



The Sound of Glass

By Karen White



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Two years after the death of her husband, Merritt Heyward receives unexpected news—Cal's family home in Beaufort, South Carolina, bequeathed by his reclusive grandmother, now belongs to Merritt.

In Beaufort, the secrets of Cal's unspoken-of past reside among the pluff mud and jasmine of the ancestral Heyward home on the Bluff. This unknown legacy, now Merritt's, will change and define her as she navigates her new life—a life complicated by the arrival of her too young stepmother and ten-year-old half brother.

Soon, in this house of strangers, Merritt is forced into unraveling the Heyward family past as she faces her own fears and finds the healing she needs in the salt air of the Lowcountry.

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Editorial Review

Review

“From the mysterious events of the first chapter to the heart-rending revelations of the last, Karen White paints a vivid portrait of a family filled with secrets, strife and—ultimately—love. I adore Karen’s stories and *The Sound of Glass* may well be my new favorite.”—*USA Today* bestselling author Diane Chamberlain

“Complex and emotionally rich, Karen White’s *Sound of Glass* will linger in the reader’s heart long after the last page is turned. A gripping story, beautifully told.”—*New York Times* bestselling author Karen Rose

“A richly imagined, multilayered mystery where interlinked stories and unearthed secrets of a damaged family lead to courage and healing. Engrossing from beginning to end.”—*New York Times* bestselling author Beth Hoffman

More Praise for *New York Times* bestselling author Karen White

“There is a rhythm to the writing of Karen White. It has a pace, a beat, a cadence that is all its own.”—The Huffington Post

“White’s dizzying carousel of a plot keeps those pages turning, so much so that the book can [be]—and should be—finished in one afternoon, interrupted only by a glass of sweet iced tea.”—Oprah.com

“White captures the true essence of Charleston by intertwining the sights and smells of the historic town with an enchanting story filled with ghostly spirits, love, and forgiveness...a once-in-a-lifetime series.”—Fresh Fiction

“This is storytelling of the highest order: the kind of book that leaves you both deeply satisfied and aching for more.”—Beatriz Williams, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Tiny Little Thing*

“Readers will find White’s prose an uplifting experience as she is a truly gifted storyteller.”—*Las Vegas Review-Journal*

About the Author

Karen White is the *New York Times* bestselling author of more than twenty novels, including the Tradd Street series, *The Night the Lights Went Out*, *Flight Patterns*, *The Sound of Glass*, *A Long Time Gone*, and *The Time Between*. She is the coauthor of *The Forgotten Room* with *New York Times* bestselling authors Beatriz Williams and Lauren Willig. She grew up in London but now lives with her husband and two children near Atlanta, Georgia.

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Prologue

Beaufort, South Carolina

July 1955

An unholy tremor rippling through the sticky night air alerted Edith Heyward that something wasn't right. Like a shadow creeping past a doorway in an empty house, or the turn of the latch on a locked door, the movement outside Edith's opened attic window raised the gooseflesh along her spine. Her breath sat in her mouth, suspended with anticipation as icy pinpricks marched down her limbs.

Her gaze moved from her paintbrush and the tiny drop of red paint she'd drizzled onto the chest of the doll's starched white cotton nightgown, to the sea-glass wind chime she'd made and hung just outside the window. The stagnant air of a South Carolina summer had stifled any movement for months, yet now the chimes seemed to shiver on an invisible breeze, the frosty blue and green glass twitching like a hanged man from a noose.

She jerked her gaze to the locked door, wondering whether her husband had returned. He didn't like locked doors. The bruises on her arms, carefully placed and easily hidden under long sleeves, seemed to press against her skin in memory. Edith dropped her paintbrush, barely aware of the splatter of red paint on the dollhouse-size room she'd been re-creating, eager to unlatch the door and make it down to the kitchen and her mending basket before Calhoun had cause to wonder where she was.

She'd barely slid from her stool when the sky exploded with fire, illuminating the river and the marshes beneath it, obliterating the stars, and shooting blurry light through the milky glass of the wind chime. The stones swayed with the shocked air, singing sweetly despite the destruction in the sky behind them. Then a rain of fire descended like fireworks, myriad balls of light extinguished as soon as they collided with water into hiccups of steam.

Smaller explosions reverberated across the river, where the migrant workers' cottages clustered near the shore like birds, their roofs and dry postage-stamp lawns easy fodder for the hungry flames that fell from the heavens. A fire siren whirred as Edith leaned out the window as far as she could, listening to people shouting and screaming, and smelling something indiscernible. Something that smelled like the tang of wood smoke mixed with the acrid odor of burning fuel. She recalled the hum of an airplane from when she'd been working on the doll, right before she'd thought the earth had shifted, and imagined she knew what was now falling from the sky.

A thud came from above her head, followed swiftly by the sound of something heavy sliding down the roof before hitting the gutter. Then the sound stopped and she pictured whatever it was falling into the back garden.

Edith ran from the room, ignoring the shoe-size bruises on her hips that made it hard to walk, sliding down half the flight of stairs to the second story, where her three-year-old son, C.J., lay in his bed, blissfully unaware of the sky falling down around them. She scooped him into her arms, along with the baby blanket he'd worn thin but wouldn't give up, feeling his warm, sweaty skin against her own. Ignoring his whimpers, she moved as quickly as she could with the boy in her arms down to the foyer.

Edith threw open the front door to stand on her wide columned porch and stared past her garden and across the street to where the river seemed to bleed in reverse with rising steam. Her neighbors streamed toward the water, as if all the trauma were occurring somewhere else and not in their own backyards. She made her way to the street, but instead of following her neighbors she turned around to inspect her roof, expecting to see it lit with flames.

Instead she was met with the same sight she'd been seeing since she'd moved into her husband's home on the Bluff nearly eight years before, the dark roof outlined neatly against a sky that seemed dwarfed in comparison.

With her little boy tucked against her shoulder, Edith stepped gingerly through the garden gate at the side of the house by the driveway, looking for anything that might have fallen from the sky, wondering what she'd do if she found something on fire. Wondering whether she'd try to put it out with her son's blanket. Or throw it into the house and watch it burn.

She studied her flower garden, her only hobby that Calhoun approved of, smelling the tea olives and lemon trees that almost eradicated the odd smell of fumes that wafted toward her in waves. The full moon guided her along the white-stoned path, past her roses and butterfly bushes that nestled closer to the house and where she imagined whatever had fallen from the roof had landed.

Her foot kicked something hard and solid, reminding her that she was wearing only her house slippers. She started at the sight of a disembodied hand, its fist enclosing a rose. She pressed her hand against her chest to slow the heavy thud of her heart as she realized it was the arm from the marble statue of Saint Michael. He'd watched over her since she'd placed him there when she first realized she needed protection. She spotted the rest of the statue lying faceup on the path among broken branches from the oak tree, his sightless eyes hollow in the moonlight. When she stepped forward to assess the damage, her foot collided with something hard and unyielding, hidden in the shadows beneath the fragrant boxwoods.

More sirens joined in the cacophony of sound that had invaded her quiet town, but as Edith knelt on the rocky path, she hardly seemed to notice, her attention completely focused on the brown leather suitcase that sat upright in her garden as if an uninvited visitor had suddenly come to call.

C.J. began to stir as Edith deliberated what she should do. Unwilling to separate herself from either her son or the suitcase, she pressed C.J. against her body with her left arm, ignoring the throbbing from the bruises that ran along her rib cage, then grabbed the handle of the suitcase. Gingerly she lifted it to test the weight, finding it lighter than it appeared. Walking slowly, she carried the suitcase up the back steps and into the empty kitchen.

After placing C.J. in the playpen, Edith returned to the brown suitcase, noticing for the first time the large dent in the bottom corner, the hinge badly damaged but not broken. Judging from the relatively good condition of the suitcase, she realized the canopy of oak limbs had broken its fall before it landed on the roof. A name tag dangled from the handle, practically begging her to touch it.

She should call the police. Let them know that she had a piece of whatever disaster had happened in the sky that night. Perhaps some survivor would be looking for this exact suitcase that now rested on her kitchen floor. Still, she hesitated. She wasn't sure why she felt the need for secrecy, but the thrill of the forbidden teased her senses, brought forth her rebellious spirit, which she'd learned years before was best left hidden.

She pressed her lips together with determination. She'd push the button on the latch to see whether it opened. It was probably locked anyway. Or the lock could be too damaged from the fall to open. Then she'd call the police.

She heard a sound from the playpen and saw C.J. watching her with his wide blue eyes. "Mama?"

She smiled. "It's all right, sweetheart. You go on back to sleep, all right?"

“Suitcase,” he said around the ever-present thumb Calhoun had been demanding she make him stop sucking.

“Yes, darling. Now go on back to sleep.”

He remained standing, watching her intently. She knew his rebellious streak came from her and she was reluctant to stifle it. “You can watch for a little bit if you like. I’ll be right back.”

Edith kissed his damp forehead as she walked out of the kitchen and to the front door, which she carefully opened to peer out. She was more afraid of her husband’s return than of the band of angry people she imagined marching toward her door to find the errant suitcase. The smells and sounds were stronger now, the sky glowing orange across the river over the fields of okra and watermelon as sirens screamed into the night.

Edith retreated into her house and closed the door, turning the key in the lock, then returned to the kitchen and the suitcase. After a quick glance at C.J., who remained sucking his thumb and watching everything with his father’s eyes, she reached for the luggage tag and tried to read the name and address. Moisture must have seeped beneath the plastic cover and the cardboard name tag, making the ink run like tears. The address was nearly illegible, but she could read the name clearly: Henry P. Holden. When she flipped up the handle, she saw that a monogram had been boldly stamped in gold: HPH. She imagined a middle-aged man in a dark suit and hat, with a wife and kids at home, traveling on business. She thought of where they were now, and how they might be notified of the accident. Wondered whether it was possible to survive such a thing as falling from the sky.

She pushed the button and the latch popped open. It was a sign, Edith thought as her hands moved to the two latches on the sides of the suitcase. One opened easily, but the one on the side with the dent took a few twists and tugs.

Without pausing, she opened the suitcase wide on her kitchen table. She unlatched the separators on each side and folded them up, revealing neat stacks of starched and pressed dress shirts and suit pants, bleached white undershirts, boxers, and linen handkerchiefs. Everything had been packed so tightly that there’d been little room for movement as the suitcase had tumbled to earth.

Edith recognized the scent of the detergent that wafted up to her as the same one she used, as if the clothes had come from her own washing machine. It had so obviously been packed by a woman that Edith almost laughed at the predictability of it, then sobered quickly as she pictured the faceless woman walking down a dark hallway to answer the ringing telephone.

She stared down again at the clothing, taking note of the quality of the thread count in the shirts, the soft linen handkerchiefs, the fine gabardine of Henry Holden’s trousers, the thickness and brightness of the undershirts. Each handkerchief had a perfectly stitched monogram on the corner in bright, bold red: HPH. It all made sense for a man traveling on business. But as she stared at the suitcase’s contents, something bothered her, something she couldn’t quite put her finger on.

Calhoun had once told her it was her analytical mind that had first attracted him to her. As the only child of a widower police detective, she’d never known any other way to be. So when the handsome lawyer Calhoun Heyward had come to her small town of Walterboro to try a case, she hadn’t known that she would have been better off pretending to be a simpering female without opinions. Because in the end, that was what he’d really wanted.

C.J. was sleeping standing up, his head cradled on the top rail of the playpen, his thumb in his mouth. Edith

glanced nervously at the round metal clock over the sink. Calhoun could be home at any minute to find a locked front door and a man's suitcase on the kitchen table. She didn't stop to think where he'd been or with whom, or if he'd seen the airplane explode and had thought to worry about her and their son.

She quickly refastened the separators, the fasteners slipping through her fingers because she was going too fast and her hands shook. It was then that she realized what had been bothering her. The dopp kit. The ubiquitous men's toiletry kit was missing. No man traveled without one. She pulled the cloth separators back again, looking at the neatly packed clothes, studying the side where the clothes had shifted slightly more than on the other. She reached in to shove a stack back to the side, revealing a small pocket where a dopp kit would have fit during the packing. She pursed her lips, thinking. Could Mr. Holden have removed it before boarding his plane, believing he might have need of something inside it during the flight?

Edith smiled to herself. These were the questions her father had taught her to ask until her inquisitiveness had become a part of her. During the years of her miscarriages and Calhoun's growing disappointment in her, it had become her saving grace. It had been what had made her ignore the censure of her friends and husband and reach out to the local police department and offer her services as an artist with an unusual talent. It had kept her whole.

Forgetting the time and the sound of an approaching siren, she reached into the suitcase and carefully began to shift the clothing, searching for the missing dopp kit. She searched the top half of the case first, and then the bottom, almost giving up before her fingers brushed against something that didn't feel like cloth. Careful not to disturb anything further, she gently pushed away three pairs of neatly rolled-up dark socks to find a crisply folded letter.

She hesitated for only a moment before taking it out. It was expensive stationery, thick, heavy linen, the Crane watermark visible when Edith held it to the light. It wasn't sealed but had been tightly folded, as if the writer had pressed his or her fingers along the creases many times. When she flipped it over, a single word was written in thin black ink with elegant penmanship.

Beloved.

She paused, wondering how many boundaries she could cross, quickly deciding that she had already crossed too many to worry about one more. With steady hands she unfolded the letter and began to read the short lines written in the same elegant script as the word on the back.

She stared at the words for so long that they began to blur and dance off the page, until the letter fell to the floor as if the weight of the words were too much for Edith's fingers. She let it go, watching as it slipped beneath the new white refrigerator that had been delivered the previous week as an apology from Calhoun. She didn't try to retrieve it, wishing that the words could disappear from her memory just as easily.

She wasn't sure how long she stood there, staring at the small crack between the black and white vinyl floor tiles and the bottom of the new appliance, but she jumped when the hall phone began to ring. With a quick glance at the sleeping boy, she ran to answer it.

"Edith? It's Betsy. I'm so glad to hear your voice. We all ran to the river, but Sidney and I got worried when I saw that you and Calhoun weren't with us. Is everything all right?"

Edith was surprised at the calmness to her voice. "I'm fine. Calhoun is working late, so I was here alone." It never surprised her how easily the lies spilled from her mouth anymore. "I didn't want to leave the house because of C.J. He's been sick and was sound asleep. Didn't even wake up at the sound of the explosion."

“It was an airplane,” Betsy said, her voice higher pitched, a tone usually reserved for neighborhood gossip. “They’re saying it exploded—just like that. Sidney said it was probably an engine catching on fire. You know how dangerous airplanes are. I took a train to visit my parents in Jackson last Christmas even though Sidney told me I should fly instead, so he can’t tell me I was wrong now, can he? It’s just tragic, though. All those people . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“How awful,” Edith said, her hands still remembering the feel of the stranger’s clothes, the image of a ringing phone in a dark hallway. The elegant handwriting in the letter. Her throat felt tight, as if the fingers of the letter writer were pressing against her windpipe. “Are there any survivors?”

“Sidney said he didn’t think so. He was outside walking the dog when it happened, and he says it was pretty high up in the sky. But the authorities are handing out flashlights to all the men to go search the fields, the river, and the marsh for survivors. A solid beam for any sign of life, and a flashing light to indicate a . . .” Her voice caught. Betsy Williams was Edith’s bridge partner, and they were neighbors. And Sidney Williams was their family lawyer. That was where their common interests ended. Betsy was content to live on the surface of life, to avoid any sharp edges that might force her to open her eyes a little wider. Betsy would tell people that she and Edith were best friends, but she couldn’t tell them anything about her except for Edith’s favorite flower and that she disliked chocolate.

“A body,” Betsy continued. “That was a while ago. Sidney sent me home, but I’m too restless to do anything. I thought maybe you could use some company.”

“No,” Edith said, a little too quickly, thinking of the suitcase in her kitchen. “I’m exhausted from taking care of C.J., and I think I’m just going to go to bed. I’m sure Calhoun is out there searching, too, and can fill me in on the details when he returns.”

There was a brief pause, and Edith pictured Betsy’s small mouth tightening with disappointment. “All right. But call me if you get nervous and need me to come around.”

Edith said good-bye and carefully replaced the phone back in the cradle, suddenly aware of the sound of voices from her front lawn. She’d already started back toward the kitchen when the doorbell rang. She stopped, unsure what to do. It wasn’t Calhoun. He would have banged on the door when he’d discovered it locked. With an eye toward the closed kitchen door, Edith smoothed down her skirt and carefully tucked her hair behind her ears before opening the door.

Two police officers stood on her front porch, their hats in their hands. She wondered if she would be sick all over their polished black shoes that reflected her porch lights or if she could make it to the side railing. How had they known about the suitcase?

“Mrs. Heyward?” The young officer on the left spoke first. She thought she recognized him, but she was having a problem focusing.

She smiled, forcing the bile back down her throat. “Yes?” She struggled to suck a breath into her lungs, the air now thick with the scent of rain. While she’d been in the kitchen, the moon and stars had disappeared as if ashamed to illuminate the scene beneath them. The splat of raindrops hitting her front walk and the leaves of the oak tree that shaded most of the front yard almost obliterated the sound of her heart thrumming in her ears. “Can I help you?” She knew she should invite them inside, just as she knew she could not.

A figure moved from the shadows of the porch, and she recognized the police chaplain as he stepped inside the arc of light. She blinked in surprise, wondering why he was there with the officers.

A flash of lightning lifted her gaze from the three men to the scene across the river, and she found herself holding her breath. Dozens of blinking flashlights came from the shore and from boats on the water like hovering fireflies, spots of light marking the souls of the departed.

“Edith?” The chaplain stepped closer, so she could now see his kind eyes and the deep creases around his mouth placed there like scars during the war. “I’m afraid we have bad news.”

“Mama?” C.J. called from the kitchen.

Edith turned to the chaplain in a panic. “I’m sorry; I have to see to my son. . . .”

He reached out to take her hands, his fingers as icy as hers. “There’s been an accident. Calhoun’s car was found off of Ribaut Road up against a tree. An eyewitness said it looked like he was distracted by the explosion.” He paused. “He . . . he didn’t survive.”

She felt as if she were free-falling from the sky, the lack of oxygen making her light-headed and strangely calm. She felt nothing. Absolutely nothing. “Was he alone?”

The men shuffled their feet in embarrassment, but it was the second officer who finally spoke. “Yes, ma’am.”

Edith nodded, feeling inordinately relieved that they hadn’t come because of the suitcase. Her son called out from the kitchen again, distracting her from the sight of the blinking lights. She knew she needed to say something, to pretend that she cared that Calhoun was dead, to pretend that she felt anything except relief. She thought instead of the feel of her mother’s cold hand in hers, and her father’s voice saying something about her being free from pain. Edith let out a sob, then pressed her knuckles against her mouth.

The chaplain spoke again. “Can I get you anything? Or can I call someone to come stay with you?”

She shook her head, blinked back the tears. “No. I’ll be all right. I just need to be alone right now with my son. I’ll be in touch in the morning to see what needs to be done. Thank you, gentlemen.” She closed the door on their surprised faces, her last glimpse that of the chaplain’s knowing eyes.

The storm outside intensified as she pressed her forehead against the closed door, feeling guilty that instead of thinking of Calhoun dying alone on a darkened road, her thoughts were occupied with the letter under her refrigerator and the woman who’d written it. Edith felt an odd kinship with the unknown woman, the bond of a secret the other woman would never know she’d shared. A secret Edith knew she’d take to her grave.

Before she turned from the door, a gust of wind pushed at the house, unfastening a shutter on an upper story and slamming the limbs of the old tree against the roof of the porch. As she began walking slowly back toward the kitchen, she heard the wind chime cry out into the troubled night like a prayer to accompany lost souls to heaven. She shivered despite the humid night, then closed her eyes for a moment, hearing only the sound of glass.

Chapter 1

Merritt

Beaufort, South Carolina

May 2014

Fires can be stopped in three different ways: exhausting the fuel source, taking away the source, or starving the fire of oxygen. Whenever Cal was worked up or upset he would repeat small facts he'd learned at the academy like reciting a prayer. It sometimes worked, which is probably why I'd taken up the habit after he was gone.

My logical and organized curator's mind wouldn't allow me to completely push away the thought that my own recitation was some kind of unanswered plea for forgiveness. Because no matter what they told me, Cal's death wasn't an accident. I was reminded often that he was a firefighter and walking into burning buildings was what he did, and sometimes a roof collapsed and firemen got trapped. And they were right, of course, because that was how Cal had died. But it didn't explain why.

I looked up at the address on the thick white door casing of the old brick building, then back to the letterhead of the law firm Williams, Willig, and White, 702 Bay Street. I stared at the brass numbers, my mind still unwilling to grasp how I'd ended up more than a thousand miles from home.

I climbed the three steps, holding down my skirt so it wouldn't expose the ridged scar on the side of my leg. I pulled on a heavy brass doorknob, needing both hands to open the large door, then stepped into a well-appointed reception room that looked like it had once been a foyer to a grand home. Old pine floors, polished to a sheen that didn't quite obscure the centuries of heel marks and scratches that gave the wood character, creaked beneath my feet as I walked toward a large mahogany reception desk.

A brass nameplate with the name Donna Difloe introduced the middle-aged woman behind the desk. She looked up at me and smiled as I approached, her rhinestone cat's-eye glasses beneath a cap of frosted blond hair catching the light from her desk lamp. She smiled at me with brightly painted pink lips, and I wondered whether I'd need to start wearing at least lipstick now that I'd moved down south.

"May I help you?" she asked.

"Yes. I'm here to see Mr. Williams. I have an appointment at eleven."

Her eyes quickly took in my navy skirt and white blouse and makeup-free face, but her smile didn't fade. "Merritt Heyward?" She said my name as if she recognized it.

I nodded. "I'm a little early. I don't mind waiting."

She rose. "He's expecting you. This way, please."

She led me down a hallway where a dark green runner had been thrown over the wood floors to cocoon all sound. Pausing outside a thick, paneled door, she said, "I'm sorry for your loss. I remember Cal when he was growing up. Such a sweet boy."

It had been almost two years since Cal's death, and her condolences surprised me. But no more so than her calling Cal a sweet boy. The person he'd grown into had been hard to know, an impenetrable character

hiding inside the imposing body of a man strong enough to scale ladders and carry people out of burning buildings. A man whose own anger smoldered inside of him like a fuse, waiting for a spark.

“Thank you,” I said, wishing I could tell her that Cal remembered her, too, and had said nice things about Ms. Difloe. But he’d never spoken of her, nor of his family or Beaufort. And I had never asked, feeling it a fair trade to avoid questions about my own family. Ashamed, I looked away as she opened the door and stepped back.

The office was large, with a wall full of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves filled with the requisite heavy leather-bound legal texts, and framed diplomas decorating a side wall. A large desk, even larger than Ms. Difloe’s, looking to be about the same vintage as the house, sat in front of the bay window facing the street but slightly above street level.

The man who stood to greet me was completely white haired, but appeared to be in his sixties. He looked like a lawyer should, complete with wire-framed glasses, a sweater vest, and the aroma of pipe smoke heavy in the room. He came from around his desk and took both my hands inside his large ones.

“Mrs. Heyward. So nice to meet you in person. And may I say again how sorry I am for your loss.”

Like Donna Difloe, when he said my name it was with familiarity. I assumed he must have known Cal, too, as a boy. He led me to a chair on the other side of his desk and waited for me to sit before returning to his own chair. He didn’t say anything at first, as if waiting for me to speak.

Unnerved, I smiled, then blurted out, “I didn’t know Cal was from Beaufort. In the seven years we were married he never spoke about his family, or growing up here. I always assumed that he had no family.”

Years of being a lawyer had schooled Mr. Williams’s face into a smooth mask of concerned evaluation, hiding any emotions my words might have evoked. He patted his hands on a neat stack of papers, his only concession to his surprise. Clearing his throat, he said, “The Heywards are an old Beaufort family, since before the Revolution.”

“Yes, you explained that on the phone. You said their house was built in the seventeen hundreds.”

“Seventeen ninety-one, to be exact—although generations have made changes and additions so it looks more Greek Revival than Federal. It’s why Cal’s grandmother left it to him, wanting to keep it in the family, you see. She wasn’t aware that he’d predeceased her.”

I swallowed, as if the reproach I heard in his voice were directed at me. “Of course. Which must seem so odd to you now, to be speaking with me about it.”

His smile was gentle. “You were his wife, and I’m sure Cal would be pleased to know that his family’s home is in good hands. Especially someone like you, who is an expert in old houses.”

I blushed. “I was a curator for a small art museum in Maine. Although I have an advanced degree in art history, I don’t think that makes me an expert in much of anything.”

Again, the lawyer patted the stack of papers. “Yes, well, we are all glad you’re here to see about things and settle the estate. As we discussed over the phone, I know the Beaufort Heritage Society would be interested in acquiring the property for a house museum. Of course, the distribution of the house and its contents is

completely up to you, but I'm sure someone of your background is aware of its value in more than simply monetary terms."

"I was actually hoping to live in it." The words sounded even more ridiculous said out loud rather than just as jumbled silent thoughts in my head. They'd been the reason I'd left my job and sold my house and driven from Farmington, Maine. I was still surprised at how far a person could go fueled with only quiet desperation.

Mr. Williams cleared his throat. "Perhaps I didn't make it clear when we spoke. I was in the house last week to assess the situation." He closed his mouth, as if afraid something he didn't want to say might leak out. After a moment he continued. "Miss Edith was a recluse. And to my knowledge nobody's been inside the house in two decades—about the time Cal left. The last time I saw her was about a month before she died, when she came to see me about her will. She knew she was ill, and wanted to get her things in order."

I adjusted myself in my seat as he waited for me to say something. But I was a New Englander, more comfortable with silence than small talk.

He cleared his throat again. "There's one other thing I preferred to speak to you about in person. Although Miss Edith left Gibbes a generous sum, she left the house and all its contents to Cal, since he was the eldest. Since Gibbes was raised in that house, I thought that perhaps I could prevail upon you to allow him to choose an item or two of furniture. We'd have it appraised, of course, and he would reimburse you for the value, but I know he'd appreciate having a part of his childhood."

"Gibbes?"

"Cal's brother. Ten years younger than Cal."

I imagined that my look of surprise mirrored his own. "Cal has a brother?"

Mr. Williams's face remained impassive, but I detected a slight raising of his brows. "Yes. He's a pediatrician here in Beaufort. Didn't Cal . . . ?" He stopped, his words suspended between us, mocking me. Mocking my marriage to an apparent stranger.

"No," I said, struggling to hide my embarrassment.

Mr. Williams smiled, making him appear as the warm grandfather he probably was. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Heyward. My family's firm has been legal counsel to the Heywards for more than four generations, but even I wasn't privy to their private matters. I know Cal left suddenly and it broke Miss Edith's heart. There was some sort of estrangement but she never spoke of it. I don't mean to pry into your life or Cal's life. I'm just glad you're here to settle things for the Heyward family, and do what you think is fitting. To lay old bones to rest, so to speak."

He continued to smile, but the chill that swept down my back at the mention of old bones made me shiver.

"Mrs. Heyward . . . may I call you Merritt?"

I nodded, glad to hear my name spoken aloud, needing something solid to anchor me to this place of strangers who were telling me things that couldn't possibly be right.

“Merritt. Miss Edith and my mother, Betsy, were best friends, and I was sort of a father figure for Cal and Gibbes after their parents died. You could say I loved them both like my own.” His eyes misted. “I’ve been very eager to meet the woman who finally managed to tame our Cal.”

I looked down at my hands, feeling very close to tears. “I didn’t tame him, Mr. Williams,” I said, knowing that such a thing would have been like pushing back a hurricane wind with my hands. I paused, taking deep breaths as he waited for me to speak. “I killed him.”

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