

MEG MOSELEY

A NOVEL

Gone South

Gone South

BOOKS BY MEG MOSELEY

When Sparrows Fall

MEG MOSELEY

Gone South

A NOVEL



WATERBROOK
P R E S S

Excerpted from *Gone South* by Meg Moseley Copyright © 2013 by Meg Moseley. Excerpted by permission of Multnomah Books, a division of Random House, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.

GONE SOUTH

PUBLISHED BY MULTNOMAH BOOKS
12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version.

The characters and events in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-0-307-73080-0

eBook ISBN: 978-0-307-73081-7

Copyright © 2013 by Meg Moseley

Cover design by Kelly Howard

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

Multnomah and its mountain colophon are registered trademarks of Random House Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

[to come]

Printed in the United States of America

2013—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



This book is dedicated to the memory of Joseph Moseley, recently departed for a far better world; and to Lizzie, Karis, and the other grandchildren who will join our family someday. I will always love you and believe in you, no matter what.

One



No doubt it was the last time they would ever meet at the hole-in-a-wall Greek place for gyros, but brooding wouldn't help. She had arrived first, as usual, so she placed their regular orders at the counter and settled into a bright orange booth by a window. Wrapped in the cocoon of clatter from the kitchen and an ancient Motown song on the stereo, Tish McComb rested her chin in her hands and watched headlights zip past on the big hill that descended into the south end of town.

Snow flurries twinkled down from the sky, a reminder that the first serious snow would arrive soon. As much as Tish loved the way a winter storm could swaddle an ordinary little Michigan town in a sparkling blanket of white, she wasn't fond of driving in it.

A gust of wind blew a flock of faded autumn leaves past the window. Her mother followed at a trot with a gigantic handbag on her arm and a red scarf hugging her neck. No gloves, probably because she loved to show off her new wedding ring. She pushed the heavy glass door open and stepped inside, smoothing her rumped gray curls with her left hand.

Spotting Tish, she smiled. "You're always too punctual. Did you order for me?"

"Yes, I did."

"Thanks. Did you remember my avgolemono? And extra tzatziki sauce?"

“Of course,” Tish said with a trace of envy. She’d blow up like a blimp if she ate like that. She didn’t have her mother’s petite figure.

Her cheeks flushed, Barb Miller plopped down on the other side of the booth and unwound her scarf. She looked both wired and tired.

“Pretty scarf,” Tish said.

“I knew you would like it. And I see you’ve been thrifting again. Cute jacket.”

“I found it online. It’s from the forties, but it still has all its original hardware, see?” Tish patted the brass buttons that marched down the jacket’s smooth, bright blue wool. “It has some tiny stains that won’t come out, but I couldn’t pass it up.”

“We vintage items always have our flaws. They’re part of our charm.”

Tish smiled at her mother, a woman whose gentle wrinkles were like those of a well-ripened persimmon. “Part of your charm is the way you describe how charming you are,” she teased.

Mom ignored the quip. “That’s a nice blue on you. It goes with your eyes.” Peering at Tish’s hair, she said, “I wish you wouldn’t keep your hair skinned back tight like that. You know it’s gorgeous, so turn it loose. Let it frame your pretty face.”

Tish refrained from rolling her eyes at her mother’s predictable comments. “You know I have to look businesslike for my job, Mom. How’s the packing coming along?”

“Slowly. Charles hasn’t moved a lot, so he hasn’t weeded out a thousand times like we did. It’ll be a miracle if we finish before moving day.”

“I’ll come over a few more times to help,” Tish offered. “And I’ve put in for that week off so I can make the trip with you.”

Her mother frowned. “I wish you wouldn’t waste your vacation days to help a couple of old fogies move their junk. You should round up some of those

nice girls from your church and go someplace special. Someplace warm. Puerto Vallarta, maybe. Isn't Fran a traveler? I bet she'd love to go on a trip."

"Yes, she would." Tish loved Fran, but when they'd roomed together at the over-thirty singles retreat, she'd snored like an overweight trucker. "But I want to see your new place and help you unpack. It'll be fun—and warm."

"Not as much fun as Puerto Vallarta, but...oh, all right. Thanks, honey." An impish smile overcame the frown. "You know I'm pretty well organized, but I'm still cleaning out your father's storage unit. Yesterday I found a blender in a box he'd labeled 'garden stuff.'"

Tish laughed. "Typical."

"This morning I hauled out a box labeled 'miscellaneous,' and you'll never guess what he'd tucked away with his electric car research." Her mom reached for her bag.

"You're right. I'll never guess."

"A treasure, just for you." She pulled out a large manila envelope and handed it to Tish. "Ta-da!"

Tish sucked in her breath, recognizing that loose, loopy penmanship. 'The McComb Letters,' her father had written, and he'd underlined it twice.

She reached for the envelope. "Oh my goodness. Finally, I have my chance to read the letters. He always kept them out of reach, like he thought they'd be stolen or something."

"I still haven't run across the other papers—the genealogy and whatnot—but I'll find them eventually. Will you want them too?"

"Sure. Thanks, Mom." Tish unfastened the metal clasp and reached into the envelope. She smiled at how meticulously he had wrapped the letters in acid-free paper.

Tish slid the packet back into the envelope. "I won't look until I get them home. I'd hate to get grease on them. Or lemon soup."

“Heaven forbid. Your father would roll over in his grave.”

“They’re for me to keep?”

“Of course. You’re the one with McComb blood, not me, and you’re at least a little bit interested in family history.”

“I haven’t given it much thought since Dad passed away, though.” Tish closed the envelope again and tucked it carefully between her purse and the wall.

“Remember the time he drove you down to Alabama to see the McComb house? He was such a sweetie, trying to distract you. He never could stand to see you hurt, so he did the best thing he knew—took you on a trip.”

Tish nodded. On that slapdash father-daughter adventure, her father had been her rock. Bob McComb might have been a dreamer, chasing the latest get-rich-quick scheme or business opportunity, but he’d made himself completely available when she’d needed him most.

The waitress set the bowl of avgolemono on the table. As her mother sipped the lemony broth, Tish listened to her talk, enjoying the excitement in her mother’s eyes.

“Just think, Tish. By the time winter really hits, Charles and I will be in Florida.” Her mom sat up straight. “Are you sure you don’t want to move south too? You’ve got enough money to buy a condo or even a house by now. Don’t you want to settle down somewhere? All those years in apartments...and it would be a new adventure.”

Tish laughed. “You sound like Dad with all his pep talks about greener pastures.”

“Talk about greener pastures, honey—we’ll have palm trees and orchids. An orange tree in the front yard and mangoes and avocados out back. You could too.”

“Trying to bribe me with guacamole and fruit salad? Nice try, but if there’s

one thing I learned from all our moves, it's that the grass isn't greener on the other side of the fence. It's just another pasture. With its own cow pies."

"At least my pasture's full of tropical flowers instead of ice and snow."

Catching a whiff of lemon, Tish could almost imagine being there. "Oh, Mom, Florida just doesn't appeal to me. Sorry. I like a place that has four seasons."

"Well, ice and snow don't appeal to me. Not anymore. I'm ready to get out of here." Pushing her empty bowl to the side, her mom said, "I'm just glad we don't live in covered-wagon days. We can hop a plane and be anywhere in a few hours. That reminds me. I'll have to buy you a plane ticket so you can fly home from Tampa."

A new idea fluttered into Tish's mind, triggered by the road-trip memories she'd made with her dad. Sunrise over a new town. The crazy place names on road signs and water towers. Different accents in different states. Seeing the landscape change, mile by mile, and coming to a new understanding of what a huge country she lived in.

"You know what I should do, Mom? I should drive myself down. Caravan with you and Charles. Then I can take my time on the way back and see some sights."

"Oh, Tish. Don't try to make that long drive all by yourself. In that old car."

"Mother, I'm thirty-five years old. I can handle it. And the car's in great shape."

The waitress set their plates of gyros and curly fries on the table. As their drinks were being refilled, Tish shrugged her way out of her vintage jacket and placed it on the seat beside her, safe from the drippy, spicy lamb and tangy sauce.

After they'd eaten and settled their bill, they headed outside and stood under the awning. The snow flurries had given way to a fine mist sifting down

from the dark sky. Tish tucked the McComb letters under her arm while she buttoned her jacket.

Her mom zipped her parka, wound her red scarf around her neck, and reached into her purse for a matching pair of knit gloves. She pulled them on and clapped her hands, the sound muffled by the fabric. “You can adopt my winter gear, Tish. I won’t need parkas and scarves and gloves in Tampa.”

Tish smiled, remembering a series of stretchy red gloves tucked into long-ago Christmas stockings. “Thanks. That would be nice. Thank you for giving me Letitia’s letters too. I’m glad you found them.”

“It’s right for you to have them, especially since you’re named after her.”

“I’ll read them with her and her husband staring down at me from their wedding portrait.”

“Ugh! That old thing always makes me think of haunted houses and bad smells. He’s ghoulish and she looks anemic.”

Tish was quick to defend her namesake. “No, she was just fair skinned. And he had a long, thin face.”

Her mother laughed. “He sure did. I think he’s related to Lurch from *The Addams Family*.” She reached out for a hug, and Tish welcomed it. “Well, good night, sweetheart. Let me know if you find anything interesting.”

“Night, Mom. Drive carefully.” Tish watched her mom hurry down the wet sidewalk toward her car, a little kick in her step. Her mom really knew how to roll with life, a trait that had served her well through Dad’s numerous ventures and so many moves.

While her Volvo warmed up, Tish rubbed her cold hands together and thought about the manila envelope on the passenger seat. Her dad had told her about the letters. About his great-great-grandmother moving from Ohio to Alabama sometime after the Civil War. She’d written home to her mother in Ohio, and her mother had saved the letters. They’d been passed down from one generation to another, treasured but seldom read.

Tish had always wanted to read them, especially since her dad always put Nathan and Letitia McComb on a pedestal. But Dad had been wise to keep them out of the hands of a curious little girl who could damage the fragile old papers. Sometimes, like the lonely child she'd once been, Tish still yearned to disappear into the past. She wasn't quite sure why.



Home again in her second-floor apartment, Tish set her purse on the piano bench and the manila envelope on the coffee table, then kicked off her shoes and walked to the window. Nightfall had completely swallowed the courtyard of the complex.

She touched the cold glass with her fingertips.

Sometimes Florida didn't sound bad...except for the hurricanes and the alligators. And millions of senior citizens clogging the roads. But it wouldn't be hard to find another job in the insurance field if she ever took a notion to move closer to her mother and Charles.

Beyond the courtyard, the parking lot filled as residents came home for the night. Each set of headlights and brake lights briefly illuminated the rows of parked vehicles and then went dark, making the streetlights seem brighter again.

Ever since college, she'd lived in an apartment. She could have bought a house somewhere by now. She could have been building equity. That was what stable, responsible people did. But when a single woman bought a house, it was like admitting that she was alone. Like a widow.

Tish turned toward the antique wedding photograph on the living room wall and pondered her mother's description of Nathan and Letitia McComb. No, they weren't ghoulish and anemic. Their solemn expressions were due to the fact that no one smiled for the camera back then. No doubt they'd been ordered to sit perfectly still.

Posing in a photographer's studio sometime around 1870, young Letitia sat

in an ornately carved chair while her much older husband stood behind it, one hand resting on her shoulder. Her slender hands lay demurely in her lap, flaunting a ring set with a dark gem of a respectable size. Matching gems dangled from her ears, and a larger stone hung from a delicate chain at her throat. Her gown was simple; its neckline cut straight across, baring her pale shoulders.

Nathan wore a multitude of layers: a floppy bow tie over a white shirt under a dark vest under a darker jacket. His black hair fell straight and smooth in a cut that ended at his ear lobes, while Letitia's lighter hair was severely parted down the middle and pulled back tight.

Tish had always wondered what colors had met the eye of the unknown photographer when he'd settled his subjects for their portrait. Brides hadn't worn white in those days, and for some reason Tish had always imagined the gown as a soft shade of green. The jewelry might have been green too, even if the stones weren't emeralds.

She had no idea what had become of the jewelry. Her dad had known some interesting family stories, but they'd had a lot of gaps. The letters might fill in some of the gaps.

Settling cross-legged in front of the coffee table, she extracted the packet of letters from the envelope and removed the protective paper. Gently, she spread out a couple of the letters. The paper was fragile, the corners crumbling. Some of the folds had become splits. The ink was faded.

Most of them were written by Letitia to her mother in that gloriously graceful style. . .what was it called? Spencerian. That was it. A useless tidbit of information that Tish had absorbed from her dad's interest in genealogy and historical documents.

At the top left corner of each letter, Letitia had included her address: 525 South Jackson Street, Noble, Alabama.

On a warm spring day over five years ago, Tish and her dad had tracked down that very house. He'd knocked on the door, hoping the current residents

would offer a tour if he introduced himself as the great-great-grandson of the man who'd built the place. Tish, mortified, had been relieved when no one came to the door. It was bad enough that they'd stood there on the porch while a little white dog yapped at them from a window.

They hadn't stayed long. They'd prowled around Noble for a few hours, exploring a used-book store and a cemetery. After supper at a local diner, they'd headed back to I-65 and the return trip north.

She picked up a letter that was obviously written by someone other than Letitia. Although the penmanship was large and bold, its flourishes made it difficult to decipher.

My darling Miss Lattimore, as the blessed day of our nuptials approaches, my happiness knows no bounds. I want only to share my joy with you forever, my dear.

That one must have been a special treasure to Letitia. Years after Nathan wrote it, she'd probably added it to the letters her mother had saved.

Setting it aside, Tish chose one that Letitia had written. *Dearest Mother, Nathan and I are wonderfully happy here...*The tiny writing strained Tish's eyes, so she decided to put off further reading until she'd used her scanner to make e-files of the letters. Then she could enlarge them on her computer screen. She'd also e-mail the files to herself for safekeeping.

Unable to resist, she skimmed a few more letters but found nothing especially interesting. She carefully returned all of them to their protective wrapping and slid the packet back into the envelope. Funny how Nathan and Letitia's correspondence was so ordinary. Maybe it meant that they had enjoyed a happy, if uneventful, life.

She picked up her smart phone, opened her browser, and typed the address of the house into the search bar. The first result was an online advertisement.

For sale by owner. Historic home restored and waiting for you. PRICE IS FIRM!!! THIS IS ALREADY A BARGAIN!!! DO NOT TRY AND DICKER AND DO NOT TEXT. PHONE CALLS OR E-MAILS ONLY!!!

She smiled at the screaming caps and the abundance of exclamation marks, then clicked on the photographs. There were only two. Blurred and dark, they both showed the exterior of the house. It was a shame that the seller hadn't provided pictures of the interior too. She especially wanted a glimpse of the parlor where Letitia might have sat, keeping up on her correspondence.

And that was a good reason to drive down to Tampa. On her return trip, she could take a detour to Noble. The town wasn't too far off the interstate. She could even call the seller and arrange a time to walk through the house.

It was a crazy idea, like something her fun-loving dad would have come up with. He'd never thought twice about packing up and hitting the road, whether for an impromptu vacation or a move halfway across Michigan.

With a fond smile for him, she settled in her favorite chair and studied the portrait on the wall. The simple dignity of Letitia's expression was what Tish had sought to imitate every time she was the new kid in school again, facing bullies on the playground. Holding her head high, she'd managed to keep her fists to herself by imagining that she was the original Letitia, regal and composed.

I am Letitia McComb. You can't change who I am.

The more she thought about taking a side trip to Noble, the more she liked the idea.



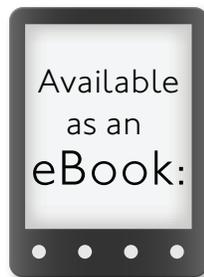
WATERBROOK MULTNOMAH
PUBLISHING GROUP
A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.

Want to keep reading? You've got options:

Purchase a copy direct from the publisher or from your favorite retailer:

[BUY NOW](#)

Download a copy for your eReader and keep reading right away:



[amazonkindle](#)

[Google
books](#)

[iBooks](#)

[nook™
by Barnes & Noble](#)

[And More...](#)