

The book cover features a collage of vintage-style images. In the top left, there are several old, worn books with leather and cloth covers. To the right, a white porcelain teacup with gold and floral patterns sits on a matching saucer, filled with yellow tea. In the bottom left, there are purple orchids. In the bottom right, a purple book with a floral pattern and a gold key lies on a wooden surface. The title 'Tea Leaf Secrets' is written in a white, elegant cursive font across the center.

Tea
Leaf
Secrets

SUSAN GABRIEL

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Chapter 1

Violet

The ancient oak that survived Hurricane Iris reaches across the Gullah cemetery like an ancestral grandmother protecting her descendants. Spanish moss clings to her limbs in the breeze, swaying like long, gray hair. Resurrection ferns wrap her body. Ferns that will remain a dry crackly brown until the next rain when the seemingly dead plants revive and turn a vibrant green. After her yearlong drought of sadness, Violet longs to resurrect, too.

Every Sunday morning, Violet visits her grandmother's grave. She usually comes alone. Today, however, her friend and half sister, Rose, asked if she could tag along, reminding her—as if Violet needed reminding—that it was the anniversary of when Old Sally left them to join her ancestors. A day that still feels recent. Merely days or weeks ago instead of a full year.

Violet places a handful of wildflowers tied with an indigo blue ribbon on Old Sally's above-ground grave. The small Gullah cemetery is on higher ground, with enough elevation to have escaped the worst part of the hurricane's storm surge two years before.

As Violet and Rose stand together at the gravesite, a comfortable silence settles between them. The half-sister part of their relationship came to light at Miss Temple's will reading when Violet was informed that her father was Mr. Oscar, Miss Temple's husband, and that Queenie was her biological mother and not Queenie's sister, who died when Violet was an infant.

Violet's family tree is as twisted as the old crepe myrtle that used to grow in front of the Temple mansion and is just as colorful, given Gullah and aristocratic Temple blood has been mixing and mingling for generations.

Violet's memories take her to the day that Old Sally died. She'd returned to the porch thinking her grandmother was napping in her rocking chair. Old Sally had looked so peaceful that it took several moments to realize she was gone. It was as though, in her last moments, Old Sally had glimpsed heaven and was pleased.

"You seem different lately." Rose's voice is soft and interrupts Violet's thoughts.

They have been friends since they were girls, and Violet sometimes glimpses the girl Rose once was. She sees her now.

"Different?"

"Sad," Rose says, looking down at her hands, which still hold the car keys.

"Sad? Me?" Violet stares at the horizon. If pressed, Violet would choose a different word. She is sad, yes, but not only that. Losing Old Sally was like having the ground disappear from underneath her feet. Even a year later, Violet has been unable to find her balance. It reminds Violet of the missing railing outside of the lighthouse the night Hurricane Iris came ashore. One wrong step, and she would have fallen into the darkness.

"If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine," Rose says.

Is Rose being careful with me, her sad friend Violet, who is different these days?

"I'm glad you're here," Violet says. "I mean, I don't mind coming alone, but it's nice to be with someone, too."

Rose looks at her. "I'm not intruding?"

"Of course not," Violet answers, with a smile usually reserved for customers these days.

The stone ruins of the small Gullah church stand in the distance. The church is covered from floor to the remaining rafters with wisteria vines that once a year present a breathtaking burst of purple blooms. The founders of the church must have picked this spot for its beauty, as well as its slight elevation. As is the Gullah tradition, all the graves face east toward the rising sun and their homeland. Remnants of a one-room schoolhouse are beyond.

Awkwardness rides in on the steamy breeze, uncharacteristic of their friendship. It is not always easy to be seen by someone. Violet has managed to hide her struggle from Jack and the girls. Or she thinks she has. Maybe they have noticed the difference, too, and just haven't said anything.

The smell of the salty sea calms her thoughts. It is a sunny June morning, already eighty degrees, even with the breeze. An effortless sweat from the humidity dots her forehead. For some reason, the summer feels eventful, as though the heat serves as a pressure cooker—a pressure cooker whose lid is poised to whistle its readiness.

Before the storm, Violet often sat in this cemetery and imagined hearing her ancestors singing in the church nearby. She would listen to the ancient Gullah songs that Old Sally taught her. Songs that floated through the breeze and shook the brittle oak leaves. It gives her goose bumps, even now.

"Not a bad place to spend eternity," Rose says, as though overhearing Violet's thoughts.

Violet agrees. With another birthday on the horizon, she is reminded that she will rest here, too, someday.

"This tree would make a great painting," Rose says, looking up into the limbs.

Although Violet walks past the portrait Rose painted of Old Sally for the living room several times a day, she sometimes forgets that Rose is an accomplished artist.

Violet studies the vastness of the tree, as well, with its intermingling of sunlight and shade. “Would you like to sit for a while?”

They walk to the new bench under the oak, one of two in the cemetery that Jack and Max, their husbands, built from the remains of the tree that fell into Queenie’s bedroom the night Hurricane Iris came ashore.

“How are you sleeping these days?” Rose asks.

Violet regrets that she told Rose about her bouts of insomnia over the last year. Now she asks about it nearly every time Violet sees her.

“I can’t seem to turn off my brain,” Violet says. “It doesn’t help that Tia and Leisha are off to college soon. Tia, for the first time.”

It is helpful to know that Tia’s older, more responsible sister goes to the same school and will watch out for her. But it’s still a huge change.

“I remember those days of being an empty nester.” Rose reaches over and squeezes Violet’s hand, an act of tenderness that somehow feels threatening. Violet is too fragile these days. Always on the verge of tears that never fall. Her life also seems smaller than it used to, a collection of meaningless routines.

Rose asks about the quarters on top of Old Sally’s grave.

“It was a joke between Old Sally and me,” Violet says. “I would ask, ‘A penny for your thoughts?’ And she always answered that it would cost me a quarter.”

They exchange brief smiles.

Violet doesn’t say that she would give all the quarters in her bank account to hear Old Sally’s voice again.

“I miss her, too.” Rose’s voice softens as if a secret is passing between them. “She still hasn’t spoken to you?”

Violet lowers her eyes. With all the preparation for Old Sally's passing—learning the Gullah secrets and honing their ability to speak to each other from the other world on what Violet called the Gullah airwaves—they have not communicated since her death. What happened to the opening she and her grandmother created between the worlds where their thoughts could get through? Was it all a lie? Did she imagine it? If this mysterious communication system of theirs had an answering machine, Violet would have left a thousand messages by now, asking Old Sally to please pick up the phone.

At times, the absence of Old Sally and all she brought to Violet's life feels unbearable. Violet has never felt so removed from her grandmother and her ancestors.

Rose leans in, and their shoulders touch. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Not really." Violet sits straighter and remembers how Miss Temple, Rose's mother, insisted on good posture whenever Violet worked at the mansion. But Rose isn't anything like her mother, and this certainly isn't the mansion.

"I'm a good listener," Rose says, with a hint of pleading.

"You are," Violet says, "and I promise to tell you when I need someone to listen."

Rose holds out her hand to pinkie swear as they did as girls. Violet laughs a short laugh, and they link fingers. Yet Violet isn't so sure she can keep this promise. The more sadness she feels, the harder it is to put into words, much less share it. But Violet knows Rose means well.

"Do you think the dead speak to the living?" Violet asks.

"Sure," Rose says. "I grew up in Savannah, remember? It's famous for ghosts."

Violet nods. The Temple family mansion was full of the spirits of former residents.

"I can't imagine Old Sally as a ghost, though," Rose says. "It wouldn't be her style. But Mother was certainly good at it."

Violet agrees. “Old Sally used to say that Miss Temple had unfinished business, and that’s why she was always hanging around, but Old Sally didn’t have any of that. She went eagerly and knowingly into the next life.” Her sigh is like a period at the end of the sentence.

“I want to die that way,” Rose says thoughtfully. “At peace. Ready to go home.”

“Don’t we all,” Violet says.

She thinks about how important it was to Old Sally to pass on her ancestors’ wisdom before going home. It fell to Violet to be the person who recorded this knowledge to preserve the Gullah traditions. But without Old Sally here, their rich culture now seems destitute.

Along with the wildflowers and quarters on Old Sally’s grave sits a small stone box, as well as Old Sally’s favorite teacup and saucer. In the Gullah tradition, items belonging to the deceased are placed on the grave, like in Egyptian tombs. The objects have meaning for the person who has died and are thought to be used in the afterlife. The stone box contains an old photograph of a dark man playing the fiddle. A small square of pink fabric sits beside it, embroidered with an A for Annabelle, who died at six days old. The elegant white china teacup and saucer, made the year that Old Sally was born, was a gift from Violet after she opened the tea shop. Faded purple flowers encircle the cup covered with tiny veins of age.

When Violet first placed the teacup on Old Sally’s grave, she imagined they could have tea together on their Sunday mornings together and talk. It seems foolish now.

A pair of Old Sally’s worn sandals also sits atop the crypt to take walks together, having conversations the way they had planned.

Life doesn’t always respect plans. Perhaps death doesn’t, either.

Rose stands and invites Violet to take a walk on the beach. When Violet says she wants to stay, Rose gives Violet one of her

worried looks. A look that reminds Violet how most people generally don't understand grief or know what to do with it.

Alone again, memories rush forward of Old Sally's funeral. Most Dolphin Island residents came, as well as many people from Savannah and neighboring states. It was astounding how many people Old Sally had touched in her long life, and how many of them wanted to pay their respects.

The sound of Gullah spirituals lifted to heaven that day as the service went long into the night. People sat in lawn chairs around a bonfire on the beach and told stories of their time with Old Sally. The tales seemed endless. Many were ones Violet had never heard before—instances of great kindness where Old Sally nursed friends or encouraged people to make their ancestors proud. Or times when Old Sally talked for hours to whoever showed up at her door. When Violet was a girl, her grandmother got ready for work some mornings without having a bit of sleep because someone had needed her the night before.

How could this same person, who showed up so often in life, abandon Violet in death? She scolds herself for thinking this way, but she can't seem to stop.

After everyone except the family left the service that night, they gathered for a final ritual with lit torches at the gravesite. Sally Rose, Rose's granddaughter and only a year old, was gently passed over Old Sally's grave. Violet handed her to Queenie, Violet's mother, who then gave her to Rose. Thankfully, Sally Rose wasn't frightened and allowed them to do it, at times laughing as if it was a game between them. This Gullah tradition supposedly protected Sally Rose from following Old Sally into the other world, given their fondness for each other.

Pelicans fly low near the water in formation and bring Violet back to the present moment. Gentle waves break on the shore. Her ancestors rest here on sacred land, thousands of miles from home, enslaved to work in a strange land for wealthy Southerners before finally finding their way to this island.

History is everywhere. A history that Violet still struggles to make sense of, as well as claim. She is lucky compared to her ancestors. Not only is Violet the owner of a lovely tea shop in downtown Savannah, but she is also no longer a servant for the Temple family. Miss Temple—may she rest in peace—has been gone for four years now, and her surprise generosity in leaving the Temple mansion to Violet changed her life forever. When Edward, Miss Temple’s son, burned the mansion to the ground, probably out of spite, it was the first time Violet realized there might be more to fate than she thought. Oddly, it feels destiny is calling her now, and she hasn’t been willing to listen.

When Rose returns, Violet is relieved to get out of her thoughts. Rose places a white sand dollar on the top of Old Sally’s grave. As girls, they collected sand dollars to hang on the tree in the Temple garden. A tree very similar to the one they sit under now.

Violet has also collected hundreds of entries in the Gullah Book of Secrets. Somehow, it seems a waste that Old Sally would give Violet all this information not to use it. Fate tugs at her again as if to remind her that it’s not too late. But Violet feels too powerless to answer its call.

Violet looks at her watch and then at Rose. It will be getting busy at the tea shop, and she needs to relieve Queenie and Spud. She tells Rose they need to go. But before leaving, Violet places her hand on the top of the grave. She leans over and kisses the cold stone as she used to bend over and kiss Old Sally’s cheek whenever she left the house. The warmth of her grandmother’s cheek is one of a thousand things that Violet grieves. Violet tells her she loves her and then waits. The hot, humid breeze carries no reply.

Chapter 2

Queenie

Queenie returns to the counter after cleaning off tables, and Spud gives her a quick kiss on the cheek.

“We’re a good team, Queenie Temple.”

“I agree, Mr. Grainger.”

After two years of marriage, they aren’t the newlyweds they once were. Since she has never been married before, Queenie wonders if this is normal.

Last night, to rekindle their ebbing flame, Queenie suggested they watch *Young Frankenstein* by Mel Brooks on the television in their bedroom. They had both seen it in the 1970s, long before they knew each other existed, but Queenie remembered it had some funny, sexy bits and thought it might be good for them. After the movie, when they were in bed, Queenie sang a boisterous rendition of the Madeline Kahn song featured when she and Frankenstein took their first roll in the hay. Spud was startled at first—Queenie never sang in bed—but they laughed so hard afterward that Queenie made a joke about wishing she wore Depends. Laughter is a good tonic, but it didn’t lead to anything else, which caused her to worry.

“What are you grinning at?” Queenie asks Spud as she makes a pot of English breakfast tea for Table 2.

“*Ah! Sweet mystery of life ...*” Spud softly sings the song from the movie.

Queenie laughs a short laugh, gives him a half-hearted *not here* look, and tells herself to stop being so concerned.

Now and again, Queenie remembers how she used to drive Iris Temple to see Spud at the Piggly Wiggly. Spud was not only the butcher of the exotic meats Iris always ordered, but also her ex-flame. It seems a million years ago now, yet it still nags at Queenie that Spud was with Iris first. Those weekly flirtations with Iris over the meat counter are imprinted in her memory. Memories she wishes she could forget. At least Iris and Spud’s time together was brief and amounted to no consequence. If it had been a long affair with more substance, Queenie isn’t so sure she could have moved past it.

Much harder to reconcile is the fact that Queenie worked for thirty-five years as Iris’s assistant, which required spending an eternity in that drafty old mansion with Iris and the Temple ghosts. Sure, Queenie ran errands and attended the occasional meeting where privileged white women sat around eating finger sandwiches and drinking tea with their pinkie fingers up. And Violet bustled around, keeping the mansion clean and Iris and Queenie fed. Yet, a busy tea shop suits Queenie much better.

It makes Queenie dizzy sometimes how much their lives changed after Iris died. Queenie is forever grateful that Violet forgave her for keeping that stupid secret all those years that Violet was Queenie’s child, not Queenie’s sister, Maya. She wonders now how she could have been so misguided. In her defense, secrets have all sorts of fear and shame wrapped around them, a fortress built to keep out the truth. Sometimes it takes years to break through that fortress. Sometimes decades. She imagines some secrets never see the daylight.

Queenie isn’t the type to reminisce, and yet today she has allowed herself this indulgence. A year has passed since she lost her

sweet mother. Violet went to the cemetery this morning, but Queenie just couldn't bring herself to tag along. Thankfully, Rose opted to go. Every time Queenie visits Old Sally's grave, she throws a full-fledged pity party and has a hangover for days afterward. People grieve in different ways. Queenie's method of avoiding the pity party is to stay busy and carry on. Otherwise, she fears she might stop carrying on at all.

Queenie returns her attention to Spud, who chats with one of their regular customers. Everyone loves him—even strangers. By the time they began to date, Queenie had given up on love. Even her fantasies of Denzel Washington had fizzled. Romantic love, she had decided, just wasn't in the cards for her. Until, well, it was.

Never say never, Queenie tells herself.

Meanwhile, two weekends ago, she and Spud celebrated their second wedding anniversary and drove up to Charleston for two nights at the Omni Hotel. Unfortunately, Spud's allergies were acting up, and most of the time he was miserable or pretending not to be. Their plans for being amorous didn't work out that weekend, either.

After all those years of being single, Queenie still pinches herself when she remembers that she is married and to an accidental millionaire at that. Queenie looks at the simple gold band that matches Spud's, trying not to think of the article she recently read in *Cosmopolitan* about the steps to take to keep your husband happy. An article that convinced Queenie she was failing at many of them.

Two middle-school girls are next in line, one black and one white. They order breakfast croissants with ham, egg, and cheese, and two hot chocolates. They remind Queenie of Violet and Rose when they were girls. In the 1960s, a mixed-race friendship was unusual. Forty years later, could things finally be changing? She is not in the mood to get her hopes up.

Spud makes the hot chocolates, and Queenie puts together the breakfast croissants and then carries everything out on a tray with two napkins and two forks. Of the friends, one is more

boisterous than the other. Queenie is reminded of the Sea Gypsies, the club she, Rose and Violet created as girls. Deemed their Queen, she kept the nickname of Queenie because her given name, Ivy, never seemed to fit her. Of the three of them, Queenie was, of course, the boisterous one.

Her mind wanders to wanting to teach Sally Rose about the Sea Gypsies someday and to extend membership to another generation. Katie and Angie, as Sally Rose's parents, would surely encourage it. To Queenie's great pleasure, she and Sally Rose are close, spiritually and physically. At two years of age, Sally Rose follows Queenie everywhere. Even up the stairs, if one of her moms doesn't stop her. Sally Rose takes one careful step at a time and then scoots back down the steps on her bottom. Sometimes Queenie will do the same, even though she is a bit hefty to scoot these days. But in some ways, being around a two-year-old has made her feel young again.

"I hope Violet's okay," Spud says, looking at his watch.

In the last year, they have voiced their concerns for Violet, who seems preoccupied and unhappy.

Queenie sometimes wonders if Violet has second thoughts about opening a tea shop. The baking alone is a massive undertaking, as is keeping up with supplies. Not to mention having to have someone here every day the shop is open. Yet Queenie has never heard Violet complain.

The bells jingle on the door, and Queenie glances up as she always does.

"Uh-oh," Queenie says, causing Spud to ask her what is wrong.

"You don't want to know," Queenie says, straightening the countertop as if a team of health inspectors has entered the premises.

"Tell me, gingersnap." Spud's endearments always make her hungry.

She gently elbows him out of the way and whispers, "Later," as two of Iris Temple's wealthy, silver-headed friends approach.

They must be slumming it today, seeing how the other ninety-nine percent of us live. Queenie dons a fake smile.

Two white women, richly dressed, have expensive handbags slung over their shoulders. One is tall, the other much shorter. They reek of entitlement and costly perfume. Queenie's nose twitches as she remembers her former training.

"Well, if it isn't Queenie Temple," the shorter woman says.

Wealthy people in Savannah know Queenie from her days as Iris Temple's assistant. More than once, these two wore fragrances that Queenie had to ask them to wash off in the restroom because of Iris's sensitivity to smells. A request that did not make Queenie popular with either of them.

"I thought you moved to Dolphin Island," the taller woman says.

"Yes, I did," Queenie says, not offering any other details. Due to the resilience of the Savannah grapevine, they undoubtedly know the entire story of the departure from Savannah. They just aren't letting on.

"Poor Iris," the shorter one says, looking at Queenie as though she is part of a fallen empire.

Restless from the effect of being looked up to physically, but down at as a person, Queenie doesn't comment. In the same book that told her to gird her private parts, she is not supposed to throw her pearls before swine. Queenie is pretty sure this applies to pearl-wearing swine, too.

Queenie felt lower than the graveyard dirt Old Sally used to keep in that time-worn flour bin during those days of working for Iris. The last few years, living with Spud and the others has raised her confidence. But seeing Iris's friends again is like a magnet pulling Queenie into the dirty past.

"Fallen on hard times?" the taller one asks, looking around at the tea shop.

“Excuse me?” Queenie straightens her backbone, contemplating giving the woman a quick slap to wake her up to such rudeness.

Spud steps in as if to stop Queenie from getting jail time. “Don’t take this personally,” he whispers to her. “She’s showing her ignorance.”

She is showing her ass, is what she’s showing, Queenie wants to say.

Queenie takes a deep breath to calm herself as Oprah taught her. “My daughter owns this tea shop,” Queenie begins. “And my husband and I help out here occasionally because of our love for her.”

They take turns glancing at Spud as though a former butcher from the Piggly Wiggly requires no respect, even if he is currently a real estate tycoon.

“Iris always complained about how arrogant you were.” The shorter woman narrows her eyes. “Always getting above your station.”

“Arrogant?” Queenie’s voice rises. It’s a good thing the countertop is there, or she might launch over it and grab that pig by her pearls.

The taller woman nods in agreement about the arrogance and says something about Iris’s unending patience with her servants and how badly they treated her in return.

Queenie’s face grows hot, and she can feel her blood pressure rising. Is Iris sending Queenie a message from the grave by way of her friends?

Spud steps in front of Queenie. “Sweetheart, let me take it from here.”

Hearing Spud’s voice breaks the spell, and Queenie takes a step back, feeling prickly heat climb her spine.

Then Spud smiles in the direction of the two women, and with a businesslike tone, he takes their order. Meanwhile, Queenie

excuses herself to go into the back room where she can seethe in private.

Every day that Queenie lived in the mansion, Iris artfully put Queenie in her place. Dead for years, Iris is doing it again and using her friends as messengers. Yet Queenie knows these old biddies were never friends to Iris. Iris had no *real* friends. Only people who thought they could benefit by knowing her.

The two women order their fancy coffees and then wait impatiently at the counter before taking them out to the courtyard.

“They’re gone,” Spud says, coming to find her in the back room.

“Sweet God in heaven, what did I do to deserve that?”

“Absolutely nothing,” Spud says.

Queenie huffs. “I mean, who died and made them judge and jury?”

“Exactly,” Spud says with a brief and uncharacteristic frown.

“I sometimes forget what a pain Iris was,” Queenie says. “This is a nice reminder of how lucky I am now.” She squeezes Spud’s arm, suddenly wondering if Iris ever said anything to him about her when they were together. Queenie never caught on that Iris had a boyfriend back then. She was just grateful that she had more time to herself.

As soon as Queenie returns to the front, Violet arrives, hugs Queenie, and asks how things have been.

“We had a rush around ten, but things have calmed down again.” Queenie doesn’t mention Iris’s friends, who just left, even though her face still feels hot from the encounter. Violet seems to have enough to worry about for now.

Spud returns to the counter and hugs Violet, too. She tells them to go home and that Tia and Leisha will be here in fifteen minutes. Violet’s girls have been working on weekends to earn spending money for college.

“I don’t know how to thank you,” Violet says to them, offering a rare smile these days.

“How was the cemetery this morning?” Queenie asks Violet.
“Any word from Mama?”

“Nothing.” Violet busies herself as if not wanting to think about it.

Like Violet, Queenie assumed that Old Sally would be in touch from the other side. Before her mama passed, they often practiced their Gullah magic, communicating without ever moving their lips. Queenie has missed her mother, too. Fiercely at times. But she could never speak to spirits as Violet does.

“Well, don’t give up,” Queenie says. “I imagine she had a long line of ancestors to greet her once she arrived. That could take some time.”

Violet nods and refills the bin with artificial sweeteners while Queenie and Spud go into the back to gather their things.

“She looks so sad,” Queenie says, putting her name tag in her purse.

“Should we try to talk to her again?” Spud asks.

“What an excellent father you would have made, Mr. Grainger.”

Spud’s cheeks blush pink. “You think so?” A look of longing crosses Spud’s face that Queenie has never seen before.

When they return to the front, Violet rearranges the pastries in the case next to the cash register. No customers wait.

“I’m worried about you, sweetheart,” Queenie says to her.

“I am, too,” Spud says. “You seem out of sorts.”

Violet turns to look at them, and her face softens. “Oh my, I must not be hiding it very well. Rose said the same thing this morning.”

“You’ve been like this since Old Sally died, sweetheart.” Queenie says this as gently as she knows how. “What can we do to help?”

“Honestly, nothing,” Violet says. “Or maybe everything? I wish I knew.”

Violet pauses as Queenie wonders if all those tears Violet has been holding back will finally fall.

“You guys go home. I’m fine,” she says.

But Queenie doesn’t believe Violet is *fine* at all. She knows when her daughter is suffering.

Violet gives them each a hug goodbye and thanks them again for helping before walking them to the door. Once outside, Queenie and Spud exchange a look of helplessness. Old Sally would know what to do. But while her mother is keeping mum in the Gullah cemetery, Iris’s friends seem to be announcing her return for the last hurrah.

Chapter 3

Rose

Rose sits at the cottage kitchen table with stacks of papers in front of her. One pile is for documents to toss. One is for pieces to save in the family vault, and one is for donations to the Georgia Historical Society in Savannah. Another stack contains photographs of the Temple mansion and the surrounding square taken in the previous century. Pictures before and after Savannah became “the Forest City.” A time when city planners planted trees for shade, as well as beauty: live oaks, palmettos, magnolias, dogwoods, crepe myrtles, and gum trees filled the squares.

Rose thinks again of Violet and their trip to the Gullah cemetery. Nothing Rose said or did helped her friend, whose grief at times still seems raw. Thankfully, they will have a joyful reason to gather tonight. It is Sally Rose’s second birthday. Two candles will grace the cake Violet has prepared. The grown-ups plan to wear party hats, and balloons will fill the kitchen. Rose imagines Max, her husband, will take pictures while the proud moms, Katie and Angie, will be all smiles.

But before the festivities, Rose goes through papers that she found the last time she went to the bank vault. She has been slowly emptying the documents and brought a box home, along with an old accordion file that was tucked away in the back.

Rose picks up a receipt written in Chinese, with a notation in English that the object purchased is a diary. Diaries have always fascinated Rose, but the Temples have never been diarists. They were more prone to document business transactions and Savannah secrets to help maintain power. Rose imagines her ancestors might consider a diary a dangerous thing in the wrong hands.

Regardless of the unlikelihood that one exists, she searches through the latest pile, questioning where her grandparents might have put a diary purchased in 1935 during one of her grandfather's overseas trips—judging from the date of the receipt.

“You still at it?” Max steps into the kitchen.

“Afraid so.” Rose doesn't look up from the papers.

“It smells like an attic in here,” he says, pouring himself a glass of cold water from the fridge.

“Old papers,” Rose says. “I've got just a few more to go. Now I'm trying to find something that I found a receipt for.”

“You ready for the party tonight?” he asks.

“Yeah. It should be fun.” Distracted, Rose searches through another stack for the diary.

“Well, I'll leave you to it.”

Rose doesn't answer as she grabs an old accordion file tied with a brown string to keep it together. She has found several of these organizers over the years. Rose unties the string and opens it, getting another stale whiff of history. Shuffling through more papers, she finds a small book with an Asian design on the cover.

Rose smiles. It is almost as if the diary wanted to be found, and that's why it was so easy. She opens to the first page like a curator observing an ancient manuscript. Her eyes widen, and she gasps upon seeing the handwriting in the first entry. She quickly closes the book again. The diary didn't belong to one of her Temple

grandparents as she imagined, but her mother. Rose stares at the book like its pages might carry a rare debilitating disease. It's surprising that her mother didn't destroy it. Iris Temple wasn't someone who wanted to be *known*. Her mother was private. Closed. Unavailable. At least Rose thought so.

A bit disoriented, Rose stands. She takes the diary to her studio and places it on the side table next to her reading chair. For now, just knowing it exists has thrown her, and she can't imagine reading it.

Later that evening, their makeshift commune gathers at the big house, a remodeled, enlarged version of Old Sally's small beach house with a cottage in the back where Rose and Max reside. Spud and Queenie live upstairs in the big house, as well as Katie, Angie, and Sally Rose. Downstairs is Violet's family. Old Sally's bedroom now sits empty.

Sally Rose, a sweet cherub of a child with blond curly hair, sits in her booster chair at the head of the table. Katie wasn't blonde when she was Sally Rose's age, so Rose imagines the light hair and curls have passed from the mysterious side of Sally Rose's genetics via the unknown sperm donor. At least unknown to Rose. Given the Temple family's attention to bloodlines, it is sometimes hard for Rose not to worry about the unknown ancestors. However, this doesn't in any way take away from Rose's love for her granddaughter.

A rousing round of "Happy Birthday to You" has Sally Rose clapping and staring at the two burning candles on her cake. What must she be thinking? Who are these silly folks? Rose looks around at the family and friends she cherishes more than any of the Temples she grew up with and tries not to think about her mother's diary on the side table in her studio.

While Queenie and Spud help Sally Rose blow out her candles, Violet arrives with plates and forks and cuts everyone a

slice, including a small one for the guest of honor. The evening progresses with gifts. As Katie and Angie requested, they were asked only to contribute one present per family unit given Sally Rose already has a room full of toys from this many quasi-grandparents.

Tiring of playing with her new toys, Sally Rose climbs into Rose's lap. The joys of being a grandmother have surpassed Rose's expectations. Max has embraced the grandfather role as quickly as he embraced living on the beach after being a rancher in Wyoming. He seems happier than she has ever seen him. Yet, a part of Rose can't seem to relax. A puzzle deep within her psyche needs to be solved.

Rose suddenly realizes she has thought about her mother more in this one day than in several years.

"Nana, swing?"

"Grandpa Max will do it," Max says, lifting the girl firmly onto his shoulders as Sally Rose giggles with glee at being taller than everyone else in the room. She waves at each person in the kitchen before going out to the swing set built for her in the back by Max and Jack, Violet's husband—last year's birthday present.

It is hard for Rose to imagine what their life was like before Sally Rose. She even has a daybed with a railing in the cottage so her granddaughter can sleep there whenever Katie and Angie need some time to themselves.

Everyone gathers on the back patio as dusk settles in around them. Sally Rose will go to bed soon and playing on the swing set is one of the ways she winds down.

"Big day," Rose says when Violet joins her.

"Sure is," Violet says. "Hard to believe that two years ago we were sheltering in a lighthouse and wondering if we would survive a hurricane."

With Old Sally's death and Sally Rose's birthday, not to mention finding her mother's diary, Rose forgot it was the hurricane's anniversary, too. Hurricane Iris. An uncanny

synchronistic tribute to her mother, Iris Temple, who now, it seems, has left behind a surprise diary.

Rose hasn't told anyone yet about her mother's diary and isn't so sure she will. Not even Violet, who seems too distracted these days to solve puzzles. For all she knows, the diary may only contain a recounting of her mother's busy social calendar and be a treatment for insomnia.

"The cake was delicious," Rose says.

Violet thanks her.

From the sadness around Violet's eyes, Rose can tell that the day has worn on her friend, too. A day that seems to have come full circle, from honoring deaths to celebrating births.

After the party ends and Rose helps clean up, she returns to her studio. The diary waits on the table by her chair. It surprises Rose how hesitant she is to peer inside. Both volumes of the Temple Book of Secrets were about prominent people in Savannah. Old secrets are useless with age. Her mother's diary feels different and of more consequence.

Rose sits in the chair and studies the red leather-bound book edged in gold with Asian etchings on the front. It is perhaps a half-inch thick. The paper is fine, probably linen.

Am I going to do this? Rose taps the cover as though knocking on a door of the past.

Rose's mother was a stranger in many ways. A woman whose prickliness and constant criticism pushed them apart—if indeed they had ever been together. To protect herself, Rose avoided her to the point of estrangement for twenty-five years. Rose never felt like she belonged in the Temple family, anyway. As a girl, a favorite fantasy was that she was adopted.

With the trepidation of someone preparing to open the Savannah version of Pandora's box to release demons into the world, Rose opens the book. The result is anticlimactic. The ink inside the front cover is faded and reveals her mother's name and

the date, 1936. It is hard to imagine her mother young. She would have been a teenager.

April 1936

Daddy brought this diary back from Hong Kong when he was there last spring. He said that I am to fill it with my private thoughts. That way, I can look back at it when I am old and see how young I used to be. But I have never felt young. Not really. I mean, technically, I am young. Fourteen. But inside, I feel much older. I already know what is expected of me for the rest of my life. I am to sit up straight and be a good girl. I am to be seen and not heard and only talk to the right people from the suitable families who make as much money as Daddy does. As a girl, I am not to be ambitious. I am to be loyal. I am never to leave the house unless I am "presentable." I am to know how to throw a good party and get my picture in the Society section of the newspaper. Though I have a lot of money, I am never to talk about it, and I am wary of people who may take advantage of me. I am a Temple, and I am never to forget it.

I hate my life!!

Rose shudders, feeling like she just walked over someone's grave. She snaps the book closed. "Wow." The word penetrates the quiet room. She grew up with the same burden of expectations and never realized until this moment that they were multigenerational, and her mother had carried the same load.

With the act of reading her mother's words, memories rush forward of her mother's constant unhappiness. Her unwillingness, or perhaps lack of ability, to be flexible or spontaneous. The total lack of affection. Rose sifts through these memories like the old papers in the bank vault. It is midnight when she finally looks at the clock again. She hasn't moved in almost two hours.

When Rose gets into bed, Max is already sleeping. She turns off the small lamp on the bedside table and finds herself thinking

about the Gullah graveyard where she started the day. Rose misses Old Sally much more than she does her mother. A fact that feels bittersweet. Everyone in their household has been grieving Old Sally's absence. But none of them more than Violet.

She yawns. The past has been everywhere today. Finding her mother's diary was like coming face-to-face with a ghost. A ghost who has stepped back onto the stage of the Temple drama to deliver a soliloquy that promises to change everything.



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