

## Inheritance from Lost Girls

Some people are born to sin; others inherit it. I didn't know which of these I was until I crossed paths with the Cabots.

The room smelled of lemons and vinegar. Alma Cabot lay stiff across her cherry Duncan Phyfe table. A tall woman, her legs almost reached the end of the table. Her face was slack where it was usually stern, but still, there was no trace of softness.

The table had a high shine. We didn't own a mirror. When I looked down, my reflection startled me. My hair hung in wild tendrils around my face. My eyes were hard. I'd been sitting with the dead woman for fifteen minutes according to the grandfather clock in the corner.

Mrs. Cabot wore her best dress, purple brocade with pearl buttons and matching earrings. I was sure her son Daniel would relieve her of these before her body went into the ground. I heard pearls came from a grain of sand that irritated the oyster. I wasn't surprised that this was Mrs. Cabot's jewelry of choice.

Though she had absented her body, I half expected Mrs. Cabot to pop up and start talking about the fine wood finish, turned edges, and four-legged base of the table. She loved ownership and often spoke about the "fine pieces" her grandmother had brought over from England. She told these stories to anyone who would listen, including my Mama, who spent years mopping the Cabot's floors and cooking their dinner—and then went home to a bed of straw ticking. If I had been my mother, I would have spit in the Cabot's food—or worse, but my mother played by the rules, ones that were set and broken by the Cabots. Because the Cabots had money, nobody said

a thing. Mama believed in God's final judgment, but I wasn't sure it was wise to leave it up to Him, what with his reputation for mercy and all.

Mrs. Cabot would have squirmed at the thought of being laid out on her elegant table, though that was the custom around these parts. I wouldn't be seated at this table if she hadn't passed.

I was here for one reason, to take away her sins. My granny had been a sin eater, as her granny was before her, a custom from England that came with her across the ocean along with the family's meager belongings. Part of me thought the ritual was foolishness, though I never said so. The other part of me feared it was real and wondered about the weight of my granny's soul.

Before she died, Granny wrapped up her black cloak and left instructions with Mamma that it was to be passed on to me. I liked to believe she thought I was tough enough to handle the job and smart enough not to take it too seriously. Either way, I'd been bearing the sins of the Cabots for a while now.

I was born on the wrong side of the river, in the elbow, a patch of land by the bend, prone to flooding. It was the kind of place people with no sense, or no money, lived. It took my family several generations before Daddy finally built the house up off the ground. So then, when it rained, we were on a dirtier version of Noah's Ark, one with nearly as many inhabitants (Mama, Daddy, me, the twins, four feral cats, three dogs, a chicken and two songbirds). With less food, of course.

Daniel Cabot had crossed the creek to fetch me that morning. It wasn't his first visit. That was shortly after I turned 16, the summer that it flooded and our crops washed out. We almost starved that summer. Daddy let Daniel in and sent him to my room. I didn't know what was

happening, but Daddy stood in my doorway and told me to make Daniel welcome; then he closed the door. Daniel stood still, looking at me. I saw his lust, but also a look like he was judging cattle. For all his looking, I don't think he saw me at all. Then he lifted my gown over my head and carried me to the bed.

He was his mother's son, greedy and prideful. He panted as he took me from behind. I stared at the water stain on the wall. It was big and yellowed with ragged brown edges in the shape of a dog. When I was little, I pretended it was real and called it Yeller, which always made my Mama laugh. While Daniel labored, I imagined running through a wide field with Yeller, someplace far away from the elbow.

Daniel pressed his finger against my teeth until I figured I was meant to suck on it, which I did, though I fantasized about biting it off and feeding it to Yeller. At first, I gagged, but then I pretended it was a piece of ice melting in my mouth until it disappeared into nothing.

The Cabots owned the coalmine, but Daniel's finger was as soft as a baby's, unstained by labor. The nail was clean, though raggedy from his chewing it. He smelled of expensive soap, a sharp citrus smell that would come to signal danger to me. I said nothing while he spent his energy on me. I barely moved, hoping he'd get bored and move on. That night, and every visit after, he left fifty cents on my dresser. I never touched the money, but it always disappeared.

I was proud of myself for not crying out that night—or the many nights after. He would have wanted me to whimper and moan. But I didn't want to wake the little ones and stain their first memories with sounds of suffering. When he left, I rinsed my mouth at the washbasin and ran wet rags across my thighs. The rags came back bloody. The next morning Ma washed the stains from my sheets without a word.

This morning, Daniel had stood in the doorway and said, “Mama’s dead. The corpse cakes are in the oven, and we need you down at the house.”

I dressed quickly in my cloak and took a fine linen handkerchief from Ma’s drawer. When we got to the house, I placed the handkerchief on the doorstep. I would retrieve it and the money when my work was done.

Daniel had pushed me roughly in the direction of the dining room and left me alone with her, while he went to fetch his brother. I knew Abraham by reputation only. He had been away at school and then opened a law practice in Charleston.

I walked around the room, running my finger across the scrolls and leaves of the carved sideboard. I slid open a drawer to find linens embroidered with sprigs of lavender. A small sachet of lavender was in the corner of the drawer. I held it to my nose; the sharp, fresh scent reminded me that just outside these walls, the fields were bursting with life. I went back to the table and sat across from Mrs. Cabot, where I could see her face as it slowly turned to stone.

I had been a sin eater before, but that family was strangers to me, folks who had come into the mining camps from Pittsburgh and lost their daughter to the flu. I wondered how much sin she could have accumulated in her five years, not much I would reckon, but the family was superstitious and wanted to send her off to the afterlife with a clean slate. The girl had taken up only a small portion of the table. A corpse cake had laid on her small chest. I said the words, and the mother handed me the cake. The cake had raisins and currants inside and crumbled in my mouth. The family watched as I ate every crumb. When I got outside, two dollars sat on my handkerchief.

I waited until I got into the woods to stick my finger down my throat. A volcano of sweet cake and fruit left a mess in the grass. It was no time at all before the bees came buzzing around

it. I figured I'd only taken in a little of the sin, nothing mortal, nothing that would keep me from heaven.

I was jumpy today, my stomach a strange mix of nausea and hunger. I was used to hunger, but the nausea was a more recent development. I had been waking up with my stomach roiling around. I kept a few peppermint leaves inside my pillow and chewed on them when things got bad.

I ran my hand around the smooth edge of the table. I could do anything now—carve my initials into the underside with my pocket knife, slide the silver sugar shell into my pocket, take a piece of the old woman's hair for some kind of hex. But instead, I touched my stomach and whispered in the dead woman's ear, "I'm carrying your grandchild."

Nobody could tell yet. The small swell in my belly was hidden by my dress. But my state would reveal itself soon—and there would be hell to pay. I looked out the window at the tall oak standing in front of the house. It was a huge old tree with a gnarled trunk. The thick branches came out like tentacles spreading toward the sun, taking up space against the sky. I saw a strong, low branch, a perfect place to perch and watch the world, and I took in the sturdy braches just beyond, footholds to the sky. My son would never play there.

I heard the back door close, and I sat back quickly and raised the hood of my cloak to cover my face. Daniel pushed the door open, a plate of cakes in his hand, and he held it for another man. Abraham was tall and resembled Daniel around the nose and forehead, but he had much kinder eyes.

He reached his hand out toward me.

"Don't bother," said Daniel.

The man raised his eyebrows. I held back a smile.

Abraham looked at his mother. “She’s not here. There is no trace of her,” he said, quietly.

“Only death could still the likes of her,” said Daniel.

“What is this?” asked Abraham, nodding at me.

“A local burial custom of the rabble, some malarkey about eating the sins of the deceased. Mother insisted we do it if she should die.”

*If she should die!* Did the Cabots think immortality was theirs for a price, like everything else?

Daniel laid the plate of cakes on his mother’s still chest.

The cakes were round and small and black around the edges.

The brothers looked at me expectantly.

I picked up a cake and held it to my mouth. When my teeth bit down, I felt like a vulture feasting on the entrails of some small, soft animal that had gotten in the way, but I knew I was that small, soft animal and Daniel wouldn’t quit visiting me at night until nothing was left of me but a crimson stain on the floor. I chewed and swallowed, felt the hard cake scrape down my throat.

I heard myself speak, though in my mind, I was far above the house, circling, waiting for my chance to pounce. My voice was loud and strong.

“I pledge my soul for your sins and ask that God Almighty remove those sins from you and place them up on me, and I eat this food to show that I have taken your sins upon me. If I lie, may God strike me dead.”

I looked at the brothers, whose eyes were closed. It was done. I walked to the door. I could see the coins shining on my handkerchief. I bent down to scoop them up. I felt a presence

behind me. Abraham stepped forward and pressed five dollars into my hands. I looked him in the face, wondering if my son would look like him.

It was enough money for the train east. I could be alone with my sins. I'd find a place somewhere, get a dog, and take in sewing. I would be free. My son would live unencumbered by legacy, free in a way I could only imagine. I walked quickly through the woods, stopping only to put my finger down my throat.

I rushed home and began to pack. I took my two dresses, crochet hook, and knitting needles and the skein of yarn I had been saving to make mittens for the twins. I stopped to touch the stain on the wall, which, in the light of day, looked like nothing but a dirty spot.

Mama stood in my doorway. "Don't," she said.

"I've got to." My hand wandered to the five dollars folded in my pockets. I looked into her face and noticed the lines worn into its surface, the hollows of her checks.

"We'll starve."

If I stayed, I would become her, more indebted to the Cabots with each passing day, for whatever table scraps they decided to throw my way, like a dog—worse than a dog, since I was more than my appetites.

I pushed past her and ran out the door. I ran all the way to town and bought a ticket to Richmond. I barely had time to sit down before the train pulled up. It was my first time on a train. The seats were covered in leather, and the interior was trimmed in wood. I knew I stood out in my simple dress and mended shawl. I took a seat near the door. It wasn't long before the rocking of the cars lulled me to sleep. It was a dreamless sleep, not like my dreams at home, where I was forever trying to escape from some unknown pursuer.

I woke up as a man made his way down the aisle with a trolley that carried a teakettle and cake. “Refreshment, Miss?”

I had a cup of tea with cream and sugar. I sipped it slowly. When I got settled, this would be my new ritual—a cup of tea in the quiet of the afternoon while the baby slept. Prince, West Virginia, its hunger and fear, would be far behind me.

I got off in Charleston, searching for the way to my connecting train. I had only taken a few steps when I felt a hand grab my arm and smelled the citrus scent of Daniel’s soap.

I pulled my arm away, and he reached forward and held me tight. I struggled to break free and stomped on his foot.

He pushed my face close to his and spoke through gritted teeth. “I’ll tell them you robbed me. They’ll find the rest of Abe’s money on you, and you will go to jail.”

I stopped struggling and looked beyond Daniel to see my train pulling out of the station. “How did you find me?”

“Your mother told me you were running away. I knew you wouldn’t get far on foot. I saw Abe hand you the money and figured you’d go to the train station.”

My mother was foolish enough to see the Cabots as benefactors.

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I was silent on the train ride home. Daniel stared at me, his mouth twisted into a smirk. “You’re hardly worth the trouble. Your bloom is fading, and you’re getting fat.”

He was ignorant as well as mean. I had nothing now, no family, no allies, just the hint of possibility in my womb that I was sure Daniel would take from me the minute he was born.

When I got home, I hugged Mama and smiled at Daddy. Let them think I was content to stay. I waited until the middle of the night to leave my bed and put on my black cloak. I touched the wall to say goodbye to Yeller.

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The rope hung on a nail on the wall of the barn. It wasn't heavy. I made it to the oak before the moon had emerged from the clouds.

I climbed to a high branch. The face of the Cabot's house was silent. How surprised Daniel would be in the morning. How quickly word would spread among the neighbors. I'd seen my father hang pigs upside down to drain the blood plenty of times. I secured the rope, fashioned a noose, and placed it around my neck.

I imagined my body swaying in the wind, a spectral figure in my dark cloak. The bees would still buzz, the river would flood, girls would get visited in the night, and the Cabots would sit counting their money, polishing their silver, with no idea of what had been taken from them. I let myself fall.