

She's here. She got in about an hour ago," Charlotte said, her gum popping audibly over the phone. Rose was sure it was pink. The gum, that is.

Tension sank into Rose's back as quickly as a pig into mud. She started tapping the steering wheel with her right hand. "You're sure?"

"Am I sure? Oh no, forgive me. It's not your mother that just walked through the door. No, oh my goodness. No, I think I was completely wrong. Well, I'll be. It's Flora Mae Jacobson, Suge's sister, from the family who obviously has a fondness for baking products. How could I have been so blind? . . . Of course it's your mother, Rosey."

"Charlotte, please."

"Oh, I'm sorry . . . Of course it's your mother, Rose. Now, why exactly did you want me to call you and let you know when she got here? You're going to have to see her whether you like it or not."

Rose knew it was true. She'd simply felt that she wouldn't have to officially begin dreading every aspect of this trip home until the exact moment her mother arrived. Welcome to that moment. "What's she doing now?"

"Scrubbing the countertop in the kitchen. So all the food that's arriving soon can just dirty it all up again."

Rose's mother had been scrubbing things for years. Trying to clean away her guilt since Rose was twelve.

"How much longer till you get here?"

"I just left."

"You just left?" The drawl in her cousin's voice escalated. As if that were possible for a girl capable of winning the "Talks So Southern She Sound Likes a Foreigner" contest. "You said you were leaving by seven."

"I left at seven fifteen."

"Well, Uncle JT and Aunt Claudine are going to be here around noon, and then Aunt Nella and Uncle Wusser are coming shortly thereafter."

Rose was certain that her mamaw's labor pains had been so intense that they were the reason for her judgment paralysis when it came to naming her children. Obviously the worse-than-normal labor pains were epidemic in that region.

"So please hurry. Until you or your brother gets here, I'm forced to endure these crazy people all alone."

"Isn't your brother there?"

"Like I said . . ."

Rose laughed. "Well, I talked to Christopher this morning. He should be there any minute. I mean, craziness does deserve company."

"Well, I don't deserve craziness. Maybe a bus ticket to the pit of wickedness—at least according to people's evaluations of me around here—but I don't deserve craziness."

"Hang in there. I'll be there in ten hours, give or take an hour." Rose didn't plan to break records to get home.

"We're all going to see Mamaw when you get here."

"How about I just meet you there." It wasn't a question.

"That's not in your mother's plan. She has us all driving over together so you can catch up with your family."

Rose's mother had been reaching out to her with endless effort. Each attempt hit Rose's brick wall and bounced back. "Like I said, I'll just meet you there."

"You can avoid, but you cannot hide." Rose's mother's shame only ran so deep. "She will have all of us together for dinner."

The steering wheel's leather seemed to meld underneath Rose's fingernails. "That's fine," she said, knowing that there would be multiple red and white buckets with a smiling old man on the front. She wouldn't touch the stuff. "Well, I need to go. I have another call coming in. Thanks for letting me know."

Rose didn't check the caller ID on the display screen of her dashboard before pressing the small telephone icon that was built into her steering wheel and settled nicely beneath her thumb.

"Rose Fletcher."

"Rose, it's Helen. Did you finish that proposal?" Rose felt her shoulders loosen. Work. This was a world she knew, understood, could control. "This job, not to mention this city, waits for nothing and no one. Neither does Max."

She smiled at Helen's stubbornness. Helen wasn't scared of a thing, but Rose's boss, Max, drove Helen right close to the edge of insanity. And even drove her to drink a time or two, if Rose was correct about the contents of the little metal flask Helen kept in the back of her top filing drawer.

"Yes. I left it on his desk. Tell him it's resting safely underneath his Cuban cigar box."

She was certain of the smile that graced Helen's face. That was the perfect place to leave something for Max—right under his faithful companions of late-night work. Rose had even shared a few cigars with him over the years. "Ooh, that was perfect."

"Well, I knew it would be perfectly safe there."

"So how long are you going to be gone exactly?" Rose knew Helen's brow was now furrowed, a brow she said Botox would never be allowed to touch. When Max informed her there was "stuff for those kinds of things now," she'd scoffed, "I worked hard for these wrinkles."

"You don't take vacations, remember," Helen continued.

"I assure you, this isn't a vacation. I'm just going to take care of some business back at home. But I'll just be a few days." Rose hesitated, then forced herself back to the conversation. "This is something I have to do."

"Well, that's neither here nor there. Plus the coffeepot broke, and I doubt I'm even going to stay much longer myself. I can't work with these slave drivers around here and not get my recommended dose of caffeine."

Rose had sworn off caffeine.

"Well, I'm sure we'll be talking a thousand times. But you better appreciate me even more when you return, because your absence means Max is hounding me instead of you."

"I don't mind. But quit biting your nails."

"How did you—?"

Rose laughed. "You always bite your nails when you talk about Max. Anyway, call me whenever you need to. It'll make the drive go quicker, if that's possible."

"Well, you drive careful now. If anything happened to you, Max would throw himself out his own window. He knows who does the work while he gets the big office. And why are you driving anyway? Hello, take a flight, why don't you?"

If Rose had any doubts before why Helen kept a notepad by her side all day, she had no doubts now. Helen had ADD.

"I'm going to South Carolina, Helen, not Mexico. Plus, I need to clear my head before I get there. I can't do that on a plane."

“Yeah, clear your head my wrinkled booty. We both know why you don’t fly.”

“And why is that, oh Wise One?”

“Because that would mean you aren’t the one behind the wheel. Too much loss of control. Ooh, I gotta go. Max is hollering at me.”

Rose opened her mouth to counter such a statement, but Helen was gone.

“Nice to talk to you too,” Rose said to the car phone. It didn’t respond.

The last line of the Wynonna song sifted through the car: “You can dream about it every now and then. But you can’t go home again.”

“You’ve got that right,” Rose said as she pressed the search button—also integrated into her steering wheel, along with the volume, the cruise control, and other features. Eventually she found a light jazz station, and the mellow saxophone playing helped her relax.

She took a drink of the bottled water she’d brought along. The yellow line that continually blurred on the pavement outside her window reminded her that she had a long drive ahead of her. And the ten-hour trek to her mamaw’s only provided an excessive amount of time to dwell on the craziness that would await her. Going back to the place of your roots and seeing family had a way of dredging up memories—not always pleasant ones.

“Not that South Carolina is home anymore,” she assured herself and adjusted her seat position to be more comfortable. No, South Carolina might be home to the first battle of the Civil War and the largest ginkgo farm in the world, but it wasn’t her home anymore.

She knew every member of her mother’s family would be in Mullins, South Carolina, by the time she got there. That’s what events like this brought. And Southern people look for an excuse to celebrate just about anything. But Rose wasn’t sure they considered her that much a part of the family anymore, not that she cared. After all, she was the only one bold enough, as they called her, to move so far from home.

Besides, apparently she wasn’t the only one moving away from Mullins, because in the last three years, the population had decreased from 5,910 to 4,854. The murder rate was still at zero, however, so at least Rose didn’t have to worry that they were being killed off one by one.

The sleepy town in the heart of the Deep South was named for Colonel William S. Mullins, a railroad president and representative of Marion County in the South

Carolina Legislature from 1852 to 1866. But it really came into existence in the 1600s, when farming families began to call this rural town home. Mullins was formally established in 1872, with fewer than a hundred people and nothing more than four streets and three stores.

But the tobacco market arrived in 1894, and everything changed. Tobacco was the official occupation of Rose's family. The Mullins Tobacco Market sold more tobacco than any other market in the state, and it was the main reason Mullins's population grew at all. Of course, Mamaw and Granddaddy's reproduction rate didn't hurt the population. With nine children, a few more sons- and daughters-in-law than children, and enough grandchildren to start their own church, the jolly clan was a strong force in the tiny town.

And that entire clan would want Rose's visit—along with the visits of others who would be coming in from different parts of the state—to be a time of catching up. She sighed. Southerners' ideas of catching up were about nothing more than new revelations of craziness. At least according to the dictionary of Rose. And she didn't need any more of that. She had never understood how such complete dysfunction could come from two beautiful people like her grandparents. But it had.

And she couldn't help but reflect on the fact that she had come from her mother.

The hectic traffic of Alexandria, Virginia, was at its peak at this time of the morning. Though Rose's car was barely moving, the December winter winds blew furiously around it, making it clear to fall that it was no longer welcome. But despite its harsh winters, Washington DC had been kind to Rose. It had given her community. The kind that gets close but not too close. It had given her a good living. And a nice house. And a husband. No children, though.

Her e-mail beeped.

Rose had spent years talking on her cell phone and checking her Palm, all while driving. But because of life's ever-increasing efficiency, she now had a BlackBerry, which combined all these functions into one piece of technology. She loved it.

Rose opened the e-mail. Breakfast meeting with your opposition at 8:00 a.m. on Wednesday. When you whup up on them, every student and teacher in the state will love you! Helen. She had added a smiley face. The woman loved emoticons.

A nearby car honked, and Rose swerved. She set the BlackBerry on the seat beside her, deciding that arriving home in one piece would be best. As if that were possible.

She was certain Helen would drive her crazy all day. But she didn't care. Despite the age difference, Helen was her closest friend these days. If you called interaction from nine to five a friendship. Because Helen didn't work past five. But Rose didn't have much time for anyone else.

A traffic light flashed in front of her. She stopped before the on ramp to the interstate that would carry her home . . . well, not home, but back to the place of her birth.

"Red light, green light." The words came fast and furious from Rosey's cousin Bobby Dean.

"Rosey, you have to stop when they say, 'Red light,'" her brother, Christopher, scolded, refusing to hide his irritation. Three and a half years older, and with brown eyes that matched hers, he had become her favorite playmate.

"I did stop," she declared firmly, flinging her auburn locks across one shoulder. Her bare foot slapped the cracked concrete walkway as she placed her hands adamantly on the sides of her khaki shorts. Bobby Dean didn't let the protest sidetrack him. "Yellow light . . . yellow light . . . yellow light . . . RED LIGHT!"

Rosey teetered on her pencil-thin legs as she brought her weight to an immediate halt. She kept her eye on the finish line—the front set of stairs to Mamaw and Granddaddy's wraparound front porch.

"I don't like that red-light part!" Bobby Dean's sister, Charlotte, protested in Southern linguistics. (That's where perfectly good words with one syllable take two.)

"You don't like anything," retorted Bobby Dean.

"I was almost at the front of the line! You did it on purpose. Mama!" And with that Charlotte ran away to the world of her mama's consolation.

"Go! Go!" Rosey demanded.

"Green light," the conductor resumed. "Green light . . ."

"I won!" Rosey declared, throwing up her hands in victory and doing a little jig up and down the steps. The wooden planks of her grandparents' porch were splintering on the ends where the ancient nails were giving up their battle to hold them in place, but her bare feet danced without incident. Until she ran smack-dab into her dad, who had come up the side set of stairs to the porch.

“Whoa there, baby girl!” He scooped her up and gave her a hug as her mama came up behind him with a smile. “I didn’t get a kiss from you this morning,” her daddy said, kissing her face in quick pecks amid her giggles.

“Oh, Daddy. We had a busy day.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

“You did?” He laughed and placed her back down on the porch. He took her mama by the hand. “Well, your mama and I are going inside to have lunch with Mamaw and Granddaddy.”

“You and Christopher need to come in shortly, Rosey honey, and get you something to eat too,” her mama added with her own kiss to Rosey’s forehead.

“We got more playing to do.” She narrowed her eyes at Bobby Dean, who had just sat down on a step.

“Well, Rosey,” added her daddy, “all that playing will require energy. So don’t forget to eat.”

“Sure, sure, Daddy,” she reassured him with a few pats and returned her attention to her brother. “Okay, let’s play Giant Steps! Okay, let’s, let’s!” Rosey said, clapping and bouncing up and down.

Christopher ignored the request and, scooting one of Mamaw’s pots from its resting place at the edge of the walkway, sat down next to Bobby Dean. Roly-polies scrambled in desperate search of new cover.

“Ooh, I love those,” Rosey said, leaning over Christopher’s shoulder to get a better look.

He flicked her hair out of his face. Then he picked up a roly-poly. Rosey watched in fascination as it promptly rolled into a ball to protect itself.

“Can I hold it? Please?” Rosey asked, extending her light brown hand. According to her daddy, her “rich olive complexion” came courtesy of her daddy’s mother, who was part Cherokee Indian.

Christopher set the roly-poly gently into her palm. Okay, well, he had shown her the world these first five years of her life—introduced her to climbing trees, making mud pies, and getting soybeans from the neighbor’s farm to make their own concoctions—he might as well show her this. “Okay, Rosey, just take it and roll it around in your hand.”

Rosey’s brow furrowed as she held out both hands to obey.

Bobby Dean elbowed her. “Lighten up, Rosey. You look as serious as my mama on salon day.”

She elbowed him back. Harder.

She turned her attention back to her latest discovery. “Why does it roll up like that?”

“To protect itself,” Christopher said and then picked up another one. Bobby Dean reached over him to retrieve his own prize as well.

“To protect itself from what?”

“To protect itself from you!” Bobby Dean retorted.

Rosey crinkled her nose and wiped a hanging curl from her eye, depositing a streak of mud across her forehead. “But I wouldn’t hurt it,” she said, carefully rolling it around in her hand with her index finger. “I wouldn’t hurt it for the world. I would never hurt anything, Christopher.”

A horn honked long and loud. Rose registered that the light had turned green. She was tired of horns already.

“Get a grip, woman! The light just turned green.” Rose cursed as she put her foot on the gas and merged onto the interstate.

If Rose’s mamaw had heard those words come out of her mouth, she would have marched Rose straight to the church next door and baptized her in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And she would have dunked her with each name just to make sure it took. But Rose would offer the driver behind her no mercy. With Rose, mercy was an ever decreasing commodity.

The green of the interstate sign that sped by her window at eighty miles an hour caused her to reach for the green folder she had brought along. She needed to make a few phone calls to the opposition to ensure their compliance. But the passenger seat held no green folder. She refused to panic. She snatched her fifteen-hundred-dollar handbag, a gift to herself, from the floorboard of the car, and there was still no green.

“You have got to be kidding me!” she yelled over the background music. Then she sighed in disgust.

That’s when she remembered. Even now she could see the green folder on the back of the caramel-hued velvet sofa that she and Jack had purchased their first year of marriage. She had perfectly positioned it there and left it for the purpose of making it unavoidable as she walked out the door. But then Christopher had called to soothe her regarding the destination to come. He knew she’d need soothing, and she was, as always, grateful for it. So how could she blame him? Besides, something more unavoidable than green on caramel had distracted her: the wedding picture on

the bookcase nestled between the windows in the family room. She had picked it up slowly. Tried to push the aching back to the recesses of her mind, where it belonged. The never-talked-about aches. The unnoticed ones. Until something forced you to notice.

Glimpsing Jack's face in the picture this morning was what had caused her to pick up the photo. She hadn't seen that face on him in a long time. The youthfulness in his eyes had turned older. The beautiful smile had been replaced with a solemnness she'd never known was in him. For a moment this morning, she had ached.

But not for long. Rose never ached for long. So she laid the picture facedown. She didn't want to have to look at it when she got home. Then she walked out, fortified by her statement to the world and to herself . . . and left her green folder perfectly positioned for her distracted eye.