

A NOVEL

*the
Vanishing
of
Josephine
Reynolds*

BESTSELLING AUTHOR
JENNIFER MOORMAN

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Jennifer Moorman



HARPER MUSE

The Vanishing of Josephine Reynolds

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Published by Harper Muse, an imprint of HarperCollins Focus LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
[CIP TO COME]

Printed in the United States of America

\$PrintCode

PROLOGUE

Couples moved around them, swaying to a sensual rhythm of brushes on drums, the steady thump of a bass guitar. Feathery high notes on the piano accentuated the lightness moving through her. The singer crooned about love and flying and blue skies. With her cheek pressed against the warmth of his chest and his arms wrapped tightly around her, she wouldn't have believed that in a couple of hours this would all be gone. All the people, the music, the joy.

The sway of their bodies mesmerized her, temporarily tricked her mind into believing that everything would be okay. Days and days would stretch out before them. Hours to laugh and love and make a future together. Endless kisses and parties and more dancing just like this. A thousand more moments with his body pressed against hers.

She looked up at him and smiled. "I could do this forever."

His grin fluttered her heart, and he leaned down to press his lips to hers, pausing only long enough to ask, "Promise?"

She didn't answer with words. She didn't have to. Their kiss made a promise she'd never be able to keep, though she wanted to. Because keeping that promise to him tonight would unravel the entire future.

CHAPTER I

Josephine Reynolds was a ghost.

She moved through life like an untethered being, a shadow on the periphery. If you turned your head to catch a glimpse, it was gone. *Gone*. That word played on a loop in her mind, had been playing for months. Her previous life. *Gone*. Her purpose. *Gone*. Nathan. *Gone* in a heart-stopping moment.

Josephine stood in the sticky warmth of the sunroom among the ZZ plants, the ferns, the Meyer lemon tree that ached to be repotted this year. A lone orchid drooped, heavy with crisp white blooms. The Christmas cactus showed off at least a dozen exotic bright-pink blossoms. Even with all the suffering, she'd managed to keep the plants alive. Most of them. The peace lily in the corner sagged as though it was in the throes of giving up, too weary to go on. No peace around here. That feeling she knew intimately.

Josephine stared out the windows at velvety smears of pink and violet reflecting on the surface of the swimming pool during sunset. If she stared hard enough and closed her eyelids just enough, she could imagine Nathan doing laps in the pool just before sunrise. After precisely half an hour of gliding through the water, back and forth, back and forth, his toned body would

rise out of the pool, water droplets beading on his skin, and reach for the folded towel on the end of the chaise nearest him. Then he'd towel off before coming inside to shower. She could almost smell the chlorine on his tan skin, almost see his wet footprints marking his path from pool to house.

Her cell phone buzzed in the living room, startling her out of the vision and forcing her back into now. Now, where every moment stretched toward nothing, heavy and meaningless. She turned her back on the sunset, on the memory of Nathan's routine, and walked into the living room. Her bare feet sank into the plush rug, which softened her steps. Grabbing her phone off the coffee table, she swiped it open to see a text from her sister, Katherine.

Hey! Let's grab dinner. I'll be there soon.

Josephine's sigh slumped her shoulders. She texted, Not tonight. I have . . .

What did she have? What excuse could she make up this time? When declining her sister's weekly invitations, she'd said she had paperwork to review, accounts to close, arrangements to make, a house to clean, laundry—a never-ending to-do list of inconsequential tasks. Anything to keep her from reengaging in anyone's life.

Before Josephine could draft a reason, Katherine sent another text. Open the door.

Josephine glanced through the living room toward the front door. The chiming doorbell caused her to flinch. The peal reverberated through the grand two-story foyer. Josephine stood still. Maybe the person would go away. Unless it was her sister.

A banging sounded against the door. "Open up, Jo!"

THE VANISHING OF JOSEPHINE REYNOLDS

For a terrible second, Josephine considered ignoring her sister. Then she crossed the living room and padded across the cold marble-tiled foyer. She unlocked the front door and opened it slowly, hesitantly, as if her sister might spring through in a defiant manner. But Katherine stood on the front landing, long dark hair flowing around her shoulders, with an expression of kindness that quickly shifted to concern. A canvas grocery bag hung on one shoulder.

“Hey,” Katherine said. “Assuming you would turn down my invitation to go out, I already picked up dinner. Can I come in?”

Josephine paused with the door halfway open and nodded. “Of course.” Her voice sounded hoarse, unused. When was the last time she’d actually had a real conversation with someone in person? Had it been weeks? She couldn’t recall. She cleared her throat. She fully opened the door and stepped back to allow Katherine to come inside.

Katherine walked past her toward the kitchen, and Josephine closed the door, flipping the deadbolt to lock it, and followed her. Katherine pulled clear containers of prepared food from Whole Foods out of her bag and displayed them on the island. Josephine stood awkwardly in her own kitchen.

The pendant lighting created pools of soft white light on the granite island. Nathan had chosen the lacquered bronze pendants from Restoration Hardware when they’d built the house five years ago. He preferred the classic-modern combination with its geometric angles and industrial vibe with a hint of timelessness. Josephine slid her fingers across the beveled edge of the counter.

With the last container removed, Katherine stilled and locked her gaze with Josephine’s. “I want to ask how you are, but it’s obvious. Selfishly I wanted to come over and see you were doing better, finding your way back, but you look—”

"I'm doing fine." Josephine's defensive tone revealed otherwise. A bit too punchy. Her stomach cramped. Heat rose up the back of her neck and flushed her face. She wasn't fine, unless *fine* meant something sunken. But to try not to appear like the heap of sorrow she knew she was, Josephine added, "I like to wear comfy clothes on Saturdays."

Katherine didn't speak for a few moments, then she exhaled. Placing both hands on the island, she stared at her splayed fingers. "Jo," she said in a quiet, gentle voice, "you're wearing Nathan's shirt, and it looks like you've been wearing it for days. I don't want to sound like Mama, but did you brush your hair today? You look like you've lost weight, and you didn't need to, and it's Thursday. If this is you doing fine, then I don't think I have the heart to see you doing badly."

Josephine swayed on her feet. She reached for the edge of the island to steady herself. Glancing down at her—no, *Nathan's*—rumpled button-up shirt, she saw she'd misaligned the buttons, so the right side of the shirt hung lower than the left. Was that a coffee stain near her hip? She finger combed her long, messy hair, which resulted in her fingers snagging tangles. When she gazed up at Katherine, tears stung her eyes.

"I'm okay, sort of," Josephine lied. "Today has just been a bad day." Actually the last few months had been a string of bad days that each bled into the next like a bloodstain.

"It's been six months," Katherine said, coming around the island to stand close to her sister. "I know there's not a time limit on grieving, and I'm not suggesting you 'look at the bright side' or any of that other garbage people blubber when you've lost someone, but, Jo, you *have* to move forward. Nathan wouldn't want this for you. If the roles were reversed, would you want him in this state?"

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Josephine laughed a dreadful, bitter sound that ripped up her dry throat. “Nathan would *never* be in this state. He’d be doing what he always did, work. He’d fill up his days with patients and parties and working lunches at restaurants where people hero worshiped him.” Josephine clenched her jaw. The acid of her words felt like blisters on her tongue. Adored, handsome, wildly successful Nathan had *left her* to deal with this gaping hole alone. She’d poured everything into his life, molded herself into the perfect polished wife, and now . . . Now she was no one but a grieving widow. Someone people pitied for a while and then forgot like last year’s fashion.

Katherine touched Josephine’s arm. “Hey, it’s going to be okay. We can get through this. You and me, we can get through anything.”

A stabbing sensation choked her breath halfway up her throat. Josephine nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

“Maybe today isn’t the best day to catch up over dinner,” Katherine said. “How about I put this in the fridge, and you eat when you’re hungry. Let’s make a plan for this weekend, though, okay? You need to get out of this house.”

Katherine looked around the kitchen. She bit her bottom lip the way she always did right before she told Josephine something that had a high probability of hurting her feelings.

“You might consider selling this place,” Katherine finally said. “It’s not really your style.”

Nathan had spent as much time choosing all of the finishings and fixtures and furniture as he did working his practice. This house was a labor of love—or a labor of something. A status symbol. A way to showcase his ambition and impressive lifestyle. Josephine hadn’t offered many opinions on the house’s style or

décor because Nathan's fondness for top-of-the-line, extravagant possessions was hardly something she wanted to argue with him about. He reminded her that his taste was impeccable, which included his choice in marrying her. Now she was just part of the collection he was no longer around to admire. This house was a museum dedicated to Nathan's prized belongings, including her.

"Nathan loved this house," Josephine replied.

"I get that, but what do *you* love?"

Josephine *heard* the words, but she didn't understand them. "I love this house too. It has everything I need." Everything except Nathan. Without him directing life and filling the house with his presence, Nathan's absence eliminated Josephine's purpose and direction.

Katherine's sigh betrayed her frustration. "Do you love this house because Nathan did or because you actually think this is your dream home?"

Josephine's expression slid downward. This time, heat akin to anger flared up the back of her neck. "What are you trying to say?"

Katherine pushed her long hair over one shoulder and leaned her hip against the counter. "Remember Seth?"

Josephine's mind squealed to a stop, then riffled through years of memories as if they were files in a drawer. "The guy I dated freshman year in college?"

Katherine nodded. "That's the one. He was obsessed with Pink Floyd and gas station burritos. I think the only clothes he owned were band T-shirts and ripped jeans. He played air guitar *in public* all the time. It was embarrassing."

Josephine's memories of the young man rose up in her mind like fog, barely formed and wispy. "How can you remember any

of that? All I remember is that he was tall and cute.”

“He was cute,” Katherine agreed, “if you could ignore all the other things not as attractive, which I couldn’t. And the only reason I remember him is because *you* started loving Pink Floyd and dressing in grungy T-shirts and faded jeans. You thought his air guitar was endearing, but the day I saw you eating a lukewarm burrito from Circle K, I nearly flipped my lid.”

“Why?” Josephine asked, not able to recall the moment.

Katherine sighed and pushed herself away from the counter-top. “There’s a pattern here, Jo. Whenever you dated a guy, you always became whatever *he* was or what *he* needed. You stopped being Josephine. You were Seth’s girlfriend or . . . Nathan’s wife. You lose yourself in them. You give up your friends, your preferences, your identity.” She motioned to the house. “Like this house. It’s a beautiful home, sure, but it’s all Nathan, and I can’t help but wonder if you even know who you are without him. After all these years, who’s Josephine? What does *she* want? What does *she* love?”

Josephine’s fingers crept up to her collarbone and rested there on clammy skin. A twinge of nausea, the faint yet staggering awareness that Katherine was right, alarmed her. Who was she without Nathan?

No one.

Katherine moved toward Josephine. “I can help you get this place on the market, find the right buyer. Not that you need the money, but you’d bank a lot for this house based on the Green Hills neighborhood alone. It would probably sell in less than a week, and I wouldn’t be surprised if there was a bidding war. Think about it.” Katherine pulled Josephine into a hug. “I love you, Jo-Jo.”

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“I love you, Katy-bug,” Josephine said, surprised to hear the childhood nickname for her sister rise from the abyss.



AN HOUR LATER, Josephine had showered, brushed her hair, and changed into a pajama set. Nathan’s shirt lay on top of a growing pile of laundry in the basket. She wandered the second-floor hallway, recalling the worry marking her sister’s face. Katherine wasn’t the only person in her life who’d voiced concerns about Josephine’s downward spiral. Her mama called every other day, and Josephine only answered once a week. Her neighbor had just yesterday dropped off a gift basket with not one but *five* business cards for therapists, ranging from grief counselors to energy healers.

Josephine had no desire to talk to anyone about anything; she didn’t need their advice or their easy-step plan to getting on with her life. When had she become a burden to everyone, a nagging worry they carried around, a thorn in their side? She brought discomfort and worry to her family and friends. This was not the woman she’d dreamed of becoming.

Her feet dragged her toward her bedroom. As she passed Nathan’s home office, she paused in the doorway, breathing in the scent of him that still lingered in the room. Her laptop had replaced his on the oversize mahogany desk, and it was open and facing the windows that overlooked the backyard.

A surge of sorrow caused a realization to hit her like a slap across her face. “I can’t do this anymore,” she whispered. She sagged beneath the weight of her grief, beneath how meaningless her life had become. “I wish I’d never been born.”

The lights in the room flickered like a pulse. Off, on. Off, on.

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Off, on. The electricity continued this heartbeat rhythm for a few seconds before darkness prevailed. Her entire body tensed. Her lungs squeezed out the last of her breath. The steady hum of electronics and the air-conditioner—ordinary sounds that no one ever noticed—ceased, leaving the house in a stillness so complete that Josephine heard her next intake of breath. She stood in the silence, almost as invisible in the darkness as she felt in life.

A ding sounded from her laptop. Within seconds the power kicked back on, and the house whirred to life again. Josephine's body unclenched, and she opened and closed her hands, flexing her fingers. She walked into the office, slid behind Nathan's desk, and sank into the cushy leather chair. She gripped the edge of the desk and pulled herself closer. Reaching for the nearest lamp, a Tiffany replica that Nathan loved, she pulled the cord and illuminated the desktop. Josephine slid her finger over the laptop's touchpad, waking up the screen. After keying in her password, she saw her email inbox was open, and one unread message waited for her. Katherine had forwarded an email. The subject line read Fw: Foreclosed Homes in Nashville, TN. In the body of the email, Katherine had written: Look what's on this list! Josephine clicked open the email.

Distractedly she scrolled through the houses and wondered about the people who had lived in these homes. Were they as lost as she was? Had they loved their homes? Had they spent more than they should have? Had someone died and left no one responsible?

A historic Victorian home in Belle Meade caught her eye. "It can't be," she said, leaning closer to the screen. Josephine's heartbeat quickened as she speed read the information, clicking through the blurry photographs, which confirmed she recognized the home. The Carter Mansion was in foreclosure?

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The Carter Mansion had been a wedding gift to her great-grandmother, Alma, when she married in 1916. Josephine hadn't set foot inside the house since she was a little girl, but seeing these online photographs resurrected delicate memories. After her grandmother's death six years ago, Josephine's mother, Emily, and her mother's brother, Donovan, had inherited the house. A disastrous family squabble ensued, and Emily had relented to Donovan, giving him complete ownership. When Josephine questioned her mama about it, Emily refused to discuss it, not wanting to further break her own heart over her brother's selfishness. Seeing the confusion and distress on her mama's face, Josephine hadn't brought it up again.

Josephine and Katherine were probably seven and five the last time they'd been inside the Carter Mansion. That was right before their dad's job moved the family to Atlanta. With its large rooms, narrow closets, and unusual storage spaces, the house had been ideal for endless games of hide-and-seek. Katherine would often give up because she tired of searching for Josephine, who Katherine swore became invisible. They ran wild through the back garden and helped Grandma Dorothy clip roses to place in Mason jars around the house. If she closed her eyes, Josephine could still smell the sweet mix of blooming flowers, lemon furniture polish, and dusty books that permeated the house.

Now five years after Uncle Donnie's underhanded act, here was the Carter Mansion in foreclosure. A barrage of questions rushed through her. What happened to her uncle? Had Uncle Donnie sold the house to someone who couldn't afford the upkeep? Had he not been able to maintain it himself? How could a historic home in the gorgeous Belle Meade area go into foreclosure? If Uncle Donnie hadn't been able to keep it, why hadn't he sold it? Why hadn't he reached out to the family?

THE VANISHING OF JOSEPHINE REYNOLDS

Josephine inhaled slowly, remembering Katherine's suggestion about selling her house. She reached for her cell phone and stared at the lock screen that lit up when she lifted it off the desk. An image of her and Katherine taken last year smiled up at her. They'd been caught laughing, and Josephine remembered the moment. She knew her sister fretted about her, which twisted her stomach. She opened her texts and typed a message to Katherine. Hey, just read your email. That's Grandma's house!

Katherine's reply vibrated Josephine's phone. Yep, the one Uncle Donnie stole.

Josephine surprised herself by laughing. She wouldn't have phrased it as such, but Katherine wasn't wrong.

I loved that house, Katherine texted. Remember that time you hid in the armoire, and I gave up searching for you?

Josephine texted, Which time? You always gave up. She could almost hear her sister laughing.

The time you found me an hour later eating cookies in the kitchen. You were furious. Until I shared my cookies.

Another question ballooned within Josephine, a question so startling her back went rigid and her breath held. She put down the phone. Should *she* buy back her family's home? Tingles moved over her skin, pushing goose bumps to the surface. Was that a yes? A confirmation from the soul fighting for survival within her? Josephine pushed back from the desk and spun herself around in the chair to gaze out into the moonlit backyard. Fireflies winked off and on in the darkness. Situated on just less than two acres, this home was on one of Nashville's most coveted streets. Although Nathan hadn't been into gardening or yardwork, he wanted a gorgeous backyard with landscaping, a pool,

and a shaded patio.

He insisted on a house with excess room for entertaining friends and family, and they'd hosted incredible parties, lavish holiday gatherings year-round, and more intimate pool soirees in the summers. Josephine couldn't even—and didn't *want* to—imagine hosting anyone in this house ever again. Maybe Katherine was right; this home no longer fit her. Maybe it never had. Maybe this had always been Nathan's desire.

Would Katherine think Josephine had completely lost her mind if she did something outrageous and bought their ancestral home? She picked up her phone and typed, I think you're right about me needing a new start. I'll need your help selling this place.

Three little dots hovered on the screen while Katherine typed a message. Just reading this makes me want to cry. Is Jo-Jo back?

What if I buy the Carter Mansion? Josephine's finger hovered over the phone before she sent her final question. Am I crazy?

Three bouncing dots had Josephine holding her breath. Then the dots disappeared, and Josephine frowned. She startled when her phone rang in her hand. Katherine was calling.

"What do you think?" Josephine said in a rush of breath.

"Let's do this, Jo-Jo."

CHAPTER 2

TWO MONTHS LATER

Metal scraped against metal and the rolling mechanism groaned when Josephine shoved up the garage door on the storage unit. “I can’t even remember what’s in here.”

Katherine stood beside her, swiping the neck of her Vanderbilt T-shirt against her sweaty brow. “Says pretty much everyone who owns a storage unit.” As the door lifted completely, she gasped and stepped forward into the half-filled space. She went immediately for the oversize armoire and ran her hands over the intricate inlays and the polished wood. Her fingers left streaks in the layer of dust coating the furniture. “Why have you been hiding this beauty?”

Josephine’s eyes moved from one piece of furniture to the next. Along with the armoire were upholstered chairs, a sideboard, a few end tables, lamps, a framed full-length mirror, and a few stacks of boxes and clear plastic containers.

Josephine rested her hand on the back of an antique wing-back chair upholstered in a soft tan fabric. “Nathan wasn’t into antiques. He preferred shiny and new. But I couldn’t bear to give away these family heirlooms. I guess I thought maybe one day I could find a home for them.”

Katherine gave Josephine *a look*, and the meaning was clear.

The abandoned antiques were yet another indicator that she had molded her life to suit his. Instead of commenting, Katherine said, "I'd forgotten how gorgeous these pieces were, Jo. They'll be perfect in the Carter Mansion." Katherine smiled at her.

"You know they were all originally there, don't you?" Josephine said.

Katherine's smile widened. "Of course, and we'll return them to where they belong." She stepped back out into the sunlight and glanced toward the parked U-Haul truck they'd rented. "Let's load up what we can reasonably carry. We'll pay the movers extra to swing by and grab the rest of these items. What time did they say they'd be finished at the Green Hills house?"

Katherine had taken to calling Josephine's previous home, which now belonged to a local attorney and his family, "the Green Hills house." It was as though she was trying to separate Josephine as much as possible from her former life. To help ease her sister out of the old and into the new. Katherine made it seem like slipping out of her old life was as easy as slipping off a pair of heels. To Josephine it felt more like wrangling off a sports bra.

"By three," Josephine said. "I'll call and give the movers directions here, and I'll ask the attendant to open the door for them since we'll be gone."

"I'm sorry Mama and Daddy can't be here to help," Katherine said. "And if Neil wasn't showing the Eastwoods a dozen different houses today, he'd be here too."

Josephine waved away the apology. "Mama and Daddy have had that trip to Charleston planned for months, and you've moved Neil around enough. One more move might do him in. How many times have you made him change houses? Nine? Ten?"

Katherine pretended to pout. "I can't help that I fall in love with a new house every year."

“Better houses than men.” Both sisters laughed. Josephine lifted the lid on the closest plastic container. A faint moldy scent of items boxed for years wafted out. “I’d forgotten Mama gave me some of great-grandma’s clothes.”

Katherine moved in close beside her sister and touched the navy-blue dress on top. “I bet you’re as tiny as she was. You should have a fashion show after we get these to the house.”

“Why just me?” Josephine asked with a hint of a smile. “Shouldn’t you be subjected to trying to wedge yourself into antique clothing?”

“Not a chance,” Katherine said with a laugh. “Not with this bust. No way those zippers or buttons would hold me in. I’d look like a harlot.”

A sound between a snort and a laugh rose up Josephine’s throat. “A harlot? You know that means ‘prostitute,’ right?”

Katherine’s laugh matched her own. “Poor word choice. But you—these clothes would look great on you. You’ve got the coveted flapper’s body.”

“You mean the body you keep reminding me has lost too much weight?” Josephine said, her dark eyebrows lifting.

“We’re working on that!” Katherine said lightly. “We can’t adjust everything all at once. Some of these changes have to happen slowly. Otherwise it’ll throw you into a wild panic, and you’ll bolt faster than a wild mustang.”

Josephine sighed. “Or sink like a stone.”

Katherine nudged her shoulder against Josephine’s. “Hey, none of that. You’re doing great. Remarkable, actually. Now let’s get these boxes into the truck and ride over to the mansion.” Then she laughed. “Don’t we sound fancy? Darling, let’s return to the mansion, shall we?”

Josephine rolled her eyes as she grabbed the nearest box, but

she was smiling.



ON THE FRONT veranda of the Carter Mansion, Josephine balanced a cardboard box on one hip while retrieving the ring of house keys from her front pants pocket. They snagged on the hem. She gave the keys a yank and wobbled. Shoes clacked against the front brick stairs. Josephine half-turned to ask her sister for help with the keys but didn't get the words out. It wasn't Katherine coming up the steps.

A tall woman dressed in a burgundy cable-knit sweater, pressed khakis, and stylish black boots stepped onto the front porch with a small wave. Her pewter-colored hair was styled into a shoulder-length bob. "Hello, I hope I'm not disturbing you."

Did any polite person *ever* admit they were being disturbed? If Josephine were less courteous, she would wholeheartedly admit to being bothered. Didn't the woman see Josephine was busy moving in? If Josephine's sweaty, disheveled appearance wasn't obvious enough, then the U-Haul and boxes were.

Without waiting for Josephine's reply, the woman held out her hand and said, "I'm Barbara Blanchard. I live up the street, and I wanted to welcome you to the neighborhood."

Josephine repositioned the box on her hip. "It's nice to meet you, Barbara. I'd shake your hand, but as you can see, I have my hands full. It's move-in day for me."

Barbara's burgundy lips stretched into a polite smile. "Of course, of course. What a headache moving is." She glanced toward the U-Haul truck, where Katherine must be still inside deciding what to bring in next. Unless her sister was hiding. "I hope you aren't trying to move all by yourself. I know a great

moving company—”

“No, thank you, though. The movers will be here this afternoon with the rest,” Josephine said. “I’m Josephine Reynolds.”

“So nice to meet you, Josephine. I’m vice-president of the neighborhood association. This is a historic neighborhood, you know.”

There it was. The real reason Barbara stood on the front porch. She wanted to ensure Josephine knew that there were certain rules to be followed, all of which Josephine had already researched. “Yes, I know. It’s a beautiful street, and I’m happy to be a part of it.”

Barbara’s smile dimmed, and her lips pinched together. “The last owner didn’t care much about keeping our street beautiful or about our responsibility to this historic neighborhood.”

What could she say to get Barbara off her porch so she could continue moving in peace? “That’s unfortunate,” Josephine said. “I have all the information about the historical society and its requirements. Thank you so much for stopping by. I look forward to seeing you around the neighborhood.” Although she didn’t mean it; Barbara didn’t seem like the kind of person Josephine could picture herself having a meaningful friendship with. What she was most looking forward to was finishing up today, taking a shower, and falling into bed.

“Donovan Grant was his name,” Barbara continued, clearly not picking up on Josephine’s social cues or not caring. “Did you know that just before he moved out, he painted some of the trim black on the windows at the back of the house? Only *some* of the trim. Not all of it. And *black*. Why would anyone paint trim black?”

Josephine had noticed the unusual paint job and made a note to strip the paint and match the trim to the rest on the house.

“Some historical homes *do* have black trim,” she countered.

“Not this one!” Barbara said, a little too aggressively. “And he didn’t ask permission. He also added that hideous shed in the backyard, which we repeatedly demanded he remove. Heaven only knows what he used it for.”

“A lawnmower or yard tools?” Josephine said, placing the box down on the porch to free her aching arms. This conversation didn’t appear to be winding down anytime soon.

“Doesn’t matter, because adding an outbuilding is against the codes. And besides, I looked inside the shed after he moved, and you know what was in there? Nothing.”

Josephine pressed her lips together before speaking, gathering more courteous words than the options that threatened to tumble out. “Wouldn’t the shed have been empty since he moved?”

Barbara huffed. “It didn’t look like he’d ever kept anything in there. I’d bet he just added it for spite. And have you *seen* the weathervane?”

Josephine craned her neck as though she could see through the porch roof to the top of the house. “I haven’t noticed it.”

“It’s a turkey,” Barbara said. When Josephine laughed, Barbara’s eyes narrowed. “It *must* be taken down. He didn’t get approval for that unsightly thing, and we didn’t notice it until a month or so before he left. When I confronted him about it, he said he’d had it professionally made, as if that makes it okay. And this”—she straight-arm pointed at the front door—“Is highly unacceptable. I *know* he replaced the front door with this monstrosity on purpose.”

Monstrosity was an exaggeration, but the generic primer-gray front door, probably purchased at a big-box store, was a woeful sight on the stately Carter Mansion. Changing the current front door to a historic one from the late 1890s was a top priority for

Josephine once she was all moved in.

Katherine bounded up the steps and lifted her eyebrows in question. Josephine forced a smile. “Thank you for all of this information, Barbara. I’ll do my best to bring the house back into line with its historic distinction.”

“I certainly hope so,” Barbara said, glancing between the sisters. “We take our historic neighborhood seriously.”

“That much is clear,” Katherine said, “since you’ve wasted no time in coming over here while we’re in the middle of moving in. We appreciate your zeal for neighborhood codes, and if you don’t mind, we’d love to keep going. It’s already been a long day.”

Barbara looked mildly snubbed, but she nodded curtly and walked down the stairs. Once on the sidewalk, she glanced over her shoulder at the sisters, a haughty look on her pinched face, then hustled away.

“I think you offended her,” Josephine said, freeing the keys from her pocket, picking up her box, and unlocking the front door.

Katherine shrugged and carried two boxes inside the house. “Her spiel could have waited a day or another week.”

Josephine crossed the small foyer and placed her box in the wide hallway that ran the length of the first floor. The switchback staircase took up half the foyer. Directly to her left was an opening to the living room, and the parlor was to the right. Branching off the long hallway were doors to the dining room, a reading and music room, and the kitchen.

Katherine stacked her boxes near Josephine’s. “My guess is she’s probably busting at the seams to find out who we are and see if we’re going to sully her precious neighborhood. I know her type.”

Josephine headed back toward the open front door. She

knocked her knuckles against it. “She’s not wrong, though, about the front door. It is ugly. I can’t believe Uncle Donnie got rid of whatever was here before. It had to be better than this eyesore.”

“I know a great salvage yard you can check out,” Katherine said. “I send all of my clients there. The owner, Leo Freeman, has been in the business for years. He’ll know exactly what you need to replace Uncle Donnie’s disaster door.”

Josephine and Katherine brought in the remaining boxes and smaller items they’d taken from the storage unit. The movers agreed to stop by the unit after leaving the Green Hills house, load up the remaining larger items, and bring everything to the Carter Mansion. Though furnished, there was plenty of room for the antiques and personal items Josephine wanted to add.

At least half of the furniture in the mansion was antique, and why Donnie had left behind such priceless pieces was anybody’s guess. It was as puzzling as why he fought viciously to own the house and then allowed it to go into foreclosure.

The dining room table, chairs, buffet, and china cabinet were original to the house, and the end tables, lamps, and a few of the upholstered chairs in the parlor were too. Stepping into those rooms felt like stepping back in time. But the living room furniture was a mishmash of styles and eras. Josephine planned to replace pieces over time and bring more cohesion to the space.

The main bedroom upstairs had updated furniture, but the other two still held their original bedroom suites. With or without permission, Donnie had added an en suite primary bathroom and a Jack and Jill between the smaller bedrooms. He’d also renovated the kitchen and added modern appliances and fixtures. Perhaps those additions had bankrupted him. Josephine knew how expensive high-end taste was. She’d been married to someone with it for fifteen years.

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An hour after Josephine and Katherine arrived at the house, the movers parked against the curb. In less than two hours, they unloaded their truck, situated everything inside the house according to the sisters' directions, and drove away with their tip money.

Josephine dropped onto the mauve, floral-patterned couch, a holdout from the eighties. She flopped her arm across her eyes and sighed. "I could probably fall asleep right now."

"The smell of that couch alone would give you nightmares," Katherine joked, lying across the living room rug, arms splayed. "But this rug might be worse. It probably hasn't been cleaned in a decade."

Josephine turned her head to look down at her sister. Love and gratefulness swelled so quickly in her chest that tears stung her eyes. She'd actually done it. She'd sold the house she shared with Nathan, leaving behind his ghost. Leaving behind the dreams they'd had for a future there. Now she was free to start over, and if possible, to attempt a reconnection with something alive and real again. "Thank you. For everything."

Katherine opened her eyes and looked at Josephine. "You'd do the same for me."

Josephine nodded. She would have, but Katherine was the most competent person Josephine knew, possibly had ever known. Katherine always appeared in control and stable, which was the opposite of how Josephine would describe herself recently.

Katherine sat up with a groan. "I'm going to feel this tomorrow. You going to be okay tonight by yourself? Want me to stay over?"

"I'll be fine," she said. After all, she'd been sleeping alone for months, even before Nathan died. He worked so many hours that he often came home after she'd gone to sleep. Rather than wake

her, he'd sleep in another bedroom. That thought caused a cramp in her heart. She sat up and rubbed her fingers across her collarbone, looking around the spacious living room. "I've just moved from one big empty house into another."

Katherine's serious expression softened for a moment. "This won't be anything like where you've come from. I have a good feeling about this place."

"Because you won't be the one trying to air out Uncle Donnie's bad vibes? I wish I'd thought to buy sage for burning."

Katherine chuckled. "They call it smudging. The bathrooms and kitchen upgrades he did are excellent. Looks like he took care of most of the antique furniture, and as far as I can tell, with the exception of the kitchen, all the original fixtures are still here. Although he wasn't much of a gardener from the state of those rose bushes in the back. They're sadder than a steel guitar in a country song. You can hire a landscaper, unless you're interested in gardening."

Josephine had loved the Green Hills backyard and garden. Though she mentioned to Nathan she'd like to help with the upkeep and plantings, he insisted on hiring landscapers to come every two weeks. Again he made her an observer rather than an active participant.

Katherine continued, "With a little care, the garden will perk back up."

"Sounds like you're talking about me," Josephine said, trying to make a joke, and yet the truth of her words created a visceral ache inside her.

Katherine stood and reached out for her sister. She pulled Josephine into a sitting position on the couch. "Don't forget to call Leo Freeman next week and get that front door replaced."

Josephine nodded and rolled her eyes. "I won't forget. I gotta

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get Barbara off my back for a while.”

Katherine grinned. “You might be surprised at the wonders changing out a front door can do for a house.”

HARPER
MUSE



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo by Matt Andrews

Born and raised in southern Georgia, where honeysuckle grows wild and the whippoorwills sing, Jennifer Moorman is the bestselling author of the magical realism *Mystic Water* series. Jennifer started writing in elementary school, crafting epic tales of adventure and love and magic. She wrote stories in Mead notebooks, on printer paper, on napkins, on the soles of her shoes. Her blog is full of dishes inspired by fiction, and she hosts baking classes showcasing these recipes. Jennifer considers herself a traveler, a baker, and a dreamer. She can always be won over with chocolate, unicorns, or rainbows. She believes in love—everlasting and forever.



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