

# Prologue

MID-OCTOBER 1940

WETHERILL PICKERING'S CHRISTMAS TREE FARM

NEW SCRIVELSBY, VIRGINIA

It was late in the season. Harold hand-dug holes while Ginny followed by setting the two-year-old bushes, filling the holes with topsoil and compost, and tamping back earth. They were both hauling water to the upper field for their biggest-ever order of plantings—northern highbush blueberry bushes—when they heard the cough of the rusted green van. Tailpipe smoking, a plume of red dust trailed as the van jerked to a stop in front of their two-story farmhouse down the hill.

Mr. Skipwith, the Pickering's longtime friend and lawyer, stepped from the car, followed by a broad-shouldered boy half a sandy head taller and dressed in a blue work shirt and dungarees, belted tight at the waist. Even from that distance Ginny saw that the boy looked half man, as if he could own the place.

"That's him." Harold swiped the sweat from his brow on his shirt sleeve and turned the bill of his cap frontward.

"Who?"

"The juvenile delinquent Dad's taking on from Mr. Skipwith."

"The hired boy."

"Don't romanticize. Keep your distance. He's no good."

## THIS PROMISED LAND

Which intrigued Ginny all the more. “How do you know? What’s he done?”

“No idea.”

“Then why are you down on him? You don’t even know him.”

Harold tossed his shovel into the back of their work wagon. “Don’t need to. You don’t get broadsided by the law and hauled in for community service for no good reason. You mind your business, Ginny Dee. Behave yourself and keep away, if you know what’s good for you.”

If her older, bossy brother had handed Ginny a gold-leaf-engraved invitation to latch on to the new boy, he couldn’t have roused her curiosity more. Ginny pulled off her worn work gloves, stuffed them into the back pockets of her dungarees, and smoothed her auburn sun-kissed braids down the sides of her head. She wished for all the world she could sneak in the back door for a good wash before dinner, maybe even change into that dress Mama was after her to wear half the time. But there was no way and no time.

They unhitched Romeo, the most obliging mule in all of Virginia, and backed the wagon into the barn just as Mr. Skipwith’s van pulled back onto the lane. Ginny left Harold quick as she could and snuck in the back door, careful not to let the screen door slam, tiptoeing through the kitchen and heading for the back stairs, determined to change clothes.

Harold followed on her heels, slamming the door behind him.

“Harold? Ginny Dee?” Mama called from the front room. “Come in here and meet Curtis.”

Ginny could have kicked Harold in the shins, but he grinned as if he knew just what she’d been thinking, pleased as punch to have thwarted her plans.

“I’ll be down in a minute, Mama,” Ginny called, almost to the stairs, but Harold grabbed hold of her shoulders and steered her into the front room, much against the will of her feet. Being four years older and fully grown gave him advantages Ginny couldn’t match.

Daddy held out his arm to draw them in. “Ginny Dee, Harold,

we want you to meet Curtis Boyden. Curtis will be living and working with us here for the next year or so.”

Shy and blushing, Ginny reached her hand out to welcome the new boy.

“Year?” Harold dropped his hands from his sister’s shoulders. “I thought we said through planting the blue spruce come spring.”

“We’ll be needing more help than that,” Mama intervened, determined, and brooking no back talk. “And Curtis needs a place to stay near Leesburg.”

“How come? For court?” Harold countered.

“Harold,” Daddy warned, but it was too late. Cold came into Curtis’s eyes.

“Curtis, let’s get you settled,” Mama directed. “You’ll share a room with Harold.”

Harold’s mouth dropped open. “I thought he was going to sleep in the barn. All the seasonal workers do that.”

“It will soon be too cold for that.” Mama didn’t look at Harold, but Daddy did, and the look was hard. “Come with me, Curtis.”

Harold started to follow but Daddy called him back and lowered his voice once Curtis left the room. “Harold, Ginny Dee, you need to understand that from this minute Curtis will be treated as part of our family.”

“Family—and in my room? He’s a court kid.”

“His father died last year and his mother’s hospitalized in a sanitarium with tuberculosis. She’s not likely to make it. Curtis was charged with stealing food for him and his younger brother. They had nothing to eat. This is the least we can do.” Daddy was like that, always ready to help anybody who needed it, kids most of all.

Harold looked away.

“Where’s his little brother now? Will he come here too?” Ginny would like a younger brother, maybe trade in Harold.

“A cousin took him in. She can’t take both, so Curtis is with us. I expect you both to treat him well. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” Ginny nodded.

## THIS PROMISED LAND

“Harold?”

Harold’s mouth opened as if he was about to object, but he closed it and nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Good.” Daddy laid his hands on both their shoulders. “That’s settled.”

If only it had been.

## CHAPTER ONE

MAY 1992

CAPE MAY, NEW JERSEY

At sixty-five, Ginny Boyden knew the deep satisfaction of paying off years of debt—her car, her mortgage, her husband’s medical and funeral bills, even his headstone—all while keeping his secret . . . and hers.

It had required the sale of her home and lean years of renting a single room with kitchen privileges and garden duties, but that was in the past. Finally, it was her turn. With a reasonable cushion in the bank and Social Security about to kick in, Ginny could breathe . . . breathe, and plan.

“That’s it, Claire. My final one.” Ginny slapped her signed paycheck onto the teller’s desktop.

“Fully retired and off to parts unknown?” The bank clerk sighed. “Must be nice.”

“Nicer than nice.” Ginny smiled. “But all the parts are known. I’ll leave as the last red maple leaf falls—for the duration.”

“Mm-hmm. I’ll see you back by Christmas, that’s what.”

“No, my friend. You won’t.” Ginny’s brows rose. “No turning back.” She wouldn’t call it a trip; it was a journey into the future—her future, her first real step in fulfilling her lifelong dream. Ginny turned on her heel and made her way out of the bank, into the sunshine.

## THIS PROMISED LAND

She'd leave the week before Thanksgiving, skirting one of those family holidays she'd long dreaded while living alone. Ten days touring formal English gardens out of season, then ten days touring Scotland's Highlands, islands, and gardens—cheaper by far in cold weather. She'd indulge in a short jaunt to Wales and a longer one to explore Ireland's Cliffs of Moher and castle ruins, then back to England and the Lake District for Christmas. Finally, she'd tour London and its museums in winter.

Mid-February she'd reach the village of Scrivelsby, her family's ancestral home, to begin greenhouse work with Logan Longwood, head gardener of Scrivelsby Park. The manor house, Scrivelsby Hall, was long gone, burned out, but the park boasted gardens that Ginny'd learned of and envisioned in her imagination at her mother's knee.

It had taken three years to convince Mr. Longwood to grant her a two-season probationary apprenticeship with lodging in one of the cottages—based, she hoped, on her night school training and community resource and volunteer work as a Master Gardener, her innovative crossbreeding of roses, and her sincerity poured into letters that sped across the Atlantic. She feared it was more likely her desperate persistence, the subtle pressure that her mother was a descendant of the Dymokes—distant relative of Lord Dymoke, Queen's Champion and owner of the park—and the fact that he'd never be rid of her if he didn't acquiesce.

But he'd said yes. That was all that mattered. Despite her age, once her feet hit British soil, she'd convince him of her strength and abilities, her strong work ethic, and her commitment. She'd make herself a valuable contributor, indispensable.

The garden catalogs she'd pored over for all the years of her adult life would have to go. The stacks filled five bins in the small closet of her room. She'd already sold or given away nearly everything not transportable in two suitcases—all but her gardening books and botanical presses. No storage units for Ginny.

Those smacked of baggage and returning.

At the retirement supper, her coworkers had celebrated her and the more than thirty years they'd worked together in the gardening center. Like Claire, they'd teased that her planned move to England was temporary—a flight of fancy and something she needed to get out of her system—and that she'd be back in their midst, eager to rejoin their ranks, before the spring rush.

Ginny knew better. She'd do whatever it took to make her move permanent. She'd volunteer if her application for an extended work visa was denied and camp out at the embassy, begging for extensions on her visa. She'd apply for dual citizenship if necessary. Her coworkers were good friends, but not family. There was nothing and no one to keep her in New Jersey, or even the US, not anymore.

From the bank, Ginny stopped at her post office box. She'd need to close that in a few months and see about having important mail forwarded. She didn't get much mail, so it shouldn't be a problem. Reaching into the box, she pulled out yet another spring garden catalog—always a pleasure—and a long, official-looking linen envelope, clearly not an advertisement.

She turned it over. The name and address did not register at first: *Miss Virginia Dionysia Pickering*—a name Ginny hadn't gone by or seen written out since she was not quite sixteen. The envelope had been mailed to and forwarded from a local Cape May boardinghouse where she'd rented a room decades ago—just after leaving Virginia during WWII, of all things—while she'd saved and waited for Curtis to return from the front before she'd purchased their home.

“I don't believe it,” Ginny whispered. The letter could have only found its way to her now because she'd stayed in touch with the family that owned the home all these years—now another generation—and had developed gardens for the old Victorian house as part of her internship in her Master Gardener's program a couple of years ago.

Seeing her maiden name, and the town of her birth, founded by her mother's ancestors, on official letterhead, sent a cramp to her heart, as if a ghost walked over old graves.

## THIS PROMISED LAND

Ginny gritted her teeth. She shoved the letter into her purse, locked her box, and hurried from the post office as if someone were following her.

She wouldn't open it, didn't want to know what it said. Anything from New Scrivelsby, Virginia, stank of her past, a past she wasn't about to dredge up now. Not when she stood on the threshold of stepping into her long-cherished dream.

She hadn't yet made her airline reservation for England. There was plenty of time. She wouldn't be traveling for six months. Whatever the letter said would be of no importance by then. She'd simply ignore it.

Back in her room, she shoved the envelope beneath a pile of junk mail and set the stack atop her boxes of seed catalogs to take to recycling. Out of sight, out of mind.

But the envelope niggled at the back of her mind for days, a little spider climbing the wall of her brain, spinning dark and silken threads to tempt her, taunt her.

For three days she stayed busy and tried to forget about it, but in the long night hours, just before dawn, knowing the letter was there, unread—it haunted her.

She wondered if the letter contained bad news, news that might alter her plans in some way. *Never*. On the third night, she turned over, punched her pillow, and stared at the ceiling.

Her parents were dead, and the farm was long gone from her. Every tie she'd ever had to the town of her birth had been severed decades ago. The only person who might still be alive had long ago shut her out, declared her dead to their family.

*Why now, Lord? Why anything from there now, after all these years? I'm ready to move on. I need to move on.*

Ginny wrestled until the clock's hands teetered on four, then she sat up, groaning aloud. She shoved her feet into her scuffs, dug the letter from her stack of junk mail, and crept down the stairs to the kitchen, taking care not to waken her landlady. She heated a little milk, spooned coffee into the filter for automatic drip, and slipped her fingernail beneath the letter's seal.



CATHY GOHLKE

May 12, 1992

Dear Miss Pickering,

*I regret to inform you of the passing of your brother, Harold Pickering, 69 years, of New Scrivelsby, Virginia, and extend my deepest sympathy.*

*As your brother's attorney and executor for his estate, I've encountered a question regarding the title for land known as Wetherill Pickering's Christmas Tree Farm which his family is unable to clarify. I hope that you will be able to help.*

*Please contact me at your earliest convenience.*

Sincerely,  
Willoughby Skipwith  
Attorney-at-Law

*Harold dead . . . and with a family.* Sixty-nine wasn't that old, but somehow his death didn't surprise her. That he'd married and had children should not have. Not much surprised Ginny. Still, there was no reason she should be contacted. He certainly would not have wished it. She'd been written out of her family's life and will fifty years before. Harold had made certain she understood that.

Could she mourn him? Did she feel anything at all? Ginny wasn't sure.

The name Skipwith rang a distant bell, conjuring images of a suited and portly man sporting only a ring of frizzy gray hair around the perimeter of his skull. A kindly enough man with a gruff exterior. *He can't possibly still be practicing.*

Ginny set the letter down, poured her coffee, and walked out to the screened porch. Cloaked in darkness, she nestled beneath a quilt in the white wicker rocker and waited for the sun to rise, waited for the morning and its light.

It was hard to take in, Harold's dying. No matter that he'd disowned her, had refused her letters, had written words that stabbed Ginny's heart like a knife, he was her brother. Her last living relative,

except, of course, for whatever “his family” meant. She closed her eyes. *Harold married, with children—a family?* She knew nothing about him, not since the night she’d left home, except that he’d wanted nothing to do with her.

Losing Daddy, losing the baby, Mama and Harold cutting her off, and finally Curtis coming home forever changed—even after all these years, all of that weighed too heavy. She pushed those memories away.

Black gave way to gray light on the horizon. The first purple streaks across the sky made things seem not so cruel as they had in the dark of night. *Harold’s gone. I’m not sorry, and I am sorry. But, maybe, is this an open window?*

Harold could no longer stop her going back. Not that she wanted to “go back,” but a trip to New Scrivelsby before leaving the States might be her only opportunity to visit her parents’ graves on the farm and say a real goodbye, something she’d given up hope of ever doing.

*Closure. Perhaps that’s what this is about, putting those final ghosts to rest before moving to England. There’s time. My tour doesn’t actually begin for a few months. Social Security won’t kick in for another month or so, and I probably shouldn’t go anywhere until it does, until I know it’s going directly into my bank account. Yes, there’s time.*

Ginny waited until ten o’clock. Surely even legal offices opened by ten. She phoned the number on the letterhead and made an appointment with the woman who answered the phone for Friday at one o’clock. That would give her the rest of the week to work up her nerve and then the weekend to recuperate from the trip—a very short trip.



With a stop or two along the way, New Scrivelsby, Virginia, was a five-hour drive. During the war, she and Curtis had believed there would be work in Cape May County. After the war, after Curtis had returned so changed, Ginny hadn’t cared to move. She’d settled, made a few friends, and found her own work in the gardening center, small pay though it was. And Cape May County was a reasonable distance

from New Scrivelsby—far enough that Ginny'd always known her family would not come looking for her, not so far away that she couldn't get back home if she ever needed to, if she ever received invitation or permission to return. She hadn't.

One suitcase holding three days' worth of clothes, two books she'd been meaning to read, a thermos of black coffee, a bag of popcorn, an apple, and a chicken sandwich for the road was plenty. Bare-bones staples, that's all she'd take—as well as the tools needed for the flowers she intended to plant on her parents' grave.

She got an early start, determined to beat the morning traffic. If she drove straight through, she'd likely get there in time to see the attorney before lunch—if he wasn't too busy—visit the family graves, then find a hotel for the night on her way back, maybe stop over near Baltimore. The extra clothes were for if she needed to stay a day or two longer. Not likely, but just in case.

Reaching 70 West, the traffic lightened, and she cautiously invited the ghosts. She couldn't think about her mama, not yet. She'd start with her daddy, and the farm, always the farm.

Daddy—Wetherill Pickering—was known far and wide as a good man, the best of men, with a large and tender heart, if a weak one. Hardworking, God-fearing, smart in a baker's dozen ways, full of grandiose ideas but never a businessman.

Mama possessed those brains for business, as well as grace, beauty, and discipline—her own and the kind that kept her children and occasional farm workers in line. It was Mama who'd insisted Daddy hire help once he'd suffered his first sign of heart trouble.

Ginny remembered the day an acre's worth of blueberry bushes had arrived in mid-October and needed to be planted before frost. Mama'd lamented from the first that Daddy was overstepping himself ordering all those bushes for the fall when they'd never even planted blueberries and didn't know the first thing about them. On top of that news, Daddy said he'd placed a preorder for an acre's worth of two-year-old blue spruce seedlings—five hundred and fifty, slow-to-medium growers, not native—to be delivered early the next spring.

## THIS PROMISED LAND

Mama nearly had a fit, but Daddy wouldn't listen. He'd proclaimed that Pickering land was God's idea for soil—gentle slopes with perfect drainage, inches of rich topsoil with just enough sand and no substantial clay, and irrigation brought from a creek with tributaries deep enough to make a Baptist smile. He vowed that with a little help they could dig the old stumps out before the seedlings arrived to transplant. Folks, he'd said, would come begging for those Christmas trees in another five to seven years.

Already he'd cultivated the largest Christmas tree farm within fifty miles—thirty acres of Scotch and white pine, Norway spruce, and Douglas fir, with another twenty cleared and lots more acreage up the mountain in high meadows if he or any future Pickerings ever wanted to expand. Already he'd pushed his bank loan out with an extension, and still the Depression ground on.

It was the only time Ginny remembered her mama challenging her daddy, reminding him the farm was Dymoke land—not Pickering—and that overstepping themselves was not how her ancestors had held on to land in the New World for more than two centuries.

Ginny flicked on the windshield spray and sent the wipers flying to clear her vision, just as her memory raced through the farm's grueling work cycle, year after year—a cycle and anchor she'd hated as a girl and yet missed over the last decades.

*Daddy was right about people coming, wanting those trees . . . but what a lot of work, and the outcome always so uncertain.*

Hard labor marked November and December, between cutting trees to ship to the city and those to sell directly from the farm. January meant taking down all those signs and props—anything not frozen in the ground—as well as the Christmas lights to store for the next year.

As soon as that was done Mama and Daddy would sit together at the kitchen table and work up the tree orders for the next year. Even now, Ginny could see them sitting there, cups of coffee steaming between them and the ledger book with its long columns—columns that Mama added up because Daddy didn't have the patience. *That*

*was a nice time, that little window when the snow fell and we were stuck indoors.*

As soon as the snow melted, there were stumps left from the Christmas tree sales to dig by hand until they could get the tractor in, and finally to spray to keep the Pales weevils—stem eaters—at bay. By late March or early April, seedlings arrived for transplanting and needed to be in the ground—six feet apart—as soon as possible, all while keeping watch for a late freeze and those thieving gophers eager to eat the roots right back to the trees' stems. Ginny shook her head at the memory.

May had brought new lime-green growth to the trees—"candles" that stood upright on their branches. Those candles were one of the prettiest sights in the world to a Christmas tree farmer. But a late frost could tip them a dry brown, setting the growth back a year and making the tree, though still alive, unsalable for that year.

Fertilizing the trees while trying not to fertilize the weeds came next—what a job—and then the hand removal of cones from the trees. Always so messy. Ginny shuddered. She'd hated that job and all the times Harold had swiped his sappy fingers through her long hair, thinking it was funny. The stuff had been like tar to comb out.

By mid-May it seemed every waking hour outside of school was spent mowing between the rows of trees. In June, they'd sheared and shaped trees waist high or taller. That's how she and Harold had spent their summers—June, July, and August in the heat and humidity of Virginia, feasted upon by mosquitoes, sculpting those trees. So funny that customers thought Christmas trees grew into cone shapes by themselves.

They were still mowing in September, not only between rows but between trees in each row, hoping to make it easier for shoppers to roam the fields come November, and especially to keep the field mice and rabbits from adding the bark of the young trees to their winter diet.

By October, Mama and Daddy roamed the fields while Harold and Ginny were in school. They priced and ticketed each tree, checking for

## THIS PROMISED LAND

any diseased or stressed trees that might need to be removed—trees that wouldn't hold their needles. Mama touched up any signs that needed a freshening—she had a light hand and artistic bent. Daddy sharpened saws and axes. On weekends they all began hanging lights and lanterns, getting ready for the season. Such a festive time.

Then back to cutting trees to ship in November. Doors opened to customers the day after Thanksgiving. Every day, especially every weekend was crazy busy after that, long hours right up until Christmas morning.

Ginny had to force her eyes wide to keep awake, lulled as she was by memories. *December was the best. Longtime friends and neighbors coming by to choose and cut their tree, often bringing cookies to pair with the hot cider Mama and I mulled. Some folks came from as far away as Maryland or West Virginia to choose their tree—a family tradition—sometimes a second generation.*

Ginny pulled onto Route 15 South. The cycle was relentless, and it had been a hard life, but a good life, for the most part.

Then her daddy had added those infernal blueberries to harvest by the acre for local stores, whatever the pick-your-own visitors missed, and the roadside farm stand to mind. Next came peaches and on and on. Mama had been right. They'd needed more help.

That need was what had brought Curtis Boyden, the handsomest, most dangerous thing Ginny'd ever laid eyes on, out to live on and help work the farm. Even now, despite all that had transpired, Ginny smiled at the memory. That was the year before the war, before Pearl Harbor was bombed, the year before everything changed.



As Ginny pulled into New Scrivelsby the bell in the stone church tower on the corner of Main and Rotherdam bonged noon. She recognized the church, the library, and the diner before parallel parking in front of the two-story white frame building bearing a sign: *Skipwith and Son, Attorneys-at-Law.*

With an hour until her appointment, she didn't want to show up too early and appear anxious, though she was—anxious to know what Willoughby Skipwith wanted, anxious to get the meeting over with. There wasn't time to drive to the farm to visit the family cemetery before the meeting, and she surely didn't want to sit in the lawyer's office while he was out to lunch. Maybe a visit to the church or the library. They were the only places, besides home, that Ginny had truly missed through the years.

Even in that short space she saw that the small town, if you could call it a town, had changed. The post office was gone or moved elsewhere. The old stone building it had been housed in was now a doctor's office. Two small stores of the mom-and-pop variety had been added—a fabric-and-yarn store and a five-and-dime. Only the hardware store remained of the enterprises Ginny remembered. She smiled, thinking of Mr. and Mrs. Reister, who'd owned and run that store, originally the town's general store. They could place their hands on anything you wanted, from a garden hose to the most obscure washer or screw to out-of-season rakes or seeds, at a moment's notice. She wondered if their children ran the store now. It had long been a family business.

She was glad to see that New Scrivelsby hadn't become too new. There were no chain stores or fast-food restaurants. When she'd left, nearly fifty years before, electricity had been new to the town. Now electric lampposts lined the streets alongside mature maples, their limbs decked in spring-green leaves.

Ginny stood outside the stone church, looking up at the bell in the tower, the bell that had tolled for Sunday morning worship and every day at noon and six in the evening, the bell that had tolled each time one of the town's own was laid to rest. She wondered if they still did that. The last time she'd heard it toll for the dead was after her daddy's funeral. *Did they ring it for Mama? Surely.*

Ginny swallowed the dry lump in her throat. She didn't want to think about that, didn't want to remember that she hadn't been there when her mama had needed her, when she was sick, let alone when she lay dying.

## THIS PROMISED LAND

*I would have come if I'd known, if I'd been allowed. Dear God, You know I would have.* Ginny wasn't sure if that was confession or prayer or both. *Coming back was a bad idea. I'm not ready. I'll never be ready.* She pulled her sweater tight around her, even as the sun beat down, and hurried back to her car.

*Breathe, Ginny, breathe.* Filling her lungs with air, she gripped the steering wheel. Nearly one o'clock. *Decide. You've got to decide whether to leave now or go in there.*

*Dear God, this is so much harder than I thought. But I'm here. If I don't do this now, I won't come back. I know I won't. Please. Help me. Come with me. Please.*



Ginny grasped the brass door handle. Squaring her shoulders and doing her best to push aside the gawky adolescent she felt inside, she walked into the office of Skipwith and Son, Attorneys-at-Law. Before she could say who she was, a young woman stood from her desk and offered her hand.

“Miss Pickering? Mr. Skipwith told me to expect you.” The woman looked half Ginny’s age and twice as nervous. “He asked me to tell you he’s so very sorry, but he was called away yesterday and won’t be back in town or able to meet with you until Monday.”

“Monday?” Ginny ignored the use of her maiden name. She was not prepared for the rest. “I’ve driven all the way from Cape May County.”

The woman’s brow wrinkled, and she wrung her hands. “He’s terribly sorry for the inconvenience. He would have written but knew a letter couldn’t reach you in time. He wanted to telephone but we don’t have a number for you.”

The young woman pulled a set of keys from her desk. “He asked me to give you these. He didn’t know if you still had keys to the house or if the locks have been changed over the years. He had me



contact the electric yesterday morning. They expect to turn that on today. Mr. Skipwith tried to get someone out to clean yesterday or today but that just didn't work out. He said to tell you he's sorry about that too."

"I don't understand why he would. Have the house cleaned, I mean."

"No one's been living there for years. He said it needs a good going over."

Ginny took the keys, staring at them. *No one? Not Harold?* She didn't know what to say, couldn't formulate questions, let alone the words to ask them.

Finally, "The farm. Mr. Skipwith thinks I'll stay at the farm until Monday? Didn't Harold live there? Doesn't his family?"

The woman looked flustered. "I don't think so. I'm not sure. Mr. Pickering lived with his son and his wife; that's all I know. To tell you the truth, this is my first week. Mr. Skipwith will explain everything when he gets back. He said if he's able to wrap things up today, he'll drive back from Raleigh tomorrow."

"Raleigh? Can he see me tomorrow? Or Sunday? I hadn't planned to stay."

"Well, I don't know. If he telephones, I can ask him . . . You don't happen to have one of those mobile phones, do you?"

Ginny shook her head. She wasn't young enough to be that trendy.

"I can leave a message on his desk, but I won't see him again until Monday. I'm sorry."

*Sorry. That's it?*

There wasn't anything else to do. Ginny hefted the keys, wondered that they felt so light and cool when they should have weighed a ton or burned the palm of her hand. She shook her head again, still trying to take in this change of plan. *No quick stop and away.* She'd have to stay over, but she had no intention of sleeping in that house.

For all the years she'd longed to come home, now all she wanted was to leave.



The drive on the main road two miles out of town revealed new neighborhoods holding a number of small frame houses. New Scrivelsby had grown, she realized, but modestly. It had always been a small town supported by farmers—dairy farmers, goat and sheep farmers, crop farmers, one or two small horse farms.

The frame houses Ginny had known growing up looked old, weathered. The larger, stone houses looked as if they could stand the test of another fifty years.

She'd wondered about the farm over the years—if Harold had been able to keep it going, if he'd modernized the house, if he'd been successful. She wasn't sure she wanted to know.

She drove a little slower, taking it all in. A right turn off the main road and half a mile down Christmas Road she saw the sign: *Wetherill Pickering's Christmas Tree and Berry Farm*. Seeing her family's name, the name of the farm on a painted board caught her by surprise. It was a new sign since she'd left—of course it would be—but it, too, was weathered, the lettering faded with the words *and Berry Farm* roughly painted over, the letters bleeding through. *Not a good advertisement if you want to attract customers.*

She turned left, into the lane leading up to the farmhouse. Ten-foot spruce trees lined the drive, new since she'd left. *Well, nothing stays the same, does it? I haven't.* The evergreens made a nice entrance to the farm but looked in need of shaping.

*Was Harold ill before he passed or did he go down with his boots on—like Daddy? By the looks of things, he let quite a bit go. Wasn't he able to afford help? What about his family?*

Ginny reminded herself it wasn't her concern. "Stay focused. You've come to see Mama and Daddy's graves, then you're leaving for a hotel—somewhere. You're not sleeping in the house. You'll see Mr. Skipwith on Monday, if not before, and then you're out of here."

The drive turned. She gasped as the house stood before her. Stone with a clapboard addition eighty years ago, white once upon a time,

now in need of sanding and a good coat of paint. The house didn't look half so huge or imposing as she'd remembered it. Not nearly as big as the ramshackle Victorians lining the streets of old Cape May, nor so well cared for. The secretary—what was her name, if she'd even said?—was right. It didn't look as if anyone had lived in the house for years.

Ginny could only imagine what cleaning or repairs it needed. She'd hate to walk inside and see it looking run-down. She didn't want to think about walking inside at all. *The cemetery. You're going to the cemetery. You don't have to go inside. You don't have to stay here. There must be a hotel somewhere, if not in New Scrivelsby then back toward Route 15 or even 70. You are not a prisoner here.*

From the trunk Ginny pulled a light jacket, her spade, a small Radio Flyer red wagon—great for transporting plants over uneven ground—and three flats of her own crossbred flowers she'd brought to plant on the graves of her family, a gift to her parents and the only way she knew to leave a little bit of herself behind.

The afternoon sun had given way to rolling clouds. The temperature dropped steadily, a sure sign that rain was on its way. If she intended to spend any amount of time at the cemetery, she'd best hurry.

Ginny'd always been thankful that the family plot was not right by the house. As a child she'd imagined the horror of looking out her window on a graveyard of Pickerings and Dymokes in the twilight, had never wanted to think about ghosts in their rollicking reunions or skeleton tea parties—all things her older brother had convinced her five-year-old self took place whenever the wind kicked up and the moon rose full over the mountains. Even now, she was glad for the quarter-mile walk and for the sprawling grove of hollies that surrounded the gated cemetery.

A breeze tugged at tree limbs, but Ginny ignored it. Unlatching the black iron gate unlocked a well of emotions. She knew where her father was buried. She'd been here for that. Ginny gulped to see her mother's name written on the stone beside his. Neither grave was well

tended. *Harold must have been sick. He wouldn't let Mama and Daddy's graves go like this if he could help it. Surely not.*

Harold's grave wasn't far, just beyond their father's. It was recent but there was not even sod over the rough clay mound. *Harold Dymoke Pickering, born August 12, 1922, died September 18, 1991.* That was all; no epitaph. "Eight months ago. Why did Mr. Skipwith wait so long to write me?" The stone beside Harold's read, *Elaine Pickering, beloved wife and mother, born March 1, 1923, died April 29, 1954.* Ginny's breath caught. *So young.*

The rest of the cemetery had overgrown, as if no one had tended it in years, except for a small section in the far-right corner, beyond the older headstones. It had been cleared of weeds and carefully tended, the stones surrounded by tiny blue forget-me-nots. No names were chiseled on the small monuments, simply three little lambs sitting amid twining vines of ivy, indicating individual plots, likely children. They'd not been there when Ginny was young. *Whose are they? Whose children? Harold's? No, the stones look too recent if Elaine Pickering was his wife.*

The breeze stiffened, whipping Ginny's gray skirt against her thighs. Dark clouds swept low over the mountain, boding a coming storm. The rumble of thunder warned that she'd best get her flowers in the ground pronto.

Ginny pulled just enough weeds to spade holes and fill them with compost. She planted her flowers at the base of each headstone, keeping a running conversation in her head. *The rain will do you good, my beauties. I'll come back tomorrow and get all these straggly weeds out of your way.*

Before she could pack up her garden tools, lightning split the sky. The heavens opened; rain poured in sheets. Ginny dropped her gloves into her wagon. She should have paid closer mind. That's what mountain storms were like—sudden. She'd had plenty of warning. She'd just forgotten. *It's been too long.*

Dragging her red wagon and stumbling as best she could through the downpour, thoroughly drenched and shaking from the steep drop

in temperature, Ginny nearly collapsed on the front porch of the farmhouse. She needed to dry off, get warm. She needed a towel or a blanket, something. Anything. She didn't have one in her car, and she couldn't sit in her car soaked; she'd drench the seat.

With trembling fingers, she pulled from her pocket the set of keys Mr. Skipwith's secretary had given her, fumbling the first one into the keyhole. Not a fit. She tried the second, the third. Finally, the fourth slipped into the slot. She turned the key, imagined the old tumblers falling into place, and braced herself.

Stepping into the past should have made the door hinges creak, the ancient lace parlor curtains ruffle, and the floorboards groan. Spiderwebs should have trembled once the outside air made contact. None of that happened. All stood still and silent, as if someone had walked out and shut the door on time.

Just as Ginny remembered, the seven-foot grandfather clock with its brass pendulum stood sentry in the corner of the entryway. The sofa—dusty blue with the 1940s floral pattern—sat in the center of the living room, facing the stone fireplace, the hearth flanked by a matching armchair and her mama's rocker. An old English pastoral scene hung over the mantel, oil lamp sconces on either side, as if electricity had passed the house by, though Ginny knew her father had installed it shortly before his last heart attack. The Victorian rosewood upright piano, its ivory keys yellowed, still sat on the opposite wall, a stack of crumbling sheet music on its lid. Mama's treadle Singer sewing machine stood beneath a window, her work basket overflowing with socks, as if she'd stepped out but would return to darn them any minute.

Ginny swallowed, her breath sucked away and mouth gone dry. Wind howled and the front door slammed behind her; she jumped in the half-light. She hadn't realized she'd stepped farther into the room. She shivered, her rain-sodden hair and jacket shedding droplets onto the floor.

Teeth chattering, she pulled herself together and headed for the kitchen. "A dish towel. That's all I need."

## THIS PROMISED LAND

But every step brought some new sense alive, brought a memory to the fore. She moved through the hallway in slow motion. There were the handprints she and Harold had traced on the hallway wall when she was six. There were the marks up the doorframe like rungs of a ladder—measurements of their growing height through the years, carpenter-penciled by their daddy every year on their birthdays, even in their teens, up until the year he died, the year she left.

The kitchen sat tidy, every dish and utensil in its place, covered in a shroud of dust. Cobwebs stretched from ceiling corners to curtain rods. The cast-iron stove looked a shade of gray, so thick was the layer of dust.

*A museum. No, not a museum—a mausoleum. This hasn't been touched in years. Is that possible? Nearly fifty years since Mama died? Did Harold just leave it like this? Where was he all that time?*

Ginny drew a ragged breath. She walked to the sideboard, just as if she still lived there, and pulled open the drawer where her mother had always kept the tea towels—Helen Dymoke Pickering would never have called them dish towels. She reached for one. Ironed and folded, as if Mama had just washed and sun-dried them as she did every Monday. The idea of taking one to dry herself felt like sacrilege. Ginny closed the drawer, wrapping her arms across her chest. She'd air-dry.

Standing in the middle of the kitchen raised the voice of every ghost in her head. Mama, Daddy, Harold, Curtis—Curtis as he was at nineteen.

“Stop! Stop!” She clutched the sides of her head, pulled her hair by its roots, willing the memories away. “I can't do this. I can't do this, Lord. Why now?” Ginny fumbled through the pockets of her jacket for her car keys. Not there. She'd left her purse in the car. The keys must be there. “I need air. I don't care what Mr. Skipwith wants or needs to know. I'm not staying.”

She threw open the front door, startled by the clean, rain-washed scent of earth, of evergreens—fragrances she hadn't inhaled in such strength for years, for decades.

The rain had slowed to a drizzle. *Mama, you'd call this a mizzle. Daddy always made fun of you for saying that. Oh, Mama. I miss you so. The sharp pang in Ginny's chest drove deep. Stop. Just stop thinking about her.*

Ginny stepped gingerly down the slick front porch steps. She wasn't about to slip and fall, sprain an ankle, or worse, break a hip and be stuck there. She tugged her car door handle. *Locked!* She tried the passenger's side, the back doors. *You've got to be kidding!* Ginny squinted her eyes and leaned her forehead against the glass. She could see her suitcase through the back-seat window, sitting there full of warm, dry clothes.

*Is this some kind of cruel joke, Lord? Because it isn't funny.*

She peered through her front window. Her car keys hung tidily from the ignition. *I don't believe it. I'd laugh if I didn't so much want to cry.*

But there was no point in crying, and no point in getting wetter.

Ginny hurried back inside and flicked the first light switch by the door, then the second. She tried the lamp by her daddy's chair. Nothing happened. *Mr. Skipwith's secretary said she called to have the electricity to the house turned on. Either the electric company's not come yet or the storm's knocked it out.*

*Well, I should be grateful, right, Lord? It's a roof over my head. It's just for one night. Surely the sun will come out tomorrow, and if Mr. Skipwith or the electrician doesn't come by, I'll walk out to the main road and find a house, ask them to let me use their phone . . . or give me a ride into town . . . I'll call a locksmith . . . somebody.*

Ginny sighed and plunked into her daddy's worn chair. Like it or not, she'd be spending the night with old ghosts.