

Miss Anne's Legacy

by

Pamela McCreary

©2010

CHAPTER ONE

The plane lurched unexpectedly; I grabbed my plastic cup that passed for a wineglass and the screw-top bottle that masqueraded as wine. I don't normally drink on airplanes, today I made an exception. I'm not a white-knuckle flyer; I'm only cowardly when it comes to facing the family with news of a divorce. Mine. Once was bad enough, anybody can make a mistake, but twice? My only hope was that the impending death of my grandmother would absorb some of the impact.

The call had come two days ago. I had been expecting it for a while. Grandma was ninety-two and had fallen several months ago and broken her hip. Since then she had been "failing," Mother's term for anyone over the age of seventy. Grandma had managed to avoid this euphemism for twenty-two years, largely, I think from an almost palpable fear of dying. Actually, I don't think the dying part bothered her so much as the after-the-dying-part. It seems though even she had come to realize it was unavoidable, and in typical fashion she had obviously decided that the week before my little sister's wedding would be

ideal. That's Miss Anne: Never one to be upstaged. Maybe the preacher would cut us a break on his rate, as long as he didn't get the ceremonies confused.

"Amanda Fay," the sound of my mother's voice on the other end of the phone in the middle of the day meant one thing: bad news. She preferred to wait for the free-after-seven-o'clock calls to partake in the passing of pleasantries. "Grandma's test results are back, and it is just as the doctor suspected."

I, of course, had no idea what the doctor suspected since I was not even aware that the doctor suspected anything. Mother didn't keep me abreast of the state of Miss Anne's health, so I knew this must be serious.

Things with my mother have always been very black or white, right or wrong, do or don't. My life, on the other hand, has been lived primarily in the gray areas. Consequently in order for us to see eye-to-eye we have each had to shut one eye, sometimes both, and look past. Mostly we would just stare.

"What test was this?" (I am embarrassed to admit that I asked this with no small measure of disinterest.)

"Well, Grandma's been at Fauquier Hospital since last Wednesday. She's been failing, and Dr. Moore thought it might be more than just old age. He tested her for a variety of things. She has leukemia. She won't be coming home." All of this delivered very

matter-of-factly, even defensively, as though she expected a snide remark about thunder stealing. Momma does have a sense of timing.

I was summoned, I complied. Actually I had been planning on going home for the wedding; this just bumped the trip up a bit. I am to be the Matron-of-Honor. Due to the recent turn of events I don't feel particularly matronly or honorable, but I will not disappoint Katie. Besides, I have already paid for the yards and yards of burgundy organza, and I am looking forward to feeling like a Prom Queen. With any luck, maybe I'll end up in the backseat of somebody's car.

The captain had turned on the seat belt sign several minutes before, I fortified myself with my last drop of wine and put the cup in the seat pocket in front of me. The flight attendant had already collected the last bit of trash and hadn't been pleased that I wasn't finished, but I was pacing myself. It wouldn't do to teeter down the ramp.

It was a relatively smooth landing, a harbinger of things to come I hoped. The flight attendants were instructed to disarm the doors for arrival. I had a mental picture of them removing grenades and Uzi's. Maybe they'd let me borrow a couple for my upcoming battle. After elbowing my way through the crowds and grabbing my bag, I walked out into the oppressive Virginia humidity of Dulles Airport; I had no idea who was picking me up. I was sure, however, they spoke English, thereby significantly narrowing the playing field. After about ten minutes and as many offers of rides in a variety of different languages, I picked up my non-rolling luggage and was about to pull out my cell phone when a truck

that could only have belonged to Tommy pulled into view. Fog lamps, roll bar, 4x4, gun rack: a Man's truck. We spotted each other about the same time. He whipped in front of a taxi, barely missed a pedestrian and screeched to a halt about half a centimeter from a long, black limousine with diplomatic plates. We're big on grand entrances in my family. Before I could even put my bags down he was out of the truck and had swept me up in a bear hug, bags and all. I love my brother and at 5'10" I don't often feel small. Now, lifted off the ground by my 6' 5" baby brother, I felt small and safe.

"Okay, okay, you can put me down now," I squeaked out through lungs that felt half the size they had just moment before.

'Oh, had I picked you up? I couldn't tell."

"Very funny." He was right though; my clothes were hanging off of my already too-thin frame. I thought I had cleverly disguised it with my choice of attire, a beige ankle-length linen dress. I had hoped that the wrinkles would add bulk. I hadn't expected to be bench-pressed. "Well I'm sure there will be enough food at the farm to sink a small destroyer." I said as he deposited me back on solid ground.

"You ain't lying. We've already got six kinds of potato salad and that was just the first wave." Tommy's laugh was easy as he hoisted my bag into the bed of the truck. "Come on, we better make tracks. Traffic is already at a standstill on 66."

Dulles Airport may be in Virginia, but it is close enough to Washington, DC., to be considered part of the metropolitan area. Rush hour begins about seven a.m. and winds down about seven p.m. My flight had arrived at five o'clock in the evening so we were going to be smack dab in the middle of it.

"How about we just pull into the bar at the Marriott, have a quick drink and wait for the traffic to die down?" I asked, ever the optimist.

"Come on Mandy, you know we can't do that. Everybody's anxious to see you. And Momma's holding supper. Besides you don't want to show up with alcohol on your breath." He leaned across the armrest, got in my face, smiled and said, "Although I think it may be too late."

"Don't start with me. Just pull into a 7-11 and I'll get some gum," I said with a tinge of annoyance.

"Hey, you know I don't care. I myself have been known to take a nip or two." My brother's exploits in high school were infamous.

"Yes, I know. Who picked you up when you were found wandering the Lincoln Memorial at two a.m. wearing nothing more than your Calvin Klein's and a guitar? I believe I can still get some blackmail mileage out of that one. It's a good thing I answered the phone that night."

"I don't know, it might have been easier to pay the price and get it over with, instead of having you hold it over my head all these years," he laughed.

Things with my brother have always been easy. Since we are five years apart, we never experienced the usual sibling rivalry. From the moment Momma and Daddy brought him home, I adored him. I felt he was a special gift to me, and I have always shielded and protected him.

"So who's at the house?" I asked as Tommy hurtled through traffic, and I frantically searched for my seatbelt. The lush green countryside of Sudley Road whizzed by as Tommy maneuvered the truck onto the shoulder, narrowly missing the stalled cement truck in front of us. "Of course, that is assuming we make it to the house. Would you please slow down, I think one funeral in the family is enough for now."

"What's up, why are you so jumpy? My driving has never bothered you before."

"Tommy, what you do could never be called driving. It's more like suicide with a wheel." I smiled to take the edge out of my voice. "I guess I'm just kind of nervous. I know I'm expected to be sad, but mostly I feel resentful, and I know Momma knows how I feel and that makes her all the more defensive. I'm just too tired to dance."

"Then don't."

"Ah, the simplicity of testosterone." I reached over and squeezed Tommy's knee.

"Hey, watch it, that's my accelerator leg, you know I'm a loose cannon." he grinned.

The tension was broken. Good. I wasn't ready to explain myself.

"So, who's there?" I asked again.

"Well, the Claymore's were pulling in as I was leaving. Thank God I missed that, nice people but they could bore dishwater. Eleanor does make the best Red Velvet Cake this side of the Mississippi." Not that Tommy would know, never having been on the other side of the Mississippi. "Katie's been here for three weeks getting ready for the big event, but you know that. Otherwise it's just me and the folks."

"I imagine the contingency from the Valley will be rolling in fairly soon, I expected Great Hattie to at least be there," I said.

"She's due in bright and early tomorrow. I offered to go and pick her up, the drive is more than she can handle these days, but apparently one of the ladies from her church group is willing to chauffeur. Momma is at home pinning her ears on even as we speak."

I laughed. "She is a bundle of energy." At eighty-one, Great Hattie lives alone in a small cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains in the Shenandoah Valley and has more raw energy than most ten year olds. She is my mother's favorite aunt; no small feat given my grandmother had six sisters. She helped raise my mother when her own mother—my sainted, dying grandmother—ran off with a younger man when my mother was a shy, vulnerable six-year-old. She has always been a surrogate grandmother to us and we love her fiercely. We just have to take shifts with her because she can wear down even an Olympic athlete.

"How did she take the news?" I asked.

"Hard. She just wants to make sure she gets over here to see her before Grandma passes."

"I've never understood why old people have such a hard time saying 'die,'" I said.

"Maybe it's just a little too personal," he replied as he stared straight ahead, jaw clenched.

"Sorry."

I studied my brother's profile as he dodged and weaved in and out of traffic. He could still pass for twenty-three, even though he had just celebrated his thirtieth birthday

the month before. Unruly sandy blonde hair that always seemed a bit too long, it was curling up just there at the edge of his navy blue polo shirt. I reached over and smoothed it down. He turned and smiled at me, "Still grooming me, Sis?" Perfect white teeth—natural.

I wore braces for four years and my teeth still aren't as perfect as his; just another familial inequity. Although we do share the same dimples, his are of the masculine finely chiseled variety, mine are a smaller more feminine version. With his strong patrician nose, bright, Ellen-DeGeneres-blue eyes and his tall athletic frame he looked like the captain of an Ivy League football team.

In truth he had excelled in sports in high school and had hoped to play major league baseball. Tommy was an incredible catcher and everyone thought he had what it took to play in the majors. He was being scouted by a number of Big Ten universities. One January night in his senior year he and Bobby Hunter, his best friend since the fourth grade, decided they needed some batting practice. They broke into the high school, found the key to the batting cages and spent the next three hours improving their swing, pitching, catching and working out signals for spring camp. Bobby was the star pitcher on the team and they lived and breathed baseball. They dreamed of rooming together on the road when they both played for the Baltimore Orioles. Every spare moment was spent practicing, critiquing and improving.

It was about midnight when they snuck out under cloak of darkness with no one the wiser, high on their hopes and dreams. They pulled into the parking lot of the Dairy Freeze. The sky was clear and the night was uncharacteristically mild.

"Hey, why do I always drive?" Tommy yelled at Bobby over the hood of the '69 Mustang that was his pride and joy.

Bobby slammed the passenger door, ducked to miss the balled up wad of paper that had once been Tommy's mid-term science exam and said, "Could it be because you're the one with the car?"

"So, we could take your Mom's car. Chicks love station wagons, makes them think you're a family guy."

"Yeah, trouble is my old man thinks it's the perfect way for me to get them in the family way, besides you know you're a better driver. If it'll make you feel better, I'll pick up the tab for your shake."

"Well, it's a start," Tommy conceded good-humoredly.

"To prove my sincerity, allow me to get the door." As Bobby reached for the heavy glass door, Tommy heard a popping sound and Bobby crumpled to the pavement in a slow, fluid motion.

"Okay, okay, I'll keep driving you around, no need to be dramatic." He saw the blood at the same time he saw the gun.

Frightened by the sudden appearance of the two boys, the junkie who was trying to get enough money to score one more fix, turned, fired by reflex and ran. It was over before it began. When the police arrived, Tommy was cradling Bobby's head in his lap; he was already dead.

When Momma and Daddy arrived to bring Tommy home, he still had not shed a tear. He didn't play baseball that year. Scholarships were offered, none accepted. To this day he has never spoken of that night.

Everyone has a defining moment; for Tommy that night served as a constant reminder that nothing is forever and no one is promised tomorrow. Without the guarantee of growing old, he saw no point in growing up.

The rest of the ride passed in companionable silence with a quick side trip to the 7-11 in Gainesville for the requisite gum.