

Prologue
June, 2006
Holiday Inn, Yancey, South Carolina

I stepped back from the sign-in table, pinning my panther shaped nametag to the lapel of my linen blazer. Thirty years. It was hard to believe so much time had passed since high school graduation and the last time I had seen or spoken to most of the people milling around the vestibule and banquet hall. I hadn't attended any of our previous reunions and I wouldn't have been at this one if I hadn't been in town on business.

The reunion committee had put together displays to update us on the activities of our fellow classmates from the class of '76. I wandered among them, stopping at the "In Memoriam" table. It was draped in black and gold, our school colors, but also in this instance, the colors of mourning. Twelve members of the class were already gone. I knew, all too well, about two of them: my good buddy Howie and my dear friend Carolyn. Howie succumbed to AIDS during the early days of the epidemic and Carolyn died by her own hand, a victim of deep depression.

I stared deep into the smiling blue eyes of Howie's senior picture, his spirit still alive on that flat surface. He was the class clown and our school mascot the last two years of high school. He hid his homosexuality well. Only a few of his closest friends knew. Once we graduated, he left town quickly, traveling across the country to the gay mecca of San Francisco. By the mid '80s, he was sick and alone, ostracized by friends and family. At the end, he stayed with me in Atlanta until he died. I spent many hours with him as he wasted away. *"I miss you, bud,"* I mouthed at his picture.

Carolyn's deep sadness wasn't obvious in her senior picture. In it, she fairly glowed. We now knew she was good at hiding her insecurities and unhappiness. Though quiet and sometimes introspective, she always seemed so happy, as if she had all she would ever need. She was intelligent and beautiful and popular, yet she didn't seek or bask in her popularity like some did. In September of 2000, Carolyn took her husband's handgun and ended a life we all thought was charmed. The note she left behind for her husband was simple: "I'm too tired and too sad to go on from here. I love you. Please continue to live, to laugh, to love." We never knew why Carolyn took her life.

I moved on to the "Where Are They Now?" tables. Each member of the class was asked to send in a recent photograph and a short biography. Along with a print of our senior picture, the entries were put into notebooks and scattered about the tables for us to look at. Some of the biographies, the ones the committee found most interesting, were mounted and displayed prominently. I expected the displayed biographies to belong to the reunion committee members or their best friends, so I just glanced at most of them, until one caught my eye.

There I was, my recent photograph and my senior picture enlarged to glossy 8 by 10s, my biography and copies of some of my articles and accompanying photographs displayed on a black background with my name, Shelby Livingston, in large gold letters across the top. I stood there, staring, my mouth hanging open in shock. I couldn't believe they put my life and my work on display.

"What do you think, Shelby?" a voice from my past asked.

I whirled around and stood face to face with the first person who helped me realize I could succeed at anything I put my mind to. She was a student teacher in a couple of my classes my senior year, including Journalism. I privately credited much of my success as a freelance writer and photographer to her. She was now head of the English department at the high school.

"Ms. Gilmore!" Without thinking, I threw my arms around her neck in the hug I always wanted to give her, but didn't dare to, so many years earlier. She returned my hug just as enthusiastically. I felt a bit of my heart melt.

"After all these years, I believe it would be okay to call me Valerie," she said, laughing.

She stood back, still grasping me by the shoulders. We took a long moment to look each other up and down. She was still a beautiful, youthful woman, though I knew she had to be in her mid-fifties. Her smile lit up the room. Her hair, cut short in an attractive style that accented her high cheekbones, was a rich brown with only a few stray silver strands. I wanted to sit and talk for hours but other people vying for her attention suddenly surrounded us. "We'll talk before the evening is over and catch up a bit." She gave my shoulder a squeeze and then turned her attention to the others.

I reluctantly returned to perusing the display of my achievements and shook my head in wonder. Ignored by the popular crowd in high school, I had only a few close friends. After graduation, my friends and I scattered to colleges and towns across the U.S. We seldom came back to our hometown except for family gatherings and special events such as this. To see my accomplishments displayed in such a manner surprised and pleased me in a way I wouldn't have expected.

I was about to move down to the next display when a familiar shock of bright red hair caught my eye. The person I considered one of my best friends for sixteen years of my life and who became my worst enemy during my seventeenth year was headed straight for me. I looked around for a quick escape but there was none.

"Shelby, how are you?" she asked. Naomi's voice was ragged from the effects of too many cigarettes and her skin was rough from working outdoors for long hours without proper protection. "It's been a long time, huh?"

"Yes, Naomi, it has been a long time." Instinctively I was on guard, even though it was over thirty years since she had deeply hurt me and my friends.

"You look good." I couldn't say the same about her, so I just nodded my thanks. "Looks like you're doing well, too," she added, acknowledging the display over my shoulder. "How long are you in town, Shel?" she asked, using the nickname only my closest friends used.

I wanted to tell her she had no right to use it, but I was trying to let the past go and move on, something easier said than done, even after thirty years. "I'm not sure yet, but probably another week or so."

"Can we get together and talk?" she asked, a note of uncertainty in her voice. "Please?"

I looked at her warily, wondering what she wanted. Just then the chimes announcing dinner rang. Without giving Naomi an answer, I followed the rest of the class into the dining room.

The evening passed quickly. People who had little to do with me in high school now wanted to pretend we'd been best friends. It was amazing how a little success and name recognition could change the way people acted. With the exception of Naomi, whom I avoided as much as possible, the few people I'd been close to were not in attendance.

That night, I reflected on the evening.

Valerie Gilmore and I made plans to meet for lunch later the following week. I agreed to call her sometime during the weekend to finalize the details. I was disappointed Melissa and Kara hadn't come to the reunion, but I understood why they chose to stay away. I wondered why Naomi wanted to talk to me. We hadn't spoken in over thirty years, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't put the hurt she caused behind me. The banquet hall, though crowded, had felt strangely empty without Howie and Carolyn.

My eyes roamed my bedroom, finally coming to rest on a framed photograph on the bookcase. There we stood, the six of us — Howie, Carolyn, Naomi, Melissa, Kara, and me — arms linked in eternal friendship, ready to conquer the world. The photograph was still clear, as were my memories of that last glorious summer before our disastrous senior year.

Howie had propped himself against the boathouse wall, his long frame stretched against the weathered wood. I leaned back against him, my head against his chest, his arms locked around my waist in a brotherly hug. Naomi stood close, her head against his left shoulder, almost as tall as he, her red hair glowing in the sun. Carolyn stood next to her, a head shorter, a tanned arm stretched in front of the two of them, grasping Howie's elbow and locking them into a tight embrace. To Howie's right, her back against his body, stood Kara, hugging tiny Melissa.

That day was a carbon copy of so many others that summer. We spent the day at the beach just an hour east of our hometown, playing in the surf and building sandcastles. We cooked hot dogs over an open fire and toasted marshmallows for dessert. When we returned home, we decided we didn't want the day to end so we traipsed down to the boathouse to fish for crabs and cast nets for shrimp. My big brother, Kyle, was already there and I asked him to take our picture. I had albums and albums of photographs of my friends and family, but few included me. This photograph was one of my favorites because it showed us all together.

Howie, Naomi, and I knew each other from our earliest days when our mothers got together to visit and let us play. We grew up leaning on, and loving each other. Carolyn joined our group in first grade; two years later, Kara and Melissa completed the Six. From that time on our mothers knew — look for one and it was inevitable they would find the rest.

Except for Howie and Carolyn, we were pretty much considered the outcasts of our high school. Kara and I were unabashedly tomboys at a time when femininity was still highly regarded. Kara and Melissa came from broken homes; something seriously frowned on in our conservative corner of the country, even still in the early twenty-first century. Naomi was loud and arrogant, and committed the cardinal sin of not being beautiful. But we all loved each other and protected each other and kept each other's secrets; at least until that horrible, out of control year that led up to me leaving my beloved hometown and my dear friends the day after graduation.

I turned off the bedside lamp and moved from the bed to the window seat in my darkened bedroom. The ghosts of my youth gathered around me and I could almost hear the giggles that used to resonate through the room. The moon rose, sparkling through the Spanish moss and foliage of the great oak outside my window. The stars glittered in the dark sky, even the smallest ones visible since they didn't have to compete with city lights — one of the benefits of having a house outside of town. The swing hanging from the giant branch that arched over the yard rocked gently in the night breeze.

I hadn't been home since Carolyn's funeral six years earlier. Dad passed away a few years before Carolyn, and since Mom and I weren't close — especially after her behavior when I came out to her, and then during the trial — I hadn't seen any reason to come home. Now Mom was gone, too. I wouldn't have come home now except I was bidding for a permanent position on the city magazine up in Charleston. My job took me all over the world, but I was ready to settle down. At nearly forty-eight years old, the traveling was wearing on me. Maybe if I could stay in one place long enough, I could have a relationship that lasted more than a few months.

I closed my eyes and breathed the night air through the open window. The smells of the salt and the pluff mud, that strange smelling mud that the South Carolina coast is famous for, wafted up from the marsh. The tide was moving in; I could hear the sea grass

swish as the water engulfed it. It would be a good night to cast for shrimp. How many nights during that last summer had we braved the mosquitoes and spent long hours on the dock throwing our nets?

Memories I had been running from for thirty years overwhelmed me.

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