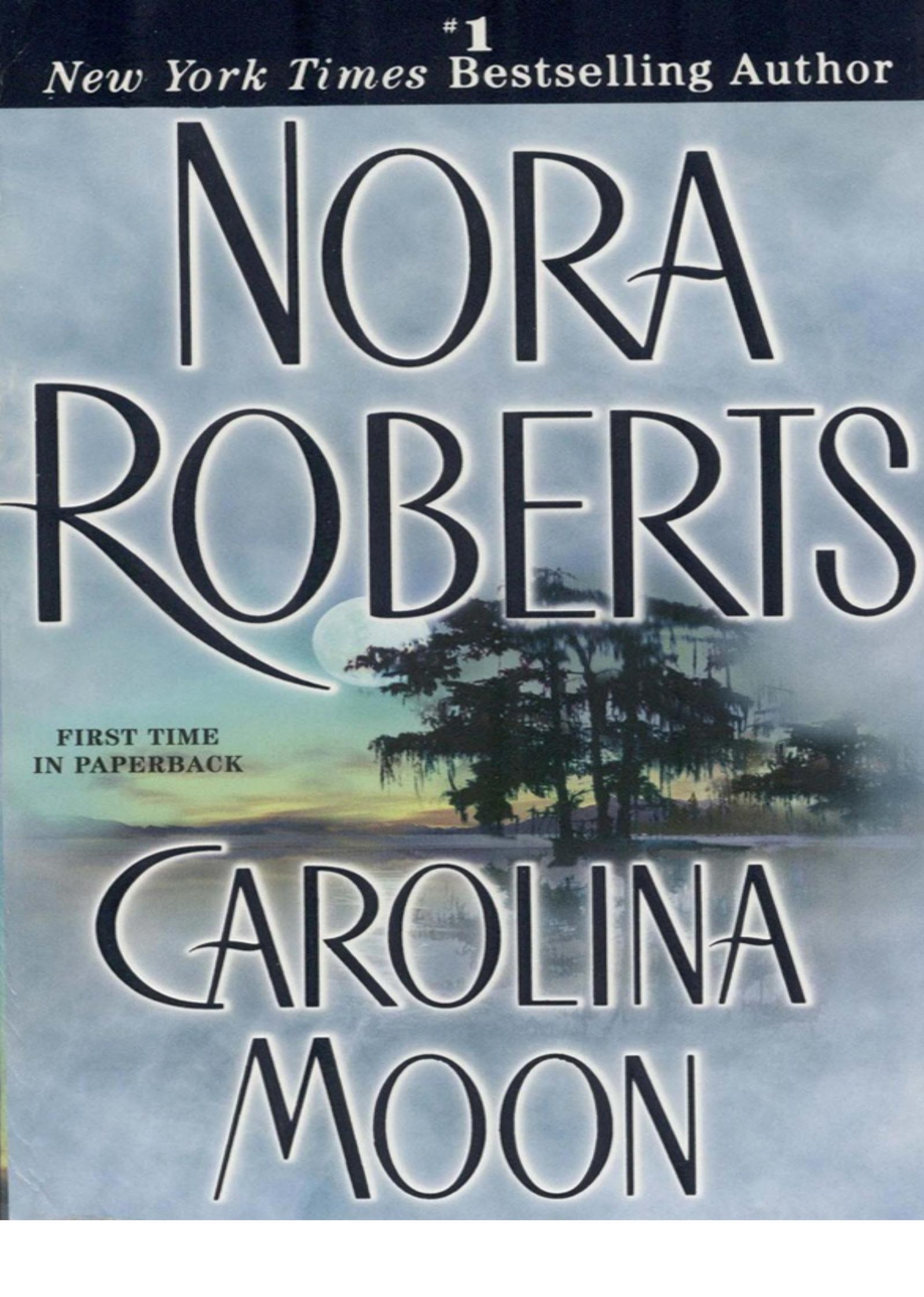


#1

New York Times Bestselling Author

NORA ROBERTS

The background of the cover is a misty, atmospheric landscape. In the foreground, a large, dark tree stands on a grassy bank overlooking a body of water. The water is calm, reflecting the light from the sky. In the sky, a large, bright full moon is visible, partially obscured by the tree's branches. The overall color palette is muted, with soft blues, greys, and greens, creating a serene and somewhat mysterious mood.

FIRST TIME
IN PAPERBACK

CAROLINA MOON

#1

New York Times Bestselling Author

NORA ROBERTS

FIRST TIME
IN PAPERBACK

CAROLINA MOON

**“[Roberts] may have achieved
her personal best...As
atmospheric and unsettling as
a Tennessee Williams play.”**
—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)



**“Steamy setting and hot love scenes.
Read it with the fan on.”
—*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution***

From #1 New York Times bestselling author Nora Roberts—an utterly spellbinding tale about a woman who, though battered in both body and spirit, can never lose Hope...

CAROLINA MOON

Tory Bodeen grew up in South Carolina, in a small run-down house, where her father ruled with an iron fist and a leather belt—and where her dreams and talents had no room to flourish. But she had Hope, who lived in the big house just a short skip away and whose friendship allowed Tory to be something she wasn't allowed to be at home: a child.

After young Hope's brutal murder, unsolved to this day, Tory's life began to fall apart. And now, as she returns to her hometown, with plans to settle in and open a stylish home-design shop, she is determined to find a measure of peace and free herself from the haunting visions of the past. As she forges a new bond with Cade Lavelle—Hope's older brother and the heir to the family fortune—she isn't sure whether the tragic loss they share will unite them or drive them apart. But she is willing to open her heart, just a little, and try.

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**Nora
Roberts**



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*To the friends of my childhood,
blood sisters and confidantes who
helped turn backyards into magic forests*



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Tory



*To me, fair friend, you never can be old,
For as you were when first your eye I eyed,
Such seems your beauty still.*

—William Shakespeare

1

She woke in the body of a dead friend. She was eight, tall for her age, fragile of bone, delicate of feature. Her hair was the color of corn silk, and slid prettily down her narrow back. Her mother loved to brush it every night, one hundred strokes with the soft-bristled, silver-backed brush that sat on the graceful cherry-wood vanity.

The child's body remembered this, felt this, each long, sustained beat with the brush and how it made her imagine herself a cat being petted. How the light slanted over the pin boxes and the bottles of crystal and cobalt, and struck the silver back of the brush as it flashed over her hair.

She remembered the scent of the room, smelled it even now. Gardenia. Always gardenia for Mama. And in the mirror, by lamplight, she could see the pale oval of her face, so young, so pretty, with those thoughtful blue eyes and smooth skin. So alive.

Her name was Hope.

The windows and French doors were closed because it was high summer. Heat pressed its damp fingers against the glass, but inside the house the air was cool, and her cotton nightgown stayed so crisp it crackled when she moved.

It was the heat she wanted, and the adventure, but she kept those thoughts inside as she kissed Mama good night. A dainty peck against a perfumed cheek.

Mama had the hall runners taken up and rolled into the attic every June. Now the loblolly pine floors with their coating of paste wax felt slick and smooth under the young girl's bare feet as she wandered out, down the hall with its panels of bald cypress and paintings in thick frames of dull gold. Up the sharp, winding curves of the stairs to her father's study.

There her father's scent. Smoke, leather, Old Spice, and bourbon.

She loved this room, with its rounded walls and big, heavy chairs with leather the color of the port her papa sometimes drank after supper. Here the circling shelves were jammed full with books and treasures. She loved the man who sat behind the enormous desk with his cigar and his shot glass and his ledgers.

The love was an ache of the heart in the woman inside the child, a shaft of longing and of envy for that uncomplicated and complete love.

His voice boomed, his arms were strong and his stomach soft as he enveloped her in a hug that was so different from the gentle and restrained good-night kiss from Mama.

There's my princess, going off to the kingdom of dreams.

What will I dream about, Papa?

Knights and white chargers and adventures over the sea.

She giggled, but rested her head on his shoulder a bit longer than usual, humming a little in her throat like a purring kitten.

Did she know? Somehow did she know she would never sit safe on his lap again?

Back down the stairs, past Cade's room. Not his bed-time, not yet, because he was four years older and a boy and could stay up late on summer nights watching TV or reading books as long as he was up and ready for his chores in the morning.

One day Cade would be the master of Beaux Reves, and sit at the big desk in the tower study with

the ledgers. He would do the hiring and firing and oversee the planting and the harvest and smoke cigars at meetings and complain about the government and the price of cotton.

Because he was the son.

That was fine with Hope. She didn't want to have to sit at a desk and add up figures.

She stopped in front of her sister's door, hesitated. It wasn't fine with Faith. Nothing ever seemed to be all right with Faith. Lilah, the housekeeper, said Miss Faith would argue with God Almighty just to irritate Him.

Hope supposed that was true, and even though Faith was her twin, she didn't understand what made her sister so prickly all the time. Just tonight she'd been sent straight to her room for sassing. Now the door was shut tight and there was no light under it. Hope imagined Faith was staring up at the ceiling with that sulky look on her face and her fists clenched tight as if she waited to box with the shadows.

Hope touched the doorknob. Most times she could coax Faith out of those black moods. She could huddle in bed with her in the dark and make up stories until Faith laughed and the spit in her eyes dried up again.

But tonight was for other things. Tonight was for adventures.

It was all planned, but Hope didn't let the excitement come until she was in her own room with the door shut. She left the light off, moving quietly in the dark that was silvered by moonlight. She changed her cotton gown for shorts and a T-shirt. Her heart drummed pleasantly in her chest as she arranged the pillows on the bed in a shape that to her naive and childish eyes resembled a sleeping form.

From under the bed, she took her adventure kit. The old dome-topped lunch box held a bottle of Coca-Cola gone warm, a bag of cookies sneaked carefully from the kitchen jar, a small, rusted penknife, matches, a compass, a water pistol—fully loaded—and a red plastic flashlight.

For a moment she sat on the floor. She could smell her crayons, and the talc that clung to her own skin from after her bath. She could hear, just barely hear, the music drifting out from her mother's sitting room.

When she slid her window open, quietly took out the screen, she was smiling.

Young, agile, and bright with anticipation, she swung her leg over the sill, found a toehold in the trellis mad with vining wisteria.

The air was like syrup, and the hot, sweet flavor of it filled her lungs as she climbed down. A splinter stabbed into her finger, causing her to hiss in a breath. But she kept moving, keeping her eye on the lighted windows of the first floor. She was a shadow, she thought, and no one would see her.

She was Hope Lavelle, girl spy, and had a meeting with her contact and partner at precisely ten thirty-five.

She had to stifle a giggle, and was breathless from the laughter that wanted to bubble out as she hit the ground.

To add to her own excitement, she darted and dashed behind the thick trunks of the grand old trees that shaded the house, then peeked around them toward the faint blue light that pulsed against the window in the room where her brother watched TV, up to the clearer yellow glow where each of her parents spent their evening.

Discovery now would mean disaster for the mission, she thought, crouching as she raced through the gardens and the sweet scent of roses and night-blooming jasmine. She must avoid capture at all costs, as the fate of the world rested on her shoulders and those of her stalwart partner.

The woman inside the child screamed out. *Go back, oh please, go back.* But the child didn't hear.

She wheeled her pink bike out from behind the camellias, where she'd stashed it that afternoon,

snuggled her kit into the white basket, then pushed it over the cushion of grass alongside the long gravel drive until the house, and the lights, were dim with distance.

When she rode, she rode like the wind, imagining the pretty little bike was a souped-up motorcycle complete with nerve gas dispenser and oil slick shooter. The white plastic streamers danced from the ends of the handlebars and slapped each other gaily.

She flew through the thick air, and the chorus of peepers and cicadas became the panther roar of her speeding machine.

At the fork in the road, she bore left, then jumped nimbly off her bike to wheel it off the road, down into the narrow gully where it would be hidden by brush. Though the moon was bright enough, she took the flashlight out of her kit. The smiling Princess Leia on her watch told her she was fifteen minutes early. Without fear, without thought, she turned onto the narrow path into the marsh.

Into the end of summer, of childhood. Of life.

There the world was alive with sound, water and insects and small night creatures. The light came in thinning ribbons through the canopy of tupelo and cypress with its dripping moss. Here magnolia blossoms grew fat with a perfume high and sweet. The way to the clearing was second nature to her. This meeting place, this *secret* place, was well tended, guarded, and loved.

As the first to arrive, she took old twigs and stubby branches from the stockpile of wood and set to making a fire. The smoke discouraged mosquitoes, but she scratched idly at bites already dotting her legs and arms.

She settled down to wait with a cookie and her Coke.

As time passed her eyes drooped, and the music of the marsh lulled her. The fire ate through the thin scraps of wood, then settled down to a simmer. Drifting, she rested her cheek on her updrawn knees.

At first the rustling was just part of her dream of dodging down twisting Paris streets to evade the wicked Russian spy. But the snap of a twig underfoot had her head jerking up and the sleep clearing from her eyes. The wide grin came first, but she quickly shifted into the stern professional expression of a top secret agent.

Password!

There was silence in the marsh but for the monotonous buzz of insects and the faint crackle of a fire dying.

She scrambled to her feet, the flashlight cocked in her hand like a gun. *Password!* she called again and aimed the short beam of light.

But now the rustle came from behind her, so she whirled, heart leaping, beam dancing in nervous jerks. Fear, something so rarely tasted in eight short years, slicked hot and burning in her throat.

Come on, cut it out. You're not scaring me.

A sound from the left, deliberate, taunting. As the next snake of fear curled in her gut she took a step in retreat.

And heard the laughter, soft, panting, close.

Running now, running through thick shadows and jumping light. Terror so sharp in the throat that it slices screams before they can escape. Footsteps pounding behind her. Fast, too fast, and too close. Something hits her from behind. Bright pain in her back that vibrates down to the soles of her feet. The jolt of bone and breath as she falls hard to the ground. Air rushes out of her lungs in a sob as the weight of him pins her down. She smells sweat and whiskey.

She screams now, one long cry of desperation, and calls out for her friend.

Tory! Tory, help me!

And the woman trapped inside the dead child weeps.

When Tory came back to herself she was lying on the flagstones of her patio, wearing only a nightshirt already soaked through from the thin spring rain. Her face was wet, and she tasted the salt of her own tears.

Screams echoed in her head, but she didn't know if they were her own or those of the child she couldn't forget.

Shivering, she rolled onto her back so the rain could cool her cheeks and wash the tears away. The episodes—spells, her mother always called them—often left her weak and queasy. There had been a time she'd been able to fight them off before they swamped her. It had either been that or the shocking sting of her father's belt.

I'll whip the devil out of you, girl.

To Hannibal Bodeen, the devil was everywhere; in every fear and temptation lurked the hand of Satan. And he'd done his best to drive that wickedness out of his only child.

At the moment, with the sickness circling in her belly, Tory wished he'd managed it.

It amazed her that for a space of years she'd actually embraced what was in her, had explored it, used it, even celebrated it. A legacy, her grandmother had told her. The sight. The shining. A gift of the blood through the blood.

But there was Hope. More and more there was Hope, and those flashes of her childhood friend's memories hurt her heart. And frightened her.

Nothing she'd experienced, either blocking or embracing this gift, had *taken* her like this. Taken her away, taken her over. It made her helpless, when she'd promised herself she would never be helpless again.

Yet here she was, sprawled on her own patio in the rain without any memory of how she got outside. She'd been in the kitchen brewing tea, standing at the counter, the lights and the music on, reading a letter from her grandmother.

That was the trigger, Tory realized, as she slowly got to her feet. Her grandmother was her link to her childhood. To Hope.

Into Hope, she thought, as she closed the patio door. Into the pain and fear and horror of that terrible night. And still she didn't know the who or the why.

Still shivering, Tory went into the bath, stripped and, turning the shower hot, stepped under the spray.

"I can't help you," she murmured, closing her eyes. "I couldn't help you then, I can't help you now."

Her best friend, her sister of the heart, had died that night in the swamp while she'd been locked in her room, sobbing over the latest beating.

And she had known. She had seen. She had been helpless.

Guilt, as fresh as it had been eighteen years before, swarmed through her. "I can't help you," she said again. "But I'm coming back."

We were eight years old that summer. That long-ago summer when it seemed those thick, hot days would last forever. It was a summer of innocence and foolishness and friendship, the kind that combines to form a pretty glass globe around your world. One night changed all of that. Nothing's been the same for me since. How could it be?

Most of my life I've avoided speaking of it. That didn't stop the memories, or the images. But for a

time I tried to bury it, as Hope was buried. To face it now, to record this out loud, if only for myself, is a relief. ~~Like pulling a splinter out of the heart. The ache will linger a while.~~

She was my best friend. Our bond had the deep and immediate intensity only children are capable of forging. I suppose we were an odd pair, bright and privileged Hope Lavelle and dark, shy Tory Bodeen. My daddy leased a small patch of land, a little corner of the grand plantation hers owned. Sometimes when her mama gave a big society dinner or one of her lavish parties, mine would help out with the cleaning and serving.

But those gaps of social standing and class never touched the friendship. Indeed, they never occurred to us.

She lived in a grand house, one her reputedly eccentric ancestor had built to resemble a castle rather than the Georgian style so popular during its era. It was stone, with towers and turrets and what you would call battlements, I suppose. But there was nothing of the princess about Hope.

She lived for adventures. And when I was with her, so did I. With her, I escaped from the miseries and turmoils of my own house, my own life, and became her partner. We were spies, detectives, knights on quests, pirates, or space marauders. We were brave and true, bold and daring.

In the spring before that summer, we used her pocketknife to cut a narrow slice in our wrists. Solemnly, we mixed our blood. We were lucky, I suppose, we didn't end up with lockjaw. Instead we became blood sisters.

She had a sister, a twin. But Faith rarely joined in our games. They were too silly for her, or too rough, too dirty. They were always too something for Faith. We didn't miss her temper or complaints. That summer, Hope and I were the twins.

If someone had asked me if I loved her, I would have been embarrassed. I wouldn't have understood. But every day since that terrible time that August, I have missed her as I have missed that part of me that died with her.

We were to meet at the swamp, in our secret place. I don't suppose it was really much of a secret, but it was ours. We often played there, in that damp green air, having our adventures among the birdsong and moss and wild azalea.

It was against the rules to go in after sunset, but at eight, rules are an exciting thing to break.

I was to bring marshmallows, and lemonade. Part of that was pride. My parents were poor and I was poorer, but I needed to contribute, and had counted out the money from the mason jar I hid under my bed. I had two dollars and eighty-six cents on that August night—after having bought the supplies at Hanson's—the sum account of my financial worth rested in a glass canning jar and consisted of pennies and nickels and some hard-won quarters.

We had chicken and rice for supper. The house was so hot, even with the fans going on high, that eating was a chore. But if there was a grain of rice on your plate, Daddy expected you to eat it and be grateful. Before supper there was grace. Depending on Daddy's mood it would last anywhere from five minutes to twenty, while the food sat going cold and your belly grumbled and the sweat ran down your back in nasty rivers.

My grandma used to say that when Hannibal Bodeen found God, even God tried to find another place to hide.

He was a big man, my father, and grew thick in the chest and arms. I've heard that he was once considered handsome. Years carve a man in different ways, and my father's years had carved him bitter. Bitter and stern with a meanness under it all. He wore his dark hair slicked back, and his face seemed to rise out of that dome like sharp-edged rocks out of a mountain. Rocks that would flay the skin off your bones at one careless misstep. His eyes were dark, too, a burning kind of dark I recognize now in the eyes of some television preachers and street people.

My mother feared him. I try to forgive her for that, for fearing him so much she never came to my side when he used his belt to whip his vengeful god into me.

That night I was quiet at supper. Chances were he'd take no notice of me if I was quiet and cleaned my plate. Inside me, the anticipation of the night was like a living thing, jittery and joyful. I kept my eyes down, trying to pace my eating so he wouldn't accuse me of dawdling over the food, or of bolting it. It was always a fine line to balance with Daddy.

I remember the sound of the fans whirling, and of forks scraping against plates. I remember the silence, the silence of souls hiding in fear that lived in my father's house.

When my mother offered him more chicken, he thanked her politely and took a second helping. The room seemed to breathe easier. It was a good sign. My mother, encouraged by this, made some mention of the tomatoes and corn coming in fine, and how she'd be canning for the next weeks. They'd be canning over at Beaux Reves, too, and did he think it was a good idea for her to help out there as she'd been asked.

She didn't mention the wage she'd earn. Even when Daddy's mood was mild, you were wise not to bring up the coin that the Lavelles would dole out for a service. He was the breadwinner in his house and we were not permitted to forget this all-important point.

The room held its breath again. There were times just the mention of the Lavelles put the thunder in Daddy's dark eyes. But that night he allowed as that would be a sensible thing. As long as she didn't neglect any of her chores under the roof he was putting over her head.

This relatively pleasant response made her smile. I remember how her face softened up, and how it made her almost pretty again. Now and again, if I think very hard, I can remember Mama being pretty.

Han, she called him when she was smiling. Tory and I'll keep things going around here, don't you worry. I'll go on over and talk to Miss Lilah tomorrow and see about getting it all done. With the berries coming in, I'll be making jelly, too. I know I've got some paraffin around here, but I can't think where it's got to.

And that, just that casual remark about jelly and wax and absentmindedness changed everything. I suppose my mind had drifted off during their conversation, that I was thinking of the adventure to come. I spoke without thought, without knowledge of the consequences. So I said the words that damned me.

The box of paraffin's in the top shelf of the cabinet over the stove, up there behind the molasses and the cornstarch.

I simply said what I saw in my head, the square box of block wax behind the dark bottle of blackstrap, and reached for my cold sweet tea to wash down the starchy grains of rice.

Before I took the first sip, I heard the silence come back, the mute wave that swamped even the monotonous hum of fans. My heart started to pound inside that vacuum, one hard hammer strike after the next, with a ringing that was only inside my own head and was the sudden and vicious pulse of blood. The pulse of fear.

He spoke softly then, as he did, always did, just before the rage. How do you know where the wax is, Victoria? How do you know it's up there, where you can't see it? Where you can't reach it?

I lied. It was foolish, because I was already doomed, but the lie tumbled out, a desperate defense. I told him I guess I saw Mama put it there. I just remember seeing her put it there, is all.

He tore that lie to shreds. He had a way of seeing through lies and ripping them to uneven pieces and sticky parts. When did I see that? Why didn't I do better in school if my memory was so keen I could remember where the paraffin was a year after the last canning season? And how was it I knew it was behind the molasses and cornstarch and not in front of them, or beside them?

Oh, he was a clever man, my father, and never missed the smallest of details.

Mama said nothing while he spoke in that soft voice, punching the words at me like fists wrapped in silk. She folded her hands, and her hands shook. Did she tremble for me? I suppose I like to think so. But she said nothing as his voice grew louder, nothing as he shoved back from the table. Nothing as the glass slipped from my hand and crashed to the floor. A shard of it nicked my ankle, and through the rising terror I felt that little pain.

He checked first, of course. He would tell himself that was the fair thing, the right thing to do. When he opened the cabinet, pushed aside the bottles, slowly took that square blue box of canning wax out from behind the dark molasses, I cried. I still had tears in me then, I still had hope. Even as he yanked me to my feet, I had the hope that the punishment would only be prayers, hours of prayer until my knees went numb. Sometimes, at least sometimes that summer, that was enough for him.

Hadn't he warned me not to let the devil in? But still, I brought wickedness into his house, shamed him before God. I said I was sorry, that I didn't mean to. Please, Daddy, please, I won't do it again. I'll be good.

I begged him, he shouted scripture and with his big, hard hands dragged me toward my room, but still I begged him. It was the last time I did so.

There was no fighting back. It was worse if you fought him. The Fourth Commandment was a sacred thing, and you would honor your father in his house, even when he beat you bloody.

His face was deep red with his righteousness, big and blinding as the sun. He only slapped me once. That was all it took to stop my pleading, and my excuses. And to kill my hope.

I lay across the bed on my stomach, passive now as any sacrificial lamb. The sound his belt made when he slid it out of the loops on his work pants was a snake hissing, then a crack, sharp, slick, as he snapped it.

He always snapped it three times. A holy trinity of cruelty.

The first whip is always the worst. No matter how many times there's been a first, the shock and pain is stunning and rips a scream from your belly. Your body jerks in protest. No, in disbelief, then the second slap bites into you, and the third.

Soon your cries are more animal than human. Your humanity has been compromised, buried under an avalanche of pain and humiliation.

He would preach as he beat me, and his voice would become a great roar. And under that roar was a hideous excitement, a vile sort of pleasure I didn't understand and recognize. No child should know that slippery undercoating, and from that, for a time, I was spared.

The first time he beat me, I was five. My mother tried to stop him, and he blackened her eye for it. She never tried again. I don't know what she did that night while he whaled away, beating at the devil that gave me visions. I couldn't see, not with eyes nor with mind, anything but a bloodred haze.

The haze was hate, but I didn't recognize that either.

He left me weeping and locked the door from the outside. After a while, the pain sent me to sleep.

When I awoke, it was dark and it seemed a fire burned in me. I can't say the pain was unbearable, because you bear it. What choice is there? I prayed, too, prayed that whatever was inside of me had finally been driven out. I didn't want to be wicked.

Yet even as I prayed, the pressure built in my belly, and the tingling came, like sharp little fingers dancing over the back of my neck. It was the first time it came into me this way, and I thought I was sick, feverish.

Then I saw Hope, as vividly as if I were sitting beside her in our clearing in the swamp. I smelled the night, the water, heard the whine of mosquitoes, the buzz of insects. And, like Hope, I heard the rustling in the brush.

Like Hope, I felt the fear. Fresh, hot gushes of it. When she ran, I ran, my breath sobbing out so that my chest hurt from it. I saw her fall under the weight of whatever leaped out at her. A shadow, a shape I couldn't see clearly, though I could see her.

She called for me. Screamed for me.

Then I saw nothing but black. When I woke, the sun was up, and I was on the floor. And Hope was gone.

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