

Chapter Two

THE PRODIGAL DAUGHTER RETURNS

The persistent rap-tap downstairs caused her eyelids to flutter. Aaren rolled over, snuggling the sea of stuffed animals. Then the sound came again with more force. She squinted at the light from the morning sun. Her head lifted and the fog cleared. The tapping was actually knocking. Someone must be at the front door.

“Alright! I’m coming,” she mumbled. She wiped at the corners of her eyes. Sleep had never come easy for Aaren. If anything, falling asleep had gotten harder as she’d gotten older. So it was surprising that a night in her old room had given her some rest. Sitting up, she scratched her head and waited for her vision to focus. Sleeping in her clothes? Nice. And now she had company. She hurried. Aaren worked her hands back through her tangles, trying to smooth them out. Her mouth, dry and cottony, made her crave the toothbrush buried down in her cosmetic bag. The only problem with that was all of her luggage remained in the trunk of her car.

Coming down the stairs, she saw Reverend Morris, and who she thought was Miz Marie from the Murphy Brothers Funeral home, at the front door. They peeked in through the thick paned windows. Aaren cursed silently to herself for falling asleep the way she had. Her watch said it was after nine in the morning, and for country-folk that meant she’d overslept.

She opened the door and offered a small welcoming smile.

“Good Morning.”

“Aaren? My Lawd, look at you, sugah!”

Miz Marie, who had to be the same age as her father, nearly deafened her with her greeting. Hands reaching, she threw open the screen and overwhelmed Aaren with a tight hug. A little surprised by the affection, Aaren stepped them back into the foyer. Their arrival confirmed it. Pops was really dead. She tried hard to mask the hurt. They were sure to look for any sign of it. Instead, she focused on her visitors. Neither had changed much. Aaren towered over Miz Marie, who stood maybe four foot ten and was quite plump. She had short, chubby legs and a rounded face with large cheeks that transformed her eyes into little slits when she smiled. Each smile sparked a twinkle from her gold front tooth, gleaming amongst her pearly whites.

Aaren looked up to the Reverend, who'd always stood as a giant amongst them. His head was crowned with gray hair knotted like sheep's wool. He rubbed the neatly trimmed beard that outlined his jaw, stretching into his sideburns, and returned her smile.

"Hello, Aaren," he said. She closed her eyes to the memories in his soothing voice. He'd led the flock of black southern Baptists in this town since before she was born.

Miz Marie let go of her, but brought her fingers to rest on Aaren's cheeks. She studied Aaren as if it had been a lifetime, instead of a decade and a half, since she'd seen her last.

"Please come in," said Aaren, leading them into the living room.

"I hope we haven't come too early, Aaren," Reverend Morris asked.

"No, it's okay, really—I needed to get up." She smoothed her hair again while running her tongue across her teeth to clean them. The truth was she would have appreciated it if they'd called first. She waved her hand at her guests to sit. As they did, she realized that the chair left for her had been her father's. She'd have chosen another seat. It hurt too much to sit in his place.

Aaren faced them, waiting patiently for what was to come next: pleasantries, small talk, and then the business of burying the last member of her family. The Reverend smiled and Miz Marie looked on with closely-held tears.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, Aaren." She placed her briefcase on the coffee table. The edges pushed aside her mom's figurines. Aaren flinched at them being disturbed.

"Yes, Pop was a good man," she replied softly.

"Amen. Your father was a great man and everyone south or north of Salt River respected him," the Reverend chimed in.

Aaren gave a thin but polite smile, not knowing what else to say. She had no idea what Pop had been doing for the past fourteen years, and she knew they knew that. There was no need for pretense with them.

Miz Marie opened her briefcase.

"Let's see here. Abraham left detailed instructions on how he'd like to be laid to rest," she said, her tone proper and businesslike. But when their eyes met as she handed over the contract, Aaren took note of the glint that slightly altered her professional smile. A pregnant pause extended between them as Aaren hesitated. She swallowed the lump in her throat and accepted the stapled paper.

Contract in hand, she scanned fine print then stopped. She hadn't really thought of the next step, but Pop had planned out her life so it should be no surprise that he planned out his death. Thumbing through the documents, she saw he was to be eulogized at First Macedonia, and then buried next to her mother. The figures for the service stated paid in full. He didn't want her money. It stung that he might have thought she wouldn't have come, or been willing to cover the expense.

"Aaren, he's also left with the church the hymns he would like for the service. He made a special request."

Aaren looked to the Reverend.

"Special request?"

"He wanted a solo by you. He asked that you sing *Thank You Lord*," the Reverend said.

Aaren blinked. She hadn't sung in public since she'd left home, since she left the Reverend's choir.

"He what?"

"Baby-girl, everyone in this parish loves that angelic voice of yours," cooed Miz Marie, evoking the name Pops would use. The forced kindness caused the hairs to prick and stand at the nape of Aaren's neck. "Your father would brag on you all the time!"

"I..." Her voice choked at the mention of her father's praise. She sucked in her bottom lip and tried to digest his request. Pop wanted her to sing?

"We have him resting down at Murphy's, sweetie." Miz Marie cleared her throat and straightened her back. Aaren's eyes dropped to the way she fiddled with her hanky's frilled edge and the persistent tapping of her left foot. The action caused her wide lap to shake. Abraham Robinson's passing took a toll on Miz Marie too. "We needed to know what you wanted to dress him in. He was a stickler for details, but everyone forgets that one."

Aaren looked between them. She slowly closed her eyes. The gravity of her mounting sorrow anchored her heart. *He died alone in this house, alone and in this house.* It hit hard. Closing her eyes, she tried to regain control as waves of grief kept moving through her. Miz Marie's brows drew together in concern. Her eyes turned to the Reverend, who also wore a look of worry.

“Aaren?”

Aaren blinked away the tears and opened her eyes. She wanted this over and done with.

“Can we do the service tomorrow?”

Their brows rose jointly in shock. “Well, uh...” stammered Miz Marie.

The Reverend chimed in. “We thought you might want to prepare, maybe decide on—”

“No, Pop left no room for preparation. There’s nothing left to decide. I can come over to the church and take care of things, but I’d like to have the service tomorrow if that’s okay. I need to get back to New York.”

“I don’t think—”

“Of course, Aaren. We can have the repast at the church as well.” The Reverend smiled.

Aaren nodded. “Miz Marie, let me get you some clothes for him.”

She rose and walked out of the living room. She could feel their eyes on her and ignored it. She couldn’t stay there much longer, in Pop’s chair, having that conversation. It was too much. Racing up the stairs, she felt a sense of relief to be alone again.

She paused at her father’s door. The old tobacco-and-leather smell that he carried with him greeted her. She stood there with her heart in her throat. His cowboy boots sat side by side, neatly next to the bed. They always did when he’d stepped out of them for the day. She looked over to his straw hat hanging off the post of the headboard and his pipe laying on the nightstand. Her chest went tight. His presence was so strong, she could barely fill her lungs with air. She wanted it all to stop. Aaren dismissed sentiment for common sense. He was gone, and people waited. She had to do what was expected of her.

She went to the closet. Inside were two suits, a black one and a gray one. She pulled them both out and threw them across the bed. The shirts were underneath, and the belt to the pants hung from the hanger. Tears dropped down her cheeks despite her resolve. Abraham Robinson was a striking man when dressed in his Sunday best. She retrieved his Stacy Adams. They were still polished to a perfect leather shine.

“I can do this,” she mumbled.

Their last conversations echoed in her mind. Neither of them had ever had much to say. And the one time he’d visited her, she’d told him to leave. The last night she’d spent under this roof with him, she’d told him she hated him. She never retracted that statement. Now, she wished she could at least understand why he hated her. Wiping at her face, she looked over to the bed. An empty

impression left by her Pop was all that remained. She gathered the rest of his things, including undergarments to wear. His suit bag was in the corner of the closet; she put everything in it neatly, then zipped it up. She desperately wanted out of the room and away from the flood of memories this place brought.

She could hear their quiet voices as she made her way downstairs.

“She looks pretty,” said Miz Marie. “Her life must be good, wherever she is.”

“Yes, she looks well, praise God. Aaren was always a very beautiful girl, just like Noelle.”

“So sad how things turned out for Abraham and Noelle. After all that man done. He should have told her of his sacrifice.”

Aaren stopped cold.

“Please respect the dead, Sister Marie. Wagging tongues are an instrument for the devil. We aren’t here to pass judgment on this family.”

“Of course. Abraham was a good man. I’m glad she came home to show some respect. Didn’t think she would.” There was a pause. “What? Forgive me, Reverend, but you have to admit, this family caused this town a great deal of pain.”

Aaren held the bag tight. She and Jarrod—what they’d done before she left had nothing to do with the town! What was Miz Marie yapping about? She cleared her throat and continued down the stairs.

“I think you’ll find what you need inside,” said Aaren, her tone dry.

Miz Marie stood. “Thank you, baby-girl.” She took the suit bag with a smile and upward toss of her chin.

“Reverend, how about two this afternoon? To go over the service?” Aaren asked.

“That will be fine, Aaren.”

It was evident he would like to say more. She just wanted them to leave. The uncomfortable silence hung between them for several seconds. Finally, the Reverend stepped over and kissed her cheek.

“It’s good to have you home, Aaren.” He grasped her hand. “I was the one to baptize you. I watched you grow into a beautiful young woman. Your mother and father would be very proud to see who you’ve become. Very proud.”

“Thank you, Reverend,” she said weakly.

Miz Marie came up behind him holding the suit bag folded over her arm. “We’ll take care of him Aaren. Don’t you worry. How about a viewing tonight at six? I’ll swing by the radio station on the north side to have it announced. There are a lot of people that loved your father, who’d like to pay their respects.”

“That will be fine,” replied Aaren. “I mean, of course. Yes.”

She nodded and walked out with the Reverend. He stopped halfway out the door and looked back. “God bless, Aaren. God bless.” He then turned and left.

Aaren stood in the living room, watching the front door close. She'd spent all that time alone in New York, but she had to come home in order to feel truly lonely.



Jarrold crossed the kitchen to his pot of coffee. The rich aroma opened him up as he poured a cup. He'd gotten little sleep last night. How could he? Staring at the dark swirl in his mug, his thoughts drifted to her. Again.

"Aaren," he said softly, shaking his head.

Becca told him she was back, but she didn't say whether she was alone. What did it matter? Fourteen years later and married to boot, she probably didn't give him a second thought. Still, he couldn't help but wonder.

Up early, he'd already been out to greet his hands, who were at it before sunrise. He gave them their instructions for the day, making sure the right things were prioritized. He had a team of four that helped groom and train the show horses that he bred, along with some of his race horses. The horses weren't the only thing to tend to on his farm. He also had a smaller herd of cows that he had to let out for grazing during the day, and a cornfield to manage.

He picked up the paper and thumbed the pages for the obituary section. He wondered about Abraham's service. Then the phone rang, drawing his eyes upward.

"Hello," he said, sipping his coffee.

"Jarrod, it's Sam Spence." The voice of the oldest attorney in Penns Point came through the line.

"Morning, Sam. What can I do for ya?" He tucked the phone into the crook of his neck as he turned the page.

"I was going to call out to the Robinson place to ask that Aaren come to my office this week." He coughed and hacked through the last of his words. He'd been diagnosed with lung cancer two months ago and refused any treatment. The cough that plagued him was becoming increasingly worse. Anyone who clucked over him got the same response: 'When it's your time to go, it's your time to go.'

"Okay?"

"It's Abraham's will."

"And?"

"I'll need you present as well. He's requested you." Sam's voice was still scratchy from the coughs.

"He what?" Jarrod dropped the mug down on the counter. Hot liquid licked over the rim and spilled down the side, splattering his hand. "Shit!" He flinched at the burn, putting the side of his finger to his mouth. "Say again, Sam?"

"I can explain it better in person. Going to schedule it with her and then I'll let you know."

"I can't. I mean I don't want—"

"Hey. Don't give me a rough time on this one, Jarrod. It's what Abraham wants, okay?"

Jarrold said nothing. He couldn't process it further. Why would Abraham do this? They'd been close the last couple of years, mostly because he'd made an effort to forge a relationship with the man. She was gone and it was Abraham and his father's fault, yet he couldn't let Abraham live his days out in isolation. So he did what he knew Aaren would have wanted. He made sure that her father was all right; in the process, he'd learned a lot about Abraham Robinson. He'd learned a lot about himself.

"Sure. Fine."

"Good, then. I'll be talking with ya later," Sam said before hanging up.

Jarrold hung up the phone. His eyes went to the window over the sink and he gazed out across his land. Being in Abraham's will could mean anything. What more could the man want from him, even in death? Shaking his head, he reached across the counter to grab his sun-worn baseball cap. He pulled it down on his head and turned to head back out to his fields, cursing under his breath.



Her senses seemed to sharpen on the land. Everything was bright and green, smelling of earth, pine, clean air and fallen leaves. The sun warmed her face. She slipped her hands in her front pockets, looking up at the clear blue sky. Had she missed this? Yes. She could easily recall the reasons why her father worked himself to the bone to preserve this place for them. Her eyes lowered and swept her father's land. She wondered what he'd done all this time she'd been gone.

Her eyes eventually fell upon the stables. It was both the first and last place she wanted to go. She was walking toward it before her brain even registered the movement of her legs. That shabby building held some of her most treasured and most heartbreaking memories. Halfway there, Aaren stopped when she heard a truck coming around the forested bend of the property. Her head turned and her hand went up to shield her eyes, wondering who else the day could bring.

Becca stopped the truck and jumped out. The sight of her girlhood friend brought a smile to Aaren's face. She opened her arms to welcome the loving hug. Becca was exactly what she needed.