

IN THE WICK OF TIME by Valona Jones

EXCERPT

Chapter One

Sage dumped a full measuring cup of sand into the small paper bag, and I added a votive candle. My twin had twisted my arm to help her prepare the luminaries for the All Good Things Nursery and Landscaping booth at the waterfront. Though the luminary celebration and the holiday boat parade were days away, we were getting sixty of these prepped ahead of time because today the nursery had a full staff. Well, almost full.

“Your manager still out?” I asked, placing another completed bag in the wooden crate. With my stiff back today, I was grateful for the stools Sage provided. They were a welcome respite after I’d already stood all day in The Book and Candle Shop.

Sage stopped working, tucked a strand of dark hair back in her ponytail, and looked at me, her green eyes clouded with concern. “Yes. It’s the strangest thing. Loren Lee is never sick, and he’s called out of work more times than not in recent weeks. I’m worried about him. This illness is more than a vomiting bug, Tabs, and he isn’t taking this seriously.”

My name is Tabby Winslow. My fraternal twin and I co-own The Book and Candle Shop, near to Savannah’s Johnson Square. We don’t look alike, but we share plenty of other genetic traits, including a secret one. Sage moonlights at the nursery because plants are her hobby. Regardless, she and I are united in our efforts to make the family business thrive. Our very future is tied to our shop; so is our longevity.

“What’s his aura look like?” I asked.

“Murky and thin. If I didn’t know better . . .” She scooped another measure of sand, then rested the cup on the worktable as her voice trailed off.

“What?” I asked.

Sage glanced toward the distant employees and customers before confidentially saying, “I saw him yesterday when he dropped in to check on the nursery. He looked like death.”

I froze mid-breath. Until now, Loren Lee Suffield had been in excellent health. For most illnesses, my family members could boost a person’s health with energy transfers, and I’m sure Sage would’ve shared energy with her boss to make him feel better. But . . . there was one disease we couldn’t help. I spoke what she couldn’t say. “Is it cancer?”

“I don’t know. He doesn’t believe in doctors. He’s been self-medicating with folk remedies for decades. I offered to drive him to a doc-in-the-box yesterday, but he refused. I became quite pushy about it, and everyone here heard our argument. That’s why the owner surprised me by calling me in to work an extra afternoon shift today. I thought I’d get the sack for giving him a hard time, but the owner, Ms. Chatham, wanted extra coverage for the holiday rush.”

“Why isn’t he seeking medical attention if it’s that bad? It’s one thing to address minor ailments yourself—that’s good common sense—but when illnesses persist it’s time for a health professional. Is he hardheaded?”

She snorted, then covered her mouth at the rude sound. “Some of my best times here have been going toe-to-toe over the outdoor display area. He reuses the same holiday displays year after year. That’s why I’m so glad he listened to me about selling potted trees and palms as Christmas trees. With people wanting to leave a smaller footprint on the earth, those living trees opened a new revenue stream for the nursery. We’ve been selling them with and without lights, but Loren Lee is missing the whole sales frenzy. It frustrates me that he won’t admit how sick he is.”

I sympathized with her. If my boyfriend let his health slide like Loren Lee, I’d insist he seek medical attention. My twin needed help. Ideas rolled through my head like ocean breakers, foaming, spilling, and receding. Short of kidnapping the man and taking him to the emergency room, our options were limited.

Sage started filling bags again, and we processed several more luminaries before something else occurred to me. I sent her a message on our telepathic twin-speak line. Is this disease Loren Lee has akin to a Dorian Gray phenomenon? The better the nursery does, the worse his health gets?

Don’t you think I’d know if this place stole his energy? I’ve surreptitiously studied all the employees here. None are energetics like us.

Energetics didn’t begin to encompass our entire “extra” skill sets. Sage and I were the latest generation in a family endowed with special abilities related to a person’s natural electrical field. In other words, we push and pull energy from our bodies and auras to suit our needs. However, our late mother kept secrets from us so we weren’t burdened by all the danger from our talents. I hated the phrases “for your own good” and “out of an abundance of caution.” Consequently, we were stuck figuring out the energetic world on the fly.

Mary Nicole Frazier breezed into the potting area looking like she owned the world. “How’s it going back here, Sage?” Not a hair of her sleek chin-length bob looked out of place, not a speck of dirt showed on her shiny nails, not a scuff marred her designer sneakers or her high-dollar clothes. I’d been here half an hour, and I had sand all over me. Self-consciously, I curled my less than perfect fingernails into my palms so she wouldn’t see them.

Sage had hated Mary Nicole on sight, and Ms. Perfect Appearance would never make my favorite person list either. The smug way she looked down her nose at everyone irritated me. I’d had enough of that when classmates called us freaks. Her attitude rubbed me wrong, but she shouldn’t act better than us.

To make matters worse, Sage and Mary Nicole both applied for the vacant assistant manager position here, the last assistant having impulsively yachted to the Bahamas with a customer last month with only a few hours’ notice. I didn’t know how we’d manage our family business if Sage worked here full-time, but we’d figure it out if she landed the job. I would never stand between my sister and her happiness. Thank goodness Auntie O had moved home and helped us in the shop.

Energy shifted in my sister. Uh-oh. If Mary Nicole had a grain of sense, she'd know what that frosty smile on Sage's face meant.

"Everything is great," Sage said. "Only a few more luminaries to go. Loren Lee and Ms. Chatham will be so happy our staff is keeping up with the holiday extras along with running the nursery."

"Yes, Ms. Chatham has no complaints about the nursery. I spoke on the phone with her a few minutes ago." Mary Nicole's face pinched. "I'm sorry. I should have led with the bad news, but I don't know how to tell you. I'll just come right out with it. Loren Lee died."

My jaw dropped. The blood drained from Sage's face. I felt her pain blasting through our telepathic twin-link. Instinctively, I showered her with good energy.

"He's dead?" Sage hugged herself. "He's been very sick, but dead? Omigosh. I'm stunned. This is terrible news. What happened?"

Sage's voice got louder and higher pitched with each word she spoke. The other employees hurried into the workroom and drew close in twos and threes. I heard them whispering to each other that Loren Lee had passed.

"Ms. Chatham went over to his place an hour ago to check on him and found him unresponsive. She called an ambulance, and EMTs pronounced him dead at the scene."

Silent tears rained down my sister's face. I couldn't sit here and let her suffer this alone. I slid off my stool and wrapped my arm around her shoulder, the energy transfer accelerating from multiple points of contact. Despite her being three inches taller, she leaned into me and welcomed the comfort I offered.

The entire staff were waiting for Sage to say something. I glowered at them, protecting Sage with a not-so-subtle extra curtain of energy because I didn't trust these people. None of them knew how rarely Sage showed any vulnerability.

After a long moment, Sage squeezed her eyes shut, then dashed her tears away with the heels of her hands, visibly pulling herself together. "Loren Lee just turned forty a few months ago. What a waste that his life is over. I can't imagine this place without him. He made a difference around here, and I swear the man had eyes in the back of his head. He kept his finger on the pulse of this nursery all the time."

"He was something, that's for sure," Mary Nicole said dryly.

Her snide tone made my twin reel. I worked to steady us both, keeping the energy transfer going and keeping my mouth shut. One did not step between quarreling lionesses.

"You won't miss him?" Sage said.

"He acted nitpicky and curt most of the time," Mary Nicole said. "He yelled at us if we did the slightest little thing wrong."

Several employees nodded in agreement with her.

I expected fire to jet out of Sage's nose any minute now from this show of disrespect. Didn't Mary Nicole have a shred of common decency?

"That's what bosses do," my twin said. "They set the standard. This place is the best nursery in Savannah because of Loren Lee Suffield's exacting standards."

"What's going to happen to the nursery?" a girl with a name tag marked Tina asked. "Will it close?"

Mary Nicole cleared her throat and waited until all eyes were on her. It took everything I had not to send a rogue energy current her way. In that moment, I disliked her as much as Sage did—more, because she'd hurt my sister.

"Ms. Chatham told me to assure everyone that nothing would change," Mary Nicole said. "The nursery stays open, and everyone's job is safe. She is already looking for an assistant manager. Now she'll expand her search for a manager too. She'll come in and do payroll. In the meantime, she appointed me as the interim assistant manager."

To her credit, Sage didn't swear aloud, but she used our twin-speak silent communication to share her thoughts on the matter with me. Until she began making sentences, I let the raw language run in one side of my thoughts and out the other. *This is completely messed up*, Sage said. *Mary Nicole will run this place into the ground in a few weeks. I won't work for her.*

You're quitting without even talking to your boss?

I don't know what I'm going to do. I can't believe Loren Lee is dead. Why didn't he let me take him to be treated yesterday?

I don't know.

I can't believe the way she's going on and on about him, painting him as a tyrant. He did his job. She sits on her stool behind the register. She's never in the aisles tending plants. From what I know of Loren Lee, he would've already given her the first and second warning about sloppy work habits. How'd she score the assistant boss spot when she's one of the laziest workers here?

Again, can't help you. These are your people. I only know what you've told me.

"Sage, are you all right?" Mary Nicole said.

She's talking to you, I said in my twin's head. *Say something.*

"What? Sorry, I'm so upset by the news. I can't get past the fact Loren Lee is dead. Seems like any minute now he'll walk through this room and tell us all to get back to work in that gruff manner of his."

Mary Nicole nodded, then a malicious glint appeared in her eyes. "Speaking of which, be sure y'all clean up the mess you made."

Energy snapped and sparked in my twin. *Don't do anything*, I said. *Too many witnesses, and this puffed-up gal can't help herself. She isn't criticizing you as much as she's letting everyone know she's in charge.*

People fled the workroom, leaving Sage and me alone.

"Close call," I said softly. "You nearly wielded your energy in front of others and for no good reason other than she irritated you. We know better."

"You're right, but I don't like it," Sage said in a matching low voice. "Mary Nicole sneaks around here taking credit for other people's work. How come the boss lady can't see through her lies? It's as if Ms. Chatham wants to hear what that liar has to say. I don't stand a chance at a promotion, and I really want it. Mary Nicole will force me out of here."

I patted Sage's shoulder. "You're the reason for the nursery's extra surge of business this month. You know that, and everyone who works here knows that. If Ms. Chatham picks Mary Nicole for the promotion, she'll suffer the consequences of her choice. You make a difference here. I see your energy all over the place. The plants respond to you, not Mary Nicole."

"Thanks, but now I have a new problem. Trying to maintain my cool around a bossy, attention-grabbing woman. Perhaps I never stood a chance at the job opening anyway. I'm only

part-time, and I've never picked up the phone to call Ms. Chatham about anything. I'm not a suck-up like my competition."

Due to Sage's longevity here, I knew some history of this place. The owner inherited the nursery from her late husband, and until today, she'd relied on Loren Lee to run the place. She kept her distance and let him have free rein. "Ms. Chatham is lucky to have you, Sage. If she can't see that, she doesn't deserve you. There are other nurseries in Savannah. No matter what happens with the assistant manager and the manager opening, you will land on your feet. Of that I have no doubt."

Energy roiled around Sage, flashing and sparking like a fireworks display. "I don't want to leave this place. I fit in here. I make a difference here. I want to be here."

"We'll see. I have a feeling things will work out the best for you."

Sage laughed, picked up a broom, and swept the spilled sand. "You sound like Mom."

I picked up the empty votive cartons and tossed them in the recycling bin. "Lately, I've had the sense I'm more like Mom than I ever knew. Trust me, that's not a comforting realization."

"I loved Mom, but her secretiveness exasperated me. Auntie O has her own agenda too. Did you know she hid my birth control pills?"

"Oh dear. Project Baby again?"

"She won't be satisfied until we're both preggers. Why is she in such a hurry? And why can't she accept that it is our choice? She makes me feel like a broodmare. At least you have a strong partner in Quig. He's rock solid."

Her comment concerned me. "Did something happen with you and Brindle? I thought you two were fine."

Sage stowed the broom and began moving crates to the loading dock. "We're good together when our schedules mesh. Brindle's been pulling back on our relationship lately, and I start to feel vulnerable when he's so distant."

I grabbed a crate and followed her. "Yikes. Turmoil at work and in your love life. That's a heavy load to shoulder at one time. Especially on top of losing a mentor you admired."

"Don't I know it. I need answers, so I'm heading to his place as soon as I leave here. Tell Auntie O I won't be home for supper."

"Tell her yourself. Quig and I are eating at our place tonight. I'm supposed to grab a bottle of wine on the way home."

"Wine is a good idea. I'll give you a lift and grab a bottle to take to Brindle's."

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The evening passed uneventfully, but I couldn't shake the nagging sense of wrongness. Sage sent me her standard message of "busy" when I pinged her, so she might not be the source of the feeling. But still. I knew a lightning strike approached, and I couldn't do a darn thing about it.