

# Chapter 1

“Come with me.” His warm breath caresses her ear, giving her a delicious tingle. This seduction is no accident.

“Baby we can be anywhere; we’ll start a new life. Dottie, all I need is you.”

She opens her eyes; he turns when he feels the flutter of her lashes. She expects another plea instead; he kisses her. Soft and slow, his lips pull her down deeper into a sweet chasm. This assault on her proprieties will be measured and deliberate. He has after all proven that he is a patient man. Those musicians’ finger will first trail on the column of her neck. The touch is soft but premeditated. Do the top buttons of her blouse come undone on their own accord or has he banished them? She is never sure, but before she can register the effect, he lightly strokes the swell of her breast. It is sinful; despite her confessions to the priest regarding her weakness, she is never stronger. Her body willingly betrays her; she will roam her hands down his back, beyond the tapered waist to the hard orbs. She knows that she is not innocent; she revels in his plea for her touch. She is convinced that she is going to hell Dottie wished she cared more about her soul.

“Honey leap with me, we will land safely I promise you.”

“Oh God, Nicky you know it is never that simple.”

Nick leans back far enough to bore into her eyes, into the depth of her soul. She prays he will stay but knows that her appeal is futile. He feels colder already; it doesn’t matter how she tries to hold on he is already leaving; leaving her behind.

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Dottie sat alone in the small house. The ticking of the clock filled the void; the only other sound was that of a car as it drove past. Slowly she opened her eyes and allowed herself to adjust to the mid-day sunlight. The old woman glanced down; amazed at the aged hands folded in her lap. She wondered how they could be hers. She fanned out her fingers and examined the paper-thin skin, the fine wrinkles that crisscrossed the parchment on the back of her hands. These are her hands; accented by age spots, and resting on legs that seldom work. Using her thumb, she spun the worn gold band on her left ring finger, without checking she knows the inscription inside the band has worn flush. She thought to herself that she had never felt her age, even when other women cried over turning forty, she shook her head in awe. It was true, Dorothy Kennedy-Denham never felt different at any age. At least, that was until this last stretch.

She has been on this earth far too long. Dottie has outlived the love of her life, two children, her brother and her friends. She believed that she also should be gone by now. A nagging thought in the far recess of her mind reminded her that there is still unfinished business. Closing her eyes, she tries to recall what this could be; but nothing comes to her, tricked by her weakening memory. It is sharp most of the time. Sure, she couldn't recall what she had for breakfast or whether she ate for that matter. Nevertheless, she could tell you what shoes she wore when she and Nicky went out on New Year's Eve in '48. She knew the address of her apartment on Monmouth Street in '32, and the color of her wedding suit. She recalled the exact words Nicky said at the birth of their first son. Staring into space the old woman shakes her head; the noise of the house momentarily disrupts the silence. Yes, she knew her past, but at times

did not know her present and frankly could care less about her future. Again, the ghost swirled in her mind: unfinished business.

She braced against the table and steadied herself; waiting until she felt the pins and needles in her feet before she attempts walking. There is a chill in the air today; she thought that she should turn on the oven to warm the house. The old woman shuffled to the stove and turned the knob, the tick of the appliance disrupted the quiet. Opening the door, she placed a paper towel on the rack then pushed the door nearly closed. Something made her stop, she assessed the situation again, but whatever is wrong won't come to her. She stared at the appliance in confusion; hoping that it would provide the answer. Checking the knob she is satisfied that she has turned on the oven, not the burner on the stovetop. Shaking her head, she reached for her walker then leaned on the apparatus, and made her way into the living room. Taking a seat at the picture window, she is lost again, immersed in watching the birds stop for an afternoon feeding. Her great-granddaughter Maisie filled that for her. The young girls face swirls in her mind, Dottie smiles at the thought of the bookish girl. She and her cousin Josie had visited...Dottie stopped; unable to recall when their visit had been. Looking to the feeder, she knew it had to be recently; the feeder was nearly full. Days run together in her life, accented by few interruptions. When the information failed to reveal itself, her mind refocused on the action surrounding the bird feeder. A cardinal flew from perch to perch taking the lion share of the food while warning off intruders. His call became oddly shrill; still, the sparrows invaded, ignoring him. She craned her neck as the birds feed while he raises a horrible racket. Dottie watched amazed; she had never seen anything like it!

The smoke alarm blared in the background as her kitchen filled with smoke. The paper towel had fluttered off the rack onto the heating element and caught fire. Her neighbor heard the alarm and used his emergency key to enter the house. Fighting the choking smoke, he made his way to the living room where he found his aged neighbor. Mrs. Denham sat by the bay window; she rocked gently in mechanical rocker; smiling serenely and completely oblivious.

“Mizz’ Denham, there’s a fire!”

His unannounced appearance frightened her; she looked around wildly, utterly confused. He realized this, and instead addressed her quietly as he gathered up the frail woman before he carried her out the front door to safety. Gingerly he laid her on the soft grass; his wife joined them to stay with Mrs. Denham. Once he has her settled, he rushed back inside to investigate the source of the smoke.

Kneeling beside their neighbor, his wife held the old woman’s hand and spoke soothingly to her. Their other neighbors’ slowly join and mill around them. A disembodied voice confirmed that the fire department was in route leaving the immediate concern being the elderly neighbor's condition.

“Mrs. Denham, are you alright? Can you breathe comfortably?”

Old Mrs. Denham mutters something unintelligent, her neighbor asks the aged woman to repeat herself, but her question goes unanswered. Shaking her head, she reflected that Miss Dottie had no business living alone. Her family should have dealt with this long ago; the old woman was lucky this time. Her husband appears as the EMTs’ pull up; conversation swirls around Dottie, but it failed to include her.

Darkness beckoned; closing her eyes, she relinquished herself.

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The sunny day evaporates, in its place an apartment bedroom materializes. A place she plucks from the deep recesses of her memory. She knows this room well; the pictures on the wall, the bedside tables adorn with starched doilies. She lies on the bed, on top of the Chenille spread; she moves her hand across the tufted ribs. She would walk around in the memory of this room; however, her focus was elsewhere.

“Baby, I need you!”

Dottie offers her hand to him, and lovingly he draws it to his chest. He leans nearer until his lips brush her own. Time rewinds, her useless body does not imprison her, she is young again, a vibrant woman and in the bloom of her youth.

“Baby, just say the word and you never have to go back there again.”

Darkness surrounds them as he draws her into his arms. She closes her eyes surrendering to him, giving herself to him. *Unfinished business*; the words invaded their Heaven.

Slowly the warmth slips away, it always did.

## Chapter 2

The SUV sliced through the traffic smoothly; the motor purred when accelerating as one expects in a luxury vehicle. The passengers stared out their respective windows as though each is secluded. Only their thoughts kept them company.

Josie Boyd was not in the moment she instead relived last night in her mind. Finding her boyfriend tangled in the sheets with another girl haunted her. The shock finally replaced by hot tears shed hours later when she was alone. The crying jag left her eyes puffy and her nose rimmed in red. Her mother jumped to the conclusion that she suffered a hangover when she arrived. She could have corrected her, but Josie preferred this rather than to confess how someone that claimed undying love for her had duped her. Had it not been that they had to go to Great Gran's house today, she would have fulfilled her mother's prophecy and gotten drunk. She glanced in the rearview at her mother's reflection. Mary Boyd always had her shit together. It would be nice to have a sounding board, she considered the woman that is driving; but she possessed nothing that was helpful to her. Sighing she returned to watch the city fall away with the miles the SUV devoured. Being gone for a week would give her time to think and give Charlie time to move out.

In the passenger seat, Kim Cole glanced over at the driver, her sister Mary. The woman returned her silent inquiry with a short question.

"What?"

"Are you OK? I mean, if you are tired I can drive."

"I'm fine."

Kim instinctively knew to quell additional questions. Her sister answered honestly, being curt is her signature. If she were upset or concerned, she would say so. Kim admired her strength; she on the other hand had been a mess since she learned Grandma nearly burned her house down. Gran has slowly lost her tether on reality. Often she called her family members by names they don't recognize. Other times, she slipped into the past and talked to them in complete nonsense. Kim felt guilty, admonishing herself about having not taken care of this earlier. She asked Gran to move in last year, but Grandma Dot refused, she told Kim that she liked her being in her own home. Kim blinked back the sting of tears; Gran was a stubbornly independent woman. She wished she had some of her strength. Kim felt battered emotionally; she recently took a part-time job to fill the void in her life. The depression had worsened when her daughter moved on campus, but working in the flower shop helped. The biggest problem remained that she never progressed beyond the day her husband Allen moved out. To be brutally honest, he didn't just leave; he moved on to a new wife and a cute little sports car. Not Kim she lived within reach of the night he packed. She stared at the hands in her lap; the gold circle on her left hand mocked her.

Mary Boyd glanced in the rearview, her brows knit in irritation when she noticed the car on her bumper. She is annoyed with his actions; the driver had two other lanes but insisted on being on her tail. Smoothly she break checked him while she monitored his reaction. Clueless, he continued driving while he fidgeted with his radio. As Mary eased into the fast lane, her sister glanced her way.

"I am trying to get this car off our bumper."

It is unnecessary to explain herself, but she knew Kim would ask if she hadn't volunteered. Presently she would rather not talk about Grandma, not about what they should do, or not do. She wanted to be alone with her thoughts, hell she wished that she was alone period. When the hospital called her, she considered driving up last night. That would have given her at least an entire day of solitude. She could use the seclusion. It isn't that she doesn't love her family but to be fair they wear on her; all but one. Her niece Maisie had her act together. It made perfect sense to her, with Kim as her mom someone had to take charge. Kim was never the strongest woman, but the last couple of years her sister had merely existed. She wasted away pining over that two-timing asshole of a husband. He was never faithful to Kim, not even in college. Thank God, Kim could rely on Maisie. Mary turned her head then smoothly piloted the vehicle into the center lane. Before returning her focus to the road, she glanced at her daughter, Josie. Her little Party Girl, she couldn't take one damn night off from her decadent lifestyle. Now she had to drag her to their grandmother's, and she looked like hell. With a short shake of her head, she damned the girl with the same stamp she used for her husband Bill: weak.

Maisie Cole counted the light poles. She had been counting road markers, but that proved useless when it was evident small accidents had mowed many of them down. The tension in the car weighed on her. With no other tool in her arsenal, she sat silently, and when stressed, her OCD kicks in, so she is counting. She glanced at her cousin Josie; the girl looked awful. She would like to talk to her but knew whatever happened she won't say in the presence of Aunt Mary. They pass a semi; she counted the ribs on the trailer as



it passed. The silence grew between the two young women in the back seat. It felt awkward. Usually, Josie joked and teased her. Maisie cut her eyes over; her cousin's focus was on a statistically placed wear mark on her jeans; absentmindedly she picked at it. She looked out her window again, as they pass a forgotten pasture fence. Maisie returned to counting the posts, but the distraction failed to help. She checked on her cousin, the wear mark on Josie's jeans was now a hole. Quietly she slid her hand over to the girl and gave Josie a childish poke. It's how they used to fight in the back seat as kids, funny how something that small enraged her when they were five. Josie smiled in response but still said nothing. Maisie is satisfied, knowing that her cousin appreciated her tacit support. She turned her head and returned to her private musings and her counting.

High on a hill, the formidable structure of St. Ignatius shone like a beacon above the town. As the sun rose, the staff busied themselves aiding their charges with breakfast, medical care, and various personal needs. The patients were thankful for the caring, efficient attention from the aides. One patient, however, was not as pleased. Dottie Kennedy-Denham sat in the hospital bed with her thin arms crossed over her chest. She was outraged over imprisonment in this facility when it was clear she was physically able to go home. To add to this insult; now this young man dared to suggest the unthinkable!

“Absolutely not.”

“Mrs. Denham this is perfectly normal, a woman your age...”

“Young man I will not repeat myself!”

“Ma'am you have to shower, and you have to have assistance, I am sorry.”

According to the orders, she should walk in short stretches, however; the woman was prone to falling. They assigned him in the event she needed support. He offered her the chart when she continued to stare.

“It is the doctors’ orders we only want to protect you from falling.”

“Honey, you are not going to be in that room while I am naked. You want to look; you will have to pay just like the rest of them do!”

Struck dumb for a moment he elected to ignore her comment and tried reasoning with her instead.

“Ma’am I am just assisting you to the bathroom for safety. I will not be in there; I am just there to adjust the temperature. I will only assist you to the shower seat if...”

She cut him off curtly, “No Sir you will not!”

Finally, he concedes, “Ma’am I can see if one of the females LPN’s would be available, but it may take some time.”

Silence and an accusatory glare was her only response.

The LPN left the hospital room after marking the chart that his patient refused assistance with the morning shower. Gary resisted the urge to underline the verb; *refused*. Her comment puzzled him, what the hell had she meant. His cursory glance at the chart indicated she had dementia; he mumbled under his breath, “No shit!” According to the notes, the hospital would release her tomorrow. He usually moved through the daily challenges with a smile but, this patient had struck a nerve. With a shake of his head, he dismissed the problem; it would be the families’ challenge soon. Gary returned to the nurses’ station to check the list of patients awaiting assistance. Regardless of his resolve to move past the occupant in room 25A, he’s irritated that his

thoughts remained with the woman down the hall. He prepared his argument mentally in the event his supervisor asks. The explanation gained dimension as he rehearsed his defense. A voice behind him stirred him from this reverie.

“Did Mrs. Denham toss you out?”

Kaylynn accented her inquiry with a smile her eyes twinkled with mischief. She already knew the answer, but she couldn’t help herself. Gary was ordinarily unflappable, but this was his introduction to their sassy patient. Due to her mobility issues, they felt it was best a male LPN assist her, Gary pulled the unlucky draw. Kaylynn could have warned him; she knew that Mrs. Kennedy-Denham had been raising hell since she was admitted. Her friend spun around towards her, his eyes wide then quickly recounted his experience.

He leaned in lowering his voice, “She thinks I want to see her naked! What the hell?”

Kaylynn laughed, “This sounds like her! Don’t worry; I will take care of her for you.”

Gary muttered his appreciation as he moved to his next charge. Chuckling Kaylynn retrieved the chart marked DENHAM.

The spirited woman was on her schedule for vitals and meds; she would offer to give her a bed bath. Kaylynn doesn’t mind the slight disruption in her floor schedule. Despite the woman’s disdain for her hospitalization, Mrs. Denham had taken a shine to her. The truth was; Kaylynn had a soft spot for her. During her last shift, the woman paid her a lovely compliment and told her how beautiful she was. Inexplicably, Mrs. Denham added that she thought that Kaylynn would ‘*do well on stage.*’ Kaylynn only knew of Mrs. Kennedy-Denham’s connection with Kennedy Electronics; she had no frame of reference regarding an acting career.

While gathering the supplies, she needed for a sponge bath; she dismissed the comment. Whatever it meant only her sassy patient knew.

## Chapter 3

Dementia, Mary rolled the word around in her mind as she drove. No one could tell her exactly what this meant or what to expect. The doctors claimed it was the gradual decrease in Grandma's cognitive ability but then could not explain the type of lapse the woman suffered. Mary found these the most difficult to deal with emotionally. In Mary's mind, it was as if Grandma Dot disappeared; became lost in her mind. It began last year, or maybe it was the year before, sad that she couldn't recall when they noticed it. She slowly exhaled as she battled with her sense of guilt. As her grandmother's power of attorney, she damn well should know this! In her peripheral vision, she saw Kim look at her, but she ignored the question in her sister's eyes. She preferred to bear her guilt in private.

Mary had been dealing with this for over a year, spending more time with Gran without anyone's knowledge. She thought that doing so would help her understand this better, however, in the end, she felt just as lost as her grandmother. When Gran's doctor tried to explain this, she left the office with more questions than she had when she began. She took Josie's suggestion and Googled the information, which was a mistake. Stories of the elderly trapped behind silenced minds, stories of women like herself attempting to appease a parent when they became unreasonable. She scanned through images of healthy brains, which diminish in size and function without rhyme or reason. After an afternoon of this, she felt more frustrated than she had before. Nothing she read addressed the problem her grandmother had currently, which was the baffling absence of...presence.

No one could explain this. Gran would be talking to you one minute, and the next she would stare off into space; smiling. The only positive was that Gran appeared happy. Mary wondered; where she went or did these lapses took her anywhere? Mary was frustrated since anywhere she turned for answers, she ran into a blank wall. It wasn't always like this, her Grandmother boasted about how bright their Great Uncle Donny was but, to be honest, the woman herself was just as intelligent. Every Christmas, Mary gave her the New York Times book of puzzles. Gran would have the puzzles finished before May. Mary was amazed, simply amazed. Even now, Gran could still on rare days sit with her and work a puzzle. Nevertheless, when she grew tired, the faraway look would come to her watery blue eyes; Gran would smile serenely then disappear before her very eyes.

Mary had no other option than to consider Grandma Dot's future. She researched facilities that specialized in dementia, Alzheimer's and treatment for patients suffering memory loss. The best doctor in the city offered recommendations but would not take Gran as a patient. Sadly, her situation was not dire enough, or it was that it was not interesting enough for him. Caustically she wondered if he'd feel the same if this was his grandmother, she doubted this. She knew several women in her club that are in the medical field; she turned to them for their input. They all recommended the same facility. After a thorough review, she was ready for the most challenging discussion, that with her sister.

"NO, absolutely not; Mary we are not putting Gran in a home!"

Sensitive Kim, she has always been a compassionate soul, but in the last couple of years, she

has been nothing but a weeping willow. She watched sad movies in her free time and sat there crying the whole damn time. She donated to every SPCA, Children's Hospital or Disaster Relief Campaign that she saw. Not that this was a bad thing, Mary reasoned, it is just that she believed that Kim should pick one single organization to support. Mary's current concern was that Gran's future would become another banner her sister would wave.

"Kim, listen to me they may be able to help her. Don't you want her to get better?" Kim eyed her sister suspiciously. Taking advantage of the lull, Mary continued. "Look it is close to us too, we can visit more often. They said she could even come home for overnight visits. Plus, when the time comes..."

"When *the time comes*, Mary?"

"Kim, Grandma, is not going to live forever; she is damn near a hundred!"

That was it; Kim stormed out of her house in tears without saying another word. Mary rose to stop her then decided against it. The reality was she was sick and tired of everyone falling to pieces when she depended on them. It was rare that she needed anyone, but it never failed that she found herself abandoned each time. They were weaklings, all of them.

In the end, Mary did what she did best; she handled it. The resolution decided by her on one of her visits to her Grandmother.

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The grandfather clock struck four; the chime interrupted the silence in Gran's home. They sat at the table with a crossword puzzle between them, the majority of the squares empty. It was apropos to the

current situation with so many questions and many more unrealized solutions. Her grandmother sat across from her soundlessly, staring without seeing. They had sat like this for the better part of an hour. Mary reached across and took the old woman's hand.

"Where is it that you go to Gran?"

Silence.

No words filled the space between them; the old woman remained as she had been; mute. In a rare moment of vulnerability, Mary dissolved into tears. She cried tears of anger that she was the only sister strong enough to deal with this. Tears of frustration because even now, she was unsure she was doing the right thing. They were tears of sadness, as a rush of memories surrounded her in her grandparents' home. Silent tears shed, as she sat embarrassed, suffocated under the weight of her ego. Her grandmother sat unaffected, like Mona Lisa, Grandma Dot smiled a soft, gentle smile. Mary's tears subsided all the while she kept her grandmother's thin hand in her own; oddly, it made her feel stronger. It didn't make sense, but she accepted it.

The open window invited the warm spring evening air, and a mix of new greenery and the perfume of gardenias' rushed in. Mary inhaled the sweet air, allowing it to calm her emotions. Quickly the mask of efficiency returned, her sense of duty bolstered her resolve. Mentally she clicked through the items that needed to be addressed to provide a safe environment for her grandmother. Mary wasn't known for being emotional; instead, she illustrated her love by her competence. She glanced at her grandmother; the woman remained imprisoned within her mind. Mary struggled to understand this.