

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, a tall, ornate street lamp stands against the wall. The lamp has a decorative top and a glass globe. The entire scene is captured in a warm, monochromatic sepia tone.

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

and

Chapter 4

Omitted from

this preview



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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