

UNVEILING THE *Past*



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PEEK**



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Kim Vogel Sawyer

A NOVEL

UNVEILING THE *Past*

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For *Mom*—

I miss you every minute of every day.
I'm doing my best to make you proud.

And for *Daddy*—

Of all the fathers God could have given me,
I'm so glad He gave me you.

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A father to the fatherless . . .
is God in his holy dwelling.
—Psalm 68:5, NIV

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June 1992

Little Rock, Arkansas

Margaret Diane DeFord

While her daughter happily crunched a big bite of off-brand sugar-frosted flakes, a cereal reserved for summer consumption only, Diane sipped her second cup of coffee and perused the Sunday paper. Bright midmorning sunshine flowed through the sliding glass doors that led to their small balcony and glared against the newsprint. Diane angled the folded pages away from the light. A short article caught her attention, and she laughed as she finished the paragraph.

“What’s so funny, Mom?”

She peeked over the top of the paper at her daughter. “It’s snowing in Colorado.”

Meghan’s fine dark eyebrows shot up and her mouth formed an O, revealing a gap where her bottom front teeth used to be. “But it’s summertime. It’s not supposed to snow in summertime.”

Diane shrugged. “Tell it to Colorado.” She glanced out the sliders and winced when the sunlight met her eyes. Not a cloud in the sky. Today would be a scorcher in Little Rock.

“You know what?” Meghan swung her bare feet and grinned, holding her spoon like a sword. “It’d be neat if it snowed in the summer. Snow is nice and cold, and it would cool us down when it’s so hot outside.”

A six-year-old’s logic. “It’d be neat, but it isn’t possible. You need cold

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atmospheric conditions for snow to form, and you don't get that in the summer."

Meghan's face puckered. "Then how come it snowed in Colorado? It's summer there, too, isn't it?"

"Sure it is, but the elevation is different."

"What's elevation?"

"Elevvvvvation." Without conscious thought, Diane slipped into her teacher's voice. "Elevation is the height of a land area above sea level. The higher the elevation, the cooler the temperature. Colorado's average elevation is probably six thousand feet higher than Arkansas's. It makes a difference."

"Ohhh." Meghan's expression brightened. She clanked her spoon onto the table and half scooted off her chair. "Can we go to Colorado and see the snow?"

Wouldn't it be wonderful to go on an impromptu vacation and experience snow in June? But a single mom on a teacher's salary didn't have the luxury of taking impromptu vacations. Or even planned vacations beyond day trips to local museums or the zoo. She shook her head. "Sorry, no can do."

Meghan's bottom lip poked out. She slumped into her seat.

"But later you can go to the pool and cool off that way." She'd had to pay more in rent than she preferred to live in an apartment complex that included a private pool and playground area, but it was worth it. Meghan could go swimming whenever she wanted.

"Okay." Little enthusiasm colored Meghan's tone.

Time for distraction. Diane pointed at Meghan's bowl. "Finish up your cereal before it gets soggy."

"I like it soggy."

"The sooner you finish eating, the sooner you can head to the pool."

"Okay."

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Diane raised the paper and focused on an article about an agreement between President Bush and Russian president Boris Yeltsin on arms reduction, ideas forming for discussing the potential ramifications of the pact with her history students when school started again in the fall.

“Mom? Mom!”

Diane snapped the paper down. “What?”

Meghan scowled. “I asked you a question.”

She’d been more caught up in her thoughts than she realized. “What was it?”

Meghan tapped the paper. “I read a new word on there. Hold it where I can see.”

Diane lifted the pages.

Meghan squinted at something. “What is *uh-bit-you-are-ees*?”

Confused, Diane flipped the paper around. “Oh. You mean obituaries.”

“What’s obituaries?”

This child had more questions in her than Diane ever imagined a small head could hold. “An obituary is the printed record of a person’s death.”

Sadness pinched the little girl’s face. “You mean it says somebody died?”

“I’m afraid so.” Diane glanced at the columns. At least a dozen names were listed, and postage stamp-sized black-and-white pictures gave a face to each name. Her gaze fixed on one, and for a moment she forgot to breathe.

“Like my lizard died?”

Diane stared at the name—Charles (Chuck) Harrison—and the grainy image beside it.

“Mom, like Lenny the Lizard died?”

“Meghan, enough questions already. Eat your breakfast. It’s turning into a soggy mess.”

“I like it—”

“Eat!”

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Meghan yanked up her spoon.

Diane bent over the page and read the entire obituary. Slowly. Underlining the words with her trembling finger.

Charles (Chuck) Harrison, of Fort Smith, Arkansas, age 52, died on June 15, 1992, in his home. He was born February 25, 1940, in Fort Smith, the fourth child to Frank and Edna (Collins) Harrison. He graduated from Fort Smith High School and earned degrees in business administration and accounting from the University of Arkansas, where he graduated summa cum laude in 1963. He owned and managed Harrison Accounting, a successful business in Fort Smith, for almost thirty years. He married his childhood sweetheart, Melinda Garland, in September 1962. To their union was born one child, Kevin, in 1965. Charles was preceded in death by his parents. He is survived by his wife, Melinda; his son, Kevin, of Fort Smith; his brothers, Richard and James; his sister, MaryAnn (Harrison) Walker; and several nieces and nephews. Cremation has taken place. No service is planned.

She gave a jolt at the final line. No service? Why wouldn't the family have a service for someone who held lifelong connections to a community? And how had the man died? "In his home" was such an ambiguous explanation. More questions than Meghan could ask in a day formed on Diane's tongue, but all of them remained unstated. She couldn't—she *wouldn't*—ask the person who could answer.

She slid her gaze to a name in the middle of the impersonal recitation. Kevin. Her blood went as cold as the snow covering the mountaintops in Colorado. A dozen images flashed through her mind's eye, and she winced with each remembrance. Mother always said she had a stubborn streak a

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mile long, and she'd put it to good use when she determined not to think about Kevin Harrison. She'd succeeded. Until now.

These people—Charles, Melinda, Richard, James, MaryAnn, the unnamed nieces and nephews . . . She had a connection to them. Well, not directly, but Meghan did, which meant Diane did by default.

She glanced at Meghan, who sat with her chin in her hand, stirring the last few sodden flakes in her bowl with a stubby finger. She'd slept in yesterday's pigtails, and they hung askew with stringy wisps of darkest brown framing her flushed cheeks. The stretched neck of her favorite Care Bears nightgown sagged, and a squiggly thread stuck out from the seam of one shoulder. Such a disheveled mess, and yet so beautiful. Not a single resemblance to her blond-haired, blue-eyed father.

Thank God.

She closed her eyes, wishing she hadn't seen the obituary. Wishing she hadn't seen Kevin's name in print. Now she'd have to start all over in wiping him from her mind. She popped her eyes open and tapped her daughter's wrist. "Hey."

Meghan didn't lift her face, but she shifted her eyes and peered across the table through a fringe of messy bangs.

"Are you done?"

She offered a barely discernible nod.

"Put your bowl and spoon in the sink. Then do your morning stuff."

Meghan nodded wisely. "I know. Wash my hands, brush my teeth, and get dressed."

"But don't put on your swimsuit."

"No swimming?"

"Nope. We're going to do something else."

A hint of curiosity flashed in Meghan's brown eyes. "What?"

"It's a surprise." It would be a surprise to Diane, too. She had no idea

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where they'd go or what they'd do. She'd probably end up using her credit card, spending money she couldn't afford to squander. But she needed a distraction.

She flicked her fingers at Meghan. "Go on now. Hurry. We don't want to be late."

Giggling, Meghan hopped down from the chair and grabbed her bowl. She scampered to the sink, her bare feet slapping the linoleum. She clattered the bowl and spoon into the sink, then flashed a grin over her shoulder. "We're gonna have fun, right?"

"C'mon, Di, we're gonna have fun."

The voice from the past—the voice she had steadfastly blocked from her memory for seven years—attacked. He'd given her a lot more than fun.

Diane gritted her teeth. "Hurry, Meghan."

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May, Twenty-Five Years Later

Carson Springs, Arkansas

Sean Eagle

Chinese takeout for the third time that month. And it was only the fifteenth. Sean picked up his fork but didn't aim the tines for the mound of steaming chicken-fried rice on his paper plate. He glanced across the kitchen table to Meghan, intending to ask if they could forgo bringing home any more little white wax-coated boxes until at least the end of June, but the sight of his wife expertly wielding chopsticks diverted his attention.

She paused with the bamboo eating utensils halfway to her mouth and grinned at him. "What?"

He pointed with his fork at the pair of sticks holding a clump of food, then met her curious gaze. "You handle those things like a pro. Are you sure you're Italian and not Chinese?"

He'd meant to joke, but when her smile faded, he recognized his error. When would Meghan decide to do more than stare at her biological father's name on the paper in her desk drawer? The sooner she found the man and satisfied her curiosity, the sooner they could stop living under the shadow of someone neither of them had ever met.

She put the bite in her mouth, chewed, and swallowed. Pinching a chunk of chicken with her chopsticks, she shrugged. "Mom always said if you're going to eat Chinese food, you shouldn't use a fork. And Grandma

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said that adage about being hungry a half hour after eating Chinese is only true because you lose part of each bite to your lap.”

Sean gave the expected laugh and finally plunged his fork into the rice. They ate in silence. Well, except for the mumble of news reporters from the television around the corner in the living room. Years ago, he’d developed the habit of keeping the television or radio on. For noise. His house was too lonely without it. He sure hadn’t expected to need a source of noise after he got married, though. They’d been husband and wife three years already, and—

“Are you done?”

Meghan stood beside him, hand outstretched. He glanced at his plate. The food, with the exception of a few stray pieces of rice, was gone. He didn’t even recall eating it.

“Yeah, I guess I am.” He handed her the grease-stained circle of white paper, then picked up the fork, wooden chopsticks, and pair of empty water bottles and followed her to the kitchen. He placed the fork on the counter near the sink and tossed everything else in the recycling bin while she dropped their plates and napkins in the trash can.

Leaning against the counter, he folded his arms over his chest and observed her put the fork in the dishwasher. He was capable of doing it, but she had a “system,” and she didn’t want him messing it up. Always so independent and self-sufficient. Sometimes he admired the traits. Sometimes he wished she needed him a little more.

“All done.” She clicked the door closed and shot a smile over her shoulder.

“Not quite.” He bobbed his chin at the appliance. “You didn’t start it.”

“It isn’t full yet. No sense in wasting water.” She grabbed a handful of paper towels and a spray bottle of cleaner and crossed to the table.

Sean remained in place, staring at the dishwasher’s stainless-steel door. She’d put things in the racks every day for more than a week, and there still

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wasn't enough in there to warrant running it? Something wasn't right with that scenario. His mom hadn't gotten a dishwasher until he was a junior in high school, but he recalled the appliance humming every other day, at least. But then, Mom had made use of her stove every day.

He understood why Meghan didn't cook much. Investigations took them away from home, sometimes for days at a time. Even when they were tied to their desks in the Arkansas Cold Case Investigations Department, the commute from Little Rock to Carson Springs put them home past the normal supper hour. Grabbing something quick was easier than preparing a meal and eating at eight o'clock or after. Before their wedding, how many suppers had he grabbed at a drive-through window?

Sure, he understood, and he didn't blame her for not wanting to cook. He was tired, too, at the end of the day. But memories of home-cooked meals and conversations around the table sent feelings of *family* rolling through him—a longing for the life he'd had with his parents. The kind of life he always thought he and his wife would share.

He shifted his attention to Meghan, who spritzed the laminate tabletop and wiped it down with the crumpled wad of paper towels. Her mink-colored ponytail swayed beside her cheek, giving her a girlish look. But she wasn't a girl anymore. She'd be thirty-two this year. Thirty-two . . . and he was thirty-six already. When his mom was thirty-six, he'd been a seventh grader. Even if he and Meghan had a baby tomorrow, he'd be forty-one by the time their child started school and fifty-four—three years older than Meghan's mom was now—when the child graduated.

Urgency propelled him across the floor. He snagged Meghan's wrist and, with a gentle tug, pulled her into his embrace. She melted against him, slipping her arms around his torso and resting her cheek on his shoulder. A sigh escaped. Ah, the contentment of holding his wife. He couldn't love her more if he tried. His very love was the reason he wanted a child with her.

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He rocked her side to side and whispered against her silky hair, “Meg, can we talk?”

She leaned back slightly, still caught in the circle of his arms, and looked at him, her brown eyes holding a smile. “What about?”

His gaze roved her upturned face. He could imagine their child—dark-haired and dark-eyed, given her Italian coloring and his father’s Native American ancestry. Of course, his mother had been from Scandinavian stock. Blond-haired and blue-eyed. If Meghan’s father had similar genes, they could have a little blue-eyed blond instead. Wouldn’t that be something?

She bumped his backside with the spray bottle. “Hey. Where’d you go? You said you wanted to talk.”

He searched her eyes for a moment, gathering courage, then took a sideways step that separated them. “Put those down, huh?” Her brow furrowed, but she placed the damp wad of towels and the bottle on the table. He captured her hand, linking fingers with hers. “Let’s sit.”

Laughing softly, she scuffed alongside him to the sofa. “It must be important if you want to sit.”

He flopped into the corner of their overstuffed L-shaped couch, and she immediately nestled—head on his shoulder, legs tucked underneath her—the way she did when they watched television or worked on a crossword puzzle together before bed. She loved him. He knew that. So wouldn’t having a child be a natural way to express their love?

He ran his fingers through the thick strands of her ponytail. “Meg, do you think we make a good team?”

She tipped her face and smirked at him. “For that we had to sit? What a silly question.” She wrinkled her nose. “No, we don’t make a good team. We make a *great* team. The best. We wouldn’t be the first husband-wife investigation pair in the history of the state’s cold-case unit if we weren’t.” She kissed the underside of his jaw and settled close again.

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He cleared his throat. "I wasn't talking about our work relationship."

She toyed with one of his buttons. "No?"

"Hm-mm. I meant as husband and wife."

She went still for the count of three, then abruptly swung her feet over the edge of the sofa and sat up. "What's wrong?"

A commercial advertising toilet bowl cleaner came on. Good grief. He grabbed the remote control from the fold-down armrest and turned off the television, then took hold of Meghan's hand. She didn't pull free from his grasp, but she didn't curl her fingers around his, either. She sat tense, chewing her lip.

"Honey, nothing's wrong." Which wasn't exactly the truth. How could he phrase things so she'd understand? "You and me, we're good together. Really good. Maybe . . . too good."

She eased against the sofa cushions but kept some distance between them. "What do you mean?"

"We've got this routine that we follow. Up early, hitting the exercise equipment, then driving to work, and"—he gestured to the living room—"hanging out. Always the two of us. Just the two of us."

She released a little huff. "We don't have a lot of extra hours every day. If we didn't get up early or have our drives to and from work, we wouldn't have any you-and-me time at all."

"That's my point." He leaned forward and propped his elbows on his knees, sandwiching her limp hand between his palms. "Our day is so structured, with work and the commute eating up a chunk of time, that we're kind of caught in a rut." He gazed steadily into her unblinking eyes. "Not necessarily an unhappy rut, but a rut all the same. What we have now, that's all we'll ever have. Unless we change something."

"Are you wanting to move to Little Rock? I mean, I love our house here, but that'd get rid of the commute."

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He, too, loved the three-bedroom Craftsman-style bungalow they'd purchased in a town near Little Rock after their *I do's*. "No. We chose the commute to give us some separation from our job. We need that."

"So, you're happy with . . . this?" She waved her hand, and he surmised she meant the house in general.

"Yes."

Meghan shook her head, making her ponytail bounce. "Then what do you want to change?"

He puffed his cheeks and blew out a breath. "I want to use one of our extra bedrooms for something other than a home office or an exercise room."

Her eyebrows pinched, and she tapped her chin with her finger. "Hmm . . . We could put the exercise equipment in the basement. The rec room is long enough to use half for a workout space. But I don't really want our desks and computers down there." She tilted her head. "What're you wanting to use the room for instead?"

"A nursery."

She drew back, shock registering on her face. An uneasy chuckle left her throat. "I thought we already talked about that."

He tightened his grip on her hand. "A year ago. You asked for time to think about it."

"No, I asked for time to get ourselves established before we thought about it."

He raised his brows. "We've taken three years. Our routine is down pat. I'd call that established, babe."

She slipped her hand free and sat back, folding her arms across her chest. "At the bureau and here at home, yes, but what about our goal of going independent?"

Her goal. Not his. He liked the promise of a steady paycheck, and he started to tell her so. Again.

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“Besides, it wouldn’t be fair to have a baby when we have so little free time. I like having you to myself. I’m sorry if that sounds selfish, but it’s the truth.” She scooted to the other end of the sofa, leaned against the armrest, and pressed the soles of her bare feet against his thigh. “And while I’m being truthful, I have to admit . . . I’d be a terrible mother.”

Sean squeezed her foot. “I don’t believe that.”

She made a face. “Because you are innately optimistic. Believe me, I admire that about you, but sometimes you aren’t realistic. I love Mom—of course I do—but she wasn’t the huggy, lovey-dovey, cookie-baking, take-your-kid-to-the-circus kind of mom yours was. That’s what you want from me, right?”

He couldn’t deny it. Her description fit his expectation. He shrugged.

A sad smile lifted the corners of her lips. “Sean, I still haven’t gotten the hang of being a wife. I’m not— I can’t—” She swung her feet to the floor and stood. “I’m sorry.” She scurried through the arched opening that led to their bedroom.

Sean sighed. He said to the empty room, “I’m sorry, too.”

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Three

Meghan DeFord-Eagle

Meghan closed herself in the master suite's bathroom and perched on the rolled edge of the soaking tub. She wrapped her arms across her aching middle and stared at her somber reflection in the mirror above the sink.

"A baby . . ." She whispered the words, forcing them past her dry throat. Why did something as helpless and harmless as an infant strike such fear into her? She snorted. How ridiculous to ponder the question when she knew the answer all too well. She could never subject an innocent baby to the DeFord Curse.

She grimaced and jerked her gaze to the tub's gleaming brass crisscross faucet knobs. Grandma DeFord had admitted to a rocky relationship with her mother. Mom had spent the majority of her childhood and adult years resenting Grandma. Meghan couldn't honestly say she resented Mom, but neither did she want to emulate her. At least not Mom's style of parenting. But what other parenting style did she know? She'd only add another generation of mother-child conflict to the family history. Would that be fair to the baby? Not to mention burdening Sean, who'd end up being the buffer between his wife and child.

Having filled the position of peacemaker more years than she wanted to count for Mom and Grandma, she wouldn't wish that frustration and heartache on anyone, much less the man she loved more than she knew how to express.

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A tap at the door intruded, and she gave a start. She blurted “What?” more sharply than she intended.

“Can I come in?”

She swallowed. Sean sounded so kind, so hopeful, so patient. He’d be such an amazing dad. She grabbed one of the spigots and gave it a vicious twist, then called over the sound of water splashing against the porcelain tub. “I’m gonna take a soak, Sean. Relax a little bit.”

She held her breath. Would he ask to join her, as he so often did?

“Okay. I want to look over some notes on the computer about the Dunbrook murders, then turn in. Enjoy your soak.”

Her breath eased out, and she slumped forward, half-relieved and half-disappointed. Probably the same way he was feeling. Guilt struck hard. She undressed and eased into the tub, willing the steamy water to dissolve the unpleasant emotion. But the guilt refused to budge. Sean deserved to be a father. But how could she watch him develop a relationship with their child and not be envious? Envy rotted the bones—wasn’t that what it said in Proverbs?

She closed her eyes and tried to imagine herself cradling a baby. The picture wouldn’t gel. Mom sometimes joked that she hadn’t inherited a maternal gene. Apparently neither had Meghan. She’d been born to a non-maternal mother and an absentee father. She’d be the worst kind of parent. Why couldn’t Sean understand?

And these thoughts weren’t helping her relax. She might as well get out. Using her toe, she flipped the drain lever and then dried off while the tub emptied. Her feet met the slate tiles, and gooseflesh broke out over her frame. She grabbed her terry-cloth robe from the hook on the back of the bathroom door and tossed it on. Her damp feet left marks on the plush carpet as she crossed to the closet. She chose a T-shirt-style nightshirt printed all over with dachshunds, then exited the closet. Sean entered the

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bedroom from the hallway at the same time. He shot her a tight smile but didn't say anything.

Temptation to run to him, to apologize, to beg his understanding twined through her. But what could she say that she hadn't said before? Sean knew her. Knew her better than anybody else. Even so, he didn't fully understand her. Or at least he didn't understand her fears. She could talk until she was blue in the face and he wouldn't understand because his upbringing had been so different from hers.

The contrasts of their childhoods bounced in her mind like a tennis ball flying back and forth over the net. Him raised in a two-parent household, her raised by a single mom. Him attending church every time the doors were open, her going only on Christmas and Easter. His parents cheering him on at sporting events and school programs, her mom shooing her out the door with a bright "Do good, Meghan" and staying home to grade papers. Him playing board games with his folks and sharing bouts of laughter, her trailing Mom through musty museums and listening to lectures and explanations. Different. She and Sean were so different.

A person couldn't change her past. Her background would never match his. Did that mean—

"Are you coming to bed?"

She blinked twice. He was already in bed, his puzzled face illuminated by the glow from his bedside lamp. She must look like an idiot, rooted in front of the open closet door, staring into space.

"Sorry. I guess I was lost in thought."

Amusement glittered in his dark eyes. "Ya think?"

Another difference between them. He was always so quick to forgive and move on. She forgave. Sure she did. But move on? That part was hard.

She closed the door and crossed the floor in a few quick strides. She slipped between the sheets and clicked off her lamp, then flopped onto her

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back. Sean rolled toward her and raised up on one elbow. The room was dark, the shadows heavy, but she made out his handsome, chiseled face tipping near, and she closed her eyes in readiness for his customary nighttime kiss. Sometimes the kiss lengthened and they ended up staying awake for a while. For reasons she couldn't explain, she hoped tonight they'd stay awake.

His warm breath brushed her cheeks, and then his lips touched hers—firm, moist, tender. She wrestled her arms from beneath the light covers, ready to draw him close, but before she caught hold of him, he lifted away from her and rested his head on his pillow. “Night, Meg.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat and whispered, “Night.” A few seconds ticked by, and then she added, “I love you.”

His hand slid across her belly. His fingers splayed, but he didn't pull her to him. Moments later, his deep, even breathing told her he'd fallen asleep.

It was Monday. They'd made love twice over the weekend. Monday led to Tuesday, a workday, and they needed their rest. He wasn't rejecting her. He was being practical and responsible. She should follow his lead. She placed her hand over his and closed her eyes, but sleep refused to claim her.

An image of the folded slip of paper in her desk drawer—the piece of paper bearing a single name, written in her mother's strong penmanship—lingered behind her closed lids. Mom had never wanted to talk about the man who'd gotten her pregnant in college and then told her to get lost. Meghan had learned not to ask questions about him. Why get Mom all worked up? Her telling Meghan his name was a huge concession.

Meghan knew the traits she'd either inherited or learned from her mother. But half of her genetic makeup came from someone else. A total stranger. All she knew about him was that he hadn't wanted to be a father. At least not back then. Maybe not now, either. After all, to her knowledge, he'd never made any effort to find her. Irresponsible and apathetic—those were the characteristics she applied to him. But no one was all bad. There

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had to be something admirable about him or Mom wouldn't have been drawn to him in the first place.

What if he'd made a mistake with Mom and didn't want to disappoint his parents, so he'd run away rather than admit he messed up? What if, out there, she had grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins who would welcome her with open arms? What if her paternal genetic half was, for the most part, stable and loving and nurturing? Would there then be a chance that some of those genes would rise up and make themselves known if she bore Sean's child? The question tormented her well past midnight until she finally fell into a restless sleep.

In the morning, she forced herself to complete a half hour on the elliptical while Sean made use of their weight bench. They rarely talked during workouts, but the silence felt heavy and almost funereal. Relief flooded her when the timer buzzed and they could shower and dress. To expedite their leave-taking, it had become their routine for him to grab his shower in the hall bathroom—would he still do that if they had a child?—and her to use the one in the master bath.

As usual, he was out, was dressed, and had a pot of coffee ready by the time she left the shower. He handed her the “Mrs.” travel mug of the “Mr.” and “Mrs.” set they'd received from Grandma for their wedding.

She inhaled the wisp of steam rising from the little sip hole and sighed. “Mmm, smells great. Almost as good as your aftershave.”

He gave her a light nudge with his elbow, grinning. “Aw, I bet you say that to all your husbands.” He'd made the teasing comment before in response to a compliment, and she'd always laughed, but this morning the statement stung her heart.

She touched his arm. “Sean, you do know . . . I don't want any other husband but you. There are things I wish I could've learned from Grandma and Mom”—like how to be a wife and a good mother—“but they did set

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one example for me that means a lot. They didn't man hop. Grandma is still faithful to her husband even though he's been gone almost forty years. Mom never married, but she was never with anyone except my father. We DeFord women aren't perfect. Not by a long shot. But we're faithful. You can trust me on that."

He gazed at her, his brow puckered, for several silent seconds. Then he set his mug aside and cupped her face with his hands. "I do trust you, Meghan. And you can trust me. We made a commitment before God and a church full of witnesses to be faithful until death parts us. Remember what we said? In sickness and in health, in want or in plenty, for better or for worse." The corners of his lips twitched into a lopsided grin. "Whatever comes our way, you're stuck with me."

"Even if—" She gulped, worry making her mouth go dry. "Even if I don't ever want to be a mom?"

He kissed her forehead and lowered his hands. "My love won't change. Now, c'mon, we better hit the road."

She wished he sounded more convincing, but she followed him to their old Bronco without asking anything else.

The commute to the cold-case department offices in Little Rock took thirty minutes, with half that time spent getting through downtown traffic and stoplights. Sean drove in silence, which wasn't out of the ordinary. He took his position as investigator seriously, and Meghan knew without asking he was mulling over the information he'd explored on the computer yesterday evening, sorting it and searching for potential leads. The murder of the eight-year-old Dunsbrook twins, Dominic and Xavier, which had taken place in the late seventies, plagued him. Whenever there were children involved, Sean always worked extra hard to solve the case. He had a soft spot for kids.

The thought led her back to his desire to be a father. Guilt crashed over

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her, and she forced her attention to the scene outside the window. She'd grown up in the city and spent several childhood summers in Las Vegas—an even bigger city—with her grandmother, but she didn't much like big cities. Which was why she and Sean had purchased a house in tiny Carson Springs instead of keeping his house or her apartment in Little Rock. If they established a private investigation office, they could work out of their home and avoid this daily crush of traffic, noise, and busyness. She made a mental note to bring up the idea with Sean again over dinner.

He pulled into the four-level parking garage a half block from their office building. She didn't need her sunglasses in the shadowy interior, so she tucked them into her attaché case for easy access when they vacated the garage. Sean located a spot on the second level and parked. The moment she stepped from the air-conditioned cab, humidity prickled her flesh. They took the concrete steps to the street level and set off up the sidewalk at a brisk pace.

Scattered clouds hid the sun, so she left her sunglasses in her case, but the clouds did little to cool things. Summer wasn't due for another month, but here it was, not quite eight in the morning, and the thermometer on the bank building across the street showed seventy-one degrees. The air was still, and the smell of exhaust permeated the area. Meghan wrinkled her nose and couldn't hold back a soft snort.

Sean glanced at her.

She waved her arm in the direction of the street. "If we worked from home, we wouldn't have to breathe in exhaust fumes. Or make that commute." Sean's clenched jaw let her know she'd said too much. Why hadn't she stuck to her original plan to bring up the going-independent idea over dinner?

She reached for his hand. "Ignore me. I didn't sleep well last night, and I guess I'm a little grumpy."

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He offered a quick smile, squeezed her fingers, then let go. Although demonstrative at home, Sean never showed her affection on the job. He was always a gentleman, though, which he proved by opening the door for her and gesturing her into the building.

Two of their coworkers, partners Tom Farber and Greg Dane, were waiting beside the tarnished doors to the ancient elevator, coffeehouse disposable cups in their hands. Tom grimaced when Meghan and Sean reached them.

“We’ll probably have to take the stairs. I think it’s stuck again.” Tom pushed the activation button three times, grunting with each thrust of his thumb. He muttered a curse under his breath. “Worthless piece of junk.”

The four of them trudged to the enclosed staircase at the rear of the building, both Tom and Greg mumbling complaints as they went. More reasons to work from home—no faulty elevators and no dealing with coworkers’ foul language. Not that the other detectives or their supervisor swore like sailors. She’d heard worse in her college dormitory.

But Sean never swore. After working closely with him and then having the privilege of being his wife, she’d become more sensitive to cursing. Sean said it was because her spirit was growing more in tune with the Holy Spirit, and she liked that idea. She’d include not having to listen to unwholesome talk as a reason for working from home.

The other two cold-case detectives, Tyler Roach and Anthony Johnson, were already at their desks when Meghan, Sean, Tom, and Greg entered the cold-case unit’s area. So was their captain, Ken Ratzlaff, who sat on the edge of Sean’s desk. The captain glanced at what Meghan called his Dick Tracy watch and scowled.

“The elevator’s not working.” Tom yanked out his chair and slumped into the seat. “So we had to hoof it. It’s three flights, you know.”

Greg swiped his sweaty forehead. “Gotta be ninety-plus degrees in that staircase. I thought we’d croak.”

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Captain Ratzlaff released a rare chuckle. “Eagle and DeFord don’t seem winded.” To avoid confusion on the job, the team had continued to call Meghan by her maiden name, but when she and Sean went independent, she’d name their agency Eagle Investigations.

Anthony tilted his computer screen and squinted at it through his glasses with thick lenses. “Of course they’re not winded. Everyone knows the two of them are”—he made his voice high and squeaky—“‘practically perfect in every way.’” Tom and Greg groaned, and Anthony grinned. “Sorry. Watched *Mary Poppins* last night with my nine-year-old daughter.”

Meghan set her attaché case on her desk and slid into her chair. Sean sat at his desk, which butted Meghan’s so they were facing each other. He winked at her.

“Intriguing.” Captain Ratzlaff stood and folded his arms over his chest. “Well, practically perfect Eagle pair, would you follow me to my office? I want to discuss a new case with you.”

Meghan sent the man an uneasy look. “But we haven’t solved the Dunbrook case yet.”

The captain headed across the floor, poking his thumb over his shoulder. “Pass it to Farber and Dane for now. They closed their investigation yesterday, so they can pick up where you left off.”

Meghan followed Captain Ratzlaff with Sean on her heels. She didn’t look, but she suspected Tom and Greg were shooting glares after them. No one wanted to take a half-completed case. She wouldn’t blame them a bit for being disgruntled, and she couldn’t help worrying about why the captain wanted to pull her and Sean from a case they’d spent two months investigating. If Ratzlaff was unhappy with them, they’d know soon enough. The man had never been one to mince words.

Their boss snapped his office door closed and nodded toward the worn leather sofa stretched in front of a trio of tall windows overlooking the street.

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They sat, and he leaned against the edge of his Volkswagen-sized desk. The desk's metal creaked, and the sofa's leather squeaked in unison. Then the room fell silent.

Ratzlaff gripped the edge of the desk, his elbows jutting outward, and aimed a frown in their direction. "I'm not generally in the habit of letting someone else dictate who will investigate which case. But I've got what I'd call a kinda special situation, and the person who alerted us to it requested a female investigator. DeFord, that means you."

The tension in her shoulders released. She and Sean wouldn't receive a reprimand. Questions crowded her brain, but before she could ask any of them, Ratzlaff crunched his face into a rueful scowl and continued.

"Eagle, you've been pretty gung ho about finding the killer of those two little boys, so I'm gonna give you an option here. I'd like to put DeFord on the new case, but if you want to stick with the Dunsbrook murders, I'll pair her with either Farber or Dane. Then you can finish the investigation with whichever of those two are at loose ends."

Captain Ratzlaff drummed his fingertips against the desk's metal front, creating a discordant percussion solo. "What's your pleasure on this one?"

Sean leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and Meghan fully expected him to offer to step away from the Dunsbrook case. "Before I let you know, would you tell us what the new case is about?"

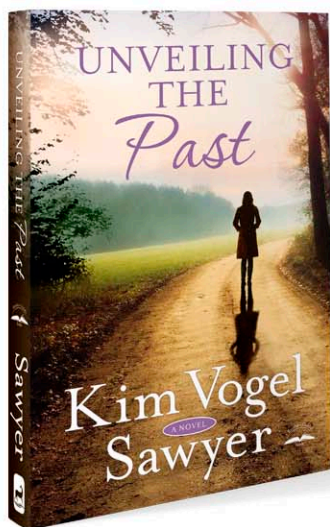
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