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Black-Eyed Susans

Written by Julia Heaberlin

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Black-Eyed Susans

Julia Heaberlin

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Prologue

Thirty-two hours of my life are missing.

My best friend, Lydia, tells me to imagine those hours like old clothes in the back of a dark closet. Shut my eyes. Open the door. Move things around. Search.

The things I do remember, I'd rather not. Four freckles. Eyes that aren't black but blue, wide open, two inches from mine. Insects gnawing into a smooth, soft cheek. The grit of the earth in my teeth. Those parts, I remember.

It's my seventeenth birthday, and the candles on my cake are burning.

The little flames are waving at me to hurry up. I'm thinking about the Black-Eyed Susans, lying in freezing metal drawers. How I scrub and scrub but can't wash away their smell no matter how many showers I take.

Be happy.

Make a wish.

I paste on a smile, and focus. Everyone in this room loves me and wants me home.

Hopeful for the same old Tessie.

Never let me remember.

I close my eyes and blow.

PART I

Tessa and Tessie

My mother she killed me,
My father he ate me,
My sister gathered together all my bones,
Tied them in a silken handkerchief,
Laid them beneath the juniper-tree,
Kywitt, kywitt, what a beautiful bird am I!

—Tessie, age 10, reading aloud to her grandfather from "The Juniper Tree," 1988

Tessa, present day

For better or worse, I am walking the crooked path to my childhood.

The house sits topsy-turvy on the crest of a hill, like a kid built it out of blocks and toilet paper rolls. The chimney tilts in a comical direction, and turrets shoot off each side like missiles about to take off. I used to sleep inside one of them on summer nights and pretend I was rocketing through space.

More than my little brother liked, I had climbed out one of the windows onto the tiled roof and inched my scrappy knees toward the widow's peak, grabbing sharp gargoyle ears and window ledges for balance. At the top, I leaned against the curlicued railing to survey the flat, endless Texas landscape and the stars of my kingdom. I played my piccolo to the night birds. The air rustled my thin white cotton nightgown like I was a strange dove alit on the top of a castle. It sounds like a fairy tale, and it was.

My grandfather made his home in this crazy storybook house in the country, but he built it for my brother, Bobby, and me. It wasn't a huge place, but I still have no idea how he could afford it. He presented each of us with a turret, a place where we could hide out from the world whenever we wanted to sneak away. It was his grand gesture, our personal Disney World, to make up for the fact that our mother had died.

Granny tried to get rid of the place shortly after Granddaddy died, but the house didn't sell till years later, when she was lying in the ground between him and their daughter. Nobody wanted it. It was weird, people said. Cursed. Their ugly words made it so.

After I was found, the house had been pasted in all the papers, all over TV. The local newspapers dubbed it Grim's Castle. I never knew if that was a typo. Texans spell things different. For instance, we don't always add the *ly*.

People whispered that my grandfather must have had something to do with my disappearance, with the murder of all the Black-Eyed Susans, because of his freaky house. *"Shades of Michael Jackson and his Neverland Ranch,"* they muttered, even after the state sent a man to Death Row a little over a year later for the crimes. These were the same people who had driven up to the front door every Christmas so their kids could gawk at the lit-up gingerbread house and grab a candy cane from the basket on the front porch.

I press the bell. It no longer plays *Ride of the Valkyries*. I don't know what to expect, so I am a little surprised when the older couple that open the door look perfectly suited to living here. The plump worn-down hausfrau with the kerchief on her head, the sharp nose, and the dust rag in her hand reminds me of the old woman in the shoe.

I stutter out my request. There's an immediate glint of recognition by the woman, a slight softening of her mouth. She locates the small crescent-moon scar under my eye. The woman's eyes say *poor little girl*, even though it's been eighteen years, and I now have a girl of my own.

"I'm Bessie Wermuth," she says. "And this is my husband, Herb. Come in, dear." Herb is scowling and leaning on his cane. Suspicious, I can tell. I don't blame him. I am a stranger, even though he knows exactly who I am. Everyone in a five-hundred-mile radius does. I am the Cartwright girl, dumped once upon a time with a strangled college student and a stack of human bones out past Highway 10, in an abandoned patch of field near the Jenkins property.

I am the star of screaming tabloid headlines and campfire ghost stories.

I am one of the four Black-Eyed Susans. The *lucky* one.

It will only take a few minutes, I promise. Mr. Wermuth frowns, but Mrs. Wermuth says, *Yes, of course.* It is clear that she makes the decisions about all of the important things, like the height of the grass and what to do with a redheaded, kissed-by-evil waif on their doorstep, asking to be let in.

"We won't be able to go down there with you," the man grumbles as he opens the door wider.

"Neither of us have been down there too much since we moved in," Mrs. Wermuth says hurriedly. "Maybe once a year. It's damp. And there's a broken step. A busted hip could do either of us in. Break one little thing at this age, and you're at the Pearly Gates in thirty days or less. If you don't want to die, don't step foot inside a hospital after you turn sixty-five."

As she makes this grim pronouncement, I am frozen in the great room, flooded with memories, searching for things no longer there. The totem pole that Bobby and I sawed and carved one summer, completely unsupervised, with only one trip to the emergency room. Granddaddy's painting of a tiny mouse riding a handkerchief sailboat in a wicked, boiling ocean.

Now a Thomas Kinkade hangs in its place. The room is home to two flowered couches and a dizzying display of knickknacks, crowded on shelves and tucked in shadow boxes. German beer steins and candlesticks, a *Little Women* doll set, crystal butterflies and frogs, at least fifty delicately etched English teacups, a porcelain clown with a single black tear rolling down. All of them, I suspect, wondering how in the hell they ended up in the same neighborhood.

The ticking is soothing. Ten antique clocks line one wall, two with twitching cat tails keeping perfect time with each other.

I can understand why Mrs. Wermuth chose our house. In her way, she is one of us.

"Here we go," she says. I follow her obediently, navigating a pas-

sageway that snakes off the living room. I used to be able to take its turns in the pitch dark on my roller skates. She is flipping light switches as we go, and I suddenly feel like I am walking to the chamber of my death.

"TV says the execution is in a couple of months." I jump. This is exactly where my mind is traveling. The scratchy male voice behind me is Mr. Wermuth's, full of cigarette smoke.

I pause, swallowing the knot in my throat as I wait for him to ask whether I plan to sit front row and watch my attacker suck in his last breath. Instead, he pats my shoulder awkwardly. "I wouldn't go. Don't give him another damn second."

I am wrong about Herb. It wouldn't be the first time I've been wrong, or the last.

My head knocks into an abrupt curve in the wall because I'm still turned toward Herb. "I'm fine," I tell Mrs. Wermuth quickly. She lifts her hand but hesitates to touch my stinging cheek, because it is just a little too close to the scar, the permanent mark from a garnet ring dangling off a skeletal finger. A gift from a Susan who didn't want me to forget her, ever. I push Mrs. Wermuth's hand away gently. "I forgot that turn was coming up so soon."

"Crazy damn house," Herb says under his breath. "What in the hell is wrong with living in St. Pete?" He doesn't seem to expect an answer. The spot on my cheek begins to complain and my scar echoes, a tiny *ping, ping, ping.*

The hallway has settled into a straight line. At the end, an ordinary door. Mrs. Wermuth pulls out a skeleton key from her apron pocket and twists it in the lock easily. There used to be twenty-five of those keys, all exactly the same, which could open any door in the place. An odd bit of practicality from my grandfather.

A chilly draft rushes at us. I smell things both dying and growing. I have my first moment of real doubt since I left home an hour ago. Mrs. Wermuth reaches up and yanks on a piece of kite string dancing above her head. The bare, dusty lightbulb flickers on.

"Take this." Mr. Wermuth prods me with the small Maglite from

his pocket. “I carry it around for reading. You know where the main light switch is?”

“Yes,” I say automatically. “Right at the bottom.”

“Watch the sixteenth step,” Mrs. Wermuth warns. “Some critter chewed a hole in it. I always count when I go down. You take as long as you like. I think I’ll make all of us a cup of tea and you can tell a bit of the history of the house after. We’d both find that fascinating. Right, Herb?” Herb grunts. He’s thinking of driving a little white ball two hundred yards into Florida’s deep blue sea.

I hesitate on the second step, and turn my head, unsure. If anyone shuts this door, I won’t be found for a hundred years. I’ve never had any doubt that death is still eager to catch up with a certain sixteen-year-old girl.

Mrs. Wermuth offers a tiny, silly wave. “I hope you find what you are looking for. It must be important.”

If this is an opening, I don’t take it.

I descend noisily, like a kid, jumping over step sixteen. At the bottom, I pull another dangling string, instantly washing the room with a harsh fluorescent glow.

It lights an empty tomb. This used to be a place where things were born, where easels stood with half-finished paintings, and strange, frightening tools hung on pegboards, where a curtained darkroom off to the side waited to bring photos to life, and dress mannequins held parties in the corners. Bobby and I would swear we had seen them move more than once.

A stack of old chests held ridiculous antique dress-up hats wrapped in tissue paper and my grandmother’s wedding dress with exactly 3,002 seed pearls and my grandfather’s World War II uniform with the brown spot on the sleeve that Bobby and I were sure was blood. My grandfather was a welder, a farmer, a historian, an artist, an Eagle Scout leader, a morgue photographer, a rifleman, a woodworker, a Republican, a yellow dog Democrat. A poet. He could never make up his mind, which is exactly what people say about me.

He ordered us never to come down here alone, and he never knew we did. But the temptation was too great. We were especially fascinated with a forbidden, dusty black album that held Granddaddy's crime scene photographs from his brief career with the county morgue. A wide-eyed housewife with her brains splattered across her linoleum kitchen floor. A drowned, naked judge pulled to shore by his dog.

I stare at the mold greedily traveling up the brick walls on every side. The black lichen flourishing in a large crack zigzagging across the filthy concrete floor.

No one has loved this place since Granddaddy died. I quickly cross over to the far corner, sliding between the wall and the coal furnace that years ago had been abandoned as a bad idea. Something travels lightly across my ankle. A scorpion, a roach. I don't flinch. Worse things have crawled across my face.

Behind the furnace, it is harder to see. I sweep the light down the wall until I find the grimy brick with the red heart, painted there to fool my brother. He had spied on me one day when I was exploring my options. I run my finger lightly around the edges of the heart three times.

Then I count ten bricks up from the red heart, and five bricks over. Too high for little Bobby to reach. I jam the screwdriver from my pocket into the crumbling mortar, and begin to pry. The first brick topples out, and clatters onto the floor. I work at three other bricks, tugging them out one at a time.

I flash the light into the hole.

Stringy cobwebs, like spin art. At the back, a gray, square lump.

Waiting, for seventeen years, in the crypt I made for it.

Tessie, 1995

"Tessie. Are you listening?"

He is asking stupid questions, like the others.

I glance up from the magazine, open in my lap, that I had conveniently found beside me on the couch. "I don't see the point."

I flip a page, just to irritate him. Of course he knows I'm not reading.

"Then why are you here?"

I let the air hang with thick silence. Silence is my only instrument of control in this parade of therapy sessions. Then I say, "You know why. I am here because my father wants me to be here." *Because I hated all the others. Because Daddy is so sad, and I can't stand it.* "My brother says I've changed." *Too much information. You'd think I'd learn.*

His chair legs squeak on the hardwood floor, as he shifts positions. Ready to pounce. "Do *you* think you've changed?"

So *obvious.* Disgusted, I flip back to the magazine. The pages are cold and slick and stiff. They smell of cloying perfume. It's the kind of magazine that I suspect is filled with bony, angry girls. I wonder: *Is that what this man sees when he stares at me?* I'd lost twenty pounds in the last year. Most of my track star muscle tone, gone. My right foot is wrapped in a new leaden cast, from the third surgery.

Bitterness rises in my lungs like hot steam. I suck in a deep breath. My goal is to feel nothing.

"OK," he says. "Dumb question." I know that he's watching me intently. "How about this one: Why did you pick me this time?"

I toss the magazine down. I try to remember that he is making an exception, probably doing the district attorney a favor. He rarely treats teen-age girls.

"You signed a legal document that said you will not prescribe drugs, that you will not ever, ever publish anything about our sessions or use me for research without my knowledge, that you will not tell a living soul you are treating the surviving Black-Eyed Susan. You told me you won't use hypnosis."

"Do you trust that I will not do any of those things?"

"No," I snap back. "But at least I'll be a millionaire if you do."

"We have fifteen minutes left," he says. "We can use the time however you like."

"Great." I pick up the magazine full of bony, angry girls.