

SANCTUARY

a novel

T.M. BROWN



Sanctuary

Limited Chapters 1-4 Preview Edition.

Copyright © 2017 — T. M. Brown

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED—No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the authors, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

Published by Deeds Publishing in Athens, GA
www.deedspublishing.com

Cover by Mark Babcock

Printed in e United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publications data is available upon request.

ISBN 978-1-944193-84-3

EISBN 978-1-944193-85-0

Books are available in quantity for promotional or premium use. For information, email info@deedspublishing.com.

First Edition, 2017

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

“Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.” — Exodus 25:8, NIV

Chapter One

A PROLONGED INDIAN SUMMER GRIPPED GEORGIA. THOUGH already the first Sunday of November, hot and humid weather more suitable for early September caused sweat to trickle unabated down my neck, dampening the collar of the fresh cotton polo I had just yanked over my head. The moving truck pulled away as I latched and locked the trailer doors. Liddy patiently watched from her passenger window as I walked up the sidewalk and locked the front door of the colonial brick suburban house we had called home for the last seven years.

I jumped into the driver's seat, buckled up and squeezed the hand of my wife of forty years, then reached for the gearshift. "Any regrets?"

Liddy raised her window and turned her gaze straight ahead as a silly smirk appeared. "Nope. Let's roll! We've got a moving truck to meet in Shiloh tomorrow."

I dropped the gearshift into drive, and my foot slid from the brake to the accelerator. Our Expedition jolted forward with the packed trailer in tow. Liddy stared straight ahead for the first few minutes while she caressed the manila envelope stuffed with photos, brochures and paperwork pertaining to the house we contracted to purchase for our retirement. Liddy dozed off soon after we turned south onto US Highway 19, and I settled in for the afternoon drive to our destination an hour south of Albany.

The all-too-familiar gated communities and shopping centers thriving under Atlanta's ever-present shadow faded in my rearview mirror. I snapped a farewell salute as we passed Cornerstone Publishing where I served as chief publishing editor until one week ago. The historic highway narrowed, introducing a scenic panorama of autumn colors as more and more farms, fields, and forests lined the historic route.

Liddy stirred enough to adjust her position and place a small pillow between her head and the window. Looking at her as she fell back to sleep jogged my memory of the first day my eyes fell upon her on the Athens campus forty years ago. My smile over the memory faded when I glanced at the stranger in the rearview mirror. Gray encroached the dirty blonde hair on the temples, and crow's feet pointed to sagging eyelids. After an extended sigh, I reminded myself that I no longer was that spirited young co-ed Liddy first met. A second peek at Liddy returned a grin to my wrinkled face.

When Liddy first suggested I consider early retirement, I turned a deaf ear. Undeterred, Liddy persisted. "Theo Phillips, it's high time you realized that you can afford to do what you've always wanted. I want you to walk away from that job you've grown to resent. Why not invest the time to write your own stories like you've always envisioned?"

Once my hard head embraced the idea, Liddy wasted little time. She arranged the sale of our home, scoured a mountain of listings, made countless phone calls and endured long day trips, while I agreed to fulfill my promise to my boss and work until the end of October. Liddy took great pride when she announced our home had a buyer. The following evening she methodically spread a collection of photos on the kitchen table of a picturesque, historic home located in a South Georgia town aptly named Shiloh. Liddy believed this house would make the perfect retirement home. Not far from our childhood home-towns, the pictures brought back fond memories. I agreed, and a day later we received acceptance of our cash offer for the house. We both felt God had answered our prayers.

On the outskirts of Albany, Liddy stirred and wiped her eyes as the late afternoon sunlight glistened between the tree tops. She cleared her throat, lowered her sunglasses from the top of her head, and surveyed the passing scenery before she asked with a drawn-out sigh, “Where are we?”

I pointed to a well-timed road sign. “Albany’s 30 more miles. Looks like we’ll arrive in Shiloh a little before six.” The news earned a smile as she stared back out the window.

Liddy adjusted herself in her seat and looked over with a curious grin. “What were you thinking about while I was asleep?”

Without turning my focus from the road ahead I said, “How lucky I was to have stolen the heart of the prettiest girl that ever graced the Athens campus.”

Liddy giggled. “That’s convenient because I feel the same about you.”

We soon turned onto the Flint River Highway, the homestretch leg of our journey. The amber glow grew darker as the sun disappeared below the distant treetops.

Liddy bit her lower lip and clenched my hand. “Do you think we did right? I mean...buying this house and leaving Peachtree?”

A chuckle erupted first. “Hun, I’ve absolutely no doubt that the vetting process you orchestrated selecting this house removed any reservations I might have clung onto about my retirement or our decision to pack up and move to Shiloh.”

Her cheeks glowed. “Me neither, but I wanted to be certain you weren’t just trying to appease me. I’m truly looking forward to sinking deep roots and making a slew of new friends.”

My wink and affirming grin brought a smile to Liddy's relieved lower lip. "You're right," she said. "But how well do you think we'll fit in?"

My smiling face bobbed up and down. "Trust me. A town like Shiloh won't allow us to remain anonymous long."

Liddy laughed and agreed that Shiloh would be like the small towns we remembered growing up in, where even strangers passing through town were addressed as "friend" or "neighbor," and names were exchanged during a hearty handshake or hug.

Liddy's attention diverted to weathered barns and sheds with rusted tin roofs along the side of the road. "We must be getting close."

She begged me to stop when her eyes fixed upon an abandoned mansion with discolored columns and dangling shutters that no longer protected the shattered windows. With critters and termites likely the only tenants, I convinced her we should save a close up inspection for another day. Plantation oaks with dangling moss lined the rest of the way into Shiloh, as the Expedition's automatic headlamps flicked on and attacked the growing dark shadows, and distant lights welcomed us into town.

The highway transformed into Main Street, and at Liddy's urging we slowed well below the speed limit and rolled through the town square. She pointed to the drug store and next-door barber among the quaint shops and office fronts. We both joked about the movie theatre with its lit marquee and reminisced about fifty-cent Saturday matinees. Without regret, Shiloh lacked familiar retail chain store names and revealed family-owned shops and businesses all but a memory in most small towns in the South.

The Chamber of Commerce brochure depicted an antebellum era red brick courthouse anchoring the center of Shiloh. Instead, we discovered a newly constructed brick and granite city hall building with

a grand portico that marked a well-lit main entrance. Decorative red brick walkways wound their way through manicured grass and meticulous gardens. As we crept along, Liddy pointed to a life-like bronze statue of a young man illuminated by spotlights near a corner of the Town Square.

“I wonder who he was?” Liddy asked. “He looks so young. There’s nothing in the literature about it.”

I only shrugged as I searched for the street that led to our house and navigated our way to our corner property. The word SOLD stood out on the Arians Real Estate sign in the front yard. Liddy’s eagerness left little doubt about her desire to show me more of the house, but darkness, the growl of our stomachs, and fatigue suggested otherwise. A couple of blocks further down the quiet neighborhood street, Liddy exchanged smiles with two red-haired girls playing out front of one of the beautiful mansions among a neighborhood of elegant but dated homes.

At the southern end of town, we drove past Shiloh’s school complex, which brought back memories of our own school days. The buildings and grounds appeared to have received recent renovations rather than merely a fresh coat of paint. The football stadium and athletic fields behind the school seemed larger than one would expect for a town the size of Shiloh.

We turned back onto Main Street, and a yellow and blue neon sign directed us to the Shiloh Motel. “Thank goodness! I’m sure goin’ to be glad to crawl out from under this steering wheel. Besides, I’m famished.”

Liddy lowered her window. “Hey, check it out. Bubba’s BBQ. Smells good too. Let’s hurry up and get checked in.”

When we entered the motel office, a silver-haired woman dressed in a blue and white flowered frock eyed us as she slurped down the last of her drink. She pulled off her makeshift paper towel bib, wiped her

cheeks, and wriggled out of her armchair. A platter next to her chair held remnants of her dinner, a couple of ketchup laden fries alongside a neat stack of sucked-clean rib bones. With a flick of her remote, she muted Aunt Bea from *The Andy Griffith Show* and adjusted her dress as she approached. Her contagious smile made us smile in return, but the shrill of her greeting we'd never forget.

“Welcome folks to Shiloh. Y'all mus' be Mista an' Missus Phillips. We've been expectin' y'all.”

Liddy froze and managed only a nod. I continued up to the counter and fought back an escalating chuckle. Instead, I feigned a cough before I greeted our cordial hostess with a suitable grin.

“I'm Barb, Barb Patterson. Me and my husband Bubba are the proud owners of the best motel and barbecue restaurant in Shiloh.” Her cheeks flushed as she muffled a cackle with her hand. “Oh, me. Oh, my. Truth be told, we own the only motel and barbecue restaurant in town.” A brief outburst of self-indulgent belly laughter followed.

My polite smile and a chuckle indulged her humor. “Well Barb, thanks for such a pleasant greeting. We're glad to be here after our long drive. This is my wife, Liddy.” I reached back and guided Liddy to my side. “I believe the two of you spoke this morning. I'm Theo, Theo Phillips.”

“Y'all mus' be plum tuckered out.” Her fingers flittered in the direction of my hand reaching for my wallet. “Just keep your wallet in your pocket for now.” She slid a registration form and pen in front of me. “Just sign right here. We've got our best room reserved for you. We'll deal with the formalities in the morning.”

I pointed to our name and new address already filled in as I slid the signed form back to her. “Thanks, but how'd you know...?”

Barb muffled another high-pitched snicker. “Honey, Mista Nick is not just the realtor in town but also a dear friend and good customer. He stopped by for lunch and told us all about you and how you’re buying Miss Betty Priestly’s old home.” She stared at Liddy’s amazed look. “Besides, everyone in Shiloh knows the Priestly house. Y’all sure are getting a mighty special home.” She pulled the form off the counter. “Will you need one or two keys.”

I lifted up one finger and promptly received a brass key with the number 10 stamped on it.

Liddy’s composure returned, and she reached out to greet our capricious but jovial hostess. Barb took Liddy’s hand and looked at Liddy. “Honey, if you need anything, just dial the desk. It’s a real pleasure to be the first to welcome y’all to Shiloh.”

Liddy grinned. “Thank you, Miss Barb. We’re glad to be here too.” After Barb released Liddy’s hand, Liddy asked, “How late is the restaurant open?”

“Just hold one second.” Barb lifted the receiver of the mustard yellow rotary phone on her desk, dialed and then tapped her deep red fingernails on the counter. “Cecil? The Phillips just arrived, and they’re mighty hungry. Will you take special care of ‘em? Maybe seat ‘em at one of the winda’ tables? ... Thanks, Ceec. You’re a doll.” Barb hung up and looked at Liddy. “Miss Liddy, y’all are all set. Hope y’all are hungry. Bubba’s ribs are ‘specially good tonight.”

Liddy smiled and glanced in the direction of Barb’s empty platter. “Sounds great. I think we’ll give those ribs a try. We haven’t eaten since we left Peachtree.”

As soon as we entered Bubba’s BBQ Restaurant, a tall, silver-haired African-American gentleman approached us with a broad toothy grin. His white bib apron wrapped easily around his slim frame allowing

him to tie it in the front and a damp towel draped over his shoulder provided clear evidence of his busy day.

“Y’all mus’ be the Phillips. Welcome to Bubba’s. My name’s Cecil, and that’s Bubba over there.”

Cecil then turned his head and yelled loud enough to be heard across the kitchen. “Bob, say hello to the newest folks in town, the couple Mista’ Nick spoke about this afta’noon.”

Bubba, a rotund man with graying dark hair raised his free hand and gave a sweaty smile and promptly returned to tending the carousel of meat slowly rotating over the smoke pit.

The table Cecil directed us to offered a clear view of Main Street. Liddy and I took the menus but handed them right back without opening them.

“Barb recommended Bubba’s ribs, so how about two platters with some sweet tea.”

Cecil affirmed our choice with an appreciative nod before he scooted towards the kitchen and yelled, “Two more ribs.”

Liddy and I soon admitted we were ready to bust by the time we shoved our near empty plates aside. When Cecil inquired about dessert, Liddy raised her hands and shook her head.

After we paid for the meal and expressed our appreciation to Cecil and Bubba, we decided to stretch our legs and venture into the center of town. On the town square, Liddy found a bench next to the walkway and admired the unique architecture of Shiloh Baptist Church across the street. My interest fell upon the bronze statue we saw earlier.

Spotlights highlighted the young man’s chiseled face. He wore a collared polo shirt with a “SHS” monogram above a fleur-de-lis over his heart. A coach’s whistle hung from his neck, and a Bible rested in one

hand while the other pointed upward. The life-like detail monopolized my attention until my eyes drifted to the plaque at the base:

JESSIE MASTERSON, BELOVED COACH AND TEACHER,
SACRIFICED HIS LIFE SAVING THE LIVES OF TWO OTHERS
THE NIGHT THE ORIGINAL COURTHOUSE BURNED DOWN,
DECEMBER 8, 2010.

I stood with my arms crossed while my instincts conjured the possible story behind those two dozen words. Liddy walked up and clutched my elbow disrupting my thoughts. I looked into her weary eyes and realized it was time we headed back to the motel.

Before we left the town square hand-in-hand, I peered over my shoulder at Jessie Masterson and then glanced at Liddy. “I was thinking...what a tragedy. I just might be curious enough to learn more about that young man’s story.”

Chapter Two

THE JANGLE OF DANGLING SAFETY CHAINS AND RATTLE OF trailers awoke me our first morning in Shiloh. I squinted at the illuminated 4:35 on the bedside clock before lowering my head back onto the pillow but struggled to block out the early-morning noises common to rural South Georgia. I allowed my mind to wander and gradually the unfamiliar sounds dissipated as visions of family, autumn foliage, and pumpkins ready for harvest captivated my mind's eye.

South Carolina led Georgia by six points when the whistle blew to mark the end of the first half. Tommy, our youngest, and Ted, Junior to the family, sat in the front seats of my Expedition with the doors swung open as the game blared on the radio. From my seat on our ice chest, I enjoyed Tommy and Junior's expert commentary about why our beloved Dawgs trailed the Gamecocks.

I laughed along with my sons as we discussed their slanted opinions until Liddy shouted, "Lunch is ready! Guys, go round up the kids."

Kari and Stacey, our daughters-in-law, offered support for their husbands' urgent missions.

"You heard your mom," Kari yelled.

Stacey added, “And for heaven’s sake, don’t you and the kids forget to wash up.”

Liddy stood under the pavilion with hands on her hips and a proud smile as her family scurried about on their assigned missions.

I maintained a safe distance. “Don’t you girls fret none, I’ll make sure they all get cleaned up for supper.” Liddy smirked as I added, “By the way Hun, good timing. Halftime just started, but I’m sorry to report our Dawgs went into the locker room dragging their tails between their legs.”

“Theo Phillips, Coach Richt will take care of our Dawgs. You mark my words. Now, skedaddle and help the boys round up the kids.”

Tommy flushed his kids from the woods at the near end of the lake. Buzz, a three-year-old with reckless abandon busted out first, stopped, cupped his hands over his mouth and yelled, “I won! I won!”

Teddy, Buzz’s ten-year-old brother and future professor exited the woods next and stared back over his shoulder and huffed, “Come on slow poke.”

Sissy, our eight-year-old granddaughter, Poppy’s princess, sulked as she cleared the woods. She stomped and fussed as she wiped her cheeks and red eyes, and then ran headlong into my waiting arms and tattled on her brothers. I lifted her into my arms, grabbed my handkerchief and dabbed her damp cheeks. She clung tight while orchestrating a barrage of sniffles and whimpers.

“You didn’t lose,” I told her. “Look, your daddy’s last.”

She raised her head off my shoulder and pulled her hair from her face as she exchanged sobs for titters while she pointed to her father brushing himself off at the foot of the trail.

Laughter announced the arrival of Junior with three-year-old Conrad on his shoulders as they chased Eddie, our other ten-year-old

grandson, affectionately nicknamed Bubba. Sissy tee-heed as Bubba ribbed his dad and little brother about their feeble attempts to corral him. Junior lowered Conrad from his shoulders, and tried to catch his breath.

Bubba ran up. “ You okay dad?”

Slumped over with his hands on his knees, Junior managed a thumbs-up between gasps. “I’m fine...just can’t keep up with you while carrying Conrad anymore.”

I chuckled and said to Junior, “Sounds like old age to me, son.”

Junior rolled his eyes before we both broke out laughing and chased the kids toward the pavilion. Liddy surveyed each of us before she gave her approval and we all found our places around the end-to-end picnic tables.

Liddy’s fried chicken never disappointed, and the boys and I risked her wrath grabbing a taste before the other side dishes were passed.

We were about to pray when Buzz and Conrad clamored with hands raised high. “Can we say the blessin’? Pleez, pleez, pleez!”

I walked to their end of the table, grabbed their hands, and the three of us said our special family prayer. “God ’s great, God ’s good, and now we thank him for our food. By his hands we are fed, thank you Lord for daily bread. Ah-man!”

At the end of dinner, Liddy tapped the side of her glass, which caused even Buzz and Conrad to stop and stare. Liddy then pointed to the head of the table and announced, “Poppy’s got something to share.”

I swallowed one more gulp of tea and then forced a cough in a feeble attempt to swallow the growing lump in my throat. “It’s no big secret that Grammy and Poppy have been searching for a place in the country to retire.” Clearing my throat once again, I glanced at my two

sons. *“Well, we’ve found our retirement home and we’ll be moving next month.”*

Teddy, the oldest grandson, raised his hand. I grinned at his welcomed interruption.

Teddy blurted, “Poppy, excuse me, but where exactly is your new house?” Stacey placed her hands over her mouth at Teddy’s question, but I raised my hand as I prepared to answer his question.

I looked upward for divine intervention as all eyes focused on me. “Good question, Teddy.” I pointed to the far end of the lake, and said, “Just follow the water.” Teddy scrunched his face. “Do you see where the creek begins at the far end of the lake?” Everyone turned their heads while Sissy and the three-year-olds stood up on their seats.

“I see it!” Sissy shouted.

“It flows into the Flint River just south from here and then flows through Albany, right by the small town of Shiloh.”

Teddy’s eyes lit up. “That means we can take our boat to your new house?”

Liddy jumped in. “Of course, a boat trip would be fun, but it’d be much easier and faster if your mom and dad drove you there.”

“And Grammy and I expect all of you to still share Christmas with us, except in Shiloh this year.”

Tommy nodded as Junior said, “We’ll see you and mom just like always. A few miles won’t change our family’s tradition.”

Squealing brakes and the growing rumble of trucks woke me again. This time the clock read 5:30. Liddy remained fast asleep. I pulled on my pants and shirt and then stepped out of our motel room.

The smell of fresh coffee lured me toward the motel lobby where I met a full-figured, affable African-American woman with an inviting smile. Her name tag introduced her as Cora. She wore a light gray uniform with a broad lace lapel and a starched white apron. Her short, black hair tucked beneath a hair net accented the fullness of her cheeks and bright red lips that framed her wide white smile.

“Good morn’ sir. I ‘magine you’d be Mista’ Phillips.”

I generated a pre-coffee grin before a stifled yawn brought a more somber look. “Good morning...at least I expect it to be shortly.” I poured some coffee into and then enjoyed the warmth of the cup between my hands.

Cora continued to wipe off the table where Barb Patterson enjoyed her dinner a few hours earlier, and then paused, looked out the window, and said, “That morning sky tells me it’s goin’ to be a mighty fine day Mista’ Phillips.” Her ever-widening smile put an exclamation on her confident prediction.

After a quick sip, I nodded before I asked, “By the way, how’d you know my name?”

“Well sir, my husband told me about you and your wife. Be-sides, we didn’ have too many folks last night ...” Cora blushed and her smile disappeared. “Mercy sakes, pleaz’ forgive me Mista’ Phillips if I’ve said anything wrong.”

“Oh, no Cora. You’re fine. I was just curious.” I took another short sip and then asked, “So, would Cecil be your husband?”

Her smile returned. “Why, yes sir.”

“My wife and I enjoyed meeting him. He took real good care of us.”

“If you and the missus are hungry later, Cecil’s famous around these parts for his breakfast fixin’s. Ever had ol’ fashioned red-eyed gravy with your grits and biscuits?”

“Sounds tempting. It’s been quite a long time since I can say I had.”

“Well, you won’t be disappointed, Mista’ Phillips,” Cora blurted and then reached for a framed photo on Barb’s desk. She grabbed her dust rag, wiped it, then showed it to me. “This here’s Cecil and Bubba when they cut the ribbon to open the restaurant. They’s been partners and best friends since their Navy days.”

“Sounds fascinating.” My eyes darted toward the door. “If you’ll excuse me I’ve some reading to do, but thanks for the coffee and pleasant conversation, Miss Cora.”

Cora smiled and then returned to her cleaning. As I closed the door behind me, I heard her humming “When the Saints Go Marching In.”

Back at the room, Liddy remained curled up under the blankets. I dug in my bag for my devotional journal and closed the door behind me. I settled into one of the chairs in front of our room, read a bit, and wrote about my dream and the sights and sounds of my first sunrise in Shiloh.

I heard a tapping at the window. I craned my neck to see Liddy’s perky smile looking out. I smiled back and held up one finger, before she disappeared behind the drawn drapes.

A few minutes later Liddy stood completely dressed, fussing to herself in the mirror while I got dressed. Liddy boasted how peace-fully she slept as she drew open the drapes and looked out the window. “Theo, Shiloh sure shines in the morning light.” Then she squealed. “Hurry up. You gotta see this. There’s a parade of pickup trucks on Main Street.”

I arrived by her side with an irresistible sly grin. Liddy and I joked back and forth with each passing sight and sound. We both agreed that Shiloh reminded us of our childhood hometowns.

Small and large trucks, more old than new, many with trailers in tow, rolled past, weighed down with all kinds of farm equipment and supplies.

Liddy grabbed my arm and pointed. “Theo, check out that shiny black pickup truck. The one with all the chrome. It doesn’t look like it’s seen a lick of work.”

With little effort, I spotted the gaudiest four-door dually pickup I’d ever set my eyes upon. Its chrome and metallic black exterior sparkled in the morning sunlight, while the chrome brush guard on the front bumper gave the truck a pretentious smile.

I said flippantly, “I wonder if the owner of that truck actually lives here. If he does, he sure ain’t a farmer.”

“Yep, I agree. But did you catch the license plate?”

“Yeah, sure did. SHILOH 1.”

Liddy laughed nearly hard enough to disguise her cynical barb. “Be nice. I think it’s actually pretty cute. Be honest now. Wouldn’t you like that fancy rig in our driveway?”

“Sorry ol’ girl. I’m not looking for that kind of attention. Be-sides, I like our paid-for, bug-riddled, dusty, reliable SUV.” I proudly stared at our Expedition with the rental trailer hitched behind it.

“If you want breakfast, let’s go buster. We’ve got a 9:30 walk-through at the house.”

“Yes, boss.” I grimaced lugging our bags through the doorway. “Go on ahead. I’ll meet you by the office.”

Barb Patterson remained seated in her chair when we entered the lobby. “You caught me again,” she confessed as she laid aside her half-eaten glazed doughnut, grabbed the napkin from her lap, wiped her face and her hands as she stood. “Aah, that’s better. Good Morning. Did y’all enjoy the room?”

“Everything was awesome. We both enjoyed a good night’s sleep.” I handed Barb my credit card and room key. “By the way, would there be any problems if we decided that we needed a room for one more night?”

Barb paused and smiled. “Knowing Nick, everything will go jus’ fine today. But if y’all need a room tonight, we’ll have one for you.”

Cora greeted us in the restaurant and poured hot coffee just before she pointed to the blackboard menu that revealed the breakfast choices. Liddy inspected her choices as Cora said, “Mista’ Phillips I reckon this is your wife.”

Liddy looked up at Cora and then over to me. “I’m sorry,”

I said. “Honey, this is Cora, Cecil’s wife. We met this morning when I went looking for a cup of coffee.”

Liddy turned and extended her hand. “Nice to meet you, Miss Cora.”

Cora placed the coffee pot down on the table, wiped her hand on her apron and shook Liddy’s hand. “Pleasure’s mine Missus Phillips.”

Liddy smiled. “Please, call me Liddy.”

“Yes ma’am, that’s a pretty name. Thank you. Do you know what you’d like this morn’ Missus Liddy?”

I spoke up while Liddy’s eyes returned to the blackboard. “Well, I know what I want.”

“Okay Mista’ Phillips, what’s it gonna be for you this morn’?”

“I’ll try Cecil’s country breakfast special. Can I have my eggs sunny-side up?”

“Umm, umm, Mista’ Phillips, one country breakfast it is. Any juice?”

“No ma’am, just coffee will suit me just fine.”

Liddy hesitated as she turned and looked at Cora. “I guess...Oh heavens...I’ll try the cheese grits with two plain biscuits, and can I have some honey with that? And oh yes, a glass of orange juice too.”

Cora never wrote anything down. She just grinned and nodded and then walked away as she cried out to Cecil. “One red-eye special sunny-up and a cheezy with biscuits.”

Cecil smiled and waved his spatula. “Good mornin’ folks.”

A few minutes passed before Cora returned. “How’s about some mo’ coffee. Y’all’s orders will be up shortly.”

Before Liddy and I engaged in more conversation, Cora reappeared with our breakfast.

“If y’all need anything else, just ask.”

Cora topped off our coffee mugs before handing Liddy a glass jar of honey.

Shortly after I crumpled my napkin and tucked it beside my empty plate, Cora scooped up our dishes and slid our ticket face down in front of me. I flipped it over and gave Cora a puzzled look as I showed Liddy the smiley face.

Cora chuckled. “Y’all just promise to come back as soon as y’all get settled. Welcome to Shiloh.”

Chapter Three

NICK ARIANS SUGGESTED HIS BROTHER, JOE ARIANS, HANDLE the closing after disclosing that Joe also happened to be the trustee of Betty Priestly estate. We expected a smooth transaction with only a few legal documents needing our signature before we exchanged our cashier's check for the keys to our new home. But first, we arranged to meet Nick's assistant, Miss Jeannie Simmons, at the house for the final walk-through and approval of the renovations we requested.

Liddy dialed Jeannie's cell phone as we pulled away from the Shiloh Motel. Her ear-to-ear smile drew a raised eyebrow from me as she ended the call. "Step on it. Jeannie's at the house, waiting on us."

Our drive covered only a handful of blocks, but the anticipation made that trip across town feel farther than the couple of minutes it actually took. Liddy's eyes widened when we turned on Main Street at the north end of Town Square onto Broad Street.

Just beyond the shadows of the stores and office buildings surrounding Town Square, our new neighborhood displayed a patchwork of quaint homes with manicured lawns. Most of the homes appeared fairly modest in size and offered little doubt that more than one generation raised their families in them. Mature magnolias, moss-laden stately oaks, as well as picturesque pecan trees stood watch over the

homes. The patched sidewalks and curbs reflected decades of children on bikes, mothers pushing baby carriages and couples taking a stroll. Inconspicuous narrow alleys ran behind each row of homes. Wrought iron or painted picket fencing with ornate stone or brick walkways welcomed guests to the front porches.

Liddy said as we slowly drove past Battery toward Calvary, “This is so beautiful. I can’t wait to see all these azaleas and crepe myrtles in full bloom.”

As I turned onto Calvary Street, Liddy unbuckled her seatbelt before I pulled into our driveway. A yellow VW Beetle was parked along the front curb and an attractive younger woman with long dark hair leaned on the rail of the front porch. Her wave and welcoming smile prompted Liddy to exit our vehicle before I shifted into park and turned off the engine.

“Mister and Missus Phillips, good morning. I imagine y’all are a bit excited?” Jeannie cradled a black leather portfolio against her chest.

Liddy said, “Of course we’re excited. Glad to see you again Jeannie. This is my husband Theo.”

Liddy led the way as I walked a bit faster to keep up. She pointed to a new sign displayed in the front yard: Welcome to Shiloh Theo & Liddy Phillips.

At the top of the porch steps, Liddy said to Jeannie, “We want you to know that both of us are already falling in love with this town and I’m anxious to check out our new house, especially the upstairs renovations.”

Jeannie grinned as she stepped aside to reveal a wicker basket beside the front door. Liddy knelt down to inspect the contents. I peeked over Liddy’s shoulder and watched her behave like a little kid on her birthday.

“Look Theo, flour, sugar, salt, coffee, and even a sack of your favorite yellow grits.”

Jeannie giggled. “Bet y’all have never received a welcome gift like this before.”

Liddy looked up at Jeannie. “It’s certainly unique.”

Jeannie bent down beside Liddy and said, “It’s a ‘pounding gift’ from the Shiloh Cooperative Church Fellowship.”

“A what-gift?” I said looking over the items in the basket.

Jeannie responded, “The churches in town work together stock-ing a central pantry that helps families in need, and fulfill the long-held tradition of providing a ‘pounding gift’ to new homeowners in Shiloh.” She chuckled as she pointed to the various sacks. “You know...a pound of this and that, but since we don’t get too many new residents in Shiloh, they kinda go overboard.”

Liddy giggled as she poked through the basket and pulled out gift certificates from local merchants, two free movie passes and a laminated map and directory of city and county services. She stood and handed the basket to me as Jeannie smiled and tugged on the handle of the glass storm door. I held it open as she pulled a ring of keys from her pocket.

“Would you like to do the honors?” Jeannie then handed over the keys, and Liddy led us across the threshold of our new home.

Liddy had painted a vivid portrayal of the charm of the house, but we both anticipated layers of dust requiring hours of cleaning before we could move in. However, to our surprise, the walk-through revealed immaculate wood floors, clean countertops, and dust-free windowsills and wood trim. We stood with our mouths open as Jeannie stood off to the side with a sheepish grin.

I asked, “Who did all of this?”

Jeannie's dimpled cheeks reddened. "My family thought it was the least we could do."

"Your family did this? Why would y'all do this for us?" Liddy inquired.

"Well, to make a long story short, after my dad and brothers finished all the work upstairs, there was so much dust and dirt. Well, the whole family decided to pitch in and make sure you'd be pleased with your new home."

I looked towards the stairs and asked, "Can we go check it out?"

"Of course." Jeannie chuckled.

Liddy brushed me aside and bounded up the stairs with Jeannie in tow. Liddy inspected each room and then smiled at Jeannie. "Your father and brothers did all this? Please let them know we'd like to personally thank them. This is better than we dreamed."

Further inspection downstairs revealed a welcome card on the kitchen counter with a handwritten inscription. Liddy read it, "Please stop by today or tomorrow before five o'clock. We'd like to welcome you to Shiloh and answer any questions you may have. Hal Archer, Shiloh Utilities Office."

Jeannie said, "I'm glad y'all are pleased. Unless you've got any other questions, I guess we can head on over to the office."

Liddy and I glanced at each other. Liddy said, "We're ready, let's go."

We followed Jeannie back to Town Square and parked across the street from the Arians Building. Jeannie pointed toward the stairwell entrance next to the Arians Real Estate and Property Management office.

“Joe and Nick are waitin’ for y’all upstairs.”

At the top of the stairs we walked down a short hallway and opened the frosted glass door with painted letters: Joseph P. Arians, Attorney at Law.

“Good morning. You must be Mister and Missus Phillips. Please come in and have a seat.” The pleasant woman behind the desk pointed across the office toward a waiting area that rivaled any elegant living-room with its plush brown leather sofa, antique coffee table, matching end tables, and two high back lounge chairs arranged upon an expensive Persian rug. A narrow serving table against the far wall held a coffeemaker and a small refrigerator.

“Mister Arians will be ready for you in just a moment. Would you like a cup of coffee?”

Liddy shook her head, but I smiled and accepted the offer of hospitality. Mr. Arians’ assistant got up from her desk and walked toward the coffee pot.

“By the way, my name’s Susanna Simmons. I believe y’all met my daughter already.”

Liddy looked at Susanna with a curious grin. “Jeannie’s your daughter?”

Susanna looked at Liddy and offered a mother’s smile.

“Then, according to Jeannie, I guess you lent a hand cleaning the house?”

Susanna handed me my cup and said to Liddy, “Yes. My whole family pitched in.”

“Well for goodness sakes, I want to thank you and your whole family. The house looks magnificent. How can we ever thank you enough?”

Susanna revealed the same reddened dimples as her daughter. “It was our pleasure. We just wanted to do our part to help you feel welcome here in Shiloh.” She returned to her desk and stacked some folders into a neat pile.

Just then, a man wearing a gray three-piece suit appeared in the doorway to the private office beyond the waiting area. He said, “Hey folks, sorry to keep you waiting. I’m Joe Arians.” He escorted us to the conference table in his private office. “I believe you already know my younger brother, Nick.”

Nick rose from his seat to greet us. “Missus Phillips, it’s a pleasure to meet you again.” He then reached toward me and smiled as he said, “Mister Phillips, glad to finally meet you.”

As we found our seats, Susanna entered with a folder and sat next to Joe. “Y’all ready to get this done?” Joe said as he opened the folder.

The closing took no longer than the time needed to sign a half dozen prepared legal documents. During the process, Joe and Susanna focused on the business at hand with nothing but cordial smiles between directives. I sensed an air of solemnity and meticulous care I had never experienced before at a closing.

With all the necessary papers signed, Liddy exchanged our check for a ring of keys along with an envelope containing our copy of the documents. With formalities completed, Joe and Nick relaxed their professional demeanor. We stood, shook hands, and both men accepted hugs offered by Liddy.

After echoed offers of assistance to help us settle into our new home, Nick asked, “I know y’all just arrived, but do you have plans to join a church once you settle in?”

Although the question caught me off guard, I welcomed his genuine interest. “Absolutely. We’re looking forward to finding a church home for sure.”

“I’d like to invite you and Liddy to be our guests at Shiloh Baptist Church. It’s that big, red brick church on the corner.” Nick pointed out the window diagonally across the street to the largest of the three churches in the center of town.

I stared at the church and then smiled. “Well, since we’re not Presbyterian or Methodist, sounds good to us. What time are services?”

Nick said, “Services begin at eleven o’clock sharp. Doctor Wright is pretty punctual at the beginning of each service and generally so at the end too.” We exchanged a chuckle over the pastor’s perceived punctuality.

Joe said, “And, no pressure, but if you’re free, stop by Wednesday night at seven o’clock. It’ll be a good opportunity to meet the pastor and get introduced to a few others in our church.”

Liddy stopped at Susanna’s desk on our way out and shook her hand before following me down the stairs. We walked across the street to our vehicle, looked back up at Joe’s office and saw Joe and Nick talking. They waved as if we were already good friends.

I started to unpack the trailer while Liddy went inside to call the moving company driver. As I walked through the front door balancing two boxes, Liddy looked in my direction with two raised fingers and pointed to her watch while she continued to give the driver final directions.

With the trailer emptied in short order and the moving truck still a couple of hours away, Liddy suggested we visit the city utility office before we get some lunch. During our walk into town, we cheerfully returned greetings from a few of the neighbors who waved, but resisted stopping and chatting since there would be plenty of future opportunities to get acquainted.

Chapter Four

WE WALKED INTO THE SIDE ENTRANCE OF SHILOH'S CITY HALL. The aroma of fresh paint and absence of scuff marks on the walls or polished granite floors revealed the building's newness. With each step, the soles of our shoes squeaked as we walked down the hallway to the Utilities Office.

"Good morning, can I help you?" the clerk behind the counter asked.

"My name's Theo Phillips, and this is my wife Liddy. We're the new residents at 10 Calvary Street..."

Before I could finish, she said, "Oh, oh, hold on a moment." She pushed her chair back and disappeared into the corner office.

A moment later, a pleasant young man with almost shoulder length brown hair and dark brown eyes returned with the clerk two steps behind.

"Mister and Missus Phillips, I'm Hal Archer, Shiloh's Utilities Department Director. I wanted to personally greet you and offer any assistance to make your move to Shiloh a pleasant experience."

"Thank you, Mister Archer. The hospitality in Shiloh has been overwhelming already."

"Please call me Hal. Mister Archer's my father, and he happens to be the mayor." Hal's eyes and voice dropped as if searching for his next thought. He then fumbled with a green customer form and laid it on the counter, took the pen clipped between the two top buttons of his blue polo shirt and handed it to me, and pointed to where I needed to sign.

“If you’ll put your John Hancock right here, that’ll be all we need. This authorizes us to officially transfer the service to your name as of today’s date.”

“That’s easy enough,” I said as I scribbled my signature.

Liddy asked, “When should we expect the bill each month?”

“Bills go out the fifth of each month. You can either mail or drop off your payment. If you ever have any questions, please feel free to call me.” He reached out to shake my hand while he dug in his pocket for the business card he gave to Liddy.

Lunch became the next order of business. Bubba’s offered a familiar short walk, but on the other side of Main Street we noted a restaurant next door to Nick’s office.

By the time we reached the corner, the line of customers had grown to the doorway. Liddy pointed to the sign overhead, “The Butcher Shoppe,” and then peeked inside.

“Look at that menu,” she said gawking at the vast menu displayed on the wall behind the counter.

A dozen eager customers waited ahead of us. I looked around and saw hardly a vacant seat inside and folks occupied the two tables along the sidewalk already. Little doubt this was a popular lunch spot in Shiloh.

Liddy squeezed my hand as she stood on her tiptoes and whispered in my ear. “Hun, this reminds me of that sandwich shop in Athens. Do you remember the name of that place?”

I squeezed my eyes tight and then leaned closer to Liddy and whispered, “Of course, Dawg Bonz.” With nostalgia I took note of the uncanny similarities to our former hangout. Then I read the sign over the French doors to our immediate right, “Fresh Meats and Cheese.”

I whispered to Liddy and pointed. “Check out their retail deli and butcher shop.”

Liddy smiled and said, “We’ll check it out later.”

My attention had returned to the menu as the line inched forward when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Do you mind if we join you?” Joe said with a smile, standing with his brother Nick.

I nudged Liddy. “Mind if Joe and Nick join us for lunch?”

Liddy peeked over her shoulder and her face lit up. “Hey Joe. Hey Nick. What a wonderful surprise. Maybe one of you can help us pick something out for lunch.”

While Nick offered a couple of suggestions, Joe stepped away from the line and shouted, “Hey everyone. Can I have your attention? Sorry to interrupt, but I’d like to introduce Theo and Liddy Phillips. They’re Shiloh’s newest residents.”

Curious, smiling faces contrasted with our stunned expressions. To make matters worse, the gentleman busy taking orders at the counter yelled, “Hey Joe. Please, bring Mistor and Missis Phillips up here.”

The customers about to order stepped back and made room for us. The man behind the counter clapped his hands and said, “Bravo, bravo. Thank you very much. These are our very special guests today.”

Liddy dug her fingernails into my bicep as we stood at the counter, embarrassed.

When the brief round of applause ended, our dark-haired host raised a generous smile beneath his bushy mustache, reached over the counter and grasped my hand. His strong accent required my full concentration. “My name is Silas Thrope. Welcome Mistor Theo to my restaurant. Please, whatever you and your wife want today is on the house.”

“Thank you Mister Thrope. That is most gracious. Since this is our first time here, what would you suggest?”

“Don’t you worry. I fix something special for both of you.” Silas released his firm grip on my hand and turned toward the other end of the counter. “Bernie. Alex. Please come here. I wanna you meet Theo and Liddy Phillips.”

A young man sharing Silas' dark Mediterranean features sans the mustache appeared wearing a red cloth apron over a long-sleeved flannel shirt with sleeves rolled up and blue jeans.

Silas puffed out his chest as he gestured to the young man. "Please, Miss Liddy, this is my son, Alex. He'll take good care of you. He's a good boy."

Alex's polite but wrinkled smile appeared to share our awkward embarrassment. Liddy said with a pleasant smile. "Nice to meet you Alex."

Alex shyly replied, "Yes ma'am, thank you."

Silas' wife wiped her hands and then greeted us. Her dark hair, olive complexion and dark eyes matched her husband's appearance. "Missis Phillips, my name is Bernie. Kaloos Oreesa-tay."

Liddy glanced at me, but I returned a likewise puzzled look. "Kaloos Oreesa-tay means welcome in Greek," Bernie said with a broad white smile.

Liddy's eyes lit up. "Oh. Thank you."

I turned to Silas. "How'd you and your family land in Shiloh, Georgia?"

Silas laughed as he began to count on his fingers. "Umm, twenty years ago when Alex was still but a baby, I told a business friend I wanted to find my own place and move out of Atlanta. He told me about this butcher shop. So, here we are."

Bernie barked at Silas. "Enough about us. Our friends are hungry." Her hands-on-hips bluster made Liddy smile. Bernie wagged her finger. "Back to work old man. You too Alex."

Moments later, Alex carried Liddy's tray and led the four of us to a table near the front window. We savored the first bites of Silas' house special, a seasoned lamb, feta cheese and grilled onions gyro with seasoned fries. As the pace of our eating slowed, and our small talk grew, Liddy asked Joe and Nick about their families.

Nick said, "Momma and me share our family's original home not far from your house. Thankfully, she spends most of her time at our family's Saint Simon Island summer home. Dad passed away eight years

ago, and shortly after that my wife was killed in an auto accident. I reckon Momma and I have sorta been taking care of one another ever since.”

Liddy responded. “I’m truly sorry about your wife. Do you have any children?”

“No, but I’ve got precocious twin nieces.” Nick peered toward Joe’s crooked smile.

“What about you Joe?” I asked.

Joe smirked at Nick. “Well, let’s see here. I cut the umbilical cord from Momma twelve years ago after I got married to Melissa.” Nick returned a childlike corny look as Joe continued. “My wife Melissa, Missy to most folks around here, and I have two daughters, Lizzie and Lucy, spirited, red-headed eight-year-olds. Our home’s across from Nick and Momma. I hope you can meet Missy and the girls soon, and of course, Momma when she gets back in town.”

Nick then asked about our family, and we shared about our two sons and the grandchildren and how they planned to visit for Christmas. While Liddy discussed her interest in Shiloh, I stared out the window and became fixated upon the bronze statue across the street.

After a few more minutes of small talk, I blurted, “Excuse me, Nick, Joe, but what can you tell me about that statue across the street?”

The small talk came to an abrupt halt. Nick and Joe glanced at each other, as their playful smiles disappeared. Nick spoke first in a subdued tone.

“You mean Jessie Masterson. He was a dear friend and it’s safe to say about everyone who knew him loved him. Though he’s gone, he’ll always remain a hero in the hearts of most everyone in Shiloh.”

Liddy asked, “What happened?”

Nick looked out the window toward City Hall. “Well, until three years ago, you’d be staring at the original Adams County Courthouse, which served as a landmark in town since before the Civil War. But during the Depression the powers-that-be transferred the county seat to Alexandria. To appease the people of Shiloh, the old courthouse underwent renovation and became Shiloh’s city hall.”

Liddy's focus remained on Nick. "So it burned down?"

"Yea. That elegant old lady wore her nostalgic brick and stone exterior well, but the renovations had been superficial. The night of the fire, Jessie and a group of students met in the basement as usual, and from what we know based on the accounts of that night, after the building caught on fire, Jessie mustered the students to safety before he ran back into the burning building to save two young men trapped upstairs." Nick paused and took a deep breath.

I leaned forward. "Sounds like a tragic accident."

Nick's solemn eyes connected with mine. "The fire department never officially declared the cause of the fire. They reported it as an accident, cause unknown. However, questions have lingered ever since."

"Like what for instance?" I asked.

"First, what happened on the inside just before the ceiling collapsed? The fire had been so intense that night that only Jessie's gold necklace was miraculously found beneath some rubble and smoldering timbers near the front entrance."

"I sense there's still more to the story." I said as I looked at Nick's and Joe's sullen expressions.

"He saved the mayor's sons, Hank and Hal Archer, which leads to a second unresolved mystery," Joe said. "No one has gotten the whole story out of either one of them about that evening."

My eyes lit up. "Umm, wait a moment. We just met Hal a short while ago at the City Utilities Office." The inquisitive itch I first felt after visiting Jessie's statue the previous night returned.

Nick nodded. "Yep, one and the same. From the testimonies we read and heard, Hal and Hank leapt out the front entrance with the flames licking their heels, seconds before the ceiling collapsed." Nick paused and sighed. "To this day, many in town still can't believe Jessie couldn't have made it out, but Hank and Hal have added nothing."

Joe interrupted. "But Jessie's a hero in the eyes of all those grateful students and their parents. Even the mayor praised Jessie as a hero because of what he did for his two sons. I won't hesitate to tell you, in our

minds, it's the uncertain circumstances behind Jessie's tragic death that's the real tragedy and the whole story hasn't been told yet."

Liddy seemed to sense how the story affected Nick and Joe. She squeezed my hand.

On her cue, I said, "I'm sorry guys. Please forgive me for asking the two of you to dive back into something so emotional. However, it sounds like there's more to this tragic story."

Joe leaned forward and placed his hand over Liddy's and mine. "Hey, you didn't do anything wrong."

Nick added, "It's just that we were close friends with Jessie, but--"

"Look here, today's supposed to be a happy day. There'll be plenty of time to talk more about Shiloh's past history." Joe smiled as he steered the conversation to cheerier, more urgent matters.

My watch and Liddy's "ready-to-go" look reminded me of the moving truck's pending arrival. We thanked Joe and Nick and reiterated our intentions to take up their offer and visit Shiloh Baptist Church.

As soon as the empty moving truck left, I surprised Liddy when I said, "I've got dinner covered." She followed me into the kitchen. "While you were busy with the movers, I spent most of the afternoon meeting some of our neighbors." I pointed to the kitchen counter covered with casseroles and baked treats.

Liddy's tired smile reflected how overwhelmed she felt with all the unopened boxes stacked throughout the house. By the time we ate and put the food away, we went straight to the bedroom and located the box with our familiar sheets and pillows.

As I listened to Liddy's breathing as she slept, my mind wrestled with unanswered questions about the horrific story Nick and Joe had shared.