

REUNION

A preview from the novel 'A Widow's Kiss'

BY

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OCTOBER 13, 1986—ONE YEAR AGO

When Sandra spotted the man watching her at the grocery store, she had stopped at the magazine rack and was thumbing through the latest issue of *LIFE*. “The Victims of Chernobyl” was the story that caught her attention. The cover photo showed a thinly smiling bald man receiving some sort of medical treatment. A firsthand account of mass human suffering by a doctor who treated hundreds of patients poisoned by radiation. Casual reading.

The man peeked around a pyramid of Charmin’ toilet paper at the end of the aisle and diverted his eyes to the floor when Sandra looked up. He was short and stocky, wearing a white T-shirt tucked tight into a pair of brightly faded jeans. Acid-washed was what the kids called it. She assumed he was a kid, and not only because of his clothes or stature. His body language seemed awkward and nervous, as if he knew he was misbehaving and didn’t want a tongue lashing from his mother.

While examining a carton of eggs, she spotted him again pretending to shop for yogurt. The moment she turned her attention toward him, he flinched nervously and swiped the closest item off the shelf: Strawberry Yoplait. As he pretended to read the small print, Sandra was able

to study his face—his features, a mosaic of gentle curves and soft lines; his eyes, deep pools that sparkled with warmth. Despite the obvious challenges a grown man with Down syndrome must have faced throughout his life, he stood in the dairy aisle with a spunky air of confidence. Sandra smirked.

“Can I help you?” she asked, bemused. He jumped nervously.

“No! No. Just shopping for groceries,” he said to the floor.

“Okay then,” Sandra turned away and pushed her cart down the aisle. After a few steps, she spun around playfully, and her suspicion was confirmed. He was glaring at her as she rolled away. The man gasped and dropped the yogurt. It exploded across the tile floor.

“Oh dear! Oh dear! Sorry. So sorry! I need a mop!” He sprinted out of sight. “Yogurt cleanup! Down that aisle! I need a mop!”

Later, as Sandra pushed her cart through the Presto Food Mart parking lot, the man chased her down.

“Excuse me!” he called, out of breath, with sweat beading on his forehead. Sandra cocked her head.

“You again. Did you get it cleaned up?”

“Yes, ma’am. They didn’t even make me pay for it.”

“That’s a relief. Have a nice day.” She turned to leave.

“Are you Peggy Lawson?” he blurted. Sandra froze, then turned slowly. She had always suspected the day would come when the past might surface, dropping that name in her lap like a lit fuse. Her rehearsed reaction was always a smile, a head shake, and a quick exit. Deny, but keep your composure. Strange faces are mistaken for familiar ones all the time. Don’t avoid eye contact. Be kind. Maintain your cordiality. Move on with your day.

In the Presto parking lot, the shock of hearing someone actually say the name was not as easy to brush aside as she had hoped. Her face fell. Maybe it was the unsuspecting messenger—a mentally disabled man with kind eyes. Sandra stared at him for longer than she should have.

“You have me confused,” she said and promptly turned her back. Her steps sped up the closer she got to her Volvo.

Sandra’s heart pounded on the drive home, and her paranoia took hold of the wheel. She found herself peering into the rearview mirror more than at the road in front of her. “*I can’t go home,*” she thought. While stopped at the light on Richards Street, a blue Vespa scooter rolled to a stop in the lane next to her.

“Ma’am! I need to talk to you!” he shouted while sporting a round helmet and sunglasses, like a mini-version of the show CHiPs. Sandra rolled down the window.

“I’m not who you think I am,” Sandra said coldly and sped off through the red light, squealing her tires. She took two quick turns onto roads she’d never driven down and stared into her mirror. The cat in the road wasn’t black, but it damn well should have been. Sandra noticed the creature in time to save it from her tire but lost control of the Volvo, skidding off the road while slamming the brakes.

The impact was gentle, but she still managed to plow through the front yard of a yellow-brick house, flattening the chain-link fence and splintering a load-bearing pole that supported the front porch. The man that emerged from inside the home wore an open plaid robe and boxer shorts.

“What in the Christ-shit are you doin’?” he asked calmly, almost pleasantly. Sandra appreciated that.

A collection of Ware County High School students had stopped their morning soccer game to gawk from across the street. More would follow, especially after the police and ambulance arrived. Plenty of classroom windows on that side of the building. She’d certainly be all the buzz at school today.



Sandra found herself sitting in a little cell at the Waycross Police Station, counting the hours—eleven of them so far. Georgia’s minimum lock-up for a DUI was eight hours, but she had blown a 1.3 on the breathalyzer

that morning, right before they snapped the cuffs on her. “Hey, isn’t that, like, a low score?” she asked, only to get a smirky shake of the head from the officer at the scene.

That morning during breakfast, Sandra had polished off the box of wine she’d started the previous night. She didn’t feel drunk or even the slightest bit tipsy when she hopped into her car for a quick grocery run. Nope, she felt like her usual radiant 10 a.m. self.

Sometime that afternoon, she napped on the cushioned bench in her cell for a few hours. Sally, the lady who took her fingerprints, even tossed her a few blankets. That was kind. But now, Sandra’s head was pounding, and she needed to eat.

“Your bond has been posted,” Sally announced and unlocked the cell door.

“How much?” Sandra asked. “My checkbook is in my purse.”

“No, it’s been posted.”

Sandra shook her head and squinted.

“It’s been paid,” Sally said.



He waited for Sandra outside the police station, his blue Vespa tilted casually on its kickstand, commandeering the spot closest to the station’s entrance.

“I sprung you from jail,” he announced, chest puffed like a rooster proclaiming dawn. Sandra ignored him and walked the other way.

“Peggy, wait!” he called, stumbling after her in a flurry. “I need to talk to you!”

“That’s not my name—”

“Sandra. You changed it to Sandra. I got it. But you used to be Peggy. Back when Margot knew you, right?” Sandra stopped dead in her tracks, glaring at him like he’d just sprouted an extra head.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Reggie. And you used to be Peggy, but now you’re Sandra.”

“How do you know me?”

"I don't know you. But Margot knows you. I found you, that's all."



The Pecan Diner was empty at 10 p.m. on a Monday. Sandra was starving but regretted her order the moment it arrived at the table. The Cobb salad sat flaccid in a refrigerator-chilled bowl with semi-wilted lettuce clinging to sliced cold cuts—prepared hours ago, maybe days.

Reggie ordered three pieces of pie because he was excited to sample the options on the menu. He spoke with his mouth full, occasionally spitting bits of food onto the table.

"I've never been here before, but I heard the pies were good," he proclaimed as soon as they sat down. Sandra's head pounded on the opposite side of the table, and she was feeling guilty for being so repelled by Reggie's endless energy. She knew her face wasn't hiding it either. Reggie didn't seem to notice.

"The pecan is the best," Reggie said, sampling each one bite at a time. "If you're really hungry, you think something tastes better, so I took a bite of all of them before I filled up. The pecan wins."

"How did you find me?" Sandra asked.

"It wasn't that hard. I just followed Margot's directions," he said casually, never looking up from his plate.

"Why didn't she come here herself? Why send you?"

Reggie laughed with his mouth open, three flavors of mashed pie on display. When he met Sandra's eyes and saw her scowl, he straightened up quickly, his smile vanishing.

"Are you serious?"

Sandra was much too exhausted to respond.

"I can't tell you where she is. I'm not allowed," Reggie said, deathly serious now.

"Why?"

"I don't think I can tell you that either," he said, considering while glancing at the ceiling tiles. "Come to think of it—I don't think I was

supposed to mention Margot at all, but I got nervous when we were talking. My mom said you'd want answers, but not to give you any."

"Margot's your mom?"

Reggie laughed so loud he spit half his bite across the table. Sandra tensed.

"No, she's not my mom!" He banged his fist on the table boisterously. "I've already got a mom. Her name is Helen Montavue, and we live on Peeking Street in Valdosta."

"Reggie, I've had a very bad day, so can you stop the bullshit?"

Reggie reached into his back pocket and handed Sandra a card.

"This is my mom."

The card read:

Helen Montavue – Georgia DHR Case Management – Valdosta, GA.

"I'm supposed to tell you to call the number on the card. Mom will tell you everything you need to know."

"Right now? Call her now?"

"No, she won't answer now. That's her office number. She's not there."

"Where is she?"

"At home."

Sandra reached into her beige leather purse, then slid a Bic pen across the table.

"Write down your home number."

"She doesn't take calls at night. You're supposed to call her at work tomorrow."

She jammed her index finger onto the table.

"Write it down."

"She doesn't take calls this late," he huffed while scribbling on the business card.

. . .

The cashier looked up from a crossword puzzle, but didn't object when Sandra asked to use the telephone behind the counter. She dialed the number with stiff fingers, her heart pounding louder than the ring tone in her ear.

It rang once... then twice.

Sandra stared at the chipped linoleum beneath her shoes, the phone cord coiled tight across her chest.

Margot. Margot. Margot.

She hadn't heard the name spoken aloud in twenty-five years, though she'd thought of that awful night on Black Island endlessly. Obsessively.

The third ring.

East Camp. Egret Faulkner's bloodied body slumped in the gravel path. Margot burying her face into her mother's stomach to muffle a scream. The horror of Lotus Cummings.

The fourth ring.

"Hello?" the woman answered.

Sandra opened her mouth, but hadn't planned a greeting.

"I...I'm here with Reggie..." she stuttered.

"In Waycross?" the woman asked.

"Yes."

"How did you get this number?"

"I asked him for it."

"I don't take work calls at home. He should know better. Please come by the office tomorrow."

"What office? Who are you?"

"The Valdosta office. It's an hour drive. I'm available at 2 p.m. After that, we're into next week."

Sandra considered.

"Will Margot be there?"

A short silence followed.

"Tomorrow at 2. The address is on the card." The woman hung up.

When Sandra plopped back down at the table, Reggie never looked up from his pie.

"I told you not to call," he said.



October 14, 1986 – 2:05 p.m.

The Georgia Department of Human Resources office in Valdosta smelled like lemon floor wax. A fan oscillated in the corner of the waiting room. A faded poster on the wall read, “*Every Child Deserves a Home.*” The smiling faces in the photo looked like they hadn’t been updated since Nixon.

Sandra stood restlessly by the front desk while a receptionist extended a clipboard across the counter.

“Fill this out. Please return it with a copy of your ID.”

“I’m here to meet with Helen Montavue.”

“Yes, I see the appointment. But we can’t start until your paperwork’s complete.”

Sandra glanced down at the stack: ten pages deep. “This looks like a foster parent application.”

“It is.”

“I’m not applying to be a foster parent.”

“All prospective caregivers are required to fill out the questionnaire and authorize a background check prior to meeting with Ms. Montavue. It’s moves quicker like that.”

“She told me to come here at 2 p.m. to meet with her. About a different issue.”

“She’ll be with you once the forms are submitted,” the woman repeated, this time slower, as if Sandra had comprehension issues. Sandra’s nostrils flared, but she took the clipboard and sat down hard in one of the cracked vinyl chairs. For a moment, she simply stared at the form.

List your current and previous addresses over the past 10 years.

Describe your experience caring for children.

Have you ever been convicted of a felony?

She scribbled answers with the tiny pencil attached to the clipboard by a knotted yarn string. By 2:15, she was done. By 2:40, she was pacing. At 2:58, she asked the receptionist how much longer it would be.

“She knows you’re here.”

Sandra returned to her seat, arms crossed tightly, eyes locked on the second hand of the wall clock.

“Ms. Hammerlock?” Helen poked her head out the door. “I’m ready for you.”

Helen Montavue’s office was brighter than expected—cheerful, even. A potted plant sat on the windowsill. A framed poster of a kitten dangling from a branch read: *Hang in there!* And behind a modest desk sat Helen herself: a square-shouldered woman in a beige blouse, large round glasses, and a smile that suggested she’d been expecting Sandra for years.

“Come in, sit. You made good time,” Helen said, gesturing toward a chair that looked older than both of them.

Sandra sat stiffly.

Helen reached for a manila folder on her desk. “I understand Reggie made contact with you yesterday. I hope he wasn’t any trouble.”

“He dropped a yogurt,” Sandra said dryly.

Helen chuckled. “That sounds about right.”

“You’re his case manager?”

“Oh, no. I’m his mother—well, foster mother—from years ago. One of my long-term placements.” Helen leaned back, the corners of her eyes crinkling with fondness. “Sometimes they don’t move out.”

Sandra offered a tight smile, unsure how to respond. She glanced at the file Helen had opened, catching her own name printed in block letters across the top.

“I didn’t come here to fill out forms,” Sandra said. “I came because of Margot.”

Helen nodded slowly, flipping through the pages with deliberate calm. “Yes. You wrote ‘educator’ under current occupation. That’s good. Stability is important.”

“I’m not applying to foster anyone,” Sandra said more firmly.

Helen looked up with a patient expression. “You came to this office. You filled out the forms.”

“Because you wouldn’t talk to me otherwise.”

“Well, that’s how we keep records,” Helen said pleasantly. “So... was Reggie an imposition? I debated not sending him, but he’s surprisingly good at putting people at ease.”

Sandra crossed her arms. “He said Margot sent him. Where is she?”

Helen’s expression didn’t change. “You mean the mother? She’s out of the picture. She’s not allowed near the kid—that’s by court order.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Helen raised her eyebrows and peered at Sandra. “I didn’t ask you to.”

Silence stretched between them. The only sound was the ticking of a small desk clock. She dropped her glare.

“You’re a natural caretaker: A history of working with kids, stable home...That’s what children need.”

Sandra’s stomach turned. “What children?”

Helen didn’t answer. She stood and crossed the room to the file cabinet, flipping through folders without urgency. She pulled one from the cabinet and returned to her seat.

“Sometimes the past comes back into our lives to offer... opportunities. Closure, even,” Helen said and drew a sheet of paper from the folder with a paper-clipped photo in the top corner. She handed it to Sandra, who didn’t take it. The pre-teen girl in the black and white photo looked exhausted. Worn-down eyes that held a suffocating contempt. After Sandra read the name on the form and realized who she was staring at, her mouth fell open.

The girl in the photo looked like her mother. The version of Margot that Sandra remembered. Those eyes were unmistakable and triggered a flood of memories that took Sandra’s breath away. In the years since her escape from Black Island, Sandra had worked through countless therapy sessions to temper the trauma from her childhood. The work had always focused on the traumatic nature of the experience—the displacement from her parents, the fear, the violence. But staring into the eyes of this girl stirred something visceral. A memory of who Sandra used to be. She didn’t see herself in the eyes of Caroline Faulkner; she saw the

contempt she once had for Margot, her former bunkmate. Shame enveloped her.

A flash image transported Sandra to the Birdhouse in 1961. Sitting around the connecting circle, not wanting to hold Margot's hand because the thought of it disgusted her. The unforgivable things Sandra would say to Margot—about her hair, her clothes, her smell—and how Margot never said a word to defend herself from Sandra's constant bullying. All Sandra ever received in response was a pair of eyes.

That pair of eyes. Caroline's eyes.

Sandra's lip quivered, and she blinked rapidly to settle some welling tears.

"Her name is Caroline Faulkner, and she's between homes," Helen said, noticing Sandra's change in body language. "Are you okay, Ms. Hammerlock?"

"I need to talk to Margot," Sandra said sternly.

"I'm sorry, that can't happen."

"I'm not doing a damn thing until I talk to Margot."



EIGHT DAYS LATER...

After her accident last week, she was instructed not to operate a vehicle under any circumstances, but she gladly took the keys to Helen Montavue's Dodge Stratus when they were offered. It wasn't an offer, really. It was more of a stipulation. Helen insisted Sandra take the car, or the meeting couldn't happen.

After tugging the parking brake, Sandra glanced in the rearview mirror and straightened her large-brimmed sun hat.

"This looks ridiculous," she said.

"...and the sunglasses," Reggie said, sitting shotgun.

"For what purpose?"

"You have to wear them. They need to think you're my mom."

"Who's 'they'?"

"The people watching," Reggie said. Sandra searched nervously out the window.

Sandra signed in as Helen Montavue, and none of the prison staff seemed to question it—just like Reggie said. Yes, they patted her down after she and Reggie walked through the metal detector, but no one ever asked to see her ID. Bizarre. The escorting guard knew Reggie by name.

"Reggie! My man! You staying out of trouble?"

"Hi, Joe. No comment," Reggie said, and the guard chuckled. Reggie moved to follow Sandra through the steel door, but she stopped him with one hand against his chest.

"I'm going alone."

He was clearly disappointed. On the drive over, he'd told Sandra it had been over a year since he'd visited Margot.

"But—"

"No." She cut him off, firmer now. "You can't come."

He deflated. "So what am I supposed to do?"

"Hang out."

The visitation room smelled like a musty locker, and the walls were painted the color of wet moss. A lifeless shade green that probably tested well in a government-funded color study. Supposed to be calming, she guessed. It wasn't. Her nerves crackled like static.

She waited.

Ten minutes passed.

The door groaned open with a cold sigh, and the guard led in a woman so frail she looked like a sharp wind might snap her. Bones pressed at her sleeves, her feet dragging as if shackled by concrete. Sandra tensed.

That's not Margot.

Margot used to have fullness in her cheeks, a sturdiness in her frame.

This woman looked like a withered scarecrow. Before Sandra could say they'd made a mistake, the woman looked up.

Those eyes.

No smile. No flicker of recognition. Just a long, unreadable stare. Like Sandra was a memory Margot had buried years ago. The more Sandra studied her, the worse it got. Margot's arms were a roadmap of bruises. Faint yellow traces of what had been a shiner under her right eye. A scratch along her chin, pink and raw. A white bandage over her ear. Her hair was yanked into a tight ponytail, which only made the lines in her face deepen. Margot sat down slowly across the glass, and Sandra picked up the red phone bolted to the wall and held it to her ear.

A moment passed, and Margot didn't move.

Sandra tilted her head. *Well?*

Margot picked up her end.

Sandra had imagined something different. Not a tearful reunion, exactly, but something human. A sliver of warmth? Instead, she got an iron wall.

"Been a while," Sandra said.

"You shouldn't be here," Margot said, voice flat through the phone static.

"That's what everyone keeps telling me."

Margot glanced away, just for a second. "It's dangerous. That's all. Someone could recognize you. Someone you wouldn't want to."

"Lucky for me, I'm a master of disguise," Sandra said, and pulled the large-brimmed sun hat off her head. "You look like you got in a fight. What happened to your face?"

"Nothing. I'm fine. It was last week."

"What was last week?"

"The fight. I started it. It's something I do when I need to get away for a bit."

"I see," Sandra said, and a suffocating silence followed. "Is there anything you'd like to tell me? Like how you found me? Or why you sent your friend Reggie to follow me around Waycross?"

Margot broke eyes and searched the room pensively, as if it wasn't safe to speak.

"It's not easy to explain, and even if I wanted to, this isn't the place."

"This is the only place—for you, anyway. So you better start talking, or I'm not doing a damn thing your friend Helen wants me to do."

"Sometimes I can see things. Remember?" Margot said softly.

Sandra squinted, confused. "What does that mean? See things?"

Margot hesitated, her eyes flicking to the corner of the room at the security camera above the clock. "When it's dark... and quiet, I can leave here sometimes."

Sandra said nothing.

"I sit alone in a room with no sound, no light, and it pulls me under. It's like flipping to a random page of a book, reading ahead. Not all of it's clear, but sometimes I see her."

"Who Caroline?" Sandra asked.

Margot nodded. "And you."

Sandra's grip tightened on the phone.

"In every version that matters, you're there," Margot said. "You rise to it, even when you don't want to, even when it costs you. You have a strong heart. You always have."

Sandra looked away, her voice small. "You don't know me. We haven't spoken in twenty-five years. I'm no mother. I got fired from a job teaching high school English for drinking."

Margot's tone didn't change. "We all carry the past in different ways, and you haven't dealt with it in a while. But you won't run from it, not when it counts."

Sandra swallowed hard. "You're remembering wrong. I'm the one who left. I abandoned all of you. I disappeared so no one would ever find me. All I know is how to run."

"You were right to run. We all ran. It took some longer than others. Don't ever regret it."

"I don't know what you're asking me to do. You want me to protect her? From what?"

"I'm not asking you to protect her. I already know you will. I just need you to sign the papers."

Sandra leaned back and sank in her chair.

"This is a lot."

"I know. I'm sorry. She's getting to that age where things are going to start changing for her. She can't be with strangers when it happens. You remember how we were, right? How it felt to connect like that. We had each other. She has no one."

"I was terrible to you back then. I couldn't fuckin' stand to be around you. That's what you want for your daughter? You're deranged."

Sandra buried her face in her hands, her thoughts racing. Silence stretched between them.

"Peggy," Margot finally said as Sandra began to weep.

"Peggy, look at me!" Margot shouted into the phone, and Sandra perked up, shocked by the sudden raise in volume. Margot's escorting guard entered the room behind her.

"That's enough. All done," he said and leaned against the open doorway.

"We were kids. None of that matters now. Caroline needs you," Margot gritted her teeth, trying to bottle the welling emotion. Her next words came out shakily. "I need you."

A thick tear landed on the table in front of Sandra.

"Alright. I'll sit down with Helen, sign the papers, check all the right boxes. I'll make up the guest room and try to make it feel like a home. I'll try to be what she needs, even if I don't know what that is. But before I do any of that, I need you to answer a question. Is it true? About her father?"

Margot's head tilted thoughtfully.

"What about her father?"

Sandra's eyes drifted to the walls, to the glass, to the lifeless green static of the prison that pressed in on all sides.

"Yes. It's true."

"Does Caroline know?"

“Not unless you tell her,” Margot quivered.

Sandra said nothing. But for the first time since Black Island, she felt the weight of a secret that belonged to someone else.