

Premonition

Tower Lowe

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DEDICATION

To my family, and my friends who are like family. I love you all.

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Gratitude to my nephew, Bill Collins III, who patiently instant-messaged me about hunting in Homeville. Also, thanks to my son Nick, who tried to explain the intricacies of rifles vs shotguns, ammunition, shells, and such. Any errors here are mine and not theirs, as I was more concerned with the people than the weaponry.

1

Homeville, Virginia

December 1972

A Saturday afternoon

Anselm Bannon held his shotgun loosely at his waist as he slogged through thick underbrush toward his deer stand in Sussex County, Virginia. He arrived and opened his satchel. Dogs barked in the distance and a twig cracked nearby. Anselm held still. A male deer, antlers high into the blue sky, stopped some fifteen yards ahead. Anselm made eye contact. Deep in the brown iris, he saw a story unfold.

A small boy with damp hair and pink hands reached up, asking Anselm to hold him. The hunter thought to lift the child, but the figure grew to six feet and became a young blond man with a mustache, holding a law book in long curved fingers. Anselm drew back from the deer and grabbed his satchel. The young man shouted at him.

“Watch out!” He closed the book. “For the wage of sin is death.”

A face entered his vision, familiar yet strange. A gun fired, striking Anselm in the head. The startled buck blinked and then leapt high into the winter forest, taking with him the young man and the law book. Anselm felt sadness at the young man's going, as he did for his own passing.

Inside the house at Oak Hill, south of the woods where Anselm lay dying, Reni Duval toasted pecans with butter and cinnamon, a Christmas tradition. Gunshots popped in the distance, a normal winter sound, and the hunting dogs let out excited yaps. She slipped a cookie sheet from the oven and breathed in the aroma of sweet spice and nuts. As the pecans cooled, Reni thumbed through an old *Redbook*, reading a Masters and Johnson article, "Plain Talk for Women Who Lie about Sex." She had no plan to leave the house on this cool December morning, until a relentless whisper blew at the back of her neck.

"Find Anselm."

It was absurd. Reni had tramped through those woods last summer, covered in bug spray, and still the chiggers got inside her long pants. She vowed never again to follow the path that meandered through the pines to her mother-in-law's modern house on the other side. Not worth it. Of course, now it was winter, and the bugs would be quieted by the cold. Her stomach stirred, hunger brought on by the rich smell of pecans, or was it? Anselm was her confidant, her lover, and the man who supported

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her while Bedford fought in the jungles of Vietnam. The whispering beckoned her to the woods.

For a moment, she considered calling her friend Cotton Lee and asking her to come along. It might be the right thing. Cotton Lee was regarded as different because she had a limp from polio as a child, but she could be trusted because she rarely bothered to tell a white lie or make nice. Calling her might be the right thing, but maybe it would be better not to involve Cotton Lee and to go alone or better yet not to go at all. As she stood at the oven door stirring the pecans, an electric tingle ran up her spine. Reni gave in to the whispers and warnings and headed to the bedroom. She pulled on a sweatshirt and a short red flannel jacket belonging to Bedford. The red would stand out in the woods and keep hunters from shooting at her.

As she headed out the back door, Reni thought about how she hadn't planned to cheat on Bedford. A diamond heart vibrated at her neck when she moved over the rough ground. Bedford had presented it to her the day he returned home from Asia. The heart reminded her that she needed to be secretive about Anselm. Bedford knew nothing at this point, and after he had served his country in a war, Reni wanted it to stay that way. At least when she was over at the Baptist church on Sunday morning, praying to God for forgiveness, she wanted it that way. This morning, when Anselm had come by the house and rushed to get extra ammo from Bedford—without even speaking to her or noticing the slinky top she bought on sale at

Thalhimer's—she had wanted to rip open the secret and spill it at Bedford's feet. Not a good idea.

Wearing hiking boots and thick socks, Reni reached the woods. She cursed the brambles at her feet. Her grandmother said there was a time in the 1860s when the woods around Homeville were bare and clear of underbrush and soldiers walked through with ease during the Civil War. Whether that was an agricultural miracle, lack of fire suppression, or a simple lie, Reni didn't know, but she wished for it now. Dry leaves crackled like ice, and the earth beneath her feet exuded a bitter smell. She hiked on through the brisk air until she jumped at the sight of a buck, antlers tall, standing a few yards away. He watched her. The brown eyes peered into hers as if asking a question. Reni spooked and ran fast down the path.

That was how she found Anselm. In a mad rush to get out of the woods and into the open field behind her mother-in-law's place, she nearly stepped on his face. Instead, she slid on the crushed leaves and dropped hard near his head. Damp blood stained her flannel jacket, melding with the red dye. The stain would reside there for the next forty years, hanging in the back of a closet until her daughter found the flannel and figured it was an old hunting jacket with deer blood. Because, then as now, no one can be sure about the past; it holds so many stories that we need to know but can only imagine, so many lessons that we need to learn but never do. Reni screamed until she was hoarse but had to drag her way to the open field before Momma Duval came out to help.

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Then she did call her friend Cotton Lee, who arrived a half hour after sheriff Jeff Bacon. The sheriff and two deputies had already spun off into the woods. One deputy returned with Anselm's hunting satchel and headed back out. Cotton Lee limped into the kitchen and propped her weak leg up on one of Mrs. Duval's embroidered stools. A partly decorated Christmas tree was visible behind her chair in the other room.

"The polio bothering you, Cotton Lee?" Reni asked.

"It's the humidity and the bad news. I had a crush on Anselm in high school."

Mrs. Duval shook her head. "Cotton Lee. You're a pretty girl all right, but talk like that's not appropriate, especially with your limp and all." The older woman stood at the stove heating up chicken noodle soup from a Campbell's can. Her eyes fell on the family photos that lined the buffet, as if the black-and-white images could hear her voice. Reni knew Cotton Lee was about to set Mrs. Duval straight.

"It certainly was appropriate to want sex with a good-looking, well-built guy, Mrs. Duval."

Momma Duval shook her head. "Child," she said.

"What's inappropriate is that Anselm is dead." Reni wore a large sweatshirt and baggy sweatpants borrowed from her mother-in-law. The sheriff had wanted her clothes for evidence, and she wanted out of them as soon as possible.

"At least the sheriff brought his satchel so I can give it to his mother," Mrs. Duval spoke.

“Why’d he go hunting with a satchel?” Cotton Lee asked. She examined the worn leather bag near her chair.

Reni threw her arms up. “Lunch, Cotton Lee? Dry socks, ammunition. Is that really the question we need to be asking? What I want to know is who shot him and why.”

Cotton Lee twisted toward her friend. “Calm down, Reni. I want to know all that, too.”

“It’s an accident, is all,” Mrs. Duval said. “A horrible accident.” She straightened a set of heirloom teacups lined up on a shelf beside the pantry.

“Accidents do happen.” Cotton Lee leaned forward and pulled the satchel toward her. “I want to see what’s in here. There might be a clue as to why he was shot.”

Reni sighed aloud and felt exhaustion, or maybe it was grief, climb from her feet to her shoulders. Anselm was gone. She remembered hot nights upstairs at her house, a black floor fan circling air around the bed sheets. Anselm smelled like lemon peel and dried tobacco leaves, a combination of the cigarettes he smoked and his mother’s soap. He still lived with his mother, Ruby, and Reni used to beg him to move out, because she dreamed they would marry, in spite of Bedford and the war. Now her dream was lifeless, and Reni felt like Bedford was a mistake she never would be able to correct.

Cotton Lee worked to unfasten the two brass buckles on the satchel, and that bugged Reni.

“Leave the man his privacy,” she said. “Don’t you have any manners?”

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As usual, Cotton Lee ignored any common sense advice. She worked as an investigator for a local attorney, Max Mayfair, and the job only encouraged her meddling. There she sat, rifling through Anselm's hunting supplies. Reni expected her friend to up and start eating Anselm's stale lunch. She pulled it right out of the pack and sniffed at it.

"He brought one of those awful chicken sandwiches his mother makes." Cotton Lee poked at the waxed paper. "The bread's so dry you can't swallow it."

"It's homemade. No preservatives," Reni said.

"It's stale." Cotton Lee plunged both hands back in the satchel.

"He was vital and happy when I saw him early this morning. I can't believe he's gone and died on our land," Mrs. Duval said.

"Don't you go thinking it's your fault because he died on your place," Cotton Lee said. "It's a coincidence he was hunting on Oak Hill land." She turned to look at Reni then. "Are you all right?"

Reni inhaled deeply. Cotton Lee had good intuition, but Reni didn't want her friend or anyone to know, especially now, how much she loved Anselm.

"Thank you," Reni said. "It was hard to find him like that." She tried to take the conversation away from her feelings. "I didn't like those sandwiches either, but Ruby isn't the person she used to be. That was his last meal...or would have been his last meal... It doesn't feel right to rummage through his pack. Be sure to put it all back—

even the sandwich—when you’re done. His momma will want to know he had everything he needed.”

Cotton Lee nodded and stood to lift the bag off the floor to the top of the oak table. She stumbled toward her weak left side. “It’s heavy,” she said. Steadying her body with her right hand, she leaned into the bag again and ran her hand along the edges.

“He took extra ammo from the house. That weighs a lot.” Reni said.

“You oughtn’t to be lifting things like that,” Mrs. Duval said. But she left her soup pan to join Cotton Lee, leaning forward to see inside the satchel.

Reni could smell a faint scent of lemon. Her heart felt like a metal block inside her chest. Cotton Lee kept digging, never able to appreciate the need for a quiet moment, a civil lie, a few good hours of denial.

Reni thought back over her history with Cotton Lee. The two spent a lot of time together in high school. They drank sweet tea and watched bad sitcoms on TV. Cotton Lee’s irreverence made Reni laugh, and she needed that back then. Right now, though, Reni didn’t feel at all like laughing. She wanted to sit quietly and stare at the half-decorated tree in Mrs. Duval’s dining room.

“There’s a pouch in here.” Cotton Lee pulled out a small black leather bag. Straps and a leather loop dangled from the opening.

“That’s an antique,” Mrs. Duval observed. “My great-great-granddaddy had one like it back in the war days. It attaches to a man’s belt to carry money and valuables.”

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“Maybe it belonged to Anselm’s great-great-grandfather,” Reni said.

“Maybe.” Cotton lee fumbled with the clasp. It unsnapped, and she peered inside.

“Anything in there?” Ms. Duval asked.

“There is.”

“Well, bring it on out.”

Cotton Lee looked at the contents a moment longer then put her hand in and brought out five round gold coins. She pushed the coins apart on the white linen cloth and read the date on one. “Eighteen sixty-two. United States Treasury.”

Reni didn’t understand. “Are they replicas?”

Cotton Lee pulled five more coins from the purse and raised one in the air for a closer look. “They look like real twenty-dollar gold pieces.”

“That’s crazy.” Reni stood up to view the coins. “Why would Anselm carry a pile of antique twenty-dollar gold pieces on a hunting trip?”

“I can’t answer that. This was two hundred dollars in gold—back then. I bet it’s worth a lot more today.”

“What should we do?” Reni asked.

“Get over there to the phone and call Max Mayfair,” Cotton Lee said.

“You think I need a lawyer?” Mrs. Duval asked.

“I think Bedford might.”

2

Homeville, Virginia

Summer 1864

The front door stood wide open, letting in an excess of flying bugs. Sophie blamed the child, her cousin Martha. It was the girl's job to make sure all the doors were closed at night. Yankee soldiers were about, and it wasn't safe at all.

Martha was already sixteen but had no sense. Indeed, that was why she was staying at Oak Hill and not with her grandmother. Sophie breathed deeply and entered the night air, thinking about her cousin. The girl's mother was an invalid, leaving only the old woman, who had no patience for silly behavior like leaving the front door wide open. So now Sophie had to deal with the behavior and the bugs.

In spite of the stories spread among the women about Yankee rapists, Sophie wandered out each night to check the buildings and the old kitchen. Her feelings were numbed by the lack of money and the emptiness of the farm. The only emotion that remained fed like a parasite on her mind: loneliness. Her childhood of abundance, family, and a black servant to look after her had not prepared Sophie for life as the long-suffering mistress of an empty plantation.

Every night at dusk, she left this house, her brown hair pulled to the nape of her neck in a bun, and a kerosene lantern in her hand. Her father and brothers went

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off to fight a year ago, and this walk in the open air and dim light allowed her to relive life before the war.

At the end of her tour, Sophie called into the thick humid air. "Cousin Martha?" The girl wasn't out here, didn't hear Sophie, or didn't want to answer. Sophie put out the lantern, and black enveloped her, interrupted only by the blinking yellow of fireflies. For a few seconds, she paused to remember her childhood again, and that was when she saw him for the first time. The man stood off by the porch chairs, so quiet not even the dog stirred, and this astonished Sophie. She often blamed the dog when she had trouble sleeping. He barked all during the night hours, disturbed by animals or by Anna or the house slave, who was newly pregnant and suffered from insomnia. The repeated barking brought back stories of Henry, her dead brother, who used to wander at night and do crazy, unexplainable things. But this figure was not Henry.

The man coughed, bringing Martha back into the moment. She walked straight up to him, as if the confrontation were merely another chore that had to be completed in the endless round of work since the war broke out. He was a Yankee. She knew that from the uniform. He stood a foot taller than she, and as he peered through the oily night, she noticed the glisten of sweat on his cheeks. A blond mustache and beard gave the man a rough appearance, but he held his head down, real polite, and looked at his feet as he spoke.

"Excuse me, ma'am." The voice was deep and kind.

“Yes?” Sophie tried to figure what this stranger in the dusty blue uniform of the enemy might want. Her neighbor Althea said that Yankee soldiers were all over Sussex County, trying to cut off supply lines to Richmond. But Sophie never expected to see one man, alone, waiting outside her door. As with so many other events in the last two years, she accepted the unacceptable.

“My brother is down the lane a piece, and we could sure use water in our canteens. I saw the well right out front here, so if you don’t mind, we’ll fill a few canteens, and we won’t bother you again, ma’am.”

Sophie slipped closer to the soldier. His body was warm. Behind him, she saw his horse tied up to a post near the well. The scent of bourbon floated near his lips, sweet with the memory of her old beau Randolph, who had gone off at the beginning of the fight. Tree frogs screeched, and she saw the shimmer of moonlight reflected off the edges of tree leaves. A spell overtook her, perhaps cast by Althea, the neighbor, who was a witch of a woman. Or, if not that, a physical reaction instead, perhaps the smell of wool clothing soaked in sweat engaged her own dormant female nature. There had to be blame, for certain and sure, since God forsook her as she passed the male figure and walked across the wet grass to lead him to the well.

“Ma’am, no need for you to come. I can draw the water myself.”

“I understand,” Sophie said. “But I want to watch and make sure nothing else is taken.”

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And what else might the man have taken from outside the house? Every item needed for life was scarce or unavailable. There weren't even many people on the property. Three dark ones remained—Anna; her husband, Sam; and the old man, Edmund. The rest of the slaves went off to the war either as servants to Confederate men or traitors to the Union Army. Althea insisted all the black men of Sussex County went off to be menservants to the Confederate boys. Sophie wanted to believe that story, but Anna, Sophie's only friend in childhood, if she ever let herself think the truth of the matter, confided to her that many local slave men went north to fight for freedom. Sophie had no idea who was right, Althea or Anna. Nothing in her childhood prepared her for the complexity of the matter. Sophie preferred not to think about any of it. With Daddy, Benjamin, and Barry off to fight, and Mother dead within a week of that, Sophie was emotionally unequal to the stark abandonment of war. The presence of a man in her yard, at the well, pulling water up in a bucket and filling a canteen marked "U.S." on the outside released the loneliness trapped in her heart. The tall officer answered her need for the succulent smell of a man. Sophie was a girl born to plenty, to gentility, to position, and now she was working to guard her large house with the help of only two black men, a black woman, and a slow-witted white cousin. She was in need of this distraction. In a few minutes, his canteens were full.

"Thank you, ma'am. I'll not be needing anything else," Albert said.

Yes, she had his first name already. He was a sergeant, so he said, and the word shone like polished silver in her mind. He reached inside a small black leather pouch attached to his belt and pulled out a gold coin from the United States Treasury.

“For your trouble, ma’am.”

She took the coin that first day because what was the harm of it, with all the suffering going on, to take this one small coin? And Martha did finally appear, so she turned the officer over to her for edible goods. The money was in payment, she told herself, for goods received. But she needed to see Albert again—not for the money, you understand; that was a onetime slip—but for her sanity and her ability to survive and live and breathe. That’s all. She considered at one point that he might die in battle or of dysentery in the cold winter months. Certainly, it did not occur to her that he would be stabbed with a bowie knife in his tent within the year, leaving an unpleasant muddle at Oak Hill. In the end, Anna got entangled too, as did Althea, and even Cousin Martha.