

SKINNY DIPPING IN CANE RIVER

Epilogue

The pain is unbearable, white fire behind my eyelids. I clutch my head trying to contain it. A cool hand massages the back of my neck. When I open my eyes Patty's face comes into focus, hovering over me. Her expression changes from concern to relief.

“Are you all right?”

It hurts, but I manage to nod.

She stops massaging my neck. “Good thing I checked on you before I went home.”

I want to say something, but my head throbs so badly I can't speak. I glance at Patty, and she shakes her head. “I was so worried. You were sitting on the curb staring at the train station. Kind of in a trance or something.”

The pain behind my eyes dissipates. Patty talks on, but I don't listen. My heart taps a disagreeable rhythm. I rest two fingers on my wrist and feel my pulse: tachycardia. I can still smell Cane River, and my hair feels damp even though I know it's dry. I haven't had a total memory break in years. I'd forgotten about residual effects, the pounding headache and rapid heart rate.

“I'm fine.” But I'm not fine. I desperately miss Sara. I want to curl up to my memories, have her stroke my back, and tell me it'll be all right. I ache all over, my muscles knotting in spasm. Simply my body's response to movements it thinks it performs while I'm deep in a memory.

“Are you sure? Do you want me to call an ambulance?” Patty rests a caring hand on my shoulder, makes me feel guilty for thinking she’s a busy body.

Before I answer, my brother wheels around the corner in the rental car. He unfolds himself, reminding me of the fluid way he leapt out of the Crawfords’ jeep as if he rode in their car this very morning. However, his gray hair and wire-thin shoulders remind me I’m in the here and now.

Brett steps to the curb, helping Patty pull me up. “What happened?”

“I found him sitting right here. He was out of it, but his eyes were open.” She leans over to my brother and whispers. “Kind of creepy.”

“Memories.” I dust my pants, checking out the coffee stains on them.

“Sweet Jesus. You haven’t had one overwhelm you in years. How long has it been?”

“Too long to count.” I wave them away, then give Patty’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “Really, I’m fine. Just need to rest a few minutes, then we can go to the river.”

Brett holds the rear car door open for Patty.

“No thanks. Y’all go on ahead. I have one more mile to jog.”

Brett shuts the rear door. I drop into the passenger seat and roll down the window. A cool breeze flutters through my hair. It feels like Sara’s fingers ruffling my hair. If only I could live in my memories.

“The train station triggered something. Didn’t it?”

“Yes.” I rub my knees through my pants. “Remember the summer Dad died?”

“A difficult summer to forget.” Brett turns into the drive. “Elizabeth came in last night, but we were sleeping, and she didn’t want to wake us. She’ll drive us to the river later.”

“Hmm.” I tap the padded armrest.

Brett gets out first and talks to me over the car’s roof as I exit. “I know you’re taking this hard, but Sara wanted this to be a celebration. You should at least try... for her sake.”

“Coming from a man who divorced three wives.” I give him a look that cuts through skin and muscle, straight for the jugular.

“Daddy?” Elizabeth stands behind me. She uses the same little girl voice I’ve listened to for the last thirty-six years. She places her hand on my back as I turn. “Are you okay? You look a little pale.”

Brett moves in next to us, and Elizabeth gives him an anxious glance. I touch her shoulder. “Nothing to worry about. Took a walk down memory lane, that’s all.”

Elizabeth looks so much like her mother my heart clinches all the way to my backbone. She steps back and assesses me. “About Mom?”

“Yes.” I wrap my arm around her shoulders, and we walk to the porch. “She knew I’d remember the first time we met if I came back to Natchitoches. She knew me better than anyone.”

“You didn’t want to do this, remember. If Mom hadn’t made you promise, we wouldn’t be here right now.” Elizabeth gives me a gentle squeeze.

I wanted to sort out my feelings, alone. I ease toward my room. “Let me change clothes, and we’ll go to Shell Beach. Give me a few minutes.”

My mind and body suffer from *memory fatigue*, an actual phenomenon after a experiencing a hyperkinetic memory. Sara named it. She'd made a career researching what I thought of as my affliction. She studied children with all kinds of detailed sensory memories and helped them gain control.

The minute I walk into the room, I suck in the fresh scent of gardenias. And I think of Priss and Mrs. Dupree's car. I pull out a clean shirt and pants, dismally changing clothes like a robot past its expiration date. Images of Mom, Tudy, and Big Red, all long gone, invade my thoughts, causing me to yearn for earlier times.

With extra care, I pick up the ceramic container containing Sara's ashes. The little pale envelope flutters to the floor, but I don't pick it up. Placing the urn on the bed, I sink beside it.

"Well, you've done it to me again." I snuggle with the urn as if Sara can hear me. "This is what you wanted. You wanted me to remember the good times. Not the end times. I understand. I guess I never thought you'd leave first. I always thought it'd be me leaving you."

My eyes mist over, and I cling to the urn, but it's not Sara, not even her essence. I don't want to be anywhere near Cane River, though I promised her. I want this small part of her to stay with me forever.

An uncertain knock sounds on the door. I set Sara's urn on the bedside table, running my hand over the muted flowers etched into the ceramic.

"Come in."

Brett peers around the door. "Are you ready?"

Rising, I pick up the urn and hold it to my chest. It feels like cold clay. I stand perfectly still.

“Take your time. Elizabeth and I will be in the car.”

I press the vase against me. I’d love to stay in this very spot and never leave, but Elizabeth and Brett are waiting. I shuffle to the door and stop. I almost forgot the note.

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Elizabeth’s car is more spacious than the little clown car Brett and I arrived in so I stretch my legs and position the urn beside me, my arm wrapped around the flared neck. The asphalt hisses beneath the tires on Highway 494, and I watch the cotton fields flash by, alternating rows of pale pink and green. The only interruption is a wooden sign shaped like an antebellum home, the directions to Sweet Magnolia.

The plantation still rises like a jewel in the curve of Cane River, but Priss doesn’t come here often. She actually married Jackson Crawford. But the marriage didn’t last. For a few years, she disappeared, breaking contact with Sara and me, but sometime in the late seventies she reemerged as the wife of the American Ambassador to the United Kingdom. We visited her once. Priss put all her southern charm to good use and lived in a city with more people than she could count in a day. Last we heard she lived in London near Piccadilly.

I crane my neck to catch a glimpse of Shell Beach and the bridge, but the beach isn’t there, only a muddy riverbank covered with unruly mounds of honeysuckle. It made me smile.

A new shiny steel bridge straddles the river just past the rusted bridge only pedestrians can walk across now. Elizabeth doesn't notice a difference. Why would she? She'd never been to Shell Beach. Brett turns toward me, nodding.

"Appears we lasted longer than the beach." He has a peculiar glint in his eye. He rarely shows any emotion, part of his training.

Thankfully, no one is around when Elizabeth shuts off the engine next to the yellow painted gates blocking any cars from treading onto the rusted bridge. We climb out, Brett first. I clutch the urn and find Elizabeth standing next to me, her eyes rimmed with moisture. This rents my heart.

Brett opens the trunk and reaches inside, emerging with a picnic basket. "Had Patty prepare this for us before her run."

From the basket, he hoists a bottle of champagne and crystal flutes.

Grimacing I say, "This isn't a party."

"My promise to Sara. She wanted this to be a celebration." Brett says with a voice too jocular for the occasion.

Elizabeth snuffles. I anticipate a break in her composure. How can I hold her and the urn? Brett fiddles with the aluminum champagne wrapper, then wrangles with the wire cage. His fingers tremble with the effort. We focus on the bottle, all the twisting and fussing. Brett is all-thumbs, but I can't help. I manage to set Sara's urn on the car's hood and wrap an arm around Elizabeth. She rests her head on my shoulder.

Then as if out of nowhere, long slender fingers with manicured ruby nails tap Brett's hand. He quits struggling, simply lets go.

"Let me, darlin'. You'd think Army Intelligence would have taught you better."

Embarrassment creeps up his face. I didn't know it was possible for old men to blush. Priss grins and embraces me.

"What... how are you here?" I ask.

"My younger sister still lives at Sweet Magnolia, in case you didn't know. Sara called me the day she was diagnosed with cancer. We talked every day until the end. I promised her I'd be here." Priss pops the cork, champagne spews over the side.

Brett holds all four flutes in between his lanky fingers, catching the bubbling liquid in deft swoops like a master juggler. He never struggled with the wire cage. It had been a ruse; he was waiting for Priss. Why didn't I catch on? Brett hands out the glasses.

"I don't understand."

My daughter lifts her hand and touches my cheek. "Mom always liked a little subterfuge."

I pick up Sara's urn, and we silently drift to the center of the bridge. Next to the railing, a metal step juts out, and I place the urn on the step.

Elizabeth opens her purse and pulls out an envelope matching the one Sara gave me. She gazes at the card. Musical notes cover three staves bracketed together. Before Elizabeth could write, she could sing. That's when Sara developed a secret musical code for just the two of them. My hand drops to my side when she speaks. "She left us individual messages. In turn, we each made her a promise. We promised to bring her to Natchitoches. She always said her life began here."

Brett opens his envelope and pulls out a card. It's a message written in a string of mathematical numbers and symbols. "I taught Sara one of the codes we used in Vietnam.

She wrote to me using it, said she felt like a secret agent when we traded letters all those years ago.”

Brett coughs and Priss slips her hand in the crook of his arm. She holds a satiny bone-white card like the rest of us. Scribbles made with Greek letters cover her card. “Sara never forgot anything. She even emailed me using the Greek alphabet, just like the notes she wrote me in college. She always invented new secret codes, but this one stuck.”

Priss slips the note inside the envelope and seals it. “I wish I could keep it.”

I fish my note from my pocket. I open the envelope. Like all the messages Sara gave me over the years, it’s written in reverse script, two simple sentences. I can hardly breathe. The words blur together, but I slide the message into the envelope and seal it.

Priss raises her glass. “Today, we celebrate the life of Sara Elizabeth James. A time to reflect on the kindest woman I’ve ever known. She never wanted sadness in the world and worked so those around her would have richer, better lives. To Sara... best friend, mother, scholar, and wife. May she travel on the wings of angels.”

We clink glasses, and the sound echoes around us. I sip champagne and struggle to swallow it down. I know she wanted this to be a celebration. I *was* trying. Big Red had been right all along. Sara was my perfect match.

My time with her is gone, but like lover’s initials carved in a tree, her memory is etched in me. I hand my glass to Elizabeth and pick up the urn. The sun had warmed the ceramic, fooling me for the moment, reminding me of my sweet Sara. We stand near the bridge’s railing, and I remove the delicate top. It’s just dust...

Carefully, I shake the contents, ashen particles and pieces flutter to the water. The river lets her lie peacefully on the surface before carrying her away. Priss and Elizabeth

kiss their envelopes leaving bright red lip prints over the seals and fling the envelopes into the river. Brett salutes with his envelope then tosses it over the side. It spirals like a paper plane to the water. Everyone looks at me.

I hold my envelope to my heart. I don't want to let it go. My eyes cloud. It's what she wanted. Her last wish. I pull it from my chest and let it fall to the water, watching it twirl and spin to the river.

The last two lines she wrote were just two sentences, but contained powerful words: *.efil yM .evol yM*. I watch until nothing is left but the rippling current heading downstream.