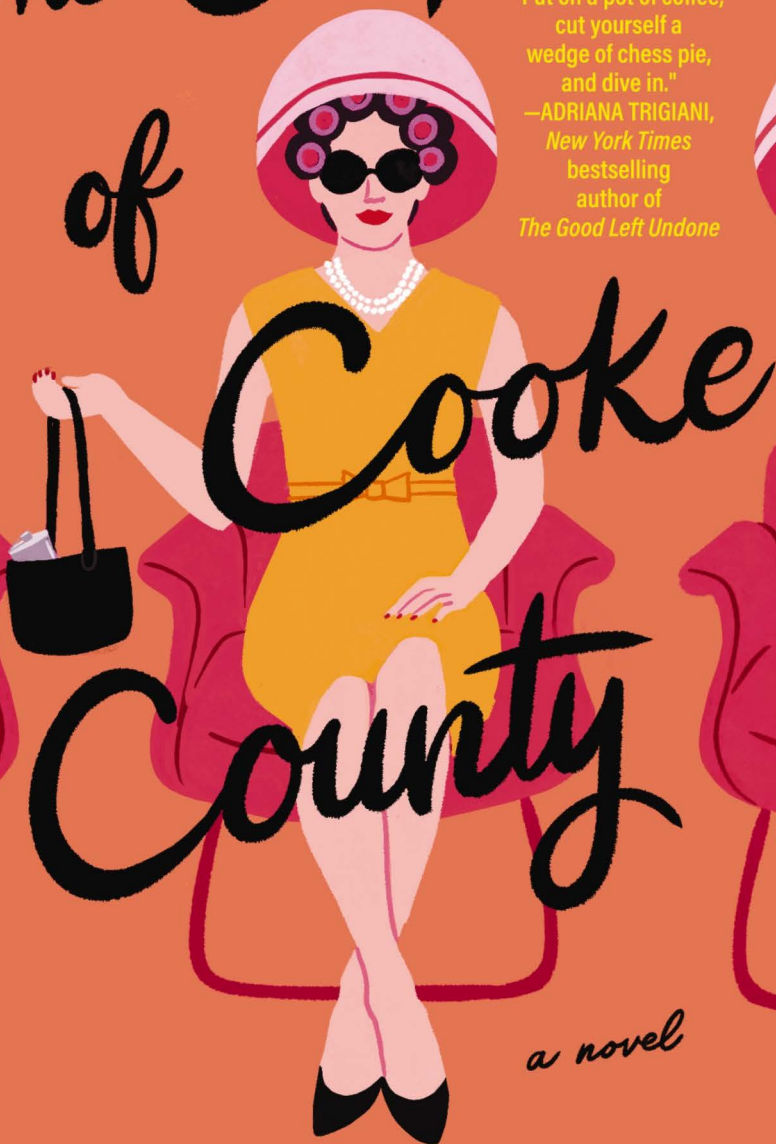


The Empress

"Put on a pot of coffee,
cut yourself a
wedge of chess pie,
and dive in."

—ADRIANA TRIGIANI,
New York Times
bestselling
author of
The Good Left Undone

of



Cooke

County

a novel

ELIZABETH BASS PARMAN

The Empress
of
Cooke
County

a novel

Elizabeth Bass Parman



HARPER MUSE

The Empress of Cooke County

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of my father, Robinson Neil
Bass, who always knew this day would come.*

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MUSE



Chapter 1

Posey

POSEY JARVIS SNATCHED the newsletter from her mailbox and rushed inside. Maneuvering around a pair of cloisonné lamps, she entered her bedroom, crammed full of ornate furniture that looked as out of place as a ball gown at a square dance. She nodded at the renewal reminder on the envelope: “1966 Membership Fee Due by February 1.” If receiving updates on Frances Ryan meant ponying up annual dues to the Nashville Garden Club, she would gladly siphon the money from her grocery allowance and send it in.

She sat at her vanity, digging under her datebook and scarves for the silver flask stolen long ago, a memento from the happiest week of her life. As she unscrewed the cap, she wondered again if CJ had ever noticed it was missing. Or why he stayed married to Frances. On her darkest days, she berated herself for not being enough to trigger their divorce, but most of the time, she blamed either CJ or Frances.

After a long pull of gin, she scanned the newsletter. The headline announced “Garden Club Gathers at President’s Coventry Circle Home to Discuss New City Garden,” with a photo of Frances on her sofa holding a sketch, surrounded by fawning

club members peering over her shoulders. Posey read, "Eighteen years ago I traveled to New Zealand on a horticultural tour. Recently I came across a souvenir from that time, which brought back vivid memories. I used my notes and photos from that trip to recreate the gardens here in my beloved Nashville."

Posey smiled wistfully as she recalled what had transpired while Frances was on the far side of the globe. Before Frances's plane had even reached cruising altitude, CJ had whisked the then nineteen-year-old Posey Burch from her dumpy apartment and into his stunning home for seven whole days of uninterrupted passion.

CJ had downshifted the white Jaguar as he turned into the driveway that day, the growl of the engine thrilling her with its power. She gasped as the three-story house came into view, silently vowing to one day live there as CJ's wife. "My God, it's a mansion."

"Yep. She calls it Eden Hall."

The last day of their weeklong rendezvous, CJ had been tense. He yelled up the stairs, "Damn it, Posey, hurry! Her plane lands in twenty minutes." A lovestruck Posey lifted the flask from his dresser and tucked it into her suitcase before slamming the lid. Impulsively, she dropped one of her monogrammed earrings among the hand creams, pens, and bookmarks in Frances's nightstand. Her mother had saved for over a year to buy them, but to get what you want to get, you have to do what you have to do.

Sure of her future with the man she was so obsessed with, Posey gave the earring three full weeks to get the ball rolling. When she realized her plan had failed, that there would be no announcement from CJ that he was divorcing, she was equal parts furious and heartbroken. In an effort to lessen the sting,

she vowed to possess a house even finer than Eden Hall. How to accomplish that goal was unclear, but if Frances could get a mansion, so could she. And once CJ saw her as a successful hostess in her own magnificent home, it would be only a matter of time before he came to his senses and married her.

Shaking herself from her memories, Posey wondered why Frances was writing about that week now. She frowned at the newsletter. Surely Frances hadn't just found the earring after almost two decades. Even if she had, how would she know it was left there while she was in New Zealand?

Posey was alerted to the arrival of her daughter and husband by the rumble of her husband's truck. Ordinarily she would object to such a jarring sound and insist the engine be fixed, but the distinctive throb served as a warning toll, and had proven itself useful on more than one occasion.

She tucked the newsletter and flask in her drawer and covered both with scarves, flinching as Vern called for her. After a quick swipe of her signature Scarlet Scandal lipstick across her thin lips, she stepped into the kitchen, first smiling at her daughter and then addressing her husband, whose deeply lined face appeared particularly pale. "You're home early."

He set a hummingbird cake onto the flecked Formica counter. Posey rolled her eyes. Vern was well-known in town for helping out his neighbors, and they were always repaying her already portly husband with sweets. If she didn't know better, she would worry about the motives of the ladies so intent on impressing him with their baked goods. And didn't they already have half a cake left over from her birthday celebration?

With a pained squint, Vern looked at her. "I have one of my migraines and Callie Jane feels puny, so we closed up early."

Posey crossed the tiny kitchen and placed a hand on her

daughter's forehead. "It's probably just excitement from getting engaged yesterday, but you do feel a little warm. Why don't you lie down until dinner?"

Callie Jane shrugged off her wool jacket, a sixteenth-birthday present from her mother she had worn every cold day for the last two years, and, without a word, headed for her bedroom.

The scent of Aqua Net filled the room. Vern gestured to Posey's beehive, asking, "Since when do you go to the Curly Q on a Thursday?"

"Queenie moved my appointment up a day—something about training a new employee." Posey scowled. "The whole point of a standing appointment is that it doesn't change. She *knows* I like fresh hair for the weekend." Gesturing to her calendar hanging on the wall, she added, "You would've known my plans if you'd bothered to learn my color-coding system." She stabbed the date, January 6, for emphasis. "Periwinkle for me and cobalt for Callie Jane. Family activities are in fuchsia."

Vern glanced at the calendar, massaging his temples through his dark hair. "What color am I?"

"You have no color because you never do anything."

"That's not true." Vern removed his jacket and hung it on a hook by the door. "I work every day, bowl on Tuesday nights, and go to church. And don't forget taking flowers out to the cemetery on Sunday afternoons."

Vern visited his parents' graves every week, bringing home-grown daisies from the first blooms until the killing frost.

"Do you need me to write down 'Vern: Cedar Hill three o'clock'?"

"Maybe so. Then at least I'd know you cared where I was at."

"Bringing bouquets to live people instead of dead ones makes more sense. And store-bought, not from your scraggly mess of

a garden.”

Vern’s voice was low. “There’s lots of ways to show love.”

“All cheaper than a real bouquet, I bet.”

His broad shoulders stiffened. “Black.”

Posey’s hands dug into her bony hips. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“My ink pen color for the calendar. I want black.”

She heaved an exasperated sigh. “The color has to start with the first letter of your name, like vermillion.”

“What the hell color is that?”

“Bloodred.” Her face brightened. “The exact hue of my latest purchase for the Emporium.” She waved her arm toward the pair of lamps standing tall on the den’s faded rag rug.

He flipped over the tag and whistled. “Way too high for what we sell. The Nashville crowd might pay those prices, but my customers won’t.”

“You said if I found something I like I could get it for the Emporium. Remember? Or has our arrangement changed?”

They had forged the deal before Callie Jane had cut her first tooth. Posey could buy inventory for the Emporium at her beloved estate sales, but Vern was in charge of the store.

“There’s been no change,” he answered, rubbing his neck. “I need to lay down. My head’s killing me.” He paused on his way to the bedroom. “But I’m cutting your budget.”

“If we don’t have new inventory, people will stop coming in,” she snapped to Vern’s back. He shut the door as she whispered, “You’re not cutting my budget.”

Without her Emporium allowance, what excuse could she give for driving into Nashville so often to shop at estate sales? She delighted in prowling through the luxurious Belle Meade homes of the recently departed, particularly when the decedent

had been a size four. Standing five foot two, with dark hair, emerald eyes, and orchid-white skin, Posey was proud of her good looks. She wasn't as tall as Jackie Kennedy, but she made sure she was as elegantly dressed as her idol. Posey's mother had always bought Posey's Goodwill clothes two sizes too big, telling her mortified daughter she would grow into them, but once Posey started buying her own outfits, she made sure every piece fit her perfectly.

The Belle Meade ladies favored Gucci and Chanel, so she was able to keep her closet stuffed with barely worn designer outfits she bought for next to nothing during her forays into Nashville. Every excursion ended the same way—with a slow cruise down magnolia-lined Coventry Circle to gape at number 229, a stately Colonial with green shutters she would have painted black.

Her own house was an abhorrence. It had belonged to her in-laws, and they had thought it a palace, but to her, the two-bedroom, too-small ranch screamed middle class. The narrow windows were better suited to a medieval fortress, and the closets couldn't hold the belongings of a nun sworn to poverty. When Vern's mother passed away less than a year after his father's death, Vern insisted their little family of three move in. Her cheeks had ached from the effort it took to smile her way through the compliments offered by the townsfolk on her new home, "the cutest house in Spark," much as they had from all the congratulations on her marriage, "The Lord has never made a sweeter man than Vern Jarvis."

Posey walked down the hall and tapped on Callie Jane's door. After hearing a soft "come in," she sat beside her daughter, who was on her bed, curled under a blanket. Posey stroked her head. "How are you feeling, sweetie?"

"Lightheaded and queasy, like I might throw up."

Posey brushed a strand of long blonde hair from Callie Jane's pale cheek. "It's probably just nerves. Getting engaged is a pretty big deal."

"I didn't know he was going to propose. It was so awkward, with his family there and all."

"The whole town's known for years you two would end up together. I'm not sure how it could be a surprise."

"Trace and I are friends. I love him, but not like that." Callie Jane struggled to a sitting position. "You and Daddy were friends before you got married, and I'm not sure you all—"

"I adore your father." Posey picked up a pillow, fluffing it. "If you love someone, hang on to them, no matter what." She gently tucked the pillow beside her daughter's head. "You'll have plenty of time to warm up to the idea while we plan the wedding." She smoothed her skirt and smiled. "Let's start with your gown. You're not obligated to wear Opal Humboldt's dress, no matter what she said."

"Mama, I'm not sure I want to marry Trace. He's been my best friend forever, but the truth is, I don't think I want him for my husband. Getting married was always just a *someday* idea we'd talk about while we were doing homework together or watching for shooting stars in his back yard, but now that we're engaged, it feels wrong."

Posey studied her daughter's troubled face, at a loss for an answer. Her own mother's advice, "*The truth is overrated,*" sprang to her mind. Marriage was for security, not for some fairy-tale happily ever after, but Callie Jane was too naive to understand that. Instead, Posey responded, "He gave you the highest compliment a man can give his future wife. He said he needs you by his side to be truly successful." She twisted her thin gold wedding band.

Callie Jane was the one thing she had done right with her life, despite the rocky start. Vern loved Callie Jane because she was smart, capable, and creative. He told anyone who would listen that she spent her first Emporium paycheck on a yard sale doghouse, repurposing it for the feral cats she fed behind the Buy-More grocery store. Posey loved Callie Jane because she was quiet, obedient, and polite. Everyone in town gave Posey credit for raising such a fine young woman, and she always accepted the compliments with a smile. What she kept to herself was what she was most proud of: Callie Jane was the spitting image of her father.

Posey had probably faded from CJ's memory long ago, but she had an unforgettable reminder—his child, something Frances had never provided. Callie Jane was the best of herself and CJ blended together, flesh-and-blood proof that he had risked everything to be with her. Each time their daughter looked at her with eyes the color of a still summer lake, a rush of both love and pride washed over her.

She studied the shadow box on the shelf containing the Miss Tiny Tennessee sash and fifteen-year-old *Gazette* article about Callie Jane participating in the Caney Ridge toddler beauty pageant. Her daughter was perfect, a blonde version of herself she could manipulate, carefully steering her away from the mistakes that had ruined her own life.

“Do you love Trace?”

Callie Jane nodded. “He’s always taken care of me and makes me feel safe, like the big brother I never had.”

“All brides get cold feet.” She frowned. “Although not usually this early.” Standing, she said, “You’ll get over it.” Pulling the curtains closed, she added, “I’ll get dinner started.” She paused by the bedroom door. “I hate to think of you grown and gone,

but being the wife of the man you love is every woman's dream."

"But, Mama, what should I do about not wanting to marry—"

"You'll be so happy," Posey said as she shut the door.

The enormous hummingbird cake Vern had deposited on the kitchen counter was swaddled in cling wrap. She'd have to take the remnants of her own cake out of the ancient fridge to make room. Sliding it from the wire shelf, she studied the remaining holes in the chocolate frosting—Callie Jane had formed a 3 and an 8 with candles—and recalled her three wishes, the same ones she made on every eyelash, double rainbow, and white horse: to be loved by her daughter, to live in a mansion, and to one day call CJ her husband. One down, two to go.

She closed the refrigerator door and pressed her hand along its side to assess the throb of the motor, like a nurse checking a pulse. Steady. *Damn it.* No Foodarama fridge for her anytime soon.

Earlier that day at the Curly Q, Barbara Ricketts had been crowing about how she was headed to Nashville to buy a Foodarama, the most expensive refrigerator sold at Sears. With a dramatic flourish, Barbara had pulled out an ad from her purse depicting a beaming woman gesturing to an enormous refrigerator, doors wide open, laden with enough food to feed their whole town of Spark for a week. "Ring in 1966 with a New Kelvinator Foodarama," the ad blared. "*What color should I get, Queenie? Mike says he can't eat anything out of a pink refrigerator, so maybe yellow.*"

Posey knew Barbara didn't want Queenie's opinion. That holier-than-thou heifer's only goal was to make Posey jealous. Barbara had never forgiven Posey for an incident their senior year of high school involving her then-fiancé-and-now-husband,

Mike. If Mike had been dumb enough to pull her into the dark cloakroom with Barbara nearby, no matter how much Posey had been flirting with him, well, that wasn't *her* fault.

She began making dinner, glancing out the window as she worked. A white envelope resting on the ground by the mailbox caught her eye. In her haste to read the garden club news, she must have dropped it.

Hunching her shoulders against the biting wind, she hurried to the road and lifted the letter from a muddy puddle. It had her full name on it, Posey Burch Jarvis, with a return address of Dawkens, Smith, and Sievers, Attorneys at Law. *What the hell?* She clawed open the letter. Could she come to their office in Nashville in two weeks for a meeting? *Why on earth would a lawyer need to speak with me?*

Had someone seen her switch price tags at that estate sale? Even if they had, how would they know her name? She nibbled a nail. Had some sharp-eyed IRS employee realized her tax return proved she had shaved a few years off her real birthdate? Did it somehow involve Frances and that trip to New Zealand?

Her head cocked at a new thought. Was her father dead and had he finally acknowledged her in his will? Doubtful.

She pushed back the memory of the day she turned five, crying after she made her single wish on her birthday cake.

"There's still more I want," she'd sobbed.

Her mother appeased Posey by saying, "You were born on the third, so instead of one wish, you should get three."

"Light them again," Posey demanded. "I'm making two more wishes."

After blowing out the candles a second time, Posey dashed out the front door of their Stadler Court home, shouting, "Daddy's coming to get me!" She plopped herself on their cracked

cement stoop, shivering in the January air.

Her mother tried for over an hour to coax her inside. “He’s not coming,” she said, and later, “Honey, it’s getting dark.”

“But my extra wishes. He’s taking me to the circus and then coming to live with us.”

Posey bit her lip. How appropriate that her earliest memory of her father involved his absence, not his presence.

She returned the letter to the envelope, making a mental note to record the appointment in her private datebook. This was certainly *not* going on the family calendar. *They probably want to thank me for my suggestion to the governor that he declare Spark’s downtown district a historic site.* Tourists would flock to Spark, spending big-city dollars in her husband’s shop.

She tucked the letter in her purse, planning to call the lawyer’s office as soon as Vern and Callie Jane left for the Emporium the next morning. She went back to preparing dinner, counting out the days until she would make the hour-long drive into Nashville. Thirteen. A bad omen.

Chapter 2

Callie Jane

CALLIE JANE GRIPPED the steering wheel of her father's truck until her knuckles whitened as she recalled what had happened two days earlier around the Humboldts' oak dining table. After Wednesday night church, she'd eaten dinner at the Humboldts' as usual. As they were sitting down, Trace had suddenly dropped to one knee and asked Callie Jane to marry him. Stunned, she had only managed to squeak out, "Oh, Trace," when his mama shot out of her chair with a scream and started hugging Callie Jane. Deep against Mrs. Humboldt's ample bosom, she was unable to articulate the rest of the sentence formed on her lips: "I'm not ready."

With tears in her eyes, Mrs. Humboldt had said, "I love all four of my sons, but I have always asked the Lord to send me a daughter." Callie Jane squirmed in Opal Humboldt's embrace, not fully sure what was happening. "I can't wait for the babies. Please let the first one be a girl, or maybe even twin girls. They *do* run in my family on my father's side." Mrs. Humboldt released Callie Jane and gasped, then said, "We'll do it on Mr. Humboldt and my's twenty-fifth anniversary, August 20. You can wear my dress." Mrs. Humboldt then grabbed a photo-

graph from the sideboard and presented it to Callie Jane. "It's a beautiful gown."

Callie Jane had been too dumbfounded to respond. She had always assumed that she and Trace would marry, everyone did, but having the engagement move from an abstract possibility to a concrete reality sent a chill through her soul.

Mrs. Humboldt had dashed to her bedroom, returning with a velvet box. She handed it to her eldest son. "It was your grandmother's. Put it on her finger, Trace."

The ring, a delicate gold band with a small diamond solitaire, dug into Callie Jane's skin. "It's too tight."

Mrs. Humboldt grabbed Callie Jane's hand to inspect her finger. "It needs to be secure, so it won't come off. You'll get used to it." She hugged Callie Jane. "A daughter at last."

Once Callie Jane had recovered from Mrs. Humboldt's outburst, she wanted to correct the misunderstanding, but she couldn't bear to embarrass Trace in front of his family. She thought she and Trace could sort it out later, but the whole thing had snowballed. Before the banana pudding had even been served, Mrs. Humboldt had called her sister, advised her other sons to find a wife as suitable as Callie Jane, and began planning the wedding. "I'll phone your mama first thing in the morning."

In shocked silence, Callie Jane had walked the short distance with Trace to her home along the worn, slick path between their backyards. Once at her kitchen door, he kissed her on the cheek, smiled shyly, and said, "May I speak to your father?"

Trace had explained his intentions. "I will always take care of her and be a good provider. My daddy said the first son to get engaged will be assistant manager, so I'll be gettin' a raise, plus I have some money saved up. My plan is to expand the BuyMore and open three stores in the next five years." He beamed at his

bride-to-be. "With Callie Jane by my side, I'll be the grocery king of Cooke County in no time."

Her daddy had asked only one question. "Do you love her, Trace?"

His voice had been strong. "Yes, sir." He looked at Callie Jane. "And I always will."

"If Callie Jane has accepted you, then I will too. Welcome to the family, son."

She had not slept that night.

Her friendship with Trace had begun when they had toddled toward each other at a Fourth of July town picnic, delighted to find a same-sized friend, and they had remained pals from that day on. As kindergarteners, Trace found Callie Jane sobbing in the cloakroom because she'd lost her lunch money, so he'd slipped her his own, saying he wasn't hungry. In third grade, Bubba Alcott had called her ugly, and Trace slugged him hard enough to bring tears to Bubba's eyes. And when Trace and Callie Jane were the last two contestants in the Cooke County High School spelling bee, he purposefully misspelled *colonel* so Callie Jane could advance to the state championship.

Was the fact that Trace was a good man—someone she genuinely cared for—a good enough reason to marry him? Or was the knot in her stomach signaling that the knot she might tie was a bad idea?

She switched on the radio, rolling the dial from her daddy's country station to her favorite, with their Beatles-heavy playlist. The Fab Four's "Think for Yourself" spilled from the speakers. Ever since that night in February two years prior, when she had stood mesmerized in front of a tiny black-and-white TV listening to "All My Loving" on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, she had been crazy about the Beatles. Her classmates had all fallen

in love with Paul that night, flashing that innocent yet wicked smile as he bobbed his head. For her, though, the experience had not been about identifying a future, albeit unlikely, husband but realizing her universe had inextricably tilted. Those boys had knocked her breathless, with an energy and urgency that seemed fully misplaced in her world. She had vowed that night she would one day see them for herself, not through a television screen but in person, where she could experience every note and beat firsthand.

Traffic was light, so in less than an hour she was driving by the sign that proclaimed “Welcome to Nashville’s Greatest Flea Market—Open Year-Round.” She parked and climbed out of the truck.

Her father had given her advice when she started purchasing Emporium inventory. “*Wait ’til right before the vendor is closing for the night, so’s he’s interested in making a deal.*” He handed her a stack of dollar bills. “*Carry only ones. We treat our customers like gold, but most of those fellas don’t. They’ll say they don’t have change when a whole wad of singles is stuffed in their pocket. Ask about the history of the item. What we all care about in life is the stories. Our customers could find their bacon presses or sewing needles anywhere, but they come to the Emporium for what they get, not what they buy.*”

Phil Brody, a neighbor of the Jarvises, was loading his truck. His booth was always popular, overflowing with handmade goods. Raw honey jarred with a piece of comb from Dixon King’s hives was his bestseller, and whenever he displayed one of Mrs. Simpkins’s double wedding ring quilts, it was sold before the day was out.

“Hey, Callie Jane,” he called. “You’uns doin’ all right? Ever’body’s closin’ up early because of the snow comin’. Roads’ll be slick by this evening. Don’t want you to get stranded.”

She waved. "Hey, Mr. Brody. I'm not staying long."

"Nice to see another generation of Jarvises gettin' into the junk business, with your daddy fixin' to retire and all."

Pulling her jacket close to her thin frame, she mustered a weak nod. Her father was older, having married for the first time at age forty-seven. Retirement was on his mind, and she was his logical successor. She had worked alongside her father since she'd stood on a peach crate to reach the counter, and just like with marrying Trace, everyone assumed her path, that she would one day take her place as owner.

She had delighted in being close to her daddy in the early days. As she grew older, though, the sameness wrapped around her like a shroud. Her father reveled in the minutiae of rolls of wire and bags of marbles, but she found the tedium of the static walls and shelves of inventory stultifying. She had no better ideas of what to do with her life, though, so for now, she dutifully pushed the register's timeworn black keys and bagged her customers' purchases.

Turning toward the vendor booths, she sighed as she wandered over to a sign promising "Oddities." A heavy-set man in grimy overalls greeted her as he hefted boxes onto the back of the battered pickup parked at the rear of his stall. "Closin' up, girlie, 'fore the snow hits. I'll make you a good deal. Better to sell something than carry it back home."

She frowned. She had been eighteen for over a month, hardly just a girl.

The booth was filled with the detritus of people's lives: a dented aluminum Jell-O mold, a Roy Rogers cap gun in a battered cardboard box, and a coffee mug declaring the owner to be the "World's Greatest Grandpa." Turning to move to the next booth, she spotted a banker's box.

Drawing closer, warmth enveloped her, despite the raw day, like she was basking in May sunshine. As she tugged open the lid, wavy from some long-ago encounter with water, excitement flooded her body.

Her eye fell on a museum postcard of a painting depicting a naked woman standing on a clam shell floating in the ocean, with a man in a cloud blowing her across the waves. “*The Birth of Venus*, by Sandro Botticelli, circa 1485, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy,” the caption read. “Venus rides a scallop shell across the sea as Zephyr guides her to shore.”

A misfolded map of California with worn edges was next, partially obscuring a hardcover book entitled *California: America’s Eden*, with an odd pendant tied to a leather cord dangling from one of its corners. A card peeking from a tattered paperback grabbed her attention. She drew it from the book and knew she had to have that box.

The card’s golden-yellow sky glowed like a summer sun. A beautiful young woman with finely sketched features and flowing blonde hair gazed serenely back at her. She was dressed in opulent robes sprigged with red flowers, with a pearl necklace gracing her neck and a crown of stars adorning her head. Holding a scepter, she reclined on vibrant red and orange cushions in a field of wheat. Resting at her feet lay a heart-shaped shield depicting a symbol Callie Jane did not recognize. The Roman numeral III was written at the top, while *The Empress* was scripted across the bottom. An empress, just like the one from her childhood tales.

“You wanna buy that?” the booth owner asked. She hastily tucked the image in its book and glanced at the title, *A Guide to Unlocking the World and Wisdom of Tarot Cards*, before returning it to the box.

“Yes,” she answered. “How about two dollars?”

“Make it three and you got yourself a deal.”

“Three it is.” Remembering her father’s instructions about getting a good story, she asked, “Can you tell me anything about this box? How did you come by it?”

“A lady in East Nashville up and left town,” he answered. “She had wrote her daughter, saying she was moving to India, or maybe it was Italy—one of those *I* countries—and to sell whatever the daughter didn’t want.”

Callie Jane contemplated being brave enough to leave everything behind and take off for an *I* country as she peeled three ones from her pocket. Juggling the ill-fitting cardboard lid back on, she hauled her treasure to the Ford. She nestled the box onto the seat beside her and then extracted the Empress card, placing it beside her to ride shotgun on the drive home.

Her friends heard stories of Cinderella and Rapunzel, but Callie Jane’s mother, who had an abhorrence of any fairy tale, took a different approach. Callie Jane was fed accounts of Princess Victoria of England, growing up in a palace and being waited on hand and foot.

“People remember Victoria as only a queen, but she was an empress, which is the only thing better than being a queen,” her mother would say as she settled dime-store crowns on both her head and Callie Jane’s. *“When you’re a queen, you rule the country, but when you’re an empress, you rule the world.”*

Her mother had once caught her daddy telling Callie Jane about Goldilocks and had exploded. *“No fairy tales! We need to teach her about the real world so she can learn to survive in it.”* He had asked how stories of a long-dead European monarch would prepare Callie Jane for a life in Spark, but his only answer had been an icy stare.

Callie Jane had spent more time than she would ever admit believing her mother was a real empress. When she was four years old, one of her parents' many fights had woken her up and she'd stumbled toward her parents' bedroom, listening as an argument wafted through the partially closed door. "*The Cadillac's a good deal, and we should buy it. I can't impress Cooke County with a beat-up truck.*" Her mother had noticed her tiny daughter and guided her back to bed. Once settled back under her quilt, Callie Jane had fallen into a fitful sleep, turning over in her mixed-up brain the news that her mother had to "empress" the whole county.

Registering Callie Jane for kindergarten offered her mother an entrée into the world of elementary school politics. Power suited her mother, and her reign soon spilled over into all areas of daily life in Spark, like when she told the owner of Honeybelle's dress shop that a geranium-pink door was unacceptable for the town's historic district. When Callie Jane had corrected Fayelene, the daughter of Honeybelle's owner, saying her mother was not bossy but was just performing her duties as an empress, things took a dramatic turn. Callie Jane was set straight by Fayelene about how Callie Jane's mother was nothing more than a housewife who pushed a buggy around the BuyMore and carried her child to the pediatrician for booster shots, the same as every other mother in Spark. Callie Jane was humiliated to realize she had confused *impress* and *empress*, and refused to join her classmates on the playground for a solid week to avoid the relentless teasing.

The teenage years hit, and she realized how fitting the moniker was for her mother: the Empress of Cooke County. Nothing was ever good enough, and appearances were valued way more than the truth. At first, Callie Jane had assumed all mothers were

like her own, but after spending the night with Cheryl Ann Tisdale one Friday night, somewhere between Mrs. Tisdale's kiss good night to *both* girls and the waffles prepared for breakfast because they were the guest's favorite, Callie Jane began to realize a mother's love was not typically transactional.

Once back on Market Street with the banker's box in tow, Callie Jane turned into the alley behind the Emporium. She pulled into her father's parking spot under the maple and let herself in the back door, lugging her flea market find. After a scary incident where her father had lost his breath as he moved a table, Callie Jane had insisted he see the town doctor. It had taken weeks of nagging for him to make an appointment with Doc Grisham, but he had finally agreed and was there that afternoon. Callie Jane sent up a quick prayer that the visit was going well as she checked her watch. Twenty more minutes until closing time. She unlocked the front door, flipped the sign to "Come In, We're Open," and returned to her flea market purchase.

The bell of the Emporium's door jingled as she lifted the box's lid. Dixon King's rawboned frame slipped through the wooden door. "Hey, Callie Jane," he called. "You holding down the fort today?"

"Hi, Mr. King." She smiled at one of her favorite customers. "Daddy's not here, so it's just me. What can I help you with?"

"I need some licorice whips for my niece. She's got an upset stomach and they'll fix her right up."

A farmer and beekeeper, Dixon King could tell you the very day the spring's first crocus would be spotted and could coax the sweetest honey in Cooke County from his bees. His ability to predict the weather was legendary. Tall and still handsome, he had sparkling brown eyes the color of a perfectly cured tobacco

leaf. His wife had died years ago, and he had never so much as looked at another woman, much to the dismay of the eligible ladies of Spark.

Callie Jane carefully transferred lines of the black candy into a paper sack, using a pair of ancient tongs. She gave an expert twist to the top. "That'll be ten cents. I hope Rennie feels better soon." As Callie Jane dropped the dime into the register, she asked, "Is the weatherman right about us getting six inches of snow tonight?"

Mr. King shook his head. "Nope. Just a dusting." He turned up his coat collar. "But an ice storm's comin' 'fore too long that'll catch ever'body off guard." He clutched the sack to his chest. "Tell your daddy I said hello." He paused. "I know Sheriff Ricketts is doing his best to catch that Peeping Tom, but it's gonna come to a bad end. I can feel it." He took a single step and then stopped, adding, "Be careful, Callie Jane."

Barbara Ricketts had rung the first warning bell about the Peeping Tom back in November, telling a spellbound group of ladies at the Curly Q how her husband had been called to a home because of a man looking through a young woman's window as she undressed for bed. Dewey Prichard, editor of the weekly *Gazette*, had dubbed the man *the Creeper* and replaced his usual headlines about a five-pound squash or a resident's trip across two time zones with offerings like "Creeper Stalking Spark!" And "Crime Wave Terrorizes Town!"

All of Spark suddenly realized they needed locks to secure doors that had always stood open. The hardware store had run out of key blanks and had to send to Nashville for more to keep up with the demand. By the time the third creeper headline had appeared, taking your trash to the dump at dusk instead of mid-day was enough for previously friendly neighbors to give each

other the side-eye. That stranger at the feedstore *claimed* he was in town visiting Beb White, but had anybody checked that story with Beb? And since when did Tiny Hendricks do their family's shopping instead of his wife at the BuyMore, where every lady of Spark could be found on a weekly basis? Was Tiny really shopping for his next victim?

Callie Jane turned the shop sign to "Sorry, We're Closed" and walked to the alcove that served as the office, thinking over Mr. King's warning to be careful about the Creeper. His accuracy predicting weather events was renowned. Did his abilities extend to knowing how the creeper issue would end? She shook the thought from her head. That was impossible.

Grabbing the tarot book, she settled into the worn recliner sitting just outside the small room that served as the office. A shiver crossed her body. Something was about to change.

Chapter 3

Posey

THE CURLY Q'S door trembled from the force of Posey's entrance. No time for chitchat today. Her appointment with the lawyer was later that afternoon. They were probably expecting a hayseed, but she would set them straight, with her best only-one-season-old Chanel suit and the tallest beehive she could bully out of Queenie.

Queenie glanced up as the doorframe rattled. "We have a new girl I want you to meet. Evangeline is Arden's niece and just moved to town. She'll be shampooing you, then watching me fix your hair." She called to the back of the shop, "Evangeline, come meet Mrs. Jarvis."

A young woman emerged from Queenie's office, and Posey did her best not to gasp. Evangeline's blonde hair was shorter than Vern's. A flowy white top billowed from her slim frame, and her tan corduroy skirt stopped well above her knees. Posey had seen similar outfits in a magazine article on the latest London fashions but had assumed such outlandish garb would never infiltrate Spark.

"I'm glad to meet you, Mrs. Jarvis." Evangeline's nasal accent rocketed Posey back to her visit with Vern's cousins in Scranton,

Pennsylvania, a side trip tacked onto their Niagara Falls honeymoon. She hadn't wanted to go, but Vern insisted on introducing his bride to his only kin. Her new husband's relatives kept asking her to say words like *reckon* and *y'all* before bursting into laughter. That had been her first visit with Vern's cousins, and it would be her last.

"Ohio," Evangeline said in response to Posey's stare. Evangeline grinned, which made her nose wrinkle, highlighting a spray of light freckles. "Yep. A Yankee. Come this way and I'll get you shampooed."

Mesmerized by white boots shiny enough to reflect the sun streaming through the front window, she followed Evangeline to the washbowl. The boots had zippers up the calves, and what were they made of? Posey squinted. Patent leather. *This new girl will be shaking up Spark for sure.*

Instead of Queenie's efficient wrist-flicking unfurl and snap of the shampoo cape, Evangeline gently tucked the plastic sheet around Posey's neck, careful to fold her suit's powder blue collar out of harm's way. As Evangeline wet and lathered Posey's hair, the tension in her neck dissolved under the soothing bubbles and gentle thumb pressure.

"Is the water temperature to your liking?" Dangly earrings swayed hypnotically as Evangeline leaned toward the faucet. "I can adjust it if you'd like."

Posey shook her head and sank back against the bowl with a dreamy sigh. Queenie had a no-nonsense scrub-and-get-on-with-it approach, but Evangeline addressed every knot and kink she encountered as she massaged Posey's scalp and neck.

She practically purred as Evangeline combed her hair and cocooned it in a towel. If this girl styled as expertly as she

shampooed, Posey might be compelled to cross the hairdresser Mason-Dixon line. The death of the out-of-favor stylist was usually the only way to move chairs without starting a blizzard of gossip or, even worse, being blackballed. She adjusted the terry turban encircling her head for a better view of Queenie, who looked as sleek as a blue-ribbon sow at the Cooke County fair. *Damn it.*

As Queenie ran her comb through Posey's wet strands, she motioned for Evangeline to join them. "Notice the similarity to both the cut and color of Jackie Kennedy. Mrs. Jarvis has dark hair already, which is a good start, but we've been able to match the shade perfectly."

"It is by coincidence the First Lady and I have the same shade and style," Posey said. "I copy no one." That statement was not true, but hairdressing information was strictly confidential, like with doctors. She would speak to Queenie later about the sanctity of the styling chair.

After most of the curlers were in place on Posey's head, Queenie snatched up the newspaper on her station. "Did you see the latest *Gazette* article about the Creeper?"

Posey read:

CREEPER SPOTTED ON HOLT ROAD!

A local family reported to Sheriff Mike Ricketts that a woman heard a rustling sound outside her window Monday night. Her husband rushed outside with his shotgun, but the Creeper had fled. The homeowner called the sheriff, who with his son, Deputy Sheriff Billy Ricketts, responded immediately and searched the area. No clues were found.

Queenie pinned a final curler into place. "I hope they find him soon."

Posey's voice was clipped. "If we're counting on Mike Ricketts to apprehend this lunatic, we're in for a long wait. The points on his badge are sharper than he is."

Queenie settled Posey under the dryer and held up two magazines. "True crime or Hollywood gossip?"

"Let's go for true crime. It's always fun to see what people think they can get away with."

After her hair was backcombed and teased into the highest beehive gravitationally possible, Posey paid her bill and glanced in the mirror for a quick check of her lipstick. Satisfied with her appearance, she stepped onto the sidewalk and moved purposefully toward her Cadillac, parked in front of her husband's shop next door.

Jarvis Emporium offered Vern the opportunity to visit with all the townsfolk who stopped in for cheese graters or flowerpots, and Posey always suspected he'd rather commiserate over a customer's arthritis or cluck about a mother-in-law's old-timer's disease than make a sale.

One night over dinner Vern had told Posey about a woman who had come in with a newborn. *"I love all my shoppers, but my favorites are the ones with babies. I always tuck an extra something in for the new arrival and tell them, 'Blessings to you and the little one.' I picked a little doll for this one. Sure hope she likes it."*

"It's hard to turn a profit when you're giving merchandise away," Posey had answered.

Driving down Market Street, Posey passed Strickland's Drugstore, whose front window was already plastered with an explosion of red hearts for Valentine's Day. Next was Honeybelle's, showcasing a trio of pink dresses that matched the too-bright

door Posey loathed. As she drove past the BuyMore, she nodded in approval at the full parking lot. Trace Humboldt would one day be a rich man.

Posey was much younger than Vern, but he counted every soul in Spark as a friend, young or old, and knew each one by name, including Posey. One of Posey's earliest memories of Vern was when she was a girl and had gone into the Emporium to buy her mother a Christmas present. She had chosen a box of embroidered napkins, but the set of four was too expensive. She had asked if she could buy two napkins from the set, as it was only herself and her mother at home. Vern told her that she was in luck, that all napkins were half off that day.

As she passed the church, she grimaced at the sight of the white lattice gazebo, the scene of the tear-filled proposal Vern had made to Posey almost twenty years ago. She hadn't neared the wisteria-canopied structure since that night, and the smell of the daggerlike blooms still nauseated her.

She chewed her lip for most of the drive. The notion that her letter to the governor asking for a historic marker required a visit to a lawyer's office was fading faster than remnants of the lipstick clinging to her mouth. Equally unlikely was the idea that her father's conscience had kicked in, including her in his will to make up for a lifetime of abandonment.

She scanned her memory for the worst of her infractions, settling for a moment on a scene from *Peyton Place* she had watched the day before. A villainous hussy was being sued for alienation of affection by a wronged spouse. Posey's affair with CJ had been nearly twenty years ago, and alienation of affection wasn't even a real thing. She tilted her head. Or was it? Even if it was, the statute of limitations had surely run out.

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The gleaming brass sign on the brick building read “Dawkens, Smith, and Sievers, Attorneys at Law.” Posey’s stomach fluttered as she opened the massive mahogany door.

An efficient-looking woman behind an elaborately carved desk looked up, her eyes flicking over Posey’s boucle suit and alligator handbag. “May I help you?”

Shifting her purse from one arm to the other, Posey tugged at her jacket. “I have an appointment with Mr. Sievers,” she croaked. “I’m Posey Burch Jarvis.”

“Have a seat, Mrs. Jarvis. I’ll let him know you’ve arrived.”

She swallowed, her throat scorched. “I need to visit your little girls’ room.”

The woman pointed down the hall. “Second door on the left.” Posey followed her directions and opened the bathroom door.

Standing in front of the sink, she extracted the flask from her bag with shaking hands. *Only a splash.* A shot of gin rolled down her throat, offering a welcome burn. She screwed the top back on and fished a mint from her bag. *Better make it two,* she thought as she peeled back the foil wrapper. She twisted up the crimson bullet of her lipstick and carefully rimmed her thin lips. Patting her cowlick, she squared her shoulders and left the bathroom. Once back in the reception area, she spotted a man by the desk, tapping his foot.

His suit was exquisitely tailored. She had rummaged through enough estate sale clothing tables to recognize his tie as Hermès. “Mrs. Jarvis, I’m Albert Sievers.” He extended a hand, and she weakly shook it. “Will you join us in the conference room?” *Us?* Through the glass wall, she spied a gray-haired woman already seated in one of the massive chairs around the wooden table.

She'd seen enough pictures of Frances in the *Nashville Banner* to know she was still a blonde. And this frowzy woman's lined face told of a rough life lived country miles from any debutante balls or country club mah-jongg tournaments. Posey exhaled as the gin kicked in, loosening her limbs. *That's not Frances.*

Mr. Sievers pulled a chair out for her, which left her facing the woman whose long braid snaked down her arm.

Slipping on a pair of wire-rimmed glasses, Mr. Sievers shuffled a stack of papers. "Mrs. Preston, may I introduce Mrs. Jarvis? And Mrs. Jarvis, this is Mrs. Preston." Posey nodded across the table. "This meeting is highly unusual, but I am following the wishes of my client, Milbrey Sullivan Harris."

Aunt Milbrey? What in the world? When Posey was five or six, her mother had dragged her to Aunt Milbrey's house on Creekside Road. "We're just distant cousins, but it's our Christian duty to visit a shut-in," her mother had said.

Posey had pouted. "Why do you call her Aunt Milbrey if she's a cousin?"

"Honey, this is the South. We make up relations right, left, and center. And it takes too long to say second-cousin-once-removed Milbrey."

"I still don't want to go."

Posey's cooperation had been secured when her mother had dangled the promise of playing with Milbrey's cats. Posey remembered gaping at the dozen or so peony bushes blossoming along the expansive porch and then looking up at just as many gleaming windows and asking her mother, "Is this whole place all for one person?"

"Yep. It's good to be rich."

Once inside the enormous house, Posey had asked, "Where are the kitties?"

Milbrey pointed to the hallway. "They're in the patio."

Posey popped one hand on her tiny hip and sassed, "Silly goose. There's no such thing as a patio."

Her cheeks flamed, recalling the humiliation that coursed through her body as the woman hooted with laughter.

Milbrey's tone was stern, but Posey could hear the amusement in her voice. "She who owns the house names the rooms. If you want to see the cats, you need to go to the patio."

Her mother scolded her on the way home as Posey defended her position. "I was just trying to be truthful."

As they bounced down their rutted driveway, her mother said, "Mamas are supposed to teach their daughters about life, so here's a pearl of wisdom for you." She threw the rusted Rambler into Park. "The truth is overrated." She slammed the car door. "Remember that."

Mr. Sievers cleared his throat, snapping Posey out of her reverie. "I am sorry to inform you both that Mrs. Harris has passed away in Florida and was buried there. She asked that you both be present as I conclude the settling of her affairs." The lawyer pulled the glasses from his face. "This is a little Hollywood for my taste, but it was her wish."

Mr. Sievers nodded to the woman opposite Posey. "I am sorry for the loss of your sister."

"No loss to me." The woman picked at a snag on her dress. "I have a long drive back to Alabama. Can we get on with it?"

"This meeting concerns her will." The *tap-tap* of the upright papers against the conference table amplified in the silent room. "*Milbrey's got a sister in Alabama, and it's her and her kin who'll be inheriting,*" her mother had bemoaned. Posey shot a look across the table at Mrs. Preston. *Lucky old coot.*

"The majority of Mrs. Harris's estate was left to a Tampa cat

sanctuary, but there remains the matter of her Tennessee holdings.” Mr. Sievers extracted a handwritten letter from the stack. “She asked me to read this with both of you present.”

Dear Posey,

The day you back-talked me about my catio was one of the highlights of my life. If I had been blessed with a daughter, she would have been exactly like you. Without children of my own, I am left to decide how to dispose of my Spark assets. I leave to you my house on Creekside Road, all its contents, and a savings account at Tennessee Farmers Bank.

To my sister, Anita Sullivan Preston: You took something I thought was mine—Jimmy Preston. Now Posey will be taking something you thought was yours—my house and money.

Sincerely,

Milbrey Sullivan Harris

Posey’s jaw did not quite drop to the mahogany table, but it came close. Posey’s mother had told her about Milbrey’s tragic life, and she had heard the stories about how her aunt’s ghost still roamed the mansion, but none of that mattered now. The house was huge, and it was hers.

A frosty silence settled over the room as Anita Preston asked one question: “Can she do that?” Upon hearing that Milbrey could, indeed, do that, she snatched up her dime-store purse and stalked across Mr. Sievers’s Persian carpet. With her hand on the doorknob, she paused to address Posey. “May you never have a happy day with that house or that money.”

After the door closed behind Anita Preston, Mr. Sievers regained his voice. "Shall we proceed?" The next few minutes were a swirl of signatures and legal jargon she didn't fully grasp, but the one thing she did comprehend was that she now owned the finest house in Spark and a bank account that was sizable enough to pay for little touches to spruce up her new home. After keys, congratulations, and handshakes, she was on her way.

She didn't recall driving to Milbrey's house, but she found herself parked in the weed-choked pea gravel driveway about an hour later. In her dreams, her mansion would manifest when CJ happily signed over Eden Hall to Frances in the divorce settlement, then presented a house twice as big to Posey as a wedding gift, but here it was. She had her second wish.

The two-story clapboard structure was elegant and stately, the polar opposite of the dumpy cottage Vern had been so proud to carry her over the threshold of all those years ago. Though overgrown shrubs obscured it, she could spy a wrap-around porch encircling the front. A Juliet balcony extended from the second story, similar to one at Eden Hall, although this one sagged a bit to the left. Sun-faded shutters framed the dozen or so windows visible from the expansive lawn, and a chimney spouted from the shaggy, shingled roof.

Did it have a ballroom? The first night at Eden Hall, CJ had brought her into the elaborately decorated ballroom and picked up his saxophone from a stand, saying he needed to practice a song for his all-doctor band, The Swinging Sawbones, that played dance music on the weekends. A friend with the unforgettable name of Dr. Payne had formed the group so he and a few hospital buddies could blow off some steam playing gigs around town.

CJ had played a sultry version of Tommy Dorsey's "Green

Eyes.” When the satin-soft notes floated through Eden Hall, her heart swelled to almost bursting. He had chosen a song about her to celebrate their first full night together.

She had given him a green bow tie with a distinctive paisley pattern that night, saying, “*Every time I see you wearing it, I’ll know you are thinking of how much you want me.*” She had hoped he would murmur, *I’ll also be thinking of how much I love you.* He hadn’t, though.

Sharp pea gravel dug into the leather of her soles, and Posey shifted her feet. Why couldn’t Milbrey have given her the house simply because Posey deserved it and not drag her sister into it? All those years Milbrey had lived alone, with only cats for company, had she been concocting her revenge, using Posey as part of her scheme to punish her sister for the poaching of a beau?

The thought of stealing a man caused Posey to look at the house with new eyes. *CJ will see what I can do with a mansion.* She took a step forward as the electrifying thought crystallized. *I can be a socialite.*

As she took the silver flask from her purse, she recalled how it had been responsible for bringing CJ and her together. She and the handsome, thirtysomething doctor had both reached for the flask at a Belle Meade estate sale, and when their hands touched, her life was changed forever.

His voice was deep, with a fine whiskey drawl. “I believe you are in possession of something I want.”

“Then take it from me.”

“I’m keen to add this to my collection.” His blue eyes reached into her very soul.

“And it would make me at least five dollars in my booth at the antique mall.” When Posey first began planning to leave Spark, she knew she wanted to be her own boss but recognized oppor-

tunities for women were limited. She and her mother had always been regular Emporium shoppers, and she had seen Vern Jarvis's success. She had peppered him with questions about running a resale shop, which he had always patiently answered. Vern emphasized providing popular goods at fair prices, but her business model was buy low and sell high.

The man bowed gracefully. "I could never deny a beautiful woman her right to turn a profit." He flashed a dimple. "I'll be in next week to buy it back from you."

CJ and Posey's affair kindled that October night over cocktails, and by the time the first snow fell in the new year, they were both fully engulfed. When the drunken revelation finally emerged that he was married, she was past caring. And when CJ's wife left for New Zealand during a mid-March sleet storm, they sipped gin martinis in front of Eden Hall's library fire and skinny-dipped in the heated pool, turned to the maximum temperature against the spring chill. While CJ was seeing patients at the hospital, she explored every room of the antique-filled home. Her tours always ended in the conservatory, lush with Frances's award-winning orchids, each nestled in a silver bowl. The largest one was engraved.

Awarded to Frances Vanderbilt
Senior Class Golf Champion

On the thirteenth of May, when she called CJ to her run-down apartment complex in a sketchy part of town to announce her pregnancy, she had been certain he would jilt his childless wife for her and the baby growing in her womb. CJ had no such plans.

"This was just for fun," a stone-faced CJ had claimed. When she protested, first crying and then screaming, he responded,

“You knew going in all I wanted was a fling.” When she shouted that he had led her to believe he would marry her, he shook his head. “I need someone who can throw elegant parties for hospital board members and help me climb the rungs of the social ladder.” He had dropped a wad of cash on her bed and careened out of her life in his Jaguar, top down, blond hair blowing behind him. She had crumpled to the floor of her efficiency unit, sobbing through the night.

She squinted at her new house, shining like a beacon in the sun. It didn’t matter how or why she got it; it was hers. Her position in society would be as secure as the enormous brass knocker bolted to the front door. She would reign over the finest parties, and invitations to her soirees would be treasured like jewels. Queenie would never give her the side-eye again, and the likes of Barbara Ricketts would weep at being excluded from the elite gatherings. Her circle would widen to include Nashville’s blue bloods, with Frances blackballed from every event.

A thrilling thought washed over her. The *Nashville Banner* would cover the parties, and CJ would see the photos. He’d realize Posey had become the socialite he wanted, divorce Frances, and marry her, claiming both her and his long-lost daughter at last.

Elated, she took a step forward as she scanned the house. After two decades of prowling through estate sales in rich neighborhoods, Posey could recognize a house’s good bones. With a little fixing up, this one could rival any mansion in Belle Meade. She’d see to it that her home would have a resplendent library, an orchid-filled conservatory, and an enormous heated pool. Her first event would be Callie Jane’s wedding reception in August, where her daughter would be celebrated like royalty.

Chipped paint on the wooden columns caught her attention

as she mounted the sagging stairs. *I'll be dipping into that bank account sooner than I thought.* To her right was a plaque affixed to the wall proclaiming "*Amor Vincit Omnia.*" She recognized it as Latin, but could only guess at its meaning. She shrugged at the fragments of glass from the broken sidelights littering the porch. *A little cleanup should be expected.* Her hand shook in anticipation as she inserted the key. Swinging the door wide, she triumphantly crossed the threshold, tripping on a stone lying on the heart-of-pine floor.

She staggered from the smell. The air was thick with years of ancient mildew. Wallpaper drooped in fly-speckled sheets from the entryway walls. *A roof leak must have let a little moisture in. The rest will be fine.* She spied a massive fireplace to her right. *That will be my library.* At the first step into the room, dark from heavy drapes pulled tight against decades of sun, she was already imagining herself lounging by a crackling fire, a gin martini in her manicured hand, without a care in the world.

Movement from within the library brought her out of her daydream. Posey fled as a possum reared up from its nest in a tattered velvet wing chair and hissed at the new owner of 1480 Creekside Road.

About the Author



Photo by Jackie Arthur

ELIZABETH BASS PARMAN grew up entranced by family stories, such as the time her grandmother woke to find Eleanor Roosevelt making breakfast in her kitchen. She worked for many years as a reading specialist for a nonprofit, and spends her summers in a cottage by a Canadian lake. She has two grown daughters and lives outside her native Nashville with her husband and maybe-Maltipoo, Pippin.

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