

# Chapter 1

## VIOLET

**The tingling in my ear was the first omen.**

**Everyone knew an itchy ear meant people were talking about you, so I glanced out of the corner of my eye at the few people leaving the bus station. I didn't want to be spotted. But they paid me no mind, casting anxious looks at the slate sky before scurrying away, eager to escape the impending summer storm. Thunder crackled from far.**

A crow cawed, and I sought its form. The bird perched on a power line, a sleek black silhouette against the heavens. A lightning bolt speared the sky, forming a chiaroscuro of gray and black shadows in its momentary flash. The crow cawed again, the cry raucous and haunting.

Most people would have counted this as the second omen, but I wasn't most people. I welcomed the storm and the darkness and the crow. It all served to divert the good folks of Normal, Alabama, from noticing me and possibly recognizing my face—which was eerily similar to my dead mother's.

Old Willie Crenshaw pulled up close to my bench in a battered Plymouth Duster. He rolled down the window and motioned for me to enter. It was a welcome stroke of luck that he had happened to be dropping off his grandson at the station. He was, perhaps, the only person in town who would pay me a kindness.

I gathered up the large box beside me with one hand, resting it against my right hip, and lifted my solitary suitcase with the other. I kept my face forward, not daring to veer it an inch to the right or left as others brushed past me. Quickly, I threw the luggage in the back seat and opened the passenger door, grasping the box in my hands.

"Hold on now," Willie cautioned. "Careful of that there spring."

A wicked coil of metal stuck out of the faded, threadbare upholstery.

"Thanks for the warning." My left ass cheek would have been punctured without it.

"Been meanin' to tape that up."

Cautiously, I slid in and shut the door, holding the box in my lap. Its solid form, which housed its strange but precious contents, made me feel more secure.

“You’ve had this car forever,” I noted. The vehicle had been ancient before I’d even left Normal. A miracle of engineering had kept the motor running.

Willie slapped the dashboard. “This thing’ll be a valuable antique one day.”

Was he joking? I suppressed a smile. “Right.”

He threw back his head and laughed, a breathless rasping that shook his shoulders. “Your face,” he managed to gasp. “The same look my Cora has when I say that.”

“How is she?” I asked politely.

“Fair to middlin’. Like always.”

Which communicated much of nothing. We fell into an easy silence as he pulled out of the station and onto the road, driving at least ten miles an hour under the already slow speed limit.

The second omen appeared as Willie crept the battered Duster through downtown. An ambulance rounded the corner from Barefoot Avenue and pulled onto the main drag just ahead of us, lights blazing. I pinched my nose straightaway to ward off bad luck.

Less than a minute later, the third sign—everything always came in threes, didn’t it?—occurred as his car rumbled over the railroad tracks. I lifted my feet and raised both arms to touch the car roof. For a split second, Willie did the same, as I’d known he would. You couldn’t be too careful. I mean, nobody wanted to die young when you could have prevented it by merely lifting your feet while going over tracks.

He stole a glance at me. His weathered black face held both curiosity and compassion, just as it had in the old days when he’d done the occasional odd job around the house for my dad.

“I’m sure Delaney was puttering round the garden, and the time just got away from her,” he said.

I bet. I hadn’t believed him the first time he’d offered up that lame excuse. Delaney had left me stranded at the bus station. If Willie hadn’t happened by and seen me sitting on the bench with my luggage, I might have lingered there another two hours or more, sending off increasingly agitated texts to my sister, who apparently wasn’t carrying her cell phone.

My silence must have made him uncomfortable. “And yer daddy can’t drive no more,” he offered. “You’ll find everything’s . . . changed. That’s why I wrote you. Figured you’d want to know.”

His letter had been brief and to the point: Your daddy is doing poorly. Might want to pay a visit while you can. I’d debated for days over whether to return. I didn’t have many fond memories of a loving father, but duty

pressed its relentless grasp on my conscience, overriding my logical objections. Besides, this homecoming might help me address the two ghosts of my past that refused to stay dead and buried—Mom and Ainsley Dalfred.

“You did the right thing, Willie. Thanks. How’d you get my address?”

“Yer sister.”

I squeezed the bloodstone clutched in my right palm. My thumb fit neatly into the indentation at the top of the tumbled rock, as if it had been custom fitted for my touch. The lady at the Green Fairy metaphysical store had promised it warded off negative energy. I needed all the armor I could get.

We passed by the old oak, whose canopy twisted sideways, reaching all the way to the other side of the road. Willie beeped his horn as we drove under the tree, so—as tradition mandated—I made a wish.

*Don't let it be as terrible as I fear.*

We’d be at the house in minutes. This called for a heftier charm. Trusting the old more than the new, I reached into my jeans pockets, tucked in the bloodstone, and replaced it with the glass chip I always carried.

When I was nine, the crows had brought me their first gift—this chip of cobalt-blue glass that had glittered in the dusk like a fairy bauble. Or maybe like a frozen sliver of ice from the sea. So blue it hurt my heart. That azure chip had stood out amid the ash-and-bone-colored landscape of home. A promise of a magical land where the muddy Alabama River flowed down to the Gulf of Mexico and transformed into a turquoise sea that lapped against sugar-white beaches.

My fingers brushed against its smooth, cool surface, and calm flowed through me like a slow-moving stream.

“Whatcha got there?” Willie asked, glancing sideways as he maneuvered the car down the bumpy dirt road.

I shrugged. “It’s like a worry stone,” I replied with elaborate casualness.

“You ain’t got nothing to worry about. I know yer folks are”—he stumbled a heartbeat—“dying to see ya.”

I cringed.

He blushed.

Yeah, dying wasn’t a good word choice, considering my past history. My nervousness returned.

I held the chip in the hollow of my palm, wishing I were my fourteen-year-old self, who could trust that it was a magic talisman to keep me safe. But despite my compulsion to ward off bad luck, I didn't much believe in magic anymore.

A twist around the bend, where white oaks towered and the spanish moss waved in the wind like an old friend, and we were near. Excitement warred with my worry. This was home, after all. The only one I'd ever known.

*There.*

My heart thundered, and I leaned forward in the seat, taking it in all at once.

It was as familiar to me as my own face and had an eternal quality. Generations of the Henderson family had lived here. But where once it may have been just this side of majestic, its years were now showing like a matronly grande dame's. It was nevertheless substantial, with an air of decayed gentility.

Wisteria vines climbed on either side of its frame, the wild encroaching on the domestic shelter. The white paint had worn thin on the south side of the house, and the wraparound porch had a subtle sag in the middle. The windows were large and dark—no need to bother with curtains when there were no nearby neighbors. The haint-blue shutters—painted that hue to ward off evil spirits and ghosts—hung crooked and were missing a few slats. But at least the massive antebellum columns remained impressive.

The forlornness of the slightly shabby structure was offset by Delaney's gardens. Purple hydrangeas, azaleas, cemetery roses, confederate jasmine, and hostas lined the home's foundation as well as the driveway.

"Bet you're glad to be back, eh?" Willie stopped the car and openly studied me, his old, wrinkled fingertips tapping the steering wheel.

"Sure." I crammed the blue chip back in my pocket and opened my purse. "I really appreciate the lift. Thanks for—"

He held up a hand. "Keep yer money."

"But . . ." A twenty-dollar bill fluttered in my fingers. Willie and his family could use the money, unless their circumstances had vastly improved during my years away.

"No way," he insisted. "Glad to help out. Yer sister's got her hands full with yer daddy. You'll be a blessing to them."

I frowned and stuffed the money back in my wallet. "Okay, then." I took a deep breath and opened the car door, retrieving my suitcase from the back seat. Willie gave me an encouraging nod before I closed the door. I

watched him drive off in a trail of red dust. If everyone in Normal were this friendly, coming home might not be so bad.

Perhaps time had softened their hatred.

My fingers clutched and unclutched the leather handles of the suitcase that held all my worldly possessions. I wished I had more. I wished I had a hefty bank account and could live anywhere in the world but here. But wishes and magic had died for me eleven years ago, and the clean beaches of Gulf Shores were merely a spot on the map, as foreign as the Taj Mahal.

I slowly turned and walked to the house. Would have been nice if they'd at least been on the porch to greet me. Then again, Dad might be too feeble and Delaney too busy. I climbed the concrete porch steps, careful of the crumbly spots and cracks. At the door, I hesitated. Should I knock or just enter? It was my home, but one I hadn't visited—couldn't visit—for all these years.

A loud screech, and the door opened. The decision had been made for me. Through the screen, a gray-skinned and gray-haired man clad only in his underwear studied me with hostility etched in his heavily lined face.

"Dad?" I asked, uncertain. Of course, it must be, but the wrinkles and thinning silver hair threw me.

"Did ya bring me my Jack?"

I'd know that rough voice anywhere. It was him, all right. I stiffened. Should have figured that would be his first question.

"If you mean Jack Daniel's, then no, I didn't bring any." I took an involuntary step back, out of striking range.

"Hey," a voice called from within. "Get away from the door, Dad. Jeez." Footsteps clomped across the room, and Delaney appeared behind the screen. Her mouth opened and shut as she stared.

I shifted from one foot to another. "It's me." A heartbeat ticked by, and I hurried to fill the void. "Violet."

"Oh shit . . . I mean, sorry." Delaney shrugged and gave a breezy smile. "I was out in the garden, and the time slipped away from me. How did you get here?" She stuck her head out the door to peer at the driveway.

"Willie Crenshaw. I waited for two hours and sent you a dozen texts and phone calls." I couldn't help the accusatory note in my voice.

"Like I said, I was in the garden. I didn't think to bring my cell with me."

I pinched my lips together before I could say something I'd regret. I mean, seriously? She couldn't have missed one day of digging?

Delaney cocked her head to the side, studying me. "I knew you were coming, and yet it's still such a shock to see you. Imagine—after all these years, you're finally back home." She pulled open the screen door. "Come in."

Long thin arms embraced me, her warm hair pressed against my cheek, and I inhaled the clean scent of baby shampoo, lilies of the valley, and something herbal. A deep, unanticipated longing crept over me to be a kid again, talking and laughing with Delaney before the events of That Night.

She withdrew, and I stepped over the threshold. Large bouquets of flowers in crystal vases did their best to cheer the gloom of the old place and offset the underlying smell of sickness—a combination of disinfectant and urine and mentholated cream.

Dad, thankfully, had already disappeared, but I could hear him shuffling about upstairs, mumbling. I pointed to the staircase. "How bad is he doing? Dad didn't even recognize me."

She relieved me of my suitcase and shrugged. "Some days are better than others."

Which didn't tell me much. I suspected the bad days outweighed the good, and I wondered how she stood it.

Delaney maneuvered around me, heading for the stairs, the right side of her body slightly leaning from the weight of my suitcase.

"Let me get that." I tugged at her arm, surprised at the strength of her resisting, muscular biceps. Presumably earned from all the gardening, I guessed.

"It's no problem." Her voice was firm. A woman used to running a household and giving orders. "Besides, you've got that box to carry."

I followed her up the creaking stairs, past the familiar portraits of grim Henderson men and women of past generations that lined the right wall. Ours was not an inheritance of cheerful dispositions. I could see a resemblance in Delaney. My older sister was serious. Not glum, but calm and matter of fact, meticulous in her bookkeeping job and family responsibilities. Or so I gathered from her infrequent visits to me at my various hospitals.

"And here you are." Delaney entered my old bedroom and set the suitcase by my antique dresser.

My breath hitched. Nothing had changed, not even the early-teen pink bedspread with ruffled lace trim. Photos of ballerinas in pink and lavender tutus hung on the walls. I set my box on the dresser, walked across the walnut floor, and opened the glass french door to my balcony. Same old pecan tree I used to jump onto

from the balcony deck. I'd shimmied down it many a night to go skinny-dipping in the river. The wrought iron bird feeder was still there. Did my old friends think I'd deserted them?

Sadness pinched my heart, and I hastily shut the door. "It's all exactly as I left it."

"I didn't know if you wanted me to redecorate or not. You can change it any way you'd like," Delaney said easily.

"This is fine." I wouldn't be staying long, anyway. Just long enough to get my portion of Mom's inheritance, which had been waiting for me unclaimed all these years. Now, I was finally ready. With that money I could start a new life somewhere far away.

Delaney plopped on the bed and patted the mattress.

I sat beside her.

"It's like old times," she said with a smile, running a hand through her sun-streaked locks and glancing at herself in the mirror. Tiny freckles dotted her nose and the tops of her cheeks like a faint sprinkle of pixie dust.

"Sure. Old times." I tried to match her light tone. But the long days and nights of my exile and the horror of our friend's disappearance weighted the time between us. The distance stretched as taut as a pulled rubber band, until I feared it would snap and sting me.

Her forehead creased. "Are you really okay? Will staying here be too stressful for you?"

"I'm not going to break." I stood and paced to work off my irritation. I had no right to feel indignant. She was only concerned, and with just reason.

"All right, then." Delaney stiffened and rose from my bed, her face averted.

I'd gone and hurt her feelings.

"Sorry. I'm fine, really. I wouldn't have come if my counselor had advised against it. She says I'm perfectly capable of handling whatever happens. She even thought returning here might help me." I rolled my eyes. "You know, confront my past issues."

Delaney regarded me soberly. "I hope she's right. It won't be easy. Folks around here have long memories and short fuses. They believe the worst."

“Let them,” I said, lifting my chin. I reminded myself it would only be for a few weeks. Maybe less. There were only a few locals whose opinions concerned me. “Do you ever see Ainsley’s parents?” My voice trembled, and I swallowed past the lump in my throat.

Her blue eyes softened. “They’re . . . the same. Give them time.”

“They’ll never change.” Even if they could forgive me, time would never alter the facts—I had been the last one to see their daughter alive, and I remained a person of interest in the open case.

“Well, I’m glad you’re back. It’s glum with just Dad and me in this huge house.”

“You told me he was going downhill, but I thought he’d recognize his own daughter.”

“You can’t take it personally, Violet. His memory comes and goes.”

“Is he still drinking?”

“No. But that doesn’t stop him from trying. Every time he leaves the house, he wants to go to the liquor store. And he’s convinced there’re hidden bottles of alcohol around the house and grounds.”

“Is he ever”—I faltered a heartbeat—“mean . . . to you?”

“No. Not too bad. He’s shoved and slapped me a couple times and cussed me out, but nothing major. I’ve learned how to handle him when his temper flares.”

I gaped at her and the casualness with which she’d said those words. “But you shouldn’t have to put up with that. It’s wrong.”

Delaney walked to the mirror and dusted dirt from her T-shirt. “It’s life. Besides, he can’t help himself these days. It’s the dementia.”

Dementia, my ass. He’d always been a harsh, hard man, especially when he drank. I forced myself to recall more pleasant memories. When sober, Dad was decent. He used to take us to the Dairy Queen every Sunday for orange Dreamsicles and had insisted one Christmas on getting us a puppy over our mom’s objections.

The sound of smashing glass exploded from downstairs, followed by a loud curse. “Shit!”

“I’d better go clean it up before he cuts himself.” Delaney hustled to the door and paused. “Rest up from your trip, and then we’ll eat dinner. I have your favorite—baked chicken and corn bread dressing.”

I blinked back sudden tears. She might not have bothered to pick me up at the station, but she had remembered my homecoming and had gone to some trouble to cook.

A better sister would have cleaned up the mess downstairs for her, or at least have helped. But I kicked off my shoes and lay on the bed. I was tired. Tired in the way that an emotional day drains your energy quicker than digging ditches. I closed my eyes and curled on my side, giving in to the lethargy. My breathing slowed, and my mind drifted to a numbing darkness.

The darkness melted to liquid that glistened and shimmered. It swirled and rippled and beckoned. I swung on the rope out over the river and let go—dropping into its inky promise of coolness on a humid summer night. Water engulfed my sticky-hot flesh in a baptism of relief. I broke through the surface, laughing.

*Ainsley. Your turn.*

Silence thickened in the waning-moon evening, and adrenaline pulsed through my body in waves of fear. My throat clogged, and I couldn't take a deep breath.

A sharp rap at the door burst the silence, and I jerked up, gulping oxygen. Deep shadows trembled in the dusk, and I shook my head, disoriented. This wasn't my bare little room at the Serenity Hills Halfway House for the Emotionally Disturbed. This was a huge princessy room with a girly bedspread and ghostly paintings of ballerinas in pastel tutus, all pale arms and legs contorted into impossibly graceful poses.

Ah yes, my old childhood bedroom. The pounding began anew. *Bambambambambam.*

"What is it?" I stumbled out of bed, drunk with interrupted sleep and the nightmare's hangover. "I'm coming." I reached for the doorknob, but the door opened before I could grasp it.

Dad filled the entrance, and the wrinkles on his face deepened with his scowl. But at least he'd donned pants and a shirt. "Time to eat, Violet. You always holdin' things up for your mother."

Mom had been dead for years, but at least he recognized me now. The smell of chicken and pan dressing drifted up the stairs, and my stomach growled. "Be right down," I promised. I rushed to the bathroom, washed my hands, and ran a brush through my hair.

Downstairs in the formal dining room, Dad and Delaney were already seated, and I quickly took my place at the table. Second chair on the right—same as ever. Mom's pink cherry blossom plates were set out, along with the better serving pieces and real silverware. Delaney had made an effort to make the occasion special.

The moment I sat, Dad started eating at a fast and furious pace, as if afraid the food would be snatched away before he could finish.

Delaney touched his shoulder. "Stop. You know you have to take your medicine first." She picked up a tiny plastic cup by his plate and held it in front of him. The mixture of pills in different sizes and colors looked like a handful of M&M'S mixed with Good & Plenty candy.

In one expert thrust, Dad emptied the bottle into his mouth and washed it all down with a chug of sweet tea. I wanted to ask why he needed so much medicine but decided to ask Delaney when he wasn't around. Who knew how much he picked up from conversations around him? No need to make a bad situation more difficult for my sister. He took his meds willingly, and I had no right to start questioning things and possibly get him riled up. If anyone knew the importance of medication, it was me. I had my own pretty little prescribed pills stashed away.

Delaney lifted her glass of tea. "Here's to Violet's homecoming."

Dad stopped eating and looked up with raised brows. "What are we toasting with?" he asked hopefully. "Wine's traditional, but I prefer bourbon."

"Water," Delaney answered, lips pursed. "Plain ole water."

"Well, that's no fun," he muttered, setting back to work on the chicken.

She winked at me, and it felt like old times. Us against the parents and all their rules. I clinked my glass to hers. "To coming home."

Delaney dug a square of dressing from the pan and put it on my plate. Her charm bracelet tinkled and shone under the chandelier's prisms light. As did a huge honker of a diamond on her left ring finger.

"Are you engaged?" I asked, astonished.

She held out her left hand and splayed her fingers wide. "Almost a year now. His name is Sawyer Harris, and we'll be married next April."

Sawyer? What a prissy, preppy kind of name. I pictured a tall man with conservatively cut hair wearing polo shirts, tailored jeans, and dock shoes. Harris . . . the name didn't ring familiar. "He from around here? Do I know any of his family?"

"Don't see how. They live in Birmingham."

Over a hundred miles from Normal. "Why haven't you told me this before now? We've talked on the phone several times, and you never mentioned him."

"I wanted to surprise you and tell you in person."

She'd surprised me, all right. "But"—I nodded my head in Dad's direction, whose attention was focused on the meal, apparently unaware of his precarious future, then lowered my voice to a whisper—"who's going to take care of him when you get married?"

Delaney set her fork down with a bang, and I jumped. "I don't know, Violet." Her words were deliberate and edged with something dangerous. "But I've been taking care of him for years, with no help from anyone."

With no help from *me*. The accusation silently spun about the dining room, and my face warmed. Stunned shame twisted my gut. Not only had I never helped, but the idea of offering to do so had never occurred to me.

"Sorry, Delaney. I've been wrapped up in my own . . . problems."

Her features relaxed. "Never mind. I shouldn't have said anything. Of course you had to take care of yourself. I couldn't expect you to tend to anyone else when your own . . . health . . . has been so fragile."

Underneath the table, I made a sign of the cross for a blessing, then took a slow sip of tea and collected myself. "I'm stronger now," I said, hoping she didn't catch the tremble in my voice. I cleared my throat. "I'll take care of Dad some while I'm here. Give you a break."

"It's okay. I don't expect anything." She took a dainty bite of butter beans and chewed.

I spooned more dressing into my mouth, but my appetite had disappeared. Did she want me to help or not? Maybe she didn't think I was capable.

"Sawyer is amazing. He's an architect. We met at an art gallery in Birmingham, and it was love at first sight. He told me I was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen." Delaney's eyes glowed, and she played with the emerald pendant on her necklace. "Spoils me rotten too. Takes me to the nicest restaurants and concerts, buys me whatever I want, and he's so—"

"What about Dad?" I interrupted, knowing that once Delaney got on the topic of herself, she could ramble on for an eternity.

"What about him?"

"Who watches him while you're out with your boyfriend?" "Oh, that. I hire someone to sit with him. Anyway, Sawyer and I went to the symphony last weekend and had—"

I tuned her out. My spartan existence at the halfway house and her expensive dates with the perfect fiancé were so far apart she might as well be talking about living in a colony on Mars. I glanced over at Dad, who had finished eating and leaned back in his chair. His eyes closed, and I worried he'd fall asleep and keel over on the hardwood floor.

"Is it his bedtime already?" I asked.

“Actually, he usually takes a nap after an early lunch, but with the excitement of your visit, he stayed up later than normal. Plus, his medication makes him drowsy.”

In other words, I’d disrupted their schedule. “I’ll be glad to help while I’m here,” I assured Delaney again. “Why don’t you take tomorrow off? Maybe go to Birmingham for the day to visit Sawyer?”

“I’d love to—but are you sure you can handle it?” Hope battled with doubt in her eyes.

“Sure,” I lied. “Piece of cake.” I turned to Dad and saw that his eyes were half-open, and he was staring at me. “We’ll be fine, won’t we?”

He stood and pointed a finger. “Who are you?” he yelled, shaking with rage. “What are you doing in my house?”

“Calm down, Dad.” Delaney stood and drew his attention. “It’s Violet. Your daughter. Remember, I told you she was coming for a visit? It’s time for your nap.”

She led him from the table, and I sat alone, wondering why I’d ever come home. I could have holed up at a cheap motel until Delaney mailed the inheritance money. No doubt my counselor would describe my return as some deep psychological need to find love and acceptance. And she’d encouraged me to come back and face my past.

But hope had been washed out of my spirit long ago. Seemed I was destined to end life like the long line of my grim, unsmiling ancestors whose portraits haunted the hallways.

After washing the dishes, I escaped to my bedroom for a few minutes and opened my box on the dresser. The largest item was the whittled bird that Seth, a fellow patient, had given me one Christmas at the Cottonwood mental institution. That went on my nightstand, where I could view it last thing at night and first thing in the morning.

Next, I removed a small metal coffee can filled with buttons that used to belong to my grandma. I gave it a shake for good luck and set it on top of my dresser. Finally, it was time to unpack my smaller treasures. I gave a silent thanks to Luanne, a kindly caretaker at Cottonwood, who had held them in safekeeping. Because of her tender mercy, they’d been protected from theft and curious eyes. Whenever I wanted to hold the mementos for comfort or luck, Luanne would unlock them from the cabinet and leave me with them for as long as I wanted.

Carefully, I lifted out the dozen plastic trays that held my crow keepsakes, the various gifts they’d bestowed on me when I was younger: paper clips, buttons, an earring, marbles, nails, bits of broken glass, shiny pebbles. I’d kept everything—except their occasional offerings of dead baby birds.

Frankly, the crows had first noticed me because I was a messy eater as a kid. We'd unload from the family station wagon, and crumbs from our fast-food forays would spill from my lap. The ever-watchful crows would swoop in and feast.

Some people said they were ugly, but I found their raven-black plumage—sometimes tinged with bright green or deep purple—fascinating. I had read up on them and taken to leaving shelled peanuts on my balcony for them to eat. In return, they'd brought me these bits and baubles. Our unusual friendship had gained such local notoriety that when I was ten years old, the Birmingham News had run a story on the crow gifts, and the article had subsequently been picked up by the Associated Press. Folks around Normal had called me the crow girl—until four years later, when everything had been overshadowed by the events of That Night.

Now, they called me a suspected murderess.