

Behind My Eyes

A sepia-toned photograph of a brick wall. On the left, there is a window with a dark frame and a brick lintel above it. To the right of the window stands a tall, ornate street lamp with a glass lantern and a decorative top. The text 'Behind My Eyes' is written in a stylized, cursive font across the top of the image.

Jessica Holt

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For my mom and dad, most of all

Part I



A Beginning
at Every Ending

CHAPTER 1

COOPER

South Carolina

1922

THE MEMORY FEELS LIKE a thousand bees stinging my skin, but while it was happening, I felt nothing. I had to get my wife out of the bathtub. Her face was above the water, but her lips were blue and specks of ice glistened on her eyelashes.

I plunged my arms into the frigid water and lifted Liza's limp body. Her wet skin slid through my arms like a block of ice as I rushed her to the bed. Remembering what I'd been taught about body heat being the best warmth, I stripped off my clothes and lay down beside her. I wrapped her in a cocoon of bed covers and body parts and waited for any sign of life.

My own heartbeat pounded out the tips of my toes, but Liza's pulse was so faint that I had to press my palm into her breastbone just to feel a tap against my fingers. I held my other hand to her nostrils until a weak stream of warmth let me know she was alive.

I vigorously rubbed Liza's arms and legs, thinking if I could just get her blood flowing again, her heart would find its beat, her lungs would demand air, and she would wake up with rosy cheeks. One day we would laugh about the day her knight—in overalls rather than shining armor—saved her from the wintry bathtub. But no amount of rubbing seemed to warm her, much less wake her.

Suddenly Liza's body stiffened, and a faint moan emerged from the depths of her unconsciousness. I'd never been around a laboring woman, but I had assisted enough deliveries on the farm to know the baby was on its way.

My brain flat-out refused to put a single thought together as to how to help Liza. A minute passed with me helpless to my failing mind and her helpless to her failing body. The moaning stopped as abruptly as it started, Liza's stomach softened, her limbs relaxed, and she melted back into the mattress.

I threw on my pants and ran shirtless into the frozen night. The crisp air shocked my brain out of its stupor, and I spent the entire trip cursing myself for going into town and leaving Liza alone all day.

What was worse, I had insisted that Liza's mama ride with me and go visit a friend while I did my business. She hadn't let Liza be for over a week, and neither had her daddy and me. Every time Liza moved, we all scrambled as though the baby might fall right out of her.

I thought I was doing a nice thing for Liza by giving her a little peace and quiet before the baby came, and she had seemed eager to have it, assuring us she felt fine as she waved us up the driveway.

I called for Liza's mama as I ran, the icy remnants of a light dusting of snow crunching beneath my feet and slowing my progress through the pasture.

I was still a good hundred feet away when a lantern appeared on the porch, bounced down the steps, and glided effortlessly across the field in front of me, the owner of the hand that held it determined to reach her daughter.

The light disappeared inside my house, and by the time I toppled through the doorway on legs that felt like they had turned to jelly, Mrs. Ford was already by Liza's side, taking hold of her feet and pushing her knees up to her ears.

"Was she like this when you got home?"

"Yes ma'am, except she was in the bathtub! I don't know how long she'd been there, but the water was ice-cold and her

lips were blue and she wasn't awake and she hasn't woken up since, even during the pain! Can she get the baby out?!"

"We'll help her get the baby out," Liza's mama answered calmly. "And then we'll tend to Liza. Now come hold these legs in place, son, so the baby will have more room."

I moved to Liza's side and set one hand on each of her knees.

"Okay, you stay right where you are and don't let those legs come down. The next time there's a contraction, I'm gonna get ahold of the baby's head."

Liza's stomach tightened. Mrs. Ford gripped the baby's head with sure hands, grimacing as her daughter groaned.

"Pull them legs back," she grunted.

Liza showed no signs of discomfort aside from the muffled moan and a slight curl in one corner of her mouth, but as churned up as my insides were, hers must have been screaming in agony as my mother-in-law patiently delivered the baby's head.

"When the next contraction comes," she instructed, "we're gonna get this baby out. You pull Liza's legs back as far as you can, and as soon as you see the baby's feet, go get a string and a pair of scissors."

I pulled until Liza was in a fetal position herself. Mrs. Ford held the baby's head with one hand and pressed on Liza's stomach with the other. Gradually, the baby came into the world—shoulders, arms alongside the back, a bottom, two legs, and two tiny feet at the end.

For a few seconds I was overcome by the miraculous little life Liza and I had made together, but as quickly as the joy came, panic set back in. Across Mrs. Ford's palm lay a limp baby as blue as its mama.

"Why ain't the baby making a noise? And why's he so blue? Is he dead?"

"He ain't dead. Right now he's still living through his mama. You'll hear him as soon as we cut the cord."

I realized then that I was the reason the baby was still attached to Liza. I pulled the pocket knife from my pants and

the lace from my shoe. Mrs. Ford set the baby on Liza's stomach while she tied off the cord and cut it.

She cleaned the baby with a towel, being no more gentle than she would be with a washboard. I had seen newborn calves receive the same treatment and come to life, but my baby didn't respond to being kneaded like a ball of dough.

Picking him up by the ankles, Mrs. Ford gave him one good smack on the bottom. He went from blue to purple to maroon and wailed with an anger I had never been so happy to hear coming from another human being.

With the baby breathing on his own, Mrs. Ford sent me for my father-in-law. He was already stomping through the frozen field, coming to see what was keeping his wife. I hollered for him to hurry and ran back inside.

Mrs. Ford had swaddled the baby during the few seconds I was gone and was tucking blankets around Liza and murmuring a prayer only God could decipher.

"We've gotta get her to the hospital," she yelled to Mr. Ford when she heard his footsteps inside the front door.

Liza's daddy sent me to Dupre Carrington's house to ask for the use of his car. Mr. Ford's flatbed would expose Liza and the new baby to the harsh night—a risk that would most likely not end well for either of them.

I sprinted as fast as the frozen ground would allow, yelling, "Dupre, Liza needs to go to the hospital!" again and again.

The car met me halfway down Dupre's so-long-it-had-a-name-on-the-town-map driveway. I jumped into the passenger seat and we lumbered to the house, sliding on snow that was quickly becoming a sheet of ice.

Dupre blew the horn as he turned into the driveway. Liza's daddy hurried out the door with his daughter in his arms, and her mama followed close behind with the baby. I moved to the back seat, and Mr. Ford draped Liza across my lap with her head resting in the crook of my elbow.

What should have been a twenty minute drive turned into a forty minute creep to the community hospital. Liza didn't move

once, and nobody else made a sound aside from the occasional mewling of the new baby.



THE DOCTOR said we were just waiting for Liza's body to stop working. The nurses warmed her up and gave her medicine to make her comfortable, but her organs were already failing when we got to the hospital and nothing could be done to fix her.

Liza's mama and daddy went in to say goodbye while I waited in the hallway with the baby. Alone with my thoughts, the events of the evening rushed through my mind. I noticed details I had been unaware of in the moment—like how the house was dark when I got home and Liza wasn't waiting at the door to greet me. I should have known something was wrong before I stepped inside, or at the very least when I saw the broom propped against the living room wall with the dust pan half full on the floor next to it. Or when a dirty breakfast plate was still sitting on the kitchen table. Or when the bed was unmade. Or when no fire was burning in the fireplace.

But I hadn't consciously noticed any of the warning signs. I had just been anxious to see Liza after being away from her all day. If only I had recognized something wasn't right and rushed to find her, I might have found her in time. Maybe I would be sitting outside a room waiting for news of the arrival of my new baby rather than the last breath of my bride.

I felt the first sting as I sat there thinking *what if*. The sensation was so real that I almost lost my grip on the baby. It only lasted a fraction of a second—long enough to reach into the water and save Liza—but then I felt it again and again. The sting of bad decisions. The sting of missed opportunities. The sting of losing the love of my life. The sting of raising a motherless child.

My thoughts continued to brand my arms until I could hardly stand it. Just when I thought I was going to have to set the baby down to keep from dropping him, Mrs. Ford appeared and took him without saying a word.

Rubbing my forearms and reminding myself to breathe, I walked toward the door Mr. Ford held open. His eyes stayed fixed on the ground as I slipped past him and stepped into the hospital room to see my wife alive for the last time.

Liza looked peaceful. A handful of sand-colored freckles dotted her flawless porcelain face. Her red hair flowed down the arms of her nightgown. She looked like she was simply sleeping, but rather than the slow, rhythmic rise and fall of deep sleep, her chest jumped with quick, sporadic breaths.

I sat down on the edge of the bed and took Liza's hand in mine. Tears choked my words, but I composed myself long enough to tell her goodbye.

"Liza, I guess we ain't gonna get a proper goodbye. But you gotta listen to me now, all right? You had a beautiful baby..."

I couldn't finish the sentence. I thought of the baby as a boy, but I had only seen his backside before Mrs. Ford wrapped him in a blanket. I kissed Liza's hand and promised her I would be right back before I hurried out of the room and found Mrs. Ford sitting on a bench at the end of the hall.

"Is the baby a boy or a girl?" I asked breathlessly when I was close enough to speak without shouting.

Liza's mama looked up, distress showing on her face for the first time since the night began. Rather than giving me an answer, she held out the bundle. "Why don't you and Liza find out together?"

I carried the baby to Liza's side and removed the blanket. Carefully unpinning the baby's diaper, my breath caught. "You had a baby girl, Liza."

As I fumbled to reassemble the cloth around the baby's bottom, I gave my wife the only glimpse she would ever get of her daughter. "She's perfect. She's got real light hair with just a little red in it. And her eyes are as blue-green as the most beautiful ocean in the world, just like you imagined. She's gonna be okay, you hear? I'm gonna take real good care of her. I'll give her all that I can, and she'll go to school all the way through, and she'll grow up to be something, Liza. I'll see to

that. Don't you worry about her. And she'll know her mama. I'll tell her about you every day and show her your pictures and make sure she knows her grandparents, too."

With the diaper back in place, I slid my hand under Liza's and felt a gentle squeeze. "That's right, Liza. I'll be okay, too. I'll think of you always, but I'll be strong for the baby. Me and the baby, we'll take care of each other. I need her just as much as she needs me."

Liza's hand squeezed mine a little tighter. Her eyes were closed and her breaths were shallow, but I knew she was with me.

"I believe with all my heart, Liza, that you're gonna see God today, and when you can tear yourself away from all the glories of heaven, you'll be able to look down on us and see that we're doing all right."

I laid the baby across Liza's chest and ran her hand along the tiny body. "This is Jasmine Rose Fowler. She'll be called Jasmine, just like you wanted."

A whisper of a smile crossed Liza's face. She took in our little daughter with one last, lingering breath and gave my hand another squeeze, holding on to life as long as she could.

At the end of what was both the longest and shortest moment of my entire life, Liza's hand went limp, settling across the baby's back. And just like that, the love of my life and mother of my child was gone.

CHAPTER 2

JULIET

London

1922

IF ROMEO'S JULIET was right about the rose, I offer then, that which we call abandonment by any other name would feel as catastrophic.

My nanny called it an extended holiday.

Two days after my fifth birthday she woke me before dawn and placed me in the bath. She scrubbed me with such vigor that I was unsure whether her purpose was to make me shine or bleed. She explained that I, or she, or perhaps both of us, either separately or together, would be going away for a bit. She seemed unclear on who was going where or for how long, and the more flustered she became, the harder she scrubbed.

With the bathtub scouring complete, Nanny dressed me in a new white Mass dress, white stockings, and glossy black shoes. She released my black curls from their foam restraints and tied the ends of a white ribbon into a bow on top of my head.

She led me outside and helped me onto the back seat of the car where my mother waited. It was only when my nanny, the woman solely responsible for my having survived five years of life, closed the door between us that I realized, somewhat frantically, that I would not be taking my extended holiday with her.

My mother called it matriculation.

As we left London and entered the English countryside, she spoke more to the chauffeur than I had ever heard her speak to any of the help. She babbled excessively about matriculating me, nervously shifting her focus between the back of the driver's head and his reflection in the rearview mirror.

I watched the driver as my mother talked, hoping for a clue as to what her obvious anxiety meant for my immediate well-being, but his eyes did not leave the road as he acknowledged her with only a compulsory nod or *yes ma'am*.

The driver called it school.

The car passed through an iron gate and slowed to a stop in the shadow of a sprawling stone building. The driver held the door open while my mother and I exited the car. As I stepped past him, he said, "Enjoy your time at school, Miss Juliet."

Before I had the opportunity to question him, my mother ushered me up a dozen stone steps to two daunting wooden doors. As she lifted a fisted hand to knock on the right one, the left one began to open with the slowness its heaviness required.

The door lethargically revealed a stern-faced nun. With no time for pleasantries, she led us into a small office and showed us to two chairs before sitting down behind an oversized desk. Claspng her hands on its surface, she glared at me over the rim of her eyeglasses.

The nun called it relinquishment.

"I understand you wish to relinquish your daughter to our care," she said, turning her attention to my mother while one eye mysteriously remained on me.

My mother's poise did not waver as she began a seemingly well-rehearsed monologue. "Sister, Juliet's father and I wish for her to have a superb education, and we believe your school to be the best in all of England. We understand that you do not accept boarders before their sixth birthdays, but if you will allow me to explain our circumstances, we feel that you may be inclined to make an exception."

The nun lifted her hand to prevent my mother from explaining the aforementioned circumstances. “We received your records and have spoken with your husband. It is the desire of the convent to accept your daughter into our school at her present age.”

My mother’s eyes closed and she bowed her head, silently thanking God for a satisfactory answer to a prayer He had likely not been asked to weigh in on before that very moment.

“Juliet will be attending the nursery school program with the day students,” the nun continued. “She will live with the other boarders, however, and will participate in all of their activities. I will show you to her dormitory now.”

“That won’t be necessary.” My mother stood and gathered her handbag. “I trust Juliet will be properly cared for. The car is waiting outside, and I don’t wish to delay the driver any longer.”

I slid off my chair and attempted to connect my hand with my mother’s. Feigning oblivion, she folded her arms across her chest and tucked her hands out of my reach.

“Very well.” The nun rose from her chair and offered me her unnaturally long, bony fingers which looked more skeletal than healthy human. When I did not accept her waiting hand, she took it upon herself to grab my wrist and squeeze my knuckles just tightly enough that no amount of maneuvering set me free.

The nun was still in the process of heaving the door open when my mother slipped through the narrow space. I tried to follow, but the nun’s firm grip held me in place.

“Mother!” I cried as she walked down the steps.

She turned around with a forced smile stretched across her face. “You’re all right, darling. Don’t be afraid. I shall come to visit you soon.”

With no resemblance of a proper farewell, I peered through what remained of the door’s opening and, being restrained by a woman I did not know, watched my mother fade away.

My father surely called it the next logical step in a child's rearing.

I didn't know what to call it. The concept of being separated from all I had known was so foreign to me that there was no word for it in my vocabulary.

Veronica Adams called it exactly what it was.

She was eight years old and in need of a roommate. Since I was apparently in need of a room, the gaunt nun dragged me down a long hall and deposited me into a small, drab room decorated only with creams and browns. The room contained two single beds with a bedside table between them, two bureaus, and two small desks. On one of the beds sat a girl with hair the color of a candied apple and more freckles than I knew one face was allowed.

"Veronica, this is Juliet. You will be sharing your room with her," was the only introduction we were given.

"Oh, I'm sure we'll be fast friends!" Veronica gleefully bounced off of the bed and took both of my hands in hers.

Seeing that I had been well-received, the nun dismissed herself from the room. With the click of the door, a look of absolute disgust swept across Veronica's face. She dropped my hands, scoffed, and returned to the doll on her bed.

I sat down on the edge of the unoccupied bed and stared out the small window, its view obstructed by bare branches scraping the glass. The twigs—not proper branches of sufficient size to aid an escape—clawed at the window, and I shuddered as I relived the sensation of the nun's cold, skeletal fingers against my flesh.

Veronica broke the silence once she had thoroughly planned her attack. "Your mummy and daddy wouldn't even accompany you to your room, huh? They abandoned you at the door. At least my parents made sure I had a suitable place to stay before they left me." Immense pleasure seeped through her mocking tone.

"Abandoned me?" I separated each syllable into its own question.

“Abandoned you,” she repeated, exaggerating her lip movements. “Dumped you. Threw you out like the garbage.”

Veronica gave me time to process her definition and then said, “What did you say your name was?”

“Juliet.”

“Well, Juliet, you are no longer part of your parents’ lives. They are at home right now, the home that was also yours just this morning, celebrating your absence. This is the moment they have waited for all your life. It’s a glorious day for them and quite a dreadful one for you.”

Veronica returned to her doll, and I returned to the window, its picture now blurred by my tears. From the hate-spewing mouth of a child came the truth. I had been abandoned.



SURROUNDED BY an audience of friends at the dinner table, Veronica sang, “Little baby Juli-ette, can’t even write the alphabet,” repeating the rhyme until everyone at the table was either laughing or singing along with her.

“My name is not Juli-ette,” I murmured toward my plate. “It’s *Juliet*.”

“What’s that, baby Juli-ette? I can’t hear you. You must speak up, darling,” Veronica teased.

“That’s enough, girls,” a young nun announced sternly, her eyes on Veronica. Shifting her focus to me, her face softened and a smile brightened sparkling brown eyes. “You must be Juliet. I’m so glad to meet you. My name is Sister Ava. Won’t you come have your dinner with me?”

I accepted her outstretched hand, and as we walked across the room, her warmth passed into my hand and settled in my core. *Maybe she’s an angel*, I thought. *My angel*.

She certainly did not look like a nun. She was beautiful, and her beauty was not hidden behind a habit. Her clothing was that of a commoner—a white blouse, a knee-length black skirt, and flat black shoes.

“Don’t mind those girls, Juliet. They’re simply afraid you’re going to get all the attention.” Sister Ava pushed my chair to the table and sat down across from me. “Go ahead and eat, darling.”

I took a bite of potatoes. “Are you my teacher?”

“I’m your friend.”

I took another bite as Sister Ava continued her introduction.

“I’m the three-year-old teacher, so you won’t be in my class. Have you been to school before?”

I shook my head.

“You have quite a new experience ahead of you, then! You must eat your dinner, wash, and go right to bed so you will be ready for tomorrow.”

“I don’t know how to wash myself,” I admitted. “My nanny does it for me, and in the morning she combs my hair and helps me dress.”

“I see.” Sister Ava paused as if she were really contemplating the predicament. “What if I help you tonight? I’ll make sure you’re tucked into bed before I leave, and I’ll help you dress in the morning.”

I looked up from my plate and returned Sister Ava’s smile. For the first time since my abandonment, I did not feel the urge to cry.

CHAPTER 3

COOPER

IT WAS TOO SOON for Liza to be nothing but a memory. I went to church and wished she was there. I passed the schoolhouse and thought of all the years we spent there together. I walked inside our house and felt the worst heartache of my life.

My daughter wouldn't get the life she deserved if we stayed on the farm. She'd have her family, but in Abbeville, Jasmine would always be that poor little girl with no mama.

My first thought was to go back to Charleston, where I was born. But in Charleston, if you weren't rich, you weren't much of anything. We would end up living on a farm, probably in old slave quarters, and I would spend my days out in the fields picking whatever crop that farm happened to grow while Jasmine was cared for by the housemaid until she was old enough to increase the farm's productivity. She might or might not go to school, but she almost certainly wouldn't go past the sixth grade.

I couldn't do that to Liza's child. I had promised to raise her right, and I intended to keep that promise.

After an exhaustive search through the want ads, moving to a more populated part of the Upstate was the most appealing option. Textile mills had sprung up all over Spartanburg County, and every man who was willing and able to work was given a sure job and an affordable house to rent. The pay

wasn't great, but all Jasmine and I needed was a roof over our heads and enough money to get by.

So against the well-meaning advice of Liza's mama and daddy, I loaded up Dupre's car and he drove me and Jasmine eighty miles northeast on a chilly, gray afternoon. We turned into the mill village when the sun should have been setting, but the sun hadn't shown itself all day. Children halted their games and scattered to the sides of dirt streets as the car crept closer to the house number I had been assigned.

Dupre came to a stop in front of a pale yellow, box-shaped house situated on brick pilings. The dirt from the street turned into more dirt patched with brown grass. Four cement steps led to a wooden porch that stretched the width of the house. A weathered wooden door stood in the middle of a clapboard wall with an oversized window centered on either side.

I carried my sleeping baby girl across the yard and up the steps. The planks on the porch were quick to let me know that I shouldn't linger on any one board for too long. The front door opened into a living room furnished with a sofa, two cloth chairs, and a coffee table, all of which looked to have been used by the tenants before us and the tenants before them and so on.

The living room turned into the kitchen without so much as a divided wall for warning, and with halls apparently considered a waste of space by the builder, a door off of each room emptied directly into the bedrooms. The first room looked more like a storage shed than a functioning bedroom, with barely enough space for a set of bunk beds, a cradle, a mattress propped against the wall, and a chest of drawers. Crammed into the other room were a bed, a bedside table, a chest of drawers, and a dresser.

Nestled between the two rooms was a bathroom, complete with a toilet, sink, and bathtub. I turned the knob and watched in awe as rushing water pounded against the white enamel. How happy Liza would be to know her baby was going to grow up with indoor plumbing, a luxury she never had.

“This is gonna be your room, Sugar,” I cooed to the baby as I laid her in the cradle. She fluttered her eyelids and stretched, quickly settling into her new bed.

As soon as my belongings were unloaded, Dupre headed home. I was still unpacking the first box when Jasmine’s wails let me know it was long past her supper time.

The evening was already turning bitterly cold, but I took her out to the front steps to feed her. I needed the fresh air, just for a minute. Wrapped tightly in her blanket, Jasmine was perfectly content sucking on her bottle outside.

While she ate, I took in my new surroundings. Closely spaced houses lined both sides of the street. Most of the houses had space for a garden, but not much was growing in the dead of winter. Each house was a replica of the one beside it, and each row led to another row until my eyes could see only a dusky blur of yellows and tans and grays.

The mill itself towered over the blur, glaring down at everything around it. Lights shone through the windows and smoke billowed from the smokestack. A low hum floated through the air, which was at best nothing like being in the country where the only sounds were the ones God made and at worst a horrifying indication of what it must sound like inside.

As I forced my attention back to the street, I noticed a familiar sight. Certain that my eyes were deceiving me, I walked toward what appeared to be a cow roped to the side of a house. Sure enough, a milk cow was chained to the back porch like it was the family pet. A pig stuck its head out of a shed in the back yard and chickens pecked at the sparse ground. *If only I’d known*, I thought, *I would have brought a cow and a pig from home*. Gardening and tending farm animals was something I knew how to do.

I looked out at the sprawling brick building, wondering what I had gotten myself into. I had no business working in a mill. I only knew how to work the land, and there was little land here to work.

I stayed on the porch long after Jasmine finished her bottle, unaware of my flushed cheeks and numb nose until her cries

reminded me it was too cold to be outside. I went into the house, strongly doubting my decision to move someplace where I knew no one. Who was I to think I could be a mill man? Back home, the advertisements made it look like an offer I couldn't refuse, but the ads had conveniently overlooked the gloominess hanging over the neighborhood like a storm cloud.

I moved Jasmine's cradle into my bedroom and crawled into bed, anxious and scared of what tomorrow might bring. Hearing the baby breathing beside me offered some comfort, but the dismal feeling lingered. Eventually I drifted off to sleep, but all too soon the morning came.



I WAS to report to the mill at seven o'clock, two hours later than my day started on the farm. I put on my nicest button-up shirt and slacks, not knowing the attire for a worker but wanting to look my best. Jasmine refused to be roused from sleep, so I dressed her and fixed a bottle to take to the nursery.

I walked through the bone-chilling cold, a whipping wind fighting every step forward, in search of the nursery and finally found it tucked away in a far corner of the property. A long hallway stretched down the center of the building with doors lining each side. I stepped inside a door labeled *Infants*, assuming that was the place for Jasmine.

Cribs covered most of the room, situated side by side with enough space for an average-sized person to squeeze in between. Two rocking chairs sat on a pastel rug—the only color in the stark room. A middle-aged woman in a white nurse's outfit was changing a baby's diaper at one of the cribs. Four or five other babies were sleeping and one baby sat in a crib, chewing on a rattle.

I walked up behind the lady. "Excuse me, ma'am."

"Yes?" She didn't look up from the baby she was diapering.

"I have a one-month-old daughter. Is this the right place for her?"

“A one-month-old?” The lady spun around and eyed the bundle of blankets covering Jasmine. “She should be at home with her mama.” She returned her attention to the baby in the crib, our conversation finished as far as she was concerned.

“Her mama’s gone, ma’am. She passed away last month.”

The caregiver’s tone turned from scolding to pity. “Oh, I see. Let me put this one down and I’ll take her.” She set the newly changed baby in his crib and reached for Jasmine. “This is the youngest one we’ve had, I believe.” She held Jasmine in the air, letting the blankets fall off of her so she could get a good look. “Yep, she’s a tiny one.”

Jasmine curled into that ball all newborns make, her head flopping forward against her chest. The lady twisted her in every direction like she had never seen the likes of such a small child.

“We’ll take good care of her. You go on now,” she said when I didn’t leave on my own.

“Don’t you wanna know her feeding and sleeping schedule?”

“We put the babies on our schedule. You’re gonna be late if you don’t go, Mister...”

“Fowler. Cooper Fowler. And that’s Jasmine.” I nodded toward the baby. “Thank you for watching her. I guess I’ll see you this afternoon.”

The lady nodded a farewell, but leaving Jasmine with a complete stranger was easier said than done. I pictured her in Liza’s mama’s arms, and then I pictured her in Liza’s arms, and then just as my eyes filled with tears, the lady said, “I love them like they’re my own, Mr. Fowler.”

I forced a smile that probably looked sadder than if I’d not smiled at all and left the room. As I walked down the hall, I heard the lady say, “Hello there, Miss Jasmine. Welcome to your new home.”

And just like that, my daughter’s world became confined to a property line.

CHAPTER 4

JULIET

IN THE WEEKS FOLLOWING my abandonment, Sister Ava woke me each morning and walked me to school. In the afternoon, I waited in her classroom while she prepared lessons and met with attentive parents. We ate dinner at our table for two, and then she helped me with my bath and tucked me into bed.

I had been at the school for two weeks when, as Sister Ava bid me goodnight, I threw my arms around her neck.

“I love you, Sister Ava,” I whispered, not quite as softly as I should have, judging by the snort coming from Veronica’s bed.

Sister Ava kissed the tips of her fingers and touched them to my forehead. Turning to Veronica, she patted her back and told her goodnight. It had been explained to me that if Sister Ava was going to oversee my bedtime routine, it was only right that she do the same for Veronica.

The door clicked, and Sister Ava’s footsteps trailed off down the hall. I closed my eyes, hoping to will myself to sleep before Veronica decided to say out loud whatever it was that was making her body shake.

As though reading my mind, she suddenly sat upright and exclaimed, “I love you, Sister Ava!”

She fell onto her back in a fit of laughter, and in my mind I told her exactly what I thought of her behavior as she continued to chuckle.



THE SPRING HOLIDAY was the first true test of the authenticity of my abandonment. Until then, the school had remained open on the weekends, but the annual four day closure meant I was required to vacate the grounds one way or another.

I sat amongst the other girls on the front lawn with my bags packed and ready to go, genuinely believing that someone—my nanny, the chauffeur, perhaps my mother if she had liquored herself up a bit—would come for me.

The cars came for the girls one by one, until only Veronica and I were waiting outside. *I would wait until the last possible second to retrieve her also*, I thought.

Veronica was not so kind as to keep her thoughts to herself.

“Little baby Juli-ette, no one’s come to get her yet! If no one wants her anymore, it’s probably because she’s such a bore!”

“You hush, Veronica Adams!” I threw myself on top of her. I had never felt so enraged, but I knew part of what she said was the truth. No one wanted me. No one had ever wanted me.

My mother was thirty-eight when I was born, my father forty-four. They had been happily married without children for sixteen years. Their lack of conception had convinced them they were unable to conceive, so they filled their days living among England’s elite. Dinner parties, horse races, afternoon teas, and other social events occupied my parents’ time.

Learning they were expecting me must have been the most dreadful news they could imagine. At least an illness would either run its course or kill them, but I’d be there always, a constant thorn in their sides.

The most time I spent with my mother was the nine months she carried me, and she didn’t last a full nine months. I

was born five weeks early, much to her delight, I'm sure. Two days after my birth, the hospital nurse passed me to my mother who immediately passed me to my nanny, and future encounters with her were infrequent.

So it came as no surprise when my mother left me at the convent without shedding a tear, but even she could not have meant to walk away forever.

Veronica quickly gained the dominant position amid the scuffle, and while it would have been easier to pull her off of me, Sister Ava grabbed my arms and scooted me out from under her, ignoring Veronica altogether.

"Juliet, what got into you?"

"Veronica's nasty to me all the time, and I'm sick of it! I hate her!"

Veronica smirked victoriously as Sister Ava sat me on the ground and knelt beside me. "Hate is a strong word, Juliet, and I don't want to hear you use it again. You shouldn't feel that way about anyone. Hate is a hurtful emotion, and it hurts the one whom it consumes the most."

In the midst of my scolding, a lone car pulled up the drive. Veronica's father emerged from the automobile and politely embraced his daughter.

"Goodbye, Sister Ava! See you on Monday! Bye-bye, baby Juli-ette!" Veronica called gleefully as the car door closed and separated us for four glorious days.

Sister Ava sat down beside me on the grass. When the car had passed through the gate and faded out of sight, I dug my fists into my hips and demanded an explanation as to why I had been singled out.

"Why did you not scold Veronica? She started it."

"And you finished it," Sister Ava answered bluntly. "I expect better from you."

"But not from her?"

Sister Ava looked out across the sprawling lawn. "I will always require better from Veronica, but I will never expect it. And unless you are in danger of bodily harm, you must not let someone like her dictate your behavior. When you retaliate, you

are doing exactly as she wishes. Don't give her that satisfaction. Do you understand?"

I bobbed my head up and down as I watched the sun slowly set on the truth of my abandonment.

Sister Ava rose to meet the school secretary as she exited the building and officially locked the doors for the long weekend. An exchange of alternating arm gestures and hands on hips took place, and after both women glanced at the desolate road, one shared shake of the head sent Sister Ava back to me.

"How would you like to spend the holiday with me?"

"Won't my family be looking for me?"

Sister Ava glanced at the ground before returning her eyes to mine. "Your nanny phoned. She's fallen ill, and she's afraid she might be contagious, so she thinks it best if you stay here this weekend."

"Oh." I reached for a blade of grass and twirled it around my finger. The thought of spending four uninterrupted days with Sister Ava was pleasing, but the reason for her company was unsettling. Was I really such an unwanted inconvenience that neither my parents nor their staff were willing to put up with me for a few short days?

Sister Ava waited expectantly, as though she was not my sole alternative to sleeping outside.

"All right." I stood up and reached for her hand. As we walked across the school grounds, my heart began to hurt. I did not realize how desperately I wanted someone to come for me until no one did. I thought I simply wanted to prove to Veronica that I had not been abandoned, but I wanted to go home. I wanted to spend the night in my own bed, surrounded by my beloved stuffed animals. I wanted to wake up to the smell of sausage and coffee. I wanted to have a tea party with my dolls. I wanted to lick the bowls after the cook poured the cake batter.

Those were the hopes and dreams of my five-year-old self. Heavy tears slid down my cheeks as I realized I would most likely never experience those luxuries again.

As I swept my free hand across my face, Sister Ava noticed my tears and knelt in front of me much like she had after my outburst with Veronica, but this time she did not correct my behavior or teach me a lesson or even tell me everything was going to be all right. She said nothing at all, simply embracing me and drawing me to her until my tears stained her blouse.

With my arms still wrapped firmly around her neck and my face buried in her shoulder, Sister Ava stood and carried me the rest of the way to her small stone cottage at the edge of the property.

She gave a tour of the entire house with a sweep of her arm. After apologizing for not owning a second bed, she said, "The couch will fit you nicely, though, and I have plenty of blankets."

I nodded to acknowledge that I had been spoken to, but I was not yet over my heartache.

Sister Ava warmed a stew, and we ate at the small table in the center of the kitchen. The tinkling of spoons against china bowls was the only break in the silence.

"How would you like to go to the theater tomorrow?" Sister Ava asked as I attempted to maneuver my way around a piece of floating cabbage that seemed to find my spoon no matter where I placed it.

The theater? My mother and father attended the theater almost every Friday night. They left the house as proper, well-spoken, well-dressed, pleasant-smelling Brits. Upon their return hours later, my mother had turned into Eliza Doolittle, pre-refinement.

I liked, possibly even loved, this version of my mother, despite the stink of alcohol and cigarettes that filled the bedroom when she made her grand entrance. Her alcohol-fueled state led her to believe she was tiptoeing up the stairs, unlatching the door without a sound, and creeping to my bed, but the hard thud as she met each step was sure to wake me if her shrieking voice had not already done so.

Accomplishing the feat of reaching the bed, she would kneel beside me and run her fingers through my hair.

Peppermint lingered on her breath—an unsuccessful attempt to cover the less pleasant smells of the theater.

Through unsavory breath and slurred speech I heard the only stories I was ever told. My mother recalled act for act, scene for scene, the details of the play she had attended. Few tales were child friendly. Shakespeare received her most animated retellings, while Moliere followed close behind.

I fought to stay awake and soak in this version of my mother—her hand willing to hold my hand, her lips willing to kiss my cheek, her eyes willing to look lovingly into mine. Sleep always won, and the next morning when I sat down at the breakfast table, my mother had returned to pristine condition, with not a hint of the previous night to be found.

The theater transformed its audience in profound ways. In my mother's case it was always for the better, but Sister Ava was already close to perfect, so it seemed the only direction she could go was down.

“I didn't know nuns were allowed to go to the theater.”

“They are. And I'm not a nun,” she quickly reminded me. “Never have been. Never will be.”

“Have you been to the theater before?” I was certain she had not.

“Yes I have. Many times. Have you?”

“No.”

“Well, tomorrow's the day then!”

Sister Ava left no room for argument, and I had no desire to disagree. I wanted nothing more than to experience the place that possessed the miraculous power of making my mother love me.



I TOSSED and turned on the couch, anxious for Sister Ava to appear. After what felt like hours, the bedroom door opened and she stepped into the living room wearing a powder-blue, drop-waist dress. Her auburn hair fell to her chin beneath a

cloche hat. It seemed as though the theater was already working its magic. Nun to flapper in one night.

Presenting me with a package, she said, "This was to be your Easter gift, but I want you to have it now."

I was unaware that it was common practice to give Easter gifts, but I thanked her and tore open the box. A coral-pink dress lay inside, along with a matching hair ribbon and shiny Mary Janes. I stroked the dress like it was the most precious gift I had ever received and then threw my arms around Sister Ava's neck.

"Thank you, Sister Ava!"

"You're welcome, darling," she said, returning the hug. "I thought you would like the ruffles and lace. Now try it on, and let's see how you look."

The dress fit like it had been stitched around my body. I stood at the full-length mirror and admired myself. Sister Ava came into view beside me and I slipped my hand into hers, thinking, *this must be what it feels like to have a mother*, and smiling radiantly at the thought.



THE GRAND MAJESTIC THEATRE lived up to its name. A man wearing a knee-length black overcoat and top hat greeted us at a wrought iron door.

"What a lovely young lady," he told Sister Ava as he tipped his hat and winked at me.

He thinks I belong to her.

"Yes she is," Sister Ava agreed, tightly gripping my hand so she wouldn't lose me in the crowd.

I do belong to her.

The man accepted our tickets and held the door open for us to enter the lobby. A crimson carpet led the way across a mahogany floor to a staircase almost as wide as the lobby itself. At the top of the stairs, a man in a black vest ushered us through an elaborate wooden door with an entire Asian village carved into it.

The man showed us to two seats on the front row of the balcony. Intricate designs brought life to ivory walls. Curved boxes, decorated in red and gold, jutted from the walls. Each box held a handful of exquisitely dressed patrons being served drinks by a man in a vest. I supposed my parents watched from a floating box complete with their very own vested server.

Oversized crystal chandeliers sparkled below a painting of the heavens on the ceiling. The rows ascended behind me until they reached the first strokes of the heavenly mural. A sea of people filled the room below. A dark hole spanned the width of a red curtain at the front of the auditorium.

The murmurings of the audience swirled around me. My anticipation grew as the orchestra filled the hole. A cacophony of tuning stringed instruments permeated the auditorium. The lights dimmed, and a braided gold rope drew back the red curtain to reveal more darkness.

A hush fell over the room, and for several seconds, twelve hundred people sat in silence. Then, in perfect synchrony, the lights illuminated the stage and music filled the air.

I watched in awe as Peter and the Darling children flew to Neverland. I was with them as they encountered the pirates and Captain Hook, the Indians and Tiger Lily, the Lost Boys and Tinkerbell.

When the curtain unexpectedly closed, harsh light forcing me back to reality, I whispered, "Is it over?"

"No dear, this is intermission. A time to stand and stretch your legs. Would you like to walk downstairs?"

I shook my head and returned my attention to the stage, sitting at the edge of my seat and waiting for the first sign that the curtain was about to open. After what felt like an eternity, the lights blinked and then went out completely. The curtain swung open, and I was back in Neverland.

The Darling children returned to London, the players took their final bows, and with the audience on its feet applauding, the curtain permanently separated me from my beloved Neverland.

The rows around us emptied, but I remained in my seat. I had lived the magic of the theater and was not ready to leave it behind.

Sister Ava sat quietly beside me until we were alone in the balcony. Standing up, she said, "We can't stay any longer, Juliet. There's another performance tonight, and the auditorium has to be cleaned before the audience arrives."

"Can't we stay and see it again?"

"You enjoyed yourself, did you?" Sister Ava smiled. "I promise I'll bring you again. Just not twice in one day."

That seemed like a fair compromise. I slowly walked to the aisle. Leaning over the railing, I looked below, above, and all around. *I will see you again soon, theater. It has been a pleasure.* I met Sister Ava at the top of the stairs and together we reentered the real world.

As the car left the city, I announced my desire to be Peter Pan.

"Not Wendy?"

"Peter," I said emphatically. "Wendy only visits Neverland. Peter lives there forever, and he never grows up. Wendy grows up. I don't want to be her."

"You want to be a child forever?"

"I don't want to be a Juliet child forever. I want to be a Peter child."

Sister Ava nodded. "You can be."

"I cannot be! I don't have any fairy dust!"

"You don't need fairy dust." Sister Ava seemed to be taking the conversation more seriously than would be expected from an adult.

"How would I get to Neverland then?"

"All you need is imagination."

"How do I get that?"

"You already have it. You just have to use it."

"How can I use it when I don't know where to find it?"

"You find it in there." Sister Ava set her hand on top of my head. Seeing that I was in need of further explanation, she said, "Do you have dolls?"

"I did when I lived with my mummy and daddy."

"Did you ever have a tea party with them?"

"With my mum and dad?"

Sister Ava smirked at my wrinkled nose. "With your dolls, silly."

"Oh, yes, with my dolls."

"Did they really drink the tea?"

"There was no tea to drink. I'm not allowed to make tea."

Sister Ava suppressed another smile. "But you set cups and plates down in front of them, yes?"

"Yes."

"That's imagination. An entire world exists inside your mind. Peter created his world and made it exactly as he wanted it to be."

"I can do that too?"

"Of course. Imagination is often what allows one to survive. Without it, one must spend all of his time in the real world, and the real world is not always a grand place to be."

Veronica's freckled face popped into my head. "So when Veronica's teasing me, I should pretend I'm somewhere else?"

"Yes, create your own Neverland behind your eyes, and go there whenever you wish."

"Behind my eyes?"

"Close your eyes," Sister Ava instructed, "and tell me what you see."

I scrunched my face around my eyes to keep my eyelids from fluttering. "I don't see anything."

"Think of something happy. Now what do you see?"

I smiled at the Peter Pan-esque exercise Sister Ava had me performing. *Think happy thoughts. Think happy thoughts.* "I see...a puppy."

"What does he look like?"

"He's small and black with a curly tail."

"What is he doing?"

"He's jumping on my legs and wagging his tail. He's waiting for me to throw a stick for him to fetch."

"Open your eyes."

Behind My Eyes

The dog was replaced by Sister Ava's smiling face.

"You just went to Neverland."

"I did? I'm going to go again!" My puppy friend returned, this time with the stick in his mouth.

By the time Sister Ava and I arrived at her cottage, the theater had fully worked its magic. I was a changed little girl. No matter my circumstances, I could escape into my mind. I could live behind my eyes.

Part II



The End
of The Beginning

CHAPTER 5

JASMINE

South Carolina

1930

THE MILL crushed us long before the stock market tried to crash us. That's what my daddy said when I asked why the depression wasn't depressing us. Apparently we were already as depressed as we could be.

In the eight years since we moved to the mill hill, I had never been any farther than my own two feet could take me. Daddy luckily still worked full shifts, so during the summer I was my own babysitter. I thought myself a rather good one until the day my own two feet assisted a bicycle in taking me a little farther than I'd ever been. Two blistered bare feet and a trip to Popsicle jail later, the crash had caught me.



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[Behind My Eyes](#)