

The Last of the Pascagoula

Rebecca Meredith



Part One

2005

My sister Martha brought the little box in with the mail, when I sent her out to look for the royalty check. She dropped it onto my lap, said one word, and, just like that, began the destruction of a wall I had spent my whole life building around us. The word she said was “Tom.”

She might have guessed from the fact that the package was from New Orleans, and that’s the last place we knew he’d lived, but I didn’t think so. Martha was like that. Sometimes, without me having any idea how, she would just know something. I thought it might be because, having given up talking for the most part, she had become more sensitive to the world. That and the fact that her heart was busted open so early in her life that she just didn’t invest herself in the regular world the way most people did. But neither did I. In spite of having made a career out of finding things out for other people, I felt like I never really knew anything for myself. Except Martha.

Martha showed no interest in what was in the box. Instead, she went upstairs to her studio and closed the door. I could hear her pounding away with her hammer, the sound muffled by the burlap bag in which she put glass and pottery and anything that might fly around. She had a lot of sense about such things, even though she walked around naked unless I made her get dressed, forgot to eat unless I insisted, and was likely to steal or tear apart anything she might suddenly take a liking to and incorporate it into whatever artwork she was making.

I turned off the computer and picked up the box. My hands shook a little as I picked at its taped-up corners, making it hard to get my bitten-down fingernails under the edges. If it really was from Tom Carmody, what on earth would he be sending to me after nearly forty years’ time? Finally, exasperated, I pushed away from the kitchen table where I’d spent the morning working, and pulled a serrated knife out of the drawer by the sink.

Once the package hung open by a tape and paper hinge, I stuck my fingers inside. I tugged at a wad of red tissue paper, the other end grabbing briefly before it snapped free. An object fell onto the counter among the remnants of the breakfast that I’d eaten and Martha had picked at.

“Oh, my God.”

It was a rosary, made of pink glass beads, the silver crucifix showing Jesus in his final agony. Beside Jesus’ head hung a little silver cupid, bow drawn, as if either guarding him or trying to pierce him. The last time I had seen it I had been fifteen years old.

A slip of stiff paper hung from the cross. It read, “You said you’d always love me, no matter what. 504-555-9824.”

I spent the morning staring at that string of beads, thinking about the boy that had bought them on the same day he’d begun the change that was to take him away from me and toward the life he needed to live. He and I had been friends in the way that only marginal children can be, joined by big hurts and the teeth-gritting determination to get out of them, to find something in ourselves to shake its fist in the face of the just plain awful that life had heaped on us. Tom had succeeded, I had thought. I’d spent all these years imagining him in some happy but essentially unchanged state, still the wry Bugs Bunny with the funny voice who could stick his head up out of things and wink at me like we were above it all, even when it seemed like the only thing we could count on was that the world was plumb crazy. Now here he was, casting the bait of “no matter what” my way, and I was full of delight and fear in just about equal measure.

I’d been in such a reverie that I jumped when Martha’s paint-spattered hand reached around me and fingered the little cupid charm. “Hey,” she crooned. I knew from her voice that she remembered when I’d given her a whole handful of them, nineteen in all, when she was eight years old and I was trying to make up for causing the accident that had made her the way she was. The one hanging with Jesus was the twentieth.

“You can’t have this, Martha,” I looked her right in the eye so she would know I was serious. If I didn’t, she’d have the rosary so deep in one of her creations I might not even recognize it. As I put my hand under her chin I noted that her short, wild hair was grey at the temples. Though I knew that if I looked in the mirror I’d see my own grey-streaked braid, for the moment I saw us fifteen and eight, Kate and

Martha Lynn, barely hanging on. What must Tom look like by now? I couldn't imagine him as anything but graceful and funny, smart and a little mean, doing his best in a time and place that couldn't have been less suited to him. I'd loved hell out of him then. I wondered if I still would.

I must have picked up the phone twenty times before I gave up and went to bed. I'd spent the brunt of the evening sitting on the front porch, wrapped in a shawl against the nighttime cool that had lingered into late August, sipping a couple of glasses of wine, though I knew the alcohol would make the night sweats worse and my joints sing and keep me from anything like a night's sleep. Not that it mattered; Martha would be wrapped around me like a human blanket before morning anyway, no matter how adamant I was about her staying in her own bed. It had always been that way and I guessed it always would. But as both of us advanced in age, and sleep, never one of my best things, was a skittery creature that I could never quite catch, maybe a little wine would bring me down from the ledge Tom's message had put me on and I could get at least a couple of hours. Maybe in the morning I could dial that number.

The next morning, as I made toast for Martha and watched her ignore it, I counted forward through time zones; I wondered if Tom kept New Orleans time, up until all hours and awake only after the streets had been hosed and swept and cleared of the detritus of the night before. He'd have taken to it, I imagined, unless he'd changed an awful lot.

The computer terminal sat waiting on the table. I had work to do. Martha needed to be cajoled into eating and coerced into a shower, only to have to be bribed and argued back out again and persuaded into panties and a T-shirt at least. I had a stack of research requests in my e-mail and, I expected, when I unlocked the desk drawer in which I kept it, the light on my answering machine would be blinking. Warily, I poured myself a cup of coffee, picked up a pad of paper and a pen, and pulled my ever-present set of keys out of my pocket. Sure enough, when I opened the drawer the light was blinking. I sat down and pushed the button.

“Hi, Kate. It's Andy. Hope you're doing well. Saw the most recent Martha book; it's darling. I don't know how she does it. Anyhow, here's the latest. Can you find me something about wooden boat building circa

1970? Materials, design, stuff like that. Oh, and wasn't there a UFO sighting in that town you grew up in? I need some idea how police interviews for that kind of thing were conducted back then. Thanks, Kate. Call me asap, okay? Hi to Martha. Tell her I bought *Martha Bites the Moon* for my granddaughter's birthday and she just loves it. Bye-bye.”

I scribbled while I listened, and then erased the tape, thankful that Andrea Gerald was such a Luddite. She didn't argue with the fact that I had an old-fashioned answering machine and no cell phone, like some of my clients did, and she hated the computer enough to write her novels longhand and never barrage me with e-mail requests. I'd even transcribed a couple of manuscripts for her, sworn to secrecy and pleased as could be that I knew the plot of the latest Andy Gerald novel before it went to press. In spite of the fact that I'd never laid eyes on the woman, and in spite of the fact that she was one of the best little-old-lady mystery writers around, I had a vision of her as wild-haired and a little bit batty, holed up in her house in Connecticut the way we holed up in ours on Whidbey Island, off the Washington coast and all the way across the continent from her. I'd never read any of her very popular books except the ones I'd typed up, and I felt a little guilty that she'd read Martha's, although “reading” didn't exactly describe what one did with Martha's work.

Even I didn't quite know what to call the Martha books, and I was more than a little responsible for their existence. I knew the checks we got for them kept us fed and sheltered far better than my research job could have, and that the time I spent sending the first of them out to agents years ago had given me connections that made my own work possible. When I wasn't chasing my sister around with clean underwear or following her like a scavenger hoping to snatch up some piece of work that I could incorporate into the narrative that I was building out of her Martha pieces, I did research for authors whose time was too precious for such things. It was a job I enjoyed; the internet had made it increasingly easy and allowed my sister and me to become more and more reclusive over the past ten years, after she'd been delivered to me one day by our father, who'd just learned he was dying.

“Don’t you dare put her away, Kate Lynn,” he’d said, his voice still able to touch the exact spot in my brain that made me want to run as fast as I could. “She ain’t a danger to herself nor anybody else and I ain’t got the money to put her anywhere that’s not a rat hole. And God knows what she’d do if anybody tried to part her from that damned dog. She’s your sister and you haven’t put yourself out one bit for her since you left home. It’s high time you did.” Then he’d entered the base hospital in Spokane, refusing any treatment that might prolong his life, turned on the television to a daily fare of judge shows, baseball games and reruns of 1960’s TV series, and completed the withdrawal he’d begun the day in 1967 that our mother had died. He seldom spoke when we came to see him, and in a few weeks he was gone. He died on a spring morning when I hadn’t been to the hospital for a week.

Once the marriage I had thought was going to keep me safe fell apart from sheer lack of interest, I had been terrified I would never be able to make it on my own. Oddly, Martha and her incessant need to produce watercolors, collages, and mosaics made out of things in which only she could see the potential became the road to our survival. Every one of them centered on the adventures of a winged dog whose name was the same as hers. Once I’d realized that her pieces were telling a long and interesting story, one whose ending I might never know but whose episodes were as clear as any of the books I’d ever read, I began gathering, ordering and photographing them. Since in many ways she was my opposite, losing interest in a piece as soon as she was finished with it and moving on to the next, I had no trouble collecting the work. I knew from the start that it was remarkable; I just wasn’t certain until I got the first call from one of the agents to whom I’d sent a small collection of the pieces that anyone else would respond to it the way I had. Then a second agent e-mailed me, and a third. By the time the fifth Martha book had come out I had been able to buy us a house in the woods on the pretty island off the Washington coast, as far away from Pascagoula, Mississippi as it was possible to get.

“Martha,” I called up the stairs to the studio where Martha spent most of her time. I could hear the television in the background, static-

laden murmuring that she liked to have on most of the time, even though we hardly had reception this far out. She didn't care what was on; if she watched at all it was, I had teased her, like a cat did, enjoying the motion and the crackling sounds but with no awareness of content. I knew it wasn't true. I could tell from the books that she paid attention. “Martha, I'm having a hard time deciding what to do about calling Tom. Do you think I should?”

I talked to her because I'd always talked to her. I talked to her the way Crusoe talked to Friday. Unlike Friday, she made no effort to create a language we could share, but in the way that lonely creatures come to know one another, we'd developed a kind of multisensory communication, a ballet that we performed constantly, that consisted of a word here and there, a way of occupying space, of leaving one another alone and yet never getting too far apart. Talking to Martha was like talking to myself, except that now and then she'd surprise me by answering and remind me that she wasn't stupid and she wasn't crazy. She just lived in Martha Land, a place the rest of us could only see through the intricate, deeply layered work she let fall from her fingers and left lying on the studio floor where I had to rescue it, lest she walk over it or tear it apart to make the next.

“Martha?” No answer. I was talking to the wrong person.

“Who may I say is calling?” It was fitting that a lovely, cheerily androgynous voice would announce my first contact with Tom Carmody in more than thirty five years. His own had been such a source of distress that I'd often wondered if he'd ever overcome it. I supposed I was about to find out.

“Tell him it's Kate Lynn. From Pascagoula.”

“Oh, Kate!” The voice rose in pitch. “He's been on pins and needles—well, not literally, but you know what I mean, he's been itching—oh, let me just get him for you!” I heard the receiver clunk and the voice recede into the background, calling “Tom, Darlin', it's her! It's your Kate!” I smiled, imagining some sweet young man who was in love with my old friend, a possibility that didn't seem extraordinary at all. I imagined Tom indulgent and charming, his red hair now full and white,

still decked out in the planter’s hat he’d acquired on the same day he’d gotten the crucifix that I now held in my hand, but grown into the role of gentility he’d always been half convinced his family had fallen from. Tom, who had never really been young in the way most kids were, would make a fine older lover.

I heard a clunk and the scratching sound of the mouthpiece being pressed against something, then a short burst of words in a muffled voice before a long intake of breath whuffed against the microphone.

“Kate Lynn. It’s about damn time.”

It was a man’s voice, soft and modulated, whispery at the edges as if not driven by quite enough breath, but so warm I could almost hear the smile. In spite of its maturity I knew it instantly. Unexpected tears welled up in my eyes.

“Tom. Tom!” I couldn’t think of a single thing more to say.

“Yes, it’s really me. Are you shocked, after all these years? Did my little present say it all?” Tom was as comfortable reintroducing himself as he had been on the first day he’d come tapping on our trailer door when I was fifteen, as if simply taking up where we had left off. I felt a rush of pleasure at that familiar characteristic. Its easy intimacy loosened my tongue now the way it had when we’d first met.

“It certainly did get my attention, if that’s what you mean. Tom, how on earth are you? Where have you been all these years?”

“In New Orleans, of course. I’ve never been anywhere else; it’s you took off, leaving us all to the whims of Pascagoula. I hated you for that. Good thing I loved you for so much else.”

My head buzzed. Tom talked as though it had been mere weeks and not most of a lifetime since I’d seen him. I felt my life telescope down to the short, intimate time we’d spent together, and with the telescoping a tinge of old hurt rose to the surface.

“Now wait a minute, Tom. You were the one who left me.”

“I beg your pardon. I didn’t move out of Pascagoula until I turned eighteen.”

“There’s more than one way to leave.”

He sighed. “You’re right. But of all people you should know I couldn’t do anything else. That’s why I knew I could look you up. How’s Martha, by the way?”

“Uh, she’s okay.” I played Martha close to my chest, the way I always did when I didn’t know how much someone knew about us.

“From the look of things she’s turned out to be quite the artist. I can’t believe she turned that terrible little dog into something damn near magical. When I saw *Martha Land* on Amazon I knew it couldn’t be anybody else. She could exhibit in any gallery in this city.” He broke off, coughing, a soft, wheezy cough.

“Is that how you found us, through the books?” We’d gotten a quite a few letters over the years through Martha’s publisher, but I’d worked hard at keeping our lives obscure. My lack of willingness to dive into publicity had driven Martha’s publicist crazy until I’d invited her to come out to the island and stay the weekend. I was pretty sure pieces of her camera, her real Dolce and Gabbana sunglasses and her fake Cartier watch were still embedded in the mural on the north wall of Martha’s studio, and though the woman had handled having her wander naked in and out of our conversation with a quiet aplomb that made me glad she was our interface with the world, she caught on right away that there weren’t going to be interviews and book signings in our future.

“That and the services of a good internet detective,” Tom went on. “You know, the ‘find anyone for fifty bucks’ variety. I hope you don’t mind too much. You were pretty easy, no name change, good driver’s license history.” He stopped again, coughing. “Sorry.”

“I’m not offended. It’s a little ironic, since looking up things on the internet is a big part of what I do for a living.”

“Really? Do tell while I swallow some tea.”

“I’m a freelance researcher for authors. I check facts for historians, get the information, say, a mystery writer needs to make a plot believable, and I work like a mule for a few academics that write a lot and need sources for citations. It doesn’t pay much of anything but between Martha’s books and the research, and the fact that we don’t have

that much outlay, we hang in there. How about you? What do you do to keep body and soul together?”

Tom barked a short laugh, coughed again briefly and said “I am recently retired, as a matter of fact. Well, sort of. I own some property and I turned its management over to a protégé. I’m at leisure for the moment.”

“Huh. I know you wanted to be Lord of the Manor but I can’t quite get my head around the idea of you as a stuffy old landlord, Tom.”

“Would you feel better if I told you I owned Miss Eddie’s, which, in case you don’t know, is one of the finest gay establishments in New Orleans?”

I choked, “Did you say ‘Miss Eddie’s?’”

“I did. Of course, when anybody asks me, I tell them it’s after an old flame and act mysterious. No one asks more than one layer of questions in these parts.”

“And Eddie? And your mother and father? How did they take it?”

There was a long pause. I had a moment of prescience, a prickling of the hairs on my arms. Still, I felt a pinch of sadness when he replied “Mother and Daddy never knew. They’re dead, Kate. Years back.”

“Oh Tom,” the words came automatically, formally, as if for a moment we were strangers. It was what you said. “I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. It was a long time ago.” His voice had changed as well, the easy familiarity dropped. I decided to leave the topic of Eddie alone.

“Do you ever hear from Claire?”

“Kate, don’t you want to know why I looked you up?”

I realized I’d been avoiding the question. Tom had found me easily enough; he could have sent an e-mail or a friendly “let’s catch up” letter. The rosary and the “no matter what” had conveyed not only intimacy but urgency, and I was afraid. I’d spent most of my adult life avoiding both. I’d slogged through a few disappointed lovers and a brief marriage with a nice man whose last name I hadn’t taken, and that had mostly left me confused and exhausted, as though there was something I knew ought to exist, that I longed for, but that I couldn’t quite grasp. I lived in a sturdy, woodsy little house on a couple of forested acres on an island, locked to a

sister who registered me as background noise, working for people that I never saw. Tom’s message had reached out from a time when I had felt that there was something valuable that ran between me and the people I was with, a vital and tantalizing sense of becoming, of the possibility of escape from what I feared most—that the world had already beaten the life out of me at fifteen. Reconnecting with him just might be admitting what I’d been avoiding all this time, that my life had been nothing much. That whatever had made me afraid had won.

“Kate?” I thought about hanging up. Then Tom laid down his trump card. “Kate, they’re here, Claire and the others. You’re the only ones I haven’t kept up with, you and Martha. I want you to fly down to see me. I’ll buy the tickets and you’ll have a place to stay. Will you?”

I laughed before I could stop myself. “Oh Tom, that’s a very nice offer, but—,”

“It’s not nice. It’s important to me. I know it’s a leap of faith for you to just pick up and come all the way down here, but—,”

“You don’t understand, Tom. I mean, it’s not just me. It’s Martha.”

“She wouldn’t come? I could talk to her. I know she probably just barely remembers me if she does at all, but maybe I could persuade her.”

I rubbed my forehead. Up in the studio, Martha was pounding away at God knew what. “No, you couldn’t persuade her. Look, do you remember the last time you saw Martha, when Daddy came back, just before we left? Do you remember how she acted like he was another piece of furniture to walk around on her way to get to her art table?”

“Sure do. You said you thought he was going to have a stroke right there for hollering, trying to get her to look at him, and she just kept staring past him until he quit, and then went on to her pencils and paints. You don’t mean she’s still that way?”

“Still that way? In a lot of ways she’s worse. She’s not a little girl anymore; she’s a middle aged woman. She sees everything in the world as either something she can use to make one of her Martha creations or as practically nonexistent. If she likes it, watch out. If not, it’s not there. After we left Pascagoula Daddy tried taking her to doctors and special classes for a little while, but she didn’t respond to therapy any differently

than she did to anything else, and the things drugs did to her were worse than the way she was without them. After a while he just hired somebody to be sure she didn't accidentally kill herself or him, or walk out of the house naked—she's not much into clothes either when she can get away with it—and went on with his life. Never did remarry, retired from the Air Force eventually and near as I can tell sat in a Barcalounger while she did what she did. I got the hell out of there as soon as I could but she came back to me when he died. I guess none of us has ever been any good at being with anybody except us, so here we are. A plane ticket for Martha would only be useful stuck into a collage of some kind.”

Tom whistled low. “You couldn't come without her?”

“Last time I tried leaving her with somebody I got halfway down the drive before she started screaming like she was possessed and thrashing so hard she had bruises for a solid month. Sorry, Tom.”

“You mean you never leave the house?”

“Oh, we do. She likes the car, although I have to be careful not to let her steal the knobs off of the controls. And she stays dressed if I threaten her. But believe me, we shop on the 'net and get as much delivered as humanly possible. An airport is completely out of the question.

“Then I'll rent a car. Someone to drive you. I can afford it. Please, Kate. If there's any way you can come here, come. Please.”

“Why? I mean, I'd love to see you too, but you have to understand how hard--,”

“I need you because of who you are, and who we were when we were best friends. Because of why we were best friends. Because I'm about to kill myself, and I need your help to do it.”

Part Two

1968

Chapter One

I've always believed that if I hadn't met Tom Carmody when I did, I wouldn't have gotten out of Pascagoula Mississippi alive. One morning in the middle of a chilly, damp January, five months after my mother's death, a hired rig pulled the ramshackle trailer in which we had spent the last three years watching her die into Carmody's Trailer Park. My father, who was too old to draft but not too old to turn his career in the Air Force into an opportunity for escape from what he'd just lived through, had left the trailer, my sister Martha and me in his own mother's care, while he volunteered to spend the last years of the Vietnam war at a communications station at the edge of the war zone. He'd told us for months, and with some shame, that our mother's illness had kept him in a state of "compassionate deferment" and out of Vietnam. Still, the fact that we had waved him off to operate a radio in a jungle on the other side of the world so soon after her death smacked to me of volunteerism. Maybe, after watching cancer eat away a woman not even out of her thirties, an only semi-dangerous job in Southeast Asia looked like a reasonable way to get some thinking space. I might have done the same were I in his place. But I wasn't. I was in the place he couldn't bear to be. I was where she'd left us after using us nearly all up. I was in a world that, at fifteen, I had long ago lost faith in.

Martha, our grandmother and I stood in the street and watched as the trailer in which we’d gone through so much was backed and hawed into a parking space between a turquoise and white Marlette mobile home with a dripping air conditioner and a tiny, silver Jetstream. The tired arrangement of salt rusted mobiles sat near the corner of Little Red Road and Front Street, an intersection just a block away from the slow, broad river that flowed toward the Gulf of Mexico, which lay no more than two miles south of our new home.

We lived on the southern fringe of America. Sometimes it seemed that that part of Mississippi clung like a barnacle to the rest of the country, not quite a part of it but fiercely attached just the same. Mississippi coastal people were part Southern port culture, part ocean culture, part bayou culture, and that made us all water culture. The Pascagoula River, what we all called the Singing River, and the people who lived at its terminal, were to become a focus of our lives in a year when the country, particularly the Mississippi part of it, was going crazy, and Martha and I were going right along with it.

1968 was shaping up to be about as bad as a year could be, and it wasn’t even Mardi Gras yet. We had spent the years of my mother’s dying just a half hour away at the Air Force Base in Biloxi, but no one, not even my grandparents, had known what went on in that trailer during those years. They had come on weekends laden with leftovers from the Rebel Café, a tiny meat-and-three restaurant that hugged the fence of Ingalls Shipyard, Pascagoula’s main industry and the source of income for most of the town. My grandmother had done what she could for us out of her own perpetual state of foot-shuffling exhaustion, but even at her sickest my mother’s pride made her sit up in bed and swear that we were doing all right, maybe not as well as we’d like, but the Lord doesn’t give anyone anything they can’t handle, hallelujah. My father had the Air Force to answer to, and in his regulation ironed uniform and spit shined shoes he was indistinguishable, sometimes even to me, from every other sergeant at Keesler Air Force Base. Martha and I had gone to

school in acceptable clothes and made acceptable grades, even if we never once participated in a club or football game or after school activity. No one thought to ask why, since we had, for the most part, not caused anyone any kind of trouble. In fact, until you got to know us we all looked passable. And so, like everyone else, my grandparents would go home, and the struggle would go on.

Maybe it was out of shame or just plain helplessness, but in spite of the obvious mark the disease had left on our mother, we hid the details of our losing fight with cancer well. It grew in the soft tissue of her belly and before anyone even knew it was there had gotten into her bones and lungs and everything. By the time she saw the Air Force doctors, complaining with some embarrassment of pain in her pelvis and her bottom when she sat down, there was nothing they could do that would cure her. They did the surgery anyway, and what they did was enormous. Afterward she hurt so bad that the pain and the drugs they had to give her made her half crazy. Sometimes they worked and sometimes they didn't, and the nights were the worst of all. At night she suffered and cried, and our father and I ran around like crazy people trying to take care of what was left of her while Martha staggered like a zombie, sucking her fingers, too little to help but too alarmed to sleep.

By the time we arrived in Pascagoula I really didn't know how to live any other way. I was a fifteen year old insomniac who had spent most of my teens working my own version of a hospital graveyard shift. I had lived those years like a zombie myself, missing a lot of school, forgetting everything except how to clean a feverish body without causing too much pain and dispense medicines according to a schedule, and in spite of the patient's pleading to either leave her alone or give her the whole blessed bottle and help her die. I learned about the world outside the trailer by watching the 10 o'clock news, curled up in bed beside a woman who hardly seemed to know I was there, while my dead-tired father snored from the living room sofa for fear of rolling over and hurting her in his sleep.

Even though I loved watching the news, it troubled me. I couldn't escape the fact that it spent a fair amount of time concentrating on what a horrible part of the country Mississippi was, and by my reckoning making a pretty good case for itself. Every night, it seemed, there were films of black men just like the ones I saw every day being beaten by the police. Little girls no older than Martha, in bright school dresses and carefully braided hair, were knocked to the ground by blasts from fire hoses. German Shepherd dogs jerked uniformed men toward women who lay down and screamed, grocery bags and purses erupting their suppers and their coin purses and their Kotex and their packs of chewing gum onto the ground. Young black men no older than I was had gone missing, or worse, been found hanging from the trees like the pretty blue bottles I had seen in Butch the café cook's yard when their old, beat-up car had given out and I had gone with my grandfather to give her rides home. As far as I could tell from what they said on television I was a product of the worst part of America. And from what I heard from the people around me every day, I figured it must pretty much be true.

Even the people I loved did things that didn't make sense. Those things got inside me and made me want to shrink away from my own skin. My grandparents, honest people who I knew loved me, and who'd kept Martha and me from being orphans for sure and without seeming mad about it at all, held onto feelings and fears that seemed strange when I heard them on the news but were everywhere around us. I'd seen Butch slide paper plates out the back door to her own husband and brothers and shoo them away like children before they could be caught loitering, and then laugh and joke with the white waitresses as though they were the best of friends. The only thing that seemed to scare people more than the way things were was the fear that they would change. Everyone knew it was crazy and everyone just kept their heads down and hoped nothing bad would happen to them. I seemed to be the only one who knew better. I knew nothing protected you from bad. Bad had already happened, and I couldn't imagine ever being safe from that fact again.

Between hiding the horror of what had happened to my mother and the terrible understanding that my people had done things I was afraid to even think about, I was pretty sure some big parts of me had faded away. By the time we moved to Pascagoula I felt bent and strange, I didn't know what to do with the rest of the world, and the only thing it seemed I could do was to stop feeling anything at all. The year before I'd started a diary, trying to find a way to write down what was going on inside of me. It lay at the bottom of the old toy box in my closet, under the pile of stuffed animals that I felt too old to sleep with any more but that I wouldn't have gotten rid of at the point of a gun. That book haunted me. Its mostly blank pages felt like the blank parts of me, longing to be filled up. Something was missing, some feeling that would connect it all together. I didn't know if I'd ever find it, whatever it was, and that thought scared me bad.

For information about purchasing “The Last of the Pascagoula”
in trade paperback or eBook formats visit
www.TheLastOfThePascagoula.com.