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Written by Diane Chamberlain

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*Diane
Chamberlain*

Necessary Lies

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*For the women and men
who had no choice*

Necessary Lies

JUNE 22, 2011

1

Brenna

It was an odd request—visit a stranger’s house and peer inside a closet—and as I drove through the neighborhood searching for the address, I felt my anxiety mounting.

There it was: number 247. I hadn’t expected the house to be so large. It stood apart from its neighbors on the gently winding road, flanked on either side by huge magnolia trees, tall oaks, and crape myrtle. It was painted a soft buttery yellow with white trim, and everything about it looked crisp and clean in the early morning sun. Every house I’d passed, although different in architecture, had the same stately yet inviting look. I didn’t know Raleigh well at all, but this had to be one of the most beautiful old neighborhoods in the city.

I parked close to the curb and headed up the walk. Potted plants lined either side of the broad steps that led up to the wraparound porch. I glanced at my watch. I had an hour before I needed to be back at the hotel. No rush, though my nerves were really acting up. There was so much I hoped would go well today, and so much of it was out of my control.

I rang the bell and heard it chime inside the house. I could see someone pass behind the sidelight and then the door opened. The woman—forty, maybe? At least ten years younger than me—smiled, although that didn’t mask her harried expression. I felt bad for bothering her this early. She wore white shorts, a pink striped T-shirt, and

tennis shoes, and sported a glowing tan. She was the petite, toned, and well-put-together sort of woman that always made me feel sloppy, even though I knew I looked fine in my black pants and blue blouse.

"Brenna?" She ran her fingers through her short-short, spiky blond hair.

"Yes," I said. "And you must be Jennifer."

Jennifer peered behind me. "She's not with you?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I thought she'd come, but at the last minute she said she just couldn't."

Jennifer nodded. "Today must be really hard for her." She took a step back from the doorway. "Come on in," she said. "My kids are done with school for the summer, but they have swim-team practice this morning, so we're in luck. We have the house to ourselves. The kids are always too full of questions."

"Thanks." I walked past her into the foyer. I was glad no one else was home. I wished I had the house totally to myself, to be honest. I would have loved to explore it. But that wasn't why I was here.

"Can I get you anything?" Jennifer asked. "Coffee?"

"No, I'm good, thanks."

"Well, come on then. I'll show you."

She led me to the broad, winding staircase and we climbed it without speaking, my shoes on the shiny dark hardwood treads making the only sound.

"How long have you been in the house?" I asked when we reached the second story.

"Five years," she said. "We redid everything. I mean, we painted every single room and every inch of molding. And every closet, too, except for that one."

"Why didn't you paint that one?" I asked as I followed her down a short hallway.

"The woman we bought the house from specifically told us not to. She said that the couple *she'd* bought the house from had also told her not to, but nobody seemed to understand why not. The woman we bought it from showed us the writing. My husband thought we should just paint over it—I think he was spooked by it—but I talked him out of it. It's a *closet*. What would it hurt to leave it unpainted?" We'd

reached the closed door at the end of the hall. “I had no idea what it meant until I spoke to you on the phone.” She pushed open the door. “It’s my daughter’s room now,” she said, “so excuse the mess.”

It wasn’t what I’d call messy at all. My twin daughters’ rooms had been far worse. “How old’s your daughter?” I asked.

“Ten. Thus the Justin Bieber obsession.” She swept her arm through the air to take in the lavender room and its nearly wall-to-wall posters.

“It only gets worse.” I smiled. “I barely survived my girls’ teen years.” I thought of my family—my husband and my daughters and their babies—up in Maryland and suddenly missed them. I hoped I’d be home by the weekend, when all of this would be over.

Jennifer opened the closet door. It was a small closet, the type you’d find in these older homes, and it was crammed with clothes on hangers and shoes helter-skelter on the floor. I felt a chill, as though a ghost had slipped past me into the room. I hugged my arms as Jennifer pulled a cord to turn on the light. She pressed the clothes to one side of the closet.

“There,” she said, pointing to the left wall at about the level of my knees. “Maybe we need a flashlight?” she asked. “Or I can just take a bunch of these clothes out. I should have done that before you got here.” She lifted an armload of the clothes and struggled to disengage the hangers before carrying them from the closet. Without the clothing, the closet filled with light and I squatted inside the tight space, pushing pink sneakers and a pair of sandals out of my way.

I ran my fingers over the words carved into the wall. Ancient paint snagged my fingertips where it had chipped away around the letters. “*Ivy and Mary was here.*” All at once, I felt overwhelmed by the fear they must have felt back then, and by their courage. When I stood up, I was brushing tears from my eyes.

Jennifer touched my arm. “You okay?” she asked.

“Fine,” I said. “I’m grateful to you for not covering that over. It makes it real to me.”

“If we ever move out of this house, we’ll tell the new owners to leave it alone, too. It’s a little bit of history, isn’t it?”

I nodded. I remembered my phone in my purse. “May I take a picture of it?”

“Of course!” Jennifer said, then added with a laugh, “Just don’t get my daughter’s messy closet in it.”

I pulled out my phone and knelt down near the writing on the wall. I snapped the picture and felt the presence of a ghost again, but this time it wrapped around me like an embrace.

1960

2

Ivy

I swept the ground by the tobacco barn, hoping for a chance to talk to Henry Allen. He was on the other side of the field, though, working with the mules, and it didn't look like he'd be done soon. No point in me staying any longer. All the day labor was gone already and if Mr. Gardiner spotted me he'd wonder why I was still here. Mary Ella was gone, too, of course. I didn't want to know which of the boys—or men—she went off with. Most likely she was someplace in the woods. Down by the crick, maybe, where the trees and that tangle of honeysuckle made a private place where you could do anything. I knew that place so well. Maybe Mary Ella knew it, too. Henry Allen told me “just don't think about it,” so I tried to put it out of my head. My sister was going to do what she wanted to do. Nothing me or nobody else could do about it. I told her we couldn't have another baby in the house and she gave me that hollow-eyed look like I was speaking a foreign tongue. Couldn't get through to Mary Ella when she gave you that look. She was seventeen—two years older than me—but you'd think I was her mama trying to keep her on the straight-and-narrow path to heaven. Some days I felt like I was everybody's mama.

I headed home down Deaf Mule Road where it ran between two tobacco fields that went on forever and ever. I couldn't look at all them acres and acres of tobacco we still had to get in. My fingers was still sticky with tar from that day's work. Even my hair felt like it had tar in

it, and as I walked down the road, I lifted one blond end of my hair from under my kerchief and checked it, but it just looked like my plain old hair. Dried hay. That's what Nonnie said about my hair one time. My own grandma, and she didn't care about hurting my feelings. It was true, though. Mary Ella got the looks in our family. Roses in her cheeks. Full head of long wild curls, the color of sweet corn. Carolina-blue eyes. "Them looks of hers is a curse," Nonnie always said. "She walks out the door and every boy in Grace County loses his good sense."

I took off my shoes and the dust from the road felt soft beneath my feet. Maybe the best thing I felt all day. Every time I did that—walked barefoot on the dirt road between the Gardiners' two-story farmhouse and our little house—I felt like I was walking on Mama's old ragged black velveteen shawl. That was practically the only thing we had left of hers. I used to sleep with it, but now with Baby William sharing the bed with me and Mary Ella, there wasn't no room for nothing bigger than my memory of Mama, and after all these years, that was just a little slip of a thing.

I came to the end of the road where it dipped into the woods. The path got rough here with tree roots and rocks but I knew where every one of them was. I put my shoes back on before I came to the open area with the chigger weeds and by then I could hear Baby William howling. He was going at it good and Nonnie was hollerin' at him to shut it, so I started running before she could get to the point of hitting him. For all I knew she'd been hitting him all afternoon. Nonnie wasn't all that mean, but when her rheumatism made her hands hot and red, her fuse was right short. She said she raised our daddy, then me and Mary Ella, and she thought she was done with the raising. Then all of a sudden, Baby William came along.

"I'm here!" I called as I ran into our yard. The bike me and Mary Ella shared was on its side in the dirt and I jumped over it and ran around the woodpile. Baby William stood on the stoop, saggy diaper hanging halfway down his fat legs, his face all red and tears making paths through the dirt on his cheeks. His black curls was so thick they looked like a wig on his head. He raised his arms out to me when he saw me.

"I'm here, baby boy!" I said, and I scooped him up. He settled right away like always, his body shaking with the end of his crying. Now, if Mary Ella was with me, it'd be her he'd reach for—he knew his mama—but right now he was mine. "Gotcha, sweet baby," I whispered in his ear.

I looked through the open doorway of our house, trying to see where Nonnie was, but it was dark in there and all I could see was the end of the ratty sofa where the sunlight lit on it from the open doorway. Nonnie kept the shades drawn all day to keep the house cooler. Mr. Gardiner put electricity in our house when I was little, but you'd swear Nonnie hadn't figured out how to work it yet. Didn't matter. The only real light in the house was the one I held in my arms.

"Let's get you changed," I said, climbing the stoop and walking into the house. I drew up the crackling old shades at the two front windows to let some light in and the dust motes took to floating around the room. Nonnie showed up in the doorway to the kitchen. She had a bundle of folded diapers and towels in her left arm and she leaned on her cane with her free hand.

"Mary Ella ain't with you?" she asked, like that was out of the ordinary.

"No." I kissed her cheek and I could of swore her hair had more gray in it than just that morning when she spent a few hours helping with the barning. She was turning into an old lady before my eyes, with big puffy arms and three chins and walking bent over. She already had the sugar and the high blood and I had this worry of losing her. You got to expecting it after a while, things going wrong. I wasn't no pessimist, though. Mrs. Rex, my science teacher two years ago, told me I was one of them people that looked on the bright side of things. I thought of Mrs. Rex every time I started to say the word "ain't" and changed it to "isn't." "You can't get anywhere in life talking dumb," she told us. Not that I was exactly getting anywhere in life.

I took the laundry from Nonnie with my free hand, catching a whiff of sunshine from the towels. "Maybe she's getting some extras from Mr. Gardiner," I said, trying to think positive. I wanted to wipe the scowl off Nonnie's face. Once or twice a week, Mr. Gardiner, Henry Allen's daddy who owned all them acres and acres of tobacco,

gave Mary Ella things from his own personal garden—and sometimes his smokehouse—for us. He could just as easy hand them to me, but her being the oldest seemed to mean something to him. Or maybe it was that she was a mama now and he thought the food should go to Baby William. I didn't know. All I knew was that we needed them extras. Mr. Gardiner took care of us in a lot of ways. He gave us a Frigidaire and a new woodstove so big the heat could reach the bedroom as long as we left the door open—and since the door didn't close all the way, that was easy. Nonnie was about to ask for indoor plumbing when Mary Ella started sprouting her belly. Then Nonnie decided she better not ask for nothing more.

"Did Mary Ella tell him about them deer getting into our garden again?" she asked. The deer got into our garden no matter how much fencing I put around the little bit of good soil Mr. Gardiner let us work for ourselves.

"Yes," I said, though it was me who told him. Mary Ella didn't like talking to Mr. Gardiner so much. She wasn't a big talker to begin with.

"Got your wages?" Nonnie asked, like she did every day.

"I'll give 'em to you soon as I change this boy," I said, walking to the bedroom. Mr. Gardiner paid us pennies compared to his other workers, but he let us live here for nothing, so we never complained.

I plunked Baby William down on the bed and started tickling the daylight out of him because I wanted to hear him giggle. We rolled around on the bed for a couple minutes, both of us getting the worries of the day out of ourselves. Sometimes I just liked to stare at that boy, he was so beautiful. Black curls like satin when you ran your fingers through them. Black eyelashes, long and thick. Eyes so dark they was nearly black, too. Mary Ella's hair was even lighter than mine. I didn't like to think where Baby William might of got all that black from.

There was a rustle of the trees outside the window and Baby William looked in that direction. We worried early on he might be deaf 'cause he didn't seem to care about noises and Mrs. Werkman and Nurse Ann said he might need a deaf school, so now every time he heard something, I celebrated inside.

“Mama?” he asked, lifting his head to look through the window. It was about the only word he knew, which Mrs. Werkman said wasn’t right. He should have more words by two, she said. I didn’t like how she was always finding something wrong with him. I told her he was just quiet like Mary Ella. Not a jabbermouth, like me.

“It’s just a breeze out there,” I said, nuzzling his sweaty little neck. “Mama’ll be home soon.”

I hoped I wasn’t lying.

In the kitchen, I fed Baby William on my lap while Nonnie made salad from the last of a chicken we’d been eating most of the week. It was getting near dusk and Mary Ella still wasn’t home. Baby William wasn’t hungry. He kept pushing my hand away and the chunks of squash fell off the spoon.

“He’s always a crab at suppertime,” Nonnie said.

“No he ain’t,” I said. I hated how she talked about him like that. I bet she talked about me and Mary Ella that way when we was little, too. “He just needs some cuddling, don’t you, Baby William?” I rocked him and he hung on to me like a monkey. Mrs. Werkman said we shouldn’t hold him when we feed him no more. He should sit on a chair at the table, up on the block of wood me and Mary Ella sat on when we was little, but I just loved holding him and he crabbed less on my lap. Sometimes when I held Baby William like that, I thought I could remember my own mama holding me that way.

“I doubt that,” Nonnie said when I told her that one day. “She wasn’t much for holding y’all.”

But I remembered it. Maybe I only imagined it, but that was near as good.

Nonnie scooped Duke’s mayonnaise out of the jar and mixed it into the salad, looking out the window the whole time. “Gonna be dark before you know it,” she said. “You better go see if you can find your sister. That girl forgets her way home sometime.”

I let Baby William eat a piece of squash with his fingers. “No telling where she is, Nonnie,” I said, but I knew I had to try or we’d both

be worrying half the night. I stood up, handing Nonnie the baby and the spoon, and she set him on the wooden block. He let out a howl and she clamped her hand over his mouth.

Outside, I checked the johnny first just in case, but she wasn't there. Then I walked through the woods and across the pasture, turning my head left and right, looking for Mary Ella. I walked down the lane that ran next to the tobacco, which looked spooky in the evening light. When I was little, Mama would tell me fairies lived in them tobacco plants. Nonnie said I imagined this, that Mama would never say such a fanciful thing, but I didn't care. If I had to make up memories of Mama, I'd do it. I used to think someday I'd be able to ask her myself if the things I remembered was true, but Mrs. Werkman said no good could come from me paying Mama a visit after all this time. "No good for either of you, dear," she said, and by the way she said it I knew she felt real bad about the whole thing.

Way off to my left, I could see the Gardiners' house blazing with light from just about every room. I walked faster so I could see the back of the house and the two windows I knew was Henry Allen's room. I'd been in that room. Snuck in, of course. I would of been kilt if anyone knew. Mr. or Mrs. Gardiner. Nonnie. Lord, Nonnie would have my head! But Henry Allen would keep me safe. Nobody I trusted more than that boy. Even when we was little, he'd take on anybody that said a bad word about me. Back then I couldn't of known I'd come to love him like I did.

I nearly tripped over my own feet as I watched the windows, trying to see Henry Allen's shadow move past one of them, but I was so far from the house that the windows was nothing more than rectangles of light. It was real dusky out now, so he probably couldn't see me even if he was looking. But I felt it anyway, that long invisible thread that connected me and him. It always had.

Down the lane in front of me, a light burned on the porch of the Jordans' house, the other family that lived on the farm. I knew Mary Ella wouldn't be there, so I turned around and pretty soon I could see the farmhouse windows again. I stared so hard at Henry Allen's windows that I near forgot I was supposed to be looking for my sister. I wondered if he was listening to his radio. He had one of them little

ones you could carry around with you. He brung it with him whenever we met up at the crick. We had a big old radio, of course, but you had to plug it in. Henry Allen said he was going to get me one of the little ones, and when I thought of having music I could carry around, I couldn't believe it. The Gardiners even had a television and Henry Allen promised someday he'd show it to me but it had to be a time when his parents and the help was out of the house and I didn't know what it would take for that to happen. A funeral maybe. I didn't want to wish for no funeral just so I could see a television.

I looked down the lane ahead of me, wishing I brung a lantern with me because it was getting right dark out. The moon was big, though, and it spilled light all over the tobacco like glitter.

"What you doin' out here this time of night, Ivy?"

I jumped, and it took my eyes a minute to make out Eli Jordan walking toward me. He was so dark he blended into the night.

I slowed my walking. "Just looking for Mary Ella," I said, casual like, not wanting to sound worried.

"That girl's a traveler, ain't she?" We was nearly face-to-face now and he looked off across the field like he might be able to see her. He was seventeen, same as Mary Ella, but could of passed for twenty. Taller than me by a hand and broad in the shoulders. Nonnie called him a buck. "That Jordan buck can do the work of four men," she'd say, sounding admiring, and then a breath later add, "Stay away from him, Ivy," like I'd be fool enough to mess with a colored boy. Wasn't me that needed that warning. Sometimes I felt like he could look out for me. Other times, I felt scared by his power. Like the day he lifted a giant tree stump from the ground to the back of Mr. Gardiner's blue pickup, the muscles in his back rippling like water in the crick. He was a boy who could be for good or evil, and I didn't know which one he was going to pick.

"Did you see her since the barning today?" I asked.

He shook his head and started walking past me toward his house. "Ain't seen her," he said, then over his shoulder, "She'll probly be home when you git there."

"Probly," I said, and I started walking again, faster this time.

The moon lit up the rows of tobacco and I went back to watching

the lights in the farmhouse as I walked. I put my hand in my shorts pocket and felt the scrap of paper. “*Midnight, tomorrow,*” Henry Allen had written in the note. Most every day, he left a note for me near the bottom of the old fence post where the wood was split. He could tuck the note in real deep and no one but me would know it was there. Sometimes he’d say one o’clock or two, but usually it was midnight. I liked that best. Liked the sound of it. I liked thinking someday I’d tell our grandkids, *Me and your grandpa would meet by the crick at midnight.* Of course, I’d never tell them what we did there.

I saw a lantern in the distance. Someone was walking along Deaf Mule Road where it ran between the Gardiners’ house and the woods. It wouldn’t be Henry Allen. Way too early. As I got closer, I saw the moonlight fall on my sister’s blond hair, which was out of her braid, loose and wild, a crazy big moonlit halo around her head. She was carrying something and I knew it was her basket with the extras Mr. Gardiner gave her for us. I walked faster till I was close enough for her to hear me.

“Mary Ella!” I called out, and she stopped walking and looked around, trying to see where my voice came from. Then she must of spotted me. Instead of walking toward me, though, she ran right across the path I was on, heading for the woods and home, and I knew she was running to keep away from me. She didn’t want to see me. Or me to see her. My sister was a strange one.

By the time I got home, Mary Ella was sitting on the porch rocking Baby William in her arms. Even in the dark, I could tell she was holding him so tight you’d expect him to cry, but Baby William put up with Mary Ella lovin’ on him. She was the only one who could calm him when he got frustrated from not having the words to tell us what he wanted. He knew who’d carried him closest to her heart. Moments like this, they was two quiet souls cut from the same cloth.

“Where you been?” I asked, like I expected her to tell me the truth.

“Had to get the extras from Mr. Gardiner,” she said.

I didn’t bother arguing with her. It didn’t take hours to get the extras unless she had to grow them herself. I didn’t say nothing about how I saw Eli walking home about the same time she was. There was

something real breakable about Mary Ella and I was always afraid if I touched her in the wrong spot, she'd crack.

Nonnie came out on the porch, rooting through the basket in the light from the house. "He gave us some of Desiree's banana pudding!" she said. "Oh sweet Jesus, I wish he'd do that every week."

"You can't have that, Nonnie," I reminded her as I sat down on the stoop. "Your sugar."

"Don't go telling me what I can and can't have," Nonnie snapped. "You seem to forget you're my granddaughter, not my mother."

I shut up. Nonnie was like a little kid about her food. You told her she couldn't have something and she'd eat it just to be ornery. You reminded her to test her pee, and she'd lie and say she already done it.

I smacked a skeeter. I wouldn't last long out here. Once you stopped moving, they was on you.

Nonnie went back in the house and came out a minute later with a spoon. She settled into her rocker and set the bowl of pudding on her lap. I couldn't watch her take that first bite. I heard her let out a sigh.

"I'm at the end of my natural working life, girls," she said. She'd been saying that for years, but lately I believed it. She didn't last but two hours at the barn today, and even chasing after Baby William seemed too much for her. It was up to me and Mary Ella to work hard enough to keep Mr. Gardiner happy so he'd let us keep the house. He could have a bunch of real workers in it. A family with a father and sons who could do five times what me and Mary Ella and Nonnie did. I was always afraid one day he'd tell us it was time to go. What we'd do without our house, I didn't know.

I watched my grandmother digging into the bowl of banana pudding and my sister holding her secrets as close as she held her baby, and I wondered how much longer we could go on this way.