

Excerpt:

*The Last Innocent Hour*

Chapter One

They reached town. Beth came out of her seat and rode now braced in the stairwell of the Greyhound bus, bent down, clinging to the pole to keep her balance, staring through the window. Seeing the landmarks, the familiar shapes of the shabby, antiquated buildings that verged on Main Street. Some of them were vacant. Nearly all of them had begun their lives as something else. She could name their evolutions. She'd grown up here, and she'd left this town. Tried ever since not to think of why. Maybe in her absence the old buildings had forgotten. But she hadn't; she didn't think she ever would.

The bus stopped in the alley beside Hickham's Hardware and Dry Goods Emporium. A grinning cowboy painted on the side of the brick building waved his huge hand in greeting. His white, ten gallon hat looked a little moth-eaten, and his red, western-style shirt was faded, but the big-lettered words: Howdy, Welcome to Wither Creek, Texas, printed in the cartoon cloud floating near his head, were still legible. When she'd lived here, Beth had thought the image was countrified and dumb. Now the sight was a comfort, a distraction from the worry that pressed heavily on her chest.

The bus doors opened, and Maizie was there, framed in their expanse, her presence as big and solid and reassuring as Beth's memory of her. Their eyes locked. Beth took a step down, and then froze, suddenly shot through with misgiving. What did Maizie see? What could she be thinking? Suppose she was angry at the way Beth had left with scarcely a glance back or a word of warning?

But, no. Maizie came toward her, open-armed and murmuring, "Honey, I cain't believe it's you. Home at last."

And that was all the invitation Beth needed. She was a child again, and powerless to help it, and flinging herself into Maizie's embrace, she snuggled there. Home. The word floated in her mind. Just the way Maizie said it flooded Beth with memories. Home was the wind in the pines, deep porch, and all her dolls lined up on the swing. Home was pails full of handpicked, ripe, juicy dewberries and wild Mustang grapes, and the smell of summer sun on Maizie's dark brown skin.

Huddled against her ample bosom, washed in a near-boneless wave of relief, Beth told herself she'd been right to come back. The farm would provide what they needed, a roof over their heads, time to think. They'd be safe here.

Maizie held her close a moment longer, then setting her to one side, said, "This must be Miss Christabelle." She bent toward the child who stood half-concealed behind Beth and laid her fingers carefully against Chrissy's cheek. That was Maizie's way. She'd always said children were like animals, frightened by sudden moves. She ought to know, Beth thought. She'd raised her share, including Beth and Beth's own mama.

Chrissy grew still under Maizie's touch. She was almost four, but they'd moved around a lot, and Beth knew her response to strangers could be unpredictable. As often as not, she'd turn and cling to Beth, pressing her face into her mother's hip. But Maizie worked her customary magic. Here came a dimpled smile, so like Charlie's, her daddy's, smile, and now, Chrissy raised her hand to touch Maizie's brown fingers with her own.

Maizie chuckled. She was still looking at Chrissy when she addressed Beth. "Honey, 'cept for that head full of curly hair an' the fact that she's got your great-grandmama's name, this child don't take after you a'tall. Jus' look at those green eyes." She glanced up at Charlie who had joined them. "Sure not much Clayton blood showin' in this one. She's her daddy's girl with those eyes." Rising, she offered him her hand.

"Beth's told me a lot about you," he said, but his greeting lacked his customary charm. He seemed stiff, out of sorts. But perhaps it was simply that he was worn out from the hours of traveling.

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“Well, I’m pleased to finally meet you. Beth has tol’ me some about you and Miss Chrissy, but I was beginning to think she was never going to bring her family home.”

“If Beth has been talking about me, I guess there's no use me trying to make a good impression.”

It was intended to be a joke, but when Charlie glanced at her, Beth saw his eyes were full of speculation, as if maybe he suspected her of complaining to Maizie about him and about the way they'd been living. She hadn't, but she could have. She could have blamed him for the fact that they were here, but she hadn't done that either.

Saying he'd get the luggage, Charlie left Beth with Maizie. Chrissy trailed in his wake.

Maizie said, “She's tired, bless her heart. It was a long trip, I guess.”

“Yes.” Beth kept her eye on her husband and small daughter, and when they were out of earshot, she brought her glance back to Maizie's. “Is he gone?” she asked. “Jason? Mama told me he was, otherwise you know I wouldn't have come.”

Maizie didn't answer.

Beth's heartbeat slowed, thickened. “Mama lied?”

“She needs your help, honey.”

“What? I can't help her. After everything that happened, how can she think I would?”

“Charlie don't know, does he?”

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Beth shook her head as the scope of her error froze in her mind. Mama hardly ever told the truth; why had Beth believed her this time? But it wasn't as if she could turn back. She and Charlie had spent the last of their money on the bus trip from Miami.

“You got to tell him, honey.”

Beth looked at her shoes, a pair of worn leather loafers covered in dust. “I can't. Not now. I could never explain why I kept it from him.” Even as she spoke, she wondered how she could have been so foolish.

“He's bound to find out.” Maizie echoed Beth's frightened thought, but then she smiled and said,

“Never you mind, we'll sort it out,” and Beth was reassured.

She started chattering about how that's why she'd come, because she knew Maizie would help her. Maizie could fix anything. But something was happening to Maizie's face. The color just drained from her broad cheeks leaving them ashen. Her eyes were wide and mostly white. She raised a hand to her throat.

“Maizie?” Beth said. “What is it?” Anxiety tightened its grip on her stomach. She put a hand on Maizie's shoulder, while the other flitted from Maizie's cheek to her brow. The old woman's chest heaved uncertainly. “Is it your heart again? Maizie?”

She bent slightly at the waist and took several moments to answer. “I'm fine, child. Jus' give me a minute.” The words wheezed on a thin current of air.

“We need to get you to the hospital.” Beth looked around for Charlie.

“No, no. C'mon now. It's your mama we got to be worrying about.” Maizie straightened. She opened the big pocketbook she carried, pulled out a freshly ironed, cotton hankie and mopped her face. “That Tinker's doing something, up to no good. He's after her to give him the farm.”

“Well, that’ a joke. Even stoned out of her mind, Mama wouldn’t consider that. Would she?”

Maizie tucked her hankie back into her purse without answering.

“Why can’t she just pack up his stuff and put him out? When I called her the other night, she said she’d filed for divorce; she said she’d even gotten a restraining order to keep him off the property.”

“There’s some things she’ll have to tell you herself. It ain’t my place, but I know he’s been sayin’ she can’t handle her biz’ness on account of her drinkin’, and she been tellin’ me she thinks she already done signed something ’bout the farm. But you know how it is, honey. That liquor really gets her head fuzzed up.”

“Yes, but when I talked to her, she was sober. It was after six at night, and Mama was sober.”

“That’s right, honey, she was sober. And she has been now for near two days waiting for you and Mr. Charlie and that child a yours.”

“Forty-eight whole hours.” Beth’s glance rose up over the cowboy’s grinning image, above his ten-gallon hat. Farther, until it topped the roofline of the building. The clouds had thickened since the bus had rolled into town. The air felt stagnant and slabby as old pond water.

“She needs you, honey, for more reasons than you know. And from the look of you, you need her too.” Maizie nodded toward Charlie, who was coming toward them, now, with Chrissy hustling alongside him. Beth had packed everything they owned into the suitcase he carried in one hand and into either of the two boxes he had tucked, one under each arm.

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“Don't 'pear to me you come back with much more baggage than what you left with five years ago. An' there's three of you now. Or can we expect a movin' van at the farm?”

Beth ducked her chin.

“I didn't think so.” Maizie brushed Beth's hair from her cheek. “You look plumb wore out, child, full of shadows.”

“Don't be nice to me, Maizie, or I'll cry,” Beth said, although, truthfully, she almost never did.

“Lean on me, honey,” Maizie murmured, pulling Beth Close. “Just you lean on me.”