

Written by Shannon Roybal,

26 Sundays

Allison remembers spending Sundays with her mother, sitting on the front porch and painting each other's nails cherry red, the air sweet, like the ripe Georgia peaches ready for harvest. The porch is in shambles now, with chipped blue paint and gouges and cracks in the wood. But it must have been pristine before, if Allison can remember. It must have been, because she would dance around the porch barefoot while her mom sang, and the neighbors, sitting on their own porches while ice clinked in the glasses of their sweet tea, watched and cooed. If anybody tried to do that now, their foot would surely end up looking like a porcupine. She remembers going for walks around the neighborhood, waving hello to everyone they saw. In the summers, they would find the biggest watermelons they could, and slice them up to bring plates to the older neighbors. Allison remembers all these small things in great detail, as if they were the only moments in her life, as if they were the only things worth remembering.

But the truth is, Allison's life was not comprised of lazy Sunday afternoons. Her father, a reporter in their small town, and a well known one at that, had left their great state of Georgia for a young blonde news anchor in New York, when Allison was just barely old enough to walk. He never came back – he wouldn't have been able to if he wanted. The town was very small, consisting of several generations of just a handful of families, including his own, and so word of his sin travelled throughout the small church town like wildfire, successfully assuring that this man would never again be able to show his face, even to his own family. Allison's mother then took on the burden of raising her child alone, although small southern towns are the best places to raise children, as every woman became like another mother to every other woman's child. Her mother also had a comfortable amount of money, both from her parents on the West Coast, and

from her business as a tailor, where her children's dresses were practically famous in the lower half of the state, and some parts of Florida. She was very well off, and in that respect, she was lucky. She'd had their house built for the two of them shortly after her husband had left. It was never intended to be a large house -- just what they needed. Two bedrooms, side by side, a cozy kitchen perfect for baking treats, a backyard with a garden, and a front porch facing out onto the small dirt road. It was serene and fairy-tale like, Allison recalls, the way they lived for years. Waking up early on Saturdays to make homemade bread, cleaning during the afternoons while the old record player spun *The Chiffons*; their lives were perfect.

When her mother was murdered, the news of the killing rocked the small town. Allison was always spared the gory details – her mother's remains were found in a ditch not far from the church. She'd been strangled to death with a rope or cord of some sort. For all the interrogations and searching the local police, and even teams from Atlanta did, they never found the killer. The town had a brief 15 minutes of fame in the national media, but no more than 15. However, the event changed the small town for years. At church, the pastors addressed it, at the grocery store old women whispered about it in the bread aisle. All the young children checked the locks on their doors twice and their windows thrice, because the older kids would tell stories of the killer roaming through the streets (although, of course, those older kids were reprimanded by their mothers, who also checked the locks). Allison was only 8 years old at the time of the murder, and was often pitied by the women in the town.

She went to live with her Uncle Walt, her father's brother, who lived just up the hill from her mother's house. He was a deacon at the Church, and a fine one at that. Everybody in the town loved him as if he were their own father. He was a round man, with a round face, and round eyes, and a rounded personality. His hands were calloused from his work on the farm as a young

boy, and he was never one to waste his words, but he was an adored man and rightfully so. There wasn't one person in that town who didn't have him to thank for at least something. Allison had always admired him. She'd grown up with him around long before the murder. He was one of the only members of her father's family who tried to remain in her life. He always treated her well, and living with him didn't change that in the least. She was his treasure, practically his own daughter, and for years they lived well in his house on top of the hill. He bought her expensive gifts and sent her to the private school in the next county. She never needed, or even wanted, for anything at all. While Uncle Walt wasn't the wealthiest person in town, he was the wealthiest deacon, and many respected and envied him. In his younger years, he said, he'd been dirt poor, but 'by the grace of God' he'd found his way. Allison never dwelled on the fact that his work as a deacon couldn't possibly have raised him out of poverty, but then again, God works in mysterious ways.

Nine years later, the town was again rocked by the death of Miss Anna Mae. One of the oldest residents of the town, Miss Anna Mae was a member of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and frequently told stories of her parents' childhood during the Civil War. Every young girl in town would go to her house in the springs, wearing their nicest dresses, to have tea with her. She, too, was widely adored in the community, and was especially fond of the church, as was everyone. At the time of her death, she had willed all of her money to the church, and distributed all of her fine jewelry and art to the women and girls of the town. Allison herself had acquired a pearl necklace and a topaz ring. Some of the money went to help others in the community, but most of the large sum was said to have been saved in the bank for the church to use it as they saw fit. Before her death, Miss Anna Mae had been struggling with her memory, and many thought her death was a result of her forgetting to refill her heart medication. It was

later discovered that the jar had been refilled just days before, according to the date printed on the label. But after weeks of interrogation and suspicion, just as with the murder of Allison's mother, it became a cold case, and the matter was reduced to whispers in the bread aisle and a few words every week from the pastor for the next year.

Allison was only 17 at the time of Miss Anna Mae's death, and although she was distraught and fearful, she also had more pressing issues. Soon after she turned 18 she began nursing school, as did most of the young girls of the town. Due to its population of young children and elders, medical assistance was almost always in demand, and every young girl aspired to grow up and become a caretaker or nurse. She spent two years in Atlanta, learning the basics of nursing with her friends from town, coming back for Christmas and Thanksgiving. She continued to live in a fairytale, but quickly returned when she heard news of Uncle Walt's illness. He was having severe breathing problems. She moved back to the house on the hill, back to her hometown that still smelled so much like her mother, and wearing the topaz ring of Miss Anna Mae.

She cared for her uncle every day, rising early on Saturdays to make him homemade bread, and cleaning in the afternoons while the old record player spun The Chiffons - and despite her uncle's illness, things returned to normal. Sometimes Allison would return to her old house at the bottom of the hill without her uncle's knowledge, to tend to the flower beds, or sometimes to tidy up the inside. The house was still cozy and serene; such a house could only make Allison's heart swell with fond memories, even if they were only memories.

One day in the spring, when Allison was digging up the flower beds, she noticed a frayed piece of rope in the soil. Her curiosity got the best of her, and she stuck her fingers into the dirt to pull it out. As she pulled, and pulled, a long piece of rope emerged from deep under the

ground, so deep it was almost difficult to dislodge it from the earth. She stared at it for a moment, and thought it peculiar that this was similar to the rope that had previously hung from the church bell, with the blue tape wrapped around the end of one edge. No, it was definitely the church rope. She remembered the day they put the tape on the rope. She'd complained to her mom that when she had to ring the bell for Sunday service – as it was always the children who got the privilege to do so – it hurt her hands, so they put a small amount of tape on the edge to prevent rope burn. It had disappeared around the same time her mother died, and was replaced with a nice, heavy, velvet rope. Now, the bell was automatic. An uneasy feeling settled in her stomach as she lowered the rope back into the ground and quickly remade the flower beds. She walked into the house, which now seemed a little less cozy and a little less light, and scrubbed her hands vigorously to clear the dirt from under her fingernails. When she thought them clean enough, she quickly exited the house and all but ran back up the hill to her uncle's. She tried to forget the rope, but for the next week it was all she could think of.

The following Friday was laundry day, as all Fridays were, and once again, the topaz ring slipped off of Allison's bony finger while she hung up some of her uncle's shirts in his closet. Miss Anna Mae hadn't really been thin, but then again, maybe it was because Allison had been too uneasy in the past week she could hardly bring herself to eat a crumb unless Uncle Walt was watching. She did not want to concern him, especially with something that was probably just in her head.

The ring had fallen off her finger and slid to the very back of the closet. Allison got on her hands and knees, and crawled to the back corner to retrieve it. Doing her best to see in the dark of the closet, she reached and grabbed at the ring and quickly brought it out into the light. But this wasn't her topaz ring. Oh, no, it was not topaz. The same cut and style, but it was

amethyst; another ring belonging to Miss Anna Mae. She knew, she recognized it. It was Miss Anna Mae's second favorite ring (she was buried with her first favorite, a lovely opal ring with small diamonds on the outside). Allison grabbed a flashlight from her uncle's work desk and returned to the closet, shining the light in the back corner, and to her surprise, she saw a number of rings and necklaces littering the floor, most of which she recognized as belonging to the old woman. She shined the flashlight up and down, and the light caught a necklace dangling from the pocket of one of her uncle's cardigans. She pulled it out of the closet and brought it over to the bed. The right pocket was empty, save the dangling necklace and one earring that were both snagged on the fabric of the clothing. The pocket itself had a hole in the bottom, explaining why the jewelry littered the floor of the closet. She stuck her hand in the left pocket, expecting more rings, but she felt something smooth. Several smooth objects, a whole pocketful. They were like rocks, yes, like small, identically shaped rocks, with similar feeling indentations on one side of them. Allison grabbed a hold of a few in her fingers and pulled her hand out of the pocket and up to where she could see them. They were pills. Heart medication, the same kind of which Miss Anna Mae was deprived of at the time of her death, the same kind of which her Uncle Walt had never needed -- and of course, Allison, as his caretaker, would know. She put the pills, the evidence, back in his pocket and hung the cardigan up in the back where she'd found it. For all the credit Uncle Walt got for being a very great man, he was not a very smart man. No, not at all.