



A SPARKLE *of* SILVER

LIZ JOHNSON



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For Aunt Chris,

who invited me to fall in love with books when I was a child
and to visit her on St. Simons Island when I was an adult.

You are a brilliant cheerleader and an incredible woman.

I'm so thankful you're my aunt.

The greedy stir up conflict
but those who trust in the LORD will prosper.
Proverbs 28:25

ONE

There were some things Millie Sullivan would rather forget. The long gravel lane up to this home. The drab interior walls that melted into sticky carpet and stained tile floors. The fact that she could afford nothing better for the woman she loved most.

But every time she stepped into her Grandma Joy's room, Millie tried to be thankful her grandmother could remember anything at all.

"Who are you?" Grandma Joy squinted from across the small studio apartment, her hooded eyes suspicious and the wrinkles at the corners of her mouth growing deeper. "I don't know you. What are you doing here? What do you want?"

Her breath caught in the back of her throat, and Millie tried to recall what she'd done last time. What had the doctor said? *Speak in low tones, calming words.*

"It's all right." She held out her hands, palms up, an invitation. Taking two slow steps, she dipped her chin and lowered her voice another half an octave. "You're safe. You're in your home."

"I know that. What do you take me for?" Grandma Joy

looked like she had half a mind to hop out of her overstuffed rocker at such an offense. “I want to know who you are and what you’re doing here.”

Fair question.

Try to use familiar words and phrases.

“I’m Mil—Camilla.”

Grandma Joy’s eyes narrowed further, nearly disappearing beneath loose skin. “Camilla?” Her tone held a hint of recognition.

Millie’s chin hitched, a smile already spreading into place. “Yes, Camilla. I’m Robert’s daughter.”

“Robert?” Any sign of clarity vanished, and her too-pink lips smacked together. “Never heard of him.”

Wrapping her arms across her stomach, Millie nodded. “Okay.” But it wasn’t, not even a little bit. Nearly everything she knew about her dad, she’d learned from his mother. And today Grandma Joy couldn’t even remember him.

Her stomach heaved like a boat on stormy waves. What if last time was the last time Grandma Joy remembered her? What if last time was the last time she heard Grandma Joy’s laugh? What if last time was the last time Grandma Joy kissed her forehead and promised that all was well?

The back of her eyes burned, and Millie pressed her hands over her face. Holding every muscle as tight as she could, she forced a smile in place and held it there for three seconds before meeting her grandma’s gaze again.

Yes, a smile. That’s what she needed. Even if she didn’t feel it, Grandma Joy would see it. And even if she didn’t recognize Millie’s smile specifically, well . . . everyone appreciated a smile. Right?

The smile in question trembled behind the cover of her

hands, and Millie sucked in a quick breath between pinched lips.

Remember. She just had to remember. This woman—the one in the faded purple rocking chair—wasn't the one who had raised Millie. She wasn't the one who had taken in her only grandchild and provided for her every need. At best she was a facsimile.

But the only thing Millie could do about it was paste a smile on her face and try to help her remember. And pray that Grandma Joy would come back to her.

Please, God. Let me have her a little longer.

“Miss Sullivan?”

Millie jumped, a shiver racing down her spine. She knew that voice, and it never brought good news. But she was paid up. She was. Her last check hadn't bounced, and Golden Isles had cashed it immediately.

Turning toward the woman at the open door, Millie bestowed the smile she'd been saving for her grandma on Virginia Baker.

The woman's sleek bob wobbled in greeting, but she didn't bother returning the grin. “May I have a word?”

A word, sure. It was imagining the second, third, fourth, and fifth that sent her stomach into a nosedive. Still, Millie turned her back on Grandma Joy and walked toward the door.

Virginia held out her hand in a silent invitation for Millie to step into the hallway. Millie tried to take a steadying breath. The rumble in her stomach was far too much like that time she'd been called into the principal's office for falling asleep in class during high school. She hung her head the same way she had all those years ago as she stepped past

Virginia from the warm tones of Grandma Joy's room into the garish lights of the hallway.

"Miss Sullivan, there's just no easy way to say this."

Suddenly it was hard to breathe. She pressed a hand to her throat and tried to gasp a thread of air, but it didn't help. Neither did Virginia's unforgiving monologue.

"She's getting worse." When Millie opened her mouth to offer an argument, Virginia shook her head. "I'm not telling you anything that you don't already know."

Millie risked a glance toward Grandma Joy, who had closed her eyes and let her mouth drop open. The even creaking of her chair had ceased, and she looked at peace. No longer disturbed by the arrival of a woman she couldn't recognize.

With a sigh Millie nodded. She knew. And no matter how much she wanted to deny it, there had been no evidence to indicate otherwise.

Grandma Joy wasn't going to get better. Her memories weren't going to come back—at least not for longer than a few minutes. But they were in there, and every so often one surfaced, only to nosedive back into oblivion before Millie could use it to pull her grandma closer.

"Your grandmother needs better care. More personalized. She needs someone to look after her one-on-one. All day. And night."

"I know, but—"

Virginia held up her hand. "I know money is a concern."

That was the understatement of the century. Money wasn't just *a* concern. It was the only one. It was all that was holding Millie back from giving Grandma Joy the finest room in the best memory-care facility.

But she couldn't make money where there was none. As

far as she knew, it was still illegal to print her own. Besides, she'd need a printer for that, and she highly doubted the library would let her use theirs. Not that she would do such a thing even if she could, of course.

"There is government help available."

"I know. I've applied for all of it. But they've turned her down. Her diagnosis isn't severe enough or something."

Virginia rubbed her chin, a frown tugging at the corners of her lips. "Then you have to appeal. Get a lawyer and take it to court."

Millie held back a snort, but only just. That required money too—a lot of it. And time, which was hard to come by when she was working two jobs just to make ends meet. And even then she'd been late with her own rent again last month.

Maybe Virginia read her face, because she moved on to another option with a hopeful lilt in her tone. "Well then, what about her Social Security?"

"What about it? It doesn't even cover half of your fine establishment's fee every month." As if on cue, the fluorescent light above them flickered, and Virginia's shoulders drooped.

"I'm sorry," Millie said, forcing her sarcasm to stay in check. It wasn't Virginia's fault. None of it. And she couldn't afford to alienate the home's administrator. "I've tried everything I can think of, but we're out of options. Golden Isles is our only choice."

Chewing on her lower lip, Virginia shook her head. "We have a list of people who belong here waiting to get in. I'll give you ninety days. And then you're going to need to find her other arrangements."

"Three months? You can't be serious." Millie's voice rose

with each word, her heart skipping every other beat until the chair in her grandma's apartment resumed squeaking. She couldn't look across the room and could barely breathe. "What am I supposed to do?"

Well, that was a silly question. And Virginia seemed to have only a silly answer.

"Some people find in-home care to be a better choice."

Millie's chin fell against her chest, and she wrapped her arms around her middle as a chill swept down her spine. She'd tried caring for Grandma Joy at home, but the first time she'd been called home from her job at the diner to find her grandma wandering down the road in little more than a threadbare robe, she'd known that they needed help.

That's where Golden Isles Assisted Living had come in. They were desperately understaffed and in a building older than any of their residents, but bless their hearts, they tried. That was all Millie asked for. A safe place with people who genuinely cared for Grandma Joy.

But now they were kicking her out. And leaving Millie in a pickle too big to swallow.

"Please." She hated the way the word came out—desperate, strangled. Taking a deep breath, she tried again. "There has to be another option. I could . . . I could pay you more. I could pay for an extra night nurse."

Yeah, right. She didn't have that kind of money, and she didn't have a clue how to get it. Maybe she could get an extra shift at the diner. That would get her approximately one percent of the way there. The truth was, there weren't enough shifts at the Hermit Crab Café to cover that kind of offer. Not that Virginia Baker was inclined to accept it anyway.

"This isn't a negotiation, Miss Sullivan. She has to move."

Virginia dropped her voice on the last sentence, a small consolation to the complete rejection in her words. “I’ll begin preparing her paperwork. Let me know if you need some recommendations. I have some literature in my office.” She didn’t wait for Millie to respond before patting her shoulder and walking away, head high.

Millie slumped against the wall and stared hard at the gray laces of her tennis shoes. She was pretty sure they’d only had one previous owner, the best pair she’d ever found at the thrift store. She pressed her toe into the carpet, wishing there was some sort of pedal she could push that would reveal a solution, but it wasn’t that easy.

It never was.

“You’re just like your dad.”

Her chin snapped up, and she peeked into the room. Grandma Joy’s eyes were still closed, but there was a tension in her features that suggested she was awake and—dare Millie even hope?—lucid.

“He never knew what to say to bad news either.”

“My dad?”

“My Robert.” Grandma Joy readjusted her folded hands over her middle and sighed. “He was so smart, but sometimes he couldn’t find the words. He said he always wanted to go to college. Then he up and met your mama, and he couldn’t tear his eyes away from her.”

Millie took a tentative step into the room, careful to avoid the groans in the old floor, careful not to spook her grandma out of this bout of memory.

“He made mistakes, but he loved me. Just like I know you do.”

Millie pressed her lips together and tried to form a picture

in her mind of the man she'd last seen when she was four. But the memories were too faded. Maybe that was what it felt like for Grandma Joy, looking for the past that remained elusive.

"Yep. You're so much like your father."

She wanted to ask if that was a compliment. Even though the memories were thin, her perception of her father was anything but. Everything she knew about him was tainted with a thick layer of cynicism based on his selfishness.

But before she could ask, Grandma Joy kept going. "You are your father's daughter. But I'm not."

Millie's eyebrows rose, and she met Grandma Joy's gaze. "You're not what? Not your father's daughter?" That couldn't be. Grandma Joy's dad, Henry, was a good man. There had been pictures of him all over the farmhouse where Millie had grown up.

Grandma Joy's lips twitched, a sparkle in her eyes promising a good secret.

"You're joking, right?" Millie couldn't hold it back.

"My mother, Ruth, was a guest at the Chateau. Before she married Henry."

"Chateau Dawkins?"

Grandma Joy chuckled. "Is there another one?"

A picture of the grand estate on the coast, built by Howard Dawkins, flashed across her mind. Three stories of gleaming white glory reached by curving white staircases and rich archways, surrounded by lush lawns and waving palms. They said at night the lights could be seen half a mile across the ocean, glowing like a beacon, brighter than the island's famous lighthouse. The Chateau adorned postcards in every St. Simons Island gift shop, and the library carried a whole shelf of books about the mansion and its short-lived golden era.

“I just . . .” Millie shook her head, trying to find her words. “You never said.”

“Oh, Mama mentioned it a time or two. I think she fell in love there.”

Her stomach lurched as Grandma Joy’s ramblings suddenly began to make sense. Ruth—Great-Grandma Ruth—had stayed at the wealthiest estate in Georgia during the late 1920s and fell in love there. And Grandma Joy wasn’t her father’s daughter, which meant . . .

Millie gasped and dropped to her grandma’s bed, perching on the edge.

Grandma Joy was the illegitimate child of one of the wealthy guests. Oil and newspapers, real estate and coal—Dawkins had been connected to millionaires of every ilk.

And even an illegitimate heir deserved something from the estate of her father. Right?

“Who was it?” Millie clapped a hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry,” she whispered between her fingers. “That was crass. I just meant . . . do you know who your father is?”

That twinkle in Grandma Joy’s eyes returned, mischief personified. “She would never say. She didn’t put his name on my birth certificate. After all, she was married to Henry before I was born. She said it was between her and her diary. And she hid that away at the estate. After all, she didn’t want the treasure map in it to get into the wrong hands.”



Ben Thornton scribbled another name on the list. Judith Tulley. That made twenty-three. Twenty-three people identified. Twenty-three lines in his notebook. Each one a ruined life.

“You hear me, Ben?”

He glared at the phone on his desk, face up and glowing. The thick Southern drawl on the other end echoed in his empty classroom but still managed to make his skin shiver.

“Judith Tulley from Augusta. Ninety-one.”

“I heard you, Owen. Why wasn’t she in the case?”

Owen shuffled some papers on the other end. “I don’t know. Maybe they couldn’t find her. Maybe she didn’t . . . Well, you know. She’s old. Maybe she just didn’t want to bother.”

“With justice?”

Owen sighed, and Ben could picture the young lawyer running a hand through his too-long hair. “With the hassle,” Owen said. “It’s not easy. It takes time. A lot of it. Y’all know that.”

Yes, Ben knew that litigation had a tendency to drag on. And maybe Judith didn’t want to spend what was left of her time on earth trying to see a woman pay for her crimes.

But Ben was young. And he would see that her crimes were paid for and her victims compensated.

“Ben, there’s something else.” Owen’s voice took a decidedly deep turn.

Ben leaned an elbow against the desktop, pushed an essay he’d been grading out of his way, and rested his forehead against his open palm. “What is it?”

“She’s filed for bankruptcy.”

His groan was entirely involuntary, and he doubled all the way over, face against his desk. “She’s going to get away with it.” There was no question involved, just a dull certainty that throbbed at the base of his skull.

“If she has no assets, she can’t repay the claimants.”

That sounded about right. Maybe it had been her plan all along. If she lived lavishly off other people's money, she'd never have to repay all that she'd stolen. And without another mark, she had no source of income.

"I guess that's all we can do." Owen sounded defeated. Even after he'd won the trial and put a swindler behind bars.

But jail time wasn't restitution. It wouldn't give those people back their savings. It wouldn't make their lives any easier. And if she was claiming bankruptcy, then there was no one to pay them back, no one to make things right.

No one but him.

"Have a good day," Owen said before hanging up the phone.

Standing, Ben took a deep breath of the stale classroom air. He strolled through the rows of empty desks, stooping to pick up a crumpled piece of paper.

He wasn't exactly responsible for cleaning up the classroom. It was only his for three classes a week, after all. Still, the sparse furniture made it easy to tell if the room had been picked up or not. He wasn't about to leave a mess for the tenured professor who would teach the next course here.

Bending over, he snagged a pen that a student had dropped before tossing it into the cup on his desk for anyone who showed up to class without a writing utensil. If only it were as easy to clean up after the mess his mom had made.

And he would have to. It wasn't even a question.

As he slid back into his desk chair and straightened the pile of essays that had been turned in, he gave another hard look at the list in his notebook. There were a lot of names there and few dollars in his checking account. He needed another job. Maybe two.