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After the Dogwoods Bloom

Chapter 1

When Isabel Montgomery woke up, she didn't remember where she was. She waited. She felt the morning light on her face. She smelled humid, musty air like she was trapped in an attic full of old junk. She smelled a faint scent of Pine Sol, and her nose flared with the new chill of autumn. She smelled her grandmother. Then it all came back to her.

She opened her eyes and stared at the high ceiling of her grandmother's house. It was painted white. She kept her eyes open and tried not to blink, fixing her vision on one spot - a water stain. It looked like the hand of a dragon reaching out to strangle her. As she stared at the dragon's fingertip, a hint of blue popped out of the paint. It began to swirl and forced her to blink.

She glanced over at the armoire, an antique. The night before, she arranged everything she owned in it. At least, everything she brought to Georgia from Las Vegas. She wondered what the Keno Brothers might say about it on *The Antiques Roadshow*. The wood was dark, and a cluster of roses was carved above its door. Her mother's favorite T.V. show always bored her until right now. Maybe her grandmother's armoire was worth so much money, she could sell it and move back to Las Vegas. Maybe she wouldn't even have to live with her dad - she could get her own apartment.

A chill snapped her back into reality, and she burrowed herself into the blankets and the soft mattress. Her mother wanted to buy her a firmer mattress because it would be better for her back, but Isabel liked this one. She slept here once before when she visited her grandmother, and she thought it must be the softest, most comfortable place in the world. Somehow that did not

comfort her now, knowing this room would be hers permanently.

The sound of a faucet and clank of a pot drifted under the door as Isabel's mother made coffee in the kitchen. She turned her face toward the sound and stuck her tongue out. She fought back tears. A bird chirped outside her window, and she turned over to look out. The window was right over her bed, and though her mother said it would be too drafty, she supposed that under different circumstances, she might like it that way. She sat up and pulled the blanket tightly over her shoulders.

The window frame was not original to the house, but it looked old, and it needed a fresh coat of paint. Isabel picked off a flaking piece of paint and mashed it between her fingers. She stared outside. She could see a hundred trees. Everything was turning shades of red, yellow and brown, except for the pine. There was a muscadine grape vine wrapped and stumbling over the wooden fence just below her window, and beyond that was the neighbor's backyard. Though the autumn was beginning to lull the blossoms to sleep, she could see what a grand garden the neighbor's yard contained. She didn't know the names of any flowers. She only knew the colors - purple, yellow, burgundy. It reminded her of the Botanical Garden that her grandmother took her to when she visited here three years ago. Isabel knew the neighbor's name was Tillie Beauchamp and that her grandmother didn't like her very much, which made Isabel stare into Mrs. Beauchamp's backyard. She wondered if her grandmother had been jealous of the garden. Mammy, her grandmother, had a green thumb herself, but her yard did not look half as exquisite as what Isabel saw through her window on the other side of the fence.

It was strange compared to where she had come from - Las Vegas, Nevada. She had been born and raised in the desert, and she loved it there. She loved the sunsets that filled the sky with gold and purple, the brown and red land, and the wide open spaces. Her father loved Lake Mead and Lake Mohave, and they had spent countless hours in his boat, exploring the shoreline and

peering up onto the jagged cliff walls, streaked with black lines as if someone had painted them. At home in Las Vegas her bedroom looked out onto a courtyard with red cobblestones and rosemary that hung from small alcoves on the wall. A white oleander grew in the corner. Isabel thought her view at home was beautiful, and she didn't know what to think of the lush, withering landscape of Georgia.

A gust of wind blew against the window, and Isabel heard the clink of leaves as they tumbled down the side of the house. Mrs. Beauchamp opened the back door of her house and stepped outside. When Isabel saw her, curiosity overtook her sleepiness. She pulled herself up and leaned against the windowsill. She had not seen the elderly woman since she had visited Mammy. At the time, Mammy had sneered at Mrs. Beauchamp through her back screen door and called her a witch. But Mrs. Beauchamp didn't look anything like a witch. She was elegant. Though her hair was white, it was cut short and sassy. She wore designer sweat outfits. Even now, Isabel could see she wore a nice pair of green pants with a matching coat. A thin, green line ran down the side of her pant leg. She was trim for her age and petite. She walked with a quick step. The only thing that gave away her age was her hair, which she didn't dye like Mammy had.

Isabel watched Mrs. Beauchamp take a trowel and a little bucket and walk into her garden. She squatted down and began to dig, placing something in the holes. Isabel stretched her neck and placed her nose against the glass, but she couldn't see what Mrs. Beauchamp was planting.

"Witch," she whispered. Her breath spread a steamy, crooked shape across the windowpane.

"Izzy!" Isabel's mother called from the kitchen.

Isabel's heart sank. It was the first day in a new school, and she dreaded going. She sat watching the old woman stooped in her yard, wondering why her grandmother never liked her.

When her mother called her again, she unwound herself from the warm, soft comforter.

Isabel padded into the kitchen, listening to the old pine floors creak under her feet. The house seemed spooky to her. So unlike the condo that her parents owned in Las Vegas. Dressed and ready to go, she plunked down at the table. Susan Montgomery picked at the stack of paper plates on the counter and handed her one.

“Good morning, *slow poke*,” Susan said.

Isabel said nothing.

Her mother handed Isabel two pieces of toast and an apple, and then she slid the butter and strawberry jam across the table.

“I already ate,” Susan said. Isabel stuck a corner of the toast into her mouth.

Susan shuffled the newspaper that was laid out on the table, and she turned the page, but she didn’t read it. Instead, she grinned at Isabel.

“I got an interview at the newspaper today.”

“Really? When?” Isabel spoke with her mouth full.

“2:30. So I might not be on time to pick you up from school, okay?”

“I’ll just walk home.”

“Oh, but I want to pick you up! It’s your first day at a new school!”

“It’s 9th grade, Mom. *Not* first. I can walk home by myself.”

Isabel felt her mother’s eyes burn into her face while she bit into the toast. Another flutter of leaves cascaded down the side of house. They turned to watch them through the window above the kitchen sink.

“You know,” said Susan, “If you want to wait a few days to go to school that would be okay. I mean, you just got here, your grandmother just died...I could explain it to them.”

“I want to go.” Isabel dropped the last bite of toast onto her plate and slouched in her chair.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Might as well get it over with.” Isabel smashed the crispy crust into the center of her paper plate. She didn’t touch the apple.

Susan frowned. “Well--”

“Mom, why didn’t daddy come to Mammy’s funeral?”

There was a long silence, and Isabel could see the discomfort in her mother’s face.

Susan closed the newspaper and folded it up. “With the divorce and all--”

“But still,” Isabel interrupted. “I mean, it would have been appropriate, wouldn’t it? And if he had come, I could’ve come. Why couldn’t I have come?” The words spilled out before she knew what she was saying.

“Izzy! Stop. I went over this with you already. Things were hectic. There was so much to be done. I just needed...” She trailed off.

“I could have helped you,” Isabel said. She knew her mother could not handle confrontation. Even though her parents just got divorced, her grandmother died, and she moved across the country to live with her mother in an old house they inherited, her mother would never speak to Isabel about any of it. Isabel knew her mother would continue to cry at night while shut inside her bedroom, and she would never discuss any of her plans for the future. Isabel wanted to scream at top of her lungs: “I HATE YOU, MOTHER! I HATE YOU! You’ve ruined my life, and I hate you!” But she sat there across from her mother and asked questions instead.

“Did Mrs. Beauchamp come to the funeral?” Isabel’s voice was flat and sultry like a hot summer day.

Susan looked up. “Why?”

Isabel let out a breath in annoyance. “She’s her neighbor, and she’s the one that *found her*, right?”

Susan stood up, took the plates to the garbage can and threw them in. Then she began to clean up the kitchen, keeping her back to her daughter.

“I think so. Yes, she did. I remember speaking to her at the wake.”

“I thought Mammy hated her?”

“Well, I don’t know about *hate*. They used to be good friends. Like you said, they were neighbors.” She sighed. “Izzy, I don’t have *time* for this. Why all these questions all of a sudden? We need to get you to school.”

“Are you going to sell the house?” Isabel asked.

Susan stopped. She opened her mouth as if to scold Isabel again, but then she inhaled and spoke softly.

“This house? Well, no, I don’t think so.” She paused. “Boy, Mammy would be mad at me if I did that, wouldn’t she?”

“She’s dead.”

“I *know*. But being here...I feel like she’s watching me or something.”

Isabel stared at her mother. Susan Montgomery was short and trim. She dressed well and tried to hide the small fold of fat forming around her middle. She wore her brown hair short in a way that flattered her face. Most people would consider her pretty for 45, though not extraordinary. She had an air of someone who had once been the center of attention - perhaps early in life or when she was a young woman, like Isabel. She could speak well and knew how to flatter people, though sensitive souls might find her a bit phony in a way that suggested she was bred to show only the brighter side of life.

Isabel was growing fast for fifteen. Like her mother, she was an only child, but she longed

for a sibling. Now that her parents were divorced, she wanted someone to talk to. To discuss the fights. The language. The things that were not said. She was smart enough to know the divorce was not her fault, but she grew tired of her mother's silence. She wouldn't tell Isabel why they divorced, but Isabel had many guesses. If she had a sibling, she would have someone to guess with, but being alone, she kept these things to herself. Sometimes she had an inner dialogue with herself, as if she had a sister or brother. It helped a little, but not enough.

On her last day of school in Las Vegas, before she flew to Georgia to join her mother, Isabel's favorite teacher, Mrs. Hammond, said that Isabel looked sad, but she thought that moving to Georgia would give Isabel and her mother a fresh start. Why did she need a fresh start? Why did moving across the country and away from her father give her a fresh start? Not that she was very close to her father, but she thought it would be strange to never see him. It hurt Isabel that her father let her go so easily. He didn't ask her what she wanted. He had only said it was for the best, and she could visit him whenever she wanted to.

Mammy's house smelled earthy like rotting leaves. The kitchen cabinets were painted blue like the outside of the house. It wasn't a happy blue, Isabel thought. It reminded her of bruises and gas stations. Isabel thought the room was dismal, but as she sat there, the sunlight through the windows grew brighter. It changed the atmosphere. She didn't want it to change, so she got up and left.

Isabel went to her room and grabbed her book bag with all her school notes from her former school. She had left all the books behind. In the front pocket, there was a note from her friend, Rachel. She had sat next to her in English class. She ran her fingers over the pocket, but she didn't take out the note, thinking it might make her cry. When she walked back into the kitchen, her mother was standing by the door with her purse over her shoulder and jingling the car keys in her hand.

Isabel's new school was a large brick building with three floors. As they pulled into the long driveway that curled around the front of the building, Isabel stared at all the windows that reflected the sky and huge, old maple trees lining the curb.

"It's so different," she said. Her school in Las Vegas had been one story and shaped like an airport terminal with classrooms clustered in pods at the end of four long hallways. These branched out from the center of the building, which held the cafeteria and main offices.

"This is the school I went to," Susan said, leaning over her steering wheel to peer out the windshield.

"No kidding?"

"Yep. Where did you think I went?"

"I don't know. Aren't there other schools around here?"

"Yeah. But this one is closest to our house. It's the house I grew up in."

Isabel hadn't thought about where her mother went to school. She had never imagined her mother being her age.

The parking lot was full of cars, but it was quiet. School was already in session. A few students lingered at one end of the building, and Isabel could tell by looking at them that they were cutting class. Her mother didn't seem to notice. They walked up the long sidewalk leading to the main doors, and her mother rushed ahead to open the big, wooden doors, which were heavy and creaked when she pulled one open.

"It hasn't changed," Susan said.

The interior of the school was predictable. There were several glass cabinets on either side of the hallway holding various trophies, and there were huge framed pictures on the wall that showcased all the alumni of the school. Susan rushed down the hall, looking at the portraits.

“Mom!” Isabel hissed. Though no one was in the hallway, she turned bright red.

“Here!” Susan stopped and pointed.

Isabel walked up to her. She peered at the photograph. There were about one hundred students standing on the bleachers in the football stadium. Her mother pointed to one of the girls out front, wearing a cheerleading costume and holding two batons.

“That’s me.”

“That’s you?!” Isabel stared at the picture. “You were a *cheerleader*?”

“Majorette. I twirled the batons!”

“Oh. My. God.” Isabel stared at the picture. It was in black and white, and her mother stood smiling along with four other girls who looked proud to be in the forefront of the picture.

“We need to find the office,” Susan said, though she kept staring at the photo.

Susan seemed amused, and she looked at everything as she walked down the hallway. Isabel walked slowly, staying far behind her, and she couldn’t believe that she never knew her mother was a cheerleader. It occurred to her that if she went to school at the same time as her mother, she would probably hate her.

Though the outside of the building had looked old-fashioned to Isabel, the office looked new. The carpet had that new smell, and the desks looked like they were just purchased from an office supply store. The receptionist smiled and motioned for them to sit down since she was talking on the phone. After she hung up, she said, “May I help you?” in a very southern accent. The nameplate on her desk said Sally Haas.

“I called earlier. My name is Susan Montgomery. My daughter, Isabel, is new here, and she needs to be enrolled.”

“Oh yes! Mrs. Montgomery, it’s so nice to meet you! And Isabel! Welcome to Clarkville High School! I *know* you’re going to like it here. Your mama told me you like art, and we got

ourselves a wonderful art teacher, Mr. Sallisaw. You're gonna be in his class during second period."

At that, she pulled out a folder and a clipboard with a small stack of paperwork on it.

"School's only been in session for less than a month, so you don't have to worry about doing much catch-up, do you? That's lucky!" The way she spoke reminded Isabel of water sloshing back and forth in a bucket, rising on one side, sliding to the other. It was at once a song and a garble. "Now, I'm sorry that our principal, Mrs. Wright, is in a meeting this morning, or she would be here to greet you. But she told me that I could go ahead and orient Miss Montgomery and then take her down to her homeroom." She looked at her notes and then at Isabel. "It's also your English class. That's your first period. In homeroom they take attendance and..." The phone rang, and Mrs. Haas gestured for them to wait. After forwarding the call, she continued.

She handed the folder to Isabel. "This here has a map of the school and other information for you. This is a closed campus, meaning you can't leave at all during the day without permission from this office."

Isabel listened patiently as Mrs. Haas rattled off other useless information. At times she glanced around the office, which was bright and airy. Two philodendrons cascaded down from high bookshelves. Two other women were sitting at desks, and one male student sat sullenly in a chair outside an office. Voices drifted out from the office door. None of them paid any attention to Isabel or her mother. The windows along the back wall looked out at the tennis courts and beyond that, a baseball field.

In a few minutes Mrs. Haas was leading Isabel and her mother down the school's long hallway, up a staircase and then down another long hallway. As they passed the classrooms, they peered inside at the students, slumped in their chairs, some of them half asleep, others

taking notes. In one classroom the students were sitting in a circle, and they were laughing.

“They look so *old*,” Susan said.

“No, they don’t.” Isabel whispered. But she knew what her mother was talking about. The seniors looked ten years older than she was, not three. They possessed bodies that looked years older than their brains. Their clothes were scant. The girls wore make-up, and the boys lifted weights. Anything to make themselves seem bigger and older than they were. It was the same way at her school in Las Vegas, but Susan had never visited that school, so how would she know?

Dread crept over Isabel. Then fear. Until now, she had suppressed the anxiety of attending a new school, but now that she was here, she couldn’t ignore it. School back home was bad enough. She felt small and insignificant there, but at least she had a few friends. They stayed together and ignored the popular kids.

“I...I need to go to the bathroom,” she said.

Susan and Mrs. Haas stopped and looked at each other.

“Sure.” Mrs. Haas smiled. “It’s right there. We’ll wait.”

Isabel left her mother and Mrs. Haas and entered a narrow, cold bathroom. On the left was a row of sinks and a long mirror that reflected the red stalls and toilets on the other side. A fresh coat of white paint covered the faint scribbling of graffiti on the walls. Isabel walked over to one of the sinks and lowered her book bag to the ground. She stared at herself in the mirror.

Three people had told her she was pretty: her mother, her best friend, and the first and only boy she had kissed. The first two did not count, and she never knew whether to believe the boy. She desperately wanted to, especially in moments like these when she was about to walk into a classroom of strangers. They would all stare at her. She looked closely at the mirror, studying what they would see. Light brown hair, thin eyebrows, a thin nose, and round pink cheeks. Her

eyes were big and brown. For the first time since she arrived in Georgia, they began to fill up with tears.

“Oh great.” She sputtered and blinked back the tears. She wore a little make-up, and she didn’t want to ruin it. She picked up her book bag and rummaged through the front pocket. She pulled out her press powder and lipstick and added another layer. Then she added more blush. She didn’t have any eyeliner or mascara, but she had eye shadow, so she put that on. She kept staring into the mirror.

“Welcome to your new school, *freak!*” she said to the mirror. She snatched up the bag and walked back into the hallway.

Her mother looked annoyed, and Mrs. Haas looked at ease.

“This class session is almost over, Isabel! I was about to come and get... What did you do?!” Susan stared at her face.

Isabel said nothing.

“Let’s get going,” Mrs. Haas intercepted. “It’s right over here.”

“Mom,” Isabel pleaded. “Please don’t come into the classroom with me, okay?”

Susan looked as though she had a hundred things she wanted to say to Isabel, but instead she wiped her fingers across Isabel’s cheeks and whispered, “A little bright. There.”

Then Susan stepped back. “It’s going to be fine. Good luck.”

Isabel felt the urge to cry again. She wanted to burrow her head into her mother’s shoulder, but instead she followed Mrs. Haas over to the large door with the number 215A painted on it.

When they walked inside, the classroom became very quiet, and all the students looked over at Mrs. Haas and the new girl. Isabel barely heard Mrs. Haas speaking to the teacher, Mrs. Nagano, a blond-haired, blue-eyed six-foot Amazon woman. Isabel’s eyes swam over all the

faces in her first class. She recognized no one, of course. Whenever she began the new year at home, she would scan the faces in each class to see who she knew. She always hated the classrooms where no friend or acquaintance appeared. Today there would be six classrooms full of students she didn't know. Although she had to admit, she was surviving the first stare-down. No one appeared that threatening except perhaps for the boy in the last row, in the farthest seat, who stared at her intently with black eyes, black hair, a strong jaw line and a five o'clock shadow. Isabel averted her eyes from him, and when she did, they landed on a girl who smiled at her. The girl was neither pretty nor ugly. Her face was long and narrow, her eyes big and green, and her lips were thin. She had a lanky body, and Isabel could tell she was tall even though she was sitting down. She was ungainly, but something about her told Isabel that she was nice. Fortunately, there was an empty desk next to her. When Mrs. Haas instructed her to sit down, Isabel went to that desk, walking down the aisle, looking at the floor until she reached the desk. Then she looked up at the girl who was still smiling.

Mrs. Nagano picked up a stack of papers on her desk and stepped forward. "Isabel, perhaps Edie can help you today. She can show you the ropes."

Isabel nodded and looked at the girl, hopeful that she was Edie. Edie nodded and jutted out a hand toward Isabel. Surprised, Isabel shook it gently, hearing someone laugh softly in the back of the class. For the first time that morning, Isabel smiled.

"Edie Sommers," Edie said.

"I'm Isabel," Isabel whispered. She gestured toward Mrs. Nagano. "She doesn't look Chinese."

"Japanese," Edie whispered back. "And it's her married name."

"Oh."

Mrs. Nagano began to talk about a paper the class had already written while she passed it

back to the students. Isabel took the time to look around the class. It was large and airy like the main office, very unlike her school in Las Vegas that did not have windows in the classrooms. Wherever there wasn't a window, there was a bookshelf, and most of them were full of books. Two, white dry erase boards were behind Mrs. Nagano's desk, and a list of book titles were written on the right side. Isabel had read one of them last year in her English class: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou. She loved that book. She hoped it was an assignment here so that she wouldn't have to read it.

The bell rang. When Isabel looked surprised, Edie said, "You got here late."

Isabel rose reluctantly. Edie grabbed her folder and opened it to Isabel's class schedule.

"Where are you going next? Oh hey! You got math with me in third period! You got art next. Mr. Sallisaw. He's cool. I can show you the way. I got P.E. Oh my god. You are sooo lucky. You don't have P.E. until 6th period! You don't have to walk around sweating all day!"

Isabel felt like she was in a weird dream. She picked up her book bag and followed Edie. Outside the classroom, she kept her head down, glancing up intermittently, but no one seemed to notice her. A moment ago the hallways were empty, but now they were a frenzy of activity. Voices bounced off the walls and ceilings. Lockers slammed shut.

"I didn't get a locker," Isabel said. She was aware that Edie kept talking, but she hadn't listened to what she said.

"Oh, you'll have to go back to the office for that. You can do it at lunchtime. Hey, you got lunch right after third period too. Here we are."

They had stopped in front of a room, and when Isabel peered in, she could tell it was the art room. It was large, and it was the first room she had seen without windows. The walls were decorated with student's artwork. Most of it was very good from what Isabel could see. She stood in the doorway with Edie while other students flowed around them like a river through the

crevices of earth.

Edie smiled at her. "I'll see you in 3rd period."

"Okay. Ugh, thanks." She was grateful that Edie had not asked if she needed help because she would have said no.

"You've got third period up on the third floor. Just take those stairs. It isn't hard to find."

Edie spoke confidently, and yet there was something awkward about her. She did not fit into her olive brown skin. She did not fit into her tall, lanky body. She wore glasses that were too small for her face.

Isabel sighed and turned toward the art room. Mr. Sallisaw was staring at her with a *you must be the new girl* look. When she turned back, Edie was gone, but across the hall was the guy from first period with the black eyes, and they were staring right at Isabel.