

EXCERPT from *Shebang*

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April 18

Post-reading Reception, Cottondale, 9 p.m.

Fin sometimes stood across the street to take it all in. Face to face with the house she'd lived in since she was four days old. The house was white with bright red shutters and red trim and a green front door and from where she stood it looked as pretty and glossy as hard candy or new buttons. The porch was long and broad, its roof supported by three slender pillars. She and Hector had furnished the porch so completely that it seemed to be an actual room with the front wall cut away. To the left, a turquoise Formica table and four not-quite companion chairs sat on a blue woven rug. A mustard yellow couch spanned the windows and rear wall, and a brass floor lamp stood between it and a good-sized purple chair. A white coffee cup rested on one of the wide flat arms of the chair.

Something moved on the roof and Fin glanced up, expecting to see Hazel, would-be feline huntress, stalking a squirrel, real or imagined. But it was Hector, her nephew. (Nephew, a nonsense sneeze of a word.) Hector crouched, heels pressed to the very edge of the roof. He had a red pencil clenched in his teeth. Folded sharply into thirds, he looked like an origami sculpture of a too-tall boy, tucked into the gutter. His darting arm startled her--he plucked a shingle from the roof and flung it toward the driveway. *Then* he saw her. Their gaze met briefly as they followed the shingle, watched it strike the left-hand corner of the magnetic sign--Sweetleaf Catering--affixed to the side panel of the station wagon. A pause, then the sign corner swung loose and the bottom hit the driveway with a clang.

Their eyes met again, a moment or two when either of them could have hollered at the other, "What in the hell are you doing?"

Instead Hector scabbled backwards, leapt into the tree beside the house and disappeared in a violent shaking of leaves.

Fin bet that if her grandmother, Reed, had had a chance to consider it in the moments before her death, she would have been certain she'd left things in damn fine order--a ship-shape buttoned-down will with a brass tacks executor, a roof (paid for) over their heads. She'd instilled in her great-grandson Hector an aversion to bad grooming, hasty decisions, and drinking liquor, three things she knew could drag even a good man down. She'd provided Fin with a livelihood and a 27-year-long example of the best way for things to be done. Pity the best way rankled, so rigid and deferential. More often what satisfied was ignoring Reed's ways, watching the matriarch's well-oiled catering machine devolve into a lurching, rickety Rube Goldberg device. Sometimes Fin overshot lurching, ended up with a godawful mess.

The car, their monstrous, olive green legacy, was stuck in the shop with some undiagnosable auto ailment. There was no logical link to Hector's lucky shot days before--that damn magnetic sign had never stayed properly attached--but it felt like Hector's fault, as if he'd loaded the shingle with malign wishes.

The oven had been on all afternoon as she spun from task to task trying to complete the day's two small jobs, one to pick up at four and the other to pick up at six, although she'd managed

to forget who was coming first, quiches or cheesecakes. The quiches were just now cooling and the cheesecakes were naked whereas she'd promised chocolate leaves. "Reed had such a special touch," Fin's inherited customers were always saying. Fin, however, did not. Her dishes usually tasted fine but presentation often failed her. Like these quiches, the four of them not quite equally filled and two with crusts baked a smidgen past golden perfection.

Fin's forearms, the tips of her braids, and the front of her sundress were crusted with dough. She tugged a thread from the dress's side seam, but when it kept coming after three inches she tucked it back in at the armpit. She should have shaved.

Fin mixed a tumbler full of vodka and orange juice. She heard Ben in the next room. At least she heard the television, a tennis match, she recognized from the hollow, syncopated thwack-wait-thwack of the ball, the goofy hushed voices of the announcers.

And there he was, leaning over the coffee table and the disassembled bits of the five-disk CD changer arrayed there.

"I think I've about figured this gizmo out." He didn't look up, of course, engaged as he was in simultaneously scrutinizing the CD changer's innards and the television. Ben pried at a small metal flap with the tip of a flat-head screwdriver. Muscles swam across his back in response to the delicate movements of his hand. It was a long, thin, serious back. His head was quite small, a disproportion exaggerated by a cowlicky mass of ash blond hair.

"That's it, that's it..." Ben murmured as the metal flap loosened.

Fin grabbed the remote and punched down the volume. No reaction. Ben's eyes clicked in their sockets as they followed a baseline volley.

Fin stood on the countertop. Her dark footsteps made a crazed jitterbug across the flour-powdered floor and an errant egg lay where it had landed, yolk intact. Fin found a flat paintbrush and the package of rose leaves in a glass pitcher at the back of the top shelf. This was the land of the mostly forgotten, where the cupboards nearly met the ceiling--the place of extra mixing bowls, heavy and chipped, dented copper gelatin molds shaped like pineapples and grape clusters, the rusted graters, warped plastic colanders, and silver serving dishes that weren't worth the bother of polishing the way tarnish bloomed overnight. Reed had worked her clients' big parties, serving her masterpieces out of those same gleaming silver dishes (Fin had polished them enough for two lifetimes), and afterwards cleared, cleaned, and put up the leftovers. Tireless. Fin delivered the food in Tupperware containers and collected her pieces later. When her car was running. The garage manager seemed to be avoiding her calls. "I'll have him call you, Miz Fin," one of the mechanics finally promised her.

The screen door screeched open. She waited: no slam meant Duncan, Mr. Manners himself. Duncan's genteel demeanor would have been a sure hit with Reed. He had the Nordic coloring and cheekbones and grace of a Renaissance Danish prince and the intelligent, tired eyes, gentle voice, and competent hands of a trusted pediatrician. He would have earned points for his shoes, which bore stiff new laces and a burnished cordovan glow.

"Good golly," he said, taking in the mess, Fin on the counter.

That he was gay and high strung wouldn't have made an impression either way. That he was Fin's only friend, a man with a musical talent so evident that even his habitual low self-esteem was not likely to derail his destiny--to be lured from shit-hole Tuscaloosa--well, Reed would have stopped listening. She took quick measure of a man and rarely found cause to revise it.

"Two jobs going at once," Fin replied. "My strong work ethic, you know."

“No, really.” He started at the butcher block, whisking dough snippets into his palm.

Fin climbed down. She stirred the melted chocolate and began to brush it on the underside of a leaf. “Did you see Hector when you came in?”

“He’s on the porch, drawing and scowling.” Duncan raised his eyebrows as the TV volume crept back up. “Doesn’t your little friend have a home of his own?”

“At least he’s not up on the roof again. Some day he’s going to put his leg right through.” Leaving the edges of the leaves unpainted was crucial or she’d never get the chocolate off.

“What is this, the sixth day in a row?” Duncan persisted.

She flicked a brushful of chocolate at him, but it fell short on the table in front of him. He wiped the drops with his finger and licked.

“I know, I should be grateful you have such a soft spot for strays. Would you like me to peel your leaves when they cool?”

“You *weren’t* a stray,” Fin said.

“You know some people hold down jobs or write novels while they write their dissertations.”

“And what do the other people do?”

He shrugged.

“Tell me.”

“Sink into deep prolonged funks, gain thirty pounds, nap on train tracks,” Duncan said.

“I’m saying.”

“Why are you always defending him? What does he do for you?”

“I’m not defending. I’m gathering facts, practicing to be a strict empiricist.”

Duncan snorted. “You are a soft *soft* touch, honey. Don’t strain yourself.”

She pressed a finished leaf into the edge of the cheesecake. Too deep. She pried the leaf up with the tip of a paring knife.

The screen door screeched and slammed, followed by the high-heeled tippety-tap, tippety-tap of Mrs. Magda Boyd pattering down the hall.

“Hello Fiona. Hector told me to come right in.” Magda paused, giving Fin the once over. “I hope that was alright.”

There was no sense in feeling sheepish about her appearance. Though Fin knew she looked like hell, almost anyone would look frumpy next to one of these relentlessly coordinated and accessorized matrons. Who would’ve guessed you could find a pair of sandals, a scarf, and a headband all in precisely the same piercing shade of lime green?

“Your quiches are ready to go,” Fin said.

Magda’s eyes nearly crossed as she regarded the quiches. Just a beat went by. “Oooh. They’re *lovely*.”

Lordy. That’s what Fin could count on with these old customers of Reed’s: unbending etiquette, unswerving loyalty in the face of slightly flawed work.

The TV blared. Duncan worked his thumbs into the instep of Fin’s left foot. The chocolate leaves were only slightly askew. The screen door screeched and slammed again. Soft sneakered footsteps announced the next customer, a younger woman, but no less fashion conscious. She wore a startling patriotic ensemble, all red, white and blue with plenty of stars and stripes, from the tips of her tiny red Keds to the navy blue brim of her white golf cap.

“Hi, I’m Sandra. I’m not too early am I?”

“Everything's all set.”

“I'm kind of anxious, over-anxious, I guess. I don't know why I volunteered to host this shower. It's for my husband's--we're newlyweds--sister. She's *very* particular. Is that your son on the porch? Nice looking boy.”

“Nephew.”

“Pardon?” Sandra raised an eyebrow.

“He's my nephew.”

“And this is your?” She pointed to Duncan. Duncan dropped Fin's foot like a hot spoon.

“This is my Duncan.” Fin grinned.

“Oh, I remember now, about your family. So tragic.” She sighed. “He was your sister's--that's right isn't it?”

“Hector is my sister's son.”

“Someone else died too, right? A terrible accident...”

“My mother and sister were killed.”

“Well...” Sandra unsnapped and snapped the clasp on her red patent leather purse. “To whom do I make out the check?”

“Everyone's dead. Kaput.” Fin felt meanness gather like venom in the back of her throat. “It's preposterous, really. Improbable even as the plot for a made-for-TV movie--who would believe it? Death by planes, trains, and power boats. The Curse of the Sweetleaves. Or should it be *Sweetleaves*, Duncan? I've always wondered about that.”

“Don't you think you were a little hard on her?” Duncan plucked a slimy, rootless avocado pit from an old pickle jar on the windowsill.

“On *whom*? Sandra?”

“Yes, Sandra. She didn't mean--”

“To be so rude?” Fin slammed a saucepan into the dishwasher. “It's just *soooooo* tragic.”

“Well isn't it?” Duncan asked in a small voice.

Tragic was a flimsy word.

Fin's grandfather drowned the year she was born, leaving Reed a widow at 43. Fin's father, Eugene, was lost the same year, when the Army plane he was on disappeared over the Pacific en route to Saigon. Fin's mother, Ursula, and older sister, Easter, were killed outside New York City when a TV news copter crashed into the Amtrak train they had ridden over a thousand miles to die on. (Theirs were the most spectacular of the Sweetleaf deaths so far, and the only ones to make the national news--a 15-second aerial shot of the smoking wreck.) So when Reed had died three years ago, that left only Hector's father, Raymond Verone, RV Reed had dubbed him (“Raymond of the portable life”), who'd been absent from any Sweetleaf's life since he was fifteen and his parents whisked him off to Seattle before Easter's pregnancy was common knowledge. As if geography could change the fact of fatherhood.

Fin had picked up the phone the day RV snuck away to say his goodbye. He'd thought he was talking to Easter. “I've only got a second. I'm really sorry. I promise to stay in touch. Take care of...” After a long pause he hung up, unable, perhaps, to say *our child* which was too big or *yourselves* which was pitifully small. Fin's palm stuck to the black plastic of the receiver. They still had that phone, a squarish black rotary model that survived all insult.

Affixing the word tragic, as quick as licking a stamp, implied that what mattered about these deaths was the method or the suddenness, rather than the loss. Tragic was a concept for public use,

something that could be tended to by prayers and casseroles for the bereaved.