

Seven Sisters

By

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my best friend and sister Karena. Thank you for endless summer days on bicycles, for sharing your blanket and keeping our room tidy. You are the best non-speaking actress I have ever met.

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“Many a night I saw the Pleiades

Rising thro’ the mellow shade

Glitter like a swarm of fire-flies

Tangled in a single braid.”

Alfred Lord Tennyson

“Locksley Hall”

1842

Prologue

Mobile, AL, 1850

Her white hand shone like bone in the moonlight. Shivering, she stood perched on the walkway that led to the Delta Queen. To the casual observer, she might appear to be a statue, standing perfectly still, leaning slightly against the shiny wood railing. No, she was not a cold, unmoving statue but a real woman alive and free for the first time.

Musical notes jostled with one another in the air, and the voices of spirited patrons rolled from the riverboat like waves lapping along the shores of the Mobile River. Above the glittering riverboat hung a clear, dark sky filled with heavy stars that shone with an unusual brilliance. She heard no familiar voice but to her, those stars, the Pleiades, shone their approval like a message from heaven. Her lips turned up in a small smile as she imagined her mother saying, “Run—be free. Be what I can never be!”

She raised her hand to her lips to calm her heart—it leapt like a calf! She turned her head slightly, her long curls brushing her bare back. Looking down the sandy, moonlit path, she gave a small wave and smiled into the darkness at the friend she left behind. Then she disappeared into the bubbling soiree aboard Mobile’s most celebrated ship.

Once inside, the young woman was thankful for the music. She was sure that without it, all of Mobile would hear the pounding of her heart. Clutched at her side was a small satin purse, elegantly beaded and embellished with silk ribbons. She slid her hand into the purse and pulled out a small, leather-bound book, running a finger over the cover. The book had changed her forever. Inside were his words, which had opened her closed heart. Like Ali Baba whispering the words that had opened the enchanted door.

How beautiful and courtly were his words! How completely he had allayed her every fear. She had carefully gathered each letter and bound them in her book. They had given her the courage to forget the darkness that had surrounded her.

Suddenly, anxiety overwhelmed her. What if he no longer wanted her? What if she had been too late in her reply? Would she now pay for her aloofness? She could never go back! She had done the unthinkable. The die was cast.

Somewhere aboard the Delta Queen was Captain David Garrett, the gentleman who had liberated her heart. The riverboat would leave Mobile soon. She had seized her chance, a chance at happiness away from the ghosts of Seven Sisters. She would reveal her soul to him, the man who had proven worthy of her love and devotion. His writings had plucked at her courage, creating a crescendo of hope, love and desire that commanded release. It would be fulfilled by her spontaneous act of affection—her willingness to leave behind a world of favor and prominence for a more uncertain one as his bride.

She moved through the thick wooden doorway, humming along to the waltz that flowed out of the concert hall. A woman with vulgar red lips smiled up at a mustached man who held two glasses overflowing with some sort of dark libation. Callie’s disgust shook her back to her task. She hated hard drink; it made good men evil.

Her green eyes glittered as she searched the hall for Captain Garrett's dark, handsome countenance. She had seen him less than a dozen times, but she had sketched his face perfectly in her mind and added details after each visit, like the curl of his hair and the dark fringe of his eyelashes. Always his hair curled around his crisp white collars. His wide, toothy smile and cleft chin made him look like an exotic Russian prince, she imagined. She would recognize those dark blue eyes in a crowd of a hundred men.

She moved amongst the partiers, touched and jostled by dancers and couples flirting. Such a different world from the ballrooms of the local plantations where elegant ladies prided themselves on navigating the crowd without crushing another debutante's dress! A few gentlemen tipped their hats to her, but she was largely ignored. Her coral-colored silk gown, his favorite, rustled as she continued her quest.

Again, those questions screamed like banshees in her mind. What if he no longer wanted her? What if she had been too late in her reply?

She could never go back to her unhappy life. The dark thing she had witnessed, the many dark things she had seen, made that impossible. Her desperation rising she asked a short, officious-looking man where the captain was. He silently led her through a myriad of hallways with a slow gait that irritated her. He tossed her a curious look once over his shoulder, and then unceremoniously left her standing in the hall outside a wooden door with a bronze handle.

She fussed over her barrette and pinched her cheeks for some color, as her mother had taught her to do. She was no hothouse rose like her cousin, but the flush of warmth in her cheeks flattered her thin nose and unusually full lips. It gave her an added sense of attractiveness. She felt confident, beautiful and wanted by this man of honor and gentility.

She raised her hand to knock, but then changed her mind. Instead, she followed her inner streak of boldness, the same boldness that had led her to this place, to this moment. Smiling to herself, she swung open the door. "David," she called out softly, laughing joyfully at saying his name aloud for the first time. The intimacy thrilled her.

No answer came. She stood silent in the small parlor, embarrassed but determined to find him.

Soft moans and a shimmer of light filtered through an open door. She strained to hear the hushed voices. Frozen momentarily in the shifting light of flickering candlelight and a rising moon, her heart raced to keep up with what her mind already knew.

"David, David! Oh, yes!"

As quietly as possible, she delicately pushed the door open wider. Standing perfectly still, she said nothing. She did nothing. The forgotten book slipped from her hand, making an odd slapping sound as the leather cover hit a space of bare wooden floor.

Half-dressed, his body exposed, his normally perfect coiffure of dark curls unruly and wild, David Garrett stood to face her. Even in the dim light, she could see his blue eyes. How easily they reflected his emotions—a flicker of realization, regret, and then sadness. Had he ever truly loved her? He opened his mouth to offer her his words, a reproach, perhaps an explanation. But she raised her hand in protest, surprising him into silence for a seemingly eternal moment.

From behind him there was a shuffling of clothes, then a familiar face peeking around his legs, a round cherubic face. Callie's cousin rose from the small, rumped bed and stood standing next to the half-dressed captain. Her skin gleamed with sweat, evidence of her extreme betrayal. A blue gown lay piled on the floor, one that Callie recognized as her own. The half-naked girl giggled again, wrapping herself around David. Then she stretched out her hand to Callie, as if inviting her to join them. The scandalous move seemed to bring the captain to his senses; he scolded her loudly for her vulgar gesture and tried to dress himself as graciously as he could with a sense of obvious urgency.

Lifting her skirts with one hand and pushing him away with the other, Callie ran from the room, leaving the muskiness of the betrayers' lovemaking and her childish dreams behind. She ran blindly down the long hallway, through the unfamiliar complex of passageways that were now filled almost to capacity. She made her way through the crowd, running when she could.

She was thankful for the tears that blurred her vision. She didn't want to see the faces, the witnesses to her great shame. She welcomed the deepening agony, the hurt of the betrayal, the overwhelming sadness. Behind her she heard someone call her name. She never looked back.

Before she understood what was happening, she felt herself falling, falling into the blackness of the river. Above her, his outstretched arms, a quiet scream, silver stars, welcoming warmth, and then—nothing.

Chapter 1

I climbed into my blue Honda, slipped it into neutral and slid silently down the driveway. I hated saying goodbye to the comfortable garage apartment that smelled like fresh paint and new wood; however, I felt an unusual call to leave for once. I had the courage to go. That Zen-like, “I’m starting over” spell comforted me on this unseasonably cool morning as I slid the last box of my belongings into the backseat of the car. The rest, a collection of CDs, memorabilia from a recent trip to the Bahamas and most anything that did not fall into the jeans and t-shirt category, I left behind in a small storage space about a mile away. I had paid for six months in advance but was already putting off the idea of coming back to Charleston.

I did feel a twinge of guilt as I put the car into gear. I had not even bothered to say goodbye to William, my friend and sort-of boyfriend. He was kind and good and understanding, but I knew that would never last. We were too different in too many ways to describe. Perversely, I liked leaving on a high note, without the nightmares and all the screaming. It felt like a personal triumph. I was being selfish, but I was okay with that. At least for the moment.

“Once I make up my mind, the die is cast,” I said to no one in particular.

I muttered, “Well, if I am stubborn, I have had to be.” I already loathed myself for traveling down this predictable mental highway, but what else could I do for the next few hours but drive and think? I hadn’t “gone there” in a while, so perhaps a quick review would be healthy. I rolled my eyes at myself in the rearview mirror. I sounded just like my last shrink. “How can I help you if you won’t share with me, Carrie Jo? Why won’t you let someone in?” Feeling a softness that I rarely experienced, I had pulled back the cover and let the light hit my secret for the first time in a long time.

* * *

“I’m not trying to be difficult, but without significant personal discipline, I would have gone nuts—like my mother, a long time ago.” Encouraged by the petite, smiling psychologist, perched in her overlarge leather chair, I continued on, “You see, Dr. O’Neal, I have a problem—I dream about the past. I’m kind of like a human DVR; my dream life is usually not my own. It belongs to whatever memory movie plays the loudest wherever I’m sleeping.”

Dr. O’Neal had looked at me blankly, unshaken by my confession.

Okay, the young, pretty doctor has earned ten points for the poker face she’s wearing, I’d thought wryly. Her focused attention encouraged me to ramble on.

“That’s why I love my garage apartment so much. It is brand spanking new, with no movies, no memories. I sleep, and I dream my own dreams. My ‘problem’ gets even more complicated when I sleep with someone else. I can see their dreams too.”

Luckily, there haven’t been too many of them, I’d thought, but I hadn’t felt the need to share my lack of a love life with the dainty Dr. O’Neal, new bride and smart career woman. Her fingers had flown across her notebook, her manicured hands busy recording her undoubtedly smart thoughts to form a brilliant pre-diagnosis. I’d discreetly peeked at the wedding photo perched on her mahogany desk. It didn’t take a degree to see she was proud of her groom.

I hated the silent moments of this confession, so I blathered on, in a hurry to make my point and come to the reason for my visit. That was me: give it to me in black and white, and I'll do the same for you.

“You see, Dr. O’Neal, I have this great job offer—it’s a once-in-a-lifetime gig, really. But I hate giving up my apartment. I just don’t know what to expect. That’s why my friend Mia suggested I come see you. And, well, here I am.”

To her credit, the shrink didn’t zero in on my “problem”; instead, she took a sidestep that I hadn’t anticipated. “What about your current relationships? Didn’t you say you were seeing someone?” Consulting her notebook, she pointed. “Yes, he’s a ‘fantastic’ guy. Don’t you find it odd that you’re worried about leaving your safe apartment but not this ‘fantastic’ guy?”

I left her office feeling deflated, insecure and even more confused. Why had I mentioned William? Obviously, Dr. Happily Married was going to focus on the sex angle rather than the real problem. When she called a few days later to setup a dream clinic session, it was a moot point. I had already made up my mind. I was leaving, come hell or high water. I had to take a chance away from the safety and security of my little apartment. I had to go where the work was. And although I couldn’t explain it, even to myself, I knew my destiny waited for me in Mobile.

* * *

As I zipped onto the highway and left Charleston behind me, a ball of anxiety settled in the pit of my stomach. What was I doing traveling into the unknown? What night terrors would I experience in Mobile? I had to admit this kind of bold, brash move was surprising, even for me. Still, like the proverbial moth to a flame, I drove down the slick highway, drowning out the voice of Cautious Carrie Jo with the hum of my old faithful car. I smiled at myself in the rearview mirror as a sort of encouragement.

Behind my oversize sunglasses was a pair of almond-shaped green eyes. I liked my eyes; they reminded me of my father. At least that’s what I figured, since they weren’t anything like my mother’s. I had never met my father. That morning, I had quickly piled my mass of brown, curly hair on top of my head in a messy ponytail bun. A few brown strands whipped around my face like wildcats in the wind as I sang along with Natalie Merchant. I dug in my purse for my favorite coral-colored lipstick. The shade looked pretty and bright against my light olive skin. I smiled at myself again to make sure the lipstick hadn’t smeared on my teeth. I rarely wore lipstick, but somehow I felt like I needed to today. I felt free and happy.

“Funny how I got here,” I pondered absently, glad to let the mental review of my conversation with Dr. O’Neal fade away. A few letters, a polished phone call from an attorney. It seemed like something I had read or dreamed about, but everything checked out. The contract was signed, and I now had a nice deposit in the bank. Best of all, the contents of an antebellum home waited to be scrutinized, categorized and stored. I would finally put that history degree to good use. No searching frantically for summer work. No more manning small-town Sno-Cone stands while wearing a goofy paper hat. Actually, that had been a fun job. Kids were my weakness and I had met plenty of them while I shoveled shaved ice and flavored syrups into cups.

With an even bigger smile, I remembered turning in my notice at the funeral home. Working in the records office wasn’t creepy, but I’d felt continually surrounded by sadness. I dozed off in my quiet

office during one boring, rainy afternoon and surprisingly had not dreamed a thing. *I guess the dead carry no memories. They leave them behind for people like me.*

My cell phone jangled on the seat next to me, and I tapped the ignore button. I was ultra-cautious when it came to driving, at least with the phone. Without looking, I knew it was William, mad and hurt that I had left him without a word. My frustration rose. He knew I was leaving, and I knew he didn't want me to go. What else was there to talk about?

I turned Natalie up louder and sang "Carnival" with all my heart.

Chapter 2

I had gotten on the road early, but there was no way I was driving eight hours straight. I couldn't sit still that long. I planned to stop in Green's Mill, Alabama, at a brand new bed and breakfast called the Delight of the South. The hotel's newness did not guarantee I would have a dream-free night, but I had a backup plan. I dug around blindly in my purse for the sleeping pills Dr. O'Neal had prescribed me. I was glad I'd remembered them, but I hated taking them. I always woke up feeling stupid, and the pills did not completely stop the dreams from coming. If the dream was there, I would still remember flashes of it the next day. But with sleeping pills, the dreams, unremembered and unappreciated faded quickly and settled back into the darkness.

I remembered the first time I took something to sleep. I would wake up screaming; masses of slithering snakes struggled to choke and strangle me in my dream, all because my mother, in a daze of medication or occasionally alcohol, had climbed in the bed with me to sleep. I could feel her loneliness, her confusion, her anger as she snored. At times I felt sorry for her, but then the snakes came while she slept. And in the daylight hours, the softness was gone.

I had plundered my mother's medicine cabinet and stolen one of her Valiums. "They always put her to sleep, so why not me?" my preteen self reasoned. I lingered on the memory, standing guiltily in front of that vanity mirror for a moment. I remembered thinking, "What would Jesus think about me stealing pills and doing drugs?" Hot tears had slid down my young face as I took the pill, choking it down without water.

Momma thought I was crazy, but the feeling was mutual. When I was about twelve, I'd tried to escape her cold indifference for a night by going to a neighbor's sleepover. I had felt safe and warm snuggled up with my sunny, red-haired friend Virginia. That night, Ginny had dreamed of her stepfather slipping into her room, sliding into her bed, lifting her pajamas and...

I was seized by Ginny's terror. I'd even felt her physical pain and woke up bathed in tears and blood. I had uncovered a tragic secret that would cost me a friendship. Even after Ginny's stepdad was arrested, I heard nothing from her. The unexpected twist was getting my first period, which had both confused and offended me. And I had made another discovery—screaming woke me from the nightmares that I witness occasionally.

I had not come home to find a sympathetic, benevolent mother. The short version of the story was Momma told her insipid religious friends that "Carrie Jo was psychic," and her prayer group tried to exorcise me. "Carrie Jo is full of the devil," Momma cried to anyone who would listen.

Momma never could keep a secret, not even her own. And she had plenty of them, I thought with a defiance and bitterness that almost smothered me.

Eventually, I wised up and kept my mouth shut about the dreams. If Momma and I had not moved around so much when I was growing up, I probably would have put those dream "demons" to sleep a bit easier. Instead, I slept in a constantly changing environment that included trailers, cheap motels and run-down homes most of my life until I left for college.

I shook my head to snap out of my reverie. I hated thinking about the past, but it chased me so much. I searched for a talk radio channel just to give myself something else to think about.

* * *

At lunch, I carried the binder of notes I had collected into a diner named Sal's and reread what I had been sent about my new project, Seven Sisters. I ordered a grilled cheese sandwich but sacrificially ignored the fries that came with it. I felt fat in my white shorts. They were a size ten, and I didn't want to move up to a twelve again. I had spent a lot of time walking the track near my home this past spring. I wasn't a big health nut, but I did like walking outdoors and exploring new scenery.

I smoothed my hand over the glossy picture of Seven Sisters, examining the columned facade of the main house. The antebellum home, the brief read, was built in 1823 by a family who went bankrupt shortly after the work was completed. By 1825, the wealthy Cottonwoods had purchased the mansion, renaming it Seven Sisters. Looking back at me from the collection of papers was a young woman with big, dark eyes, wearing a full-skirted gown with lace trim. She was riveting.

From what I had gathered from multiple video conferences and emails with the owner's attorney, the goal was to make Seven Sisters a sort of museum for visitors to Mobile, but the current owner had enough respect for the home's history to want a proper catalogue of its antiques first. That earned them points in my book. Too many people forget the past—I never could; it wouldn't allow me to.

I was the chief historian assigned to the project. I much preferred working alone, but that was impossible on a job this size. Luckily, my dearest friend and fellow historian, Mia, would be joining me soon. She had recommended me for the lead position, despite her own qualifications. She was one of the few people who knew about my "dream catching" as she called it. She never stayed in one spot too long—she had spent a few months in Egypt, then travelled to the UK for a tour of medieval castles, and then lived in Paris with a friend for six months over a bakery. I loved her confidence, her zest for life and her ability to travel like a local.

Mia knew more about antebellum artifacts than anyone I knew, which was hilarious considering Egyptology was her first love. I hadn't seen her since Christmas; I was excited to catch up on her latest adventures.

Right after college, I had worked on a few estate projects cataloging for an auction house. I was sad to see each antique sold off to the highest bidder. For a few months, I had possessed them, lovingly working to establish each item's value and historical importance. How I cried when the Trevi figurine, "Genteel Boy on Rocking Horse," sold at auction. The company had moved to Tennessee, and I had turned down an invitation to relocate with them. I'm not sure why.

I couldn't wait to see what Seven Sisters and Mobile had in store for me. Comparable to Charleston, Mobile had its charms; at least that's what the brochures told me. Coming so late in spring, I missed the city's big Mardi Gras party, but I wasn't much of a partier. I preferred studying the belongings of people who no longer walked the earth to drinking and dancing with its current residents.

I passed on a second glass of tea, as I didn't want to make another stop before calling it a day at the Delight of the South, but I gave the waitress a big smile all the same. I had a soft spot for hard-working women, having been one for so long.

I tucked a defiant curl behind my ear and flipped through the brief again. I would be working with Ashland Stuart, the current owner. His attorney had mailed me his picture and a brief summary of his credentials. He was incredibly handsome, in a masculine, southern kind of way. (*Too perfect. He*

must be short.) He had short, blond hair with expressive blue eyes and a slightly pink, kissable mouth. I knew I had been staring too long at the photo because the waitress (Susan, according to her pink nametag) said, “Wow! He your boyfriend?”

“Nope, just a business partner.” I smiled and flushed.

“Lucky girl.” She tossed her head slightly in the direction of an open kitchen window at a heavysset man sweating over a grill. “He’s my business partner.” I laughed along with her but decided that was my cue to leave. I paid the bill, gathered the paperwork and left a nice tip for Susan. After she caught me leering at the picture of a complete stranger, it felt like passing off hush money.

Naturally, I thought of William, and I welcomed the guilt that seemed to surround everything in our relationship—or whatever it was. While the car’s interior cooled off, I rang him back. His voicemail picked up, and I was so surprised that I stumbled over leaving a message.

“Hey, William, I’ll be in Green’s Mill soon. I’m doing fine, and the car is great. I wanted to say, I mean...I’ll try to call again when I get to my room. Okay? Okay, talk to you later. Oh, this is Carrie Jo.” Yep, that sounded dumb *and* guilty.

Chapter 3

My drive into Mobile was uneventful. Like most downtown areas, the streets were narrow and lumpy, and the roadways were shaded by the oak trees whose branches obscured the light with its boughs full of Spanish moss. I found my new garage apartment quite easily and spent a few minutes getting to know my temporary landlord, Bette. I knew right from that first meeting that I was going to like chatting with her. She was amiable and helpful, and she seemed to have a tremendous knowledge about the history of the area.

I spent some time getting my room in order. Time wasn't on my side; I had to get ready for an afternoon meeting with the attorney, the contractor and, of course, Ashland Stuart. The apartment was new, clean and completely comfortable. I adored it. Bette told me that she had considered writing a novel or two a few years ago, with the apartment as her studio, but life had not slowed enough so far to allow her the luxury. There was a full-size bed, complete with a comfortable mattress and clean cotton sheets. The desk was perched near the entrance window, which overlooked the street below and gave me a wonderful view of downtown. I was happy to see a mini-fridge and a kitchenette; Bette had really thought of all the basics. I decided to explore more later. Right now, I had a meeting to prepare for, and I was nervous already—I was the boss. I couldn't believe it! A few changes of clothes and about 45 minutes later, I was walking up to Seven Sisters.

I began to rethink my choice of shoes for the evening as I walked up the broken brick sidewalk that led to the house. Seven Sisters stood at the end of a private road that needed a bit of upkeep. As I walked, I breathed in the purple wisteria. Bees hung around it, even in the late afternoon, and the flowers drooped in the humidity. Tough brown vines grasped at any growing thing they could reach. Masses of pink azaleas that someone, years ago, thought would add color and charm to the sidewalk crowded the pathway.

Hollis Matthews, the attorney who had originally contacted me about the research project, had warned me about this slight inconvenience. But I had not realized I would be trekking through a subtropical jungle—not in these shoes, anyway. Silently, I rebuked myself. This was the opportunity of a lifetime! Was I going to let a little humidity and some abandoned gardens prevent me from exploring this prize?

As I moved along the path, I looked back at my blue car sitting behind a shiny black Lincoln with a few other vehicles—all the cars looked much nicer than mine. It suddenly occurred to me that I could afford to buy a new car now. My current employer was paying me well.

I smoothed my skirt, admiring the tiny red rose pattern, and tugged at my short-sleeved red blouse. The sweetheart neckline made me feel pretty and didn't reveal my cleavage at all. I touched my hair absently. It felt soft, but I knew the night air would make it curl even more. I had left my hair down for the evening, but I did manage to straighten it. Sort of. I at least made the effort to tame my normally wild locks.

I looked down at my worrisome shoes, red sandals with a pretty wedge heel, with my red painted toenails poking out happily. I decided I looked great, and I squared my shoulders to boost my confidence.

It was dusk, and the lights from the house shone through the thick hedges. The flowers' fragrance set an irresistible ambiance for a romantic southern evening. "How often does a girl get to visit an

antebellum home that has been hidden away from the world for the past hundred years?” I asked myself. I felt very lucky indeed.

As the path turned, I stepped out of the maze of flowers, surprised at the sight of Seven Sisters, with her faded white columns rising up like an ancient Greek temple from the dark woods that surrounded her. I blinked, letting my eyes adjust to the fading light. The surrounding foliage and wild trees seemed to make it even darker. I stood gawking at my new office and felt no initial foreboding, no warning, just a warm feeling of delight and excitement. (I would reflect on this later. Shouldn’t I have sensed something?) Oh yes, this would be my home—at least until next spring.

Through the old, warped windows, I could see lights and hear music playing softly inside. I hated being late and last. The scene seemed so strange, the present imposing on the past. Seven Sisters stood tall and silent, enduring the “party” that had gathered under her roof. The quiet dignity of the house juxtaposed against the tinkling of laughter and the sounds of jazz music made the gathering seem like a group of naughty teenagers assembled to dance on a grave, disregarding all the lost life beneath their feet.

The warm feeling from just a moment ago disappeared as the fine hairs on my neck pricked up. Suddenly, I felt the air move slightly. I scanned the area around me but detected only an abandoned garden statue a few yards away. It was an odd—and disturbing—sight. The statue was a satyr pouring water over a nude girl. His tongue poked out at me, the one who dared invade his garden. His grotesque face, as well as the rest of him, was weathered green, evidence of his lengthy stay on the property. I laughed nervously, pulling my attention away from the leering creature. I paused on the sparse grass below the steps leading to the great house. A curious aroma of damp, old wood and leaves filled the air, and I could see that the promised repairs had begun with the wooden porch. Out of the corner of my eye, I detected movement. I turned quickly, my skirt swirling around my tanned legs.

A broad white smile and the handsome face of Ashland Stuart greeted me. He wasn’t short—at all.

“Hey! I hope I didn’t startle you.” Ashland smiled even bigger, if that were possible. For some reason, I was not sure he was honest in his apology. He looked like someone who liked having the upper hand.

“Well, maybe a little. I didn’t hear you pull up.” I smiled back nervously and purposefully turned my attention back to the house, away from the man who had managed to sneak up on me. I needed a moment to compose myself.

“I’m Ashland Stuart, but I’m sure you know that—my attorney believes in bios with pictures. I recognize you from yours, Carrie Jo Jardine.” I didn’t know what to say; he seemed to know everything. So I gave him a slight nod. He stood close to me and turned his attention to the house. “First time here at Seven Sisters?”

“Yes. I regret that my maiden voyage had to be in the dark. Still, I’m glad to be here. Can I ask you a question?”

His white teeth gleamed at me; they shone in the fading light, making him look like something fierce. He had a wide, masculine smile, which I suspected he enjoyed flashing at all the women he encountered. “Any question at all.”

I ignored his flirtatious invitation. “Seven Sisters—how did it get its name? It’s easy to romanticize a name like that, so I figured I’d ask someone who probably knows rather than assume it was named after seven actual sisters or a family of tragic Greek goddesses. There were no real facts on that in the profile I received.”

He laughed at that, and then it was my turn to smile at him. “Not a romantic, then? Actually, we’re not sure and had hoped that our new historian would be able to answer that question for us in the fullness of time.” He shot me another smile. “Family gossip suggests that the Seven Sisters are actually the seven columns that surround the house. But there are those who think it may be a clue to a lost family treasure.”

“How interesting,” I said sincerely, captivated by the notion of uncovering a family secret.

“One other older bit of gossip is that Seven Sisters is not this house at all but the name of the family house in France. That was the talk in the 1820s, anyway. Who knows? Perhaps you’ll be able to settle it once and for all.” I didn’t know what to say, but I was intrigued.

He broke the silence. “It looks like we’re both late. I’ve kept you to myself for too long.” He stood so close I could smell his expensive cologne. It was worth the money. I had an urge to touch his creased cotton shirt. I snuck a peek up at him as he stood silently gazing at Seven Sisters.

I wondered what he dreamt about when he closed his light blue eyes at night. Would he see memories of a happy childhood, inspiring dreams tinged in a warm, honey hue, or would his dreams unroll endlessly like dark shadows leaking from a deadly, hidden personality? There was only one way to truly know, and I shuddered slightly at the thought of waking up next to this golden man.

He must have felt my movement as I sensed my own terrible vulnerability, standing in the woods, in the dark, with a man I did not know. He looked at me serenely, like another statue in the garden. Only he was much nicer to look at than the satyr. I felt like he belonged here.

“Shall we make a grand entrance?” He offered me his arm, as I suspected he had done with countless women before me. Feeling disarmed, as much by my own thoughts as by his practiced charm, I nodded courteously and looped my arm through his, trying to ignore his muscles. I shoved back conjured images of southern belles entertaining well-dressed suitors as they glided up these same steps together before walking through the massive doors of the house. (I wasn’t a romantic, right?) My skin flushed slightly, and I didn’t know if it was due to my nerves or the nearness of Ashland Stuart.

He rang the bell, and the door swung open. We were greeted by a tall, distinguished-looking man who I knew immediately was Hollis Matthews, Ashland’s attorney. Before I could speak, Ashland said, “Look who I found wandering around the property.” He gave me a playful grin as he strode down the hall, and I took a moment to admire his big shoulders. Matthews was a perfectly dressed gentleman, down to his blue suit with a subtle pinstripe, white pocket handkerchief and neat manicure.

“Not wandering, just walking up the driveway,” I called after Ashland. I fought my natural tendency to get defensive when embarrassed. “You must be Mr. Matthews.” I leaned forward to shake the attorney’s hand, remembering to act like a professional. His skin felt cool and moist, and I wanted to snatch my hand away and wipe it on my skirt. With a tiny nod, he welcomed me inside the foyer of Seven Sisters.

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