

PRAISE FOR THE ANNALISSE SERIES INCLUDING MIA AND NATTIE CHILDREN'S BOOK

“An irresistible page turner and a successful melding of thriller and romance. With a splash of international adventure and plenty of surprises, *Stolen Obsession* is an entertaining read and a great beginning to the Annalisse Series.”

—Self-Publishing Review, ★★★★★½

“Author, Marlene M. Bell, has delivered a truly stunning work of fiction. The characters are relatable and the protagonist, Annalisse, is a complex heroine you’ll want to root for. The book is filled with vivid, brilliant descriptions that take the reader on a mind-blowing sensory journey. The writing will make you feel as though you are living and breathing each scene with the characters! ...multiple twists and turns keep you guessing until the very end. A real page turner!” *Spent Identity*

—Elite Choice Awards, Gold Winner

“Bell’s novel provides a fast-moving plot with danger at every turn, though she tempers the tension nicely with humor, romance, and a satisfying international flavor.” *Scattered Legacy*

—Book Excellence Review

“Marlene M. Bell is a master storyteller when it comes to the cozy mystery genre.”

— Book Review Directory

“Bell’s meticulous detailing and comprehensive research are unmistakable, immersing readers into the vibrant landscapes, indigenous culture, and even the intriguing sphere of sheep farming. This novel offers a refreshing deviation from traditional locales that imbues the narrative with depth and texture.” *Copper Waters* ★★★★★

—Literary Titan

“Bell’s gorgeously illustrated picture book provides several life lessons for young children. First, all animals’ inherent worth, large and small, despite any perceived “shortcomings,” underlies the entire story. Secondly, Mia’s initiative in rescuing and caring for Nattie, eventually letting her thrive independently, reminds readers that sometimes a child is wisest among us.” *Mia and Nattie-One Great Team*, children’s picture book RECOMMENDED

—The US Review



A HUSH AT MIDNIGHT

A NOVEL BY
MARLENE M. BELL



Euphoric Publishing

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, dialog, localities, and incidents are strictly from the imagination of the author. Any similarities to actual events and places, or real persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and not intended by the author.

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To the flight instructors, pilots, and staff at Hawke Flying Service. You were a fun-loving crowd from the Modesto and Tracy Airports who dared to be different.
There's nothing better than a pilot— I married one.



CAST OF CHARACTERS

A HUSH AT MIDNIGHT

Laura Harris—Her tentative taste in love interests hasn't stopped this petite pastry chef from plunging into complicated relationships and a murder case much larger than her career.

Brent Hill—A compassionate counselor at law with a set of ethics as deep as his East Texas roots and he's as hot as the yellow Maserati he drives during off hours.

Hattie Stenburg—Colorful and wise, the elderly World War II ferry pilot captures the hearts of those she favors but makes enemies of others who envy her worldly status.

Warren F. Stenburg III—From a Prohibition speak-easy to a modern-day corporation, he's the last direct progeny of his family's wine dynasty to have a devastating secret erupt into mayhem.

Zane Harris—The charismatic ex-CEO of Stenburg Enterprises turned widower who attracts the opposite sex with his kindness and the relationship he shares with his daughter, Laura.

Duska Novak—Exceptionally tall and somewhat clumsy, the quirky baker has a keen sense for making desserts that please while attracting some who would like to destroy her sweet lifestyle.

Lucas Olsen—A high-flying airline pilot with a quiet agenda to take what he wants when he wants it no matter who gets hurt along the way.

Moon Pie—An irresistible Welsh corgi that answers to Moonie as she wriggles her way into the hearts of most who cross her path; the rest are viciously shown her teeth.

Connie Holloway—A busybody friend of Zane's from yesteryear stuck in the hippie decade to transform herself younger while she travels the downside of midlife.

Nicole Bressler—An ill-suited caregiver and next-door neighbor to the matriarch of the Stenburg fortune stuck in a tragic situation to keep their own property from seizure.

Edith Bressler—On her last nerve, she worries for her unattached daughter and hopes that life will be forgiving and smile down on them, even though she's openly a pessimistic person.

Jordan Woods—Fate shined the day he stowed away inside the Stenburg barn during a violent storm and later moved into the guesthouse as groundskeeper for the estate.

Detective Adams—A persnickety man who finds it hard to stay with one sheriff's office too long as he unravels criminal cases and rumples clues and suspects alike wherever his boots tread.

Coroner Clark—Dispatch this sheriff's deputy to the scene of a crime and get a coroner who likes to cut corners and move things along to keep his workload orderly and carefree.

DeeDee and Kody Harris—Siblings to Laura in charge of Celestemore Cellars family vineyard and restaurant in California—a pursuit that operates without Laura's expertise.



CHAPTER ONE

Stenburg, Texas – Friday evening

A KILLER SUNSET plunged toward the horizon, casting its tangerine glare on the Stenburg Estate's green metal roof and aging bricks. Since her hasty arrival from the Los Angeles area last year, Laura Harris had sought out the renowned East Texas skyline for its towering thunderstorm clouds and the lemonade-pinks at twilight.

The colors gave her a sense of calm before the inaugural trip to see her elderly mentor and dearest pen pal, Hattie Stenburg. Laura last visited with her in California—over a decade ago.

As Laura skirted a large puddle in her Subaru and stopped along the shoulder of the roadway, she parked the car, turned off the engine, and exited the driver's side. She breathed in air filled with pungent smells of wet pine needles and dampened leaves. Laura had passed through the April shower a few miles east of the Stenburg town limits sign. *Leave it to the Stenburgs to live in a town named after themselves.*

A HUSH AT MIDNIGHT

Snaggled grapevines across the road on Hattie's property sat stoic and graying in long horizontal rows from the oil and gravel highway road to the classic red brick two-story at the top of the hill. The vines showed no signs of new growth even though T-posts held the outstretched limbs twisted within wire and sagging driplines. Gnarled stumps had been left behind from a time when the Stenburgs had added varietal grapes to their company's wine processing vats prior to Warren Stenburg's death nearly eight years ago—before Laura's dad took over as the Texas corporation's chief executive officer.

Neglected grapevines aside, the sight made her homesick for the old days with family. Laura leaned against the outer door and marveled at the vibrant wildflowers alive and welcoming between the lifeless vines covering at least twenty acres. Texas bluebonnet spikes in brilliant cobalt shades, fiery orange Indian paintbrush, and Drummond phlox in salmon and variegated pinks splashed the land, possibly in conjunction with the Highway Beautification Act of 1965, thanks to Lady Bird Johnson's care of the state as First Lady, during LBJ's term in office. Laura had heard that wildflower seeds were sown along Texas highways each spring to enhance the countryside.

The white stucco house built on the slope looked like a newer addition next to the colonial belonging to Hattie. Acreage stretched between driveways, the vines dividing two homes from different eras. Hattie's vineyard could've served as a makeshift property line if the 1970s ranch-style residence belonged to a neighbor.

Laura had no idea what arrangements the Stenburgs had with others on their hill overlooking the town. She hadn't visited Hattie's place before. Perhaps another Stenburg family member lived there. She'd ask about the house if they didn't get sidetracked on other subjects. A face-to-face conversation spanning Laura's eleven-year absence would take time. She'd been away far too long from someone who felt more like her grandmother than a casual friend.

If memory served, the last time she'd met with Hattie was during the Decade of DeeDee, Laura's younger sister. It was a tumultuous time for the Harris kids trying to keep their winery, tasting room, and restaurant afloat during a down economy. Laura was thirty-six back then, and tired of the heated sibling arguments by the time she left the Celestevine Vineyard Restaurant in Northern California to strengthen her chef's career. The celebrity chef opportunity in Los Angeles had saved a pending disaster between two hot-tempered sisters and a brother who preferred to stay neutral. When Laura headed south, she felt that her move had preserved the family winery named for their mother, Celeste.

Laura shoved aside bitter memories and sighed.

She'd left a great job and moved to Texas to be with her parents, and she would do it all again.

Laura scanned the neighbor's rocky driveway as steam rose from the wet stones. The parcel of land in front of the mid-century-modern with dark brown trim had nothing planted on it. Instead, it featured numerous ruts made by rain pelting the sandy soil season after season. Where the vines ended, a wide driveway

long enough for a semi-truck and trailer to pass led to the residence. Not one fence separated the properties nor lined the county road as a boundary, which seemed strange to Laura. She'd come from a community with manicured yards and well-marked concrete drives.

She turned her focus on the long entrance leading to Hattie's American Civil War-era home, not actually seeing what was there. Instead, Laura's heart thumped with longing. She'd left a comfortable life to begin a new chapter with her parents in the woodlands of Texas, but now that her mother had lost her battle with cancer, Laura felt lost. She questioned the emotional decision to uproot herself with such finality when friends and colleagues had stayed behind. The wedge was as real as a stake driven deeply into Texas soil.

Laura returned to her bucket seat and drove toward Hattie's place, absently checking for the earring backing, which had a habit of falling off. She glanced at the time on her dashboard, hoping Hattie had finished her evening meal. She was anxious to taste the custard-filled profiteroles Laura made for her.

Light struck the old two-story home at odd angles, projecting vertical shadows on the wraparound porch from four ornate pillars on either side of grand steps fit for royalty. She slowed to gaze at the sinking colors of a dying day as if she could absorb their final warmth and quell her many insecurities. Leather driving gloves did little to soothe her cold fingers wrapped around the Subaru's steering wheel.

On her right, halfway between the county road and Hattie's estate house, the vineyards were gone. A weathered old barn about the size of a small cottage

stood alone, tractor disks and other implements rusting outside. Missing exterior planks in eight-foot lengths exposed a dark loft space. There were no visible windows for light or air, from what Laura could see. A tin Texas star and an oxidized roof lifted at its peak, leftover damage from storms throughout the decades. Meandering pine and pecan trees, some dying with absent leaves, lined the driveway entrance on either side leading away from the barn. Long ago, someone had planted the mature magnolia for shade in addition to the flowers it produced. Snowy petals formed huge blooms the size of formal charger plates. The trees were as ancient as the barn, marked by their awesome height, broken branches aloft, and trunk circumference.

As expected, the grounds were meticulously cared for, as Laura remembered Hattie liked. Everything about the Stenburgs' preferences included order and symmetry. All had their proper place in the scheme of things. A white panel van from Stenburg Nursery had parked near the home, and a man in a logoed black polo came out of the back carrying a full flat of pansies in the fading daylight. A variety of baby blue forget-me-nots and multicolored snapdragons already lined the flower beds, and low-growing sweet white alyssum flanked the outer borders, giving Laura the feeling she'd entered a conservatory for Texans, and not a residence.

Landscapers working at dusk for Hattie made Laura smile. The ninety-three-year-old wanted things just so and at a time of her choosing. Her World War military training had a way of bleeding through all situations and personal preferences. Laura admired her friend's habits.

Tall flagpoles flew the red and white with a single star on a blue field. The Lone Star flag of Texas. The Stars and Bars crisscross flag flew next to it, reminiscent of the American Civil War Confederacy. A fitting tribute to the property's history—in modern-day 2010. Between the flagpoles, a gray chiseled rock displayed a faded metal plate too small to read from the car. Undoubtedly, a Texas historical marker because the builder of the Stenburg Estate had post-Civil War connections. Hattie had remarked on the history of the home, which was built between the 1860s and 1870s Reconstruction period.

Laura swerved around the van and rolled to a complete stop several yards from the porch, taking in the magnificence of the house belonging to the elderly widow she assumed still lived alone. The home reminded her of a giant breadbox made of brick and mortar, with three visible fireplaces. White dormers shot through the rooftop, breaking up the flat surface.

She spotted a pair of rocking chairs on the porch with a woman sitting in one of them. Hattie had been spry and mobile under her own power while in her eighties. When Laura had mentioned her upcoming visit with Hattie to her dad, he warned of new developments and to prepare herself for the decline. Of late, Hattie used a cane or a wheelchair to get around the house.

Laura leaned closer to the windshield and squinted for a better look. *The hair's shorter and whiter, but I'd recognize her narrow face and inquisitive stare anywhere.*

Other than the landscaper, no person or corgi dogs wandered the grounds. The Stenburgs loved their

short-legged corgis. The passing storm could've sent them indoors, but it didn't seem likely Hattie would be left unaccompanied if that were the case.

Laura waved through her open window and caught a glimpse of the gaunt face in the side mirror. Her own reflection. She should've used concealer to hide the dark smudges beneath her eyes, a result of middle-of-the-night bakery duties, but at least her shoulder-length, highlighted hair had kept its shape in the humidity and her lipstick was still intact. She'd take two out of three.

When she removed her driving gloves and stepped out to close the car door, Hattie made no acknowledgment at first. Then, she donned a pair of glasses and gave a timid wave back.

Hattie was also hard of hearing, which made her constant letter-writing much more enjoyable for her and Laura. The telephone only frustrated Hattie. That, and she thought cursive writing and good penmanship to be a dying art. She would never give up handwritten letters because it was a more personal way to communicate, and writing gave an aging woman so much pleasure. As long as she could hold a fountain pen, Hattie had sworn a solemn oath to write every day and never wear anything "*as distasteful as a hearing aid or use a confounded cellular phone,*" as she'd put it.

As Laura mounted the concrete porch steps, her tongue tasted foul from the quick cup of coffee she'd downed prior to leaving Coldspell. And she'd forgotten Hattie's desserts on the floorboard.

She briefly turned to go back, changed her mind, and decided to retrieve them from the cooler box later.

“Laura? Good gracious; have you gotten taller?” Hattie’s blue-veined hand clutched the cane, wobbling the handle as she lifted herself out of the chair with difficulty.

“Let me help you.” Laura dropped her purse clumsily and jumped to Hattie’s side, snagging her lap blanket from the chair and saving her from a topple.

The soft crocheted piece against Laura’s face and shoulder smelled of Hattie’s fragrance. Laura savored the warm, penetrating scent that combined hyacinth and jasmine flowers. Hattie’s husband, Warren, had sent her the *Southern Kiss* perfume when he found out she’d volunteered her aircraft ferrying services during World War II. He asked her to wear it and think of him marching in Europe. Laura’s heart welled with pride, knowing how their harrowing yet fascinating beginning helped win a world war years before Laura was born.

“It’s so good to see you.” Laura’s eyes misted as she took Hattie’s frail hand in hers and squeezed. She feared a hug might break a bone or knock her off balance. “What you must think of me taking so long to visit.”

Hattie stood a little hunched, resting on her four-toed cane. She appeared awe-struck by Laura’s presence. Perhaps she hadn’t imagined Laura would ever come to Texas and thought her fading vision had deceived her. Hattie’s light denim-blue eyes gazed into hers as if trying to decipher Laura’s thoughts. In her nineties, the fragile limbs looked hardly capable of carrying Hattie without the help of something more substantial like a walker or wheelchair.

“Two visits from the Harris clan in the same week. Your father was here a few days ago.” Laura had missed Hattie’s infectious smile. “Come. Let’s be on our way before Moon Pie returns from her evening walk with Jordan. She’ll muddy up your jeans and those cute boots.”

Moonie, the resident Welsh corgi, had been mentioned in many of Hattie’s letters but not a peep about a person named Jordan.

The door to the estate house magically opened, and stale air followed the ponytailed brunette in a gray sweatshirt and baggy sweatpants standing there. She wore no makeup but had an enviable clear complexion and natural glow about her cheeks. Laura thought she looked about forty, maybe older. The harshly dyed hair seemed too strong a color next to her creamy light skin. Were they being watched by a care worker or a relative? It would make sense that Hattie needed an extra pair of eyes on her most of the time.

The woman swooped in wearing a serious frown and rudely seized Hattie’s upper arm away from Laura. “Watch your step,” was scarcely audible.

“Hey, be careful with her. Can’t you see she’s fragile?” Laura wanted nothing more than to push the newcomer aside and guide Hattie through the entrance cautiously. “Is she hurting you?” Turning toward Hattie, Laura waited for a reply.

“I can get along myself, Nicole.” Hattie tugged free and shifted more weight onto the cane, raising the small suction cups toward the kitchen. “Please make us a fresh pot of coffee and bring my pastries.” She stopped and faced Laura standing behind her a few paces. “That

downpour gave me a chill. How about a nice shot of whiskey to warm you up?”

No matter how much Hattie had changed physically, thankfully some things stayed the same.

“I’d better pass. It’s a long drive to Coldspell.” Laura grinned at the whiskey reference she knew all too well. Hattie had a custom of eating sinful desserts and following them with the unusual whiskey chaser. It was something she and the other fly girls had done between trainer and bomber ferry flights during the war. Hattie’s mission during the conflict had been ferrying planes in Texas after they were assembled at their aerospace facilities and needed at military bases.

“Okay, I’ll make another pot, but I wouldn’t drink more than a cup. You know how coffee keeps you awake at night.” The woman referred to as Nicole was now standing next to a coffee maker perched on an oversized island in the middle of a blue-tiled kitchen. From there, she had an excellent view across the island into the large room where Laura and Hattie stood. She ignored all but her duties—including introductions. Her occasional glance toward Laura reminded her of an overprotective parent on guard around a stranger. The unfriendly vibe coming from Nicole was as thick in the room as a *crème brûlée*. Laura doubted that she was a relative because of her unemotional coolness toward Hattie, or perhaps they’d recently had an unfinished disagreement before her arrival. And the barometric pressure change probably had everyone grouchy or preoccupied.

Laura stroked the soft shawl on her shoulder as she stood in the huge great room, with its vaulted

ceilings and a winding staircase leading to the second floor. From the comfortable living space with a recliner, rocker, and overstuffed couch situated at the window, to the overly blue kitchen, she suspected some renovations had been made to the interior since the home was built. Those changes would no doubt include the mahogany paneling, white painted surfaces, and bright tile in a remodeled kitchen with a center island. Hattie liked to cook and would've demanded updated counters and cabinets.

Five generations of Stenburgs had raised their children in the estate house. The Stenburg women, all except Hattie, had large families to carry on their treasured lineage. In the thirty-nine years she and Hattie had been friends, Laura knew of no kids in the Warren Stenburg household, whether by choice or having sustained a personal loss during the marriage. Laura always thought they would've made magnificent parents.

All ninety pounds of Hattie slowly ambled over to the vintage rocker and plunked down in it. Next to the rocker stood a large black leather recliner, made for a big man's frame like Warren's. The dark and dreary living area redeemed itself with a collection of porcelain statues and natural purple amethyst clusters. Every spare nook and crevice held painted, posed animals, and Victorian figurines wearing nineteenth century period dress—all of them watching over Hattie.

Laura suspected they were mostly Staffordshire, collected during vacations to the UK and Europe. Hattie's amethyst geodes were known to strengthen intuition and imagination, in addition to their healing properties. The glistening violet crystals must have

been significant to the many Stenburg trips to South America.

Laura spun in a circle, digesting the space she'd only read about in Hattie's letters. "This is an amazing home. I came close to imagining what it looked like, and I love the personal mementos from trips abroad."

"I hoped you'd see it one day, Laura." Hattie swiped at a tear. "God granted me one of my wishes."

Of note, the living area was void of devices such as a television, a turntable for records from their youth, or anything computerized. Instead, the end table next to Warren's recliner held old classic books with gilded edge pages, from the few titles Laura could read.

Hattie had told her that their evenings, spent next to the fireplace, were for quiet reading and discussions about Warren's days at the office—a catching up of sorts on their activities.

All picture windows had been draped shut, and the house smelled of wood paneling in need of a cleaning; sickly sweet tobacco still permeated the room from a lack of ventilation. Hattie's late husband had smoked big cigars and favored a pipe in the afternoons, as she recalled. Laura abhorred smoking of any kind because tobacco smokers reeked of ashtray odor.

Her dad had smoked cigarettes while he worked himself up the ranks of the Stenburg Corporation. She'd begged him to stop the habit, and when he finally did, she rejoiced. He had finally taken responsibility for his health, albeit too late to save her mother from suspected secondhand smoke lung cancer.

The angora lap robe grazed Laura's ear as she placed it over Hattie's polyester pants. She received a weak thank you followed by a deep, syrupy cough.

Hattie patted her chest and coughed hard for some time to clear her lungs before she was able to breathe normally again, which scared Laura.

"What can I get you?" Laura glanced at the side table for a glass or pitcher of water but only found a tray holding one orange prescription bottle, a box of valerian root sleep aid, dog treats, and a pack of tissues. Laura's dad had commented on Hattie's bouts with pneumonia earlier in the year. Her lungs were still heavily congested.

Nicole reappeared next to the rocker with a bottle of cough syrup and a teaspoon. "She'll be right as rain in a minute. Here ya go, hon." She pushed a stray lock of hair behind one ear and set the syrup on the tray. She then forcefully pulled Hattie forward to fluff the flattened pillow at her back. "There. That's better." And just like that, the caregiver sped off to the kitchen to add more donuts to a plate.

"There's something special for you in the car," Laura said, leaning close to Hattie's ear. "I'll just be a minute." She crouched toward her at eye level. "Is it possible to talk in private?" She sent a glance over her shoulder to Nicole, who continued working steadily at her task.

Hattie patted Laura's hand, indicating that she understood. "I've missed you, dearie," she said in a stage whisper.

The super short bangs and brittle white hair were long enough to reach Hattie's jawbones. Her flat

hairstyle and translucent complexion made her look less sophisticated and so much older than the last time they'd visited in person. How long had it been since someone had taken Hattie for a manicure to clip her long nails, or sit for her hairdresser?

Hattie had a standing hair appointment with her beautician each week—a decade ago. Her hair was so long and laid at odd angles, as if Nicole or someone else had taken a set of pinking shears to it. Worse yet, the defeated look of surrender written in sorrowful eyes came from a woman unrecognizable as the vivacious person she used to be.

The drastic change was a sober reminder to Laura of losing her mother and how close Hattie was to the same ending. She stifled a cold shiver. No one was immune.

“How long before coffee's ready?” Hattie asked Nicole. “I need more cough medicine, and... take my grocery list to your mother. Go with her.” She pointed to the door. “You know what I like.”

Nicole wordlessly walked to the rocker and removed the tray with the meds by its handles. She set it on the coffee table and replaced it with a pile of glazed and candied donuts, enough to feed a small family.

“Is there anything else? It's late. I'll go shopping for you another day.” Nicole smiled sweetly at Laura, possibly to avert the heat from Hattie's glare.

“Tonight,” Hattie said authoritatively. “You know how I hate backtalk. Laura and I have lots to discuss. In private.”

Laura motioned Nicole over to a corner away from Hattie. “I'll stay until you get back. She'll be fine.”

Keys rattled in Nicole's sweatpants pocket as she walked to the kitchen and removed a slip of paper from the refrigerator door. "I won't be long." She shot Laura a sideways glance and marched in an awkward gait out the front door.

"Thought she'd never leave." Hattie giggled. "That girl hovers over me and won't take a hint. Now, tell me what's new at the bakery and all about that pilot of yours. I want all the juicy details. Don't leave anything out." Hattie straightened the white blanket over her knees and clasped her hands together.

"We have a nuisance brewing at the bakery but we're busy." Laura moved toward the hearth to hide her feelings about a workaholic guy. Hattie could read faces well. "Nothing earthshattering on the Lucas front. I'll see him again on his next layover. He had to slide in for another pilot this weekend. An aviator's life. Unpredictable. You know how it is."

A monumental sepia-toned picture hanging over the brick and stone fireplace caught Laura's eye, and she moved closer to investigate. She flipped the wall light switch to brighten the print's details. A youthful Hattie in an oversized shirt and pants stood next to a four-engine bomber with a pin-up style girl painted on the fuselage.

"An iconic shot. Tell me about this one." Laura pointed to the woman in the photo. "That's you next to the bomber, isn't it?" She'd remembered that particular aircraft from descriptions in long talks with Hattie. The girl standing in the photo resembled how Hattie would've looked in her twenties. Forties pageboy hair-style and all.

“Me at Avenger Field in Sweetwater. That was ol’ Sheila Mae, the big girl. One of the biggest birds I’ve ever had the privilege to ferry. Did you know that B-17s take ten people to fly them on a mission?”

Laura scrutinized the giant silver aircraft and how small Hattie looked standing next to the wing.

“If you’re wondering about my baggy clothes, the girls had to wear military-issued men’s gear because all the clothes were made for men. Women flying trainers and bombers were unheard of until the WASPs, which stands for Women Airforce Service Pilots. Flying in theater was a men-only job back then. The girls asked to fly in combat, but General Peterson turned us down. He wouldn’t be responsible for women drivers getting blown out of the sky or something like that.” Hattie sighed. “The only things that kept our pants from falling around our ankles were extra wide belts and lots of elastic.” Hattie slapped her thigh and grinned, followed by a cough.

“How did you reach the pedals to fly something that huge?” Laura couldn’t imagine that petite woman like herself had an easy time of it in the plane’s cockpit that Hattie had referred to as a *Fortress*.

“We rigged the seats with pillows so we could see above the instrument panel. We had to work out other things, but a few of us put our heads together and got it done.” Hattie reached for a glazed donut and held it up. “Try these with your coffee; they’re delish.”

“I have something you might like better. Will you be okay for a couple of minutes? I left the cooler in the car.”

“If it’s something made by your hands, I can’t wait.” Hattie set the donut on the plate and licked sugar from her fingertips. “Go ahead.” She flipped her hand toward the door. “Surprise me.”

Laura and Hattie ate the chocolate-glazed profiteroles and drank coffee for at least half an hour, catching up on so much lost time. Although writing letters was a nice pastime, it couldn’t replace a personal interaction where facial expressions said more than reading words on a page. Laura was glad she’d listened to her dad’s advice about driving a couple of hours to see her old friend. How Laura had longed for Hattie’s sense of humor and hearing the crazy recounts about her flying days.

Their near-fatal accidents were terrifying and the tales about frying donuts in their rooms and getting thrown out of the men’s local bar made Laura temporarily forget her irritation with Lucas Olsen, her latest companion of six months.

“Is Nicole a close friend of yours?” Laura asked. “You’re lucky to have someone staying with you.”

“She has her own place with Edith next door.” Hattie took another sip from her third cup of coffee. “Nicole lives at home to help out her mother and comes here to fix my meals and straighten the house. All but Warren’s office beneath the staircase. I keep his door locked with a special key.” Eating the last of her pastry had left custard on her lip. “Nicki’s a good kid. I don’t know what I’d do without her and Jordan, my groundskeeper.”

Two questions answered. Jordan cut the grass and did general maintenance on the property outside,

while Nicole took care of Hattie's indoor needs from the white house next door. Laura wondered what lay inside Warren's office.

"Is there something I can clean or move for you in his office while I'm here?"

"All in good time." Hattie held one eye in a wink longer than needed. "The Alamo's behind that door."

A conflicting statement if there ever was one.

Laura laughed as she worked through the puzzle. "Don't tell me; Warren collected Texas battle memorabilia and you, the Staffordshire pieces?"

Hattie nodded. "Right-e-o. I've gathered almost every piece of Staffordshire made, large and small. The bigger specimens are upstairs." Her eyes swept the staircase as she gripped the rocker armrest, then turned her pinpoint gaze on Laura. "I'm glad you stopped by, Laura." She held up one bony finger. "You do look taller, though."

A smile stretched across Laura's face. "I wish. Still four-foot-eleven inches in bare feet."

Hattie whisked crumbs from her lap blanket. "I adore French pastry, and your profiteroles were crack-erjack. Time for a potty break." She rocked forward with the help of her cane, tossing the throw blanket aside.

Neighbor Nicole banged through the front door with bags of groceries on a trolley cart, traipsing to the kitchen. She pulled along her heavy burden on squeaky wheels.

"I'll help you to the bathroom. Point me in the right direction." Laura set her coffee cup down, taking Hattie's arm.

Hattie chuckled. “Did I ever tell you how I found Jordan trespassing in my barn?”

“What?”

“A few years ago, when I could still check the outbuildings in the mornings, I caught him sleeping in there and helping himself to the drinks in the little fridge. He was stranded on the road between towns. Poor fellow. He needed a job, so I put him to work.”

Laura was surprised at how easily Hattie had offered the stranger a job.

“I had the vacant guesthouse in back and needed the help. *Mutually beneficial*, as Warren would say. The guest’s quarters are over there around the corner.” Hattie pointed to her left and began coughing. “Sometimes, he takes Moonie.” Another deep-seated cough. “It keeps the little nubbin out of trouble.” Hattie’s coughing grew in intensity, and she had trouble taking breaths in between.

“Hattie, catch your wind.” Laura planted her feet, catching her friend as she lost her balance and swayed on her cane. Her coughing could bring about an embarrassing accident, and Laura knew how prim and proper Hattie would hate that. “How far to the bathroom?” she asked Nicole.

“Just go. I can handle her.” Nicole arrived on the cane side of Hattie with a fresh bottle of cough syrup. “Take a swig.”

Laura’s jaw dropped. “You’ve got to be kidding. Let her breathe normally first. She’ll choke.”

Hattie patted her chest and cleared her throat as she brushed Nicole’s hand away. Between coughs and gasps, Hattie managed a goodbye wave for Laura.

“I’ll stay with Hattie tonight,” Laura addressed Nicole. “Leave the groceries for now. Hattie needs her rest. I can sit with her.”

Laura’s dear pen pal managed a smile and a short wink.

Nicole folded her arms. “She doesn’t need you. I’ll even sleep on the couch if *that* makes you feel any better.”

Laura was shocked by the neighbor’s wisecrack in front of Hattie.

“You aren’t making me feel better.” Laura turned to Hattie. “Will you be all right if I leave now? I’ll stay if you want.” Laura hoped that Hattie would ask her to stay, but it was up to her.

Hattie paused, looked sadly into Laura’s eyes, then nodded. “We’ll talk again soon, my girl. I’m fine.”

Grabbing her leather bag from the floor, Laura’s tears welled, spilling down her cheeks. She hated to leave Hattie with someone as uncaring as Nicole. Laura made one last turn to watch the pair move along the hardwood floor and around the staircase.

She exited into chilly blackness on the porch amid a chorus of croaking toads and nighttime crickets.

Almost to Coldspell and full of misgivings, Laura couldn’t shake her feeling of dread for Hattie’s sake. *Why did she allow Nicole to steer her away?* She should’ve stayed with her mentor and not bowed to the will of a neighbor she knew nothing about.

Laura had to drive back to Stenburg no matter how late it was.

She glanced at the clock on her dash, beyond caring what anyone thought about an after-midnight

visitation. Even if she had to nap in her car to make the trip back to Coldspell, she wouldn't rest until she knew that Hattie was okay.

An inky blanket hung over the property when she arrived. Not a single porch or barn light shone from the Stenburg Estate. Living this far out from town, Laura couldn't imagine why a dusk-to-dawn light hadn't been installed. She'd mention it to her dad. Her headlights beamed on the front door and bay window, bright enough to wake someone sleeping on the living room couch. Laura left her Subaru in park with the engine running and jogged up the steps. She knocked quietly on the huge glass pane. If she could rouse the neighbor without waking Hattie, better yet.

A dog barked in the distance. The only sound for miles. Moon Pie should've been with Hattie, but Laura picked up no sound from inside the estate house. Surely, Hattie's pet would notice visitors.

The barking continued, perhaps from a nearby shelter for stray animals.

Laura cupped her hands and peered through the window but was unable to see past the dark glass cloaked by heavy curtains. She knocked more firmly with her knuckles. Other than raising goosebumps on her arms, no one inside rose to open the front door.

Nicole had lied about staying with Hattie and sleeping on the couch.

Laura's heartbeat quickened as she pounded on the massive door, calling for Nicole or Hattie to let her inside. No human or pet could sleep through the noise she was making. She tried the door and found it as it should've been. Locked.

“Hattie! Is anyone in there?” Laura kicked her boot at the door in frustration.

She checked the kitchen and bedroom windows that were too high for her to climb through even if she were lucky enough to find one unlocked. She ran along the wraparound porch, calling for Hattie—her car’s right headlight spotting the way from porch to grass.

The further she went toward the back of the house, the louder the barking became.

Hattie had mentioned that Moon Pie stayed with Jordan in the guesthouse.

Wake Jordan. He’ll find Hattie.

Laura ran to her car and drove behind the building to where the guesthouse connected to the estate via a concrete breezeway. There, she found a sharp-eared corgi with her nose pressed against the window, scratching with her claws and raising all kinds of ruckus.

Where is Jordan, and why is Moon Pie alone in the guesthouse? Laura’s tingling senses told her the scene was all wrong.

She slammed the Subaru into park and faced the dog from the other side of the narrow four-foot window near the guesthouse’s entrance. Laura tried to open the locked metal door by the knob, then gave a strong shove with her shoulder. All she received for her trouble was a sore arm. When she made eye contact with Moon Pie once more, the dog wriggled its rump, whining and whimpering. Crouching to Moon Pie’s level, she placed the flat of her hand on the outside screen, trying to soothe the irate dog with her words. A small gap below the sash showed her that Jordan had left the window slightly ajar for the dog.

Laura caught a whiff of something she couldn't describe.

Moon Pie had her red nylon lead attached at the collar, as if she'd been dropped inside abruptly.

"Sweetie, I'm coming in." Laura removed a driving glove, pried the screen from its runners with her nails, and threw it aside.

Moon Pie stuck her nose through the opening and sniffed.

"Don't bite my fingers." She replaced the glove on her hand and with all her might, lifted the sash from the gap, sliding it up and open. Enough to squeeze her small frame through sideways.

Moon Pie jumped out then came back to follow her inside, barking madly at her feet. Her boot caught the dog, throwing Laura headlong into the wall. "Honey, quiet. I can't think." Laura groped the painted surface with her palm until she found a light switch and flipped it on.

She stood in a bedroom.

Someone lay still on the mattress. Deathly pale.

A crawling sensation moved up her spine. Jordan. As she walked closer to the person, she realized the body was that of a female, partially obscured by a bed pillow. Laura took several labored breaths and sped around the footboard—watching for the rise and fall of the woman's chest.

A fleeting thought of Nicole went through her mind, quickly dashed by the person's hair color. Bitterness filled Laura's mouth and she swallowed hard. Her worst fears had come true.



CHAPTER TWO

THE SHROUD OF death hung on Laura's shoulders like a jacket taken from the freezer. *Was she smelling a corpse decomposing?* With each footstep taken, she moved nearer to the horror in front of her. Too many thoughts assaulted her all at once and Laura found it hard to breathe as she imagined the woman's last moments.

She stood in the midst of the aftermath that had followed a violent struggle. An elderly person was hardly a match for an assailant who intended to take a life. Laura shivered as she averted her eyes from the small body on the bed, switching her gaze to the bare walls and neutral floor tiles. The room was plain. Void of pictures or mementos other than a calendar flipped to the month of April with a few highlighted circles around dates. She lifted her nose and detected the faint smell of soap or perhaps shampoo coming from a little bathroom. In one corner, a dark big-screen television sat propped on a table that hadn't seen a dust rag in quite a while.

The corgi had quieted, which helped to calm Laura's thoughts immensely. Moon Pie followed her dutifully, near her ankles. Laura could imagine the poor creature's distress, especially if she'd witnessed what had transpired. The dog's neck felt warm when she'd bent down to rub beneath the collar.

She moved slowly along one side of the queen-size bed, careful not to trip on the leash Moon Pie dragged around with her. Laura rubbed her gloved hands across her arms in a crisscross fashion, hoping the friction against blouse and skin would somehow add more heat to the room. Laura hated having to take a closer look at the body but needed to be certain of the identity before calling authorities.