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THE SECRET SENSE OF WILDFLOWER

CHAPTER ONE

There are two things I am afraid of. One is dying young. The other is Johnny Monroe. Whenever I see him I get a creepy feeling that crawls up the length of my spine. Daddy used to say that fear is a friend that teaches us life isn't to be played with. Friends like this I can live without.

I am on my way to the graveyard when I run into Johnny. His smile shows shreds of chewing tobacco caked around the edges of his teeth. But the scariest thing is the look in his eyes when he sees me or my sisters coming down the road. He is like a wildcat. People living in the mountains know that anytime you come across a wildcat you don't look it in the eye or make sudden moves. Every time I see Johnny Monroe I slow down and stare at the tops of my shoes.

“Hey, Louisa May.” Johnny drawls out my name. He is eighteen, nearly two years older than me, and dropped out of school in the sixth grade. His tall, thin frame droops like a corn stalk. He is a good six inches taller than me, even slouched.

I wish I’d turned back when it first occurred to me. Aunt Sadie, Daddy’s sister, calls this my secret sense. The secret sense is a nudge from somewhere deep inside that keeps you out of harm’s way. Aunt Sadie is full of ideas that most people don’t cater to, not to mention that she never married, a fact that makes some people nervous. She collects herbs and roots from all over the mountains to make her remedies. People come to get them from as far away as the next county.

“What’s the matter, girl, you deaf?” Johnny says.

“I’m not talking to you,” I mutter behind clinched teeth.

“But you’re talking to me right now,” he says.

“Go away,” I say. I focus on the worn spot at the end of my shoe and roll my shoulders forward so Johnny will stop staring at my chest.

“Where’s that sister of yours?” Johnny asks.

I know he means Meg. Johnny asks after her every chance he gets.

“I wouldn’t mind getting her out behind those bushes. She’s not scrawny like you are, Louisa May.” Johnny laughs. An empty peach can sits on the ground next to him. He spits a mouthful of tobacco juice toward the can and it pings against the side. Only Johnny would make a sport of spitting. He could just as well spit on the road, but he appears to take pride in the “ping,” like a dart thrower hitting the bright red bull’s-eye in the center of the board.

I bite my bottom lip hard. I want to call Johnny a low-life, but shuffle forward instead, not looking up again until I reach the bend in the road. When I glance back Johnny is still watching me.

I never hated anyone before Johnny. I've come close a couple of times, with Doc Lester and Preacher, who pretend to be better than everybody else. They remind me of gnats. But Johnny is more like a black widow spider. That doesn't stop me from feeling sorry for him in my weaker moments. I figure life must be boring standing on that road, kicking rocks all day. Not to mention that he doesn't have a mother. She died from tuberculosis when he was nine. I heard Mama say his old man hates kids and would just as soon sell them if he could get a decent price.

Johnny has a sister my age named Ruby and another sister named Melody who is probably around ten by now. Ruby doesn't come to school anymore, just stays home to cook and clean for Johnny and the old man. Her younger sister Melody never even started school. I've tried to talk to Ruby a few times, but she won't have any part of people around here. Every time I see her she looks like she's made friends with misery. She is as slight as a sixteen-year-old girl can be, but she drags herself around like she has a fifty pound sack of potatoes on her back.

Meanwhile, Johnny stands out on that old road like he's waiting for his mother to come back and make his life different than it is. That doesn't make the things he says to me right, or make Meg want to give him the time of day, but in a way I think I understand why Johnny is stuck on that road.

If Daddy was here he'd knock Johnny Monroe's rotten teeth right out of his head for looking at his daughters the way Johnny does. But Daddy is one of those markers in

the graveyard where if you subtract the years, you know he was thirty-eight when he died almost a year ago. Every few days I walk up the hill and sit with him and tell him about things in my life. I don't tell him about Johnny, though, because I wouldn't want him to worry.

Sometimes I ask Daddy to talk to God for me. Mainly I have questions, like why do accidents happen to good people, while bad people stay perfectly fine? And why did Johnny Monroe have to end up here in Katy's Ridge? I've found a favorite sitting spot by Daddy's grave so I can wait for him and God to answer. They haven't so far, but I have time to wait. Time is about the only thing I have plenty of in Katy's Ridge.

With Johnny out of sight, I quit looking at my shoes and pull back my shoulders. I approach the shortcut I found to Daddy's final resting place. The old trail meanders up the mountain and to the far corner of the graveyard where they pile all the dead flowers. The trail is so overgrown in spots I have to guess which way it points. And it has a footbridge built across the highest point of the stream that has only one sturdy board left. The rest I wouldn't trust to hold a cricket.

A dogwood tree on the shady side of the hill marks the beginning of the trail. That old dogwood is twisted and tangled from fighting its way toward sunlight. But all that struggling made it beautiful. Thick underbrush hides the trail behind it like a locked gate. I like having a secret. With three older sisters, it was like finally having something of my own.

I check to make sure no one is watching before I cut through the woods. The gossip grapevine in Katy's Ridge is like Western Union telegrams. If anybody sees me,

Mama will know in a matter of minutes. Minding your own business isn't the way of mountain people.

The coast clear, I duck behind the tree and take the path. The trail travels a steep hill before it levels out and dips down into the valley again. The footbridge is about halfway between home and the graveyard.

At the footbridge, I do my good luck ritual that I've used since I was a little girl. It has three steps. Daddy used to say that threes always happen in fairy tales. Three wishes, three ogres, three sisters. Whenever a "three" shows up you can expect some kind of magic to take place. I don't care how old I get to be, I'll use magic, luck, my own prayer meeting, or anything else, if it means I get safely across that bridge.

I take my rabbit's foot key chain out of my pocket that my sister Meg gave me last Christmas from Woolworth's and squeeze a dose of good luck out of it. Then I ask Daddy to watch out for me calling on God and his angels if need be. Then I kiss the dime-sized gold medallion around my neck that used to belong to my Grandma McAllister. It has a picture of the baby Jesus sitting on his mother's lap engraved on it. I like looking at the sweet smile on her face on account of my mother hardly ever smiles anymore.

All us girls got something after Grandma McAllister died. Jo got fancy doilies and things. Amy got some of her books. And Meg got a set of her dishes. I would have liked to have the books, since I've been a tomboy most of my life and was never much of a jewelry person. But Daddy said that I was the luckiest one because Jesus' mother watches out for people. Standing at the bridge, this seems as good a time as any for her to watch out for me.

Little Women is Mama's favorite book. A worn copy of it sits on her dresser right next to the King James Bible. I was named after the lady who wrote it, Louisa May Alcott. Destiny must have rewarded Mama for her devotion to the book because she gave Daddy four daughters, just like the March family. My older sisters, Amy, Jo, and Meg, were each named after somebody in the book. Another sister, Beth, died two days after she was born. This explains how I ended up with the name Louisa May, because all the good names were already taken.

I am the youngest. Jo and Amy, my two older sisters are already married and live in Katy's Ridge, right down the road from our house. Meg, my closest sister in age, graduated from Rocky Bluff High School last year but still lives at home and works at the Woolworth's store in the town of Rocky Bluff. I like having Meg around. She smoothes things out between Mama and me. Even on our best days, we are like vinegar and soda, always reacting. When Meg isn't there, Mama and I do our best to avoid each other.

The board of the old footbridge creaks and sways when I step onto it. I steady myself. I shot up like a weed the previous year, from 4 feet, eleven inches to 5 feet 7 and I am still not used to this willowy version of myself.

The secret to not falling is to keep your feet moving in a straight line, which is probably the one good thing that has come from looking at my shoes so much around Johnny Monroe. I look at my shoes and hold my arms out like the pictures I saw once of trapeze artists crossing a wire at a circus. My knees start to shake and I will them to stop. If I'm not careful I could shake myself right into an early grave. I bite my lip and taste blood.

Even though I am nearly sixteen years of age, if Mama knew I was crossing that old bridge she'd give me a good talking to, using all three of my given names while she did. *Louisa May McAllister, what were you thinking? Don't you know you could fall in and bust your head against the rocks? You'd be dead in an instant. Then what would I do?* Mama has a way of asking questions that make my head hurt.

On the other side, I sit cross-legged on the ground and take a few deep breaths. The mountain feels solid underneath me and I take the time to thank Daddy, my rabbit's foot, and the mother of our good Lord, by way of Grandma McAllister, for helping me get across.

At the top of the hill I push open the rusty gate at the back of the graveyard and enter. In the distance stands the willow tree draping its branches above Daddy's final resting place. We made fishing poles out of its branches the summer before he died. And he told me stories about our people buried here, especially my baby sister Beth. He never failed to mention how old she'd be if she hadn't died, which is always one year older than me at any given moment.

It is still strange to think of Daddy being under the ground in a wooden box, even if his spirit has gone off to live in heaven. It seems like his bones would get to go, too. But Preacher says you throw off your body at the end, just like you throw off an old coat. Maybe your bones weigh you down when you get to heaven if you take them with you. I don't know.

I am one month away from my sixteenth birthday and the only girl I know who hangs out in graveyards. But if you don't mind being around dead people, it has a beautiful view overlooking the Tennessee River. Thick, old maples and oaks grace the

hillside and the nearby stream empties into the river at the bottom of the hill. In the distance stands the small, white Baptist church practically everybody in Katy's Ridge attends. A large weeping willow grows in the center of the graveyard whose leaves sweep the ground when the wind blows, just like Mama sweeps our porch in the evenings. Last fall it wept down almond-shaped gold leaves on top of Daddy's grave, and I knew he must be smiling because he always said he'd struck gold when I was born.

I sit under the willow tree and cross my long legs up under me. "Hi Daddy," I say to his tombstone. I trace the dates, 1902-1940, with my finger, feeling the coldness of the stone. Daddy is the one who nicknamed me "Wildflower" when I was twelve-years-old. He said the name fit me perfectly since I'd sprung up here in the mountains like a wild trillium. Trillium will take your breath away if you see a patch of them. Daddy had a way with words, like a poet, and not just with me. He could make Mama smile faster than anything. Sometimes he'd get her laughing so hard she'd hold her sides till tears came to her eyes. All we kids stood around with our jaws dropped. To see Mama laugh was as rare as snow in August.

Daddy always put his arms around Mama in the kitchen or laid an extra blanket on the bed because he knew she got cold in the middle of the night when the fire died down. No matter if he was sweating he kept Mama warm. But there aren't enough blankets in the world to make up for Daddy being gone. Sometimes I wonder if she ever gets mad at him for going away. I know I do. After the sadness gnawed me numb, I got pissed as a rattlesnake that he hadn't been more careful while working at the sawmill, and that he'd left us all alone.

“Louisa May, you fell asleep again.”

The voice hovers over me and I wonder if maybe one of God’s angels has come to take me to be with Daddy. Even though I am not a little girl anymore, I like thinking there are angels. When my eyes focus on what I hope will be my first celestial visitor, I see instead my sister, Jo. She is the most beautiful of all us McAllisters. She has golden blond hair the color of the inside of a honey comb, unlike my tangled dirty mop of curls, as Mama likes to call them. Like honey, Jo is also very sweet, but she isn’t the angel I hoped for.

“My name is Wildflower,” I say half asleep, rolling my gangly legs across Daddy’s grave.

When I was little, Daddy and I used to take naps together on Saturday afternoons like this one. He’d be folded up on one end of the sofa, I’d be on the other, our toes touching, until Mama made us get up to do our chores.

“Mama has dinner ready,” Jo says. She taps the bottom of my shoes with hers.

“How’s Daniel?” I ask, opening one eye. Her husband is almost as sweet as she is.

“He’s fine, and he’s waiting on his dinner, too.” She reaches down to pull me up.

I brush away the pieces of leaves and dirt that leave spider web patterns on my legs. Jo and I are the same height now, but I haven’t filled out like her yet.

“Mama worries about you coming up here all the time,” Jo says. “I don’t see why you bother. It takes forever to get here.”

I don’t tell Jo about my secret shortcut. If she knew about the old footbridge she’d probably make me promise not to come that way again.

“Do you ever think about Daddy, Jo?”

She pauses, as if my question has surprised her. “All the time,” she says softly. She looks down at Daddy’s grave like he isn’t there at all, but instead lives in her memory. Nobody talks much about him, probably because none of us are fond of crying. I envy Jo sometimes, mainly because she had more time with him. She was nineteen when he died. I’d just turned fifteen.

“Let’s go home,” Jo says, sliding her hand into mine. We lock fingers like best girlfriends.

“Goodbye, Daddy,” I say, as we walk away.

Goodbye, Wildflower, I imagine him saying.

It takes nearly thirty minutes to get home. My secret way through the woods would have cut that time in half. Johnny is gone when we reach the crossroads, and my step automatically lightens. I smile at the sky, imagining a world without Johnny Monroe.

Nearer to home the smell of honeysuckle and wild roses walks with us. As the sun dips below the ridge, the crickets warm up their night songs. Jo and I say our goodbyes at the three mailboxes at the bottom of our property. She and Daniel live across the street; Amy and Nathan next door to them. But there are several acres in between. I take the steep dirt path toward home, glad the rainstorm from the day before dampened down the dust from the dirt road.

I let the screen door slam to announce my arrival. Mama and Meg are in the kitchen. I wash up at the sink and sit next to Meg. Meg catches a ride to and from work with Cecil Appleby who drives his almost-new 1940 Ford truck into Rocky Bluff to work at the mill, an hour away. Not that many people have cars in Katy’s Ridge.

Catching rides makes a long day for Meg, because Cecil goes in at seven in the morning and she doesn't start work until nine. For two hours every morning she sits in the diner across from Woolworth's and reads cheap romance novels passed along by one of her customers.

Mama has no idea how much time Meg spends reading trashy novels. She would burn them in the woodstove if she ever found them. I have been sworn to secrecy, and not being one to pass up a business opportunity, I also collect ten cents a month for keeping my mouth shut. A box under our bed is stacked full of books with bare-chested men standing next to women in long, sexy nightgowns. Meg says I can read them if I want to. But I can't get past the first chapter without feeling like heaving my breakfast oatmeal. If that is romance I don't want any part of it.

In all my years of schooling, I've never had a boyfriend. I've had plenty of friends who were boys, but beyond that they hold no interest for me. In the country, some girls my age are already married. But that's the last thing on my mind right now.

I can tell Mama wants to say something to me about being at the graveyard again, but like always, she swallows her words. If she wasn't so busy doing chores she might be up on that hill, too, lying next to Daddy's grave like they used to lie in bed together. I've never seen Mama cry, not even the day he died. But sometimes I hear her through the wall, tossing and turning all over the bed that doesn't have Daddy in it anymore.

A large bowl of pinto beans sits on the table next to an iron skillet of cornbread. We eat beans a lot since Daddy died. Mixed in with the beans are pieces of ham, sweet onion, and turnip greens. The skillet rests on folded dishrags so it won't burn the wood.

Next to the cornbread is a big plate of sliced tomatoes that Mama grows in the side yard. I spear three slices with my fork and put them on my plate.

“Who came into the store today?” Mama asks Meg.

You’d think Woolworth’s is the center of our world as much as they talk about it. The population of Rocky Bluff is roughly six hundred people. Katy’s Ridge has all of eighty, five of which are my immediate family, and another dozen or so that are related in one way or another. Some of the markers in the graveyard date back to the 1840s, and there are at least a dozen confederate soldiers there, and two Union soldiers on the far side, a whole graveyard separating them. The 1860s saw a lot of funerals in Katy’s Ridge. I can recite nearly every name and date on the tombstones, except the ones that are faded beyond recognition. Meg and Mama like to study the here and now. I like to study the past.

Mama rests her chin in her hand while Meg shares the latest gossip. Tonight’s news consists of Marcy Abbott’s new dentures that don’t fit, even after paying a fancy dentist in Nashville, three hours away. Mama’s eyebrows arch, as if hearing about Marcy’s troubles gives her a break from her own.

While Mama soaks in the idle chatter, I sneak a third piece of cornbread, missing her speech on gluttony and how I won’t always be skinny if I keep eating anything I want. Riled up, Mama can sound just like Preacher.

I clear the table, a job I inherited after Amy left home. It is a chore I don’t mind. I let my mind wander standing at the bucket in the kitchen sink. My thoughts travel old paths as well as new ones, depending on what we are studying in school or what I am

reading. Pondering comes natural to me. I can sit and be entertained by my thoughts for enormous amounts of time. Mama calls this just being lazy.

I scrape the leftovers into a rusty pie tin to take out back to feed the stray cats that stay under our house. Daddy started this tradition, but Mama doesn't like it. She accused him of soft heartedness, saying he'd attract every stray cat in the state of Tennessee if he had his way about it. Not all the cats decide to stay. But the ones that do run from Mama every time they see her. Even cats can sense when they're not wanted.

A new one showed up two days before. He is small and orange and doesn't mind being touched. I call him Pumpkin. I go outside and sit on the steps. Pumpkin finishes the little bits of food the other cats let him have and weaves between my ankles. I rub his whiskers and he soaks up my attention with a raspy purr.

Even though I am full of Mama's cornbread and beans, I have a deep ache in my stomach when I think about Daddy being in the graveyard instead of sitting on the back porch with me. Evenings are the worst. It's the time of day when we all sat on the porch together. I lean against the porch post and close my eyes searching my memory for how his voice sounded.

A second later something rustles in the woods. I jump. The cats scatter, taking shelter under the house. I fix my eyes on the woods and wait for the next sound. Sometimes wild dogs roam the mountains, or raccoons come to eat what I've put out for the cats. I wrap my sweater closer and get that creepy feeling like when Johnny Monroe watches me.

"Who's out there?" I yell. My voice sounds shaky, but I can't help it.

A million crickets answer me.

I think about getting Daddy's shotgun leaning next to the back door, but Mama keeps the shells in her dresser drawer. Daddy taught me how to shoot it but by the time I get the gun loaded I could be dead.

"Are you all right out here?" Mama says from behind the screen door. I've never been so glad to see her in all my life, but don't tell her that.

I am nearly a woman myself, but still a little girl in many ways. In the last year, I get scared by things that never used to scare me. It's as if all my courage got buried along with Daddy.

"I heard something," I say, looking out into the woods.

Mama stands there for a long time, watching where I watch.

"Come on inside," she says finally. The screen door needs grease and squeaks loudly as she opens it. She latches it and the regular door, too, something I've never seen her do. Daniel put in the locks after Daddy died, but we've never once used them. She closes the short drapes over the kitchen sink, then walks through the living room and latches the front door, too. I like that she is taking me seriously for a change, but this spooks me.

To distract myself, I leave Mama and Meg in the kitchen and sit in the rocker in the living room near the wood stove Daddy bought from the Sears & Roebuck catalog when I was seven. Daddy's banjo, missing one string, leans against the wall nearby. He used to sing country songs that told stories about people. His voice was deep and rich and it wrapped around you like one of Mama's softest quilts.

In the shadows, I pick up Daddy's old banjo and return to the rocker where he used to sit and play. I wrap his memory around me to try to feel safe. I am quiet, so Meg

and Mama won't hear, and pretend to pick at some of the strings. I hum the words of *Down in the Valley, Valley So Low*. At that moment the ache I felt in my stomach earlier moves to my chest.

I finish the song and get up from the rocking chair, being careful not to let it crackle on the wooden floor. I put Daddy's banjo back in its spot where the dust keeps the shape of it, so Mama won't know I've touched it. It would be just like her to put it away if she knew I wanted to keep it out.

I get ready for bed and try not to think about the noise I heard earlier in the woods behind the house. Meg has already sunk into a loud snore. I walk down the hall toward Mama's room. She is sitting on the edge of the bed brushing her hair, which reaches almost to her waist. It is much prettier down, instead of up in the tight bun she wears during the day.

"Can I sleep with you?" I ask her. She looks at me surprised, like when I told her, at age twelve, that I was changing my name to Wildflower.

For a split second her face softens, but then she says, "Don't be silly, Louisa May. You're grown up now."

Her words sting like a bee stepped on barefooted in a patch of clover. I want to kick myself for even asking. In my weakness, I imagined Mama opening the covers wide on Daddy's side of the bed while I get in. Instead, she motions me over so she can brush my hair.

I stand with my back to her while she attacks the tangles in my hair. It's as though I need her to touch me more than I need my pride, and I let her do it, even though I want to scream. I silently curse the tears that squeeze out of my eyes.

Mama gives up eventually and declares my tangles a battle she cannot win. Our eyes meet briefly before she turns away, as if the tangled emotions between us are also a losing battle.

I return to the bed I share with Meg. Lying there in the dark, I count backwards from a hundred by threes and try not to think about the fact that my father will never be coming home. Or my deepest, darkest, secret wish: that Mama had died instead of him.

