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Gods in Alabama

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CHAPTER 1

THERE ARE GODS in Alabama: Jack Daniel's, high school quarterbacks, trucks, big tits, and also Jesus. I left one back there myself, back in Possett. I kicked it under the kudzu and left it to the roaches.

I made a deal with God two years before I left there. At the time, I thought He made out pretty well. I offered Him a three-for-one-deal: All He had to do was perform a miracle. He fulfilled His end of the bargain, so I kept my three promises faithfully, no matter what the cost. I held our deal as sacred for twelve solid years. But that was before God let Rose Mae Lolley show up on my doorstep, dragging my ghosts and her own considerable baggage with her.

It was the week before summer vacation began, and my uncle Bruster was getting ready to retire. He'd been schlepping the mail up and down Route 19 for thirty years and now, finally, he was going to get a gold watch, a shitty pension, and the federal government's official permission to die. His retirement party was

looming, and my aunt Florence was using it as the catalyst for her latest campaign to get me home. She launched these crusades three or four times a year, usually prompted by major holidays or family events.

I had already explained multiple times to Mama that I wasn't coming. I shouldn't have had to explain it at all. I had not gone back to Possett since I graduated from high school in '87. I had stayed in Chicago for nine Christmas vacations, had not come home for nine spring breaks, had faithfully signed up to take or teach classes every summer quarter for ten years. I had avoided weekend fly-downs for the births, graduation ceremonies, and weddings of various cousins and second cousins. I had even claimed exemption from attending the funerals of my asshole grampa and his wife, Saint Granny.

At this point, I figured I had firmly established that I would not be coming home, even if all of Chicago was scheduled to be consumed by the holy flames of a vengeful Old Testament–style Lord. "Thanks for the invite, Mama," I would say, "but I have plans to be burned up in a fire that weekend." Mama, however, could wipe a conversation out of her mind an infinite number of times and come back to the topic fresh as a daisy the next time we spoke.

Burr had his feet propped up on my battered coffee table and was reading a legal thriller he had picked up at the grocery store. In between an early movie and a late supper, we had dropped by my place to intercept Florence's eight o'clock call. Missing it was not an option. I called Aunt Florence every Sunday after church, and every Wednesday night, Flo parked my mother by the phone and dialed my number. I wouldn't put it past Florence to hire a

team of redneck ninjas to fly up to Chicago and take me down if she ever got my answering machine.

Florence had not yet mentioned my uncle's retirement to me directly, although she had prepped Mama to ask me if I was coming home for it through six weeks' worth of calls now. With only ten days left before the party, it was time for Aunt Florence to personally enter the fray. Mama was so malleable she was practically an invertebrate, but Florence had giant man hands on the ends of her bony wrists, and she could squeeze me with them till I couldn't get any breath to say no. Even over the phone she could do it.

Burr watched me over the top of his book as I paced the room. I was too nervous about my upcoming martyrdom on the stainless-steel cross of Florence to sit down with him. He was sunk hip deep into my sofa. My apartment was decorated in garage-sale chic, the default decorating choice for every graduate student. The sofa had curlicues of moss-colored velvet running all over its sage-green hide, and it was so deflated and aslant that Burr swore he only ever kissed me the first time because of it. We sat down on it at the same time, and it sucked us down and pressed us up against each other in its sagging middle. He had to kiss me, he claimed, to be polite.

"About how long do you think this is going to take?" Burr asked now. "I'm starving."

I shrugged. "Just the usual Wednesday-night conversation with Mama."

"Okay," said Burr.

"And then I have to have a fight with Aunt Florence about whether or not I'm going down for Uncle Bruster's party."

"In that case," said Burr, and he levered himself out of the

depths of the sofa and walked the five steps to my kitchenette. He opened the cabinet and started rummaging around for something to tide himself over.

"It's not going to take that long," I said.

"Sure, baby," he said, and took a pack of peanut-butter crackers back over to the sofa. He sat down with his book but didn't open it for a moment. "Try to keep it under four hours," he said. "I need to talk to you about something at dinner."

I stopped pacing around. "Is it bad?" I asked, nervous because he'd said it in such a serious tone of voice. He could mean he wanted to break up again or he could mean he was going to propose to me. We'd broken up last year over Christmas and both hated it so much that we'd found ourselves drifting back together casually, without even really talking about it. We'd been coasting along easy for a few months now, but Burr would not coast forever. We had to be going somewhere, and if he thought we weren't, then that would be it for him.

I said, "You know I hate that. You have to give me a hint."

Burr grinned at me, and his brown eyes were warm. "Don't panic."

"Okay," I said. I felt something flutter down low in my stomach, excitement or fear, I wasn't sure which, and then the phone rang.

"Dammit," I said. The phone was on a crate full of books at the other end of the ugly sofa. I sat down next to Burr and picked it up. "Hello?"

"Arlene, honey! You remember Clarice?"

Clarice was my first cousin, and we were raised in the same house, practically as sisters. Mama was possibly the only person on earth who could have asked this question sans sarcasm to a

daughter who had not been home in almost a decade. Aunt Florence would have gotten a lot of miles out of it, and in fact I couldn't help but wonder if Aunt Florence hadn't somehow planted the question in the fertile minefields of my mother's mind.

It was not unlike the Christmas card Mama had sent me for the last five years. It had a red phone on it, and it said, in bright red curling text, "Daughter! Do you remember that man I introduced you to the day you were born? Why don't you give him a call? I know he never hears from you, and today's his birthday." Open it up and there, in giant candy-striped letters, was a one-word explanation for the terminally stupid: "Jesus," it said. Three exclamation points.

Mama got those abominations from the Baptist Women's League for Plaguing Your Own Children to Death in the Name of the Lord or whatever her service club was called. My aunt Florence was, of course, the president. And my aunt Florence, of course, bought Mama's cards for her, held them out for her to sign, licked the envelopes, got stamps from Uncle Bruster, and mailed them for her. In Florence's eyes, I was on the high road to apostasy because my church was American Baptist, not Southern Baptist.

But all I said was "Obviously I know Clarice, Mama."

"Well, Clarice wants to know if you can drive over to the home and pick up your great-great-aunt Mag on Friday next. Mag needs someone to carry her over to the Quincy's for your uncle Bruster's party."

I said, "Are you seriously telling me that Clarice wants to know if I'll drive fourteen hours down from Chicago, and then go another hour to Vinegar Park, where by the way Clarice lives, and

pick up Aunt Mag, who will no doubt piss in my rental car, and then backtrack forty-five minutes to Quincy's?"

"Yes, but please don't say 'piss,' it isn't nice," my mother said, deadly earnest. "Also, Clarice and Bud moved on in to Fruiton. So it's a good forty minutes for her to go get Mag now."

"Oh, well then. Why don't you tell Aunt Florence—I mean Clarice—that I will be sure to go pick up Mag. Right after Aunt Flo drops by hell and picks up the devil."

Burr was jammed deep into the sofa with his book open, but his eyes had stopped moving over the text. He was too busy trying to laugh silently without choking to death on his peanut-butter cracker.

"Arlene, I am not repeating blasphemy," said my mother mildly. "Florence can ask Fat Agnes to get Mag, and you can drive me."

Oh, Aunt Florence was crafty. Asking my mother to have this conversation with me was tantamount to taping a hair-trigger pistol to a kitten's paw. The kitten, quite naturally, shakes its fluffy leg, and bullets go flying everywhere; a few are bound to hit something. I was, after all, talking with my mama about whether or not I would pick up Mag, not whether or not I was coming. A cheap trap worthy of Burr's legal thriller, and I had bounced right into it.

"I can't drive you, Mama," I said gently. Why shoot the messenger? "I won't be there."

"Oh, Arleney," my mother said, sounding vaguely sad. "Aren't you ever coming home for a visit?"

"Not this time, Mama," I said.

Mama made a pensive little noise and then said, in a cheerier voice, "Oh well, I will just look double forward to Christmas,

then!" That I hadn't been home for the last nine Christmases was not a factor in Mama's fogbound equations. Before I could even try a quick "Love you, bye" and escape, I heard Aunt Florence's voice barking in the background, and then Mama said, "Here's Aunt Flo's turn!"

I heard the rustle of the phone changing hands, and then Aunt Florence's muffled voice asking Mama to please go check the Bundt cake. There was a brief pause where my mother presumably wafted out of the room, and then Aunt Florence took her hand off the mouthpiece and said in a disarmingly affectionate tone, "Hello, serpent."

"Hi, Aunt Florence," I said.

"Do you know why I am calling you 'serpent,' serpent?"

"I couldn't begin to guess, Aunt Florence," I said.

"I am referencing a Bible verse. Do they have the Bible at that American Baptist church?"

"I believe I may have seen one there once," I said. "No doubt it fled the moment it realized where it was. As I recall, it had a lot of serpents in it, and I am sure I could justly be called many of them."

Burr was still amused. I busted him looking at me, and I gestured at his book. He stifled his grin and turned his eyes virtuously back to the pages.

Aunt Florence, adopting a low and holy voice, intoned, "How like a serpent you have nestled to your bosom is a thankless child."

"That's not the Bible, Aunt Florence. You're misquoting *King Lear*."

"Do you realize that the women in our service group at church all sit around nattering like biddy hens about what horrors your

poor mama—and me—must have inflicted on your head to make her only girl-child flee the state, never to return? Do you realize the vicious things those biddies say about your poor, poor mama? And me?"

"No, Aunt Florence, I didn't realize," I said, but Aunt Florence wasn't listening. She barked on and on into my ear, etc. etc. you-a culpa with breast beating and a side of guilt. Who did I think had put bread in my mouth? Uncle Bruster and his mail route. And now all he wanted was for his family to gather and eat buffet dinner at the Quincy's in his honor. I countered by asking Florence to please pass Bruster the phone so I could tell him how proud of him I was right this second.

Florence wasn't about to give up the phone, not even to her husband. She shifted gears abruptly, dropping her voice to a reverent whisper as she segued into the "Your mama will probably be dead by next year" theme, asking sorrowfully how I would feel if I missed this last chance to see her. I pointed out that she'd used that argument for nine years running and Mama hadn't died yet.

Burr set his book down and reached across me to grab the pad and pencil I kept on the crate by the phone. He scrawled something down on the top page and then tore it off and passed it to me. The note said "Say yes to the trip and let's go eat."

I crumpled it up and bounced it off his chest, sticking my tongue out at him.

"You don't know how bad off she is, Arlene," Florence said. "She's failing bad. She looks like the walking dead. She's been to the hospital to stay twice this year."

"The real hospital?" I said. "Or the place in Deer Park?"

"It's a real hospital," said Florence defensively.

"Real hospitals don't have padded walls in the card room," I

countered. Burr uncrumpled the piece of paper and held it up like a sign, pointing to the words one at a time, in order. I shook my head at him and then dropped my head forward to hide behind my long dark hair. "It isn't just that I am not coming. I can't come. I don't have the money to make the trip down right this second."

I peeked up at Burr. He narrowed his eyes at me and touched two fingers to his chin. This was code, lifted from his mock-trial days back in law school. It meant "I am in possession of two contradictory facts." I knew what he was referencing. Fact one: Burr knew that as of last week I had almost three thousand in savings. Fact two: Burr knew I didn't tell lies. Ever. I pointed at him, then touched my chin with one finger, signaling that there was no paradox; one of his facts was off.

Aunt Florence talked about wire transfers and loans and me getting off my butt and taking a part-time job while Burr thought it through. After a moment a light dawned, and he got up and walked towards my front door, looking at me with his eyebrows raised. I braced the phone against my shoulder and clutched my arms around my middle, pantomiming that I was freezing. I realized there was silence on the other end of the line, and I hurried to fill it.

"Aunt Florence, you know I won't take your money—"

"Oh no, just the food off my table and a bed in my house your whole childhood."

Burr reversed direction and went to my kitchenette. I pretended I was even colder, wrapping an imaginary blanket around myself.

"The school pays me a stipend and a housing allowance, plus my tuition," I said into the phone. "It's not like I'm on welfare."

Burr walked the four steps past my kitchenette, back to the doorway into the walk-in closet my Yankee landlord called a bedroom. I mopped imaginary sweat from my brow and threw the invisible blanket off, then fanned myself. He disappeared through the doorway, and I could hear him rummaging around, feet padding on the scuffed hardwood as he searched.

"No," I said into the phone, "I don't think this rates a special collection at church."

But maybe it did. Florence was getting to me a little. She always could. I thought of my uncle Bruster, with his wispy blond tufts combed over his bald spot, his big belly, his broad sloping shoulders. Bruster looked like what would happen if the bear got over on the mountain and they had a baby. He had the Lukey blue eyes, large and powder blue and a little moist-looking, and when I was eleven, he had been my date to the Possett First Baptist Father-Daughter Pancake Brunch. Clarice had been on his other arm, but he had pulled out my chair for me and called me Little Lady all morning.

I heard my closet door squeak open, and then a pause that Florence filled with alternating sentiment and invective. The closet door shut, and Burr came back in the room toting the Computer City bag with my new laptop in it. He pantomimed a whistle, looking impressed, but I didn't believe it. Something else was going on in his head as he stared down at the laptop in its bag. I couldn't tell what he was thinking.

Burr was a good lawyer and an even better poker player. He and I used to play a card game we made up called Five-Card Minor Sexual Favor Stud, but I quit for two reasons. One, it led us too far down a path that could only end in frustration and a whomping great fight. And two, he almost always won.

Burr sat back down and put the bag on the coffee table. He picked up his book again, but he wasn't reading, and he wouldn't meet my eyes.

Eventually, against all odds, Aunt Florence got to the part where she told me she would be praying to God, asking Him to help me not be such a selfish little turd. Then she let me get off the phone. I gave her a vague promise about taking a hard look at my summer course schedule and seeing if I could squeeze in a trip home sometime before fall. Aunt Florence's final skeptical snort was still ringing in my ears as I hung up.

"That's a speedy machine," Burr said casually, indicating the bag. "You really are broke."

"Yup," I said. I had cleaned myself out to buy it. In fact, I bought it to clean myself out.

"Lucky I'm not," said Burr.

"Very lucky, since you're taking me to dinner," I said. I got up, but Burr stayed wedged down in the sofa.

"That's not what I meant," he said. "Lena, remember I said I wanted to talk to you about something at dinner?"

"Yes?" I said, and all at once the flutter was back. I was standing up, already looking down at him. I was wondering if there was room between the sofa and the coffee table for him to slide down onto one knee, or if I should move out from behind the coffee table to give him space.

"I think I better ask you now," he said, and his dark eyes were very serious. Burr had nice eyes, but they were small and square. I never noticed how sweet they were until I got close enough to kiss him. His face wasn't about his eyes. It was about his cheekbones and his sharply narrow jaw, severe enough to contrast with

his wide, soft mouth, with the gorgeous teeth his mama paid eight thousand dollars to straighten. "I'm a little nervous."

"You don't have to be nervous," I said, but I was nervous as all hell.

"Take your aunt Florence out of the equation, and your mama. Take everything out of the equation but you and me. If I said it was important to me, would you take the trip down to Alabama for this party next week?" Burr asked.

I sat down again abruptly. "What?" I said.

"I can pay for the trip."

"I can't let you pay for me to go down and see my family," I said.

"I wouldn't be," he said. "I would be paying for both of us to make the trip."

"I can't let you do that, either," I said.

"Can't or won't?" he said. He was smiling, but I could read him now, and underneath the smile he was angry.

"Won't," I agreed. There is a big, fat downside to never telling a lie.

"Don't worry," Burr said, gesturing at the laptop, still smiling his beautiful, angry smile. "Computer City has a ten-day no-questions return policy." He stood up and stalked around the coffee table away from me. "Because obviously you have no intention of keeping this thing."

"No, of course not," I agreed. And immediately the words "There are gods in Alabama" rolled through my head so powerfully that I thought I was going to say them aloud, but Burr stopped them by speaking again.

"Lena, if you won't take me down and introduce me to your family, we're coming to a dead end."

"But I love you," I said. It came out flat and wrong, though I was remembering how it was with us when we made out on the sofa in the late nights when Burr came over after I'd studied myself sick. I was thinking of how we were together when his huge hands were on me, and we both knew the rules.

His hands were so big, Burr could practically span my waist with them. And he had a jet-rocket metabolism, so his skin was always liquid hot to the touch. His big hands would slide over my body, slipping up or down into forbidden zones. As he touched me, I could see in my mind the flex of the muscles, how the dim light would reflect on the shifting planes of his hands as they moved on me. And I could take my hand and push that big hand away, down off my breasts, onto my waist. Guide it so slowly out from between my legs onto my thigh. His hands always went where mine told them to go, immediately, no matter what. The power of that, the ability or maybe the permission to move something so much stronger than me, left me light-headed and feeling something I couldn't name, but it was close kin to longing. Eventually I would have to shove him away, push him out the door with hasty little kisses, both of us dying of wanting to and not, both of us laughing.

Burr said, "You say that a lot." He was standing by the front door, looking at a point somewhere just over my left shoulder. He sometimes did that when he was ticked off, carry on a fight while peering moodily off at the horizon, as brooding and ugly-beautiful as Heathcliff thinking, "Oh! The moors! The moors!"

I said, "If I didn't love you, I wouldn't say it at all. You know I don't lie."

"There are a lot of things you say you don't do, Lena," he answered. "You don't lie, and you don't fuck, and you don't take

your boyfriend home to meet your family. You say you love me, but you have a hundred ways to avoid the truth without ever lying." He pointed at the laptop on the table. "Case in point. Today you tell your aunt that you're broke, and tomorrow you return that and get your money back. And that's what you call telling the truth."

"No, it's what I call not lying. There is a difference, you know. I am not under any obligation to tell anyone everything. I just don't lie, which is more than ninety percent of the freakin' world can say, and anyway, why are we having this fight? Why did you this minute decide I need to take you to my uncle's retirement party? That's not what I thought you were going to ask me."

Burr said, "Maybe it's not what I planned to ask you, either. But Lena, I watched you work your aunt over, and I found myself wondering—not for the first time—how often you work me, to keep me out of the middle of your life."

"First of all, Possett, Alabama, is not the middle of my life. It is not my home. It's the fourth rack of hell. I don't go there myself, let alone want to take you—"

"Look at your phone bill," Burr said.

"And second of all," I went on as if he had not spoken, "I don't see the connection between not having sex with you and taking you to Alabama."

"It's what women do when they fall in love with a man," Burr said. "They have sex with him, or they take him home to meet their family. In point of fact, Lena, most women do both."

"But my family is insane," I said in what I hoped was a reasonable tone. "Why would you want to meet them?"

"Because they're yours," he said matter-of-factly, one hand reaching for the doorknob. "I thought you were mine."

I was instantly furious. It was too good a line, a movie line. People don't get to say smashing things and then walk out in real life. Burr could say crap like that more often than most because of his low-slung basso profundo voice. He could say hyper-dramatic lines that, if I said them, would have whole crowds rolling on the floor, shrieking with laughter and telling me to get over myself. But Burr? He could say "Luke, I am your father," and get away with it.

But not with me.

"Don't you dare try to Rhett Butler your way out the door in the middle of a fight," I said, getting up and coming around the coffee table after him.

He let go of the doorknob and said, "You've never so much as mentioned my name to your folks, but you spend half your free time at my mama's house. You won't be my lover, but you can't keep your hands off me until I'm clinically insane. I'm a twenty-nine-year-old man, Lena. Not some fifteen-year-old kid who says he loves you in the hopes of seeing his first tit."

I said, "It isn't that I don't love you. But I swear before God, you don't want to make this trip. It would be like stepping into a soap opera, except no one is beautiful or rich or interesting. If we went down there, you have to know what it would be like. I mean, come on, Burr, what do you see when you look at us?"

Burr said, "I always saw the best couple going. The question is, what do you see?"

"Same thing," I said. "But that is not what they are going to see down in Possett, Alabama. They'll look at me and see that weird Arlene Fleet who was never any better than she should be, and when they look at you, they'll see that nigger she's fucking."

Burr smiled a little and said, "But I'm not fucking you."

"Well, we could maybe get you a T-shirt that says you aren't, but they wouldn't believe it, because why else would I be with you? It can't be that you're smart, or handsome, or interesting, or successful, because you can't be any of those things when you're in Possett, Alabama. You will be much too busy being black. When you're with my family, being black is such a big job, it takes up your entire definition. You don't get to be anything else.

"If I show up home, wanting to bring my black boyfriend to my uncle Bruster's good-ol'-boy retirement party, they're going to take that as personal. Like I got a black boyfriend specifically to use as spit for their soup.

"And maybe then you'll get it in your thick man head that I picked you because you're black and that's a button I can push. I mean, a girl doesn't go home for ten years, you have to guess she has some issues with her family. But that's not why at all. I picked you because you're you, and you're perfect for me, and because I'm so in love with you."

Burr said, "I love you, too, Lena. But I'm done being played."

I said, "What does that mean? You're giving me an ultimatum? 'Fuck me or lose me'? Because that sucks, Burr."

"Don't misunderstand me," he said, his voice rising. "Don't make this about me trying to get over on you. I've never pressured you that way. And yeah, obviously I want to have sex with you, but that's not what I'm saying here. I'm asking you to introduce me to your family. That's all. I'm asking for a commitment, Lena. We've been together two years now."

"On and off," I said.

"Mostly on."

He reached for the doorknob again, and I said, "Don't you dare walk out on me in the middle of a fight." I was so angry, I

was practically screaming. "I mean it, don't you do it." He paused for a second, but then he flipped the dead bolt.

The door seemed to catch in the frame, so he gave it an angry shove. It swung open, knocking back a girl who was standing on the other side. She was so close she must have had her ear pressed up against the wood, and the force of Burr's exit spilled her all the way backwards onto her bottom.

"What the—" said Burr, and he stepped over the threshold towards her, already reaching down to help her up. She went scuttling backwards like a panicked crab. He stopped moving, and she bounced back to her feet, scrabbling frantically in her huge macramé purse. She was dressed like one of my students, in tight jeans and a peasant blouse, but I didn't recognize her. Her hand came out of her purse and up, holding a tiny spray can aimed at Burr's face.

"I heard you yelling," she said to me. She was breathing hard, but once on her feet, she seemed more exhilarated than frightened, taking a theatrical *Charlie's Angels* pose with the spray can.

"Whoa," Burr said. He put his hands up. "Calm down."

She didn't take her eyes off him, but she was talking to me. "You go for the soft parts," she said. "And then we run while he's down."

I realized I had put my hands up, too, instinctively. I dropped them and walked over beside Burr. "Are you all right?" I said to her. "It was an accident. We didn't know you were there. What on earth were you doing?"

"Lena, is this one of your students?" said Burr. He angled himself, trying to stay between me and the Mace, which was easy since she had it pointed aggressively at his face. She had her legs

apart in a fighter's stance, and both her arms were fully extended, aiming the can like a gun.

"I don't think she's after me, Burr," I said, and because I was so angry, I couldn't help but be amused, watching this tiny girl hold him at bay. "Her problem's with you, looks like."

"I was just leaving," said Burr.

"Bet your ass you are," the girl said.

"He was only trying to help you up," I said to her, but she ignored me and kept the can trained on Burr.

Burr dropped his hands slowly and walked past her, and she turned in a circle, keeping him covered.

"We're not done with this conversation," I called after him.

"I am," he said and went on down the stairs.

I started after him, but the girl turned sideways and then stepped to block me. She whipped her head back and forth, trying to keep an eye on both of us.

"Excuse me," I said, but she ignored me. Burr turned the corner, and the moment he was out of sight, she faced me and dropped her arms, grinning triumphantly. "They're almost all sonsabitches."

At second glance, she was too old to be one of my students. I put her at about thirty. She was my size or maybe even a little shorter. I doubted she could claim five-one in bare feet. Her thick dark hair was cut in an aggressive bob, shorter in the back and angling down into two razor-sharp points on either side of her fiercely pretty face.

"We were only arguing," I said. "Excuse me, I need to catch him." I started after Burr, but she moved into my path, blocking me again. She still clutched the spray can.

She said, "If I had a dime for every time I said those words!"

"Put the Mace away," I said.

"Oh, right." She dropped it into her bag. "What timing, huh? I heard you yelling in there, and I was about to bust this door down and come in after you."

She said the word "you" as if it had a W on the end. It was pure Alabama. I forgot about going after Burr and stared at her, taking in her pointy face and the huge violet-blue eyes gazing out from between the sharp wings of her hair.

"Rose?" I said, but it simply couldn't be. The last time I'd seen Rose Mae Lolley, she'd had waist-length hair and had moved with the slow grace of an underwater ballerina on opium. The Rose Mae I knew and loathed years ago, back in Alabama, would never go leaping around wielding Mace in a Yankee stairwell. And she certainly wouldn't lower herself to speak to me.

But she was nodding and saying, "Can you believe it? I look different, huh? You don't. Not much, anyway. I mean, older, sure. But I knew in a glance I'd found Arlene Fleet. May I come in?"

"I don't think so," I said. I thought for one absurd moment that she had to be here on a mission from Aunt Flo, a tactical maneuver in the perpetual war to bring me home. Before I could stop myself, I found myself asking, "Who sent you? Was it Florence?"

Rose looked puzzled and said, "Florence? Oh! Mrs. Lukey? Clarice's mom? Lord, no, I haven't seen her in a dog's age. How is she doing?"

I boggled at her. "This isn't some sort of old-home week, Rose. I haven't seen you in ten years. I didn't even know if you were alive or dead, and quite frankly, I didn't much care. And now you are standing out in my stairwell, apparently eavesdropping on me and my boyfriend? It's none of your business how my family is. If

Aunt Florence didn't send you as some form of torture, then how the hell did you even find me? What are you doing here? What do you want from me?"

She briefly looked nonplussed, but then she plastered a smile on her face and said, "Okay, Arlene. I guess you never were one for social graces. That's fine. It's kind of a long story, but if you want the short, standing-in-a-stairwell version, I can do that. I got in a fight with my therapist, and now I'm on a spiritual journey. Congratulations, you're my next stop."

I looked at her skeptically. "Is this about the retirement party?"

"No, I don't even know what that means. Surprisingly, everything in the world isn't all about you, Arlene. This is about me. I told you, I am trying to follow a path I've devised for my own spiritual development—"

I held up my hand to stop her talking and said, "If this is some sort of twelve-step thing, making amends or whatever, fine. I forgive you. Now I need to go catch Burr."

"Forgive me for what?" said Rose. We did a little three-step dance in the hallway as I tried to get around her, and she bounced back and forth from foot to foot, hair swinging, to stop me. "Wait, Arlene, one minute. I'm sorry I sounded snippy. I really do need your help. I'm only doing what you're trying to do. Going after the one that got away."

I stopped trying to get around her and eyed her warily. You can take the girl out of Alabama, but how do you stop Alabama from following you over a thousand miles to lay siege to your doorstep? I felt the beginnings of an old anger stirring; God was not supposed to let this happen. It was an unspoken part of the deal. I took a step back towards my open apartment door. "Whatever this is, it can't have anything to do with me," I said.

"But it does, indirectly. See, my therapist said I get crappy men because I go looking for them, not because men are mostly crappy." I took another step back, and she started talking faster, trying to make me hear her out. "She thinks I choose assholes because that's what I think I deserve, blah blah, masochism, blah blah, low self-esteem. You know how shrinks talk."

"No," I said pointedly. "I don't."

Rose looked skeptical. "With your mother? Come on. Anyway, she's wrong. I've been thinking through my romantic history, looking for a guy I picked who wasn't an asshole. If I can find just one, then my shrink is wrong and it isn't me, it's the men. And there is one, I know it. I remember. But I need you to help me find him."

"Find him?" I said. While she was talking, I continued to edge backwards. Rose followed me, step for step but with a longer stride, so she was now much too close to me. I could smell fruit gum on her breath, and her eyes held the fervid light of a convert.

"Yes. I have to find Jim Beverly," she said.

The last syllable had not cleared her lips before I was leaping wildly into my apartment. I slammed the door in her face and then shot the bolt and put the chain on. I couldn't breathe. I had not heard his name spoken aloud in ten years.

Outside, Rose Mae Lolley gave my door three sharp raps. "Arlene?" she called.

I bolted across the room to the boom box that was sitting by the sofa. I dug around in the box of jumbled CDs next to it, looking for something, anything, loud. I came up with the Clash. I had not noticed until I tried to get the CD out of the jewel box and load it into the player how violently my hands were shaking.

All of me was shaking. My teeth were banging together as if I were freezing.

"Arlene? This is ridiculous. I need maybe five minutes of your time," Rose Mae Lolley called, kicking my door once for emphasis. At last I got the CD tray to slide home. I pumped the volume up to about six.

Rose gave the door a good pounding I could hear over "London Calling," so I upped the dial to eight, neighbors be damned. Then I sat on the floor with my arms at my sides, pressing my palms down against the cool hardwood while the first song played out. I wanted to go and look through the peephole, but I was afraid I would see her giant lavender eyeball peering in at me.

I cast about for something to distract myself. I had a stack of freshman world literature papers I needed to grade, but I wasn't in any shape to face the grammar. I also had three books I was reading in tandem, research for my dissertation, but my heart was pounding and I doubted I could concentrate. I felt like going to bed, or maybe crawling under it and never coming back out.

I noticed Burr had left his book behind, facedown on the arm of the sofa. The old cushion had a sinkhole in it where Burr had been. I wedged myself into his warmth and read, forcing myself to concentrate on the words, and not on whatever Alabama drama might be playing itself out in my hallway, or Aunt Florence's demands, or the fact that my boyfriend had just walked out on me, maybe for good this time.

It might have been easier if Burr had left a better book. He liked courtroom dramas, and he was the fastest reader I had ever seen. He ate text like pudding, no chewing, but he still managed to digest it. And these lawyer thrillers, he devoured two or three a weekend. In real life he was a tax attorney who wouldn't touch

criminal law, but he loved the books. They ran the gamut from literature to penny dreadfuls. Burr didn't care about the quality. He ate them in bulk. If it had a lawyer protagonist, plot twists, and someone with big tits in jeopardy, he was all for it.

This was one of the bad ones. The prologue alone had a body count of seven. The bad guy had killed five of them. Because he was bad, his reaction was to laugh gleefully and dance in the mayhem. The young DA, backed into a corner and in the wrong place at the wrong time, whacked two people. Self-defense, of course. Because he was good, his reaction was to vomit and think deep thoughts along the lines of "Oh the humanity." Complete crap.

I've personally committed only one murder, but the truth is, it's not that simple. You can't tell whether you're the good guy or the bad guy based on whether you laugh or throw up. The truth is, I did both.

I read for as long as I could stand it before I reached down beside me and hit the pause button on the boom box. My ears rang in the sudden silence. I did not hear anything from the hallway. I threw Burr's book across the room. It smacked into the front door and bounced off to the floor. No reaction. Rose Mae Lolley was gone, for the moment.

I was still shaking. I wanted to pray, but I was too angry with God to concentrate. Ten years, ten years I had been faithful, and now God was breaking the deal.

Before I left Possett, I had promised God I would stop fucking every boy who crossed my path. (Although when actively involved in prayer I used the word "fornicating," as if this would spare God's delicate ears.) Now I was losing Burr over it. The

truth was, I had worried that I was losing him for months, but still I had stayed faithful.

I had promised God I would never tell another lie, and I hadn't. Even when lying would make everything easy with Aunt Florence and my family, I had never let a word of untruth cross my lips.

Lastly, I had promised that if He would get me out safe, I would never go back to Possett, Alabama. Not for anything. I wouldn't even look back, lest I turn to salt.

And now God had allowed Possett, Alabama, to show up on my doorstep.

As far as I was concerned, all bets were off.