

A romantic outdoor dinner table at night. The table is set with plates, glasses, a lantern, and a vase of flowers. The background is dark with bokeh lights and hanging moss. A large, light blue cursive title 'Bitter' is overlaid on the top half of the image.

Bitter

and

Sweet

A NOVEL

RHONDA McKNIGHT

Bitter and Sweet

RHONDA McKNIGHT



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Bitter and Sweet

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GEORGETOWN, SOUTH CAROLINA

Present Day

Grandma "Jail" Cooper Holland

My expectations were too high. That's what I'd been telling myself as I exited the hospital. It repeated in my mind as I started the car and pulled out of the parking lot.

The sun had been swallowed by the dark of dusk by the time I parked behind the restaurant. I reached for my purse and stepped from the car. The keys jangled in my free hand as I walked to the back door. I inserted them, releasing the locks one at a time, and then pushed the noisy door open. Lingering citrus from the oil cleanser I'd used on the floor rose to my nostrils. I was impressed that the scent was still so strong. It'd been a week since I'd mopped. Maybe it was always strong, but this place wasn't always so empty. Usually, the tiny kitchen was in use, the smells of spices and coconut, and sounds of searing meat and pots of seafood gumbo rolling to a boil always met me at the door. That is, unless I arrived before the cooking began, and that was rare. I was never here alone. I

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never considered I'd have to be here . . . alone.

I looked at the tables, their chairs atop them. The glass door to the bakery case glistened with a haunting emptiness. I stepped to my left and walked into the kitchen. It was small. I'd always thought much too small for all that we'd done here, but today it felt huge, like it was swallowing the nothingness that had erected itself and rested in every corner.

Nothing had been cooked here in weeks. Nothing had been served to the community who had depended on us for almost ninety years. We would reach ninety. Forever was the goal, but we couldn't end at eighty-seven. It was too odd of a number. It came up short. Eighty-seven was unfinished.

I walked to the wall across the room. I called it the "Wall of History" because it included pictures all the way back to 1937 when my grandmother opened this place. There were pictures of every cook, every celebrity and politician who ever visited, our family and friends—this wall contained lifeblood. A lot was shed to open this place, and even more was shed to keep it. My eyes roamed the many framed award certificates and settled on one in particular, a presentation from the mayor of Georgetown. I was proudest of this one. Etched in gold script, it read: GAIL AND ODELL HOLLAND FOR RESTAURANT OF THE YEAR. We had rivaled fancier establishments and shined.

I reached into my purse for my phone and placed a call to my granddaughter Mariah. Her voicemail encouraged me to leave a message. Coincidence? A reprieve? Maybe I wasn't supposed to ask. I pushed that thought away. Ask I would, because it was the season for shocking statements and questions. I knew that well. Three weeks ago, the doctor had let my husband's condition slip from his mouth as easily as raw oysters slipped from the shell.

"Your husband has had a massive stroke."

"He will need full-time care."

"A skilled nursing facility is your best option."

The doctor's report stabbed me, wounded me in a way I was wholly unprepared for and destroyed by.

And then Odell's words: "Gail, keep oona promise."

A tear slid over my cheek as I fell back against the wall. I was tired. My sixty-nine-year-old body was exhausted. It was time for the younger ones to relieve us in the same way I relieved my mother.

I went to my contacts again. This time I called my other granddaughter, Sabrina. I got her voicemail too. She didn't listen to voicemail. None of these young people did, so I sent a text to both of them with the simple message:

I need you to come home.

Chapter 1

DUNCAN, SOUTH CAROLINA

Present Day

Mariah Clark

Find a way to survive.

I bolted up in the bathtub, water sloshed over the side. I coughed until my lungs were cleared of the water that had slipped down my throat and then pinched my nose.

I had to find a way, or I was going to die from heartbreak, disappointment, betrayal, and this migraine I couldn't shake. But I couldn't manage to find air anymore. Even though oxygen was all around me, breathing was not just hard but impossible.

Regretting I hadn't brought the wine bottle I'd opened into the bathroom, I reached for my empty glass and raised it to get the final drop out. Muscadine wine. My grandfather's creation. Low in alcohol, high in sweet, rich in love. The taste usually conjured up feelings of comfort and safety—memories of better days or at least not days as bad as these. But it wasn't working tonight. Not working because drinking it made me sad. My grandfather was sick. He might never make this wine again. A sick grandfather

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was the last thing I needed in my messed-up life right now. The life I didn't even know if I wanted to live. But I had zero permission from heaven to die. My grandmother had enough stress. She didn't need to bury her granddaughter.

And if I died, I'd be chum in the ocean for gossip. Everyone in Hendley was already talking about me. Again. I could feel the wind from their whispers. It wasn't hard to be the subject of gossip. In a town as small as Hendley, South Carolina, where the population was twenty-two hundred, including children, gossip was served with the grits in the morning and the cracklin' corn bread at night. However, I didn't think I would receive the honor of being the subject of conversation so soon. It didn't seem fair that it was my turn again.

The first time people let my name fall off their lips was because Vince Clark, one of the city of Hendley's golden boys, got married to someone other than Callie Humphries, the head cheerleader/prom queen in his kingdom whom they expected him to propose to after college. Callie had been waiting at his house when he brought me home. There was disappointment that their story hadn't ended in a happily ever after, but folks got over it fast. The cash bar at our wedding helped.

The second time my name was caught up in town gossip involved my mother-in-law, Sylvia. When the grapevine caught the news that she was sick, people were surprised I was taking such good care of her. Everybody knew she didn't like me. The Callie thing was a source of disappointment to her too, and liquor at the wedding had not changed that. Sylvia's aggressive form of bone cancer carried the prognosis—dying. The accuracy—right on, nearly to the day the doctor told her.

Sylvia refused a nurse until one was absolutely medically necessary. As she had no daughters, the assignment to care for her fell on me. In truth, I could have been a full daughter if she'd only embraced me. I'd lost my own mother at age six, had a horrible

stepmother, and even as an adult, I still wanted that sacred relationship.

Still, I did the right thing. Even with our complicated relationship, I did all I could for her. What I did was right in the sight of myself and God, certainly my poor husband, who couldn't take care of himself, forget another person.

You would think I would have been appreciated by the wagging tongues and certainly by my husband for my charity, but I wasn't that either, which was why I was in my current state of depression. I couldn't unsee his horrible behavior or unhear his words. They pounded against my brain like a temporal migraine.

"I'm leaving you."

I stood over a boiling pot of sausage and kale soup, a new recipe I was attempting to perfect. I wasn't listening to him, not really. My head was full of basil, onion, garlic, and the scent of bay leaves, but I heard him say he was leaving. "Where are you going?"

"You're not paying attention, Mariah. I want a divorce." The words hit me from behind like a bat pummeled against my spine. I turned toward him and found he'd been waiting for me to look up from my pot, which I did before he clarified his statement with, "I'm taking a divorce."

Taking a divorce? Who says it that way?

After eleven months of date nights, new perfume, and five new lingerie purchases, this man was still standing here telling me he was leaving.

"You can't just give up."

"I've tried. I'm not built for this."

I really didn't know what he was talking about. "Not built for what?"

"Unhappiness."

A little sound escaped through my lips, something like a muffled grunt. I uttered, "Unhappiness? What does that even mean?"

"If you can't define unhappiness, then you're probably not happy either." Vince walked out of the kitchen like he hadn't thrown a meat cleaver at my heart.

I reached across the tub for my bottled water. Through the

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open bathroom door , I caught sight of the manila envelope I'd put on the table near the door. It was legal papers. Vince delivered them personally the evening after he'd spoken of his unhappiness. It was a temporary order issued by the Turnin County Court that gave him ownership of his family home and the diner. It also instructed me to vacate far too quickly for it to be legal. It included an Order of Separate Maintenance and Support that required him to pay my rent and my medical and car insurance. The document was signed by his second cousin once removed, Sharon Clark, justice of the Turnin County Court. One of the only two justices in the county.

Sharon had never liked me. She didn't even like Vince much. But if she'd been even a decent human being, she would have had more empathy. I didn't deserve to be made to leave the home I'd lived in for nine years and helped Vince renovate and pay the taxes on with only a two-week notice. Or maybe she still would have done just what Vince asked—protect the Clark family assets, mainly land, and in Vince's case the house his great-great-grandfather built and the restaurant Vince inherited from his grandparents. The restaurant that was in bankruptcy when I married him, and which I not only saved from ruin but made into the success it was today. Success that included it having been listed on just about every top list of diners to visit in the Southeast and a few spots on the Food Network. It was also the new location for my upcoming weekly cooking show for ABC Upstate Daily Television.

I didn't want his property. I wanted my show. The show that had been my plan, my pitch, my dream, which was disappearing in his newfound happiness. All I had now for nine years of marriage and the work I'd done to save the diner was anger, regret, and a paltry ten thousand dollars.

"An advance on the divorce settlement," Vince was quick to say as he handed the check to me. "I don't want you to be broke. That

wouldn't be fair. I know you have to buy food and clothes until you find a new j—"Job was on the tip of his tongue, but he didn't say it. "I'm sorry you have to leave the house."

Just the day before, he'd said he was leaving, but I supposed the word *leaving* was only a metaphor for breaking the covenant of marriage. *He* didn't have to go anywhere. I was the one in this tiny little apartment. My moving out was convenient now as he'd moved his girlfriend in. I hadn't seen her at the house, but the rumors were true. Small-town talk never failed to deliver. My attorney assured me that Vince would regret committing adultery. South Carolina courts took fidelity seriously. Maybe that was true—that Vince would reap what he was sowing—but today the only person paying for our separation was me.

It had been three months since I'd moved. I was still trying to get the knife out of my back, but my arms—they weren't long enough.

I stepped out of the chilly tub water, toweled off, and changed into my new favorite clothing—yoga pants and a T-shirt.

The doorbell chimed. I knew who it was before I peeked out and saw the little boy from next door. I pulled it open. "Hi, Jordy." I took care to use the name he'd asked me to call him. Jordy, not Jordan, because he didn't want to be called a river—not one the Bible said had dirty water. He was a smart kid.

"Hello, ma'am. My mama says you shoulda got her box."

The delivery companies couldn't get the addresses for these duplexes right to save their lives. Every week I received a package that was meant for Jordy's mama or one of my other neighbors. I walked to the dresser and picked up the small box. Before I handed it to him, I asked him the same question I always did. "Do you want something to eat?"

Jordy was a slip of a child. Small for nine and as dirty as a full-grown ditchdigger. He made good use of the playground behind our units. But I wasn't sure if that was the reason he looked so

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unclean. I'd seen him board the school bus a few times, and he didn't look much better in the morning.

Jordy nodded in the affirmative, his long sandy-brown hair moving with enthusiasm that suggested he very much wanted something to eat. He was always hungry. What his mother was ordering when she couldn't seem to keep one child fed, I didn't know but wanted to. Our nosy and gossipy landlord told me she had a public housing voucher and EBT benefits. How he knew the latter, I don't know. Based on the hours she came and went, I assumed she worked full-time or close to it, but still her kid needed a meal. Either Jordy had a tapeworm or there just wasn't enough food.

"Close the door." I put the box down and walked to the kitchen area with Jordy following me. It was a tiny place. We didn't have to go far to reach our destination. I tossed him the last apple from my fruit bowl, and I swear I heard the crunch before it could possibly have settled in his hands good. I reached into the cabinet for one of the many empty plastic storage bowls I kept there with Jordy in mind and scooped out ham and potato corn chowder. The chowder was more of a winter soup, perfect for the leftover ham bones from Thanksgiving through Easter, but I continued to make it because children liked corn and potatoes and ham. I'd made this pot with Jordy in mind, so I scooped out most of it and pressed the lid closed. Next, I slathered butter on the yeast rolls I'd kept in the warmer and wrapped them in tin foil. I double plastic-bagged the bowl and put the bread on top before handing it to him. There was enough to last them two or three days.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said. He was the politest child I knew. No child deserved to feel the growl of their belly at night, but this sweet one doubly did not.

I opened the door and, carrying his mother's package, followed him outside. I put the box down on the cement stoop in the space that separated our units and left before Jordy could push the slightly ajar door open. I didn't want to see or speak to his

mother. Apparently she didn't want to see or speak to me either because she never did, not even to say thank you. In a few days, I would find the same plastic bag hanging on my doorknob with the washed bowl and lid inside. She and I understood each other. I had more and she had less. There wasn't much to discuss. Jordy connected us and his thank-you was enough.

I'd barely locked my door when my phone pinged. A text message from my best/only friend, Hope. The preview line for the message read: Therapy is an opportunity to get strategies. It doesn't mean you're . . .

I'd have to swipe to see the rest. Hope was continuing the conversation we'd had earlier when I hinted not so subtly that I had nothing to live for. Did she think the idea of going to therapy was something to live for? It wasn't. Therapy looked painful. I was in enough pain.

I put down the phone and dropped onto the couch. Therapy wasn't going to give me my TV show. I'd really wanted that. After all I'd put up with from Vince and his family, I deserved it. He could have at least let the show start before putting me out.

My phone rang, and I ignored it. Hope didn't like her text messages to be ignored. The second time the phone started ringing, I ignored it some more. I picked up the remote and turned on the television. I glanced at the phone and saw two missed calls from my grandmother's number. My heart locked in my chest. I closed my eyes and prayed, "Please, God. Don't let anything have happened to Grandpa."

I tapped the screen and redialed my grandmother's mobile number. It went to voicemail. I left a message. "Grandma, this is Mariah. I'm sorry I missed you . . ."

The ping of a text message interrupted my message. I looked at the sender. It was Grandma. I ended the voicemail message and opened the text.

I need you to come home.

Chapter 2

GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA

Present Day

Sabrina Holland

*T*_{ap. Tap. Tap.}

“Hey in there. This is the Greenville Sherriff’s Department.”

My eyes popped open. I pushed my body forward, fighting to climb into the front seat. Gear shifts and knees were not meant to collide. Jesus heard my cry. It was difficult, but I managed to sit.

The sound of the Velcro zipping free as I detached my window coverings was usually welcome. It signaled a new day, a quest for sunshine after a night of securing my privacy. But this morning, the tearing grated against the surge of fear I felt. Cops were scary for many reasons—chief among them being that it was illegal to sleep in my vehicle. My system went into fight-or-flight mode when I heard a tap on the window. I lowered the window, then locked my hands at ten and two on the steering wheel before peeking out at the officer.

I recognized him. For that I was grateful. At least I could hope for some kind of grace from one I kind of knew. I hoped, but I

still followed the drill.

Keep your hands where they can see them and ask permission to do everything.

“Good morning, officer.” A rebellious yawn slipped through my lips.

“You can’t sleep here, miss.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I got tired last night . . .”

“No point in that. I know you live in this van,” he said, scrunching his nose as he took a sideways glance at it. I knew what he saw—faded paint, a rusted bumper, dented wheel wells, and balding tires. “I talked to you when you were parked in the Home Depot lot a few weeks ago. We have a list of you grifters.”

Grifters. What was that even? And I was on a list.

“License and insurance.”

I swiveled my neck to glance behind the passenger seat and spotted my purse. “Is it okay if I get my bag? It’s behind the seat.”

The officer looked around me, behind the passenger seat, and replied, “Slow and easy.”

I forced a closed-mouth smile despite hearing blood thundering through my ears. I removed my right hand from the wheel and reached for my well-worn hobo bag and pulled it to the front seat before fumbling around for my wallet. Once I had it, I used both hands to work the license free from its holder.

“My insurance card is in the glove compartment.”

He nodded again, and I reached over and opened the glove compartment and removed my insurance card and registration just in case he wanted that too.

The officer’s radio crackled to life. He reached up to his shoulder and pushed the bottom for the walkie-talkie and spoke.

I caught sight of myself in the rearview mirror. Ugly bags stole the beauty of my amber-colored eyes. It was eight o’clock I hadn’t fallen off to sleep until after four.

“I’m giving you a verbal warning this time, Miss Holland. You

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can't sleep here anymore. None of you can."

He didn't take my documents. He walked back to his car and got inside. Relieved he'd gotten summoned to a more important call, I released the tense breath that was lodged in my chest and raised the window, leaving only a crack for some fresh air. I'd lived to die another day.

I looked to the right. The parking lot of the Walmart was filling up, but not enough to need this space I'd parked in. The assistant manager must be on early duty this morning. He was the only one who called the sheriff to report us "grifters" sleeping in the lot.

Once upon a time, all Walmart stores allowed people to park their cars overnight. There was an urban legend about Sam Walton having been homeless once, therefore having empathy for homeless people. But it wasn't a company policy. In the Greenville stores, permission depended on who was working.

I pushed the seat back, climbed across it to reach for my cell phone, and plugged it into the charger. The bill was due two days ago, and I hadn't been able to pay it, so the service was disconnected, but I had a few things downloaded that I could listen to while I made my morning cup of tea.

I unlocked the door and stepped out of the van. After a long stretch and another yawn, I reached into the cargo space and removed the caddy that held my morning routine items, put it on the passenger seat, and slipped back inside.

I plugged in my portable electric kettle and poured water from a bottle of water into the metal cup and pressed the power button. Then I reached into the caddy and removed my toothbrush and paste. I did a quick brush, rinsing with the remaining water from the bottle. Once done, a disposable face wipe to my face was next. Once the coating of night was gone, I looked at my reflection in the rearview mirror. The luggage under my eyes carried my exhaustion. I looked way too old for twenty-seven.

I tapped my phone until I got to the recording I kept in my files. Most days I didn't listen, but on mornings like this one—mornings that started rough—I needed to remember that I'd been happy once. I pressed the app.

Hey, Rina, it's me. I'm sorry about earlier. I . . . You're right. It's time. I'm not afraid of what I have with you. You've never hurt me. You've always been there for me, and I love you. Silence for a moment. A tear leaked out from under my eyelid. My insides ached. I wiped my eyes and sat up straighter.

Let's do it.

We'd be married for almost five years. Losing him wasn't as fresh as it had been, but still, how had five years passed so fast? A better question was, how had I let it all fall apart so quickly?

I swiped at my eyes again and tapped the phone for the music player until I found my favorite morning worship song. Then I dropped a tea bag into the hot water, added a packet of honey, and pulled out of the parking lot. It wouldn't do for me to be sitting here when the cop came back around.

After a quick trip to the gym for a shower, it was time to go to work at Kakes, which was a bakery. The interior boasted a state-of-the-art commercial kitchen that produced goods, but there were also four mini kitchens they rented out to independent bakers. I worked in the rental center a few days a week, signing people in and out, cleaning—whatever was needed. I also got to use one of the kitchens when I had a job. A job as a cake decorator using fondant flowers, icing, and colors to create show pieces. I was a baker too.

I was off from Kakes today, but I had a birthday cake due to a customer tomorrow. My plan? To deliver it early this evening so I could collect my money, get my phone turned back on, and buy some food other than ramen noodles. My last three paychecks had gone to my quarterly insurance bill on the van. I'd only had a few cake jobs. Those paid for my gym membership and put gas in my

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tank and noodles in my stomach, but little else.

The lemon-flavored cake I was decorating had been cooling for a few hours, so it was ready for the magic. I ran an offset spatula around the layers and released them from the pans and onto wax paper on the surface of the woodgrain island.

“What masterpiece are you turning that into today?”

Kevin Rose’s voice cut through my peace like a housefly beating its wings near my ear. He happened to be the owner’s son, so I couldn’t tell him to get some business like I wanted to. However, I didn’t have to meet his eyes. He was an okay guy, but eye contact would only invite him to linger. I liked to work without an audience. I reached for a serrated knife to level the cake’s layers. “This is for a twenty-ninth birthday party.”

“Twenty-nine seems like a silly year to make a big deal out of.”

I sighed, standing upright to inspect my work from an elevated view. “All birthdays matter. There’s an alternative, you know.”

Kevin chuckled. Real throaty like he had spring pollen lodged in his throat. I could feel him moving closer.

“I’m just saying . . . most folks do a big deal for twenty-five, thirty, and then forty.”

“I think people do what they want.” I sliced the top off the second layer and put it aside.

He leaned across my island. He wasn’t wearing a hair net, and he was sure to open his mouth again. I raised the knife sideways like a weapon and said, “Back up. No spittle in my cakes.”

He did as I told him but kept watching as I worked. “You’re fast.”

He was right. I’d learned to work fast. You do that when you pay for space by the hour. I sliced the caramelized sides off.

“And always the perfectionist,” he added, admiration in his tone.

I appreciated the respect, so I finally looked at him. “Your mother should hire me to bake for her.”

“She will as soon as she gets an opening,” he said.

The promise of a full-time job baking had been in the plan, which was why I kept a foot in the door with the part-time work, even if it was cleaning up. This kitchen—any kitchen—was my happy place.

When the cake was done, I loaded it into the van and drove the ten-mile ride to my customer’s house in Simpsonville, praying the whole time she would be there to receive it, especially since I couldn’t call first. Fortunately, I pulled into the driveway at the same time as Mrs. Halstead. She was the one paying the bill.

I followed her into the enormous kitchen, placed the box on the oversize marble island, and pulled the top open. Her inspection was slow and thorough, but satisfaction lit her eyes immediately. “This is beautiful, Sabrina.” Even I marveled at the elaborate five-layer masterpiece. It was pink and green—sorority colors. I’d alternated round and square cake layers. Pearls and flowers trimmed the seams of each layer. I created a jewelry box for the topper. The box sat open, a handkerchief with “29” etched on it, surrounded by more pearls spilling over the inside. It was all fondant. All art. “It’ll be the hit of the party.”

“Do you want me to transfer it to your refrigerator?” I asked, knowing they had one on the back porch for such things as this. She’d purchased several cakes from me.

Mrs. Halstead was busy with her phone. “If you will,” she asked, finally giving me her attention. “Is a check okay?”

I cut my eyes to the clock on the microwave. It was already four-thirty. If I had any delay, I would miss the bank and not have my phone for another night. That was not safe when you slept in a van. “I’d prefer Zelle.”

I opened the back door and the fridge doors and then came back for the cake.

By the time I finished, Mrs. Halstead turned her phone around and showed me the transaction, which included a nice tip.

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“Thank you, ma’am,” I said. I was grateful her phone rang, because she took the call, giving me an easy escape out of the house and back to my van, where I peeled out of the driveway three hundred dollars richer.

Minutes after I paid my phone bill, the familiar sound of life came to it. I went to my favorite café and ordered a sandwich. Just as I was about to place a call, a text message came through.

It was from my grandmother. It simply read: I need you to come home.

I called her and got no answer . . . over and over. *Is something wrong with Grandpa? Is he worse?*

The emotions of fear and worry collided in my chest. I slid out of the booth just as the server was delivering my food.

“I need it to go,” I said.

Once I had my food, I made the drive up to the eastern part of Greer. Traffic wasn’t a problem in this section of the city. I made lefts and rights until I reached my destination. The sun had set, and the large Magnolia trees outside of the house were giving sleepy Southern vibes like they always did.

I pulled in the driveway, not sure how I would be received, especially since I’d skipped calling first, but my giving Ellen a heads-up would be a mistake. I needed the element of surprise, even if it was selfish of me to use.

The front door of the house opened, and a familiar figure appeared on the porch. I exited the van and walked to the bottom of the steps.

Ellen Guthrie wrapped her arms around herself. Seeing the van always made her sad. She hated to see it coming, dragging with it memories of her dead only child. It had been his before it became mine.

“I have to go to Georgetown.”

“You should have called.” Ellen dropped her arms. “I’m about to plate her dinner.”

“Would you wrap it up?”

“You’re going tonight?”

“It’s my grandfather . . .” I pushed through the words. “I want to get there as soon as I can.” Tears pricked the back of my eyes. I struggled to finish my thought, which was to make sure Kenni got to spend time with him in case he didn’t live much longer.

A small figure appeared in the screened door and then flew onto the porch. “Mommy!”

My heart exploded with a burst of happiness. I took a few steps closer, but Ellen grabbed Kenni’s outstretched hand. “Slow down before you fall and bust your teeth out,” she said letting Kenni’s hand go.

I opened my arms and my four-year-old flew into them.

“I was making a picture, Mommy.”

I never tired of hearing that name. My baby’s warm body melted into mine. I stroked her arm and kissed her. “Is the picture for me?”

“No. It’s for Nana,” she said, looking over her shoulder at Ellen. She whispered conspiratorially. “But I cou’ give it to you.”

“That would be nice,” I said, glancing over Kenni’s shoulder to meet Ellen’s wary eyes. “I need to get on the road as soon as possible.”

Ellen shook her head and went inside. Ellen didn’t like this. Didn’t like me not calling. Didn’t like me taking Kenni. The last few months had been rough, and our interactions had become strained. So rough and so strained that I’d been thinking this area might not be the right place for Kenni and me anymore. Kenni had been spending more nights with Ellen than I wanted because I’d been working a second job in a warehouse during evenings. Sometimes I did a double shift. I was trying to save up for another apartment. Being evicted from the last one meant I needed a hefty down payment. At first Ellen was happy to help with Kenni, but more and more she kept asking if I wanted her to take guardian-

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ship of Kenni while I figured things out. The conversation always went the same.

"I'm not giving up my daughter, Ellen."

"I'm not asking you to give her up."

"I just need help," I said.

I softened the no she was hearing between the lines by mentioning the fact that she already had her hands full. Ellen ran a personal care home for the state. Her extra bedrooms housed elderly clients who couldn't live alone. She'd hinted more times than I wanted to hear that she would downsize her client load to make a bedroom for Kenni, but she'd never explicitly extended that offer to me too.

"You know you would need to go to training and have a background check and a drug test."

She mumbled the list without making eye contact. I could read between the lines too. Ellen didn't want me in her house. She still blamed me for Kendrick's death. We had that in common. I blamed me too.

"Mommy, am I going whif you?" Kenni asked.

I kissed her again, this time on the forehead. "Yes."

"For how many days?" The child held up her hand and raised three fingers.

The most time Kenni had spent with me in recent months had had been two days at a time, and that was only when I could rent a motel room for us. Kenni wanted more. She always wanted three days.

I took Kenni's hand and kissed her pudgy little fingers. I looked up at the intimidating two-story Cape Cod that had everything a child needed to be comfortable. I'd been forced to leave my baby here while I chased normal, but this wasn't the only house that would welcome my daughter. I thought about the timing of my grandmother's text. The way she worded it: I need you to come home.

Georgetown wasn't technically home. I spent summers and

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some holidays there. Although I'd lived in Greenville my whole life, Grandma always considered her home to be my home. I'd been praying for God to fix my living situation. I looked at Kenni, remembered her question: "*How many days?*"

I said, "I'm not sure, baby." I thought, *Maybe forever.*



Chapter 3

GEORGETOWN, SOUTH CAROLINA

March 1915

Tabitha Cooper

Tabitha Cooper measured herself against men. 'Specially, their height. She was tall for a woman, five foot nine by eighth grade, and that was where her height settled. There weren't many tall girls in her school, so she was seen—all the time. Seen enough for a nickname, which she didn't need. Her family already called her Bitta. Still, one of the boys in her seventh-grade class called her Giant. She was probably about five foot seven then. Taller than all the girls and most of the boys whose voices were still squeaking. She knew about squeaky voices. She had a brother close to her age. Anyway, Giant stuck at school. The kids said it to tease her, but her mama taught her to accept the power of the word. Mama was big on words and their meanings. She said giants were taller than everyone else, and because of their tallness, they had a unique view of the world. They saw things others didn't. Giants were feared, and people fearing her a little was a healthy thing. It kept folks in line the same way it kept them in line with God. So,

Tabitha learned to be proud of her height. It was a gift from God. But on many days, it seemed like the only one she had. Until she met Joseph McCoy.

Tabitha had been working her after-school job at the North Market, a general store and pot house when she met Joseph McCoy for the first time. She'd cooked a purloo rice and oyster and okra stew that day, and he could not get enough of it. He kept coming back. She'd gotten used to him stopping in. They only had food on Fridays and Saturdays, so when he came in on a Monday, Tabitha could tell he hadn't walked in for no good reason. He rarely purchased from the store, and today he hadn't stopped to look at anything.

"You are looking mighty fine today, Miss Tabitha."

He asked her for her name the first time she served him.

"I've got to know the name of a woman who can cook this fine."

He smiled, and Tabitha didn't think she'd ever seen anything more beautiful in her life.

Joseph was tall, and she appreciated being able to look up to him. If she didn't have to hitch her neck back a little to look a man in his eyes, she wasn't interested in him. Tabitha believed God had a man for her who would be her giant. She didn't want to be the only one with vision.

She lowered her eyes and busied her hands with the garden pruner she'd just taken out of the box. Putting inventory on the shelves was one of her jobs.

She avoided his eyes when she replied, "That's fine of you to say, Mr. Joseph. What can I get for you?"

He didn't like that she called him Mr. Joseph, but he looked to be about thirty years old. She couldn't help it.

"I need whatever that is in your hand," he replied.

She looked at him now. He was being too direct for her not to. She observed him in his brown suit and shiny shoes. He wasn't working on a farm. His smooth hands made Tabitha think he'd

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never worked a day in his life. "If you don't know what it is, sir, how you know you need it?"

His eyes danced with amusement, and he raised a hand to stroke the shiny black hair of his mustache. "Tell me what it is."

"It's a pruner. It cuts stems and leaves on plants. This one is new. We just got it in from A. Fields. They are a German company. This one is made of cast iron."

"Do we not make cast-iron pruners in this country?"

"We do, but this is the best." Tabitha dropped her eyes again. Selling like this wasn't in her nature. The customers who shopped here didn't need someone selling to them. It was a small general store with little inventory for the Negro customers who didn't want to travel downtown to the larger general store. Everyone who came in here knew what they wanted before they entered. Tabitha cleared her throat and finished sharing her knowledge of the thing. "At least the catalog we order from says it's the best."

"If you believe it, I believe you." One side of his mouth lifted lazily like he was smiling inside. "I'll take it."

She was confused by his purchase. "What did you come in here for? You weren't looking for a pruner?"

"I came in here to ask you if you would have dinner with me."

Tabitha looked away. Shyness overtook her again. "I don't know."

"You don't know if you want to eat with me?"

"I do not, sir. I don't know you." Tabitha said the words more firmly than she felt them. She wasn't sure how she felt. He made her nervous, but it was an excited tickle in her belly that made sweat break out on her forehead and back.

"Dinner is for getting to know each other."

"I can't keep company without asking my papa's permission."

Joseph frowned like he'd never heard of such a thing. Of course he had. He just wanted what he wanted. That's what Mama said about men when she warned her to be careful.

“You’re almost twenty-one now, aren’t you?”

“I’m seventeen. I’ll be eighteen in a month,” she replied, suddenly wishing she was older so Papa would be less ready to say a direct no.

“Seventeen. I wouldn’t think you could get so pretty in seventeen years.”

Joseph slipped his hand in his jacket pocket and removed a bill. “For the pruner.”

Tabitha reached for the cash box to make change. He interrupted her fumbling.

“You keep the extra, pretty lady.” His index finger was on her chin, lifting it so her eyes met his again like he wanted. He smiled, slowly and nice, like one of those handsome men in a picture show. “Buy yourself something.”

Tabitha moved her chin away from his warm fingertips. “I cannot.” She slid the change—five dollars—back across the counter. Her fingers trembled as she clumsily put his purchase in a bag and handed it to him.

Joseph took the bag but not his change. He walked backward as he spoke. “You talk to your father. I’ll stop by on Friday to find out his answer. If he says yes, we can have dinner and go to the show.” He was confident, and she didn’t think he had a reason to be.

She looked down at the five-dollar bill, pulled it across the counter, and slipped it into her pocket. She wasn’t sure this was proper. She didn’t know what to do with it except keep it until she saw him again.

Once she finished at the store, she got on her bicycle and rode home. Her best friend, Dot, was sitting on the porch talking to Mama. Dot lived a piece down the road and visited most days when her mother didn’t need help with the wash and folding. Like Mama, Dot’s mother took in laundry for white families on the other side of Georgetown. Although Mama didn’t do nearly

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as much as Dot's mother. It didn't seem Mama needed to, and that was because Papa made enough.

People complained about the pay for Negro men at the mill. Most of the men who worked at the mill didn't have much of nothing. Tabitha's family did. Their rent house was nicer than most of the houses the Negro families lived in. Papa had a new wagon, and they had two bicycles. Their stove was the best Tabitha had seen. It was better than the stove some white folks had. Sometimes Tabitha helped Mama tote wash. She'd seen their kitchens. Some of the Negro mill workers thought Papa had better pay on account of his nearly white skin. Papa was the whitest Negro man in the city of Georgetown. But it wasn't true that Papa had better pay at the mill. Papa and Mama managed their money better than most. At least that was what Mama said was the reason they seemed to have more.

As Tabitha got closer to the house, Dot stood and leaned over the porch railing and waved. Tabitha waved back. She could tell by the movements of Mama's hands that she was shelling peas. Mama liked to have Papa's dinner on the table when he came home from working at the lumber plant. Mama, however, did not cook. It was Tabitha who prepared all the meals, so if she was just getting the peas ready, Papa wasn't going to be home before nightfall.

Tabitha stopped at the steps and got off the bicycle.

Mama looked up at her but then down at her work. "Reverend Clydesdale told me to tell you that he liked the catfish stew."

"I saw him. He came in the store and told me so."

Mama liked to give Tabitha's food away. Tabitha thought it was Mama's way of showing the world that Tabitha was worth something.

"You want me to help?" Tabitha asked, looking at the peas Mama had yet to shell.

"I offered," Dot said.

Mama looked at Tabitha again. "No. This clears my mind. You

girls go on. I'll let you know when I'm done."

Dot followed Tabitha into the house. They went to Tabitha's room. Behind the closed door, Tabitha told Dot about Joseph, and showed her the five dollars.

"I don't think I can keep it."

Dot did not agree. Her eyes were as big as saucers when she said, "He gave it to you."

Dot dropped down on Tabitha's bed and opened one of the fashion magazines Tabitha's sister, Retha, had given her. Retha lived in Columbia with her husband, Clifford, and their twin boys. Clifford made a good living as a federal land surveyor, so Retha had money for magazines and books. Those things were her sister's passion. Retha gave Tabitha all her old magazines and brought her novels whenever she came to visit.

Nervous to hear Dot's thoughts, Tabitha asked, "What will my Papa say?"

"He might think he's too old. That's what my daddy said about Isra's first man." Isra was Dot's older sister. "Your daddy is older than mine. He gon' be old fashioned. I say you need to start somewhere, or you'll never get yourself a husband. Plus, you have to be careful about your daddy. He might not . . ." Dot's words trailed off. She shook her head, but her eyes said she was sorry she'd started words she couldn't finish. "Never mind."

Tabitha didn't have to think hard on what Dot was being coy about. Papa might not care because Tabitha wasn't always on his mind.

Charles Cooper, the man Tabitha called Papa, was not her father, and everyone knew that. Tabitha sensed something was different about her from an early age. Papa and Mama looked like most any white people Tabitha passed on the street. Tabitha's brothers and sisters were the same. Tabitha was dark. By the time she was seven, she knew . . . Papa wasn't her father. She just needed someone to tell her. One day Mama did.

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“You behave,” Mama said. “Your daddy . . . he has hard days sometimes.”

“He’s not my daddy,” Tabitha said.

Mama’s eyes were scary. “No. He’s not.”

“Where is my daddy?”

“I don’t know.”

Tabitha cried.

“You stop crying. You don’t need your daddy. You got me. Women hold up each other. You gon’ learn that one day. You let your sister be your best friend.”

Tabitha was confused. Didn’t all children need a daddy?

“You hear me?” Mama asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Then she said, “Retha, y’all go down to Miss Fran. Stay there for a spell.”

Retha, four years older than Tabitha, nodded with knowing eyes.

Miss Fran’s house was where they went when Papa was sick from shine. His drinking meant the house wasn’t safe for anyone until he fell asleep. That included Mama, but she stayed and managed to survive his temper.

When Tabitha was older, it was Retha who told her the whole truth. Papa and Mama split once. Papa went away. He traveled north a few times a year to tend to some business. None of the children knew what or where the business was, but they did know Papa was estranged from his family. Everything about his trips was secretive. But one year, after an ugly argument, he told Mama he wasn’t coming back, so she took up with a new man who put Tabitha in Mama’s belly. Then Papa came back to an expecting wife and the shame of it.

Papa called her Bitta, supposedly short for Tabitha, but she always felt like it was short for bitter because she was a bitter reminder that Mama had been another man’s. It was that year that his drinking started—or so Retha said.

Dot's voice got her out of her thoughts. "Anyway, I think you should go to dinner with him. We have to think on getting married." That was all Dot had thought about since they were little girls. Marrying and raising children. She didn't have any other thing that she wanted to do, and she was already keeping company with one of the boys in school. "It's not easy to find a husband with so many Negro people leaving to go north."

"The Good Book says, 'He who finds a wife finds a good thing.' It's not the other way around. Women aren't supposed to find husbands."

"The Good Book will have you be a virgin praying in the temple."

"Don't blaspheme the Word."

Dot rolled her eyes. "You don't go nowhere but school, the store, and church. So how he gonna find you?"

"That's not for me to decide."

Dot's smirk was long and full of expected disappointment. "You won't even go to bingo or dance at the hall."

"I'm not going to meet a good man in the dance hall."

Dot pursed her lips. "You met exactly who you gonna meet in the store. An older man. You could do worse. At least you say he's nice-looking, and he's not poor if he's got five dollars to give away."

She was right about both. Joseph had a carriage. He wasn't from Georgetown. He told her his people were from Atlanta, but he lived in Charleston. He traveled to Georgetown for business.

"I need a dress," Tabitha said, realizing she'd decided that if Papa said yes, she would have dinner with Joseph.

"You have time to go to Hudson's and pick out one." Dot popped off the bed. "I'll go with you tomorrow."

"How much is a tea dress?"

Dot walked to Tabitha's closet. "Hudson's has afternoon dresses for five, six seven . . . eight dollars."

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Tabitha thought about the five dollars Joseph had given her. Spending it all on one dress that would be for one outing seemed wasteful.

“I know you been saving.” Dot’s words interrupted her thoughts and reminded her of the money she’d saved.

Mr. Wilson said he would pay Tabitha fifty cents a week to work in the store after school. Some weeks she got all the money, but other weeks she didn’t. Everything depended on what he sold and which customers paid their bills. He had a lot of customers who ran up credit and some that never really seemed to do anything but add to what they owed. Mr. Wilson was good-hearted, but he wasn’t a good businessman—not all the time. But he always gave Tabitha an extra fifty cents if she cooked on Friday and Saturday. He was sure to make money on the meals he sold. People paid for her food.

Tabitha had saved sixty-two dollars in the two years she’d worked in the store. She still made her church dresses, and she didn’t spend money on things like makeup, perfume, and fancy shoes and hats. She did her own hair too. Even Retha told her she was going to be an old maid if she didn’t start being more feminine sometimes.

But now she had a man calling on her—a full-grown man. She just hoped his age wouldn’t have Papa running the poor man off with a shotgun—or at least that was the dream, that Papa would care that much.

“Do you want to go buy a dress tomorrow?” Dot inserted herself in her thoughts again.

“I’m thinkin’ on it.”

Dot rolled her eyes. “What are you saving for anyway? You don’t need a dowry. You need to give in to the beauty of the romance.”

Dot was in love with a love story. It made sense. She wasn’t a giant. *Petite* was the word people used to describe Dot. Petite, fair-

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skinned, with long hair and pretty legs. It didn't matter how many men moved north; with Dot's looks, marriage would find her. Her future was set. Tabitha had to figure hers out.



About the Author



Photo by Alex Johnson III Photography

Rhonda McKnight is the author of several bestselling novels, including *An Inconvenient Friend* and *What Kind of Fool*. She is the winner of the 2015 Emma Award for Inspirational Romance of the Year. She loves reading and writing books that touch the heart of women through complex plots and interesting characters in crisis. Themes of faith, forgiveness, and hope are central to her stories. Originally from a small coastal town in New Jersey, Rhonda writes from the comfort of her South Carolina home.

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