from Mama's gardening shed. The warmth of the spring sun lay on my shoulders but inside I felt chilled. Jenn pulled me into a hug as she sat beside me, then pulled back to search my eyes.

"Are you sure, Janie? You've taken the test and everything? The blue line one? You saw a blue line?" Her eyebrows furrowed.

"Yeah, Jenn. I took the test. Five of them, in fact. Five blue lines. I'm definitely pregnant." I pulled at the peeling white paint chips on the swing's arm.

"Wow. Well. That's good, though. Now you know, right?"

"Yeah, I know. It's good." I was relieved she agreed. I leaned my head on her shoulder. Jenn stroked my hair as I stroked my stomach.

The news wasn't terrible. A possible bad decision on my part, and maybe not the best timing, but I couldn't turn my back on the result. A baby. That was a beautiful thing, right? I was dying for someone else to care about it. Dying for someone to tell me what to do next. Precarious for someone in my circumstance.

"You're going to be fine, Janie. Really. And we can still move to Myrtle Beach this summer. I've already talked to my uncle about getting us jobs. He's fixin' to open another restaurant right on the new boardwalk they're building. This doesn't have to change a thing." Jenn rubbed my back and leaned to touch heads.

My eyes welled up with the relief of having her in my life. "Thanks, Jenn. I knew you'd make me feel normal. I mean, it's not like I'm the first girl my age to have this happen. It's not even a big deal anymore."

"I know, right? I've even heard of a guy you can go to. Someone over in Malton who takes care of these things."

My breath caught in my throat as if I'd been reamed in the middle. Sitting straight up, I pushed Jenn away from me. How could she bring up something like that, knowing all the hours I'd put into the campus Pro-life campaign? She knew how I felt about everything. Especially this.

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“Jenn! I could never. I’m not—there is no way I can do something like that. I wasn’t raised like that. It’s just . . . wrong, Jenn. It’s wrong.” Tears fell faster than I could control as I stumbled to get off the swing and away from the thought. I wanted to run. But, without Jenn. . . What if my family reacted the same way? I’d be completely alone.

“Janie. You’re about to finish your sophomore year at State. You start your internship in the fall. We’re moving to Myrtle in, like, two months. You’ve got your entire life ahead of you. You can’t. You just can’t. It’s not right—for the baby, I mean. You can’t be a mother now.” Jenn’s voice broke and then trailed off as she walked around the tree as if searching for a way to get me to agree.

“Right for the baby. Yeah. You’re bubbling over with concern.” I wished I’d kept my secret to myself.

“Well, what if . . . what if there’s something wrong with it, Janie? What then?”

“What does that mean? Why would there be something wrong with it? Oh. I see where you’re going with this. Because I did something ‘bad,’ I get something bad. Is that it? More of your ‘balance of good and evil’ bit?”

“Well, it’s true, you know. Whether you admit it or not. What goes around comes around. You do something negative, something negative has to happen to you. The universe has to balance out.”

“Since when did you see sex as negative? Where’s the whole ‘it’s my body and I can do what I want’ attitude? Pregnancies aren’t automatically bad, Jenn.” Did I know how she truly felt about anything? Maybe all that posturing was for show, as Mama always said.

Jenn shrugged and rolled her eyes. “Just because you don’t buy into what I believe doesn’t make it untrue.”

Ditto. I’d been raised in the church. I knew right from wrong. Even if I didn’t understand all the rest of it. “And, what about what you’re suggesting I do? That isn’t bad? This is more than a thing to

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be taken care of, Jenn. It's a baby. It's my baby." The last words echoed in my ears.

Jenn crossed her arms and widened her stance. She tilted her head looking at me, incredulous. "You're twenty. Do what you want."

"Maybe I'll do what's right." I should've known we'd have opposite opinions.

A board creaking in the tree house above caused my entire body to jerk. I peered upward, panicked.

"I've got to go," Jenn said with tears in her eyes. She hurried across the lawn as I reached for her but missed. I glanced up to see two brown eyes open wide in disbelief, and then shut tight.

Zee was hiding.

\* \* \*

I rushed to the worn ladder rungs Daddy hammered directly into the tree so many years before. Stopping as I caught my finger on the splintered top of the bottom rung, I thought of the many times I'd raced Jenn and Zee to the top. Summer days that felt like weeks.

I took each step with care, making sure the planks still held, and climbed to the first platform: the lookout. It was the last open space before the next level, which was completely enclosed: the hideout. The higher up I moved, the more cramped the space became. Zee snickered as I moved closer and I realized how much I'd missed him. A child still, regardless of the fact that we were the same age.

I crouched at the door and knocked. Six knocks. Two knocks. One knock. Our secret signal. The door creaked open, then closed, then open.

I peeked in to see Zee sitting on the old twin mattress. He held the string mechanism we'd rigged to open the door in one hand, and Bracey, the doll my Grandma Parker made when she was a girl,

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in the other. Zee rocked the rag doll back and forth, stroking her yellowed fabric face. Both age and pollen had taken their toll on Bracey.

Being with him there, I still felt like a child. Comfortable around the forgotten toys we'd abandoned so many years ago. Sitting among stale stuffed animals and walls covered in bubble gum wrappers. I knew my life would be so different soon.

"Janie's baby." Zee handed Bracey to me. He touched her yarn hair and surveyed her as if he still wanted to hold her, but knew she was mine.

"Did you hear me and Jenn talking, Zee?" I hoped it was over his head. A thought that made me feel terrible, but grateful for the possibility at the same time.

Zee shrugged his shoulders, his brown eyes looking up at me from beneath a layer of thick blond hair that seemed to have a life of its own. He touched Bracey once more.

"Sweet baby." I tried to ease him into telling me if he understood.

"Janie's baby." Zee nodded as he scrutinized the doll, then my stomach.

My eyes burned with tears. I thought of the bad example I was setting for Zee, whose mama was a devout Christian—really living it. "Yes," I said leaning over to kiss the doll's head. "Janie's baby."

"I like babies." Zee smiled and reached for Bracey. He held her and rocked her side to side in his overzealous way, pretending to comfort her. "I take care you baby too. See? I good at it."

"You are, Zee. You're really good at it." I forced myself to give him an encouraging smile. "You're good at keeping secrets too."

"Yeah. I'm good at not telling. I willn't." He pulled his lips inward as they formed a tight line.

"Promise me, Zee. Swear."

"Pomise." He held three fingers up, a throwback to the Brownie troop Jenn and I tried to form when we found out boys weren't allowed, but Zee wanted to be a Brownie. He pretended to

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turn a key on his lips and flung his hand haphazardly to toss it out the window.

I leaned over to hug him. “You’re the best friend I have, Zee. Always have been.”

He lowered his head as a wide smile filled his face. He put Bracey back on the bed and covered her up with a torn blanket, peeking to see if I’d noticed. He propped a sun-faded comic book beside her and placed a cup of imaginary milk in her hand. I had to force myself not to cry.

We stood and hunched down, filling the space. Zee rushed ahead, but I was careful to make my way out and turned to peek in once more before closing the door for good.

Zee skittered down the ladder in a way that made me nervous. He’d never taken on the fears growing older instills in you. I stepped carefully, making sure each foot was stable before moving on to the next rung.

As I reached the bottom of the old oak, I found Mama sitting on the swing, gardening tools in hand, eyes wet. My heart constricted.

Zee took one look at Mama and somehow knew to go home.

Mama glimpsed over her shoulder and motioned toward the back of the garden shed. In the far corner of the yard sprawled mounds of spring flowers sorted by type and color. Mama’s delicate hands were covered in the dark speckled soil that would become their home. It never crossed my mind she might come home early and work in her garden. Her one stress reliever.

Mama sat in silence, begging me with her blue eyes. The tiny wrinkles that surrounded them when she smiled now just made her look worn.

I knew she heard everything. I knew she wanted me to tell her it wasn’t true.

“Mama . . .” I sat beside her and placed my hand over hers as she remained motionless. No reaction. “I wanted to tell you, Mama. I did. I didn’t know how.”

“Does Drew know?” Her voice wavered, making me tear up.

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“Yes,” I whispered. I never meant to let her down.

Neither of us moved. No one uttered a sound. I leaned my head on Mama’s shoulder and felt her tense up. I was sure she hated me for what I’d done.

“Who else?” Mama whispered in a voice hoarse with restrained emotion.

“Who else, what?” What kind of girl did she think I was? There was only Drew.

“Who else knows, Janie? Is everyone in town talking about us? Do all your friends from high school know? Have you plastered your shame all over town so your family can be as humiliated as possible by your carelessness?”

“Mama, what shame? I didn’t—”

“Didn’t what, Janie? Didn’t think about us? Didn’t know how pregnancy happens? Didn’t think we would find out? Didn’t what? Didn’t what!” Mama pushed me off her and stood, staring down at me. I felt so small in that moment.

“I’m sorry, Mama. No one else knows. Except Jenn. And Zee. But I didn’t tell him, he overheard.”

“Great.” Mama let the garden tools fall from her hands and walked shoulder-slumped toward the house.

I fell in step behind her, determined to make her see my side. “It’s going to be okay, Mama. Drew and I are going to get married. I’m looking into married housing tomorrow. It’ll be exactly like you and Daddy when you were young.”

Mama turned and stared at me for a moment, her eyes bleak and weary. She reached out to take my hand, but stopped as our fingers touched, leaving me aching. She opened her mouth to speak, raked her hand through her blond hair before realizing they were still covered in dirt, then whirled around and stomped into the house. The red door slammed and the windows shook behind her.

## Chapter Three

### Purdy

I hung my rusty old body over the ceramic pedestal tub, arms deep in bleach water, trying to clean the world's most stubborn tub ring once again. Disgusting. I couldn't stand the look of it, even though no one else ever came into this bathroom or used the tub. It haunted me, taunting me with its refusal to do what I wanted. I pulled a pad of steel wool out of the cleaning bucket and began scrubbing as a memory flashed through my mind.

I was seven years old the first time I realized how sick my mother was. The first time she tried to kill me. It was early summer. Freedom from school hung foremost in my mind and I planned my days long and wide, allowing plenty of time away from the house. The salamanders were out in full force, and easy to catch—though I'd been warned nearly on the hour by Mother not to touch them lest I get leprosy, or lose all my teeth. Looking back now, I can't believe I ever sought out those nasty things.

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But that June morning, the air was warm and moist, the perfect time for trapping. The sweet smell of honeysuckle filled the air. I stopped along the way to pluck a few flowers and suck out the honey as Daddy taught me. Mother had taken to sleeping in late, and Granny Finn, her mother, had taken to raising Charlotte for the most part. I don't recall where Granny Finn was that day, but I can tell you for certain I knew every step she took from that day forward. I soon clung to her like my own life.

I'd snuck down to the creek behind our property being careful to follow the worn trail and avoid the corn fields, which Mother said were full of rattlesnakes. Six salamanders swam in a bucket by the time I heard her calling for me. Her voice was tense and frantic and I knew my day was over. Though I hated to do it, I tossed those slimy little suckers back into the creek and rushed down the trail toward home. I tried my best to check the sundress I'd chosen that morning—a sienna color—hoping she wouldn't notice any spots of red clay I'd happened to miss. But, I didn't take into account the speckled splashes of red that clung to the back of my legs. If it weren't for that, I'd have been home free.

From the second my eyes met Mother's, I knew I was in for it. Usually she'd yell a lot and force me to take another bath while she lectured me on cleanliness being after godliness, or some such nonsense. I could tell this time was different, but I didn't care. I was sick to death of her crazy ways. Always twitching and embarrassing me and Daddy. I was glad Charlotte was still a baby and I could tell her how things really should be—instead of the way things were around here.

Pacing, Mother continued with her usual ranting, while I pretended like I was somewhere else. Someone else. I only remember doing as I was told, as Granny Finn warned me to do so many times.

“Get into the bathroom, this instant.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Take off those nasty clothes and draw yourself a bath.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

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“Wash that disease-infested slime off, before I come and do it for you.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Mother was not one to put up with messes of any kind. And she was becoming more and more fanatical about cleanliness. Telling me always that it was how God wanted things. She never let a housekeeper near our home, even though every neighbor in the area had one. She insisted on cleaning everything herself. Sterilizing it thoroughly, as she put it. I’d watched her wash her hands so many times one evening after dinner that her knuckles bled from the incessant scrubbing. Later she’d stood at the sink flirting with Daddy as he held her hands under the cool water and let it run over the lacerations. She prattled on about his job, the neighborhood, the upcoming Parker family reunion, and such silly things, as if it was a normal way to spend time with your husband.

\* \* \*

That summer morning, I sank into the lukewarm water and slid beneath, drowning out her voice as she stomped up and down the hall gathering her cleaning items. The silence felt good. Peaceful. I could imagine heaven and God and all the things she told me I’d have one day if I’d straighten up and behave.

I held my breath as long as I could, letting my face rise to the top only enough that I could let my mouth form a little “o”, take another breath, and sink back under. With my eyes closed, I counted how long I could stay under. Well, most of me anyway.

Seventy-five seconds. One hundred seconds. A little “o” rising. One hundred and thirty. One hundred and forty-five. A little “o”.

At two hundred, I opened my eyes under the water and could see a blurred moving version of Mother standing over me and turning her hand to the side. My little “o” quickly sputtered at whatever she was pouring on top of me. It burned, and I was

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choking, trying to get it out of me. Within seconds, I'd thrown up all over myself.

I rose to stand, buck-naked in the tub and crying. Mother held a bottle of straight bleach and a Brillo pad in her hand.

"Mother, what are you—"

She grabbed my arm and began to scrub. Rubbing hard, making me wince and pull from her. "Ow. Stop it!" My throat burned. "I need some water. Mother, please! I don't feel good."

"You hush, you hear me? I've got to get that off of you. Out of you. I don't want to catch—drink this."

She handed me a glass, as if full of water, goading me with a sweet smile.

I lifted it to my mouth, the smell of bleach rising and burning my nostrils.

"I can't drink that. It's poison, see? It'll make me sick again." I pointed to the skull and crossbones sign on the back. The same one they'd shown us in school and told us never to touch. Now, my own mother was trying to kill me with it.

"Never mind that. Do as you're told, Darlin'." Mother pushed my hand toward my mouth again this time using her sweet voice.

"No!" Everything in me wanted to get out of that tub.

"Drink it. This instant!" She screamed at me shaking her head from side to side.

"I can't. My teacher said—"

Before I could get the words out, the glass dropped into the tub, clinking to the bottom as Mother's hand wacked me across my face and threw me off balance. I started crying, partly from the slap, and partly from the fact I thought the bleach was going to eat me alive in that tub.

Mother peered at me with wide eyes. Then, as if turned by a switch, her countenance changed completely. Pulling me out of the tub, she covered my shoulders with a scratchy white towel, and sat me down on the makeup stool I was told never to sit on. She lowered to her knees and stared me right in the eyes, brushing my tears away with the sleeve of her gauzy nightgown.

## WIDE PLANK PORCHES

“Now, now, Darlin’. Hush, now. It’s ok. You’re clean now. Just perfect.”

I sat stunned on the stool as she took the time to towel dry my hair and brush out the tangles, as gentle as she’d ever done it. Watching her from the mirror, her blue eyes darted as she took care of me. I wondered how someone could be so crazy and so sweet at the same time. I asked God to take the crazy out of me right then and there. But I was beginning to understand it was too late for Mother.

The memory fell as my cell phone buzzed on the counter. I cleared my throat, pushing the lump out of the way. Charlotte was calling. Again. Some nerve after skipping out on our lunch.

“Hello?” I put on my sweet voice. It always annoyed Charlotte.

“Can we talk, Purdy? It’s about Janie.”

“Who is this?”

“It’s Charlotte. You know it’s me. Plus, it’s right there on your phone screen. Can I come over or not?”

“Oh. Well, hey there, Charlotte. Of course you can come over, Darlin’. There isn’t a problem is there?” Of course I knew the problem. Any idiot could see it coming. Plus, I had my ways.

“I’ll tell you about it when I get there,” Charlotte said and hung up the phone.

I slapped the phone onto the counter and was startled by Tizzy, my precious tabby, as she jumped at the noise. “You know, it’s a miracle she can even pick out her own underwear, Tizzy. I’m forced to take care of everything in this family.” Tizzy wound around my ankles, leaning in to love on me. I patted her head, repositioning the bow on her collar the groomer tied the day before. If only everyone were a cat.

I pulled off my cleaning gloves and washed my hands at the sink. Wisps of graying blond hair waved at me as I stared into the mirror. Charlotte kept insinuating I dye it, but what did she know? Gray was a sign of grace and wisdom as far as I was concerned. Plus, I liked to remind her that she’s the one who gave me all this gray—a comment she still despised from my first gray strand until

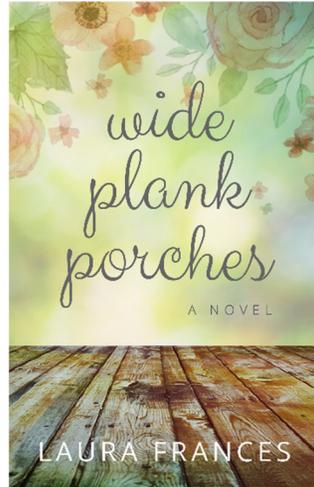
## WIDE PLANK PORCHES

today. So, of course, I had to keep it. Still, the disorder would never do. I took care to replace each piece, put on my rose lipstick, and smacked at my reflection. Perfect.

Removing my cleaning apron, I brushed off my capris, thankful I'd ironed them earlier. I watched my reflection once more, breathing in deeply. Once. Twice. Three times. I'd figure out something to take care of this. As a matter of fact, an idea was already brewing.

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Left wanting more?



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Best,