

NOTOWN

By Tess Collins

(Chapter sample)

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For as long as Randi Jo Gaylor could remember, fear had been her guiding angel. She even knew what the seraph looked like: broad wings laced with chain, rope-tight muscles flinching at nocturnal sounds, surly eyes squinting in the dark, spread talons anticipating attack. And yet, It knew how to mimic defeat—a pleading, pitiful gaze that begged for mercy, baring purplish gums and jagged teeth. At times, the hollow sound of submission had been Its survival. Maybe if life had been kinder to Randi Jo, she might now be holding a wedding corsage instead of a gasoline can ready to torch a man she'd once loved.

He stared at her with eyes of fear. Licorice-colored irises followed her as she paced in front of him. His pasty forehead sweated raindrops and she wished she could see his mouth—that know-it-all grin had once made her tingle like a teenager meeting a movie star. She peeled a side of gray duct tape from his cheek. Fear-latticed eyes glared at her on the edge of panic. She paused, thinking, *there's that word again.*

Fear.

She pressed down the tape and gave his jaw a smack. His wrists twisted against nylon cord trapping them tightly to the chair arms. He'd given up kicking out his spread-eagled legs, also tied firmly. Her grandfather had built the oak chair, buttressed against an interior wall. Strong wood. Strong chair. Mettle infused that wood, so strong only an ax could break it.

“Ship to China’s already sailed, sweetness,” Randi Jo mocked words he’d once said to her. “So drop the crabby act.” She set the gasoline can aside and stared past the man tied to the chair, out a window she used to call the Daydream Portal. Her gaze traveled down the wrinkled hillside, across rusted railroad tracks scorched from overloaded L&M trains hauling coal from the mines. In her memory the haunted wail of a train whistle rumbled on a cold fall day, mixing with the crunch of her feet kicking dead leaves along the track. Running parallel to them was a weathered two-lane road, over-paved until it protruded from the ground like a swollen tongue. Wink’s Market clung to an older chunk of Laynchark Avenue. The store remained one of her favorite childhood haunts and stirred memories of candy melting in her mouth as she watched a lanky teenage boy sprawled on the steps licking an ice cream cone into a swirl. Hunger pinched her gut.

Randi Jo knew to wait until dark before igniting the blaze, or the Quinntown Fire Department might make it up the hill before the deed was done. At night they wouldn’t come as quickly as for a fire in a more prosperous neighborhood. Townfolk thought Notown was the home of nogoods, good-for-nothings, and the poorest white trash in Crimson Country. Three streets, half a dozen hills, two thousand residents, and if half of it burned down, Quinntown would consider that a favor from the good Lord.

Crimson County anchored the southeast portion of Kentucky, deep in Appalachia’s Cumberland Mountains. The big show was Contrary, a place everybody aspired to go, where there were beauty shops and banks, restaurants and jewelry stores. Flowers grew in planters lining the main street and creek banks were, for the most part, clean and free of yesterday’s trash and discarded washing machines. To the east sat

Quinntown, a white-trash cousin that acted better than it was, and Notown, its retarded little brother, the secret both communities tried to hide in case the outside might be looking in.

Notown led up to the mines. Its roads had crumbled from oversized coal trucks, the air was dusty with soot, the ground water poisoned, and every other hillside sodden with cancer-ridden old folk who refused to give up their unfiltered Camel cigarettes. Meanness ran in people's veins. Gangs of boys would throw rocks through your windows and knock down your mailbox as a rite of manhood. Most had been or would be in jail before their sixteenth birthday. As they got older they'd find a girlfriend, slap her into submission, and then pop out babies for the welfare money. The women were more likely to buy Maybelline makeup than food for their babies, dyed their mousy locks ice-blond, and ordered sluttish clothes from Fredericks of Hollywood. From girlhood they knew how to hold onto a man even if he occasionally strayed with a sister, cousin or best friend. After a hair-pulling knockdown, life eventually got back to normal. There wasn't nothing good about Notown that Randi Jo had ever known.

Her stomach growled. She looked over at him, still as a tree stump probably for the first time in his sorry life. He wasn't going anywhere and there were a few more items she had to buy. He grunted as she opened the door. "I'll be back," she said and blew him a kiss. "Promise."

Outside, June smelled like strawberries. Cautiously Randi Jo ambled down the forty-five-degree slope. Houses dotted the steep hillside like mountain climbers hanging on for dear life. Somehow the feeble pole porches held them up against wind, rain, flood and the carnage of man, almost as if they had sprouted from a fallow earth. Not one

building had changed since she'd been a child growing up here. The Dunway house that kids thought was haunted because it looked like a vacant-eyed skull. A clutch of four-room cabins lined the railroad track, yards were littered with rusted-out washtubs and disabled cars and furniture whose stuffing had seen better days. From one house radio gospel tunes rang out, from another rock-and-roll.

Quickly Randi Jo looked up and back at her mother's house. Chalkboard walls. Tin roof. The concrete porch was all that would stand if a strong wind shifted direction. This house defined her. Perched crooked on the hill, not facing the sunrise or the sunset, it seemed like an out-of-season fowl with no sense of direction, but to Randi Jo it was the one place she could breathe. *Randi Jo Gaylor, the nobody from Notown*, the downtown kids used to tease her, elongating *no* and *No* into a little song.

She crossed the railroad track and cut through a backyard to the main road. Mrs. Cooley weighed three hundred pounds now and couldn't twist her neck to see who might be on her property. Ever since her only son died in Vietnam she'd sit in her porch rocker every afternoon, rain, shine or snow, counting the school kids who walked by as if waiting for a ghost to pass or for Armageddon to arrive. Farther on, Connie Phillips parked a green van painted with American eagles behind her house but didn't notice the petite woman looking both directions before crossing Laynchark Avenue. Nor did Nora Pryor as she hung white sheets on a clothesline. On husband number six with thirteen kids, two of the girls pregnant and none of the boys living at home, Nora positioned the sheets to hide her current husband's personal patch of marijuana.

Wink's Market had been Randi Jo's hangout as a young girl and she wondered if that family still owned it. The boy who had been eating ice cream was long gone when

she arrived. The building's off-white paint had dulled with the thickness of several coats. Redbrick planters lined one side where pansies caught the late afternoon sun. The rusted red-and-gold weighing machine was gone and Randi Jo felt a sad pang of what used to be. She swung open the door and a chime wrinkled the air.

A blond-haired girl of about eighteen perched on a counter stool, reading *Glamor* magazine. She glanced up, studied Randi Jo, then went back to flipping pages. The smell of cooking wafted past, a meaty stew and dinner rolls. Pretty much the same, Randi Jo thought, as she looked around the one-room store that would have been the living room of a house. The Winks had lived in the back, a door to their quarters covered by two chenille blankets hung like drapes. A wooden beaded curtain had replaced those and a black terrier nosed its way through it to see who had entered.

Randi Jo leaned down and scratched the pooch behind the ears and the girl glanced over. "Mighty pretty dog," Randi Jo said.

"Sylvester's my Momma's." The girl went back to her magazine. "I prefer cats."

Randi Jo bought chips and soda, a bottle of Mr. Clean cleanser, a sponge, plastic gloves, pack of Marlboros, and a lighter. As she dropped them on the counter she noticed a rack filled with pink and white Sno Balls. The memory of marshmallowy sugar spread through her mouth. She chose a package of white, holding it in both hands like the tiniest of infants. Maybe if they'd had white Sno Balls all those years ago, she would never have fallen in love with Connor Herne.

When I was nine . . .

Pink Sno Balls were on the top shelf and I couldn't reach them. Chocolate cupcakes were on a bottom ledge but they lacked the coconut taste I craved. I was only fifty inches tall, small for my age. When my teacher, Miss Singer, acted concerned about my size, Momma told her my daddy was a little man, so not much else was ever said.

Old Mr. Wink sat on a stool behind a crumbly Masonite counter reading *The Crimson County Sun* and smoking a pipe that sent a whiff of nutty-flavored tobacco into the air. I kept an eye on his reflection as I studied soda bottles and picked out an Orange Crush and Lays potato chips. I only had fifteen cents and didn't want to spend it all. If he would turn around I might be able to shake a pink Sno Ball off that top shelf. I wished even more that they had the white ones. I loved white Sno Balls. They reminded me of the first winter snow, when the air vibrated crystal and the world was clean.

Good thing Mr. Wink's wife ain't working now, I thought. Can't steal a thing under with her beady hawk eyes. She could grab a pack of Winston cigarettes stacked behind her, bag it with the other groceries, ring up the cash register, and still keep count of what boy was reading which Tarzan comic book in the far aisle. Mr. Wink, on the other hand, often fell asleep listening to his radio or he'd open his newspaper so you could pocket candy without him noticing. With him, it was all in picking your moment.

I waited. He opened the news page wide. The headlines were bold and announced something about people arguing over whether to make Israel a new state. I'd learned in school that we had forty-eight, so, you know, what's one more? I crept up beside the shelf, stood on my toes and, using the Orange Crush to give me a few more inches of height, popped the soda bottle through the wire stand and sent a Sno Ball up into the air. Catching it with my free hand, I slipped it under my skirt and into my panties.

Mr. Wink put down his newspaper and stared at me over thick glasses that made his amber eyes look like huge ladybugs. "Ready, little sweetie-pie?"

"Just this Orange Crush and chips." I slid a dime across the counter.

"Let me open that for you." He held the pop bottle against the backside of the counter and tore off the lid. The aroma of orange sent sparks through my mouth. "There you go, little sweetie-pie."

"Thank you, Mr. Wink." I pushed open the front door and a shopkeeper's bell dinged. The hot August sun brought out a slew of kids playing around the railroad tracks. The Barton brothers were fighting and a crowd had gathered round them. Good. Nobody would notice me. I traipsed up the hill toward our house behind the high weeds overgrowing the banks of a dry gully. I could hardly wait to get the first bite of the Sno Ball. The best place to eat was in Daddy's fishing boat locked in the garage. If there was sugar around, my twin sisters would smell it and come running. Hiding my food was something I'd learned to do a long time ago.

The busted lock on a high window of the garage dangled by a screw. I pulled a ladder leaned against the coal shed over to where I could climb up and poked my head through the window. An oily, dank smell filled the dark room but strips of sunlight

through the flat-board walls cast enough light for me to see. I pulled myself inside. It was a short drop onto a rusted icebox that we didn't use anymore since getting electricity. From there I stepped into Daddy's silver canoe. I liked sitting in the tip. It was small, pointy, and just my size.

Trying to sip the Orange Crush to make it last and tearing open the packaging of the Sno Ball was like a blur. I gulped more than sipped then pressed my whole mouth into that chewy marshmallow with chocolate blended in. For sheer joy I couldn't see as the flavors exploded in my throat.

"Who's in here?" my older brother called from the high window.

"Me," I told him sternly. "Go away, Pug!" I don't know why I said it 'cause I knew he wouldn't, and within seconds his head leaned in the window as far as his shoulders.

"What'cho you doing in here?"

"None of your beeswax. I said go away!"

He crawled the rest of the way in, landed on the icebox, and stepped into the boat.

"You steal that?" He pointed at my Orange Crush, chips and Sno Ball.

"Did not. Bought it with my fifteen cents Daddy gave me last week."

Pug squatted, causing the canoe to shift. He was a fat little boy even though he wasn't all that much taller than me. He reached to take my Sno Ball and I kicked at him. He smacked me across the mouth and took it anyway.

"Mmmm," he moaned, staring down at me, chocolate and pink coconut on both cheeks as he bit into it.

“You’re a snotty, fat pig.” Tears welled up in my eyes and he made a face at me and took the Orange Crush and chips, too. Without so much as a word, he and my food were crawling out the high window. I sat on the edge of the boat looking after them, knowing there wasn’t much I could do. “Fat pig!” I screamed after him. I heard him laughing as he climbed down the ladder. I kicked the other side of the boat, trying not to cry. I only had a nickel left. I picked at chocolate crumbs on the boat seat and licked them off my thumb, then crawled out the window and went to the house.

Mayonnaise and white bread, along with some powdered milk, were in the refrigerator but other than that and two sweet pickles there wasn’t much else to eat. Unless you considered beans. Pinto beans simmered in a big tin pot on the coal stove. Momma boiled them up on Monday and that crusty soup pan sat there until Thursday, giving the house a salty aroma. I hated beans but ate a lot of them.

I crawled up on a chair and dipped in a spoon, dry and mushy from two days of being re-heated. I didn’t want beans. I wanted a Sno Ball.

My sister Kim stood at a cracked mirror nailed over the sink, applying eye makeup.

“Pug took my Orange Crush and Sno Ball.”

She spit on the tip of an eyeliner brush and began lining her eyes. “Pug’s a pig.”

“That’s what I told him.” My nose burned and I still felt like crying.

She looked over at me. “How much money you got?”

“A nickel.”

She lined her other eye then cast a glance toward the living room. “Momma, me and Randi Jo are going out walking.”

I could see the back of Momma's head as she sat beside the radio, leaning her ear toward it to make out the sound through crumbly static. "Hush up," she yelled back. "My story's on."

Kim motioned for me to come with her and we pranced down the hill to walk the railroad tracks and crossed to the paved road. We slowed down as we passed Wink's and looked inside. "Shoot," Kim said. "Ole lady Wink is perched at the register."

"Well, scrap that," I said and pointed to the street. "Let's go over to Notown Road. Least three stores there."

"Read my mind." Kim petted the top of my head and we walked on. "Wait," she said and jerked my arm hard.

"What?" Suddenly I saw why she'd pulled me back. Two colored men were crossing Gray's Pin, a hairpin curve that divided white Notown Road from the Negro section of Divergence. Gray's Pin was the only place where both races could go and so that area was called Gray. The coloreds would no more come onto Notown Road than a white would venture up into Divergence. Gray's Pin was shared, usually when a white was there the coloreds held back, and if a Negro was winding around the bend then the white people waited for him to finish crossing. If ever a white and a colored ended up on the same patch of land at the same time, there was always talk that somebody would get killed. But I'd never known that to happen. Maybe we were lucky or just had more common sense than outsiders supposed. It was like this—they have their road and we have ours, and all of us understood that.

I backed up against Kim and waited. Both roads curved onto Laynchark Avenue where our house sat high on the mountainside. Either white or colored could go on

Laynchark, which led through Quinntown and over into Contrary, Kentucky, one long, snaky road growing out of Notown's rotting roots and ending up in Contrary's fine redbrick houses. Everybody in Notown wanted to live in Quinntown, and everybody there wanted to live in Contrary. Folks who lived in town were different. Somehow, they smelled better. I'm not sure why but we all acted like we'd been brought up by the Queen of Sheba when we went to town. Except for Pug, who always acted like a fool.

Kim held my hand as the two colored men crossed. One of them glanced at Kim. He looked away real fast and her hand tightened on mine. She tapped her foot impatiently as if they were taking too long. The two men continued up the road toward Divergence. Kim tugged me and we crossed onto Notown Road.

"New place at Stony Fork creek," she said. "Herne's Market and Barbershop."

"Sounds fine," I answered, but knew she wanted to loll around the bridge at the creek. That's where boys hung out.

I looked back at Gray's Pin. The two men had disappeared. I thought they might have followed us although it would have been crazy for a colored man to come on Notown Road. It was hard being around colored people. I was not supposed to talk to them or I'd get whipped.

I liked Kim. She was my older sister by six years but she treated me fine. There were nine of us in all, but half the time I couldn't remember the little ones' names. They were always screaming for something or other and I just yelled, "Shut up!" Let's see, there was Gene, Melvin, and Casper, the three boys younger than me, Kim, and Pug, there was the twins Patsy and Rhoda, also known as the three-year-old terrors, who did most of the screaming, and there was baby Gregory, who for a infant was pretty good and didn't cry much even though he did stink up the house. Pug's real name was Burl but he always got into fights, and once it took three deacons from the Holiness Church to carry him down the aisle and throw him out the door. The preacher banned him from services for "pugnacious behavior." Since then we'd called him Pug.

I was named after my father, Randy Joseph Gaylor. He worked in the coal mines, leaving the house around four a.m. and was usually asleep by the time I got home from school, so we didn't see him all that much unless it was summer. Daddy's foreman at the mines called him a squirrelly man who was part gnome because he could fit into the smallest places and still bring out a brimming bucket of coal. He was proud of that and usually at the end of the week had loaded more coal than any man on his shift. Momma was Malva. She traded paperback romances with her friend Brenda Cooley and smoked Camel cigarettes. She hollered a lot and after a while we tuned her out unless she was about to whip one of us. Mostly she listened to her stories on the radio. *The Guiding Light* was her favorite. She worried about those people on the radio and whether they'd

be able to work out their problems okay. Momma is a worried kind of person. Kim and me kept the house. My job was sweeping and that was okay with me.

When Kim and me got to the bridge, Bo Raynes was smoking with some of his buddies so I figured it'd be a while before we went into the store. Kim sauntered past them and leaned against the concrete railing. Her body was long and curvy like Momma's and she practiced a half-tilt Veronica Lake pose. It worked 'cause Bo, who was a few years older than her, left his friends and lit her a cigarette from his own. I went to the other side of the bridge 'cause I got all choky when smoke was blown in my face. Down by the gurgling water, a blond-haired boy about my age played at the edge of the creek. He had built a dam from creek rock, pooling the water into a circular pond. Beside him lay a toy boat made of twigs, peeled coffee tree bark and grape vines.

“Hey, Randi Jo,” Kim called out. “Bo wants to talk to you.”

I skipped across the road quick as I could. Any time Bo noticed me, giggly swirls boogied all through my stomach. Bo's blond sideburns grew down his cheeks and he flipped his bangs back from his forehead with a short black comb. He flashed that kind of grin that made you want to do anything for him and I stared up at him like a puppy eager to please.

“Wanna make a dime?” he asked.

“What do I have to do?”

He pointed at a house on the opposite side of the creek. “Run 'round to the rear and tell me how many windows are on the back wall.”

It sounded easy enough and, for a dime, it was a solid job, but to tell you the truth, I'd have done anything for Bo.

“Don’t let anybody see you.”

Kim smiled, loopy from the cigarette smoke, and one of her hands rubbed Bo’s back. I re-crossed the road and crawled through a barbed wire fence, running the length of the yard. The house was set back a ways from the road. Brown creek rock formed its base and white tile sides set off the sparkling black tarpaper roof, partially shaded by a giant beech tree. Yellow husks covered the ground around the tree and purple irises grew alongside a concrete porch. I squatted, ducked under a window, and flattened myself against the wall. I counted four windows, two on each side of a back door. Around back a stone well built beside a smokehouse stood opposite a barn and chicken coop. Looked like some grapevines covered part of a dog lot and out near the creek three white bee hives lined up beside an outhouse.

From inside the house, a woman’s voice carried wavy as water and her song described the banks of the River Jordan. Peeking in the back door, I saw a brown-headed woman, her back toward me as she ironed. Don’t think I’d ever seen a cleaner house. Bedroom with pink bedspreads and lace doilies on the pillows. This room seemed to be a catch-all space filled with a foot-peddled sewing machine, a brand new radio with a Victrola underneath it, and assorted canned foods lining several shelves. Peaches. Okra. Tomatoes. Green beans. Russet-colored honey still on the comb.

“What’s workin’ you?” a boy’s voice asked.

I spun around fast as a dog chasing its tail. The boy from the creek stood a short distance away staring at me. He held his boat against his hip and scratched his head. My face heated up and my knees trembled. The awful feeling of being caught replaced the giddiness of Bo’s favor. “Heard pretty singing,” I lied. “Thought I’d listen a spell.”

The woman's voice gently lifted out the open door. He glanced at the house and I turned and ran. At the road, I looked back, grateful he hadn't chased me off.

"Took longer than piss," Bo said, impatiently

"No windows," I lied again. I couldn't tell them about being caught looking inside the house by the boy. "Just a locked door."

"Dern it," he said and glanced at his friends.

"Let's haul over to Quinntown," a snaggle-toothed boy said. "Fancier houses over yonder." Bo got up to leave.

"What about my dime?"

"That ain't worth a dime." Bo wagged a finger at me.

"Kim!" I looked at my sister and pouted. She flashed a big smile for Bo and pinched his arm.

"She did as you asked. You owe her the dime."

He dug into his pocket and flipped the coin to me. I caught it and held it in my fist tight as I could. After Bo and his friends left, I sat on the bridge with Kim while she finished the cigarette. "They gonna rob that house?"

She didn't answer. Instead, she grabbed my hand and pulled me to the store as she flicked the cigarette into the creek. "Mr. Herne's in the barber shop so grab a Sno Ball faster than spit."

His door had a bell too, and he smiled as we came in and said, "Howdy-do." A mint-green wall split the store from the barbershop. Two barber chairs with lion paw arms sat opposite mirrors that reflected each other in eternity. The room smelled of lacquer, and mounds of hair were piled around one chair. Mr. Herne was cutting Vincent

Maroney's hair and he had a lot of it. Some people said he was so hairy his momma must've been a bear. Kim gave me a nudge and I went to the store while she looked at barrettes clipped to a cardboard cutout of a smiling woman who favored Lana Turner.

The Sno Balls were on a shelf I could reach. Even though Kim said there was nobody else in the store, I liked to check it out myself and looked down the length of the room. I reached for the white Sno Ball, holding the edge of my dress so I could quickly scoop it into my bloomers.

"Little girl?"

My heart jumped like a spooked rabbit. Behind me, a teenage girl perched cross-legged on a counter like a cat hanging on a tree limb. I must've walked right past her and not seen. Either that or she had a way of making herself invisible. She wore thin wire-framed glasses that made her eyes seem big and bulged out like Mr. Wink's, and her dirt-colored hair was twisted into a topknot. I dropped the Sno Ball back on the shelf. "I'm looking while I wait on my sis." I pointed at Kim.

The girl closed the book open on her lap and hopped off the counter. She was taller than Kim and probably a few years older. "Think I can't see what you got up your sleeves?"

"I don't have any sleeves." My face warmed up but I looked into her eyes just as mean as I could. Kim could probably stomp her and I had half a mind to yell out.

Just then the door slammed so hard it covered the sound of the dinging bell. The girl and I looked in that direction. The woman from the house stood just inside the door, frowning like a frog and holding the boy by the arm.

"No, Momma!" the boy cried, his face twisted in a scowl.

She jerked him forward and lifted him into the barber chair. The girl went to the front and I followed her. Kim gave me a nod like this was the perfect time to get the Sno Ball but I couldn't help wanting to see what was happening.

"Everything all right, Mom?" the girl asked.

"Your brother has lice." The woman struggled to hold the boy in the second barber chair.

"Do I have to pick it out?" the girl complained.

"Leave me alone." The boy twisted but his mother held him firm. "Ain't got no lice!"

"Tempy," the woman said firmly to the girl, "mind the store." She nodded toward Kim and me, and suddenly Tempy turned toward us like a hawk on rats.

"Connor, hold still." The boy slipped out of the barber chair but his mother grabbed him by the scruff of the neck.

"Here, son." Mr. Herne stepped away from Mr. Maroney. "I'll take care of that lice." With a few strokes of the shaver Connor's blond hair fell from his head in cake-like strips. His hands gripped onto the lion's paws as if pain seared through him and his lower lip trembled. His cheeks warmed pink and finally, big puppy tears escaped his squinted eyes. With the last swipe of hair gone, he bolted out of the chair and whizzed passed me. The door banged in its frame and the bell swayed wildly.

"You got the money for that?" Tempy asked Kim.

Kim had been watching as well and took advantage of the haircut episode to slip a barrette in her bra. I could tell she wanted the other one too but now that Tempy was on us, she couldn't take the chance. I came up next to my sister and offered her my dime.

After all, she was the one who got it for me so I guess I could do without a Sno Ball.

While Kim paid for the second barrette, I went outside and waited for her.

Peering over the bridge, I saw Connor throwing rocks hard as he could into the creek. “Hey,” I yelled down at him.

“Leave me alone!” he yelled. The peaks of his face were pink as cherries.

“You can get a cap to cover your head and it won’t look so bad,” I said.

He hurled the rocks, splashing water high as possible.

“They have ’em at John’s Store for a nickel.” I waited silently. “I’ll loan you my nickel.” I held out the shiny coin that I had left. He picked up a rock and threw it at me. It missed by a mile but I figured right now I wouldn’t look over the bridge rail again. I felt sorry for that boy—Connor Herne. Until that time I’d always had a crush on Bo even though I knew he liked Kim.

Connor had pluck, challenging his mother like that, then taking his medicine. He reminded me of the wounded hero in Daddy’s Jack-tales, and even though Connor had thrown a rock at me I had a feeling we could be friends.

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