



Wildwood Creek

A Novel



Lisa Wingate



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Prologue

BONNIE ROSE
FEBRUARY 1861

I imagine the words as he's lookin' at me, hear the echo as he spies Maggie outside the door. It troubles me not so much for myself, but for my sister. . . .

She's little more than a babe, Maggie May. Just nine and a mite, yet she scarce remembers when the words were *angel, sweet one, daughter*, not *whore, burden, soiled one*.

How can a fallen woman be just a child? A wee girl, like Maggie May? Small for her age, arms thin as if they might break in a stiff wind. But she's stronger than they know. I must take her from this place, if there is a way.

He could be the way, this man.

But then come the words—those he speaks only with his eyes, with an upward tilt of chin, a slight pullin' away, as if the air's gone foul.

It's something I know, how they place the words on me. But how can they set them upon a child? None of it was

Maggie May's doing. It was I who cut off the road to slip home through the trees. Who said, *It'll be shorter, Maggie May, come along.* I thought I'd such knowledge of the dangers, after only weeks in Texas. No longer did the Comanche maraud so far east. They'd been kept away by the tide of folk settlin' west of Fort Worth and on the winding Trinity River. Or so I'd been told.

It was I who decided all of it, not Maggie. Not Ma, or Da, poor little baby Cormie. My thinking brought the raiding party down upon us. My choice caused the shame, and the scars, and the pain, and the loss of all but little Maggie May and me.

Now this man . . . he knows of our shame as well. Stories travel like chaff on a bad wind here where we've refuged the four years since our ordeal, our story reaching as far as Elkhart and Crockett, seeming to find every plantation, settlement, and ferry landin' between here and Houston City.

He'll not be choosing me for the position, even though the good reverend and the missionaries have sent me here with a fine reference. I see the truth as the man slides his fingers over the silken collar of his jacket, rubbing long, slow. His eyes are dark, deep. Cold as the winter nights in Chicago before Da brought us away from the little Canaryville tenements. A better life is what he said we'd find in Texas. But instead, there was only death. Quickly for some. A shred at a time for Maggie May and me.

The man's eyes comb over me now, scratching in like the teeth on a garden rake sharpened for planting. They tell me, as if I knew it not already, he *owns* things. People. The whole of a town. He sees in me a whore in his saloon, not a teacher for his school. It matters little what the missionary or the reverend have said to him about the plight of Maggie May and me. There is none of the grace of our Lord in this man. Or if there is, it's too spare to cover my sins.

His hands fall together on the desk, intertwine. In his chair, he leans away, watching me with the sad sort of curiosity I've come to loathe most of all. Never do I turn a corner here that the shame isn't walkin' before me.

"You seem very young," he says.

I rise a bit straighter in my chair, clutch my hands in my lap, the good fingers covering over the two that healed crooked. I've forgotten my gloves in my rush today, and I'm cursin' myself for it now.

I say, "I am eighteen, sir. I've taught two full terms at the mission school for orphaned children. I am qualified, I assure you." I speak the words very plainly, as I've practiced at the mission school. Not a hint of Irish, if I can help it. I have enough logged against me already. I fasten my gaze to this man very directly, and for a moment he's surprised by that. He blinks. His lips twitch slightly, but I cannot say whether toward a smile or a frown. "I am quite good with children, sir. My recommendations are there in the parcel." I nod toward the wrapper on his desk—unopened, as far as I can see.

Leaning slightly, he peers into the hall, where Maggie May waits on the bench, quiet and meek. "And how old is she?"

"Only nine, sir. Just a child. We have none but each other."

This pleases him, if *pleased* is a means of describin' his expression. Perhaps it is more satisfaction than pleasure. No joy is in it, but I feel I've crossed some barrier I cannot see.

"I had the finest education at the mission school after . . ." They dangle like a hangin' noose, the words, quickly sliced through. Too late, I know where they were leading. All of life is *before*, then *after*. Before the shame. After the shame.

Two fingers straighten as he raises his hands, making the steeple on the church in a children's game. The fingertips are the folk inside the buildin'. Da played this game with us when we were small, and the remembering skitters through

my mind like a dragonfly. It leaves a lacy shadow. Da's hands were big, his fingers a sturdy roof and steeple. A shelter.

The man trails the steeple along his bottom lip. "Yes," he says quite slowly, thinking the words in the speakin'. "Yes, you will do nicely, I believe." Again, a sentence drifts away between us, unfinished somehow.

I'm feeling there's more unspoken than's been spoken. I wish I could be asking, *Nicely . . . for what purpose?* But I've been warned. I've been warned to take care. By its nature, the position he's offering is one of few a girl soiled as myself might be considered for.

His gaze lingers there on my cheek, skimming as light as grass-feathers 'cross my ear, touching the skin at the edge of my collar. I finger the cameo locket the good reverend's wife has given me, then I tug the new bit of ribbon we've strung it on. I wonder if the scars show, red and anger-filled.

"You are not afraid to go into the wilderness?" he asks.

"I see no point in it," I say. "Fear changes nothing. A circumstance is still a circumstance."

"Fear motivates. In fact, I find it to be the most certain motivator of all." His long, thin fingers take up the pen and into the ink he dips, then signs a paper before pushing it my way. He turns the pen in his hand, extending it. "Sign here. I assume that you have no problem in working with Irish. Many of my laborers are Irish, which of course means that the whelps are Irish as well. The remainder in the settlement are Germans, for the most part."

"My parents were Irish. I was born there, but I do not remember it well," I say, though to be sure, he's seen it in my surname and in the look of me. It can't be missed.

I take the paper, begin to pen my signature.

After my first name and my middle adorn the paper, he stops me. I've lifted the pen to dip the ink. "That will do,"

he says. His lips curve again, and I feel that we're sharin' a secret together, but I've no way of knowing what it is.

"It is Bonnie Rose O'Brien, sir," I tell him, reaching toward the well of black liquid again.

He touches the pen to take it from me. "It is *Bonnie Rose* now." His flesh meets mine. Our eyes tangle. He is young to own so much. "It is better this way, don't you think?"

Suddenly, I've an understandin' of it.

I open my hand, let the pen slide through my fingers. A drip slips 'cross my skin, to splash on the desk. He takes a kerchief from his breast pocket. It's clean and white. Without a thought, he soils it beyond repair. The blackness seeps through and spreads as he strokes the linen over my palm. I can't help watching it.

He, instead, is watching me.

My wits gather up, and I look at him, then lose my composure at the meeting of our eyes. I've been offered something, but I neither know what it is, nor understand the terms of it. Anonymity? Absolution? A future for Maggie May?

What price does he ask to purchase it?

He smiles then, and this time I find some warmth in it. Or am I only seeing it because I need it to be so?

"I will expect you to be prepared for travel by the first day of the coming month," he says. "Arrangements will await you at the river port. I have ownership of a stern-wheeler that has made the run up the Trinity as far as Porter's Bluff thrice this winter, bearing both passengers and freight. You will travel with the *New Ila* as far as Trinidad, then overland with the ox freighter who transports my supply shipments." He rises, and I bolt from my seat, afraid even of smoothing my shirtwaist as he speaks.

"Set your affairs in order, Bonnie Rose. Pack well. It is a long journey to Wildwood."

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Chapter 1

ALLIE KIRKLAND

FEBRUARY, PRESENT DAY

Even as a child, I was fascinated by my father's ability to create things that never were.

I'd forgotten so much about those little-girl years out in LA, my mother playing a bit part in the weekly soap opera, and my father working his magic. When the past is an amalgam of the painful and the sweet, sometimes all the mind can do is let the details fuse and blur. Maybe remold history a little, over time.

But somewhere in the muddle, there was always the indelible feeling of sitting on my knees in my dad's canvas chair, looking through camera lenses and realizing he was willing to keep the whole world waiting while he explained shooting angles, and boom microphones, and lighting to an eight-year-old. Every little girl should have that moment with her dad, and no little girl should be forced to tuck away the crisp details of it. No little girl should be told she's better off ignoring the evidence in the mirror—her father's brown eyes, his penchant for daydreaming at inopportune times, the overwhelming hole where he promised he would be. Always and forever.

But some things just are what they are, no matter who tells you to overlook them. Along with the brown eyes and double-jointed elbows came my father's passion for all things related to film and live stage production . . . which made it hard to understand why the hairs on my neck stood up when I first walked into the old Berman Theater, just a few blocks off the University of Texas campus in downtown Austin. I couldn't pin the disquieting feeling on any one thing.

The building was cavernous and shadowy, rife with gold leaf and elaborate cornices, draped in heavy velvet curtains and gilded balconies, the frescos fading like an old woman's makeup slowly disappearing into aging skin. It seemed the sort of place where ghost hunters might come to do a show. The uneasiness it stirred in me was just a vague sense, like the one you get when you walk out the door in the morning, and the barometric pressure has dropped, and without ever having watched the weather you know a storm is coming.

I felt something . . . happening, but I didn't know what.

The sensation had been with me all day. My redheaded grandmother, who'd hauled me off to church every time she could wrestle me away from my mother and my stepfather and bring me to Texas for a visit, would've called it *the brush of angel wings*. To Grandma Rita, everything unexplained was either the brush of angel wings, or the touch of divine appointment.

The Berman Theater didn't feel like either one.

From the center aisle my roommate, Kim, sent a little finger wave my way, then nodded toward the balcony. The casting call line moved forward and Kim shuffled along with it, and I lost sight of her perky head. Goose bumps traveled over my arm and ran up my neck and into the little red curlicues that were probably sticking out of my ponytail by now. Luckily, I

wasn't here for the casting call, but for another reason, and movie star hair wasn't necessarily required.

I slid into a theater seat near the wall, feeling conspicuously out of place. If I had to explain to one more person that I *was* allowed to be here, and that I was waiting exactly where the big, burly security guy had told me to wait, it was entirely possible that I'd cave in and abandon this crazy plan altogether. If there was anyone else here seeking the production assistant's job Kim had told me about, I hadn't crossed paths with him or her. While Kim's line was progressing, mine didn't seem to be forming anytime soon.

Tucking my backpack in beside me, I looked for Kim again, but she'd been permanently absorbed by the crowd. Sooner or later, she'd make it to the front table, where hopefuls were turning in one-sheets, modeling cards, and eight-by-ten glossies that ranged from professionally produced to snapped in the backyard and printed on an inkjet. Tonight, when all the files were compiled, Kim's application and mine would mysteriously be moved to the top of the pile by a friend she had in the production company—at least, that was the plan.

My phone chimed in my pocket, and I scrambled to silence it before reading the text. People in the casting call line glanced my way.

The text was from Kim, wherever she was now. *Whoa! You see him up there? IDK, but think he's watching you . . .*

I looked for her again, then answered, *Who? Where? R U close to the front yet?*

Kim only responded to part of the question. Typical. Kim's train of thought ran on several tracks at once, jumping back and forth with no operator at the switchboard. *Look up in the first balcony! That's him, I think.*

I lowered the phone, peered upward, and made out a form. A man. Dark hair. Tall. Thin.

With the long coat cloaking his profile, he looked like Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theatre. His face was hidden, but he was leaning slightly forward, watching, seemingly with curiosity, the activity on the floor below. For a moment, I had the strangest feeling that his eyes were locked with mine, as if through the darkness I could somehow see them. The uneasiness walked across my skin again, and I turned away, slouching over my phone.

Who? I texted.

The answer came quickly. *Singh. Rav Singh.*

Kim's friend, who was only a paper-shuffler from a temp agency, had heard that this casting call was related to Rav Singh—that he had signed on to produce the newest *Mysterious History* docudrama miniseries. It didn't seem likely, considering that Singh was known for box-office films, not television. But the psychological elements of *Mysterious History* did seem to fit his profile.

Singh's projects were rife with dark psychological stuff that tended to explore the worst side of human nature. He'd come from Mumbai and quickly made a name for himself in the American film industry. Maybe this was his way of capturing the American television market as well . . . or maybe the macabre elements of *Mysterious History* appealed to him. Along with taking a cast of modern-day adventurers back to a historical time period, *Mysterious History* projects always included a twist. For last season's show, forty people had been sent to live in, and staff, an English manor house. The twist was only revealed after they arrived—Hartshorne Abbey came with a gruesome history and a plethora of legendary ghost stories.

I glanced at the balcony again. The man was gone.

Kim didn't send another message. Apparently, she'd reached the front of the line. At least one of us might be getting a

summer job today. As far as I could tell, I'd been completely overlooked. It was almost a relief. If I told my mother and Lloyd I'd found yet another way to prolong my impractical dream and avoid moving back to Phoenix to clerk in Lloyd's law office, they'd probably lock the front gates and hide the security code. They were still livid that I'd used my small inheritance from Grandma Rita to start a grad degree in film production at my father's alma mater, UT. I wanted to do what he had done—work my way up in the movie business. Austin wasn't LA, but it was a growing hub. There were opportunities here.

For Mom and Lloyd, the whole idea was ridiculous. *Your grandmother never should've encouraged it. If it weren't for that, you'd be on track right now, like your brothers and sisters.* Lloyd delighted in pointing out that my three older stepsiblings, *his* kids, were tremendously successful people. Doctor, lawyer, engineer. Even the three Lloyd and my mother had together were science fair winners, kiddie chess champions, expert junior gymnasts. And then, there was me. *It's time to surrender this fantasy life you've created, Allison, and take up residence in the real world. . . .*

But that fantasy life, that universe within a story, was exactly what my father adored. Somehow, deep down inside, I couldn't help clinging to the idea that he would have adored *me*, starry eyes and all.

A shadow fell nearby and I looked up to find a woman there, her face rigid, exotic in some way, her dark hair slicked back in a bun so tight you could've bounced a quarter off it. A gray sheath dress made her thin frame look even thinner, and impossibly high heels gave her an imposing height. Standing up, I felt like a munchkin on the soundstage of *Amazon Women on the Moon*.

Her lashes lowered partway and I wondered if she was

going to tell me to leave. She seemed unhappy about something. Decidedly.

“This way please.” Her voice was strangely robotic, tinged with an accent that sounded slightly Middle Eastern and slightly French. I couldn’t place it, and I was usually good with accents. The University of Texas being fairly global, Kim and I loved guessing where the strangers came from. This woman was far too glamorous to be shuttling people through a casting call in a dank theater building.

Which made me wonder if Kim might be right about Rav Singh. This exotic girl looked like she could be an actress out of Bollywood, a part of Singh’s famed inner circle. He was known for keeping a tribe of loyal minions who fiercely protected his privacy . . . and the content of his ongoing projects.

I hitched up my backpack and fell into step behind her, feeling uncertain, awkward, and plain as we moved into the deepening shadows near an arched side-stage door that led into total darkness. A chill skittered past, and I conjured wild scenarios in which I was grabbed by the burly security guy, bound, gagged, and stuffed into a shipping crate. What would happen from there, I wasn’t sure, but if I gave my mind a little time, it would come up with several possibilities. For as long as I could remember, my thoughts had worked that way. In scenes. Wild, unpredictable scenes.

“They told you I’m here to interview for the production assistant’s job, right?” I asked.

She skimmed a look over her shoulder, the way people do when they want you to know you’re wasting your breath. Perhaps, schlepping applicants around wasn’t her normal job, and she resented having to fetch me. Since we weren’t going to talk, I focused on the bun . . . sort of a flawless blue-black cinnamon roll. A half-dozen hairs had escaped

to trail along her smooth olive skin. The only rebellious thing about her.

The darkness fell like a veil and I was walking blind, following the *click, click, click* of her heels. My flip-flops slapped in response, the thready Bohemian skirt I'd grabbed before leaving the apartment, swishing in a way that was soft, yet audible against the dusty silence. We moved down a ramp, and the murmur of the multitudes faded until there was nothing but the echo of our passing. Not a soul was back here, as far as I could tell. Old wall sconces cast a dim glow along the corridor as we turned a corner, the arched plaster tunnels like catacombs reaching deep into the earth. She stopped at one of the dimly lit doors, opened it, then stepped aside, motioning for me to enter the room.

"In here, please." The request was polite, yet clipped. I glanced at her as I passed, and she looked me up and down in the way one alley cat sizes up another. What her issue could possibly be, I had no idea. Someone like her was under no threat from someone like me.

The room was small, with a desk on one end, a leather chair behind it, and a cheap plastic cafeteria seat in front. One position was intended to denote importance and the other to emphasize subjugation. I had a sudden creepy image of what the production manager might be like, assuming I was here to interview with him or her. I envisioned the guard staff in an out-of-the-way Russian work camp somewhere.

There had been a meeting in this room recently—something having to do with costuming. Assorted fabric swatches lay strewn across the desk and there were sketches on a whiteboard—line drawings of men and women, the clothing seeming appropriate for an eighteen-hundreds reenactment, at least inasmuch as I knew about eighteen-hundreds reenactments, which honestly was not all that much. I'd taken a few

classes in costuming as an undergrad and worked on many university and community theater productions over the years, but that was about it.

A scattering of résumés rested on the desk, along with design portfolios in neat black folders. Setting my backpack in the plastic chair, I sidled closer and peeked at the nearest ones. Clean dossiers printed on linen paper and accompanied by lists of coursework and various accolades. Qualified people had applied for the jobs here. Film and fashion design graduates who'd already racked up a plethora of industry experience.

I didn't have a prayer.

The door opened and I jerked away, then hovered by the cafeteria chair as a woman stepped in. Tall, leggy, smartly dressed in a formfitting white silk shirt and a black skirt with some sort of gold thread in the weave, she glowed. She was gorgeous. Bun hair, this time blond. She looked unfriendly. I was detecting a pattern here.

The door clicked closed behind her, as if it were afraid not to hop to its job, and she whisked past me on her way to the leather chair, a perfumed breeze traveling in her wake. "Sit," she commanded, pointing. I wondered if she had a dog at home.

Slipping into the seat, I set my backpack aside.

"Résumé." Her lashes swept upward, tugging cool sea-gray eyes with them as she adjusted a Bluetooth in her ear.

I hesitated, and she stretched a hand, fingers open impatiently. "You have brought one, I presume."

"Yes." I retrieved it and handed it over, though now it seemed pathetic. I noticed the wrinkles in the paper as she pinched it between her neatly manicured fingernails. Next to the other packets on the desk, mine was Cinderella after the stroke of midnight, realizing she doesn't belong at the ball.

I sat there waiting while the woman perused my credentials.

“You have experience sewing with commercial machines?” she asked without looking up. She was far back on the résumé now, to my high school vacations at Grandma Rita’s in Texas.

“Yes. My grandmother owned a dry cleaning and alterations shop. I worked for her in the summers for years. I’ve worked part time in several fabric shops, and I’ve also taken fashion classes when I’ve been able, but of course my primary interest is production.”

She blinked, the action completely, perfectly impassive. Her pale eyes were blank, her face android-like. “And you’ve applied for a position with us because . . .” She left the sentence open-ended, as if she were volleying the ball back to me and seeing what I would do with it.

“Film has always been my dream.” For some reason, I decided to go for the personal approach, to see if I could melt the ice a bit. It’d always been a problem for me—desperately wanting to persuade people to like me. Being the odd man out in a blended family, you develop strange quirks. “My father was a director. My earliest memories are of being on set with him. He died when I was eight. I’ve always wanted to follow in his footsteps. Being in Arizona, there weren’t many opportunities.”

“Yes, I see you’ve completed your undergrad degree at some . . . this is a community college, I presume? I’ve never heard of it.”

“I worked my way through. My parents were only willing to finance college if I studied something they considered practical, preferably law school.”

“I see.” For an instant, she and I were strangely, unexpectedly connected. I had the distinct feeling she knew all about having someone else pull your strings. Her eyes thawed momentarily, and there was something behind them, but I couldn’t tell what.

“I have many qualified applicants for the production assistant’s positions. Perhaps your skills would be better suited to one of the lay positions available—something on the cast. No experience in the film industry is required there, this being a reality-based production.”

“I’m not exactly the on-stage type. I was the only fifth grader in the school production of *A Christmas Carol* selected to work behind the scenes, rather than in front. I love the inner mechanisms of a production. I’ve been involved in every way I could with theater—costuming, set design, whatever was needed. I know it’s nothing compared to a full-scale film project like this one, but I’m willing to do whatever it takes to learn. No one will work harder than I will.”

I scooted to the front of the chair, and she lifted a hand in a way that indicated she was accustomed to people freezing in place when she told them to. Her eyes darted toward her earpiece, and there was a quick headshake before her attention returned to me.

The interview questions then took a rapid right turn toward Terre Haute. “I would assume that you are not a superstitious type? There are some . . . myths and legends surrounding the town we intend to reenact. We are *not* looking for ghost enthusiasts, psychic mediums, and thrill seekers. We are also *not* looking for those who might be sniffing after a story or who intend to cash in by leaking details of the production to the media. Cast members *in* the reenactment village are, of course, not a concern, as they will be living on set for the duration, as part of the game. They will have no means of entering or leaving, unless they are dismissed from the cast. The location is remote enough to allow us that luxury. Support personnel, conversely, may be coming and going for months, though they will be housed in an onsite camp prepared for crew members. Confidentiality agreements will be required,

as well as references and background checks. Would any of these caveats be problematic for you?”

Now I was thoroughly confused. Was she offering me a job? Or telling me why I wasn't qualified for the job? “I'm not superstitious and I have no problem signing confidentiality agreements of any kind.”

Her attention drifted toward the door. Finally she stood, so I did too.

“One final thing,” she added. “Are you familiar with the name Bonnie Rose?”

The interview had taken another hairpin turn. “No, not that I know of . . .”

“Very well,” she said. “We'll be in touch.”