

S. K. WATERS

A murder long ago. A secret buried deep. A truth never spoken.

THE
DEAD
WON'T
TELL

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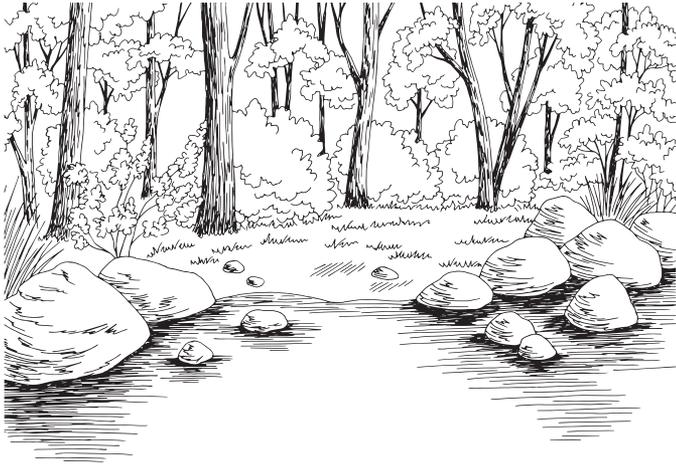
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PROLOGUE

July 25, 1969, 12:41 a.m., Hunts Landing

A crid sulfur from the fireworks faded with the nighttime breeze. Dr. Theodore Wexler held up his glass—red flashes from the police cars on the Quad pulsed chestnut in the bourbon. *Pulse. Pulse.* The cadence matched his heartbeat, steadier now, settled after this disrupted day of jubilee.

“Damn.”

Fourteen hours ago, Armstrong, Aldrin, and Collins had splashed down into the tranquil waters of the Pacific, and the town had erupted in celebration. Engineers from Hunts Landing College—a small school on the Tennessee River—were instrumental in getting those men home safely. Their success ensured prestige and rewards. Theodore, the college president, had spent his day dreaming of accolades and endowments.

Now, however, his thoughts simmered.

Pulse. Pulse.

Wexler House stood elevated above the Quad. From the French doors of his study, he could inspect every corner of the common. He sipped twenty-six-year-old Pappy Van Winkle. The bourbon had been a reward, purchased three years ago when the college won the NASA contract, saved for today and stored in a particular nook in the cellar. Wexler had intended it for tonight's party.

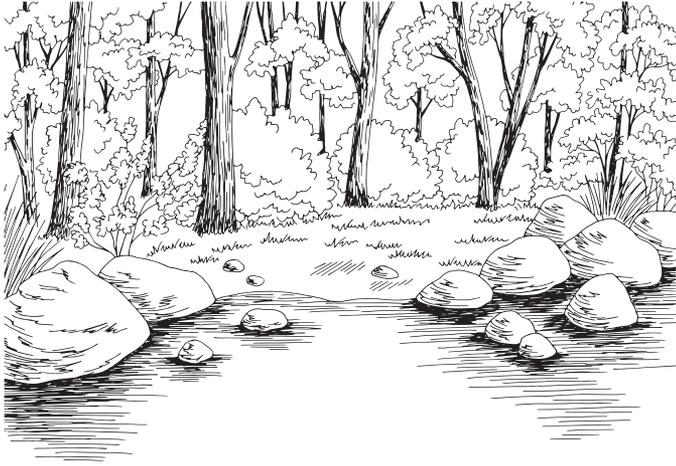
Instead, only after the guests left, and he could brood in peace, did he send Cyrus to fetch the Pappy. Now the bottle sat half empty.

Earlier, there'd been some fracas on the Quad. He'd observed the squad cars arrive with disinterest. If the incident involved any students, campus police would handle the situation. He would deal with the aftermath in the morning. No, his thoughts returned to the thick manila envelope on his desk, its contents strewn on his blotter.

Oblivious to the fiery liquid trickling down his throat, he sipped and contemplated. The implications of those papers tumbled through his thoughts as if he stood in the shadows of a snow-covered mountain, unable to escape the avalanche hurtling toward him. Yes, avalanche. The appropriate metaphor. The contents of the envelope could bury the college.

"Damn and damn again."

Like a chess player, he considered his first move, his second move, then a third, before discarding them all as futile and unlikely to save the school from exposure. Glass empty, he refilled it, three fingers' worth. His sister Nevelyn, who'd taken over management of the household (and of Theodore as well, if he would be truthful) after Theodore had been widowed, would disapprove. At the moment, though, he didn't care a bit what Nevelyn thought. He turned back to the open doors. There were more red lights now, from more squad cars than the campus police had in its fleet. Someone must have called in the town cops. With a scowl, he downed his drink. Allowing himself one final "Damn!", he swept the cursed papers into his desk drawer, and went out through the French doors.



CHAPTER ONE

Wednesday, March 11, 2015, 8:59 a.m., The Hunts Landing Times

Abbie Adams's loose fist hovered inches away from the engraved nickel nameplate reading *Sylvia Van Cleave*, and she wondered again if last night's nightmare, where Sylvia fired her, was coming true.

A summons from the editor of *The Hunts Landing Times* was rare. The last time, a reader had disputed a Sunday feature on worker conditions at the town's old cotton mills, calling the article an utter disparagement of her dear granddaddy Puckett, one of the town's more infamous mill owners.

Abbie had done the research on the piece for Will Irestone, the paper's primary reporter, and although she had double-checked every fact, the Pucketts had persuaded the paper to amend the article with more favorable language.

In Hunts Landing the memory of old money ran long, and its advertising dollars stretched far.

She gripped the strap of her shoulder bag, inhaled, and knocked.

At the terse “Come in!”, she pushed open the door. Stacks of storage boxes littered the floor, Post-It notes covered the windows, and whiteboards crammed with scribbles dominated the walls. The cluttered office satisfied Abbie’s sense of Woodward and Bernstein.

Sylvia Van Cleave’s fingers flew over her keyboard. Her linen suit and silk blouse were crisp and professional, her hair was pulled back into a loose French braid, and the reading glasses perched on the tip of her nose only added to her flair. She extended a hand to the only empty chair but didn’t stop typing with the other. One finger poised over the return key for a moment before she pressed it. “Abbie!” the editor smiled. “Thanks for coming in. We’re in crisis mode today.”

Part of the knot in Abbie’s stomach loosened. At least Sylvia hadn’t led with *You’re fired*.

Sylvia fished a brown file folder from the messy pile on her desk. “Will crashed his Jeep into a cement truck last night.”

Abbie gasped. “Is he alright?”

“On the one hand, yes,” Sylvia said. “A mild concussion and a broken nose from the airbag. The bad part is that the truck crushed his leg. He needs a complete hardware reconstruction. Dammit,” Sylvia shook her head. “There’s no story in Hunts Landing worth speeding in the rain, but that’s exactly what he did last night. No more marathons for Will, and that’s going to really piss him off. After he’s stabilized, he’ll go into surgery.”

Abbie realized she didn’t know much about his private life, only that he was a bachelor. “Is anyone with him?”

“His sister is on her way.” Sylvia handed her the folder. “I’ve farmed out his other assignments, but this one requires your touch. We’re starting a new series for the Sunday edition. The history of Hunts Landing. Events that may have gone unreported or were reported only scantily. Will has begun the first piece, but it’s not finished, and we’ve already sold the advertising. Waiting for his return isn’t an option. Good news for you: you get the by-line.”

A by-line!

Writing credentials were currency in this business.

Terrible that the opportunity came only because of Will's injuries, but gee, *a by-line*. *By Abbie Adams.*

Sylvia motioned toward the folder. "This first story is an unsolved murder from 1969. Campus police found the body of a young Black woman, Rosalie DuFrayne, near the river. Cause of death: blunt force trauma. The police investigation was . . . half-hearted. Even this newspaper didn't seem to care much about the story. You'll find the reporter's notes and an unpublished article draft."

"Why unpublished?"

"No idea. Caleb Jackson covered the murder, but he died in 1989. His editor, Ozzie Etherington, passed four years ago. We can't ask them." She leaned forward. "There are two interesting angles to this story. The first one is the date. July 24, 1969. Do you remember the significance?"

"Of course," Abbie said. Anyone who'd grown up in Hunts Landing knew about the day the astronauts came back from the moon. Hunts Landing scientists had built the rocket systems that carried the Apollo crew into space, and the town still beamed with pride. July 24th was a day of celebration, starting with a parade and ending with parties that lasted all night long.

"That night," Sylvia continued, "there was a party on the college Quad, next to the river. Two hundred yards away, someone brutally killed Rosalie DuFrayne."

Abbie opened the file and found a photograph on top, a yearbook photo perhaps. Rosalie DuFrayne had been a looker, with light brown skin and bright eyes. "The police didn't do much of an investigation?"

"Next to none. That should be high on your list. Racism might have been one of the reasons why the authorities didn't sufficiently investigate the murder and why the paper's coverage was, well, let's say 'anemic.' I believe that's the aspect that Will was exploring."

Only because he didn't grow up here, Abbie thought. As a historian with an addiction for the truth, she wanted to dive right into any and every angle of the story, but as a resident of Hunts Landing, warning-bells pealed in her head. Perhaps forty-five years put enough time and distance between the present and the racial turbulence of the past. Or did it?

Given the viral nature of stories exposing potential racism, she wondered why the paper wanted to touch the topic now. Especially after the Puckett fiasco. “Don’t you think this is a little risky for the paper?”

“It’s part of the history of Hunts Landing,” Sylvia said. “The murder of a Black girl that the police barely investigated and this very paper ignored? That’s a story.”

Abbie leafed through the folder. “You mentioned two interesting angles?”

“A more human aspect of the case. The victim’s mother, Miss Etta DuFrayne, was the Wexler family cook. Rosalie worked with her mother at the Wexlers’ party the night she died.”

Abbie felt the blood drain from her face. “She worked for the Wexlers.”

“Yes.”

“And this is the first story in the series?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Funny thing about family-owned papers,” Sylvia said. “They get to stick their hands in the editorial side of the house. The owners asked for *this* story.”

“Did you know it was Dr. Wexler who shot down my thesis?” Abbie swallowed the sudden trickle of bile she tasted at the back of her throat.

The editor hesitated. “Yes, I knew. But your Dr. Wexler was only nineteen at the time of the murder. Miss Etta worked for his father,

Dr. *Theodore* Wexler. The question is, can *you* be objective about that family?"

"I don't know!" Abbie blurted before she could stop herself. She wanted this assignment, wanted the by-line.

Sylvia took a seat on the armrest of the only other chair. "The board wants this series to tell the untold history of Hunts Landing, and the Wexlers are news in this town. I can't farm this out to someone who doesn't know the place. I need *you*. You're trained as a historian. Objectivity has been *ingrained* in you. Stick to the facts. What happened the night of July 24, 1969? Why didn't the police investigate thoroughly? Why did the paper ignore the story? How were the Wexlers involved? I smell something funny here, and the Wexlers are in the middle of it." Sylvia glanced at her watch. "I've got another meeting. Your article is due next Wednesday—legal will have to review this—and I need artwork by next Thursday. We print next Sunday."

All Abbie had to do to get the by-line was go buy a jumbo bottle of Pepto Bismol to quench the nausea in her gut. After all these years, the Wexler name could still turn her stomach upside down. She tucked the file folder into her satchel. "Any tips on where to start?"

"Go talk to Will at the hospital. Room 227."

"He's about to go into surgery. They won't let me in."

Sylvia stood in dismissal. "Tell them you're Will's baby sister."

Wednesday, March 11th, 7:37 a.m., Santa Monica, CA

Joss Freeman didn't know which crisis he should tackle first: his missing cat, his fiancée's empty closet, or the fallout from the phone call he'd just finished. Lincoln's missing pet carrier combined with the tangled mess of empty wire hangers only partially explained the cat's

disappearance. Harriet loathed the long-haired Persian. Joss had never persuaded her to even pet the animal, let alone attempt to coax Lincoln into a pet carrier he had no intention of getting into. So why would she take him? And why had she left with no phone call, no note?

It wasn't the first time he'd missed a flight home.

Joss left two voicemails. Harriet would return the calls when she was good and ready. He opened the sliding glass door to the balcony. A few blocks away, the Pacific sparkled, a view that usually soothed him. Not today. Not when his career hung by a thread. The third crisis.

Shows got canceled all the time, but none whose hosts had as many social media followers as Joss did. At this moment, the news was going viral on Twitter and Instagram. America's Stories *canceled*. *What will @JossFreemanHistorian do next? #IsHistoryDead?* And some idiot would certainly post some Photoshopped meme of him in a gruesome state of demise.

The channel had called while his plane was in midair, and he hadn't returned the call until he'd landed and was far enough away from LAX that he could drive on autopilot. Stuck in gridlock, he'd been prisoner to the words coming through his car's speakers. *Shift in programming*. America's Stories *doesn't fit into the new concept*.

The ocean was far enough that he could smell the salt in the air but couldn't quite make out the whitecaps on the water. *What to do next*.

He'd never been one to kowtow to the network establishment, which was why he'd been so unsuccessful yesterday. The six-hour flight to New York. The four-hour wait in the lobby of National Media Corporation's headquarters. The scant five minutes during which he attempted to enthrall programming executives with the reasons they should renew *America's Stories*.

Facts had always been his friend. The data was irrefutable. He'd never lost an advertiser. He had more social media followers and friends than all the other series on NMC combined. He couldn't define his ideal viewer because he didn't have one. Retired grandmothers

commented on his posts as often as the high school girls suddenly acing history. Joss loved being able to transform the dull, dusty names and dates from history books into vibrant stories that educated and entertained. His viewership reflected that.

His numbers were better than any other NMC series. Yet, those programming executives delivered the rebuke in seemingly innocent words: *America's Stories doesn't fit into the new concept.*

Joss didn't know what that meant. He didn't have many appealing options. He could pitch to one of the big networks, or he could go the indie route. Either option would compel him to spend more time on the business end of things and less time creating, and, well, creating was the fun part. None of his choices tickled his fancy. His doorbell chimed, and he buzzed in whoever it was without checking. Harriet, maybe? His heart leaped at the possibility.

Instead, Ursula Quinville swept in, a short dynamo with a backpack slung over her shoulder, sunglasses on her head, and readers tucked into her cleavage. "What the hell did you say in New York?" she breathed.

Ursula, his brilliant but excitable producer from the Bahamas, never wasted time on silly things like 'How was your flight?' At the moment, Joss didn't know if he appreciated that characteristic. "All I did was pitch them the profile for a new series. *America's Stories II: 500 Years of Amazing Tales.*"

"And all they did was cancel your old one! Zeesh, Joss, how many times to I have to tell you to leave this stuff to me?" She flung her backpack down onto his sofa. A shoulder strap snagged her readers, which tumbled under the coffee table. "I mean, what were you thinking? To appeal to that fraction of the audience that still thinks all true American history begins with Columbus?"

Joss thought it best not to mention the spectacles. "It's the same problem historians always have with pre-Columbian events. There's no documentation we can refer to."

“Oh, shut up. You hypothesize on camera all the time. You’re the king of *what if*.” Ursula plopped herself onto the sofa next to her knapsack and dug for her phone. “We’ve got one chance to fix this,” she said, and felt beneath her throat for her readers. “Aw, dammit.”

Joss knelt and reached for the missing glasses. “How do we fix it?”

“How do we . . . ?” Her head trembled with the effort at self-control, and Joss could have sworn her jaw was about to become detached from the rest of her face. She pointed a single finger at him, once, hard. “*We* do nothing. *You* will do whatever the new director of programming wants you to do. Which is . . .”—she used the same finger to swipe on her phone—“a treatment on missing treasures from the Civil War.”

Joss stifled his groan. “C’mon, anything but the Civil War.”

“Civil War, Joss. Missing treasures. The new guy’s named Kenetsky and according to his Twitter account he’s a buff. You pitch him a week from Friday.”

The countdown timer ticked in the back of his head. *Nine days times twenty-four hours a day . . .* “What am I supposed to come up with in a week?”

“You’ve gotta dazzle him. Any ideas?”

Too many, not necessarily good ideas, ricocheted through his skull like pinballs run amok. “I need more than twelve seconds.”

“Don’t take too many. You’ve only got nine days.” She picked up her backpack and slung it over her shoulder. “Call me later.” With a kiss on his cheek, she left.

Joss locked the door behind her. *Something new? In nine days?* Did Kenetsky have any idea what he was asking? It took *weeks* of planning, research, prep, and shooting to develop a documentary. The pinballs were heading toward Tilt.

He knew next to nothing about the Civil War, other than that it was an overplayed subject in the documentary universe.

He didn’t have time to do a 101 course on the topic.

What about Abbie Adams?

When they were undergraduates, Joss had shared a house with Abbie and four other students who were at school on athletic scholarships. He and Abbie were the sole academics in the house, spending endless late nights with boxed wine and arguing the finer points of history. During those early years after graduation, they'd remained fairly close. Close enough to manage cross-country visits, although once she'd had her kids, those trips were harder on her. He'd stood in for her husband, Zach, deployed in Iraq, at her daughter's christening.

The Abbie he'd known in college, assiduously passionate about everything historical, who fleshed out multiple research topics before selecting one, just for fun, might be the person Joss needed. He wasn't ashamed to admit that, more than once, he'd taken one of Abbie's rejects to use for his own assignment. Joss was good at telling the story. In fact, he wasn't just good, he was great at it. But finding the story to tell, that's where Abbie shined. Of course.

Abbie was what he needed now. She'd help him come up with something sexy enough for Kenetsky. He activated his headset. "Siri, call Abbie Adams."

Wednesday, 9:49 a.m., Hunts Landing Medical Center

He looks terrible, Abbie thought.

Will Irestone reminded Abbie of a really young Denzel Washington. He was a big guy, who'd played football for Auburn. Today, he looked like the entire offensive line had piled onto him. He sported a swollen and taped nose, a black eye, and a large bandage on his forehead. Butterfly bandages crisscrossed his face. His left arm was in a cast, and the sheer number of machines surrounding him took Abbie's breath away.

Abbie stepped closer to the bed and whispered, “Will.”

His one undamaged eye opened. “Hey, sunshine.” His voice was low, raspy, and he spoke slower than he usually did. He winked at her, then winced.

“Quit that. What did you do to yourself?” Abbie pulled the single chair closer to his bedside.

“Hit a cement truck. Don’t recommend it.” The hint of a grin at the corner of his mouth belied the serious surgery that was only hours away. “I don’t know how much time we have before they come get me, so let’s talk.” His phone, nestled in his right hand, buzzed. He ignored it.

“Does the truck look as bad?”

“The truck didn’t get a morphine drip. I’ll be alright. Focus on the story. It’s a big break for you. Byline, Abbie Adams. You got the folder?”

Abbie pulled it from her bag.

“Caleb Jackson was the reporter in ’69. That there is his file. I didn’t get to dig too deep, but here’s what I found out. Take notes.”

She had already pulled a notepad and pen out of her bag. “Ready.”

“I’m going to record us, ‘cause I’m gonna talk fast.” He swiped with one good thumb twice, then placed the phone on the bed near the edge. “Rosalie DuFrayne, student at Hunts Landing College, found dead by the river the morning of July 25, 1969.” He paused and caught his breath. “Hunts Landing PD in charge. The paper assigns Caleb Jackson to the story. Caleb does his thing, writes a good article, about fifteen column inches. He submits it to his editor. You see some stapled pages in there?”

Two double-spaced typed pages were paper-clipped to a black-and-white photo. Abbie carefully held up the fragile pages, crinkly sheets of old-fashioned typing paper with preprinted margins and blue pencil marks.

“Reporters used to peck out their stories on that kind of paper. That was Caleb’s original article. It was good enough for a blue-pencil

edit. But that's not the version that made the paper. The clippings are in the file. That's it, that's the one."

Abbie held a half-page of yellowed newsprint, with a small article circled in ink. Only two column inches. She read aloud. "Campus police found the body of a Black woman Friday morning in the woods west of Hunts Landing College. Hunts Landing police are treating this case as a homicide." She shook her head slightly. "This is it?"

"Yup. Now, read Caleb's original." He winced again at some pain in his bruised body.

Abbie wondered if the morphine was working. She read again, this time from the typewritten pages.

Campus police found the body of twenty-year-old Rosalie DuFrayne of Hunts Landing early Friday morning in the woods southwest of the campus. "Right now, we're beginning our investigation, and we will not speculate prematurely," Police Chief Kenneth Farrow told reporters. Witnesses last saw Ms. DuFrayne leave the home of Dr. Theodore Wexler, president of Hunts Landing College, where she spent the evening as a domestic. Dr. Wexler's party celebrated the safe return of NASA astronauts from the moon. The Wexler family is not commenting.

Abbie stopped speaking, scanning ahead to the second page. "It's an entire page on Wexler and his party and the school. Nothing more on Rosalie until the end. 'Funeral arrangements to be announced tomorrow.' Is it wrong to say that this is fluff?"

"Exactly what I thought," Will said. "But a lot of fluff about the Wexlers. Now, Caleb left some handwritten notes in the file, legal-size page."

Abbie found the page ripped from a legal pad, covered with doodles and scribbles. Some notes were easy to decipher—Rosalie

was the daughter of Wexler's cook who lived on such-and-such a street, the investigating officer was Officer Turner. A drawing on the bottom perplexed her, though, a pencil sketch with the name *Dr. Theodore Wexler* underneath, and the words *respect for family, stand down* next to his ear.

Someone had underlined the words *respect* and *stand down*, twice. Abbie couldn't tell if the drawing resembled Old Dr. Wexler or not, but she liked Caleb Jackson's depiction of a lit pipe and smoke swirling around Wexler's head.

"Respect for the family?"

"Here's what I think. The police didn't have much to go on at first, so Caleb follows his nose to the Wexlers. Writes his piece and submits. Ozzie edits, which would only happen if the story were going to press. Then someone, I don't know who, maybe Ozzie, tells Caleb to back off. What gets printed instead isn't even two column inches. That's enough to make my nose itch."

Abbie thought for a second. "And now, forty-six years later, the board is pushing for this story."

Will shifted his position, causing his IV tube to swing and eliciting a groan. "I don't know the reasons behind their thinking, but I'll tell you this. Anytime a reporter is asked to back off, it's bad news. No idea why the board wants to open that can of worms."

A nurse in pink scrubs entered and propped the door open with a rubber wedge. "They'll be coming for you in a minute, Mr. Irestone." She left, and Will's gaze followed her out.

"Think she'd date me?"

"You've got other things to worry about," Abbie said. Even banged up as he was, Will was still trying to tell jokes.

"And so do you. Listen, the police never caught Rosalie's killer, so don't go down any rabbit holes. The case is over forty years old. Some people, you're just not going to find, you understand? Start with background. Try to track down her family, her friends, her

schoolmates. She was a Black girl in a predominantly white private school in the deep South in 1969—how'd she manage that? Did she have a boyfriend?"

Two orderlies with a gurney entered the hospital room, and Will stopped. He swiped his phone two more times. "I sent you the recording."

Abbie gathered her things and squeezed his good hand. "Good luck."

"No need to wish you luck," he almost smiled. "You've got this."

Abbie had missed two texts from her teenagers.

Fourteen-year-old Martha's volleyball practice with her travel club had been extended; the girls had gotten trounced in a scrimmage Monday night, and there was a big tournament next weekend. Sixteen-year-old George was catching a ride home from school with Pudge, who'd passed his driver's test last week. At least she wouldn't have to interrupt her afternoon to pick up her kids.

She started to text George back when her phone chimed *Twinkle twinkle little star*. The ring-tone was Abbie's joke on her old college roommate, Joss Freeman, who thought himself a TV star.

Twinkle twinkle . . .

She answered. "Hey."

"Darling, I need you."

His story tumbled out in a frantic rush. His series had gotten the axe. He needed help. He knew next to nothing about the Civil War. He only had nine days.

"Whoa, Joss, hold on. My expertise was eighteenth century, not nineteenth. Pre-Revolution. You've got the wrong war."

"Don't you have some leftover paper from Northwestern? Just to point me in the right direction?"

Joss-the-TV-star lived in a very different world from Joss-the-history-student, although student Joss was never much good at coming up with his own research topics; he'd preferred taking Abbie's fleshed-out rejects.

Dang it.

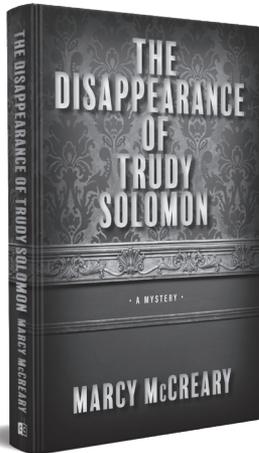
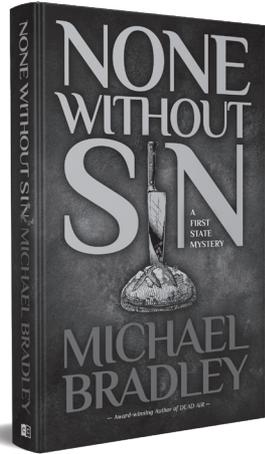
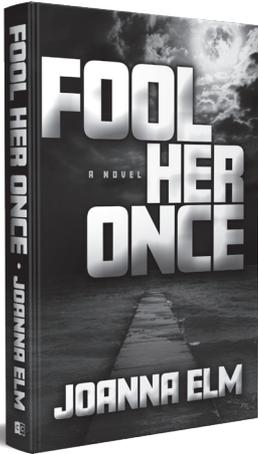
Despite *The Times* assignment, she couldn't turn him away. Joss had held baby Martha at her christening while Zach was in Iraq. The kids called him Uncle Joss. He was family.

Abbie exhaled. Her grad school papers were up in the attic, collecting dust, along with the lifetime work of her parents. She wondered if one of those boxes held material sexy enough for a television show. "Tell you what. Give me until tonight, I'll see what I can find."

"I'll call you in two hours. Catch you later—"

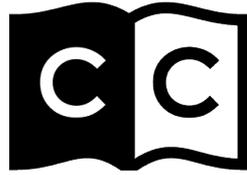
"Wait, Joss!" Abbie gripped the phone hard, as if that would prevent his *click*.

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NO SECRET IS BURIED DEEP ENOUGH.

WHEN ABBIE ADAMS, a historian-turned-journalist, is hired to investigate a cold-case murder from 1969, she jumps at the chance. But soon after she begins researching the case, she realizes that Frank Wexler, the faculty advisor who tanked her thesis and a member of a powerful family in town, is connected to the crime and is definitely not talking. As Abbie tracks down the remaining living witnesses, she slowly pieces together the events of that fateful night, and yet is not a single step closer to solving the case. Were the police back then told to stand down? To cover up the crime? When her witnesses suddenly wind up dead, it becomes clear that Abbie has stumbled upon a sensitive truth that threatens to tear the fabric of the southern town apart. The killer could still be out there, and now he could be hunting her.

*“Headstones, they aren’t for the dead,
they’re for the living.”*



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