

TREE OF LIFE BOOK 1

THE
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AT
HIDDEN
RUN

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DEDICATION

*Remembering my parents with wonder about the generations
that came before and delight in the generations that came after.*

CHAPTER ONE



Sad, but true. She would have to procure a new favorite coffee mug. Moving the old one from hand to hand and turning it 180 degrees only confirmed the body of data growing over the last two weeks. The crack down the wide blue stripe would imminently progress to a leak. The wobbly handle was untrustworthy with the weight of the next refill. And the promises of extraordinary adhesive products were not the solution to a receptacle of hot liquids on the way into her throat.

“You’re not listening. Jillian Parisi-Duffy, sometimes I wish I could send you to your room like the old days.”

“That was twenty years ago.” Jillian snatched a tissue from a box on the gray-speckled granite kitchen counter and wiped the bead of brown liquid seeping through the midpoint of one side of the mug and moved to the sink to surrender to reality. The vessel had given her a good run, but it was over. She had thought she could at least finish this cup of coffee. “Besides, I never stayed in my room. You know that. I crept out to the landing and listened to you use the telephone to call your boyfriends.”

Nia Dunston, seven years older than Jillian and her former babysitter, swatted her shoulder with the backs of her fingers.

“As if I didn’t know that,” Nia said. “Sometimes there wasn’t even a boy on the other end of the line. It was all show.”

“Let’s see, there was Ricky and John—and Mario. Then you were over the moon for Jean-Luc.”

“In my own defense, I was fifteen, and he was a tall, dark, French foreign exchange student who could already grow a beard,” Nia said. “But never mind that. I came to take you for some real coffee.”

Jillian pointed to the elaborate café barista-quality espresso and cappuccino system gleaming across the kitchen. Beside it was a single-serve machine with a built-in frother.

“I work at home and look after myself,” she said. “I hardly lack for real coffee.”

“Real coffee is the kind you have out in the real world with real people,” Nia said. “If I didn’t show up every now and then to drag you out of this house, you’d never leave.”

This was not strictly true. Jillian couldn’t rely on her father to buy groceries at appropriate intervals, and she had a weakness for double-dipped, hard-shell chocolate chip cookie dough cones at Ore the Mountain Ice Cream on Main Street. But Nia’s assessment was largely true, so Jillian didn’t offer a counterargument.

“What’s this?” Nia tugged a blue folder from the bottom of a stack of work Jillian had left on the breakfast bar and opened it. She slid out a sheet of paper. “Does your dad know you’re taking work from another law firm?”

Jillian lurched across the counter and snatched the folder from Nia. “First, not your business. Second, I have a system, and you’re mucking it up.”

“Whoa. You seriously need some exposure to the real world.”

“Fine. If it will stop you from being so nosy. Let me get my stuff.” Jillian picked up the whole stack of folders. She hated carrying a purse, but she wouldn’t leave the house without her iPhone. The case held her driver’s license, a credit card, and a debit card.

“Run a comb through your hair,” Nia said.

“Are you serious?”

“Look in the mirror, girlfriend.”

Jillian rolled her eyes but shuffled into the first-floor powder room squeezed between the kitchen and her office in the old Victorian home. Surrounding the green eyes that matched her Irish father’s was the mass of black hair that was her Italian mother’s legacy, and truth be told, most days Jillian did little to manage it. If she had a video call scheduled with a client, she made sure to tame it and put on a business-appropriate top. Otherwise, she was a wholehearted proponent of working in comfort. Her long-sleeved red T-shirt showed no evidence of breakfast droppings, and her favorite lightweight hooded blue sweater had been through the wash just two days ago, so she deemed herself presentable for an October Thursday. For now, she found a hair band in the cabinet over the sink, gathered her hair at the base of her neck, grabbed her phone and keys off her desk, and returned to the kitchen.

“So you hired her,” Jillian said. “That’s what you said when you accused me of not listening.”

“Well, there you go.” Nia’s wide-set gray eyes lifted in surprise, and she swung her long brown braid over her shoulder. “I did in fact hire her.”

“Even though you know nothing about her.”

“I know I need help at the Inn and she needs a job.”

“I suppose there’s something algebraic about the way that equation settles out.” They left through the door on the side of the house that served as its main entrance, and Jillian pulled it shut. Once the home had been a double cottage, two residences sharing a center wall with mirroring floor plans. The other side of the house, just outside Jillian’s office, had a similar though less ornate entrance and porch where she sometimes worked while enjoying fresh air and mountain views. A previous owner had opened up the center of the house, making it spacious for one family. Jillian’s parents fell in love with the place when she was a toddler, and her mother turned it into a nest of love. For the last fourteen years, only Jillian and her father lived in the nest. She made sure the door locked, just as her mother always had, tugging it toward her twice for good measure.

Anyone who thinks you ever “get over” losing someone you love, or who loves you, from this world—even into the arms of Jesus—is deluded. Jillian had decided that when she was fourteen, and so far nothing had changed her mind.

She glanced over her shoulder at the mountains. Situated nearly at the end of Main Street, before it angled to join the old highway headed west, the house had nearly unimpeded views of the canyon that spoiled her for living anywhere else. The home’s gray-blue color, with white trim and rusty red accents, had been her mother’s choice, and when it needed repainting a couple of years ago Jillian and her dad didn’t even discuss altering the color scheme. They’d never erase this mark of her presence.

Jillian and Nia walked toward downtown Canyon Mines, a community that stretched along the roadway that in its rough form had carried nineteenth-century gold and silver prospectors to the region and now in its modern highway iteration brought tourists, many on their way into the Rockies for skiing, mountain-climbing, hiking, camping, or family day outings.

“You’re very analytical, you know that?” Nia set a vigorous clip

for someone so short.

Jillian matched Nia's progress with fewer strides of her longer legs and laughed. "I've been told. But I make a decent living because of it."

"You know how much I depended on Carlotta. I hated to lose her, but she had to go look after her mother and she's not coming back."

"You're sure?"

"She called four days ago. The move is permanent."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I didn't get to say goodbye. I'd like to have an address where I can send a note."

"I'll give it to you."

They took a few steps in silence.

"I can't manage on my own," Nia said. "I've tried, with Carlotta gone. I just can't find the rhythms. Leo helps, but when he has a big job of his own, it's hard to juggle everything. I'm exhausted every day."

"The Inn is at capacity every weekend and often during the week," Jillian said. "Obviously you should hire help."

"I haven't even had time to place an ad or ask around town for someone. This young woman shows up inquiring and promising she'll work hard. Providential, don't you think?"

Jillian eyed her friend. "Maybe. What exactly did she tell you about herself?"

"Her name is Meri. M-e-r-i."

"Sounds like it's short for something."

"Probably."

"You didn't ask?"

"You're the genealogist, not me. Meri Davies. She's a graduate of University of the South."

"Sewanee?"

"Is that what they call it?"

"Because it's in Sewanee, Tennessee," Jillian said. "Impressive school."

"She double-majored in biology and chemistry. I did ask that."

"Mmm."

Nia laughed. "You're wondering why she wants a job doing laundry and cleaning up in a bed-and-breakfast with a degree like that from any school. I'm not a complete dolt."

"The question is kind of hanging out there." Jillian's mind drifted to

the menu of Ore the Mountain, but she knew Nia's mind was set on coffee and not what she considered the poor substitute served at the ice cream parlor. It was a poor substitute. Nothing to dispute there. She yanked her attention back to Nia.

"I don't know the answer to that question," Nia said. "I realize she won't be at my right hand for six years, like Carlotta was. But I need help, and she needs a job, and it is fairly simple work. So why not?"

"I suppose. When does she start?"

"I left her at the desk when I went to grab you."

"Throwing her in the deep end?"

"Twenty minutes at a time." Nia nodded her head down Double Jack Street. "We'll take a slight detour, check on things, and you can meet her before we hit the coffee shop."

The Inn at Hidden Run Bed-and-Breakfast was the only structure on its block, the second one off Main Street. Another Victorian—most of the structures close to the center of town proudly displayed evidence of the mining era in which the town sprang up—this one was larger and sprawling and painted in natural shades of sand and stone with spots of bright yellow. When Nia and Leo bought it, critics questioned their judgment. But the renovations were splendid, with a veranda encasing the front and two sides of the house, a fascinating web of rooms inside, a partially covered brick patio out back, and a woodworking shop in what had once been a carriage house at the rear of the property where Leo gladly gave demonstrations of his woodworking craft.

They climbed the steps to the shaded veranda, and Jillian quelled a moment of habitual envy, even though she had two perfectly enchanting porches on her own home, and entered through the front door. This was Jillian's favorite way in, the breathtaking view guests saw when they came into the capacious hall at the base of the sweeping oak stairs, with the library that truly was a library to one side with floor-to-ceiling books and a rolling ladder. Across the hall was the parlor with an authentic period piece serving as a reception desk. Behind it sat a young woman with warm bronze skin, blue-tinted black short hair, and studious black-framed glasses on a thin face.

She sprang up.

What a ball of nerves. Jillian hung back.

“Is everything all right?” Nia asked.

Meri nodded. “No one came in.” Relief heaved off her words.

“You’re doing fine,” Nia said. “Remember, Leo is out back.”

Meri nodded again.

“I wanted to introduce you to my friend, Jillian. This is Meri.”

Jillian stepped forward and offered a hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Thank you.”

Was that a tremble in Meri’s handshake?

“Jillian and I are going for a quick cup of coffee,” Nia said. “We’ll be at Canary Cage Coffee, up on Main Street just around the corner. You probably drove past it coming into town. Remember that. It’s a great draw for our inn—just off Main Street and walking distance to many interesting shops.”

Meri nodded yet again, this time scribbling notes on a small pad.

“As I mentioned before,” Nia continued, “we’re fully booked for the next two weeks, so if anyone calls about availability in the short term, the answer is easy. After that, you check the red leather book. I still keep it the old-fashioned way for ambience. I don’t like to have a computer out here in the parlor. Even a laptop detracts from the atmosphere guests are paying good money to enjoy in the common rooms, though of course I do the real work in the office. Just open the book and look. The rates are right inside the front cover, if anyone asks about that. If you need Leo, you can push this button on the phone to put a call on hold and use the walkie-talkie to get Leo in the shop. I’ll be back soon enough.”

Meri pressed her lips together and nodded repeatedly, writing all the while, but to Jillian she looked terrified.

Back on Main Street, Jillian said, “You don’t think this is all a bit much for her first half hour on the job?”

“She graduated from Sewanee with a double major. I didn’t even ask her to move a load of laundry. Besides, these days most people try booking through our website first. We don’t even get that many calls, and no new guests will be checking in for at least two hours.”

“You thought this through.”

“I’m telling you, I need a break. She practically begged me for the job even though she admitted she has no experience in the industry.”

“The industry? She said that?”

“She did. If she wants the job, this is the job. Give me another half hour, and I’ll be ready to give her a real orientation. And of course I’d like to figure out how we can help her.”

Help her? Jillian cranked her head for a full-on look at her friend.

Nia raised her eyebrows. “You know there’s something there.”

“Maybe,” Jillian said. “What makes you so sure?”

“A person doesn’t spend four years as a counselor for at-risk inner-city middle school students without developing an intuition about these things.”

“When are you going to take that part-time job with the Canyon Mines School District? They’ve been after you ever since you came back.”

“Jillian. Stay on topic. Helping Meri.”

“Nia, I’m a genealogist, as you pointed out.”

“So we might need your dad.”

“Wrangling a story out of someone definitely is more his style.”

They reached Canary Cage Coffee, her father’s favorite spot in Canyon Mines. He could buy anyone a hot beverage and work his magic.

Jillian had her nose within twelve inches of the baked goods case, weighing her options, when an elbow jostled her from behind, forcing her to shift her weight to one foot. She didn’t have to turn around.

“Hello, Kristina. You’d better have a waffle cone in your hand.”

“Ha. You wish. I just want ten minutes to think about something besides waffle cones and sprinkles and how many customers are going to scowl today when I say yet again that we are out of chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream.”

Now Jillian turned around. “You’re out of chocolate chip cookie dough?”

“Don’t you start,” Kris said. “Just for that, you’re buying my coffee. I’m going to go grab my couch.”

Kris pivoted away from the counter. Jillian didn’t mind. She knew what to order.

“Kris Bryant,” Nia said, “and now Veronica O’Reilly.”

Veronica and her husband, Luke, ran the Victorium Emporium, done up with just enough Victorian charisma to make tourists park their cars, get out, wander through, and then wonder what else might be worth exploring on Main Street. Most of the smaller shops nearby owed their foot

traffic to the presence of the Emporium.

“Hail, hail, the gang’s all here,” Jillian said. “Meet her at the door. I’ll get this round and assorted croissants and meet everyone on the couch.”

By the time Jillian arrived with espressos, lattes, and enough pastries to allow for extras to take home, the other women were laughing. They all ran businesses and dealt with people face-to-face day in and day out. She had her own business as well, but she was a researcher who prowled depths of the internet most people had no idea existed. Her clients included insurance companies, law firms—her father’s, primarily—and individuals who wanted to track missing heirs, sort out unidentified family members, or simply leaf out a family tree as far back as possible. Contacts came from across the country. On her desk were a dozen active cases at various stages of investigation. She had gone from attending genealogy conferences as a participant to presenting at them a couple of times a year, but for many cases she might never meet a client in person, much less have to spend the day disappointing dozens of customers with the lack of chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream.

“These are from Ben Zabel’s bakery, you know,” Nia said, before biting into a cheese croissant.

Jillian snapped into the present conversation. Everyone knew where the baked goods came from. Ben worked himself to the bone supplying not only his own shop but Canary Cage Coffee, Burgers ’n’ More, the Inn, and any other place in town he could think of to keep down the competition by selling them a better baked goods product than they could make themselves and guaranteeing that it would have more tourist-appealing homespun authenticity than anything they could ship in from Denver.

“I hear you have a new Carlotta at the Inn,” Veronica said.

Nia coughed brown liquid into her napkin. “That’s impossible.”

“Then it’s true.”

“I cannot possibly have a ‘new Carlotta,’ but yes, I did hire someone this morning. Barely thirty minutes ago. How can you possibly have heard?”

Veronica winked. “I sent Luke over to pick up the latest batch of wooden toy cars Leo had ready. We can’t keep those things in the store.”

“Well, there you have it.”

“Luke stopped in to say hello. He says she’s nervous.”

“Your husband is enough to make anybody nervous.” Nia wadded up her napkin and stuffed it into her empty coffee cup. “I’ll thank you all not to scare off my help with your effusion of small-town quirky charm. Come on, Jillian. We’d better get back to Meri.”

Jillian stifled a smile and closed the box of extra pastries. If her father was lucky, there might be one left when he got home from Denver that evening. Or not.

At the corner, Nia hooked a hand through Jillian’s elbow. “You’re coming with me.”

“I should get back to work.”

“Just another few minutes. You know what Luke can be like.”

“He just likes to kid around.”

“He says outrageous things in the process. I might need reinforcements to persuade Meri to stay.”

“I doubt it. You said she was desperate.”

“But not stupid. Sewanee double major, remember?” Nia began trotting toward the Inn. “Oh no. She’s getting in her car.”

Jillian trailed a few steps behind.

“Please don’t leave!” Nia called out.

Meri, who was leaning into her car, pulled her head out. “Ma’am?”

“Please don’t leave!”

They reached the car, a late-model tan Toyota Camry.

“I’m not leaving, ma’am.”

“You don’t have to ‘ma’am’ me.” Nia braced the back of the car as if she could hold it in place. “‘Nia’ is fine. Why are you out here?”

“Your husband said it was all right to get my things. He’s at the desk now. You did say room and board came with the position.”

“Yes, yes. I’ll show you the room right away. There’s a place you can park in the back, but you don’t have to move your car right now.”

Breath whooshed out of Nia’s lungs so fast Jillian had to suck in her lips to stifle a laugh. Jillian stepped forward. “What can I help you carry?”

“Thanks. I don’t have too much,” Meri said. “Just the things in the backseat.”

Jillian opened a rear door. The backseat held only a large duffel and midsize rolling pilot case. Meri already had a student-style messenger bag strapped across her torso.

“I’ll take the suitcase.” Nia grabbed the handle as soon as Jillian had the case out of the car, racing off as if she still feared Meri might change her mind. That left Jillian with the duffel. She closed the back door and started for the house behind Nia.

When the sound of the car’s front door closing as well didn’t come as quickly as she expected, Jillian squinted back. Meri hunched over a cell phone for a few seconds before throwing it onto the front passenger floorboard and slamming the door.