

## *Chapter Seven*

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Pearl left Matthew's office, hurrying down the corridor, looking as distraught as Charlotte had ever seen anyone. With her hands clutching the neck of her shirt and her head bent low, Pearl looked like she was trying to pack her bleeding heart. Tears ran down her face, and her chin trembled. Her step, frailer than usual, seemed out of line with her effort to get someplace before the dam burst. She passed by Charlotte, giving no heed to her questioning look. Pearl seemed not the least bit aware of her presence. Charlotte placed her hands on her hips and wondered what was going on.

Keeping a moderate distance, she followed Pearl to her room and then listened outside the door. Pearl had barely made it inside before the sobs broke loose, the weeping filled with such agony that Charlotte could scarcely bear it herself. Still, she hesitated, trying to figure out what had happened. Matthew wouldn't cause such distress. As caseworkers went, he was one of the best. He was a blessing to his clients. However, she considered, he could have been the bearer of bad news.

Pearl was usually a bright spot on Charlotte's shift with her good humor and kind smile, unwavering even after a seizure. Charlotte didn't know how she did it, and her sadness now was hard to take. She briefly wondered what she could do to help with-

out looking like she was interfering. Then she reconsidered. Well, she was Pearl's nurse, dang it. She was supposed to help. With that settled, she peered around the door, giving it a gentle knock. "Pearl?"

Pearl glanced up, blowing her nose and sniffing before answering, "C-come in."

Charlotte closed the door behind her. The storm outside had darkened the room considerably. Only the lamp on the desk shed a dim light across the floor. It barely reached the bed on which Pearl lay. Hers was one of the nicer rooms, yet not a private one.

Making their twin beds and keeping the room reasonably tidy were Pearl and Karoline's only housekeeping responsibilities. Karoline's blankets were in a heap atop her bed. She had clothes strewn at the end of it. Charlotte couldn't help but notice the contrast with Pearl's side of the room. Pearl hung her clothes in the closet the two women shared. And she made her bed with a white chenille bedspread, embroidered with clumps of cheery yellow daffodils in neat little rows. Although, disheveled by Pearl's form, the daffodils were twisted and strewn about. A sweater lay neatly folded over a chair. Her other personal belongings were tucked away inside the bed stand, the desk, or the closet. Her helmet lay atop the bed stand instead of where it was supposed to be. But it was not the time for a lecture about that.

Pearl sat up clutching a pillow, its casing wet from her tears.

Charlotte seized the Kleenex box from the bed stand and then sat next to Pearl. The bed sank slightly beneath her weight, and her white dress inched up above her knees. Cocking one leg farther up onto the bed, she adjusted her position. She handed over a tissue and then patiently waited while Pearl blew her nose.

Speaking in quiet tones resonating with her Southern accent, she asked, "Do you want to tell me what's wrong? I'd like to help you, if I can."

The kindness motivated bigger tears to fall from Pearl's brown eyes; she held the tissue to her face and wept. Charlotte moved closer and patted Pearl's back, hoping this small gesture

would help ease whatever pain she was enduring. She waited while Pearl tried to compose herself enough to speak. Then, clutching Charlotte's hand, Pearl looked into her eyes and tried to speak, but there seemed to be no words to describe her pain. The words did not come. She ducked her chin to her neck and cried harder.

Charlotte gently rubbed Pearl's back and prompted her to try again. "What is it, Pearl? What could be so bad?"

Pearl raised her watery eyes and, with great difficulty, the words finally came. "They've taken Sonny from me." Her head again dropped to her chest, and she wailed uncontrollably.

Charlotte cocked her head to one side and gazed sympathetically at the broken woman before her. The painful words were finally out, but Charlotte needed more information. She didn't understand why anyone would do such a thing. She had seen Sonny and Pearl together. Sonny had a tremendous impact on Pearl. In fact, he was the light of Pearl's life. Anyone could see that. Who would want to put a stop to that?

She couldn't believe that Matthew would take this happiness from Pearl. Someone else had to be involved, and she needed to find out who. She was suddenly aware of how little she knew about Pearl. "What do you mean they've taken Sonny from you? And who's they?"

Through eyes thick with tears, Pearl answered, "Matthew. He said that it's in my best interest to stop seeing Sonny." An angry edge had increased the stammer in her voice. She stopped, hiccupped, cried, and then began again. "They moved Sonny to a new job, and I don't know where. All I know is that he no longer works at Brambles with me." Her voice grew louder between sobs, and Charlotte could barely understand her. But Pearl continued, "It's so horrible. Matthew said that Sonny couldn't come here to visit me anymore."

Charlotte finally figured out what Pearl was trying to tell her. She felt her own eyes soften. "Did Matthew give you a reason for this change?"

"He said that our relationship would only cause pain. That we were getting too close."

In disbelief, Charlotte cocked her head in the other direction. “Why would he say that?”

Pearl looked directly at Charlotte, who straightened her head and looked back.

“Because I want to marry Sonny,” declared Pearl. “He asked me to. That’s what I want to do. But now they’ve taken him away from me.” Her voice rose and then cracked. “I have a right to love too.” Pearl collapsed onto the bed, her face again meeting the pillow with a torrent of tears.

Pearl’s last words gave a mighty pull on Charlotte’s heart-strings. She finally understood the problem—from both sides of the situation, she had to admit. “Ah, I see.” Then she thought: to shut off all Pearl’s ties to Sonny seemed an incredible measure. There must be more to this. “Are you sure Matthew is behind this? It doesn’t sound like something he would do.”

Pearl sat up again, shaking her head. “I can’t believe it’s him either. I thought he would support me on this, although I hadn’t asked him to yet. The warden has to be behind it.”

“The warden?”

“He’s trying to get back at me for being out of my room the other night.”

“Oh, I don’t think that’s it, Pearl. I spoke with him before he left the other night and explained that you got confused before your seizure and ended up in the hallway by accident.” Charlotte lowered her eyelids and then brushed an invisible speck of lint off the bed. “He seemed quite satisfied with what I presumed happened the other night.” Charlotte glanced at Pearl.

Pearl’s eyes widened. “You told him that? That’s what you told him? And he believed you?” Clearly, Pearl couldn’t believe that piece of good information.

Charlotte nodded and before she could say any more, she noticed a change in Pearl. A far-off look had taken hold in Pearl’s eyes. Charlotte felt uneasy, wondering if a seizure was coming on. But then Pearl blinked, and it appeared as if she were only trying to figure something out. Charlotte breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

A look of comprehension soon replaced the analysis that

seemed to have been going on inside Pearl's head. She shifted her gaze to Charlotte. The nurse hadn't thought it possible for Pearl's eyes to look any sadder, but they suddenly did. Then, just as abruptly, her eyes turned a deeper shade of brown and flashed with anger.

Pearl burst out, "It was my sister!"

It was Charlotte's turn to stammer. "Y-you have a sister? You think your s-sister did this?" She didn't know which surprised her more: that a sister could be responsible for Pearl's pain, or that Pearl had a sister. Pearl never mentioned a sister. In the months of her employment with Glory Heights, she hadn't seen anyone other than Sonny visit Pearl. Feeling a bit contrite for never asking Pearl about her family, Charlotte said, "Do you have other siblings?"

Pearl responded to the last question first. "Just one, and that's enough."

Charlotte smiled at Pearl's wit. Even in her sadness, it was finding its way back to her.

"I wrote to Susan—that's my sister—to tell her about my plans with Sonny."

Charlotte's eyes widened. "You had plans? You and Sonny?"

"Well, nothing concrete. But, we've decided to get married."

Charlotte again saw the problem. With Pearl's seizures and Sonny's mental capacity, a marriage would be the recipe for disaster. Still, Charlotte's heart went out to Pearl. Pearl's haunting words again ran through her mind: "I have a right to love too." There had to be another answer. But before she could contemplate it further, Pearl interrupted her thoughts.

Taking Charlotte's hand, Pearl searched her eyes as if hoping for understanding. "Sonny makes me feel so good," she confided. "When I have a spell, he knows how to take care of me. He wraps his arms around me and squeezes me oh so tight." Dropping Charlotte's hand, she wrapped her arms around herself and rocked back and forth. She closed her eyes and smiled. That was how Sonny would hold her.

Charlotte felt the comfort Sonny provided Pearl. The sense of human bonding was overwhelming. Charlotte's own eyes filled with tears. Fortunately, Pearl didn't notice her damp eyes, and before she got a chance to, Charlotte stood up. After straightening her dress around her knees, she turned her back and sniffed back the tears.

Knowing she could not leave Pearl at a time like this, she tried to think of what to do next. She couldn't go against Matthew. She doubted that speaking to him would change things. But, suddenly, she had an idea.

She spun around toward Pearl. The tissue box was empty and the tears were still rolling. Pearl looked at her, helplessly. Charlotte dug into her dress pocket, retrieved a tissue, and handed it to Pearl. Having done that, she broached the subject, not really knowing where it would lead, or if she should suggest it. However, she simply couldn't leave Pearl like this.

"Pearl," Charlotte ventured, "do you have any other relatives? I mean, besides Susan?"

Pearl shook her head and sniffled. "My parents died years ago. That's when I was left here. The only other relative I know of is Susan's daughter, Jordana. But I don't think she knows about me."

"Well," Charlotte began a slow grin, "perhaps it's time she did."

Pearl stopped crying. "What do you mean?"

"Do you know how to reach Jordana?"

"Oh heavens, no. Why, what are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking you should contact Jordana. Tell me what you do know about her."

Pearl seemed reluctant, but finally, she said, "I have a keepsake box. All I know about Jordana is in that box."

"Okay." Charlotte didn't know how much she could push Pearl. "Do you want to show me the box?"

Pearl's gaze lingered on Charlotte; she was probably wondering if she should trust her. She must have decided it was worth the risk, because she reached down and pulled something out from

beneath the bed.

The sight of it embarrassed Charlotte, and she hoped her dark complexion would hide the blush. It was a shoe box, decorated in brightly colored fabric. Pearl must have glued it on herself. On the lid, she had written in permanent marker: Pearl's Treasures.

Pearl set the box on her lap and smiled timidly before opening it. "This is Jordana's birth announcement." She handed it to Charlotte.

She took the card and read it. Upon Jordana's birth over twenty-five years ago, Susan, most likely unable to contain her own excitement over the baby, had sent it to Pearl. It read: "Proud parents announce the joyful birth of their daughter, Jordana Kaitlyn Barlow."

Charlotte handed the announcement back to Pearl, and peered into the box.

Pearl cleared her throat, probably dry from crying. "I saved the announcement, along with every letter Susan ever wrote me."

The letters barely covered the bottom of the box.

Charlotte looked at Pearl. "I think a sister could do a little better than this." Then she immediately wished she hadn't said it.

But Pearl didn't make any excuses for her sister. She just smiled, and then drew out her real treasures. For her, the box came to life with anniversary cards, dried flowers, and other mementos from Sonny. For the next half hour, Charlotte forgot that she was on duty and had other patients to attend to. She allowed Pearl time to talk about each gift from Sonny, let her cry in between, and reassured her they'd come up with a plan to help her.

Before leaving, Charlotte helped Pearl get ready for bed. While pleased to see that Pearl had stopped crying and seemed less distraught, Charlotte had a sad feeling of her own. She wondered how many people could sum up their whole life in a five by twelve shoe box.