

## Chapter One

When I attended grade school, John was always my “boyfriend.” Yes, almost from the beginning of our life, we were in love. We married directly out of college from Auburn University. Ours was a blissful mirage of happiness. I longed to remember each second of time, since I pledged that I would rehearse our life, not leaving out an important moment. I feel pressed to do this to obtain closure at the near-end of our life together. Maybe, I can finally free myself of his hold. *Is this possible?* Such is my goal.

When we were young, the roles for John and me were reversed. He was the angelic altar boy, and I was the “bad girl.” I supposed my corruption of John was my attempt to save him. Proudly, he often explained his desire to become a priest. My thought was, “What a waste,” as efforts to save him brought howls of laughter from the adults around us, who understood my naive struggle to redeem this handsome man from a life of celibacy so that I might have him for myself. What a naughty girl I was! Of course, these actions were over the heads of our classmates.

Also, unbeknown to all of the kids from our school was the fact that my grandmother, Iddie, taught me to drive her Cadillac on the backstreets of Port St. Joe. That way, when she played cards with the “girls,” she could arrive home safely despite her every Wednesday slightly intoxicated state. I became proficient at driving that gigantic, canary yellow monstrosity Grandfather left to her. My driving, *Miss Daisy*, was a great deal of fun for me and may have saved many lives in our beloved hometown of Port St. Joe, Florida. At least, it saved Grandmother Richards and our family some embarrassment.

On a particular day, I drove past the school, after this same hallowed figure allowed me to skip class so that I could accompany her to the strawberry fields in Wewa. Grandmother Richards had been delivered safely to her mansion. With great mirth, I drove the “Yellow Bomber,” her car, on to my home. I blew the horn, as I slowly meandered past everyone at the elementary school, which appeared to be my worst mistake. After all, I had only been driving for a few months. I could hear the yells, “Is that Becky Richards? Isn’t she too young to drive?” Several of the teachers demanded I pull over, but I wasn’t stupid. Quickly, I stepped on the gas. My best friend, Mary Edwards, hackled with joy, as I sped past her, the bewildered students, and the teachers, while almost plowing into a small group of innocents. When I entered the house, the telephone shrilly alerted me to the problems I had created for myself. Our maid, Carrie, tried to answer it, but I knocked the phone from her hand explaining that Mary Edwards was having a birthday party. Therefore, we may receive a lot of calls from my friends, as we made plans. “Really, Miss Becky? Seems to me that Miss Mary just had a birthday about six months ago. Um hum, I’m pretty sure your grandmother instructed me to drop you off at the Edwards’ house. Isn’t it odd that *she’s* having another birthday so soon?”

Although Carrie’s eyes blazed at me, her soft smile told me, she was on to me and the fact that, once again, I had accomplished some factitious disorder.

*If only I could return to the joyous days of our past. All of those memories are about to be filed in my memory bank as “obsolete.”*

One thing that never became obsolete was my dear Grandmother Richards. “Iddie” represented everything Mother did not. Mother, always the consonant perfectionist, demanded exemplary behavior, while *her* mother, Iddie, cooed, “To err is only human, my darling. No human can be perfect, but Jesus, and he didn’t live very long, unfortunately.”

To this day, I miss Grandmother Richards much more than I miss Mother. I wonder what *she* would say at my predicament with you?

Endless, hot summers, we whiled away in our beloved Port St. Joe, that filled with purple azaleas, Tupelo honey, and the gorgeous changing waters of the Gulf of Mexico. So many amazing memories confound me. How do I select the truly outstanding ones? My mind reels, as I try to recall such joys of yesterday.

Our small group of select buddies was small for a reason; we learned at an early age to surround ourselves with those we could trust. Our crew would always support each other, and never rat out whoever unfortunately faced the stern reproach of parents.

A certain older neighbor, who yelled at us if we so much, as trespassed an inch into her stately border of bright blue plumbagos, haunts my mind. One night, we decided to carry shovels and avenge ourselves of her angry taunts. Carefully, we dug up her sprawling border plants to replant them about a foot over into her yard. That way, we decided we could safely walk past the curb, which seemed to be her measure of encroachment.

The next morning, we were all so exhausted, we didn’t even look for horseshoe crabs, as we treaded the warm green waters which surrounded us. Instead, we lined up on the curb across

from Grumpy's large white house and waited. No one was brave enough to risk her verbal assaults on *that* bright sunny morning. Thankfully, one of the city workers, unknowingly, arrived to gather the dirt we dropped all over the curb. Just as we expected, shrill yells filled the air, as he gingerly treaded into her yard. The poor man softly recused himself.

"Now, Miss Betsy, I'm not officially in your yard, although I admit it looks like you lost some land here somehow during the night." Miss Betsy, who was a recluse, slinked toward him in her bright pink nightgown with brighter pink rollers lining her blue-gray hair.

"What?" she screamed as she pranced toward Curtis, the worker. I guessed she didn't realize that it rained last night. That was the reason we were unable to rearrange all of her plumbagos completely, as we had earlier planned. When she sighted our brilliant handiwork, her doleful cries filled the air.

"How could this happen? Just look at my beautiful yard. Who would do such a horrible thing? Seems to me quite the coincidence that *you* would stop by this morning, Curtis. Did you and Harley Billings do this, because I shorted you a few dollars last week? Well, I'll take care of you." Oh, she was a vindictive woman!

Suddenly, her eyes strayed to the far left corner of the street, where we studied the entire transaction, as we faced her lined in a row with tremendous glee.

"You! You darn kids. *You're* the culprit? Well, I'll take care of you right now." As she pivoted in the slick dirt, she lost her footing and fell onto the damp earth. What a sight to behold, there amongst the pale blue plumbagos and wet sandy soil rested a giant pink blob that begged Curtis to assist her. We were a

mischievous lot, but not mean. The worker stood there a little longer, only to watch her gently slip again. Finally, the sad spectacle arose covered in white streaks of moist earth with small bits of blue flowers pasted to her forehead. Holding her misaligned head of pink rollers high, as Southern women always do, she marched back into the air-conditioned comfort of her mansion. I noticed her pearls limply hanging around her neck. Turning one more time to stare us down, she gently closed the door.

“That’s it! I’m never going home. My mother will ground me for the rest of the summer.” Southern families revere their older counterparts. Never, under any circumstance, does one disrespect the gray-haired saints. To do so is the ultimate offense, especially in the South, where “Yes, ma’am and sir” are always uttered by the children from proper families. Not only had we disrespected one of their icons, we just put her in danger. If Miss Betsy had hurt herself from that fall, we probably would have been sent to reform school for the rest of our lives. Very much aware of our use of poor judgment in vindicating ourselves, we huddled together in fear. That beautiful sunny day, which beckoned for swimming and ice cream, now had turned terribly astray. All of us refused to go home until we heard Tommy Peterson’s mom calling him to dinner.

Entering the darkness of my abode, I thrilled to see Carrie sitting at the table, in the kitchen, with a tall glass of iced sweet tea. “Now, why are you so late, Miss Becky? If your mother were here, she’d be fussin’. Where have you been?”

Carrie was the most gentle soul in this world. I loved her with a fierce sort of love. She practically raised me, as Mother and Father gallivanted between our main home in Port St. Joe and

the other one located in Jekyll Island. As much as I adored the big sprawling old beach house in Georgia, I refused to visit there often in the summer, because I would miss my friends, especially my beloved John.

“Look here, Carrie, I could have really done it this time. May I spend the night with Iddie? You’ll not want to be a part of this one.” Carrie’s black eyes gleamed at me.

“What have you done? How bad of a mess have you made, again?”

“We’re talking bad, really bad. Maybe injury to an elderly lady, if I can call her a *lady*.”

“Now, you look here, Miss Becky, *any* Southern woman’s a lady no matter how unladylike she may behave. Don’t ever forget it.” My head hung low with shame, as tears slowly dropped over my fat, dirty little cheeks. I didn’t bathe last night after moving Miss Betsy’s plumbagos.

“You don’t need to leave your home. Stay here, and we’ll face the music together. Besides, Iddie’s done and gone to Hotlanta with Mr. Norris; she waited here all afternoon to invite you to accompany them to the ballet. Seems to me, she and *that* Mr. Norris is becoming a little thick if you know what I mean.”

I had no idea what that meant. I did have an idea that Carrie’s tall glass of ice tea sporting a large slice of fresh lemon and mint from our herb garden appealingly faced me. Ambling toward the table to take a big swig, I jumped about a foot, when the phone did its thing.

“Oh, no, Carrie, here it comes!”

“That’s right, and don’t you ever forget, when you do somethin’ mean, you’ve got to face the music or the telephone in this case.” Slowly, she meandered to the shrilling black box.

*Surely, her leisurely crawl is meant to prolong my agony.* It's impossible to explain the joy that filled my small, young heart, as she called me to the phone to speak with Iddie. My beloved grandmother had stopped to call on her way to Atlanta with Mr. Norris to be sure I arrived safely home.

After sending me to the shower, Carrie and I lazily enjoyed a large plate of her homemade chicken salad. She always used Duke mayonnaise and lined it with bread-and-butter pickles atop a slice of homemade bread. Swinging together in the ancient wicker swing on the front porch, we faced another beautiful sunset.

Port St. Joe was famous for dynamic evening skies. Never, would I forget that special night, as purple swaths of deep purple mingled with blue, the color of Miss Betsy's plumbago. It seemed to me God said, "Don't worry, Becky, no one is perfect, but your mother, and she's only perfect in *her* mind, but don't tell her I said that." I smiled.

As Carrie and I moved inside to a large bucket of buttered popcorn, the phone only rang once. "Hey, Becky, you get any calls yet?"

"Naw, John, none. You?"

"Naw, none for me neither, but I'm telling you this, the next time Jim Lambert comes up with a way for us to avenge ourselves against an older citizen, I'm having none of it."

"Nope. Me neither."

Again, tonight, I smiled, as I realized that I had received from God the best family, group of friends and hometown in this world. You see, I loved John even then.

## Chapter Two

That memory of so long ago created a compelling emotion, as I laughed out loud reliving the escapade with Miss Betsy. After that interaction, “Grumpy,” never yelled at us again. In fact, I don’t recall ever seeing Miss Betsy after that. We were only around ten years old when we carried our shovels to her home and moved her beloved shrubs in the darkness. Again, I softly laughed. *Why do I maintain this silence? No one is present in this tomb of a home to hear my laughter since John doesn’t live here anymore.* I despondently gazed around me, as I considered that the love of my life resided with another woman.

There was a time when our home brought me immense joy. Slowly, I strolled through each room touching precious pieces like the chair John loved, as he munched nightly snacks during our television time or the desk where he paid bills and fused over his unpublished manuscripts. So many beloved parts of our life. Many memories surrounded me. I realized no lamps burned. *Since you are not by my side, John, I prefer the darkness.*

The loud shrill of the phone jarred me back to the present. “Oh, hello, Mary, I’m okay. Yes, of course, I feel lonely. What? Who died? No, not Ida, you don’t say? Mary, I’m not sure I’m up to attending a funeral right now, but thank you so much for telling me. Talk to you soon. Bye.”

Stumbling to the sofa, I softly cried, as the gentle sound of summer rain pattered on the metal roof. Death and sadness seemed to present themselves in a neat package when one arrived at my age.

*Now, Rebecca, you must stop being so quiet; John can’t hear you anymore. You can scream and cry. He won’t be yelling for*



*you to turn down the music or television. You can make all of the noise that you want, old girl.* I broke down into a slobbering mess, as I said those words to myself. “Old girl?”

I never thought of being old. It had arrived quickly, much too fast. My not being prepared for something like the inevitable created confusion and fear for me. My entire life, I had felt in control and ready for the next phase of time. What I looked at, now facing me, was not happy like all of the other steps. Thinking of graduating from college, marriage, buying a home, and starting a family, those appeared joyous. Even retirement was exciting because, at that time, my beautiful husband stood at my side. Old age rated hard for anyone, but especially for those alone. *My isolation surrounds me like a grave.* Now, my thoughts reverted to the fact that I had lost two of my loves. That of my husband and one of my best friends. I had not lost my John to death or sickness, but another woman!

*How can this happen? Did I not see what transpired at the end of our marriage? That is still the hardest thing for me to accept. Could I have prevented Joan from controlling my husband's later moments on earth?*

After a good long cry, my thoughts returned to my friend, Ida Joyce. “Oh, dear Ida, I have also lost you? It is all too much.” *When did I become this soft and weak?*

Ida Joyce became my friend when she transferred to Port St. Joe Elementary School during our fifth year. My best friend, Mary Edwards, and I insisted on passing notes to each other, whenever Mrs. Stiller turned her head to write on the chalkboard. We thought our actions went undetected.

Instant quietness, which our class rarely experienced, replaced the hushed giggles and whispers when the new girl

appeared. We set our attention to the most beautiful girl in the world. Even John sat up, straighter, at his desk. The school secretary, Mrs. Murphy, escorted this newcomer to our class with a sheet of paper that she handed to our teacher. The poor girl looked terrified, as she shyly gazed at the rack-tag group of kids. We represented a diversified group of the culture of this country, as the beloved of bankers, businessmen, factory workers, and fishermen all turned their attention to the small girl wearing a plaid navy and yellow skirt, a white blouse, and black and white saddle oxfords. I had never seen saddle oxfords worn with knee-high navy blue socks. She carried a small backpack of dark blue that matched the color in her skirt and socks. Her blonde hair was pulled from her face and held in place with a navy-blue headband. She was the epitome of class and style, at least to me.

“Now, class, please give a nice welcome to Miss Ida Joyce. Miss Ida is transferring here from Macon, Georgia. How many of you have ever been to Macon?” My hand was the only one raised. Sometimes, my family and I stayed there, as we ventured to our other home in Jekyll Island. Mom and Dad loved a particular restaurant located there.

“Miss Ida, why don’t you take the seat that Mary Edwards now occupies? I have meant to separate Becky and Mary for some time. Girls, you need to pay better attention and stop passing notes! Your actions distract other classmates!” Mary and I looked at each other in horror.

*So, Mrs. Stiller always knew that we passed notes? Did someone rat us out, or did she possess eyes in the back of her head? It sounded like it.*

My best friend quickly emptied her desk and scurried to an empty one in the back of the room, as the stranger gracefully lowered herself beside me.

*This kid looks like royalty. She must be invited to join our little group.* Turning to look at poor Mary, I witnessed small tears filtering down her tiny pink cheeks. This pint-sized new kid had infiltrated our world, but I couldn't blame *her*; she was too beautiful to be the brunt of my anger.

John turned in his seat to smile at the gorgeous girl. His eyes lingered a little longer than necessary, which caused me to wonder if maybe I should use caution in welcoming this beauty into our clan. However, I, too, felt enamored by her uniqueness. Most of the girls, I knew, were brash and loud. This delicate creature's composure rocked me.

"Good grief, John, you turn around!" I ordered a little louder than I meant. Mrs. Stiller stared at me as she placed her index finger to her lips to quieten our rambunctious group. My smile appeared to surprise my teacher, since she had just stripped me of the pleasure of sitting beside my best friend, Mary, each day. My teacher looked shocked that her punishment was gladly received by yours truly. As Mrs. Stiller explained the relating of matter changes to atoms and molecules, I passed a note to my new friend. I turned with a shrug to poor Mary. *I will make it up to her later*, I vowed to myself.

*Would you like to join me, Mary Edwards, Nancy Huggins, Joan Jones, John Connors, Louis Rafter, and Bobby Clarke at our table today?*

Excitedly, the new kid nodded, as if I just offered her a stay from execution. The worse thing about being a new kid was lunch. *What if no one invites me to sit with them?*

Many times, I considered that exile to loneliness, at one of the oversized tables in the cafeteria, might be better than listening to Joan and Nancy argue about whose teeth were whiter, or John and Louis brag about their athletic accomplishments. I figured, since I just threw her a lifeline, Ida should be a friend for life.

I was certainly right about that. Ida Joyce remained a friend until today when she was called home to be with the Lord. *How desperately, I will miss you.*

