

## The Road She Left Behind by Christine Nolfi

### Chapter One

The harbor cruise had devolved into a kidnapping.

Slipping past the revelers, Darcy inched toward the relative privacy of the boat's lower deck. *She* was the hostage.

That morning, Darcy had stopped in to clean out her office with a minimum of fuss. She'd rehearsed her goodbye to the staff, the usual pithy speech she trotted out whenever quitting the latest job. Just a few quick words about how much she'd enjoyed the year in Charleston as the assistant manager for Big Bud's Harbor Tours.

The plan went disastrously awry. The moment she'd hoisted the heavy box of belongings into her arms, her replacement—a tall brunette with the smooth gait of a racehorse—appeared in the doorway. A girl from accounting darted in behind her. Together, they wrested the box from Darcy's grip and pushed her into the corridor.

In their enthusiasm, they pushed too hard. Darcy stumbled headfirst into the flock of assistants on three-inch heels. Southern women understood grooming like nobody's business, and a cloud of perfume accosted her. Darcy's flats skidded across the linoleum. Nose tingling, she shrieked. Caught between terror and a sneeze brought on by Lancôme, she pitched forward.

The assistants caught her a thin second before she face-planted.

Once they righted the shuddering plank of her body, Darcy attempted to bolt. She felt like an untamed filly hemmed in by a dozen silk-clad jockeys of varying ages. The women—stronger than they appeared—captured her.

During the last year, the stealthy ways of Big Bud's staff had become all too familiar. Oh, the women meant well as they bypassed common courtesy—and US law—to scroll through employee files, gathering information with the zeal of hostesses planning a gala. If they discovered an employee birthday on the horizon, the women brought in helium balloons and birthday cake. Anniversaries rated balloons, cake, *and* small presents wrapped in silver or gold. If a woman left on maternity leave, she would return to find baby gifts stacked on her desk and luscious platters of homemade baked goods lined up in the lunchroom.

Factor in a family pet, and these women pulled out all the stops. When Big Bud's French bulldog gave birth to a squirmy litter of pups, the enthusiastic staff paid for family photos. They even purchased a burnished-gold frame and hung the best photo in the lobby.

Overall, the niceness factor was sweet, even heartwarming. But these women from the land of Dixie weren't usually accomplices to a kidnapping. Darcy was still demanding an explanation when they began to circle her.

High heels clacking, they had pushed her out the back of the low brick building and down the gangplank. Before Darcy got a grip on their plan, they'd pushed her aboard the *Irma*, a two-deck party ship—and the fanciest vessel in Big Bud's fleet.

Bud, his belly jiggling and his beard flapping in the salty breeze, told the staff to return within the hour. At seventy-six, he was no longer seaworthy. Hugged close to his side, his wife—the real-life Irma—waved with merriment. The boat rumbled to life.

Officially kidnapped, Darcy surveyed the retreating dock with frustration. The staff, leaving her alone to stew in her own juices, clattered up the stairwell to the boat's top deck. Corks popped, and the cheap champagne Bud kept onboard during the tourist season began flowing. With only an hour to get their groove on, the employees weren't about to waste time.

To the east, a container ship carved a ponderous swath as it lumbered toward Charleston Harbor. The sun, lazy on the fine June morning, lifted above the horizon. Golden light scattered across the foam-capped waves.

The solitude was nearly enjoyable.

The boat picked up speed, drawing cheers from the staff above. The shoreline retreated from view. Resigned to her fate, Darcy leaned against the railing. A one-hour delay didn't represent a major calamity. Even if it *was* the worst day of the year.

A voice came from behind. "Aren't you having a drink, honey?"

One of the secretaries joined her at the prow. Trista, or Trixie—a middle-aged redhead who worked the evening shift. Darcy rarely interacted with her.

"I'm fine, thanks."

"You're not celebrating at your own going-away party? There's nothing wrong with starting the day with a teeny glass of champagne."

The secretary meant well, so Darcy made an effort to scrape the irritation from her face. "Is there coffee onboard?"

“I’m sorry, there isn’t. Should I find some orange juice? I’m sure there’s some below deck. I’ll make you a nice mimosa.”

With misgiving, she eyed the champagne bottle. “Really, I’m good. I have to be on the road soon.”

The redhead lowered the bottle. “Sure, honey. I don’t want you getting behind the wheel if you’re tipsy.” She lifted her own glass and took a noisy sip. Leaning close, she dropped her voice to a whisper. “Where are you going, anyway? Everyone says it’s a secret. I don’t mean to pry, but I do love a mystery. Did one of Bud’s competitors make you a better offer?”

The friendly curiosity echoed the comments Darcy had become proficient at dodging. The loss from eight years ago still festered like a wound that would not heal. She avoided chatty conversations out of fear that a well-meaning coworker might unearth the details.

Regret sifted through her. After years drifting from one job to the next, Darcy knew how to snuff out the tiniest flicker of friendship.

Only this time, she’d failed. At this particular job, she’d made a friend she’d miss.

The first time ever.

“I don’t have my plans nailed down,” she hedged. Despising the lie, she layered false cheer into her tone. “Something will turn up.”

“Hold on. Did someone on the staff hurt your feelings?” A burst of anger rippled across the redhead’s shoulders. “Is *that* why you’re leaving? Sweetie, talk to Bud. He’ll fix it.”

“There’s nothing to fix,” Darcy assured her. She didn’t wish to share details about the new job she’d accepted out of state. “I wanted to leave, and Bud’s already found a new assistant manager. It’s time to move on, that’s all.”

“Move on?” The woman stared at her, wide-eyed. “You quit without having something else lined up? Why’d you do a fool thing like that?”

The questions were beginning to feel like an interrogation. “I’ll find something when I decide where to land. It’s no big—” She cut off.

A funny sensation carried her attention to the upper deck.

*Is someone watching me?*

Employees milled around in small clusters, clinking glasses and gesturing at landmarks. Charleston’s peninsula streamed by, the church steeples gathering sunlight on their pointed spires and the historic antebellum homes peeking out from behind ash-colored shadows. A school of

dolphins kept time with the boat. Their sleek bodies slipped through the waves like mermaids welcoming in the day.

The dolphins began arrowing away from the boat. Darcy barely noticed. Shielding her eyes to study the employees above her, she replayed the moments when she'd been hauled down the gangplank to the *Irma*. She couldn't recall if she had seen Samson get onboard.

Then she saw him, and dismay snatched her breath.

On the metal stairs leading down to the lower deck, Samson wavered. He attempted a smile.

Fate was often cruel, and Samson Dray had suffered more than most. Shuttled through South Carolina's foster care system, he'd carried his biblical name into adulthood on a slight build. With skin the color of teak, and dreadlocks that swung across his narrow shoulders, he smiled often and with genuine affection that never failed to brighten the atmosphere at Big Bud's. The eighteen-year-old was newly released from foster care.

When tourists stood ten deep at the counter, grumpy from the Lowcountry's swamp heat and wilting in their bright vacation clothes, Samson handed out icy bottles of water. If he noticed an older couple in the crush, he would drag folding chairs from the storage room and invite them to sit near the wall, out of the general chaos. A fussy toddler in the crowd was soothed with a lollipop; boisterous children received bags of peanuts and a gentle request to quiet down. Given Samson's easygoing nature, they readily complied.

In between busy periods when tourists waited to board the fleet of boats, Samson dispensed with his role of cheerful butler and danced among the island of desks in the main office, happy to run errands for the staff or handle odd jobs for the elderly Bud and his wife.

The redhead caught the silent exchange between Darcy and the dark-skinned teen everyone at Big Bud's treated as a favorite. Smiling faintly, she excused herself.

The moment she'd gone, Samson climbed down the stairs.

Darcy swung her attention to the water. This wasn't how she'd planned to exit Samson's life. Not trapped a mile from shore without a rehearsed script at the ready.

As he loped across the deck, erasing the distance between them, she came to a depressing conclusion. She'd devised *no* plan for how to say goodbye.

Sparing her a recriminating stare, Samson rested his elbows on the railing. He gazed out to sea. Waves lapped at the side of the boat. Darcy followed his cue, pretending interest in the landmarks streaming past. Spidery threads of embarrassment crawled up her neck.

*Proffer an apology? Or remain silent until he fires up the salvos I deserve?*

The silence grew oppressive. Breaking it, he said, “You sure are ugly.”

Relief spilled through her. “You think?” She hadn’t expected his standard greeting on their last day together. An inside joke, really. Samson had come up with the gem last winter after she took him to Green Island Bar for shrimp po’boys and three men had hit on her in as many minutes.

“I hate to point out the obvious,” he quipped, still refusing to look at her. “You’re uglier than normal today.”

“My special gift.”

“Guess we all need a talent. Although I don’t know how you go out in public without a sack over your head.”

“I knew I forgot something.” Gulping down the salty air, Darcy kept her eyes trained on the waves. “I did take special care with my ugly routine this morning. Seemed appropriate for my last day on the job.”

“Time well spent. You could scare fish from the water.”

“My intention, of course.”

“Your office is all packed?”

“Don’t ask what happened to the box of my stuff. Someone stole it. Right before they manhandled me onto this boat.”

Tiny cowrie shells clicked on Samson’s dreadlocks as he nodded with faint amusement. “Don’t you worry none, Darcy. Theft is exactly what you need. I’m sure Irma herself is tearing through the box as we speak. Lord knows what Bud’s better half will find inside.”

No personal effects were hidden in the box—a minor point. The notion of anyone rifling through her things bothered Darcy. That was another inside joke—Samson liked to tease her about her paranoia. She detested sharing personal information for reasons never explained to her young friend.

Discussing the shattering events of the past was even more out of bounds.

“I hope Irma doesn’t make off with my gel pens,” she said, dismissing the thought before it triggered sharp, unwanted memories. “I’m partial to the ones with purple ink.”

“Then you’re out of luck. Irma likes anything purple.”

“She does?”

Samson grunted. “Plan on buying new pens,” he replied. There was no telling if he was joking. “Older ladies like Miz Irma wear dresses with big pockets. Haven’t you noticed? She’ll be filling hers.”

“Nonsense.” He *was* joking. Darcy laughed, releasing some of the tension brewing inside her. “Irma keeps a Bible on her desk, right next to her pot of African violets. No way does she steal.”

“For a college-educated woman, you sure are dumb. There’s larceny in every soul.”

“Not yours.”

“Like you know what’s inside me. We haven’t been friends very long.”

“I know people.” Darcy attempted to add something else. Words failed her.

Samson never borrowed a paper clip without asking. Considerate, decent—his raw goodness was hard to understand. A childhood short on love and long on disappointment should have tempted him to pitch his tent on the wrong side of the law. Some people were onions: peel back enough layers, and there was nothing underneath. A precious few were like apples. Life had bruised Samson, but he retained a solid core.

On the railing, his fingers stilled. “Darcy, do you want the God’s-honest truth? I’ve been doing my best to channel meanness. Working real hard at it too. I just don’t know how to get the meanness to bubble up inside me.” He slid a glance in her general direction; it seemed more fearful than accusatory. An indication of distress, maybe anguish. With lightning speed, he returned his attention to the harbor. “So you’re going. Farewell. It’s been nice knowing you, and all that. I’m not dumb. I know you won’t change your mind. Your stubborn streak is harder than stone.”

“Samson . . .”

“I get it. You don’t want some kid dragging his sorry ass behind you on a new adventure—extra baggage, and you like to travel light. All I’m saying is we make a good team. Almost like we’re family. And I can pull my weight.” He slid his elbows off the railing. Crossing his arms, he watched the gulls swooping past as the boat rounded the tip of Charleston Peninsula.

A pang of guilt struck her deep. Samson was still more boy than man. Yet he was man enough not to let her see him cry.

Helplessly, she splayed her hands. “I want you to forgive me. Not today—but someday. I don’t want you feeling bad just because I don’t think it’s a great idea to bring you along.” The plea for understanding brought no reaction as he continued to study the splashing waves. “Samson, I know you’re feeling adrift now that you’re out of foster care. But you’ve spent your whole life in

Charleston. This is your home. I don't have roots. Not anymore. I never stay anywhere long. One year exactly, that's all. Then I move on."

"I'd still like to go."

"My lifestyle isn't a great choice for someone your age. You need a life that'll give you a sense of direction."

He weighed the explanation with suspicion—or doubt. It was hard to tell. Over the last months he'd begun to idolize her, and she wondered if he feared missing out on what he imagined would be a grand adventure. Little did he know the lonely future awaiting Darcy.

"One favor," he said. "That's all I'm asking."

"Anything."

"If you get on the road and change your mind, send a text. All I need is a time and place. I'll find a way to catch up."

A childish request, heartbreaking in its simplicity.

"You can't follow me. Big Bud and Irma rely on you. No one responsible quits a job without giving notice." She reached out to offer comfort, but she left her palm hovering above his shoulder for an uncomfortable moment. Lowering her hand to her side felt like the worst kind of retreat. "By then, I'll be four states away. Too far away for you to catch up."

"Bud and Miz Irma won't mind if I quit right away. You know what they're always telling me."

"If you're patient, you'll find your North Star." The older couple went out of their way to encourage Samson's belief that his life's direction would reveal itself if he looked hard enough.

His dreadlocks clacked as he gave a sharp nod. "Everyone's got one," he said with fierce conviction. "Even if it's buried deep inside. Even someone like me."

"You'll find your star," she promised. "Just not with me."

Her frustration welled. What right did Samson have to assume she possessed the means to help him at all? She'd allowed a nearly maternal urge to bring him into her orbit. He was young and alone, and his sweetness reminded her of the sister she'd lost. But she never would have succumbed to the desire to protect him if she'd known he'd begin to view her as a guiding light.

Anger layered onto her frustration. He was not to blame. Months ago, she'd begun buying him dinner after work and allowing him to hang out at her apartment. As if treating him like a cherished little brother could fill the hole in her heart.

Or stopper the grief over all she had lost.

Laughter rang out from the upper deck. The new manager was flirting with a man from the accounting department, the one with a goatee and heavy brows. He grabbed her by the waist and whirled her around. The champagne in her glass sloshed out in a glittery arc. The scene provided a stark contrast to the emotions colliding inside Darcy.

Tears collected on her lashes. Brushing them away, she leaned into Samson. Even shoulder to shoulder, he kept his eyes locked on the waves.

She glanced skyward. “Most of time I’m just lost,” she admitted. “I’ve been lost for a long time. Even if I believed in guiding stars—and I don’t—I wouldn’t recognize mine if it fell from the heavens and landed right at my feet.”

Samson withdrew his arms from the railing. At last his dark, solemn gaze swung to hers.

“Someday you’ll find your North Star,” he said. “You’ve just lost the will to look.”

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Late-morning sunlight poured through the window. Checking under the bed, Darcy was satisfied she’d left nothing behind.

Only the wrought-iron bed and a simple pine dresser occupied the bedroom. The rest of the apartment had always felt equally severe, with angular Danish furniture in dull, uninviting gray. From the first day she’d moved in, the rental’s lack of warmth had appealed to Darcy. It was easier to leave an apartment she’d never considered a home.

Still, she lingered. She dared the memory of Samson’s disappointment to seize her again. Now that he’d aged out of South Carolina’s foster care system, he needed to find somewhere to live. He’d been looking into group housing, but she knew he’d put off a decision in hopes of leaving Charleston with her instead. Aside from his job, there wasn’t much tying him to the city.

*Let it go.*

Better to leave Samson here, with his idealism rooted in fertile soil. If he became familiar with the real Darcy, he’d learn the worst lessons. Not that she allowed the heartache to cripple her or allowed herself to succumb to self-pity. She was too pragmatic to discount reality. Many people were knocked down by misfortune. Most people, in fact—if they loved deeply enough or lived long enough. A friendship became estranged, or a marriage led to divorce. Illness sent you into a tailspin, or financial hardship erased your self-confidence.

Or death took the people you cherished.

Tugging her long, wheat-colored hair into a ponytail, Darcy hesitated. She checked under the dresser for stray items and found only several dust bunnies. The box she'd packed this morning at the office—which Irma had *not* rifled through—was already stowed in the car.

Moving day. Always on the dreaded anniversary, always to another city chosen at random. This year it would be Cape May, in New Jersey. Thanks to an executive headhunter website, her new job started next week. An inside sales position with a national company specializing in flood insurance. A big change from the casual atmosphere at Big Bud's.

After Darcy dropped off the apartment key with the landlord, she wheeled her luggage into the parking lot. She was just settling in behind the steering wheel of her Honda Accord when her smartphone rang.

Reading the display, she frowned. It was Latrice calling.

For a fraction of a second, Darcy hesitated.

The middle-aged Latrice worked as the housekeeper for Darcy's mother. By mutual agreement, they only chatted on Christmas. More contact was too painful for them both.

*Why is she breaking protocol?*

Whatever the reason, it didn't bode well.

On a steadying breath, Darcy picked up. "Latrice. Hello."

"Hi, sweetie. How are you?"

"Fine, I suppose."

"You sound congested. Are you coming down with something?"

A painful image leaped before her eyesight. Samson, waving goodbye as she'd marched off the *Irma*. His disappointment was added misery on the anniversary of the deaths of her beloved sister and distant father.

"I'm all right." A falsehood. She'd cried ugly-girl tears all the way back to the apartment.

A silence rife with skepticism filled her ears. Latrice wasn't easily fooled. She'd been sneaking around the emotional terrain of Darcy's heart for years.

"You sure about that?" she asked. The loving timbre of her voice threatened Darcy's weak hold on her emotions. "From where I'm sitting, it sounds like you're talking through a nose filled with snot."

"My allergies are just acting up. I'm fine."

“You’re not fine, but I’ll give you points for bravery. You never were one for complaining. Remember when you ran the hundred-and-four temp?”

“Listen, I have a busy day ahead. Can this wait until we talk at Christmas?”

“That high temp got a hold of you in first grade,” the housekeeper continued. “You were cherry red and sweating like a sumo wrestler. Worst case of strep throat I’d ever seen.”

“Oh. Right. I do remember.”

Latrice gave a low murmur of approval. “You never made a fuss. My brave girl,” she said. “I’m still mad at myself for letting your little sister follow us into the examination room. Why didn’t I leave Elizabeth with the nurse? I suppose we’re all prone to making bad decisions, and I was young at the time . . .”

A double meaning was hidden in the story, one flavored with forgiveness and advice. As the housekeeper rambled on about poor choices, Darcy glanced at the dashboard clock. One minute spun into the next.

Curiosity snuck past her apprehension. “What did Elizabeth do?”

“When Dr. Johnson reached for the syringe of penicillin, she let out a howl like nobody’s business. She thought he’d do you harm.”

“Poor Elizabeth.”

“What are you talking about? Poor *me*. Once she quit hollering, she threw up on my shoes.”

“Elizabeth puked on your shoes? Yuck.”

“Right next to the exam table. She’d had spaghetti for lunch. I thought *I’d* throw up. You were still comforting her when Dr. Johnson asked you to roll over for the shot.”

Before her death, Elizabeth had been squeamish in the extreme. The sharp scent of antiseptic, blood oozing from a scraped knee, a glimpse of a snake slithering in high grass—it never took much to make her queasy. Darcy recalled a spring afternoon during their elementary school years when she found the half-eaten remains of a mouse on the mansion’s circular driveway. Curiosity drove her to snap off a branch from her mother’s expertly trimmed boxwood to examine the bloody remains. With fascination, she’d poked and prodded, unaware of her little sister standing close behind.

For weeks afterward, Elizabeth slept in Darcy’s bedroom with her head burrowed beneath her big sister’s armpit.

For sisters so close in age, they couldn't have been more different. When they were teenagers, Elizabeth would dash from the living room whenever Darcy turned on a horror flick. The vampire romances Darcy read until her senior year of high school made Elizabeth shudder. No matter how hot the guy depicted in the pages, Elizabeth couldn't square razor-sharp fangs with passionate love.

"I don't recall Elizabeth throwing up at the doctor's office," she admitted.

"I had to throw those shoes away."

"I'm sure she felt bad about ruining them."

Another memory rushed over Darcy. The arduous labor her sister had endured to bring her son, Emerson, into the world. How Elizabeth clung to Darcy's blood-starved fingers as each contraction gripped her. How Elizabeth, two days after Emerson's birth, had elicited a solemn vow from her big sister.

*If anything happens to me, promise you'll look after my baby.*

At the time, Elizabeth's worries seemed far-fetched. She was twenty years old, a young woman with her whole life ahead of her. Or so Darcy thought. Never could she have imagined that her sister would die soon after Emerson's birth.

Self-loathing coursed through Darcy. The broken promise haunted her still.

"Elizabeth made the cutest drawings to apologize," Latrice was saying, her lighthearted tone at odds with Darcy's sad thoughts. "The minute we got back to the house, she ran off to get her crayons. I still have the pictures she made—she drew a halo over my head." Latrice paused, clearly relishing how much she'd enjoyed tending to her young charges. Getting back on track, she added, "There's no shame in being out of sorts today, child. The anniversary is hard on all of us. Your mother most of all."

Darcy bit her lip. The falling-out with her mother was bad enough. Pondering the raw bitterness Rosalind endured every June was an agony not worth exploring.

"Did you go with her to the cemetery?" she asked, astonished by her curiosity.

"First thing this morning. The lilacs by the patio are blooming like crazy. I made two bouquets. Of course she complained the whole drive."

"About the lilacs?"

"About the car smelling like a brothel. The way she went on, you'd think I'd dumped a bottle of perfume in her Mercedes. I can't imagine why she prefers store-bought roses. All the scent is

bred right out of them. She managed well enough at your daddy's grave. She broke down at Elizabeth's. She always does."

Bile rose in Darcy's throat. After the accident, Crowne Funeral Home had performed a miracle on her father. Their careful work allowed for an open casket during the calling hours prior to the service.

Not so for Elizabeth.

Latrice said, "I am sorry about breaking our rule and calling you today. There wasn't any choice." She paused a beat. "You must come home."

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