

JUDI WILLIAMS MORAW



NO STONE UNTURNED

BOOK 5

a novel

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One

“You can’t change your mind now, Allie.”

“Why not? I’m a woman. It’s my prerogative.”

“Maybe so, but it is too late for that now.”

“Says who?”

“You are not being rational, Moonbeam. You know exactly what I mean.”

“Can you honestly tell me you think we are doing the right thing?” Allie looked to Jaxon, all the while tugging at her ear. Before he could gather his thoughts to respond, she rambled on, “I’ve given it a lot of thought and I do believe this is a good thing, the right thing to do; but I also know my parents are probably turning over in their graves right now. I think that is what concerns me the most; but then again, surely they would understand why we’ve made the decision we’ve made. What do you think, Jaxon? Say something, please. Talk to me.”

“I think you are doing it again, Allie. You’re forgetting to breath. Slow down; relax.” Jaxon stepped closer and reached for her hand. Squeezing it repeatedly, he watched as Allie involuntarily turned on the waterworks, her vibrant green eyes immediately alive beneath the moisture.

As she slowly surveyed her childhood home, she realized her absolute affection for the memories, the house, and the land was now punctuated by staggering twinges of sadness. Where had all the years gone? How could she be facing this decision

already? Leaning into Jaxon in search of comfort, the kind only he could give, she wiped her eyes with the backs of both hands.

“Everything is going to work out; you’ll see. You and your sister have considered both sides of this issue already, the pros and the cons. The important question is which list outweighs the other? If either of your parents were alive, we wouldn’t be having this conversation; but they aren’t and the pros for selling your family property far outweigh the cons.

“First off, neither you nor Cheyenne anticipates living in this house again. You don’t want to see it fall into disrepair but neither of you is in a position or inclined to take on the constant chore of managing rental property. We both know you don’t want to sell it to just anybody, to complete strangers. So, I would have to say selling it to your first cousin who owns the property next door is the ideal answer. The property stays in the family, in a manner of speaking, but someone else will shoulder the responsibility. You and Cheyenne are delivering this acreage back to the parcel of land from whence it came when your family first settled on it so many years ago. I think your folks would agree with the logic of your decision.”

“Do you? Do you really, Jaxon?” Tears plummeted from her eyes faster than she could wipe them away with one hand. She was forced to stop massaging her ear in order to use both hands to swab her face. Letting go of her past, releasing her lifelong grip on all that had defined her family was no easy task for Allie.

“What time do you expect Cheyenne?”

Glancing at her watch, Allie answered without looking up, as she mindlessly went back to massaging her earlobe. She stared into space, deep in thought. “They should be here any minute now. She and Presley are pulling a small trailer so we can haul my stuff, our stuff, to the house and they can take what they want to keep to Slidell. Presley said there is still a fifty-gallon drum by the artesian well ditch which we can use to burn paperwork and such.” Suddenly sobbing as she spoke, she struggled through what she was trying to say. “I know it’s been a while since we lost Mother and Daddy, but embarking on this task now makes it feel new again, as if it just happened.”

In his effort to console her aching heart, Jaxon reached for Allie and held her tight; but he knew the reality of the situation. Nothing he did would make any difference. She had to work through this herself. She had to start where the pain of death was the most vivid and come out on the other side where the sting of loss was at least sufferable. Vacating the house and selling the property were two small steps in a long, heart-wrenching trek, one which Allie had to complete alone. Even her sister would travel a different path because grief presents itself in diverse ways.

Jaxon heard a familiar noise close at hand, the deep cawing of their feathered friend. He looked around for the egret, Allie’s faithful muse, her constant source of comfort. As absurd as it sounded, they had come to believe the graceful bird was the disincarnated spirit of Allie’s deceased mother. How appropriate she should make an appearance at

this particular time, a hard day for Allie by any standard. It seemed the large, white bird always appeared, as if on cue, when Allie needed her reassuring presence the most.

Just then, they were distracted by a different noise, the slow crunch of tires on the gravel driveway. Allie turned to see her brother-in-law and sister braking to a stop. She inhaled deeply, dried her eyes one last time, and went to greet them, all before Jaxon could point out Mother Egret watching from her vantage point atop the large, rural mailbox situated in the middle of the circle drive.

The two sisters, separated in age by twelve years but connected by an ineffable love of family, spent the better part of a week going through what had taken Allie's parents a lifetime to collect. Often crying or laughing through various memories as they worked, they divided the property between them, ever mindful of their parents' wishes, setting aside items for the four grandchildren, making a pile for the consignment shop in town and another for trash pickup.

Allie appreciated the fact her rekindled grief was something Cheyenne knew all too well and was dealing with herself. She had her own personal seat on the same emotional roller coaster Allie was riding. As often as Allie's face showed telltale signs of sorrow, Cheyenne's chocolate brown eyes shone like spun glass under the weight of tear-laden

lashes. Grief was taxing business, even when shared.

Until Allie could decide what to do with the things she could not bear to part with, Jaxon stored most of them in the garage.

To his chagrin, Allie cherished every memento of her parents' life together. Every piece of furniture, each article of jewelry or clothing, every scrap of paper held precious memories for Allie. Feeling the texture of an item, smelling the fragrance of it, or visualizing the place of prominence it had once held within her parents' house kept Allie's familial memories streaming past her mind's eye, one by one. Those memories felt very much alive and she was thankful for that.

That is not to say she was experiencing the same chilling sensation she had felt every time she touched her great aunt Artie Mae Williams' journal. Those diary readings, held weekly at the Bogalusa Railroad Station, had been excruciating for Allie, not to mention mystifying and frightening. Reading Artie's words in a public venue one hundred years after they were penned launched Allie's first steps into the world of the paranormal, something she never expected to experience.

The emotions she found herself dealing with at this point in time were totally different; they were not otherworldly, but were the result of the various stages of grief, a fact which rendered them no less excruciating, mystifying, or frightening.

Invariably, though, every time she was in close proximity to the garage, Allie experienced a strong impulse to check on one specific item, an old roll top desk which had occupied one corner of her parents' den. Honestly, Allie believed it had always been there. She could not remember the house without it; but she did not know anything about the desk or its origin.

She and Cheyenne had done a cursory check of the various drawers and cubbyholes without finding anything of apparent interest or value. Nonetheless, the desk continued to pull Allie toward it; basically, she could not stop thinking about it.

She decided it was time to move the desk into the house to give it a complete once-over and a thorough cleaning, hopefully discovering why she was so drawn to it, somewhere along the way. She would empty the desk of its contents and look through them, as she prepared the desk for her own use. When cleaned and organized, it would be a warm and comforting place for Allie to sit while she used her laptop, paid bills, or opened the mail.

Possibly considered a child's roll top, the desk was about half the size of a normal desk. Definitely antiques, the desk and chair were oak and bore the scars of heavy use. Even the drawer pulls down the right side of the desk, also fashioned of solid oak, had become sullied by generations of fingerprints. Allie wondered whose they might be.

Allie remembered sitting there as a child, contemplating homework, reading, or simply daydreaming. Her current plan was to stock one drawer with crayons, markers, coloring books and

activity pads for her grandchildren. They would feel special, knowing they had their own private drawer in Granny's desk.

But then again, having acknowledged the magnetic pull of the old desk, Allie was unsure whether to involve her grandchildren in the air of secrecy that seemed to surround the desk. She would have to make that decision as she defined more of the eerie magnetism she was feeling.

Jaxon was at work; Allie, being an impatient sort, did not want to wait until he got home. Forthwith, she carried the chair into the den and returned outside to get the desk.

As she studied the roll top, considering the easiest way to get it into the house, she was roused from her thoughts by a low, nasal caw emanating from the eaves of the garage. Mother Egret was perched directly above Allie and the desk, closer than she had been in weeks. As Allie watched her preening herself, she considered how striking the bird was, as beautiful in her own way as her Mother had been in life.

She contemplated why the egret had not maintained her usual distance. Whether Allie wanted to admit it or not, she knew the answer in her heart of hearts. Some mystery had come to light which only Mother Egret sensed at this point in time; and as Jax often reminded her early on in these situations, the egret would make it known to Allie when the time was right...and not a minute before.

Returning her attention to the task at hand, Allie realized the only way she could move the desk by herself was to tilt it toward her body and walk it

forward a few steps at a time before stopping to rest. As she leaned it onto two legs, she could hear the various contents shuffling about inside, piquing her curiosity further. A stale, musty odor billowed upward from the desk, announcing each painstaking movement. As if endorsing Allie's efforts, Mother Egret cawed ever louder from her roost above the garage.

It took considerable time, but Allie managed to get the desk all the way to the back door. Once there, the question became whether she could lift it over the threshold and into the den. Determination - that was the key factor as she tried several times before succeeding.

Allie had mentally selected the far northwest corner of Jaxon's den as the new home for the antique desk. Walking it across the room, she strategically placed the roll top where she had imagined it would look best and realized she would be able to gaze out the patio door and enjoy one of her bottle trees from this vantage point, an unexpected perk. Allie acknowledged the fact the antique furniture was an attractive addition to the den. Surprisingly, it looked as perfectly placed as it had in her parents' den and the very thought made her smile.

Allie sat before the desk, studying its simple yet complex character before she began the task of emptying the old piece of its memories, its treasures, the secrets it had held for years. Rolling the desktop to an open position, Allie slowly but solidly placed her hands, palms down, on the small writing surface. She smiled again as she realized

anew there was no icy chill at the moment of contact, as there had been with Artie's journal.

Regardless, Allie tried to prepare herself for whatever awaited her in the desk; would it be memories of any and all descriptions, treasures, or just plain trash, more paperwork to discard and burn? She sat back, staring at the roll top desk, thinking about her parents, missing their presence, the influence each had wielded on her life.

Her father had grown up in a somewhat affluent family, for the era, and was the second youngest in the large clan of four full siblings and seven half-siblings. In a family that large, pretty much everything had to be shared; it was difficult, if not impossible, to hold onto prized personal possessions. Still, her dad had wanted to have his "own things" and, as a child, hid his precious belongings from his brothers and sisters. As an adult, he became a collector of sorts. If he was drawn to an item, he might start a collection until something else caught his fancy. When it did, he might cache away the older pieces in a drawer, such as in this desk or in his bedroom dresser, to make room for his new fixation. He accumulated items on a regular basis, always out of appreciation for the beauty he saw in them.

Allie's mother had grown up pretty much penniless, fatherless since the age of seven, but with a wonderful mother who did not drive or work outside the home. Allie's grandmother had married an older widower with eight children. They, in turn, added six children to the menagerie, creating a collection in and of itself. When Allie's grandfather

died, the boys in the family became the sole bread winners, such as they were. Allie's mother began to amass "stuff" out of what she deemed to be "necessity," but what those who knew her best interpreted as a lingering fear of finding herself in dire straits again. Her needy childhood left psychological scars that would never heal.

Starting at the top of the drawers aligned down the right side of the desk, Allie removed each of them, placing them on the floor. One by one, she unloaded each drawer of its contents, putting the assortment of paperwork and keepsakes on the floor for later inspection. Then, she systematically emptied the mail slots and the cubbyholes in the far back of the roll top. She took great care to vacuum all dust, debris, and spider webs from the empty drawers.

Her next step involved Murphy's Oil Soap, one of Jaxon's old t-shirts, and some honest to goodness elbow grease. As she cleansed years of dirt and scratches from the various wooden surfaces, she sensed again there was something more to the history of the old desk, some heretofore unknown backstory which she was working feverishly to bring to the surface as she cleaned. The appearance of the desk not only improved with each purgative swipe, but the history of the desk somehow felt closer to realization, too,

Allie felt sure her parents had not purchased the desk new, based solely on its age. *Where had it originated? Who had it belonged to? Why did it radiate such an irresistible allure? Was everyone drawn to it, as much as she was?*

Allie absentmindedly reached for her duster as she considered the questions pounding away at her. Working her way from left to right, she disturbed dust bunnies long resting in the mail slots, resulting in an awakening of allergies she couldn't control. As she finally stopped sneezing and reached for the last slot, she quickly realized a gargantuan spider had tiptoed from its hiding place there and was skittering toward her, giving Allie a genuine fright. She attacked the creepy-crawly with the duster as though it were an eight foot, three hundred pound ogre; but during her killing frenzy, she must have accidentally pounded a spring-loaded area secreted well within the roll top. She froze as the screeching sound of wood scraping against wood literally offended her sensibilities.

Grabbing a flashlight, Allie looked first to be sure the spider was completely lifeless and then to ascertain the source of the raspy, scraping noise.

What in the heck had just happened?