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LIGHTNING IN A MASON JAR

A Novel

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MANN

LAKE UNION
PUBLISHING

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To all the women who've lived in the shadows

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PROLOGUE

1971

Changing my identity and leaving behind everything familiar should have been difficult. Traumatic, even. Except it wasn't. Because from birth, we women aren't tethered to our names. Marriage may turn a Jane Smith into Jane Brown or Jane Jones. Or into Jane Smith Brown Jones through widowhood or divorce, followed by remarriage.

Even the connection to a first name is tenuous when spoken. "Introducing Mrs. John Smith" would be followed with a whisper like a distorted echo . . .

"Her husband's a *doctor*."

"Her baby d-i-e-d."

"She's barren."

As if a woman's entire worth, her sum total sense of self, were tied into her ring finger and uterus. A Mrs. or a mom.

Could those hushed voices be that oblivious to the world exploding with marches and rallies, bra burnings and sit-ins? I wasn't. I cheered those women on from my living room, images flickering across my new color television set, the wooden cabinet kind that dominated its own corner where once a tiny black and white had rested on an antique tea cart.

This was more than simply incinerating cotton and lace. It was like a broken bottle being melted and reshaped by an emerging sisterhood, a revolutionary sorority.

The world was changing, and that bigger, brighter screen gave me an expanded peek. Decorated with family portraits and silk flowers on top, the Magnavox invited me on a nightly news date to watch *them*. I was proud of *them* and all *they* were battling to achieve. I was also thankful for my safe life

that protected *me* from being *them*. What a comfortable place to exist, in that cottony swaddle of complacency.

So yes, I expected the changes that began when my father gave away the bride. Giving *me* away to Phillip, as if I were a possession passed over to a neighbor like a handsaw or a charcoal grill—or the tiny black-and-white television—he no longer needed but still thought of fondly. Although if I'd been a brighter color TV, I might have been wanted. Still objectified, but not discarded.

However, I accepted, and at that time embraced, my new identity as Phillip's wife, even if it meant losing a part of myself. No one forced me to walk down the aisle in my mother's white lace gown that itched, with my hair piled on my head, anchored by Aqua Net that stung my eyes and bobby pins that scarred my scalp. Nobody insisted I put aside completing college to start a family right away. I made my own choices. At least I thought I did.

Then I began doubting even my tiniest of decisions. I forgot to buy slaw for supper, even though Phillip insisted he'd written it on the list I'd anchored to the refrigerator with a banana-shaped magnet—a list I now couldn't locate. But no need to be upset or melodramatic. Didn't I know how much he treasured me?

I thought I'd put the credit card in my wallet as always, except it was in the medicine cabinet. No wonder a husband had to sign the application for a Master Charge card. Perhaps he should keep it from now on. If I wanted extra cash, I only had to ask him and he would increase my household allowance. Money that came from my trust fund.

Maybe I just needed rest. I should cancel the cruise to Mexico with his parents. Send our regrets for my class reunion. Leave behind sad reminders of my dead parents and relocate to the country for fresh air, where we could build my dream studio for glassblowing. Didn't I want to get back to my art? Eventually. Once I was myself again.

Except time went by, feeling more and more strange. And as I lost my bearings, my husband retreated from me in ways that unnerved me. Who

was he to become the expert on my mental health? And why did I feel better the days when he traveled for work? The weeks when he left for conferences?

By increments my world grew smaller and smaller, until that day, the worst day, when *I* became one of *them*. My cottony swaddle of complacency split open to reveal a light so blinding it sliced through me like the electroshock therapy that followed. Therapy that Phillip had been quick to suggest. Quick to approve.

In the silence that followed came a soul-deep realization. Phillip intended to keep me institutionalized forever and take what was mine for himself. Who knew when he'd made that decision? Surely not from the start. After the miscarriages? The stillbirth? Or simply because he could. Now that my parents were gone, who would stop him?

Except he underestimated me. Or overestimated himself. He could steal the money, my name, even a piece of my sanity. But he couldn't steal *me*. Which meant I had the most important choice of my life, the first I made completely on my own.

I had to run.

The details of how I managed to escape the hospital aren't important yet. Those secrets are carefully guarded, doled out in increments to only the most trusted in what has become my network—my life's work, you could say. To protect those with the greatest need.

All you have to know for now? I embraced the reality of my own making, being one of *them*. Helping the most vulnerable of *them* when they need to run as well.

Ask me who I am or where I'm from? Eloise Carlisle Curtis is a faint specter, ostracized to the dim recesses of my mind. I rarely think of my life in Mobile, Alabama, anymore, of my marriage, of my art. Of my daughter. In fact, it's better that way since a whisper of that time threatens my present, even my hard-won sanity.

Today? My name is Winnie Ballard. I'm from Bent Oak, South Carolina, where I work in the paper mill.

But tomorrow? Well, like I said, I'm not tethered to something so inconsequential as a name.

CHAPTER ONE

2025

Without Aunt Winnie, nothing anchored Bailey Rae Rigby to backwoods Bent Oak, South Carolina, anymore.

Only a month left until she could hitch her vintage Airstream behind her F-250 and hightail it out of this town to Myrtle Beach, where she would fulfill the dream of the woman who'd raised her. She just had to survive the next four Saturdays at the Bent Oak Farmers' Market settling Aunt Winnie's affairs in an estate sale—flea-market style.

How fitting.

Bailey Rae leaped onto the tailgate of her eighteen-year-old truck parked behind her stall. She grabbed a can of bug repellent from her backpack and showered herself in an aloe-scented haze. Pitiful protection against Southern mosquitoes hatching from swamps in an endless horde.

Aunt Winnie had been gone for sixty-seven days.

Tears still welled up without warning at the least reminder of the person Bailey Rae loved more than any individual on the planet. But there wasn't time to grieve. The estate wasn't going to settle itself.

As she hefted a crate of canned tomatoes—five dollars a jar—she could hear Winnie's voice insisting that estate was a hoity-toity word for a barn full of clutter.

"Aunt" had been an honorary title, since Winnie had been more of a mother than the woman who only came around when she didn't have a better offer from a man. Bailey Rae never quite understood why Aunt Winnie had kept her or why child services never intervened. But thank heaven for unexplained blessings. Time to move forward, to leave behind all those painful memories plastered all over Bent Oak like out-of-date wallpaper.

The weight of gossipy stares beat down on her shoulders, fierce as the Southern sun. Heavy. Unrelenting. Weightier than ever on market day, with the field packed full of vendors and early shoppers, even a police cruiser on duty to monitor the expected crowd. She'd long ago learned to pretend indifference, a survival mechanism to withstand the whispers about her mom and Aunt Winnie, not to mention being a reject kid. Still, for some reason, today the small-town, judgy vibe really put her on edge when she needed to focus on unloading the first batch of loot from Winnie's farm.

Her farm now. She blinked away the tears and got back to work.

One box after another. So. Much. Stuff.

How could a person possibly have expected to consume hundreds of jars of home-canned goods? Who needed seven microwaves, twenty-two quilts, and three crates of the same cookbook?

Yep. Buy three jars, get a cookbook for free. With any luck, she would only have a kajillion of them left at the end of the next four weeks.

A muggy breeze drifted through the open-air market at the end of Main Street, which wasn't much more than two blocks with old storefronts. At least a quarter of them sported SPACE FOR RENT signs in the front window. The library perched on the other end of the road, a redbrick building that had once been a schoolhouse. And one street back, along the river, the paper mill loomed, a stark steel building. Even with upgrades, it still looked like a relic from a bygone era, and somehow, Aunt Winnie had survived working there for thirty years.

No doubt about it, the town was dying. Well, for six days a week, anyway. On market day, though? Bent Oak came alive.

Farmers and artisans set up their booths. Livestock bleated, watched over by the 4-H kids ready to educate. The scent of hay bales and grilled hot dogs filled the air. A local pickup band tuned their instruments and performed a sound check before warming up with a beach tune, the heartbeat of South Carolina no matter how far from the sandy shores.

Pausing for a water break, Bailey Rae chugged half the bottle, then used the rest to refill Skeeter's metal bucket. The old hound mix peered up at her

from under the truck, his leash hooked to a leg of her chair. Skeeter's eyes were two different colors. When he looked up with the brown one, like now, he was all soul. The day promised to be a long one, and she hadn't wanted him to be lonely, so she'd brought him along. He'd been extra clingy since losing Aunt Winnie.

"Hang in there, pup. Before you know it, we'll be living in Myrtle Beach, proud owners of a food truck by the ocean, just like Aunt Winnie always talked about."

It wasn't a big dream. But it was hers now, along with one of those cookbooks for inspiration.

As she scooted along the truck bed to grab another crate, a honking horn drew her attention. A familiar minivan careened across the field on shock absorbers long past their expiration date.

She should have known Winnie's three best friends would show up, even though she hadn't asked. And yes, while it was only one vehicle, they always traveled in a flock.

Of course they had come today. They would want to honor Winnie every bit as much as Bailey Rae did.

The minivan kicked up a cloud of dust as they drove past the 4-H booth and a slushy stand before pulling up alongside her truck.

"Yoo-hoo." Waving, Libby Farrell leaned out of a back window, her thick braid swinging free. "Never fear, the reinforcements are here."

The driver's side door creaked open, with June Evans behind the wheel. It wasn't her van, but she chauffeured whenever Libby's son, Keith, was unavailable to help his widowed mom.

June grabbed the doorframe and hopped out. "Bailey Rae, honey, dry your eyes. The party has arrived."

Barely five feet tall, June sported a neon-pink streak through her bobbed graying hair today. Blue last month. Highlights, lowlights, she changed her hair color on a regular basis. June once said hair was her way of appearing relevant to the students at the community college where she taught women's lit. She still hadn't recovered from the rejection of her

submission for a class based on an Ivy League college course called “Feminist Perspectives, Politicizing Taylor Swift.”

Bailey Rae lifted her ponytail off her sweaty neck. “Love the rosy stripe. I see you’re the designated driver.”

Nodding, June hip-bumped the door closed. “Keith had a job interview, but he’ll be along shortly.”

Keith always had another job interview.

The passenger-side door opened, and a disdainful snort sounded ahead of the woman who’d never thought much of Keith Farrell. Thea Tyler was overdressed as usual in a Chanel-style suit that had been around for at least two decades. Some said she took her role as a councilman’s wife a bit too seriously.

Judgmental gossips.

Then the side panel rolled away and a wheelchair ramp cranked out for Libby, frail and holding a picnic basket on her lap. A cane was hooked on the armrest if needed, since her mobility, though limited, was not entirely gone. June guided the wheelchair carefully onto the packed earth.

Thea held a handkerchief as she activated the remote to retract the ramp. “We’ve brought sweet tea—”

Libby interrupted, patting the basket. “And Southern Comfort for later.”

Bailey Rae hopped off the tailgate, then shifted a crate to the table. “Surely you have something better to do with your time than help me sell off all this . . .” She waved toward the boxes under the table and stacked in the back of her truck. “Well, you know what a collector Aunt Winnie could be.”

Thea stuffed the handkerchief into her leather handbag, the small type like Queen Elizabeth had always carried. The kind that, no matter how big or small, couldn’t contain all the mystery of the aloof wearer. “And that’s why we’re here. Libby even circled the date on her calendar.”

Bailey Rae grieved over how calendars had become more and more a part of Libby’s world lately, a memory aid that sometimes worked. Other times, not.

Libby released the brakes on her wheelchair and wheeled herself over the packed earth to the table. Grinning, she patted a jar of peaches. "Don't let Winnie catch you snitching any of these from her stash. She saves those for your Uncle Russell."

Silence fell, cut only by strains of the pickup band playing "My Girl." One minute Libby could recall that the picnic basket contained Southern Comfort, and the next she couldn't remember that Russell had been dead for years and her very best friend had been gone for two months.

Sixty-seven days. No body to bury.

As best they could reconstruct from footprints, Winnie had walked from her cabin to swim in the nearby river, only to be carried away by the current that had claimed a fisherman just this week as well. Her striped sack had snagged on a downed tree, just barely protruding from the muddy water. A tragic accident. Or had her grief over losing Uncle Russell finally led her to that shoreline?

Bailey Rae's fingers clenched around the amber jar. "Aunt Winnie canned so many, she's okay with me sharing the extras."

That seemed a benign-enough answer that would fit in whatever time frame Libby's mind currently embraced.

Thea skimmed her gloved hands along a stack of quilts, the one on top a scrap pattern made with old clothes. "I understand needing to clear out some of Winnie's clutter, but are you sure you want to sell the cabin too? It's not too late to change your mind."

"It's time. I'll still come to visit." Bailey Rae had zero regrets about leaving Bent Oak, but the people . . . this makeshift family of no blood relation . . . she would miss them dearly.

June grapevined to the music, her feet dancing pinwheels in the dirt as she carried a box of wind chimes crafted from kitchen utensils. "Why would she want to stay here? The town's old and dying. Like us."

"Shush your mouth," Thea said. "Bailey Rae, honey, you don't have to sell off everything." Easy for Thea to say, thanks to her husband's

generational wealth and her sharp mind for investments. “We’ll give you the money for the start-up cost of your food truck.”

The wheelchair rattled over rocks as Libby joined them. “Then if things don’t work out in Myrtle Beach with the food truck business, you can just pull up stakes on the Airstream and come on back.”

They were like Winnie that way. Generous. But something about the way Bailey Rae had lived the first six years of her life made it tough to accept help. Even owning the farm made her as itchy as sitting in a bed of chiggers.

The cabin and three riverfront acres had actually belonged to Uncle Russell, a quiet man with a genius mind when it came to anything with an engine. Everyone assumed he and Winnie were married, but she’d always insisted a piece of paper didn’t mean squat.

He’d died six years ago and left the farmhouse to Bailey Rae, with the provision that Winnie could live there for the rest of her life. When Bailey Rae had asked the attorney why the will had been structured that way, the lawyer said it was easier legally. Which didn’t make sense. Had Russell been angry with Winnie over not marrying him, even though he never said as much? Bailey Rae had been too busy mourning the great man to untangle his motives.

And now she mourned them both. A double loss that choked her, surrounded by all these memories.

“Thank you, Thea,” Bailey Rae said. “That’s a truly generous offer. But I’m not moving back, so selling makes the most sense.”

“Well, then,” June said, even though the fight hadn’t left her eyes, “at least we get to keep you until the Fourth of July.” She gave Bailey Rae a swift hug, one of those firm kinds that hurt a little as it reminded a person of the tender spots on their heart.

“Ladies?” Thea whispered, which should have been a big red flag coming from the usually assertive woman. She pointed across the field toward the tractor supply store’s parking lot.

Squinting in the sun, Bailey Rae saw a pair of teenage boys wearing camo and an air of troublemaking. Both stood in the back of a shiny pickup

with a huge crate.

A bolted-down crate filled with an angry wild pig.

A beast charging the grate, tusks gleaming.

Bailey Rae had lived in this town long enough to recognize that those mischief-making boys were about to set that crazed hog loose in the middle of a crowded market.

And people wondered why she couldn't wait to put Bent Oak in her rearview mirror.