HELEN OF TROY

By Tess Collins

(Chapter sample)

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Nobody in the county, let alone the state of Tennessee, would have laid down even money on me and Rudy Ramsey ending up married. My great-grandmother Dottie and his great uncle Ernie caused considerable scandal when they eloped before she'd divorced her husband. With the law hot on their heels because Ernie was a month shy of sixteen, they got as far as Chattanooga before being hauled back and thrown in Claiborne County jail. He was released to his parents, while twenty-year old Dottie fought charges of immoral behavior and corrupting a minor.

Twenty-nine days and eight hours later, Ernie celebrated his birthday by stealing his Uncle Joe's motorbike. He and Dottie disappeared forever, leaving behind her fed-up husband and four squalling kids. Far as anybody ever knew, Dottie never got that divorce. After all this time it's easy to think of their affair as romantic, but my forbearers' taint followed me when Rudy's Aunt Birdy whispered at my bridal shower that wildness just might run in the veins of the Aubrey women and Rudy better think twice before marrying me. I didn't take kindly to that and I called her out, waiting for two hours in the town square, ready to whip her good. She might have been a fifty-year-old woman, but if she was old enough to insult me, she was young enough to fight me.

The only time I ever got whipped was when I was seven. I'd gotten into my mother's make-up, powdering my face, streaking my cheeks pink with rouge. Blue eyeshadow ringed my eyes and my lips were a wet, scarlet bow. Momma took a hickory switch to my legs. The humiliating blows stung like bees. "I'll beat that hot, wild blood out of you!" she cried, then dragged me to the sink and rubbed a washcloth around my face until the skin was raw. "You're vain, Helen Aubrey. Pride is the devil's mirror." Those final words never stuck with me. It was my hot, wild blood that fixed in my mind. As I grew older I often traced the veins on the back of my hands and wondered where those fiery and untamed rivers would lead me?

My husband Rudy and I have run Troy Hardware in Eastern Tennessee since his mother died last summer and left him the business. It's a slender building with a high ceiling and a gray, unfinished floor worn down in the aisles from customers who have traded here for the last eighty years. These blanched green walls have stories to tell of how Elvis Presley bought a fan belt when his car overheated right in the middle of the town's intersection. That was before he was famous so nobody paid him any mind, and Rudy's daddy helped him fix the car. John F. Kennedy also stopped to use the bathroom when he was on his Appalachian tour. He rolled through town in a black limousine that some said was half a block long. For years the hand towel that Senator Kennedy used hung framed in a place of honor beside family pictures of four generations of Ramseys. It disappeared one

night after Rudy's high school graduation party. Much as we all hated to admit it, most of us believed Rudy's best friend Raleigh Lynch had thrown up and absentmindedly used the towel to clean up the mess.

A tin Pepsi thermometer nailed beside the door is autographed by Jane Russell, and several bullet holes line the arch over the tractor parts, left from a shoot-out between revenuers and moonshiners—the store just happened to get caught in the middle. There's even a faded bloodstain on the brown Masonite counter where Rudy's great-grandfather was wounded during a robbery. Townsfolk always claimed that Al Capone held up Troy Hardware while passing through to Knoxville, but after I married Rudy I found out it was Nelson Pitt, a no-account cousin that his family disowned.

Troy, Tennessee is perched at the peak of Waldemar Mountain, west of Pruden and east of Jellico in Clearfork Valley. Not much in this area but snaky roads leading around abandoned coal mines, sharp ridges and steep cliffs that shelter the ancient hollows of the Appalachian highlands. Named after a great city with mythic warriors and beautiful princesses, Troy has nothing like that. We've never been sacked, looted or overrun by invading armies.

In our Troy, hardly anything ever changes. The population has been between two hundred sixty-eight and two seventy-five for at least a decade. Our people work in the mines, on farms, at the rock quarry, in the ministry and government service. Almost every household has a garden patch and if

the frost gets your tomatoes, somebody will give you their extras. Everyone knows everyone else's names. We watch the news on television, listen to country music on Knoxville stations, and a few of us talk by CB radio to the truckers on I-75. We gossip and philosophize, pray and complain, yet all the troubles of the world rarely affect Troy. Inflation might rise, the economy might flounder, wars are fought and peace is made, but life here is as constant as a river that's never seen a heavy rain.

From my kitchen window I can see Hazel's Beauty Shop where I have my hair set once a week, and an army-navy store where Mr. Henderson leaves his checker board set up in the front window and if he's in the middle of a game when you need something then count on waiting until he's won. Yvonne Couasonon's diner is across the street and she regularly hangs out a handwritten sign claiming her Grandma Sissy invented cornbread in that kitchen. The streets fill out with a drug store, three dress shops, a dentist, and a locked up lawyer's office that to my knowledge has never opened for business. If anyone from Troy was ever in a courtroom, they've kept it a secret.

At the outskirts of our town is a gallery for a dozen artisans who ferry their folk art and crafts to places like Gatlinburg and Cumberland Gap, and sell them at county fairs and museums. Most of the buildings in the center of town were built in the early 1900s from stands of thousand-year old forests of white oak, basswood, birch, ash, hickory, maples and tulip poplars. The post

office and a school are the only redbrick buildings anchoring the east and west blocks and an unkempt park and Baptist church box in the north and south sides. Reverend Johnnie Studen has baptized most of us in Clear Fork Creek, and he reads Psalm 121 over us after we've been laid to rest.

Having a corner lot at the town's sole intersection is a good location and we're the only hardware store between Jellico and Fork Ridge, so it's easier for people on all sides of us to drive here than risk the winding roads of the Cumberland Mountains to the larger towns. We have a thriving little business with locals, from farmers to auto repairmen to the average citizen in need of a plunger. We serve not only the small number of people in our unincorporated community but most everybody within sight of the mountain.

We have pretty good friends and neighbors despite that for a generation our ancestral lovebirds were a real sore spot. The Ramsey and Aubrey clans wouldn't walk down the same side of the street or go shopping on the same day. But all that stopped before Rudy and I were born. My family became a row of tombstones and quaint names in a worn out Bible: Mattie Parmeda, Beulah Lambdin, Arly Dale, Marcus Dewey, Siler Lee. More than fifty others were now no more than faded ink on yellow, brittle paper. Except for the stories of old-timers, I could only imagine what kind of lives my ancestors led. Most the Ramseys went north to the big cities of Cleveland and Detroit, chasing assembly line jobs they hoped would lead to union pensions. Rudy's line, however, stayed in the Cumberland Mountains. I guess

that was lucky for me—but I swear there were days when it sure didn't feel like it.

Two weeks after my thirty-eighth birthday, and I'd spent the time since then scrubbing shelves and dusting the overstocked summer patio furniture. Rudy was supposed to clean the store's awning, but I could hear him upstairs in our apartment, grunting at the televised football game every few minutes.

"Rudy!" I yelled up the stairs. "We're never gonna be ready for the Thanksgiving Sidewalk Sale if you don't get down here and help."

"I'm fixing the cable." He followed that with, "It's too cold to crawl out on the roof. I'll do it next summer."

I threw down my dust rag and rolled my eyes. Bootlegging the cable was what he meant. Once upon a time, he'd have come running like a hound for supper at the sound of my voice. He'd start every day by rising first, then wake me up with a mug of coffee steaming under my nose. At bedtime he'd brush my hair and massage my shoulders. Some nights he'd play his guitar until I fell asleep, and before I married him, he even wrote a song called "Helen of my Heart." That's when I figured I'd better love this man.

Those were the days before sports infected his blood. Now it's not much use trying to get any work out of him when the University of Tennessee Volunteers play football, or during a Kentucky Wildcats basketball game, or if any southern team's having a good year. That left a few odd weeks between

sports seasons when I might get his attention. “Ru-dee,” I called out again, but it had no fire to it because I knew it was hopeless. In the back where a storage room shared space with what we called the kitchen, I put the kettle on the burner. A few minutes later I settled into an old Appalachian sittin’ rocker with a cup of warm water.

The leaves outside the window were starting to turn brown and soon winter would take them all. But right now, some were still changing colors. Red, gold, orange and purple, some a fade of wash, creating hues that even my artist friend, Rachel could never duplicate, and she’s as good as you can find in these parts. I wished I could change as easy as those leaves. But then, they didn’t really do anything but live their lives, did they? Their transformation happened just like popping corn. Every year I watched their magic and couldn’t help but be envious.

Across the street, a man who looked vaguely familiar pulled a rental truck up to the side of Troy Market. He got out and started unloading boxes at the rear entrance. It led up to the apartment above. I leaned the rocker back a littler farther to see what was going on. A rusted, half-fallen Stucky’s Diner sign pointing toward the freeway blocked my view.

Workmen had been constructing something on top of the store for a week now. The owner had retired to Florida and rumors going up and down Troy’s two intersecting streets said his son Garland was moving back home from Knoxville to take over. Cassandra Dimsdale, the local postmistress, was

Garland's sister and she told Joan Jackson who told Rachel Kincaid who told Maude Fletcher who told me that her brother was looking for a quieter kind of life. Well, he'd sure find it in Troy. He was six years older than me as I was growing up, so I didn't remember much about him.

One memory remained strong. I was twelve when everybody living on the mountain fought a fire that almost destroyed the town. I helped fill buckets from a fountain in front of the church. When I turned to hand off my bucket, the sight of leaping flames sent a rod of fear through me and I stood there paralyzed. This gangly eighteen-year old boy, singed eyebrows and soot-ringed nostrils, took my bucket and jiggled my arm, breaking me from my trance. Our eyes fixed on each other's. His irises were the dark blue of the sky melting into dusk. I reached out and touched his cheek. He nodded but didn't speak. I held my breath as he rushed back to the burning building. In that moment, knowing he might die, I yelled out, "Be careful!" He left town not long after that. I don't believe we ever spoke again, but even at twelve years old, I knew I'd been in the company of a hero.

Now movers were unloading furniture off the truck outside of Troy Market. A premonition of something terrible bubbled in my veins. I shook it off, blaming it on staying too long in the memory of the fire. No reason to be nervous about Garland Cookson moving back to town. It was as much his town as mine. Still, my insides filled with a need for caution as if I were getting ready to walk a narrow plank.

I've lived here since I was eight with Maude Fletcher, who took in orphans for the state. She was like my mother and was surely my best friend. When most of my graduating class decided to leave this mountaintop perch, she offered to pay my way through beauty school. I was all set to attend Collins School of Cosmetology in Middlesboro, Kentucky and thought maybe some day I might even open my own shop. Rudy was headed to college at Lincoln Memorial University, only three miles from there, but his father fell ill and he stayed to help his mother. The next night he asked me to marry him. Looking into his eyes, somehow I saw how lonely he'd be without me and I couldn't bear for him to feel that emptiness. So, I stayed in Troy. Though I never told anyone, my daydreams were always about what might have happened to me if I'd tried my luck at the world.

"Helen!" Rudy yelled without even coming to the staircase. "Make me a burnt baloney sandwich."

Damn! He had this way of always asking for something right when I'd found the most comfortable position. But it was a reasonable enough request considering I hadn't made lunch. I pushed myself up out of the rocker, fetched the bread and baloney from the refrigerator, turned on the burner and leaned back, expecting flames to pop up. All I got was a hiss of gas.

"Pilot light's out," I called up. "Come down here and fix it."

His heavy footsteps on the stairs were accompanied by a frustrated, "I swear to God. . ." He bounced into the kitchen like a locker room jock in his orange UT sweatshirt and boxer shorts.

"Put some pants on. What if a customer comes in."

"They'd just tell you what a lucky woman you are." He grinned like a fool, ran his fingers through blond hair thinning at the crown, and winked, then bent, pulled open the oven and sniffed. "Can't figure why you don't learn to do this yourself."

"You know fire spooks me."

"It's silly that a grown woman won't hold a match to her own pilot light." He checked the broiler, then pulled up the top counter. "It's only the top part." He struck a match against the side of the stove and held it to the burner.

The puff of blue flame shot up and he smirked at me like it was the easiest thing in the world. Taking a Budweiser from the refrigerator, he headed back to the football game. I placed the frying pan on the burner and dropped in a slice of butter. The flame whizzed like someone had sucked it in.

"It went out again," I called to him.

He came around the corner and kicked the stove. Then kicked it again.

"That's not gonna make it light," I said.

"I hate it when the dern thing does that. I lit it three times yesterday. Dern thing should stay lit when I light it."

I stood back while he worked on the pilot once more, wondering if he'd added another dent. A half dozen dings on the side and four more on the front had started to rust. Rudy was only responsible for about three of them. His father had left the others. Ramsey men had this way of taking their frustrations out on the furniture. In the time I've lived in this building, we'd thrown out four lop-sided bookshelves, six sinks and twelve television sets. After Rudy's dad took a baseball bat to a leaking toilet he'd been unable to fix, we found ourselves without a bathroom the whole month of December. My mother-in-law finally issued an ultimatum to her wheelchair-bound husband, "You're not a carpenter, a plumber or a TV repairman, and if I catch you trying to act like one again, it'll be me losing my temper and it won't be household furnishings I'm kicking!" She had smiled a sad smile in my direction as if she knew I'd have to learn to deal with the famous Ramsey temper in my own way.

These days Rudy always seemed to be mad at something, even if it was only the stove. When that happened, all I could do was wait. His brown and black beagle, Myrtle came in from the room off the kitchen and that seemed to calm him down. After Rudy got the burner going again, he said, "Hello boy, hello boy, what's ya doin'?" then he picked up the piece of baloney I was about to fry. "Here, have this."

"Don't give him that," I objected, too late, "he'll never eat dog food again." The slice disappeared in one bite.

"This dog's my best buddy," he said. "I tell him all my secrets, even my Swiss bank account number. We go hunting, fishing and canoeing. If it's good enough for me, it's good enough for Myrtle."

"Well, then, your dog is the only one getting a baloney sandwich 'cause you just fed him the last piece."

Rudy looked at me then back at the empty package sitting on the table. "Blast it, Helen, why didn't you say something?"

"Well, I figured if Myrtle could take it as a bribe, she might give me them Swiss bank numbers and I'll go out and buy an electric stove."

He studied me for a few seconds, somehow knowing he'd been insulted but not quite wanting to accuse the woman who cooked for him. "Well, run across the street and get some more baloney."

"You run across the street and get more baloney. I been working and scrubbing all day while your lazy hindend's been watching television."

"Don't smart-mouth me, woman."

"Or you'll do what?" He shut up good and quick. But now I was peeved. I marched forward, always able to back down a big mouth, and he stumbled two steps backwards. "Come on, Mr. Tough-Guy, you'll what?"

"All I wanted was a baloney sandwich."

"No, all you wanted was a burnt baloney sandwich."

"What's wrong with you?"

"With me?" For a second I saw myself running him through with the butter knife in my hand. I squeezed it and must have had a dangerous look on my face cause the dog got up and moved to the door, tail between its legs. "I'll tell you. Six o'clock this morning the alarm went off. Seven to ten I stickered sales prices on the summer inventory. Ten to twelve I swept the sidewalk, watered the flower box and tried to spray the bird dung off the awning. Twelve to two I pulled those kiddie swimming pools that I told you not to order from the storeroom, and stacked them up real pretty out front. Two to six I re-stocked the bags and packing, did a bank deposit, and in between all this waited on fifteen customers. I haven't eaten, sat down or pissed all day, and I reckon you could say I've just about had it."

Rudy crossed his arms over his chest and cocked his head to one side. His pale blue eyes narrowed and his lower lip stuck out. "You know what you need, Helen. You need a baby."

That stopped me cold. I stood there staring, trying to comprehend what he'd really said and half thinking I'd heard wrong.

"A baby would keep you occupied. It'd delight and entertain you. You wouldn't be so upset all the time." He walked around me, looking up and down my body. "Besides that, it's about time I got me a namesake."

Those last words caught my attention, all right. "You want something named after you, honey, take that hounddog sitting right there over to the

county courthouse, and change its name to Rudy Ramsey, Jr. 'cause that's as close to a namesake as you're gonna get in this house!"

I stormed out to the front, put the closed sign on the door, then shut myself in the bedroom and didn't come out the rest of the evening. When I woke up several hours later, Rudy was snoring away next to me. He had baloney breath so I figured he'd gotten his sandwich. I turned my back to him, eyes wide open, unable to sleep.

Baby, I thought, that's a subject that hadn't reared its bald head in a while. We'd always planned on having a child. Sometimes I wondered how so much time passed without us noticing that another year gone and no patter of little feet. Early in our marriage I could blame work. "Next month," one of us would say. "We'll start a family next month." Another season would roll by and I began to grow irritated with Rudy's forgetfulness, his messiness, his stubborn temper. Part of me wasn't sure I wanted a baby who might inherit those Ramsey traits. It's not that I meant to avoid him but I know I did.

Then one day, Selma Hanks came into the store. She must have been in her late thirties, thin and bird-like with salt-and-pepper hair. She had a tired, droopy-eyed look as if she'd given up on the world. Rudy waited on her, but from the back of the store I could see from his expression that something was wrong.

I came forward and realized he was staring at ten of her fifteen children. Eight of them were lined up in height order right to the side of her.

They squirmed and bit, punched and pinched. She'd holler at them, and they'd be good for about ten and a half seconds. She had another on her hip and an infant in a carriage. Then Rudy smiled. His wide, crap-eatin' grin that he shoots off when he's real uncomfortable. I found myself worried about him, wondering why I'd never even given him one child. His smile stayed frozen in place a good three minutes after she left. He never said anything and I never asked.

I shifted in bed and looked at his profile. Sometimes he was a man I didn't know. Babies, I thought again. Odd that he'd mention that today. Oh, well, he'll forget all about it by morning.

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