Where Mercy Begins

MIRACLES & MYSTERIES of MERCY HOSPITAL

KATHLEEN Y’BARBO
“Charleston has a landscape that encourages intimacy and partisanship. I have heard it said that an inoculation to the sights and smells of the Carolina low country is an almost irreversible antidote to the charms of other landscapes, other alien geographies. You can be moved profoundly by other vistas, by other oceans, by soaring mountain ranges, but you can never be seduced. You can even forsake the low country, renounce it for other climates, but you can never completely escape the sensuous, semitropical pull of Charleston and her marshes.”

—Pat Conroy
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Chapter One

It was the beginning of a beautiful June Tuesday in Charleston. The cool of the night had not yet given way to the heat of summer, and the ever-present sea breeze rustled the leaves of palm trees permanently bent inland. The unpredictable spring weather was behind them, and the heat of July had not yet arrived.

Joy Atkins spent the two-block walk from her home to work as she always did—praying about the coming day and being grateful for the beauty around her. Straight ahead was the Charleston Harbor. She could just see the shoreline peeking around the old wing of Mercy Hospital, her destination. Halfway there, she looked left and caught a glimpse of Rainbow Row—a line of historic row houses painted in pastel colors that reminded her of the Caribbean.

“Good morning, Mercy.” Joy smiled up at the Angel of Mercy statue that had graced the south side of Charleston’s Mercy Hospital for as long as anyone could remember—longer than anyone who walked this path had been alive. For this beautiful and modern hospital had its roots in the original building, which was built in the 1820s. The statue was lovingly situated in a beautifully landscaped area with flower beds and several benches where staff sometimes came to take their much-needed breaks.
Mercy was old by most standards but not here in Charleston, where age was a measure of pride—at least in statues and buildings. If only it worked that way for people.

Joy patted the statue’s foot and winked at the beautiful stone woman, a habit she’d acquired soon after coming to Charleston and taking the job at Mercy Hospital’s gift shop. For the past several months she’d been taking a detour to the south side of the hospital every morning to greet the angel before backtracking her way to the front entrance. While she no longer required daily treks past the statue in order to gather her thoughts and find solace in her new role as a widow and her new life managing the shop, she kept up the habit of visiting the old girl because she found her to be good company and an excellent listener.

Not that the ageless Angel of Mercy looked old. Rather, she was beautifully young with smiling features and a kind face that radiated happiness. A strange way to describe a statue made of stone, and yet it was true.

One look at the angel and Joy could smile, no matter if the news of the day was good, bad, or somewhere in between. Thus, it only seemed right to offer some response. And though the angel had never returned the gesture, Joy half expected to get a wink back someday.

Someone else must have agreed with Joy’s assessment of the statue, for occasionally a beautiful Noisette rose, a pale cream bloom with a crimson center, was waiting when she arrived at work. Perhaps it was a tribute to the angel or, possibly, to someone else. Either way, the appearance of the rose always prompted Joy to pray for the person who left it.
She retraced her steps to the front of the building and the main entrance. As the automatic doors opened to admit her into the hospital’s lobby, she shifted the bundle of freshly cut flowers from her garden so as to keep the delicate iris blooms safe from accidental jostling. Though her official job was manager of Mercy Flowers and Gifts, she often became a supplier as well when she supplemented the floral inventory with blooms from her own little patch of abundance. Wilson had called her love of gardening endearing, although he certainly must have had his moments when whatever she was growing that season took over their yard and nearly all available indoor space as well.

What a wonderful man, her husband. When questioned, Wilson would refer to all the greenery, flowers, fruits, and vegetables as Joy’s Abundance. Thus, any spot where she put in a garden was her patch of abundance. Wilson had even taken to his woodshop—that small space he’d carved out of their garage where no plants were allowed—to make a beautiful wooden sign. Even now, the Joy’s Abundance sign held a place of honor in the rear garden of her new house after the movers had transported it more than a thousand miles away from the home she’d shared with Wilson.

“Good morning, Joy,” her friend Evelyn Perry called as she hurried past, likely headed to her office in the Records Department.

“Good morning to you,” she responded.

Evelyn paused to look at Joy. “Oh, those irises are beautiful. Mine aren’t blooming yet.”

Joy smiled. Evelyn was a busy working woman with a full life and a job that often required her to work long hours. Though she and her history professor husband had no children of their own, it
hadn’t taken Joy long to see that Evelyn had become surrogate grandmother to uncounted numbers of the hospital’s youngest patients. She loved flowers, but the growing of them was another subject. Joy had an entire section of her garden devoted to plants she had rescued from Evelyn in just the past few months.

“Did you fertilize like I suggested?” she asked her friend, already suspecting she knew the answer.

Evelyn returned her grin. “I handed that job over to James, so I don’t know. Say, are you free for coffee around ten? I’ve got something I’d like to talk to you about, and it’s not flowers. Actually, I’m thinking of putting together a wedding shower for Nancy Jones, a sweet nurse up in maternity. She’s getting married soon, and I don’t think she or her young man have any family here to give her any sort of send-off into marriage.”

Joy nodded. “Coffee sounds great. See you then.”

Evelyn offered a wave before ducking into the hall on the opposite side of the building from the elevators. Joy hurried on, her pace slowed by the people milling about the lobby, her favorite place of the entire hospital other than the gardens.

Joy looked skyward, as was her habit, and smiled. Overhead, a painted blue sky with wisps of clouds remained from the original building and made the space always sunny no matter what the weather was outside. An ancient gas lamp, now electrified, hung from the center of the ceiling, its cut crystal pieces dancing in the breeze from the air conditioner and showering the gloriously veined white marble floor with spirals of tiny rainbows.

The lobby’s modern touches blended perfectly with the beautiful antique doors and stained-glass windows that marched
along walls covered in ancient cypress panels and dotted with artwork done by the patients over the years. In pride of place on the mezzanine of the second-floor walkway was an Alfred Hutty original painting depicting Mercy Hospital as it looked in the early 1900s.

Just like the city itself, Mercy Hospital had perfectly blended old and new, modern and antique. And though she missed Texas and the life she’d shared with Wilson, she was quickly falling in love with her newly adopted home. If only she could find her place here—the spot where she belonged. She chuckled when she thought of something Evelyn had told her. When Alfred Hutty first came to Charleston after serving in World War I, he had wired home to his wife, “Come quickly, have found heaven.”

Another glance at the painting above and she smiled. She’d known the move here was meant to be. Now she’d just have to muster up a bit of the patience she too often lacked to find out just why He had planted her here.

Juggling the flowers and her purse in order to retrieve her keys, Joy lost her grip on both. The keys went sliding on the marble floor while the flowers and her purse landed at the feet of Dr. Chad Barnhardt, an emergency room physician.

“Here, let me help. I’ll get these. You go find those keys.”

Tall with sandy brown hair that faded to silver at the temples, Dr. Barnhardt was known for his strict adherence to the rules and his penchant for long hours and hard work. He also had a nice smile despite a reputation for being a bit of a grump on occasion.

The doctor gallantly scooped up the flowers and then snatched up her purse while Joy chased after her keys, which had become
wedged behind an oversized urn filled with greenery. A moment later, she let herself into the shop and turned on the lights.

Dropping her keys into her pocket, Joy gratefully accepted the flowers and purse from the doctor and took them to the back of the store. Stowing her purse under the antique counter that used to be the hospital’s front desk during the first half of the previous century, she gently laid the irises out in front of her.

“Thank you so much.” Joy gave him an appraising look and found his handsome face etched with what could only be exhaustion. “Won’t you sit down and have a cup of coffee? It’s on a timer so that it starts brewing just about the time I get here. There’s nothing more lovely than fresh coffee on a beautiful morning.”

He gave her a grateful smile as he leaned against the doorway. “I’d like that, but I’m on my way home to catch some sleep.”

“Another twenty-four-hour shift?” At his nod, she continued. “Oh my stars, I don’t see how you doctors manage it. I know there are places for y’all to hide and catch a nap, but I just couldn’t go that long without a proper eight hours.”

Dr. Barnhardt’s smile faltered. “I vaguely remember what eight hours of sleep is like. The need for it is successfully trained out of us somewhere between studying for our MCATs and the first year of medical school.”

“Bless your heart,” she said. “You need to take a vacation.”

He straightened and shook his head. “Not while we’re understaffed and there’s a hiring freeze going on. No one’s getting any time off. I know you believe in miracles, so maybe you should pray that the board increases our budget for the next fiscal year so we can hire some help. Even a few well-qualified interns would be welcome.”
There it was. Another reminder of the hospital’s budget issues and the accompanying hiring freeze. Joy mustered a smile.

“Well now,” she said. “I most certainly can do that, but then you know I’m always happy to pray for you.”

The doctor gave her a sideways look. The subject of prayer had quickly become a sore one between them. Joy knew the man standing before her would one day give up on his lack of faith and accept what she already knew, namely that the Lord loved him and was worthy of love from him in return.

But she had been gentle in her prodding and respectful in their conversations. Thus, while Dr. Barnhardt seemed resistant to faith, he was apparently not resistant to the occasional mention of it from Joy.

A bell rang behind her letting Joy know the coffee was ready. She held up her hand. “Wait right there,” she said, her Texas drawl creeping through. “I’ll be back in two shakes of a lamb’s tail.” She hurried to the back room and poured the doctor a cup. “Here ya go, honey. Black coffee, no cream or sugar,” she told him when she reappeared.

His grin broadened. “Just the way I like it. How do you remember these things?”

Joy shrugged. “I just do. Now go home and get some rest. But take a few sips on your way so you don’t fall asleep before then, please.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said as he accepted the coffee and headed toward the door, weaving his way through a rush of shoppers entering the shop. “Thank you,” trailed behind him.

“Anytime,” she said to the retreating doctor. And in the meantime, I’ll be praying for that miracle. And a well-qualified intern, Joy thought as she watched the doctor depart the building.
Between assisting the shoppers and answering phone calls for floral orders for patients, Joy barely noticed that the morning had passed. “It’s a pity my part-time assistant’s position is on hold thanks to budget constraints,” she muttered, using the words that HR had sent in the email she received a week ago. “Oh well. Maybe I can find myself another volunteer.”

When Evelyn called and began a lengthy apology, Joy glanced up at the clock. Almost noon. Where had the time gone?

“So I promise, next time I’ll be there,” Evelyn continued. “But there was this absolutely adorable little girl who was just admitted, and her mama was having a bit of trouble getting her to settle down, so I found some children’s books, and the next thing I knew I had missed our coffee and a whole lot of other things I should have been doing.”

“Relax,” Joy said. “I only just now noticed the time.”

“So you wouldn’t have been there either?” Evelyn laughed. “We are a fine pair, aren’t we?”

“I’m glad you called.” Joy glanced around the shop to make sure it was empty before slipping into the back room. “I’ve got a prayer request. Dr. Barnhardt needs a miracle and an intern. Actually, a well-qualified intern,” she corrected.

“I see.” There was a long pause, and then Evelyn said, “Did he ask you to pray for that?”

“He did. Using those exact words.” The bell rang on the door, alerting Joy to incoming shoppers. “Sorry, gotta go. I’ve got a customer.”

“Okay,” Evelyn said. “I can’t wait to see what God does with this.”

“Neither can I,” Joy agreed. “I have a feeling it’ll be something good.”
The remainder of the day flew by, and the next thing Joy knew, she was locking up the shop. She loved her job, and she especially loved those days when time slipped away and then returned to surprise her hours later.

Shrugging her purse over her shoulder, she crossed the now-empty lobby and stepped out into a glorious Charleston afternoon. Her phone buzzed in her purse, likely a text from her daughter, Sabrina, asking how her day at work had gone.

She retrieved her phone and texted Sabrina back. Moving to Charleston had certainly been the right decision. With her daughter and grandchildren nearby, her life was full even if a big part of her heart was still aching over the loss of her husband.

Joy spent the evening quietly putting in her garden until the lack of light forced her to go inside. As she went about her nightly routine of dinner and bedtime with a favorite book and some television in between, she once again prayed for Dr. Barnhardt. He would have his miracle, of this she was certain.

The next morning, Joy awakened surer of Dr. Barnhardt’s soon-to-come miracle than ever. As she passed Rainbow Row, she suddenly remembered the dollhouse her father had made for her sixth birthday. He’d painted it that exact shade of pink. Deep in thought, she arrived at the hospital and was startled to find the parking lot blocked and yellow crime scene tape across the path she always took to the angel. “What’s happening?” she asked an officer stationed nearby once she’d made her way to him.

He waved his hand behind him as his radio squawked. “The angel is gone.”
“The angel statue is gone?” Joy’s heart lurched. Then she shook her head. “Impossible!”

“Tell that to my boss,” he said, giving her a look that said he had no patience for this line of questioning. The tall, thin policeman with a clipboard under his arm scrutinized her. The nameplate over his pocket said WILLIAMS, J.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

“Joy Atkins,” she said, clutching her bundle of blooms as she looked around and then back at the officer. “I run the gift shop here at the hospital. And I walk by Mercy—the statue—every day. I declare, I can’t imagine that someone just took her. I mean, how could they, for goodness’ sake? She’s a heavy, life-size statue on a pedestal beside a very busy hospital.”

Officer Williams held out the clipboard and then reached for the pen in his pocket. “Did you see anything, Mrs. Atkins?”

“Heavens, how could I? I haven’t been over there,” she said. “You saw which direction I was walking when I came toward you. All I’ve laid eyes on are flashing lights, police officers, and crime scene tape.”

He looked at her over wire-rimmed glasses. “So the answer is no.”
“No, sir,” she echoed. “I mean yes, sir, the answer is no.”

“When were you last at the hospital?”

“Yesterday afternoon,” she said. “I closed up the gift shop around three and then walked down Tradd Street that way to go home.” She gestured behind her to indicate the direction of her normal route.

“And was there a flower on the statue’s base at that time?” Officer Williams asked.

“I don’t know,” Joy said. “I didn’t go by her on the way home. But sometimes there’s a flower there—a Noisette.”

“A Noisette?” The officer looked very confused, his pen in midair over the pad.

“Sorry, I’m a bit of a rosarian. A Noisette is a type of rose. Is there one there this morning?”

He ignored her question. “When was the last time you saw one? And did you see who put it there?”

“Probably two weeks ago,” she said. “And no, sir, I’ve never seen the person put the rose there. I figure they must do it at night. Did you find another one today?”

“Yes, a rose was found where the statue used to be. Unless forensics removed it already, it should be there.” Officer Williams eyed her curiously. “Why do you say they put it there at night if you’ve never seen anyone do it?”

“Oh,” Joy said. “Well, simple. I get here early, usually before seven. I was a little late today. I had a call from my granddaughter, and that put me a little behind schedule. But you know how it is with grandchildren. When they’re chatty, you just have to …” She trailed off.
The officer tilted his head. “So how does that figure into your theory that whoever is putting that flower on the statue is doing it at night?”

“Because when the rose is there on my morning walk in, it’s never wilted. I figure that whoever places the rose on the statue must do it within a few hours at most of when I see it. A rose doesn’t do well off the bush unless it’s kept in water.”

Officer Williams wrote something down then looked up at Joy. “So you’re usually walking by at what, six forty-five, give or take a few minutes?”

“Yes, sir. Thereabouts,” she said. “I set the timer to have the coffeepot on before the seven a.m. shift starts. It starts brewing at six forty-five then remains on warm until we use it up. The nurses and doctors appreciate it, and I am an early riser regardless.”

He nodded and went back to his writing. “And you’re saying the flower is just a few hours past having been taken out of water?”

“Oh yes. No more than that.”

“Because it isn’t wilted.”

A statement, not a question. Still Joy nodded. “Yes, sir, that’s right.”

“Anything else you can tell me, Mrs. Atkins?” He glanced up again. “Any suspicious persons that you’ve seen hanging around? Maybe threats you’ve overheard? People talking about putting a rose on the statue?”

“Threats? Oh no. People who come into the gift shop are generally either very kind or very quiet. The quiet ones are usually worried about a loved one who’s a patient here. I find that out over coffee or a discussion about gardening. Something like that.”
Joy paused. “Of course, not all of them open up to me, but some do.”

“Right. So,” Officer Williams said on an exhale of breath. “So no threats. And no talk of putting roses on the statue.” He looked down at the bundle of flowers in her hand. “No one buying a similar rose from you. Or you bringing one to place there?”

Joy frowned. “Excuse me, Officer, but that’s ridiculous. If I put a rose there, wouldn’t I have said so?” She shook her head. “A Noisette rose like that can’t be purchased in my shop, so that’s not possible either.”

His brows rose. “Why can’t it?”

“Because I’ve never seen one like it. It’s been a mystery to me for a while as to what kind it is. I’ve researched to see if I could place it, but so far, I haven’t found another example of it online. I’m just a hobbyist, so an expert rosarian might not be surprised to see a Noisette rose with that coloring, but I certainly am.”

The officer took a few more notes. “Anything else you can add to this?”

“No, I can’t think of anything,” she said. “Except that I’m very sad she’s gone, and I hope y’all find her soon.”

Officer Williams lowered his clipboard and put his pen in his shirt pocket. His gaze moved from her face to the bundle in her arms. “How can you be reached if the detectives have more questions?”

“As I said, I manage the gift shop. I’ll be there until three, maybe later depending on whether we have customers or not.”

“And a contact number besides your place of business?”

Joy gave the police officer her cell phone number. “You can always come by the shop too.”

“Duly noted,” he said dryly, though he didn’t write it down.
“Well,” she said as brightly as she could manage, “if that’s all, I’ll just get on in to work then.”

“Go ahead but take care that you don’t get behind the crime scene tape.”

With a nod to the officer, she set off down the sidewalk. As she stepped around the trees that shaded the pathway, Joy stuttered to a stop.

There behind the crime scene tape was a void where the Angel of Mercy had stood guard over the hospital for more than one hundred and fifty years—likely much more than that—and now she was gone.

“Unbelievable!”

“Exactly what I was thinking.” Joy turned to see that Anne Mabry had joined her on the sidewalk.

With her warm laughter and her penchant for exercising her gift for Southern hospitality whenever she could, Anne’s job as a hospital volunteer suited her. Her husband, Ralph, had recently retired from the pastorate and was serving as the hospital chaplain, which was another reason she loved her work.

Only this morning she wasn’t laughing. And for good reason.

Instead, Anne’s lovely smile had been replaced with a look of disbelief that likely matched her own. “Good night, nurse! I just can’t believe it’s gone,” she said as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I sometimes go see her on my break, and now she just … oh, that flower is here again.”

“Noisette rose,” Joy said, “and a rare one. I’ve never seen a red center on a Noisette of any kind. And it isn’t wilted, so it’s only been here for a few hours at most.”
Anne shook her head. “Seriously, Joy. I’m just beside myself. Who would do such a thing? The angel has stood in place for more than a century!”

Joy looked past Anne to see Evelyn hurrying toward them.

“What’s going on around here?” Evelyn demanded when she reached them. “There are policemen all over. I couldn’t even park in the garage without—” She stopped short and placed her hand over her mouth. “Oh.” She shook her head. “Oh,” she said again. “It’s gone.”

Then her eyes narrowed. Her shoulders straightened.

“Well that’s just not right,” she said. A stickler for order and protocol as well as a history buff, the head of the hospital records department was clearly indignant at the travesty that had befallen the hospital. “Someone’s got to do something about this!”

Joy nodded to the side. “I spoke to a policeman over yonder named Officer Williams. He took my statement.” She glanced at Anne then back to Evelyn. “If either of you saw something you thought was important, I’m sure he’d take your statements too.”

“I don’t know what I would have to say,” Anne said. “I’m just flabbergasted.” She let out a quick chuckle that held no humor. “I guess I’ve already made that clear.”

Joy looked toward the entrance of the hospital. “How about we talk about it over coffee?”

She led the way to the front entrance and into the lobby. Unlike the normal hushed atmosphere at this time of the morning, the space was filled with activity.

Two men and a woman in dark trousers, white shirts, and police badges hanging from around their necks on silver chains—
obviously police detectives—were huddled together near the elevators. All three looked up as Joy and her friends approached.

“Just opening the gift shop,” Joy called out as she jammed her keys into the lock of the gift shop door. “I have coffee ready if y’all would like some.”

“Thank you.” The female detective, a tall woman with dark hair and only the slightest bit of silver at her temples, smiled. “We’re fine for now.”

A moment later, her expression changed. She leaned in to the other detectives and said something then walked toward the ladies. “I assume at least one of you works here.”

All three nodded. “Yes, ma’am, that’s right,” Evelyn said. “I’m in the records department, Joy Atkins runs the gift shop, and Anne Mabry is a volunteer. My name is Evelyn Perry.”

“Detective Rebekah Osborne, Charleston PD. Pleased to meet you all. Obviously, you couldn’t miss the fact that the Angel of Mercy statue is missing. Have any of you spoken with a police officer about what happened?”

“I have,” Joy volunteered as she jangled her keys in the lock and then swung the door to the gift shop open. “On my way in I was interviewed by Officer Williams.”

“Officer Williams.” Detective Osborne retrieved a small notebook from her jacket pocket and made a note. Then she looked up. “And you are Joy Atkins, manager of the hospital gift shop.”

Joy tucked her keys into her pocket. “That’s right. Come on in. I’ve got fresh coffee already brewed.”

She turned on the lights with her free hand, being careful not to jostle the flowers she still held tucked under her other arm. “The pot
is in the back. I’ll just put these flowers in the sink back here and be with you in a minute.”

“All right,” the detective called.

When Joy returned with a tray holding three steaming mugs of coffee, she found Detective Osborne at the front counter deep in conversation with Evelyn while Anne nodded and interjected the occasional statement of her own.

“Coffee is ready.” She placed the tray on the counter. “I know how Evelyn and Anne like their coffees, but I didn’t think to ask you, Detective.”

“Black is fine,” she said. “And thank you.”

Joy retrieved the cup with no added sugar or creamer and handed it to Detective Osborne. “Give me just a sec, and I’ll go grab mine. I should probably get a bigger tray, but we rarely have more than one or two at a time who want my coffee.” She made a quick trip to the back room and filled her favorite mug, decorated with wildflowers, then returned to the group.

The detective was taking a sip from her mug. “It’s excellent coffee, Mrs. Atkins. I can’t imagine why there’s not a line out the door. Is this a local blend?”

“Thank you. And no, it isn’t. Before I moved to Charleston, I lived in Houston. There was a lovely man named Raphael who owned a coffee shop near me. When the requests started coming in for take-home versions of the coffee he was selling there, Raphael started bagging and selling his own coffee beans. Lucky for me, when I moved here to live closer to family, the company had become large enough to include shipping in their business plan.”
The detective took another sip and smiled. “It’s delicious. Do they sell it in Charleston?”

“I’m afraid not. I order for myself and get enough to supply the gift shop too.” She nodded across the lobby. “If they plan on lingering, most folks get their coffee over at the coffee shop, so I don’t require a large quantity here.”

Detective Osborne took one more sip and then set her mug down. “Before we go any further, I will need the name of that company. I’ve got to get some of this.”

Joy repeated the information she had given out to countless gift shop customers already. Then she chuckled. “I’ve told Raphael that he needs to send a stack of business cards with my next order. He probably gets a lot of sales through this shop.”

“For good reason.” The detective wrote down the name of Raphael’s company then sobered. “Thank you. Now, back to the missing statue. I’ll get Officer Williams’s notes, but is there anything you’d like to add to what you told him?”

Evelyn shrugged. “This is probably completely unrelated, but there was that guy who kept skateboarding around the statue a couple of weeks ago. Remember him?” she asked Joy and Anne. “Norm tried so hard to catch him.”

“I do,” Joy said. “Poor Norm. He skinned both knees and nearly broke his arm the last time he made the attempt.”

“Norm?”

“Norm Ashford,” Anne said. “He’s one of our security guards. He generally works the night or evening shift. He’s complained about a skateboarder coming up at night and trying to skate around the statue.”
“Recently?” she asked Anne.

“Well, I don’t know exactly, but he did mention it to me a few days ago in passing. We were talking about how difficult it is to keep kids from trampling the flowers or climbing on the statue. He said he’d caught someone standing on the statue base in the middle of the night. Said it was the strangest thing. The person was dressed all in black—long black pants and a black sweatshirt with the hood up—in this heat! When he walked up, they took off. I didn’t think to ask when it was, but it had to be at least a week ago that he told me about it.”

“Okay, thank you. I’ll check with Mr. Ashford about that, but there’s nothing unusual about a kid skateboarding on public property. Unfortunately, we deal with that a lot. They’re usually harmless, but because these guys tend to skate in groups and video themselves trying—and usually failing—to defy gravity, we get calls to handle them. I should add, though, that they’re generally skating where they shouldn’t be skating, so there’s that.”

“I don’t think that guy was one of them,” Evelyn said.

“Why do you think this?” the detective asked her.

“Well, if he’s the same guy I’m thinking of—and how many guys dressed like that in Charleston in June are there?—he wasn’t with anyone else, and he certainly wasn’t a kid.”

Detective Osborne paused in her note taking to look up at Evelyn. “How do you know?”

“Because I saw a skateboarder dressed like that a while ago too. My husband was away at a conference a couple of weekends ago, so I thought I’d spend some time organizing the storage room where the old hospital records are kept. I’m something of a night owl, and
I never can get anything extra like that done when my staff is here.” Evelyn paused. “I was just finishing up when I heard this odd sound.”

“What kind of odd sound?” the detective asked.

“A swooshing sound. Like wheels but nothing like the noise a cart or a gurney makes. I heard it again, so I went out into the hall and a skateboarder nearly ran me down. I guess he was going up and down the hall.”

“He,” the detective repeated as she went back to her notes. “A man.”

“Yes indeed, a man.” Evelyn nodded emphatically. “I couldn’t see much of his face because of the hood and his sunglasses, but I saw that he had a full beard. He was wearing all black from the shoes on his feet to the hood covering his head. And he had one of those cameras strapped to the front of him.” She chuckled. “I yelled at him when he passed me, and he just about fell off his skateboard. I think I startled him more than he did me. He jumped off his board, grabbed it, and ran for the stairwell. By the time I got to the stairs, he was long gone.”

“Dressed in black like the guy standing on the statue,” the detective observed.

“Yes,” Evelyn said. “Do you think he could be a suspect?”

“At the beginning of a case, everyone’s a suspect until someone proves they’re not.”
Chapter Three

The detective wrote a few more lines in her notebook then returned her attention to Evelyn. “Okay. What did the board look like? Can you remember anything about it? Color, length? Any detail would be helpful.”

“Well,” she said slowly, “I don’t remember anything specific about the top of the skateboard, but I do recall that the wheels were yellow.”

Detective Osborne nodded and made another note. “Did you tell security about what you saw?”

“Yes,” Evelyn said. “I called the security office Monday morning and told the guy who answered the phone about it. I think he just chalked it up to a visitor taking advantage of a long hall late at night.” She chuckled. “Believe me, it’s not the strangest thing a visitor has ever done.”

The detective scribbled some more on her notepad, allowing silence to fall between them. Finally she looked up.

“I think I’ve got what I need for now. Is there anything else that any of you would like to add?” When Anne shook her head, she turned her attention to Evelyn. “What about you, Mrs. Perry? Other than the mystery skateboarder, do you have any insights?”

Evelyn frowned. “Well, we did have a patient recently that might be of interest. HIPAA laws won’t let me divulge his name, but I can
say he had quite an unsavory reputation. He was here for an operation that required a lengthy stay—two weeks almost. The only reason I mention him is because we had several police officers ask for his records since he was here. One just yesterday.”

Anne nodded. “I remember rumors circulating about that man. But he was always very polite and kind to me. Nothing like the criminal I’d heard he was. So perhaps he wasn’t that kind of person anymore. People do change.”

Joy remembered the fellow Anne and Evelyn referred to very well. Alan Parker came in under police escort, not a completely unusual circumstance.

Often the emergency room was called upon to patch up a future prisoner before he or she was delivered to the Charleston jail. But Alan Parker was different.

The officers who guarded Parker during the time he was a patient at Mercy Hospital were not members of the Charleston police force. They wore serious expressions and dark clothing, and the guns strapped beneath their coats were impossible to miss. So were the black Suburbans posted at the front and back exits of the building.

No, there was something very different about Alan Parker.

“Okay, so if I am understanding you,” Detective Osborne said, “you had a high-profile patient recently. Would you say it was three weeks ago? More? Less?”

Evelyn gave her a doubtful look. “As supervisor of records, I don’t think it’s appropriate to be that specific. Let’s say he was recently here and leave it at that. I’m sure you understand we would tell you more if we could.”
Both Anne and Joy nodded.

“Yes, I understand,” Detective Osborne said. “And I’m sure I can get clearance to find out what I need to. If I do, I’ll come back with a subpoena so we can do this the right way.”

Evelyn smiled. “I’ll help however I can as long as you show me a subpoena.”

Detective Osborne closed her notepad. “I’ll do that, and no hard feelings. You have your job to do, and I respect that.” She took another quick sip of coffee and then put the mug down to retrieve three business cards from her pocket. “You ladies have been helpful. If you remember anything else, would you call me?”

Joy looked down at the card and then back up at the police officer. “We will, of course. I hope you bring her back soon. I miss her already.”

“We’re going to try.” The detective put away her notebook and pen. “I’m done here. Mrs. Atkins, I prefer you keep the gift shop closed to customers until the officer in charge gives you the all clear. Until then we’re in an active investigation zone.”

“Yes, all right,” Joy said. “I’m sure I’ll have phone orders for deliveries to patients. Is it okay for me to fill those orders and make those deliveries?”

“That should be fine. Just try as much as possible to stay in one place and be available to any of the officers who might need to ask follow-up questions.”

Norm Ashford, the elderly security guard who had been with the hospital since he retired from the Charleston Police Department, stuck his head into the gift shop.

“Hi, Norm,” Joy greeted him.
Norm grinned at her and said, “Detective Osborne, you’re needed out here.”

The detective stood. “Are you Norm Ashford? The man who saw someone standing on the statue recently?”

“That’s me. I gave my statement already, though,” he said.

“I’d still like to talk to you if you’ve got a minute.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He waved at the ladies then held the door open so Detective Osborne could exit the shop. Then, with a tip of his cap, Norm followed her down the hall.

Joy exhaled. “Well, this has been quite the beginning to our day, hasn’t it, ladies?”

“Oh, look at the time,” Anne exclaimed. “I need to get upstairs and check in.”

After Anne left, Evelyn turned to Joy. “I never gave that skateboarder another thought after I called security. Now I wonder if I was almost run down by the thief who took the Angel of Mercy. I should have insisted the security office look into the incident.”

“Think of it this way,” Joy said. “You were able to give a description.”

“Not good enough,” Evelyn said. “I didn’t see his face, and all I got off the skateboard was that it had yellow wheels.”

“Which may be all Detective Osborne needs to find him.”

“What is this world coming to?” a familiar voice called. “Anne told me I would find you all in here.”

Joy looked in the direction of the approaching voice and spied Nurse Shirley Bashore walking toward them. While Evelyn and Anne were longtime residents of Charleston, Shirley had only resided in the city for two months. She’d made the move in order to
better see to the care of her mother, who had also been a nurse until the early effects of a serious health issue made working impossible.

Joy’s grin was swift. “Good morning, Shirley. Evelyn and I were just wondering the same thing.”

Shirley shook her head and smoothed a wayward strand of hair into her pulled-back style. “How is it that statue stood there for over a century and no one messed with her until now? And of all things, someone took her while I was on duty.”

While waiting for a permanent spot on the day shift, Shirley had become a floater who worked in whatever unit she was needed. With a mother who needed her at home, Joy knew that Shirley was grateful for the work, though too often she ended up on the night shift.

“The police have been crawling all over the place,” Evelyn said.

“You wouldn’t know it up in maternity. It must be a full moon, because we’ve been so busy I barely remember taking a break all night.” She paused. “Have you heard if the police have any leads?”

“If they do, they’re not saying,” Evelyn said. “I’m sorry to do this, but I need to get to my office. I’ve got a phone meeting scheduled in a half hour, and I need to prepare for it. If either of you hear anything, would you let me know?”

Joy nodded. “Of course.”

“Much as I wish I could say yes to that, I’m headed home,” Shirley said as she waved goodbye to Evelyn. “The senior bus will have picked Mama up for her breakfast and bingo outing over at the center, so I’ll have the house to myself for a few hours. I’ve got laundry and housecleaning to do before I can think about getting some sleep.”
“I’ve been told to keep the gift shop closed until the officer in charge allows me to open again, so unless you’re anxious to get started on that laundry and housecleaning, come in and have some coffee and a chat first, Shirley,” Joy suggested. “I’ve got a stash of decaf I can brew for you.”

“Oh honey,” Shirley said with a hearty chuckle, “I don’t have to hurry. I’ll take the chat, but don’t even try to serve me that nasty decaf.” She retrieved a lime-green water bottle emblazoned with I AM THE LORD’S FAVORITE in rhinestones from her bag and showed it to Joy. “I’m trying to drink more water, although I have to admit it doesn’t taste near as good as cream soda.”

Joy leaned toward her. “I’m with you on the decaf, though I’d prefer water to cream soda any day.”

“That’s why you’re so trim, Joy,” Shirley said with a chuckle. “As soon as the Lord decides that fresh bread and butter is a vegetable, I will be the happiest of all His children. In the meantime, I’m just going to manage.”

“You manage quite well, it seems to me,” Joy told her. “Now come on. Let’s chat before you go home. I’d like to get to know you better.”

Shirley followed her into the back of the gift shop, where she sat on one of the two chairs on either side of the small table that was used for everything from taking breaks to tallying up inventory and marking prices on items for sale in the store.

“How are you settling in?” Joy asked her once she’d claimed her favorite wildflower-bedecked coffee mug and poured herself a cup. “I know it wasn’t easy making the decision to move here, but I’m sure your mother appreciates that you’ve done this.”
“Well, Mama and I have our moments, but we’ve mostly learned how to live under the same roof again. Still, I think the decision to move was easier than the decision to stay once I got here.”

“I wish I didn’t understand, but I do,” Joy said. “I guess the idea of what you’re headed toward propels you, but once you’re here you’re faced with how to live with your new normal.”

“It’s hard, isn’t it? You want to be there for the one you love, but what you think it’s going to be like isn’t necessarily what it turns out to be.” Shirley’s expression softened as her brown eyes focused on her hands now resting on the tabletop. “This isn’t easy to admit, me being a nurse and all, but I’m having a hard time with her. I can tell her what to do when she has one of her spells, but whether she does it or not depends on her mood and not because she believes I know what I’m talking about. To my mama I will forever be her child and not a grown woman with a nursing degree and plenty of years of experience.”

Joy took a sip of her coffee. “She’s your mother, and she’s used to being the one in charge.”

“I know you’re right,” Shirley said, “but I want the best for her, and I sure don’t mean to let her boss me around when her health is at risk.” She let out a sigh. “I love her, and I’m going to keep doing what I’m doing. As sassy as I am, well, you can imagine who I got it from.” She paused to laugh, and Joy joined her. “Somehow the Lord will show us the way. Of that I’m sure.”

“Yes, He will.” Joy took another sip of coffee and returned her mug to the table.

“You seem like you made an easy transition, Joy,” Shirley said. “I know you love your family, but tell me the truth. Are you sorry you moved here?”
“No,” Joy said slowly, “but I don’t know that I would say it’s been easy. I’m thrilled for the time I get to spend with my daughter and grandbabies, but it’s a completely different life than the one I lived in Houston. There’s so much I miss,” she admitted. “But now it seems like an eternity ago.”

“Oh, honey, I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. Of course you miss your husband.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Joy said. “And if wishes would bring him back, he’d be here right now. But the Lord called him home, and there’s no changing that. I’ve made peace with it.” She paused. “You know what I’m struggling with, though?”

“What’s that?”

She shrugged. “It’s going to sound silly. I’m a grown woman. I shouldn’t feel this way, but I still feel a little bit adrift. I’m not unhappy, but I haven’t quite settled into my place yet. I had so many irons in the fire in Houston, but that’s really not the case here.”

“Joy,” Shirley said slowly, “I could talk to you the rest of the morning about how I see that you fit in here at the hospital, but you feel the way you feel, and that’s that. Just like I plan to ask the Lord to give me a job that doesn’t change from day to day, I’m going to ask Him to heal that feeling in you. Is that too bold?”

She grinned. “Not at all. I’m a big fan of bold prayers.”

“I’m glad you think so. Mama raised me to be bold in my faith.” Shirley shook her head. “Enough of that. Catch me up on the scoop about the theft.”

Once Shirley was up to speed on the details, she sat back in her chair and shook her head. “And to think all of that happened while I was right here in the hospital.”
Joy nodded. “It certainly looks that way.”

Shirley’s expression grew determined. “You know what? I might not have had time to take a break last night, but I know some folks did. I wonder if I ought to ask around and see if anyone saw anything out of the ordinary.”

Joy perked up. “It couldn’t hurt. Something that seemed normal at the time may look suspicious now that people know what was happening to the statue overnight. I’ve got Detective Osborne’s card. Would you like the information?”

“Show it to me, and I’ll take a picture.”

Joy retrieved the card and set it on the table. Shirley snapped a photo.

Joy noticed a look of concern on Shirley’s face. “Is something wrong?”

“Something you just said has made me think. There was something normal that happened, but now that I think about it, I may need to follow up on it.” She reached for her phone and tucked it into her pocket. “I’m not ready to call the police yet, but I might, depending on what I find out when I come back to work tonight.”

A bell dinged, alerting Joy to someone’s arrival in the store. She rose and peered around the corner to see Officer Williams standing there.

“You’re free to open now, ma’am,” he said then ducked back out the door.

“Thank you,” Joy called before the door shut completely.

Joy turned back to Shirley, who gathered up her purse and stood.

“That’s my cue to say goodbye.” Shirley reached over to give Joy a hug. “Everything’s going to be fine, you know.”
Joy grinned. “I was about to tell you that.”

“We’re a fine pair.” Shirley’s expression sobered. “You know what might help you, Joy? I see all these beautiful flowers here, and I know you’ve got a talent for gardening. Have you thought about joining a garden club or something like that? Mama used to belong to the local one. She loved it.”

Joy groaned. “Have you been reading my emails?”


“Suffice it to say, you’re not the first one to come up with that idea.” Joy shrugged. “My neighbor is the current president of the local group. When I first moved in, she tried to convince me to join.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I was busy unpacking at the time, and it seemed like more than I could manage.” She shrugged again. “I know. I’ve been here six months. She’s invited me to six monthly meetings, and I’ve turned her down every time.”

“ Doesn’t sound like unpacking is your excuse.” Shirley appeared to study Joy for a moment. “Maybe the truth is you just need a tiny kick in the pants.”
Chapter Four

That evening, after fortifying herself with an extra scoop of ice cream, Joy got online and looked for the website of the garden club her neighbor kept urging her to join. After a few wrong clicks, she finally found it. “Petals and Plants,” she read out loud. “Charleston’s up-and-coming garden club for green thumbs of all shapes and sizes.”

Hmm. Interesting. This Saturday’s meeting featured an expert on the Noisette rose. What were the odds? Maybe Shirley was right. Maybe this was her “tiny kick in the pants.”

The next morning, Joy was still pondering Shirley’s comment about avoiding the garden club when the gift shop door opened. Because the police had redirected all deliveries from yesterday to today, her usual Wednesday morning restocking was happening on Thursday.

She’d been at it for almost an hour, with a volunteer working the cash register until just a few minutes ago, so Joy was grateful to straighten and stretch her back. Though she loved working at the gift shop, unpacking boxes was not her favorite chore.

While she could have the volunteer do that, she preferred seeing to the task herself. That way she could deal with any delivery issues immediately and not risk putting broken merchandise out for sale.
“I’ll be right with you,” Joy called out. She tucked a handful of books among the half dozen boxes that remained from the morning’s delivery, and then she hurried out into the shop. “Please do browse and let me know if…”

Her mouth opened but words escaped her. There standing before her was the exact image of the missing statue. To be certain, this was no stone maiden, nor were her clothes the old-fashioned garments that the angel wore. But that smile, those eyes. That expression. It was her. But not her.

She couldn’t be. And yet she looked just like her.

Joy shook her head when she realized she was staring at the young woman who could be a twin to the missing stone angel. “I’m sorry. Can I help you?”

“I hope so. I’m Angela Simpson. Today’s my first day.” She shrugged, and the heart-shaped gold locket and a small key hanging from her neck caught the light. “I saw Dr. Barnhardt in the hallway. He sent me to the HR department to do some paperwork, but I’m not sure where to find it.”

Joy gathered her wits. “I can get you where you need to be. Human Resources is on the second floor. You can take the elevators, over there, or use the stairs, which are just across the hall. First door on the left after you get off the elevator.”

“Thank you.” Her smile rose. “I do appreciate the help.”

“Anytime,” Joy said, trying not to stare but failing miserably. “If you like coffee, I’ve always got some perking and love to share. And to chat.”

“I like chatting too. I’ll look forward to it.” Angela paused. “Thank you.”

And then she winked...
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