

An Excerpt from Running from Mercy...



Chad Greene stood over his wife's casket and wondered if he had taken leave of his senses during the period of time between that very moment and the day before. Paris looked the same, still peaceful and serene, despite the jarring circumstances of her death, but something was different.

Beside him, his daughter was staggering and gripping at him for balance, and his arm shot out reflexively to steady her and bring her closer to his side. She burrowed in, slipping her arms inside his suit jacket and pressing her face into his shirt, and he continued to stare at the woman he had married fifteen years ago and was about to bury today.

Her hair was different, that much was obvious. Just yesterday he'd instructed Glenna, the funeral home's cosmetologist, to arrange Paris's hair in a neat bun at the crown of her head. Other than at bedtime, when she'd combed her hair out and pulled it into one thick braid that hung down her back, Paris never fussed with her hair. The bun was simple and low maintenance, she said. So he had given explicit instructions for his wife's hair to be arranged in a bun and he'd seen it for himself just yesterday. She'd even gone so far as to arrange little sprigs of baby's breath around the base of the bun and the overall effect had been lovely.

The baby's breath was gone now and in its own way, so was the bun. It was looser and slightly tilted to one side. Livelier. Strands of hair framed his wife's face and rested against her forehead, giving her a gently tousled appearance, as if she had been running around all day and was just now stopping to rest.

Then there was Paris's makeup to consider. She hadn't bothered with it since before she'd graduated from college, but lipstick was smoothed onto her lips now and blush was visible

along her cheekbones. In his mind's eye he saw her as she had looked when he'd first decided to marry her.

A lump formed in Chad's throat as he studied his wife. They'd shared fifteen years of life together, fifteen good years and even if he was never able to give her all of his heart, she had possessed part of it. He'd never known anyone as selfless and loving, hadn't believed anyone so genuinely good existed, until Paris. Her generosity and unflagging optimism was what had initially drawn him to her and then he'd grown to love her for her strength and drive to overcome the obstacles in her life. Theirs was never a passionate love, but it was strong enough that he sincerely mourned the loss of her.

"She looks so pretty," Nikki whispered for her father's ears only. Now that the service was over she and her father were the only ones standing at her mother's casket and she was glad for the solitude. She hadn't been able to linger the way she wanted to during the viewing portion of the service. "I can't believe how pretty she looks. Did you tell them to put the makeup on?"

"No," Chad shook his head. He studied the lipstick again and felt himself go cold all over. Suddenly he remembered the name of the vivid shade, he heard himself commenting on it a long time ago and then he heard a voice telling him it was called *Glazed Raspberry*. He saw it in motion as familiar lips moved in one watery memory after another. He should've noticed it right away, because God knew he'd seen it enough, though not on Paris's lips.

He closed his eyes and then opened them back up on Paris's hands. Two seconds later, his breath was locking up in his throat and Nikki was patting him on his back like she thought he might be choking. The concerned expression on her face was so like her mother's he had to look away from her until he got himself under control. He didn't know what he'd do if he looked around the sanctuary and saw her, couldn't guarantee that he wouldn't lose his mind if he called

her name and she answered. So, he kept his eyes lowered and let himself be led back to the front pew, where he sat like a statue while the casket was readied for transport. Doing anything else was liable to result in there being two funerals instead of just the one, and he figured the town had had enough excitement for one day.

She's here, Chad thought numbly. Pam is here.

It occurred to him to share his discovery with Nikki. He was sure she would be relieved to know her aunt was near. She'd been crying over Pam's lack of presence almost as much as her mother's and she would want to know. But, he couldn't bring himself to push the words past his lips just yet.

Chad scrubbed his hands across his face and admitted to himself that he wanted to sit with the knowledge a little while longer. As soon as his racing heart calmed down, he would share.



Nikki saw her first. She spied her aunt standing at the side of the road talking to Gillian and broke away from her father's embrace to go to her. A few minutes ago, Chad had mentioned that Pam was at the church and Nikki had been keeping her eyes open for her ever since.

Nikki raced across the cemetery, unmindful of the graves she trampled over, and stopped less than a foot away from her aunt. With her back to the gravesite, Pam was unaware she and Gillian had company until the other woman's eyebrows shot up in surprise. She barely had time to pivot and then her arms were full of heaving teenage flesh. Over her niece's head, her eyes met Gillian's.

“I’ll call you,” Gillian said and squeezed Pam’s shoulder one last time before climbing into her rental car and slowly driving off.

Pam watched the car until it disappeared around a curve, then she pushed her face into Nikki’s soft curls. The girl was holding on for dear life, stealing her breath, but she returned the embrace because she needed it just as much.

“There must be a boy in the picture if you’re curling your hair.” Pam set Nikki away from her gently and pushed her fingers into her hair, careful not to rearrange the style. “Three months ago you were vowing to stick with a ponytail until you were eighty-years-old.”

“You had your hair like this on the BET Awards,” Nikki said. “I wanted it like yours.” Before she knew what was happening, Nikki reached out and nipped the dark sunglasses from their perch on Pam’s nose.

“If you knew how badly I need those, you’d give them back to me right now.” The indulgent smile on her face took some of the sting out of her voice. She felt naked without the oversize round black glasses on because they allowed her to see out and no one to see in. Without them, she was laid bare for the world to stare at and it was unnerving.

Right now the world consisted of Mercy, Georgia and its residents. It seemed that everyone who was anyone had turned out for Paris Greene’s funeral. Not that that was unusual, Pam reminded herself. Paris was well loved and highly regarded, starting way back when, when she was a quiet and perfectly polite girl. Never a moment’s trouble, Paris was. She had cemented her standing in Mercy when, after college, she returned to put her social work degree to use in the children’s home where they’d grown up. She and Chad had made a good home here and raised a good kid.

“They’re all here,” she said.

“A lot of people loved mom.”

Pam brought her eyes away from the crowd at the gravesite and looked at Nikki solemnly. At seventeen, she was taller than Pam by at least three inches and shockingly thin. She had claimed her father’s cocoa brown complexion and his height, but everything else was her mother’s, right down to her long, slender fingers. Her hair was long, silky with natural waves and inky black. She had eyes a make-up artist would fawn over, deep-set and wide beneath thick, naturally arched brows. And they were green, just like her mother’s and Pam’s were.

A black child with green eyes, a nurse had exclaimed minutes after Nikki was born. She was a beautiful baby. Smooth and pecan brown with perfectly symmetrical features, big-eyed and nosy right from the start. The nurse had speculated that her eyes would change in time and then she’d noticed that both the child’s mother and aunt were green-eyed, so change was not likely. If anything, Nikki’s eyes were a more intense shade of green than her predecessors’ were.

“Not nearly as much as we did though. I wanted to stop breathing when your dad called me. I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner, Nikki. I should’ve been here for you, but I couldn’t...” Her voice trailed off as tears filled her eyes.

“You and mom were best friends,” Nikki said. “I figured you were spazzing out, Aunt Pam. It’s okay. They say it’s different with twins.”

“Who says that?”

“Dad, for one. He said you and mom were like two halves of a whole when you were kids. He knew you’d come, said we just had to wait until you could handle it. I’m glad you sent the dress, though.”

“Now do you see why I need the glasses?” Pam wiped at tears and grinned. She glanced back into the crowd and found Chad deep in the thick of it, talking with an elderly white woman

who was dressed in black from head to toe. She instantly recognized the woman as Moira Tobias and smiled fondly.

Nikki noted the direction of her aunt's gaze and touched her arm softly. "Are you ready to go over there, Aunt Pam?"

"I have to be, don't I?" She slid an arm around Nikki's waist and leaned in. "Will you stay close?"

"I promise," Nikki said and began leading her aunt across the grass. Pam slipped the dark glasses back over her eyes and allowed herself to be led.