



Excerpts from *Hallow*

Chapter 8

The front door slamming shut recharged Grandfather's narrative. "In contrast to all the cheerful letters to keep up the spirits of the troops—young women were taught to do that—Peggy's last missive was blotched with tears." He raised his hands and then lowered them into his lap, maybe imploring, maybe surrendering. "She thought she might be pregnant."

My hair rose in shocked dismay at my grandfather's words, as though I were the possible father of Peggy's child. I'd never received such a communication, neither in person nor any other way, but the specter was always in the background of every relationship. I asked, "Her last letter?"

"In fact, her last communication of any kind. I sent telegrams, wrote letters, called her at her parents' home, all to no avail. I never received a response, and her family hung up whenever I called. If her fears were justified, she would have been three or four months along when she wrote, and at least six months along by the time I read her letter. Before you ask, yes, I believe the child would have been mine."

"I wouldn't ask. You're the expert, and asking that question never goes well. Did you love her?" I asked, curious enough to charge over the line I'd always felt lay between me and my elders.

"I would have married her. It's how things were done then." He looked again out the window into the murky past. If I'd breached privacy, he did too. He'd never done that with me before. "When I left for Vietnam, I thought I was in love with her. If we could get through my deployment, we might get through my schooling—I still had college and law school ahead of me. I remembered lying in my cot at night and holding her



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letters close in hopes their floral scent would save me from my surroundings. It felt like love, or something close to it.”

I made a noncommittal noise and wished I could say something wise.

The wind rose outside and blew bare branches against the windows. The tap-tap-tap seemed to absorb all of Grandfather’s attention. “But my wounds and their treatment came close to destroying me, did destroy some parts. I had to remind myself that I loved my parents, the rest of my family, my friends. I felt nothing. I took those memories as truth. It was that or lose contact with everyone I knew. I told myself I loved Peggy, and I would marry her if we were to have a child together. It was comforting to have a plan of action that didn’t depend on those elusive things called feelings.”

Chapter 17

Pausing only to fix and swallow a sandwich, I took off for Mayaville shortly after the morning’s weird interaction.

I drove with a stomach full of lead. Also the mum and the chapbook. I’d felt like two people preparing for this meeting. One guy, excited at seeing this attractive woman again, planned to give her a chapbook of his poetry and an expensive mum. The furious guy was ready to flay her in cross-examination.

I had no idea how this visit would go, no idea how she would react, how I would react. I consoled myself with the thought that I could throw the gifts in one of the several rivers I’d have to cross.

When she opened the door, my heart jumped and then plummeted into my shoes. I had a hard time answering her brittle smile.

She admitted me to a little brick house, a product of the days of the GI bill in the 1960s. The economics of life were different fifty years ago, and minimally employed adults could afford such a house back then. Now, with the weight of loans from two



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college degrees, I understood why Mallory would hang on to a paid-for house, however she'd acquired it, if indeed it was hers now.

Everything in the living room sagged under the weight of its history, from the chipped spinet piano to the uneven cushions on the overstuffed chairs and sofa to the scuffed carpet, screaming for replacement.

Fresh as a—pardon the pun—daisy in a sundress of autumn colors, she contrasted with her faded surroundings, but she didn't look any happier than I was. We trudged through greetings and offers of refreshment.

With a sad, serious expression, she handed me a sparkling glass of water. "JD, when I first met you, you thought I might be your aunt, didn't you? The child of Peggy Porter and your grandfather, I think you said. Would you like me to take a DNA test? My only condition is that it would end my contact with your family."

I sat down and took a long slow drink. "Thank you, but I know you're not my aunt. I did some research on the people involved in this case. You're not the daughter of Peggy Porter or Daisy Davis. Your mother is Ximena Saldana Mason."

A million expressions flitted across her face. "I said something like that once to Mama Daisy, when I was nine. Mama Mena slapped my face, the first and last time. She screamed about everything Mama Daisy did for me that made her my mother, so much more important than whose body I resided in for only nine months of my life. We all screamed and cried—her, me, and Mama Daisy, reminding her they'd promised never to strike the child. But hearing you say that makes me sympathize with her violent impulse."



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