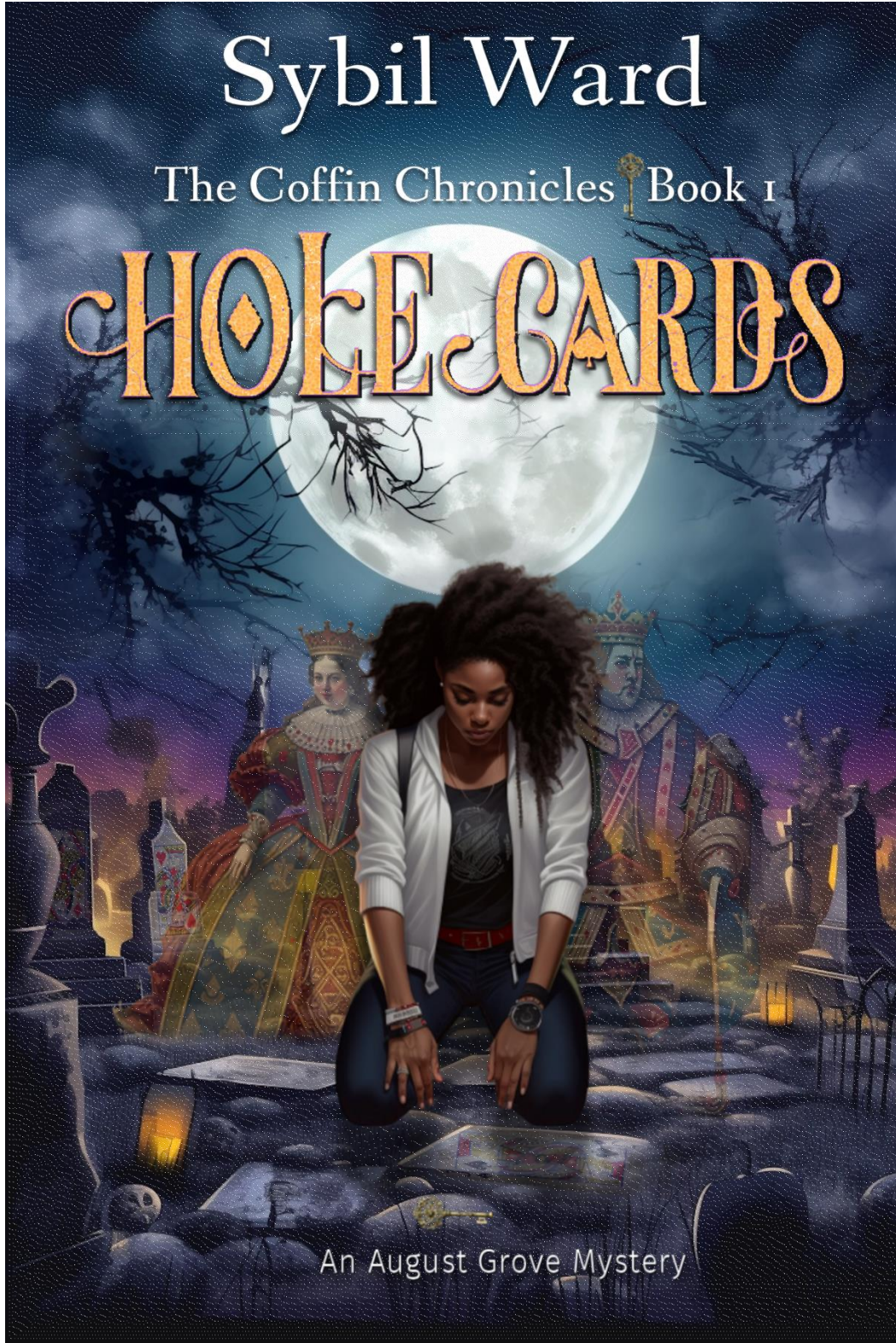


Sybil Ward

The Coffin Chronicles Book 1

HOLE CARDS



An August Grove Mystery

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HOLE CARDS

THE COFFIN CHRONICLES - BOOK 1  AN AUGUST GROVE MYSTERY

Please allow me to make a few observations.

People who live in sprawling urban areas, or just well-populated cities, seem to think everyone in a small town knows everyone else. That might be true in the tiniest, most isolated areas. But you can, in most places, on any given day, pass someone on the street, in a school, or at a grocery store that you have never seen before. A complete stranger.

And of late, we are less open to strangers. Especially since that nasty little bug raced around the planet and killed so many of us. We are, despite seeking “friends and followers” on the Internet, less open to people when outside our front door. In real life.

And there’s always something, or some... thing... to make you glad you’re not so all-embracing.

But those “things” often come calling at home. And sometimes we even recognize the faces they wear. But when those things are unknown, or even worse, unseen... Well, that’s when genuine terror happens. That’s when everyone becomes a stranger. A suspect. An enemy. Something to fear.

And fear doesn’t care about the size of your town.

At the moment, fear is alive and thriving in August Grove, Georgia. It’s bold, feeding and growing on tortured hearts, and stretching its way into a full-grown terror. Fear is feasting, thanks to the twisted evil descending on the town.

It’s an evil without a face.

An evil without a name.

No one has seen it. Nobody knows it. Just the grief it leaves behind.

A friend once told me she wished she knew everything. I smiled as I told her to be careful what she wished for. Knowing everything isn’t a gift. It’s a curse wrapped up in pretty paper, and the package inside often contains pain, loneliness, and mind-numbing horrors.

I know, because I know everything.

I am the August Grove Herald. And unlike the town’s rag of a newspaper, I am a true herald, and I’ve been one for hundreds of years. It is my blessing, my curse, and my purpose to relay what is occurring and what is yet to arrive. But I can never interfere.

As a Herald, I am compelled to tell someone what I know. That is my purpose. But I can never, ever



tell those to whom my knowledge would benefit the most. To do so would bring destruction upon me, and to all whom I have confided.

Thus, is my life. That is my curse.

But you... I will tell you everything. It is you who will bear witness.

I am the Herald.

Hear me.

Somewhere on earth, every day of the year, every moment of the day, Good is confronting Evil. As they say, twenty-four/seven. In August Grove, a town in the southeastern United States, one of those confrontations is beginning.

And it begins with Dash Coffin.



*If you must enter a darkened hallway,
make sure you're not the one walking in front,
or ensure the person behind isn't carrying
a sharp-edged grudge.*

Clearly, I never follow my own advice.

Dash Coffin

Chapter 1

Something like a tingle, then more a twinge, centered itself between Dash Coffin's shoulder blades. She squirmed, the sensation deepening to a hot, not-quite-agonizing slice. As the pain worsened, she considered what Nietzsche meant when he said, "If looks could kill." Glaring pricks. Hate-filled gazes. Staring daggers into someone's skin...

That kind of stuff.

The stabbing pain in her back, directly over the spine, intensified.

Perhaps mirroring her unease, all fifty-three cards of the poker deck she carried in her jeans pocket riffled slightly. Dash patted the pocket, but the gesture did little to reassure her or her cardboard companions. The atmosphere in the musty hallway felt too much like a stroll to an execution.

Dash shrugged and rotated her shoulders as she trudged along, and all the while, her mother's titanium-sharp gaze continued to slice into her flesh. That brand of animosity was not unanticipated. Her glowering and suspicious parent was preparing for her youngest child's next lie. But there wouldn't be one. Not today. Her mother was doing Dash a favor by letting her move back home. Lying to the person doing you a kindness was bad juju.

Even if the provider laced that kindness with venom.

As a child, Dash questioned how her mother seemed able to inflict pain upon her without a single touch. After leaving August Grove, she convinced herself it had been her childish imagination. But the

pain had always felt so real. She wondered if her mother's hatred of her had become an actual weapon. Was that even possible?

Shivers barged their way into her already aching back. The ability to weaponize an emotion into a physical threat was a terrifying idea.

At the doorway to her childhood room, Dash's stomach pinched. The place was even smaller than she remembered. With its raw wooden floor, unpainted planked walls, and single exposed bulb hanging from a cord in the ceiling, Dash could think of only one word to describe it. Unfinished. And like her, an afterthought. She took a deep breath and sought the shinier side of the coin. That poor wizard boy had slept beneath the stairs. As a child, that lovely bit of fiction always reminded her there were worse places to sleep than a butler's pantry. At least she'd had a window.

Dash once again patted her pocket, trying to calm the squirming deck within. When the cards were this nervous, it was never a good sign. But they had a lot of nerve getting antsy now. That damned near sentient set of cardboard hustlers and heifers was the reason she was in this current mess. Completely their fault. *Must go home*, they said. *Must hurry*, they said. *Return now*, they said. They had nagged her night and day until she relented.

Not something she wanted to do at all, but she came. She had packed her duffle and got on a plane, another thing she wasn't all that crazy about. The cards had only ever pressed her so hard about one thing, and she hadn't listened. And she'd paid dearly for that mistake. With them raising such a ruckus, she knew whatever was happening was serious. Dash sighed. It damned well better be. She could be somewhere enjoying something. Anything. Anywhere. Except back here in August Grove.

She sighed again. "Home, sweet home."

The words, though hollow in her mind, sounded less like a lie than Dash expected. Maybe because, somewhere beyond the brazen bull of not giving a damn, she didn't lie. She wished it was home. It just wasn't. The cramped and decrepit room held too many ghosts. They collected in the corners like

frightened dust bunnies, crumpled boxes of them—church programs and religious pamphlets and “good girl” indoctrination paraphernalia—all reminders of the person her mother had wanted Dash to be.

And the innumerable times Dash failed her.

Louise continued to stand in the hallway, bent over like an owl, eyeing Dash as she always had, as if her child were a zoo specimen or lab rat. The woman would never come into the room; at least not when Dash was in it. She would come and prowl around, search Dash’s things, and sometimes trash a book when her daughter was at school. She’d use house cleaning as her reason for being in there, except she never so much as swept an inch. Maybe she’d done so when Dash was a baby, but from the time Dash could remember, her mother never cleaned her room or otherwise stepped foot in it to care for her. Never. She spent all her affections on her sons.

“Just like you left it. Ten years ago.” Her mother leaned on her crutch and frowned into the space. “Still your room... Dashira.”

Dashira was her given name, of course, but only a handful of people ever called her that. And no one ever said it with the same intonation, uttered it with the same inflection, as her mother. She said “Dashira” as if the very word left a foul taste in her mouth. Louise Williams spoke her only daughter’s name like it was a curse.

Suddenly, for Dash, ten years away didn’t seem nearly long enough.

A cold, hard lump formed in the back of her throat as she tried to ignore the old feelings her own name conjured for her. Bad feelings, and that was so terribly wrong. No one should ever make a child hate their own name. Dash fought back her mounting rage. Anger, and the cold need to lash out, served no purpose in the here and now. She’d done enough of that in her nightmares. No, she needed to be in the moment. This moment. Instead of giving in to the scream collecting in her throat, she nodded, summoned a rebellious smile, and surveyed her old accommodation.

So much stuff in such a small space. Dash marveled at the amount of junk she accumulated as a child. More surprising was how much of it remained in the eight-by-ten-foot space. She had never attributed sentimentality to Louise—

Funny. Now that she was back home, groveling for a roof over her head, calling her mother by her first name didn't sit right in her mind's mouth. She tried it out. *Louise... Mother...* Neither felt right, but she knew instinct would fill in the blank when the time came.

Again, the books, plaques, and awards drew her eye. She'd never considered her mother to be a sentimental woman. In fact, sentimentality was a disease her entire family seemed immune to. Except her. Dash had to learn, the hard way, that letting your heart rule your actions could get you killed. She shook her head. Now was not the time to relive that memory.

But oblivious to her desires, as usual, her heart went there. "Is Pete still around the house?"

"Who?" Her mother straightened. "Who's Pete?"

"You know... that one-eared dog that used to hang around." Dash smiled at the memory. "I used to sneak my food from my plate so I could feed him at night. He was a nice dog."

Louise frowned. "That mangy thing is probably dead. I had Animal Control pick it up as soon as you left." She snorted. "Might have called the next day. At any rate, ten years gone. Thing would be dead now, anyway."

"Yeah." Dash sniffed, hard, and turned her back to her mother. That dog had lived under the house, beneath her little room, and they would fall asleep at night—her on the floor with her blanket, staring down through the cracks between the floorboards at his shiny eyes. He always seemed so happy to have company. As was she. Dash hadn't been a little kid back then, maybe ten or eleven, but Pete was still the doll, teddy bear, and old stuffed animal she never had, all rolled up into a warm, living thing. Back then, if she could have found a way to do it, she would have dragged him, fleas and all, up into her bed.

Dash sniffled again. The day she ran, she couldn't... she didn't get the chance to say goodbye to Pete. If only she had taken him with her—

A hard sneeze dragged Dash's attention back to the present.

"That's the dust." Louise rapped the doorframe with her metal crutch causing chunky bits of gray to drift to the floor. "I don't get around so well anymore. The entire place needs a good cleaning."

She had told Dash, even before allowing her to enter the house, how arthritis had plagued her for all the years Dash had been gone. In recent months, she'd said with lowered eyes, the disease threatened to immobilize her as it ruthlessly attacked her lower spine.

Dash had recognized the guilt shot and the follow-on play for sympathy. As she scanned the room, she acknowledged her mother might have a legitimate excuse not to clean. Now. But as her tear-filled eyes danced across the dresser, chest-of-drawers, and bookshelf—each covered with a ten-year-old layer of dust, that was as close to sympathy as Dash could manage. Something less than charitable within her concluded Karma was a bitch.

Her mother seemed poised for some kind of response, so Dash said, "Not a problem... Mama. I've slept in worse."

As usual, not the best answer.

"You won't sleep in worse here. In case you missed it, that was a hint to clean your room." Louise smiled, sort of, her tobacco-stained teeth barely showing. "Well, might not be a hint."

Dash nodded and suppressed another sneeze. "You were never subtle." She dropped onto the twin bed and launched a swarm of dusty devils. "And neither is this bed." She leapt to her feet as the powdery shower returned to its resting place.

"Everything for cleaning is right where it should be," her mother said as she limped away. "If you can remember where that is."

“Ouch.” Dash thought she’d need Kevlar to make it through the rest of the week. Those shots would keep on coming. Perhaps being here wasn’t the best—

Before she could complete the thought, the front door of the three-bedroom house slammed open so hard, Dash felt it in her feet. She didn’t have to ask, nor wait for this visitor to be announced. She raced out into the hall, searching for the one person she loved without question.

The cousins screamed each other’s names as they collided, throwing their arms around each other, with Ardis Canaday bursting into tears. They shoved each other, inspected each other, and bawled like babies. “When did you get home?” Ardis snatched the bright red bandana from Dash’s head, allowing a mass of tight black and red curls to escape. “And damn, your hair.”

“Watch your mouth, Ardis,” Louise called from somewhere in the house.

“Yes, ma’am.” Ardis rolled her eyes before grinning broadly.

Dash squealed. “Look at you, in a dress.” Ardis twirled, showing off the dark green coat dress with a black belt at the waist. The patent leather belt matched her shoes. “You look like a friggin’ woman in that getup.”

“I am a woman. I got to be one while your ass was gone.”

“Ardis!” Louise rapped her crutch against the wall. “And you too, Dashira.”

“Yes, ma’am,” they chorused. The cousins grinned as Dash grabbed Ardis’s hand and dragged her into the tiny bedroom. She closed the door and waited, her ear to the only painted surface in the room. Within a minute, the soft thump of Louise’s crutch made its way to her door. Dash put a finger to her lips and shushed Ardis, who shook with laughter.

“I wore a dress like that to the Conway Baptist Church Revival,” Dash said, her voice ringing in the small space. “I swear, I saw the light that day.”

The harrumph from the other side was loud enough that Ardis heard it across the room. Grinning, she slapped a hand over her mouth as Dash whispered, “Some things never change.”

Louise, either satisfied or disappointed with her eavesdropping, nonetheless retreated. The thump of her crutch ebbed as she exited the hallway.

Dash waited half a second after the final thud before she squealed, rushed to Ardis, and flung her arms around the taller woman's neck. "I've missed you so much."

Ardis returned her hug and raised it to a giant squeeze. "You, too."

Her cousin was a year older than Dash, but they had always been together. Some people called them the midnight twins. Dash never understood the midnight part, unless it was a reference to their coloring. She and Ardis were both dark-skinned, much darker than their mothers and siblings. Probably inherited their coloring from their fathers—whoever they were. Aunt Mandy, aka Miranda Walsh, married the light-skinned Tyson Walsh right out of high school and had two sons in three years. Like Dash, Ardis hadn't come along until much later, and she didn't resemble her mother or the man she called daddy.

Infidelity ran in the damned family, was Dash's thought on the subject. And thank God. Ardis was the only person in the entire bunch Dash could tolerate. In her opinion, because they were "outside children," they had missed out on the Asshole gene.

"Tell me everything," Ardis said.

Dash grinned. "Help me clean."

"Yeah, nothing changes." Ardis laughed and headed to the door. "Talk. I'll get the vacuum." She vanished into the dark hallway.

Dash eased the deck of playing cards from her jeans pocket and let it lie flat on her left palm. For an instant, the edges glowed a deep golden-yellow, and an electric thrill raced up her arm. She flipped the Archangel deck in her hand to view the face of the bottom card. The Joker smiled up at her, the epitome of innocence, its eyes glowing. Dash squeezed the deck gently. "Don't grin at me. As much as I love Ardy, you'd better have a damned good reason for dragging me back here."

Chapter 2

When Ardis returned with the vacuum, Dash was leaning out through the bedroom window, plucking a bloom from an azalea bush. Ardis sat the machine at the foot of the bed and joined her. “So, wishing you’d never come back?”

“I’m conflicted.” Dash drew back and smiled. “Did you talk the cards into bringing me home?”

“Of course, I did. Your butt hadn’t been home in forever. Even that good looking detective couldn’t drag you back to August Grove.”

Dash frowned. “You mean Frank Gamble?”

Ardis laughed. “Who else. My, my. If not for Randy...”

“Stop it.” Dash laughed. “Though I have to admit, Mr. Frank Oscar Gamble III is quite the eyeful. And persuasive. He got me on the phone with you, right?”

“But not persuasive enough to get your body back here.”

“I told you. There were things happening right then. Bad things. In fact, I was glad Frank showed up. He was a major help. Even after all that happened, I still needed to disappear for a minute. There was no way I could come back to August Grove.”

“But you didn’t even come home when Fletcher was born. Fletcher...” Ardis shuddered. “As much as I love Randy, I hate that name. It’s tradition, but did he have to name my son after his father? What’s wrong with *my* father’s name?”

“What’s wrong with that, nutty girl, is we don’t know who your old man is. Or did you forget that?”
Laughter bubbled up so easily, it gave Dash pause. Why was it Ardis made her so comfortable? It was

always so easy to laugh, to relax, and to just be herself when she was with her. Ardis was more like a sister than a cousin.

“Hey, just because you *think* you know who your daddy is, don’t go throwing shade in my direction.” Ardis mock pouted. “We could have named the baby after Tyson, even if he isn’t my biological.”

“No way,” Dash said. “Old man Fletcher actually loves his grandson; and giving the baby his name keeps you on the right side of your in-laws.”

“I guess.” Ardis squeezed into the window beside Dash. “One of us got fat.”

“I heard babies can do that to you.” Dash laughed and nudged Ardis further over the window’s sill. “It’s been ten years, and nothing has changed.”

Keeping her gaze forward, Ardis smiled. “That’s not exactly true. Your godson is two years old—”

“And where is my godson?” Dash tried to put on a frown. “How dare you show up without him.”

“Your godson is at daycare learning how to be a mover and shaker in this town. Like his folks. His father was promoted to Police Sergeant First Class six months ago, and your cousin is now the proud owner of Ellison’s Fine Portraits.”

“Ouch!” Dash bumped her head on the sash while pulling herself out of the window. Pink blooms fluttered to the floor as she grabbed Ardis by the waist and yanked her back into the room. “You’re kidding. Mr. Ellison kept his word? He left the shop to you?”

“Don’t be so happy he’s dead.” Ardis pushed Dash onto the bed. Again, a swarm of dust motes took to the air. “I loved Mr. Ell. After you left, he was the only person I could trust. Until Randy.”

Dash swallowed hard, moved by the sincere pain in her cousin’s eyes. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you were so close. When you told me that little white man promised you the store if you worked for him two years without pay, I thought you’d lost your mind.”

“I remember. You chewed on me about that every time you called.” Ardis sat down on the bed beside Dash amid the shower of dust. “I ended up working without salary for closer to three years, right up to the time I started dating Randy.”

Dash sneezed while trying to say, “You and a cop’s kid. Wow.”

“Me and a cop, you mean. Sergeant Randall Canaday.”

She said it with such pride, Dash had a moment of jealousy. Ardis and Randy married three years ago, and he did everything, as far as Dash could see, to make Ardis happy. New house, new son. And now she was a new proprietor. Ardis had it all, and in Dash’s opinion, it was much deserved. There wasn’t a better person in the world.

“I’m glad you’re home. I’m less scared already.” Ardis leaned forward, as if staring at something far away. “You may be the only person who can figure this out.”

Dash sat up. “Figure what out?”

Tiny gray clumps settled onto Ardis’s braided bun as she twisted around on the bed. Her eyes were red, but Dash wasn’t certain it was from the dust. Beneath her cousin’s smile was a tremble, the same tremble Dash now felt in her pocket. She pulled the deck from her jeans without removing her gaze from Ardis. “What’s happening here?”

She asked the question of whoever or whatever had an answer. Dash felt the deck quiver, and she let it fan out over both palms, face down, watching as one jogged out of line. Ardis reached over and plucked the card from the deck and held it up facing Dash.

“The death card,” Dash whispered. “A dark past...”

Ardis didn’t seem surprised by the Ace of Spades, but her voice quavered. “Someone is taking our children. Dash, I’m so worried for them. It’s been weeks... I’m scared someone has...”

Chilling whispers from the cards echoed in Dash’s mind. *The children are gone. Find them. The children are gone. Find them...*

Dash experienced a knee-weakening wave of nausea as darkness crept in from the corners of her eyes. In her hands, the cards glowed, but the fanned deck faltered, almost falling to the floor. Ardis's sobbing seemed far away, but that sound helped Dash claw back her control from the fear trying to consume it. Her trembling fingers stilled.

But the moment wasn't over. Ardis's voice cracked with an ice Dash had never heard. "Someone is taking our children and the police, not even Randy, know what to do about it. They're small and helpless and... I'm having nightmares. If we don't find them soon..."

Dash shivered.

Another card wriggled its way out of the deck and fell to the floor. The Jack of Hearts lay amidst the dust, golden edges gleaming, its indices glowing a molten red. On the card, its two larger hearts animated. One began growing and then shrinking, as if beating. The other heart shrank and shriveled; blood seeping from it out onto the floor.

"The present..." Dash whispered as the air in the room thinned. "A loved one, young, and male."

Ardis gasped. The Ace of Spades tipped, as if in slow motion, sliding from her fingers... falling...

The ace landed, face up, atop the Jack of Hearts. A sudden pain throbbled in Dash's chest, as if an unseen terror was drilling a hole into her heart. Her words came without thought and rasped out. "A darkness, a menace from the past, overtakes the present."

"Dash, does that mean... will there be more children taken? More babies?" Ardis stared down at the Jack of Hearts, her eyes growing larger. "Oh, God." She reached out and grabbed Dash by the shoulder. "It's Fletcher, isn't it? My son. Dash, Fletcher is the next child to be taken."

Chapter 3

For almost an hour, Dash sat and listened as Ardis told her what was happening in August Grove. Ardis said she'd had nightmares since the first child went missing in February. Two entire months, and the police didn't have a single clue where the child might be or who had taken him. The little boy, only two years old, had vanished from his home in the middle of the day. Of course, the initial investigation centered on the parents, relatives, and strangers; but for naught.

Five weeks ago, after the second child vanished, it was clear there was a serial kidnapper in the community. She knew, down to her bones, that whoever was doing this would take another child, even though her husband tried to reassure her. As always, Ardis tried to be that thing—reassured—but the only way that would happen was if the kidnapper was in jail.

Ardis brushed dust from her dress. “The parents of the second missing child did an interview with a reporter from CNN. The story went national and viral on the Internet. The governor didn't want to see these kidnappings turn into a horror show like the one a few years ago. At least not on his watch. He and the state's top cop decided our police force needed some help, so they sent a detective. Supposedly, he was sent to help, but Chief Carther put him in charge and pulled every other detective off the case.”

“What? He doesn't have any help?” Dash asked.

“No. Randy volunteered, and that's it. So far, the detective is stumped. The kidnapper took the third child the same night the detective arrived.”

“So, you sent for me?” Dash asked.

“So, I sent for you.”

Her cousin managed a weak smile. “Subconsciously, I must have gone to bed that night wishing I could reach you. For only the second time ever, your cards appeared in my dream.” She shrugged. “I didn’t even question it, whether I was awake or asleep. I begged Joker to bring you home.”

“Well, you got through to them, and they didn’t give me a lot of choice. They pestered me until I threatened to buy another deck. Tenacious, that bunch. When I gave in, they did everything except pack my bag to get me here.” Dash smiled. “I’m not so sure Joker didn’t help with that.”

“So, you’re here,” Ardis said.

Dash smiled. “We’ve got work to do.”

When Dash had a problem, she turned her brain away from it, putting it to work solving things she could control until she was once again steady. Only then would she speak to the cards. Ardis knew her, respected her process, and wouldn’t push her for answers Dash wasn’t ready or able to give. To calm her mind and boost her spirit, to enable her soul to reach out to whoever or whatever guided her, she needed to settle herself.

Without another word, the two of them got to work. Ardis plugged in the vacuum and Dash stripped the bed, dumping dust and dirt as she did. For the next two hours, they cleaned. Ardis vacuumed and dusted, while Dash made trips back and forth to the washer and dryer, cleaning curtains and bedding and the clothes from her duffle. Childhood books and memorabilia were stacked, packed, and carried out to her mother’s church donation bins until every surface was clear for the microfiber cloths and furniture polish. Dash didn’t intend to be there long enough to care about the state of the room, but just in case...

Besides, it might help to keep Louise off her back.

Between the rumbling cleaning machine and the overly exuberant washing machine next door, there wasn’t much quiet space for chatting. But that was okay. There was another noise in the room—a warm

noise—two quiet thudding sounds, that was slowly becoming one. Dash recognized it as the sound of her heart, and her heartbeat was synching to Ardis. For her, Ardis was home.

They were finishing the bed with fresh linen when Ardis checked her watch. “I have to go.”

Dash straightened and stared at her cousin. “Now?”

Ardis nodded. “I have to pick up Fletcher, grab something for dinner, and get home before Randy. I don’t like him coming home to an empty house.” She shrugged. “And he’s always famished when he walks in the door, so…” Her voice trailed off.

Somewhere, someone pulled a long, sharp stick through Dash’s chest. “Uh, sure, okay.” She tried to smile. “You’re a married woman with a family. I can’t expect you to hang around in my room like we’re still kids. Yeah, you should get home.” She stood with one end of the bedspread in her hands, threading the woven fabric back and forth between her fingers as if she didn’t understand what to do with it. “Guess I’ll see you. Tomorrow?”

Ardis pulled her corner of the bedspread over the mattress before speaking. “I’ll be at the shop. I closed up today to come and see you.”

She wasn’t looking at Dash, and Dash was glad. They’d both start crying again. “That’s good. I’ll drop by the studio, see the place. And we can have a real talk—”

The embrace came so hard and fast, Dash couldn’t draw a new breath. But she held on, reinforcing the belief that the two of them were undefeated when taking on any foe. She was still that kid, albeit ten years later, who took on the big boys with only a broken broomstick. And Ardis continued to be the smartest and best strategic thinker she’d ever met. Together, they were friggin’ invincible and damned near indestructible. Dash pushed Ardis out to arms-length and stared into her eyes.

“Don’t let that card drop scare you. Fletcher may or may not be in danger. I have to do some work, get my head back in the game.”

Ardis swiped at her eyes. “You really haven’t read since Brenner?”

The name alone threatened to chase all the air out of the room. Dash squeezed her eyes closed until the desire to flee the question ebbed. If she was ever to regain her confidence, that thing, the Brenner thing, was an issue she'd have to confront. But not tonight. The stack of issues awaiting her attention was too deep and thick to dive into. She'd never survive the collision.

Dash opened her eyes as she inhaled. One at a time, piece by piece, was the only way to bring that wall of crap down to a manageable size.

She released Ardis and finished the bed. "No, I haven't, at least nothing serious. I did a couple of BS sessions with some boys one afternoon in return for a couple of burgers, fries, and a shake. Just junk and foolishness about grades, girls, and the usual teenage angst. I didn't have to reach or press, and I guess the cards recognized my desire not to delve too deep. Not a single card popped on its own." Dash forced her lips into something resembling a smile. "Maybe the deck was hungry, too."

"You have to forgive yourself for that, Dash. What happened to Mr. Brenner—"

"Is a subject for another time." Dash pushed stray curls away from her eyes. "For now, my focus is on lost children. I hope that detective you mentioned is bringing more to the table than a helpful attitude. If he's not willing to go where people don't want him to go, or ask hard questions when it matters, I'll have to."

Ardis dropped onto the freshly made bed. "He came down from Atlanta to help with the case, so I don't know a lot about him, but Randy says he might be the best detective he's ever seen. We had him over for dinner, and he seems like a really good guy. Cares about getting the kids back. And Randy says he's not scared of stepping on toes to solve this. That said, I don't know how open he is to a civilian looking into things. Might be a good idea to stay out of his way."

"Will do." Dash gathered her clothes from the chair and took them to the dresser. "I've learned how to keep my head down and stay out of reach of police officers. My allergies act up when the boys in blue

are around. Besides, I'm not looking for fame or trouble, so no reason we have to cross paths. When I get info from the cards or the streets, I'll give it to you, and you can pass it to Randy. How's that?"

Ardis nodded, but then checked her watch again. "Guess I'd better go. Come early to the shop if you can. In fact, come for breakfast. I'll pick up some of Maylene's chicken and waffles on the way in. You can eat while I show you some pictures." Ardis gave Dash a bump with her hip as she headed to the door. "By the way, almost everybody's heard you're in town."

"What?" Dash shoved the drawer, but a t-shirt caught on the drawer's lip. "How do people... heck, how did *you* know I was here?"

Ardis grinned as she moved off to the door. "No magic involved. Remember Mavis Trent? She works at the bus station. That human Internet was on the phone before you got into your cab." She turned back, still grinning, and leaned against the door frame. "And that cab driver... he called Randy before he pulled away from the curb outside. Randy, of course... you get it. Six degrees and all that."

"Ugh. You know, there are a few people I'd like to stay away from, both from in and out of town." Dash pushed the t-shirt deeper into the drawer and slammed it closed. "Mavis and her interactive mouth might get me shot."

"Don't "Don't worry about it. You've been away a long time." Ardis winked before opening the door. "You're not the superstar you used to be."

Dash snorted. "Yes, I am."

"So delusional." Ardis laughed as she melted into the hallway. "Bye."

Dash yelled after her. "I want dark meat with my waffles."

But her cousin's departure lasted less than a minute. "Wait a minute," Ardis said from the hallway. She came back through the door, a frown cutting a deep furrow in her brow. "That's the reason, isn't it?"

Dash plopped onto the bed. "Sorry, cuz, but even the cards don't know what—"

“You hate it here.” Ardis glanced over her shoulder into the hall. There was no thud-thud of crutches, but she lowered her voice, anyway. “You hate this house, this room, and you’d never stay here if you had a choice. Admit it, Dash. You won’t stay with Randy and me because you’re scared someone will come for you and we’ll get hurt.”

In moments like this, Dash was never sure how to answer. Saying yes implied too many negative things, from arrogance to a lack of respect for the other party. Ardis might think she was bragging, or that Dash believed Randy couldn’t protect them, or... Too many things.

But saying no and letting Ardis drag her home was a lie, and dangerous. The people chasing her wouldn’t mind slaughtering her relatives if it meant killing her. Mix ego with rage and an unquenchable thirst for revenge, and no one was safe. The only reason she dared come to her mother was because, as awful as it sounded, this was the last place anyone who knew her would come looking. No one, friend or enemy, would think she’d come home.

Still, she couldn’t get in and out of August Grove fast enough.

“Dash?” Ardis watched her, that scrutinizing gaze dissecting her. “What you just said... You weren’t joking. There’s more to you staying here than you’re saying, isn’t there?”

“Stop it, Ardy. I told you why on the phone. You and Randy are still newlyweds, and I’m not horning in on your privacy.” Ardis tried to interrupt, but Dash held up a hand to stop her. “Of course, I’m coming to hang out, but I won’t stay. For now, this is the best place for me to take a nap. I’m too broke for a hotel.”

Ardis did her Spock thing, her left eyebrow raised. She always knew when Dash was lying.

Dash laughed. “Stop it. It’s like you said. No worries. All my enemies are gone or... Well, they’re no threat. So, go home. Be with your family. I’ll come around enough that Randy will get sick of me. And I’ll be at the shop tomorrow.”

Ardis glanced at her watch. “You’re sure?”

“Get out, already.” Dash threw a pair of socks at Ardis, who tried to catch them, but missed.

“Well, some things never change.” Ardis grinned. “You’ll be at the shop for breakfast?”

Dash winked. “I can always have cold waffles for lunch.”

Spring was alive and well in Georgia, and the dogwoods and azaleas were bursting with pink, white, and red blooms everywhere in August Grove. March had used up the last of the rough weather, and April had set about sprucing up the trees and lawns with an array of greens that broke the frowns of the worst curmudgeons. Dash stood on her mother’s porch and appreciated what it was like to be home.

For all of ten minutes.

Louise came out of the house and pushed past her daughter. No “pardon” or “excuse me” or anything resembling a civil apology. Just a short shove before she took a seat on the porch swing near the kitchen window.

Dash pretended not to notice the subtle assault, instead placing her attention on the swing. The large bench swing hadn’t been there when Dash lived at home, and from the look of the paint, hadn’t been on the porch for more than two or three years. There were no dents or dings, and the white paint still had a bright finish. It dressed up the porch, and Dash, unfortunately, said so.

“So glad you approve.” Louise scowled at her daughter before pulling a pack of cigarettes from her pocket.

Dash thought she’d give it one more try. “That was just a compliment, Mama. It’s a pretty swing, and it makes a nice place to sit on a nice day like today. Did one of the boys make it?”

“One of the boys? Are you talking about my sons?” The sneer on Louise’s face threatened to extinguish her cigarette. “If you mean your brothers, say *my brothers*. ‘The boys’ don’t mean anything to me.”

Dash sucked a breath between her teeth and swallowed a thousand words that would have only made matters worse. Things like, “They’re the boys to me since none of them ever treated me like a sister.” Or “I barely know their names since they all left home before I was ten.” And the big swing— “Why should I call them anything better than they call me? Aren’t I just ‘that girl?’”

All of that was true, but not at all helpful. For Ardis’s sake, Dash needed to remain here for at least a week. She couldn’t afford to alienate her mother any further. Louise was already annoyed by the simple fact Dash was breathing. With an audible sigh, Dash prepared for another foray. “Fine. Did my brothers build the swing?”

“No.” Louise blew out a cloud of smoke. She raised her red-rimmed eyes and stared into the porch’s ceiling, all her attention on the mini fog, no longer acknowledging Dash’s presence.

Yes, some things never change, Dash thought. Iron-clad. Absolutely immutable.

After ten minutes of no other comment from her mother, Dash returned to her room. If forced to spend an entire hour with Louise, she’d absolutely run to a hotel. For sure, danger lay in renting any room where she had to show ID or use a credit card; but damn. The woman’s constant abuse was almost as bad as getting shot. “Just... just damn.”

Dash leaned against the door and let her fingers trace the whorls and swirls of the door’s less than stellar paint job. As she gazed around the room, the hotel room idea got shinier and shinier. Ardis could be right. Her old home-grown enemies had probably moved on, made lives for themselves elsewhere, and forgotten about her. Or they were in prison. Maybe even dead. In any case, she probably didn’t have to worry about them.

Probably.

But those out-of-town folks—yeah, they were a problem. She had no doubt that gangster from NOLA had eyes on August Grove, maybe checking hotels on the regular. The tiniest whiff of her and he'd have his guys here in just a few hours. She knew she could lose them, but those idiots didn't care who they harmed as long as they could return home with blood on their sleeves. Anybody they thought could lead them to her was a potential victim.

But was a hotel truly a worse gamble than staying where she was guaranteed an hourly dose of hate and degradation?

Dash pulled a quarter from her jeans pocket and flicked it into the air. "Heads, gangsters who want me dead; or tails, a mother who wishes I'd never been born." Dash snatched the coin out of the air and crammed it back into her pocket without looking. As someone who could sometimes see the future, she knew there were things better left unknown.

Her stomach rumbled. Louise hadn't seemed interested in preparing a meal, and Dash suspected volunteering to cook would bring her enough grief to destroy her appetite. She grabbed her bandana and tied it up and over her curls, securing the knot at the base of her neck. Time to see what cuisine August Grove had to offer.

With her phone, wallet, and deck in her pockets, Dash slipped out through the window the way she'd done most of her life.

Some things never changed.

Chapter 4

Detective Gerald Betteres stood in the doorway of the abandoned house and stared into what was once a living room, straight through the back door of the kitchen. Someone had called in a report of hearing a child crying while driving by; but didn't see anyone when they stopped to check. Gerald was out once more with Sergeant Canaday to investigate what he was sure was yet another false alarm. Whoever had those missing children wasn't hiding in a dump like this.

He considered the legs of his trousers—pants that no longer matched his coat—the dark blue fabric now a sick shade of green from pollen, cockleburs, and possibly a few things he didn't want to imagine.

The detective altered his gaze as the uniformed officer appeared from the shadows on the side of the house, rotting boards moaning and complaining as he crossed the porch. “No sign anyone's been here in years, sir.” Canaday's face creased with aggravation. “I appreciate people being responsible citizens and keeping an eye out, but does the captain have to send us out on every tip? We were doing some good work with those files, I thought.”

Canaday must have realized he'd just criticized Chief Carther, because he dropped his eyes. The police chief had ordered their captain to send them out on every call. “No disrespect intended, Detective.”

“Don't worry about it,” Gerald said, “and no disagreement here. Any of the patrol cars could have driven by, especially this time of day.” As the sergeant looked up, Gerald added, “Between you and me, I don't think the chief's thrilled with me being here.”

Sergeant Randall Canaday nodded as the two men turned and made their way through debris, weeds, and tall grass back to the squad car. The detective studied the sergeant as they walked.

About Gerald's height, Canaday nonetheless appeared to be a much larger man. He was... Gerald searched for a word... dense. Randy Canaday appeared to be thicker, his mass denser, as if he'd been raised in a pressure cooker. His muscles didn't bulge as much as ripple when he moved. And there wasn't a spot on him, as far as the detective could see, that wasn't well toned, including his face. Light brown skin pulled taut across high cheek bones, a prominent chin, and a narrow-but-rounded nose. All of those features weren't in the least pointed because of the ample sinew supporting the surrounding flesh. Not a guy you wanted to punch.

Inside the car, Canaday glanced over at Gerald. "Since we're having this conversation between us, sir—"

"Randy, stop calling me sir. These days, I imagine you spend as much time with me as you do with your pretty wife. Please, call me Gerald." He extended a hand.

Randy took it and smiled. "When we're alone, just like with Ardis."

Gerald laughed. "You call her Gerald when you're alone?"

Randy winked. "This is a PG conversation, Gerald."

They laughed for a moment, but Randy sobered as he started the car. "You know, Carther would love to see you fail."

"You're not serious."

The sergeant didn't answer until he had backed the car out onto the street. "I'll say it straight, okay?"

When Gerald nodded, Randy said, "These are black babies vanishing, and Carther and his boy, Allberry, don't give a single damn. Sure, he'd like to catch the guy in case he goes after some white kids, but he'd rather one of his boys did the catching. You getting the job done will make his squad look bad. And it should. You shine a harsh light on that lazy bunch of suit-wearing slobs that draw a check for doing nothing all day but rousting a junkie or two."

The man's jaw clenched, and Gerald watched his anger seep out through the strong hands gripping the steering wheel.

"Sounds like the department's got serious issues."

Randy nodded, but he didn't speak. In fact, he said nothing else for more than a block. Heat still radiated off his strong arms, and Gerald gave him time to cool off.

Those moments also gave Gerald time to think. It wasn't lost on the detective how much this man trusted him. Being a black police officer was hard enough; but the sergeant was risking his job and possibly his life by confiding to him, a white detective. Gerald didn't want Randy to worry about what he'd said.

"Thanks for giving me an inside view of the department. I had my suspicions. The detectives always clam up in front of me, but the uniforms aren't so discreet. I've caught a few words on the breeze that let me know leadership doesn't mind a racial slur here or there. That means they're fine with other things as well."

Instead of turning left at the next intersection, Randy turned right, away from the station. "There's more here than insults and simple harassment." He slowed across the street from a three-story warehouse. The building sat on the corner of Downs and 5th, the onset of an industrial area crowded with defunct storage facilities and processing plants. Beyond, a scant four blocks away, lay The Bottoms, the home to August Grove's poorest, and primarily black, citizens.

"Over there on the sidewalk, three years ago, my dad found his friend, Sergeant Jasper Pruitt, with three slugs in his back. Dad said Jasper was responding to a radio call for which there was no record, yet they both heard it."

"An ambush?"

“I’d say so. Jasper survived, but just. And stubborn mule that he is, he beat the odds on being paralyzed, despite all the damage inflicted by those hollow points to his insides. He can’t work, and according to his daughter, he’s in a lot of pain...” Randy’s voice trailed away.

Gerald had a slow-boiling gut happening. “So, someone sent Sergeant Pruitt out to be slaughtered for, what? Did your dad know why?”

Randy slouched in his seat. “No, because he said Jasper didn’t even know. Carther, back when he was captain, had gone out of his way to lay a murder charge on Jasper, but he couldn’t make it stick, and Sergeant Pruitt wouldn’t quit. Jasper gained a lot of enemies just for being, well, Jasper. Know what I mean? He and my dad suspected it was another cop who took the shots, but the motive...” Randy frowned. “Only the shooter knows. Maybe it’s as simple as hate.”

“Then why him?” Gerald pondered that. “With all the black officers in the department, why Pruitt? Just bad luck?”

“Could be.” Randy twisted on the seat and stared hard at Gerald. “I brought you here to tell you two things. The night of the Pruitt shooting, one man on the scene said, ‘Will you look at that? I thought his blood would be black like him.’”

Those words stole Gerald’s breath for a moment. He gaped, unable to respond.

Randy’s eyes hardened. “I said that to say they don’t care how red your blood is, Detective. If you get in their way...” He turned back to the steering wheel. “I just don’t want to find you on a street corner somewhere, okay? That blond head of yours would make a great target, even in the dark. So, when you go out, I go with you. If there’s a chase, I’m at your side.”

Gerald was still groping for words, his thoughts whirring out of control. “Uh... well, damn.”

“Yeah.” Randy gave him a half-hearted smile. “And if you haven’t figured it out yet, you’re kind of a problem for Carther. The man you are inside is far more dangerous to him than the way you look on the outside. In your short time here, you’ve made it clear where you stand, what you’ll do, and more

importantly, what you won't. That puts you on the wrong side as far as Carther and his goons are concerned. A long way out on the wrong side. So, never alone, right?"

Gerald nodded, his tongue and mind still trying to reconnect. This was not unlike warnings he'd heard before, for sure. There was always unspoken tension between him and some of his colleagues because being a police officer was more than a job to him. It was his chance to make a difference, to be of help. Maybe even to serve. But he believed you did your job with the right side up. If you had to lie, cheat, or hurt someone to make a case, you tipped your hat to the other guy and let it go. Do better the next time. But he could count his losses on one hand because he did the job, he worked the case, and he didn't let this kind of bullshit get in his way.

The famous Better's obstinance came to his rescue. "If you're my bodyguard, Sergeant, then it's mutual. You can't be on too many Christmas lists around the station. I see the rolling eyes, hear the muttering. You're a damned good cop, and I suspect more than a few of your compadres, black and white, don't appreciate that about you. So, we'll have each other's backs for as long as I'm here. That a plan?"

"That's a plan." Randy smiled as he put the car in gear and made a U-turn toward downtown. "Where to next?"

Where to, indeed. Gerald was still processing everything Randy had said, and he didn't like that chilled sweat seeping down his back. He hadn't expected the case in August Grove to be simple, but he never imagined he'd have to worry about becoming a victim, especially at the hands of a fellow officer. "Well, shit."

Randy laughed. "I think we need food, and I know who has the best pot in town. I'll call Ardis and see what we're having for dinner tonight."

Gerald smiled but shook his head. "No, not tonight. I've already taken up more of your wife's time than she's probably willing to forgive. And by the way, I can see why you married that woman. Her gentle spirit picks you up and hugs you when she says hello."

Randy laughed. “I won’t try to dissuade you from those nice thoughts about my wife; but let me just say her gentle spirit has a feisty companion that doesn’t mind showing up when the need arises.” His big grin appeared for the first time. “And her best bud, Dash Coffin, is in town this week. I expect my damned-near-angelic wife to get into some kind of trouble in the next few days.”

“Dash. Coffin?” It was Gerald’s turn to grin. “With a name like that, there must be stories. You’ve got between here and the station to tell me all about this... Uh, Dash is a woman, right?”

“Oh, yeah.” Randy laughed. “And what a woman. There’s always trouble when Dashira Coffin is back in the hood.”

Chapter 5

In Dash's opinion, the true advantage of living in a small town was getting around without a car. For most places she wanted to go, she could walk. And on a day like this, it was sheer pleasure to be out and about. Cool, warm, bright, mellow—all and every at the same time. She stopped at the edge of one yard and gawked at the flower beds. The sight of an outrageous number of shades and hues embodied in wonderful shapes... Snowdrops, pansies, petunias, marigolds, snapdragons...

Her deck wriggled in her pocket, and Dash giggled. "Yes, such beautiful things make me happy, too."

The amazing display swept all thoughts of her mother's behavior from her mind. Who could dwell on ugliness when the world offered so much beauty? It had taken her a long time after she left home to trust beautiful things and kind people. Because of her twisted upbringing, Dash was still learning how to accept love from others. But thanks to the many people who helped her on her journey, she was learning.

When she ran from home with nothing but fear, confusion, and anger in her heart, people along the road had cared for her. Maybe even saved her life. And when she found the circus, the people there took her in. The acrobats, the clowns, and all the other performers and carnies showed her nothing but concern and kindness. They appreciated who and what she was; and embraced everything about her that her mother hated—from her dark skin to that peculiar deck of cards in her pocket. The circus folk cherished magic, especially when it was real.

It had been far too long since she acknowledged the love and gratitude she had for her adopted family. Perhaps being back in August Grove was making her sentimental. For sure, she didn't have to dwell on what she didn't have. She had gotten a second chance, and now had a family that wanted her.

With a smile of appreciation for the golden daffodils encircling the neighboring mailbox, Dash left Main Street, cutting instead across 4th Street and over to Downs.

Homes and yards weren't so pretty here. People called this stretch of town, "The Bottoms." The topography of the low-lying area wasn't the only reason for the name. The Bottoms had grown up around the plants and mills—tiny wooden houses and bungalows, even a few brick homes, rented or owned by the plant workers. All decrepit buildings now, but Dash imagined they were once filled with light, music, and happy families—a pleasant neighborhood until the work dried up. Now, it was the "bad part" of town.

But the only bad thing Dash found there was poverty.

Most of those plants and mills closed long before she was born, leaving the people who remained there scurrying to find whatever work they could. They had been scrambling ever since. She remembered when she was small, hearing two women discuss those "lazy people" that lived "down there." But she learned early in life that there was a difference between lazy and downtrodden. And despite rhetoric to the contrary, certain individuals wanted the people in The Bottoms to stay just the way they were—bereft, barren, and beholden.

Dash shook her head, pushing back a surge of anger and helplessness. It seemed the rich and powerful wanted poor folks to stay put, but only until they needed the land beneath their feet. Empty houses on both sides of the street proclaimed people were getting nudged, if not shoved, out of their homes. Change had come to August Grove, and the people in The Bottoms probably weren't enjoying it.

Ardis had written to her about the changes in their hometown, but Dash never imagined the extent of it. The new, young mayor had ambitions to be governor someday, and he was intent on making his mark as a progressive politician capable of improving life for his constituents. And he was, for some of them. Thanks in part to the mayor's friendship with Senator Jeff Houston, two large companies had deposited their new factories on the outskirts of August Grove. New jobs, new money, and perhaps, new people. With so much change, had the town opened its arms to a serial kidnapper? Or worse?

Dash hadn't seen all the new yet; but to her, it seemed very little of the good fortune was seeping into this part of town. Once poor, always poor, seemed the hard held philosophy here.

She crossed the street and entered what had once been a thriving industrial park. She thought it would soon thrive again. Developers were renovating the abandoned warehouses and plants into upscale lofts, condos, and retail spaces. She slowed as she reached the corner, her attention captured by the Medallion Flour plant, an old packing facility where she and Ardis played when they were kids. She studied the old building, remembering how they had discovered a door that, though chained, allowed them to squeeze inside. So much fun. They spent the entire afternoon sliding down the old chutes, flour raining down like snow.

And boy, the trouble she'd gotten in. She had earned a scream of terror from her mother when she came home looking like a grungy ghost, covered in flour from head to toe. That feigned fear led to the usual punishments and sore backside, but Dash went to bed that night still smiling. Having never been to a fair or an amusement park, that afternoon on the chutes was the most fun she'd ever had. She fell asleep that night and dreamed of sledding down snow-covered hills in the dark.

Dash wondered how much the building's interior had changed. Were the chutes still in place? The urge to slip inside beckoned. After all, when the building's makeover was complete, it might be a place too expensive for either she or Ardis to enter. And for certain, it would be her last opportunity to experience a bit of her childhood. Why not go inside now?

Dash took several steps toward the building before her adult mind reemerged. The fun-filled notion of chute sliding receded as she remembered none of this renovation would benefit the people living in The Bottoms. Dash ground her teeth. It was so unfair. All this building and developing was for...

Was for...

She turned about. For whom? For what? Were a handful of new jobs enough to pay for all the new structures and expansion? Who would live in these new homes, apartments, and condos? Where was all the money coming from?

Dash thought about what Ardis had said. The new factories would create less than three thousand new jobs, but changes like these were happening all over town. Even a couple of new ultra-modern businesses and shopping centers had sprung up downtown. Someone was muscling aside the old southern money and age-old traditions.

New homes, apartment buildings, stores... even a new Egyptian-themed art museum. In her mind, more fuss than two new factories warranted. Something else had to be happening. And again, she wondered if this mysterious city rebirth had anything to do with the missing children.

Dash needed to make her way through some of that construction to get back to the street. Her path was encumbered by enormous machines, crates of supplies, bricks and blocks—so much so, she had to squeeze between a couple of heavy-duty flatbed trailers to get out to the road. Each trailer carried gigantic rolls—each one over twenty feet long—of a shiny white material. As she reached the end of the rigs, she reached up, curious, and touched a roll.

“Ow!” Searing heat lanced through her fingers as if she’d dunked her hand into boiling water. She snatched her hand away as her cards shivered.

“What was that?” She blew on her fingers and searched for damage. The tips of her fingers were red, but not blistered.

Dash stepped back and away from the trailer, her eyes never leaving the truckload of... What was that? She couldn’t identify the material by sight since there were no signs or manufacturer’s labels. She’d seen that white construction fabric, Tyvek, plenty of times. This wasn’t it. She placed a hand over her cards as she stepped forward, intent on examining the rolls.

“Hey! Can I help you?” a tall guy in a hard hat called out to her from the flour plant.

“Nope. Just passing through, thanks.” Dash turned and strode away, waiting until she reached the top of the hill at the end of the street before turning back. She put her burned hand into her pocket with the cards and watched the workers moving back and forth between the old plant and the trucks. Although improbable, she thought that fabric, plastic, or whatever it was, contained magic. “Who in August Grove would have that kind of magic? And what does it have to do with that building?”

She didn’t get a chance to ponder the questions. Her name and loud wolf whistles rang out from across the street. Dash smiled and waved at the guys calling to her from the old railway platform. She recognized at least four of them, even though she hadn’t seen them since high school. She smiled and waved again. Despite the lack of prosperity in The Bottoms, and a madman roaming the streets, it was still great to be home.

Dash pulled her hand from her pocket and inspected her fingers. The cards, as usual, had done good work. No pain, discoloration, or scabbing appeared on the previously burned skin. She had long since stopped wondering how the cards could do what they did. Sometimes, it was enough to be grateful for a gift when you got one. “Thanks, guys.”

Her mind returned to the mysterious fabric and the old building. She’d talk to Ardis about all of it tomorrow over breakfast. There was more happening in August Grove than a simple economic boom. Possibly much more. And at the root, at least of some of it, was magic.



END OF EXCERPT

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HOLE CARDS

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