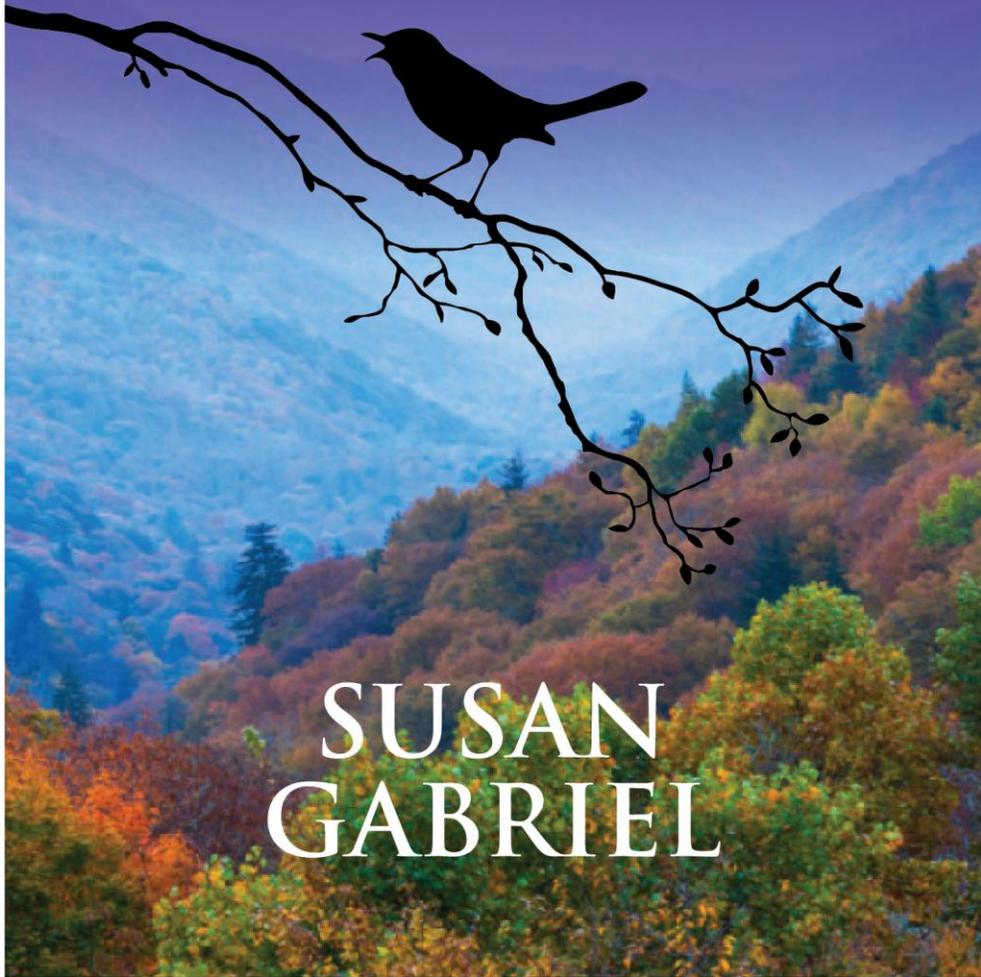


*Lily's
Song*



SUSAN
GABRIEL

CHAPTER ONE

Lily McAllister

At the kitchen door, I try not to linger too long or Granny will give me something to do. Granny doesn't believe in lingering. Lingering makes a soul lazy, she's told me more than once. But it turns out that lingering is what I am especially good at, and my soul doesn't feel lazy at all.

"Where's Mama?" I ask, giving her a quick hug.

"Wildflower's up at the cemetery already," Granny says. "You know how she gets on the anniversary."

Granny takes a baking sheet lined with biscuits out of the oven. My mouth waters from the yeasty smell and the sight of the golden tops. Mama says that Granny's biscuits can make a believer out of anybody. That's because if you add fresh churned butter and a healthy dollop of homemade strawberry preserves, the first words out of your mouth are *Oh, God*. Or *Oh, Lord*, depending on whether you're leaning that day toward the Father or the Son.

"Take those scraps out back for Pumpkin and the others," Granny says.

The biscuits have caused me to linger, and I've been caught doing nothing again. The plate of scraps from breakfast sits next to the sink, and I grab them to do as I'm told. The cats have already gathered, as though possessing secret knowledge that I've been asked to feed them. Pumpkin sits at the center while the others weave around him like kite tails on a windy day.

Pumpkin is a year older than me. Fifteen is old for a cat here in the Tennessee mountains. Most cats are lucky to make it past year one, given hoot owls consider them biscuits right out of the oven. Not to mention the foxes and bobcats who hunt morning and night for their next meal. Pumpkin is good at surviving and has scars to prove it. Half an ear is missing, as well as the tip of his tail, and one paw points to the right like he's hitching a ride into town.

The kite tails mew and stand on their back legs as I lower the plate. Yet they wait until Pumpkin takes the biggest piece of scrambled egg before digging in themselves, as if to show respect to their elder. At least half of the cats assembled are orange tabbies like Pumpkin. He's been a daddy and a granddaddy many times over.

As for me, I've had neither. The mountains are my kin, just as much as the people, my Great Aunt Sadie tells me. So any time I linger on a soft piece of earth, I imagine sitting on my Granddaddy McAllister's lap. I've heard stories about him my entire life. About how he knew all the names for things here in the mountains, read books and played banjo better than anybody in Katy's Ridge. He used to sing, too, and Mama says that's where I got my singing talent.

Every year on the anniversary of the saw mill accident that took his life, Mama spends the day at the cemetery. Today marks fifteen years since it happened, and I think she still misses him.

The longing I feel for a daddy goes beyond missing and is the dull pain that comes from total absence. Sometimes in the middle of the night I can feel the loss at the center of my chest, like old Pumpkin has fallen asleep there, pressing on my heart. The grief feels as old as he is.

Just this morning I dreamt about a man standing in the shadows of my bedroom watching me. I've had this dream several times in my life, and I can never see his face, but I can hear him breathing and feel his presence. When I wake, I am full of yearning. Mama refuses to tell me who my daddy is, no matter how many times I ask. I know she has her reasons for not telling me, but that doesn't make me not need to know.

"Can I take Mama a biscuit?" I ask, when I come back inside. "She'll be getting hungry about now."

"I reckon," Granny says, tucking a sigh at the end of her words. She and Mama have been tearing down and fixing the same fence their entire lives. Love resides in the center of all the mending. Of this I am certain. But I can't imagine the two of them living together without ending up looking like Pumpkin.

Granny gets a small basket from the cupboard and wraps up two biscuits with melted butter and jam already on them. They ooze their sweetness onto the worn cloth wrapped around them. Granny puts a ball jar full of water in there, too, in case our mouths get gooey.

Before I leave, Granny kisses me on the forehead and says, "Give a kiss to your mama, too."

I tell her I will.

Granny is fond of saying I'm just like Mama, and she smiles when she says it like that's just what she deserves. I'd rather hear how much I am like myself. Or how much I am like my daddy. That would be something different at least. But nobody ever mentions him and me in the same breath. Nobody mentions him at all.

I've lived in Granny's house since the day I was born, so I've had time to figure out ways to stay on Granny's good side, which doesn't have a whole lot of room. Mama says she wasn't always irritable. She says she changed after Granddaddy died. Sometimes I wish I had known her before.

The anniversary of Granddaddy McAllister's death is treated sacred like Christmas or Easter. If it falls on a weekday, I get to stay out of school so I can go to the cemetery with Mama. Then later this afternoon, all my aunts, uncles and cousins will come over for a special supper and I'll be asked to sing. Usually I sing *Down in the Valley* or *Amazing Grace*, the songs my granddaddy loved most. My family is sometimes my only audience, except for the times I sing at the small Baptist church. At this rate, I'll never reach my dreams.

The first chance I get I'm leaving Katy's Ridge. Although I'm pretty sure it would break Mama's heart if I did. In some ways, I'm all she's got. Yet a voice tells me from somewhere deep inside, I am meant for bigger things. I want to sing in each of the 48 states and then go around the world and sing in every place I've ever read about in books. Cathedrals. Palaces. Concert halls. Nobody knows my dream of becoming a world renowned singer. It is a secret I keep even from Mama.

After leaving the house, I take off down the path that leads to the road. It is 1956 and most of the roads in Katy's Ridge are now paved and a few folks even have paved driveways, but not us. Mama said we didn't have indoor plumbing until after I was born, so I won't be holding my breath for a paved driveway. Unlike me, Granny has never made a friend of change and is fine with her world staying small.

Katy's Ridge is about as small as the world can get. If it were a puppy or a kitten it would be the runt of the litter and in danger of not surviving. Most kids I know have no intention of staying in this area after they graduate high school, and many don't even keep it a secret.

Mama's old Ford truck that she drives to work every day sits at the bottom of the hill, but on the anniversary she walks to the cemetery. I run my fingers along the truck's passenger side. Although I learned to drive as soon as I was tall enough to reach the brakes, Mama says I can get my driver's license in a year to make it official. Mama's not a big stickler for rules. Never has been, to hear her tell it.

I toss a wave to the four Red Bud sisters, trees that Granddaddy McAllister named back when Mama was a girl: Susie, Samantha, Sally and Shirley Red Bud. More than once I've wished for sisters, at least one, instead of being an only child. It would make it so much easier to leave Katy's Ridge if Mama had someone else to fret over.

After walking down the road a few hundred yards, I take the shortcut beside the old dogwood and follow the path Mama took earlier that morning to the cemetery. Because of my earlier dream, the shadows look thick enough to hide a person and the breeze through the trees sounds like breathing. To take my mind off the creepy things, I pretend I'm Judy Garland walking the yellow brick road. Except I'm actually walking a leaf-covered path that I've taken a million times. I hum *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* and take note of the blue skies, wondering if dreams really do come true.

The Wizard of Oz finally came to the movie theater in Rocky Bluff two summers ago, when I turned twelve. A movie has to be a hundred years old before it makes it to the backwoods of Tennessee. Most Saturday nights the theater runs Gene Autry films and other cowboy westerns that are as dull as old kitchen knives. The women in those pictures work in saloons and are always in need of rescuing. Mama doesn't rely on men for anything, except maybe Uncle Daniel, who keeps the books at the sawmill.

I think of Crow Sector, who I've had a crush on forever. With his black hair and blue eyes, he can ride up on his white horse and rescue me any time he wants. I'll just throw up my arm like in one of those cowboy westerns and let him pull me up in the saddle.

Meanwhile, it is mid-October here in Katy's Ridge and the tree leaves race each other to the ground. They crunch underneath my feet releasing the perfume of fall. On the path in front of me I find a perfect red maple leaf, its color bold in the afternoon sun. I put it in the front pocket of my overalls to give to Mama.

Gusts of wind race over the mountain and my long hair flies wild behind me. I never think to bring a rubber band, and I stop long enough to tuck my hair into the back of my shirt. A whirlwind

of leaves dances up the hillside, gathering others to join in. It's the most playful time of year here in the mountains. The leaves and the wind have a last bit of fun before the seasons change. A hint of winter floats on the breeze, a ribbon of cold air mixed in with the warm.

At the footbridge I repeat the ritual Mama taught me when I was younger. A rabbit's foot keychain hangs from a small nail under the top railing of the bridge. I take it off and rub it between my hands before returning it to the nail. Three months ago, on my fourteenth birthday, Mama gave me a necklace that she'd had since she was a girl, a Madonna and Child that my great grandmother gave to her. I kiss the Madonna and ask for her blessing and protection. Then I ask Granddaddy McAllister, and any angels he knows, to help with the crossing, too.

A much older bridge crossed this ravine years ago, but my uncles Daniel and Nathan built a new one the year I was born. It doesn't look so new anymore, but it's as sturdy a footbridge as you'll ever cross. At least that's what my Uncle Daniel says. This doesn't change the fact that I get an uneasy feeling every time I cross it.

At the center of the bridge, the whispers start. I tell myself it's just how the wind sounds when it blows through the trees. But it sounds more like a human voice than the wind. It's like this part of the mountain has a secret story, and it can't help saying: *Once upon a time...* I want to know the rest of the story.

Granny says I'm too curious for my own good, and I should remember what curiosity did to the cat. But this has nothing to do with a cat, I simply want to know things.

The old wood of the bridge creaks when I stop and gaze into the ravine. Goose bumps raise on my arms and the hair prickles at the back of my neck. People say when this happens that you've just walked on top of somebody's grave. I've walked on plenty of dead people in my lifetime, having visited my kinfolk in the graveyard since I was a baby. Something about this old bridge feels just like a graveyard.

Pushed by a sudden gust of wind, I grab my necklace and run the rest of the way across. The whispers call me to come back. They aren't ready for me to leave. Sometimes I wonder if Katy's Ridge will actually let me go when I finally figure out how to leave this place. It's like it has its reasons to keep me here. Reasons I don't begin to understand, but that yank at me whenever I dream of escaping.

At the backside of the cemetery, Mama sits under the biggest weeping willow tree. The sunlight dances off the green and gold almond-shaped leaves. Mama turns and waves to me. On account of her secret sense, it is impossible to sneak up on her. She pats the ground next to where Granddaddy is resting, and I join her. Mama is the one who taught me to linger.

"Granny sent biscuits right out of the oven," I say.

Mama caresses the side of my face like she always does.

I unwrap our treasure and spread out the strawberry stained napkin like it's a fancy tablecloth for our picnic. We each take a bite of biscuit. In a way, it's like we're taking Holy Communion and the biscuits are the wafers. Mama takes a bite and then looks up at the sky like she is seeing a bit of heaven.

"How's Granddaddy today?" I ask.

“He loves getting caught up on how we’re all doing,” she says, between bites. “I told him how well you’re doing in school, and how you’re just like him when it comes to reading big books.”

“Did you tell him about my singing?”

“I did. I told him you’re the best singer in the Cumberland Mountains.”

And someday the world? I want to add. But no one in our family speaks their dreams out loud, as far as I know.

I read the sadness in Mama’s eyes that visits her on anniversaries and other days throughout the year. She’s even sad on my birthdays sometimes, though she is an expert at hiding it. Once we finish our biscuits, she looks out over the river as though something this beautiful requires witnessing.

“This is the prettiest spot in all of Katy’s Ridge,” I say, repeating one of Mama’s favorite things to say.

“You know, it really is.” She smiles, like she’s just now noticing.

The wind kicks up and an empty paint can from recent upkeep at the church rattles through the cemetery. Mama sits up with a jolt. Something about the sound turns her eyes dark and narrow, as though she’s looking through a portal into the past.

“You okay?” I ask.

She doesn’t answer.

Sometimes Mama seems haunted. Haunted by something she never talks about. I wait for her return, pressing bread crumbs into my finger and eating the remains of our host. I begin to hum *Over the Rainbow* again. Sometimes I wish a cyclone would transport me to a world outside of Katy’s Ridge. I click my heels together three times, wishing I was anywhere but home.

Before long, the spell Mama has fallen under is broken. She smiles at me again.

“Did I ever tell you how Daddy could make us all laugh until our stomachs hurt?” she asks.

Even though I’ve heard Mama’s stories multiple times, I ask her to tell me again.

“Your Aunt Amy was all grumpy because she’d had a tooth pulled. Doc Lester did the pulling, which is a story I’ll save for another time.”

A quick grimace turns into a grin.

“Amy’s mouth was full of cotton,” she begins again, “and we could barely understand her when she talked. When Daddy tried to tease the bad mood out of her she said, ‘addy, op it.’ ‘Who’s Addy?’ he said. ‘I don’t know any Addy.’ Then he asked every single one of us, including your granny, who this Addy was. He wanted to talk to this Addy, he said, so Amy would feel better. Well, by the time he did that for a while, even Amy had tears in her eyes from laughing.”

Mama and I laugh with the telling of the story.

“That was his nickname for Amy. He called her Addy,” Mama concludes.

“And he called you Wildflower, right?” Sometimes I ask to hear the story of how she got her nickname just to see Mama’s face turn bright.

“Yes, he called me Wildflower,” she says. “He said I’d sprung up here in the mountains like a wild trillium, and that trilliums take your breath away if you see a patch of them. I was ten when he gave me that nickname. As you know, some people still call me that. Mostly family.”

Mama gets another one of her faraway looks. Sometimes she’ll visit the past and stay gone for an entire afternoon. I hope this isn’t one of those times. The world gets lonely without Mama in it. Despite my plans to shed Katy’s Ridge like a snakeskin, I’m not sure how I’ll live without Mama.

Nobody in Katy’s Ridge will talk about who my daddy was. I’ve been told that he died before I was born. But when I ask for his name and what he was like, people tell me to ask Mama. Then when I ask her, she says some things are better left unsaid.

My best friend Pearl thinks my daddy must have been someone Mama met in Rocky Bluff. Maybe a soldier passing through or a traveling salesman. But Mama isn’t the type to take up with someone for just a day or two. She’s slow to warm to strangers, although I’ve heard from her sisters this wasn’t always the case. Maybe Granny isn’t the only one who changed after Granddaddy McAllister died.

The breeze rattles the leaves on the weeping willow behind us. The branches sway over our heads. The sound reminds me of the electric fan on Mama’s dresser that lulls me to sleep on hot nights. I recall the dream again from the night before and wonder if the man in the shadows is my daddy. If I were living in a fairy tale and was granted three wishes, my first wish would be to know who my daddy was. The second wish would be to understand why Mama refuses to tell me. And my third wish would be to live anywhere but Katy’s Ridge.

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What readers are saying about *Lily’s Song*...

“It’s a beautiful story that will have you hooked from the very first. One that I could not put down until I finished it. It will stay with you long after you have finished. You will fall in love with Lily. She is not one to let things drop just because some don’t want to talk about it. She wants answers and intends to have them...” - Ismore43

“Once again Susan Gabriel writes the kind of story that wo”t release you and invites you to return time and time again like an old friend. This is the mark of a true story teller. Having read the first book *The Secret Sense of Wildflower* and finding it very powerful, and thought provoking I was anxious to read *Lily’s Song*. Susan Gabriel weaves her magic and trademark flowing prose. *Lily’s Song* is the continuation of Louisa May “Wildflower’s” fourteen-year-old daughter Lily where dark secrets from the past crash full force into secrets in the present that ultimately impact everyone on Katy’s Ridge.” - Turtlegirl

“When Wildflower’s story ended, I wanted more. I wanted to know the story of her growth to adulthood, how she would face the many problems a child with a child will encounter. I loved the characters. I wanted to stay. I was delighted to read *Lily’s Song* and go back to Katy’s Ridge once

again, and again the characters blossomed into real people. The story highlights the strength, and sadly the weakness, of the human spirit and in the end, the song soars with hope for the future.”  
- Frances Garner

“I rarely find a book that keeps me from sleeping, eating and doing other important things throughout my days and nights, however, I kept coming back whenever I could sneak in a few minutes. To finally see how the characters evolved and always feeling like I was right there in the cabin on Katy’s Ridge. Well done!” - Kimberly Goodwin

“Couldn’t wait for *Lily’s Song* (sequel to *The Secret Sense of Wildflower*) to be published. Sequels have a tendency to disappoint but not this one. I began reading and literally could not put it down till I finished. Now I hate that I didn’t slow down and savor it. This is well written and Lily’s character is just as interesting as *Wildflower*.” - J. Shown

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