

# Before We Were Yours



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LISA WINGATE

Lisa Wingate was born in Germany in 1965, but was raised in Oklahoma after her family moved to the U.S. Wingate developed a love of writing as a young child when her first-grade teacher told her that her name would be in a magazine one day. From that point on, Wingate's love for storytelling and writing turned into a passion. She went on to earn a B.A. in technical English but didn't begin her career as a novelist until 2001 when she published her first book, *Tending Roses*. Since then, Wingate has published over 30 novels and novellas that have been translated into over 40 languages for publication all over the world. Additionally, Wingate's works have received a number of nominations and awards, including the Pat Conroy Southern Book Prize, the Oklahoma Book Award, and the Goodreads Choice Award. *Before We Were Yours* is Wingate's most well-known and widely praised novel; it spent over one year on the New York Times Bestseller List and won the 2017 Goodreads Choice Award for Historical Fiction. Wingate married her husband Sam in 1988 and the couple has two sons together. Wingate lives on her family's farm in Texas.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The events in *Before We Were Yours* begin in 1939 in Memphis, Tennessee. Throughout most of the '30s, the Great Depression forced millions of Americans out of work and out of their homes. For many people living in the states along the Mississippi River—including Queenie and Briny Foss—living on a shanty boat was an ideal solution because they could quickly travel from one city to the next to find work with their families. Still, poverty was rampant and work opportunities were scarce, so these shanty-boat families struggled to get by. However, some people thrived during the Great Depression, including Georgia Tann, who also existed in real life. Between 1924 and 1950 when the Tennessee Children's Home Society closed, Tann trafficked over 5,000 children using fraudulent adoption papers and with the help of some of Memphis, Tennessee's family court judges. In most cases, Tann did not run background checks on adoptive parents and she favored out-of-state adoptions because they allowed her to charge exorbitant fees. Because Tann would give children to whomever could pay these fees, many out-of-state celebrities and even politicians used Tann's services. These include Joan Crawford (who was actually denied a petition for adoption in California because of her lifestyle and multiple failed marriages), Dick Powell, and Ric Flair. To meet the demand for children, Tann began kidnapping children from the lower classes or using scare tactics to force

single mothers to give up their babies. The children under Tann's care were frequently neglected, sexually and physically abused, and even starved to death for not following the rules. Nobody knows how many children died (either from illness, forced starvation, or abuse) in Tann's care, but it's estimated that the number could be as high as 500. An investigation into the Tennessee Children's Home Society and Tann began in late 1950, but Tann died before charges were filed.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In *Before We Were Yours*, Lisa Wingate tells half of the story through the eyes of a child, Rill Foss. Other works of Southern Gothic fiction that are told from the perspective of a child include Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* follows the childhood experiences of Ruth Anne "Bone" Boatwright. Like Rill, Bone is the oldest child in her lower-class family in the South and she does her best to take care of her younger siblings even in the face of unimaginable abuse and terror. For a work of Southern fiction with a child narrator and a much happier ending, Harper Lee's [To Kill a Mockingbird](#) is told from the perspective of a young girl named Scout Finch as she comes of age in Maycomb, Alabama; like *Before We Were Yours*, the events of [To Kill a Mockingbird](#) also take place during the Great Depression. Rill Foss and her siblings love their life on the Mississippi River and find joy even while they're in one of Georgia Tann's orphanages by reading Mark Twain's [Adventures of Huckleberry Finn](#), which is about a young boy's own adventures on the Mississippi River. For a book with a more modern setting that also focuses on orphans struggling to make sense of their identities, Kazuo Ishiguro's [Never Let Me Go](#) follows the lives of three friends who question where they came from and whether they have any ties to the outside world—although instead of wondering where their parents are, they wonder who they were cloned from. For more information about the nefarious Tennessee Children's Home Society, Lisa Wingate and Judy Christie co-authored a nonfiction book titled *Before and After: The Incredible Real-Life Stories of Orphans Who Survived the Tennessee Children's Home Society*.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Before We Were Yours
- **When Written:** 2017
- **Where Written:** U.S.
- **When Published:** 2017
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction; Southern Gothic fiction
- **Setting:** Memphis, Tennessee and Aiken, South Carolina

- **Climax:** Avery Stafford finds out that Judy Stafford is one of the twins born to Queenie Foss and sold by Georgia Tann.
- **Antagonist:** Georgia Tann
- **Point of View:** First Person with multiple narrators

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Picking Favorites.** Lisa Wingate's first novel, *Tending Roses*, was based on a story her grandmother told Wingate's first son shortly after his birth. Even after publishing dozens of works since her first novel, Lisa says *Tender Roses* remains her favorite.

**Olympic Dreams.** Although Lisa Wingate has always loved writing and storytelling, one of her earliest dreams was to be an Olympic gymnast. However, her dream was cut short by her crippling fear of performing backflips on the balance beam.



## PLOT SUMMARY

An unnamed narrator says that the story begins in a room she'll never see on a hot summer night in Baltimore, Maryland in 1939. A young, pretty woman named Christine is screaming and sweating on a hospital bed surrounded by nurses. Christine gives birth to a stillborn daughter, although Christine is too heavily medicated to comprehend what is happening. A doctor walks out to where Christine's father is anxiously waiting for news. The doctor tells the man that not only was Christine's daughter stillborn, but that Christine will never be able to safely carry a baby to term. Distraught, the man says that Christine is his only child and that he and his wife had been looking forward to having grandchildren in the house. The doctor leans down and tells the man that there is a woman in Memphis who can help.

In the present day, Avery Stafford is gearing herself up for a public appearance at a nursing home with her father, Senator Wells Stafford. The two are in a limo alone together as they pull up to the nursing home. Avery thinks about why she's come back home to Aiken, South Carolina: her father has been diagnosed with cancer and might have to step down from his office in the U.S. Senate if his condition worsens, so Avery has been called home to be groomed to take his spot in Congress. Unfortunately, this also means that she is living several hours away from her fiancé, Elliot. In the nursing home, Avery and Wells smile and take pictures with their political supporters. While they sit up on the stage and listen to the life story of the woman whose 100th birthday they're celebrating, Avery finds herself watching an elderly woman who is standing alone outside. When the audience inside sings "Happy Birthday," the old woman slowly turns around and starts walking back to the facility. Avery is clearly distracted by the sight of the woman, so her father's assistant, Leslie, tells her to focus so the cameras don't catch her looking distracted.

Suddenly, the old woman Avery was watching grabs Avery's wrist and says, "Fern?" Avery is stunned, but a nurse quickly comes up and tries to lead the woman—whom she calls May Crandall—away.

Back at her parents' house, Avery calls Elliot and gets ready to take a family Christmas picture even though it's July—Avery's mother, Honeybee Stafford, is worried that Wells's hair will thin due to his new cancer treatment. Avery plays around with her sister Allison's daughter Courtney until she gets a phone call from the nursing home she visited earlier. The nurse on the phone tells Avery that they found May with a **dragonfly bracelet** she slipped off Avery's wrist at the birthday party. Avery loves the bracelet because it belonged to her grandma, Judy Stafford, before Judy had to be put into the memory care unit of an upscale nursing home. Avery decides to go get the bracelet herself instead of sending Leslie's intern, Ian, because she also wants to know more about May. At the nursing home, Avery walks into May's room and notices an old picture of a couple. The woman in the picture bears a striking resemblance to Judy, so Avery takes a picture of it. Suddenly, May walks in and strikes up a conversation with Avery. May mentions that she knows Judy Stafford from her bridge club but won't answer any questions about the picture. Avery goes to visit Judy and ask her about May and the picture. When Avery shows Judy the picture, Judy touches it lightly and says "Queenie." Judy also cryptically tells Avery that nobody can ever know about the *Arcadia* but doesn't explain what this means.

Avery is unable to shake the feeling that her grandmother is somehow connected to May Crandall, so she decides to go through Judy's account books and papers. In one of Judy's notebooks, Avery finds the phone number for someone named Trent Turner. Avery doesn't recognize the name, but she calls and finds out Trent works in real estate on Edisto Island, where Judy owns a beach house. After a little more research, Avery finds out Trent is actually Trent Turner Sr., but that he died six months before and left the business to his grandson, Trent Turner III. Trent Turner III talks to Avery on the phone and says he has a packet of papers that his grandfather wanted Judy to have, but he refuses to give the files to Avery. Determined to know what's going on, Avery visits Trent in person, but he still refuses to give her the papers. Avery goes to her grandmother's cottage and finds an old typewriter, pulls out the tape, and deciphers the last few lines of the last letter that was typed up on it. The lines indicate that Judy was trying to learn more about the Tennessee Children's Home Society (TCHS). Confused and worried that her family has a dark secret, Avery calls Trent and demands answers. Reluctantly, Trent agrees to give Avery the papers, which turns out to be the record of the adoption of Shad Arthur Foss. Avery is still confused, so Trent suggests they look through his grandfather's office, which is full of files about the TCHS. Just then, however, Trent's son, Jonah, comes out of his bedroom and Avery leaves. She feels drawn to

both Trent and Jonah but pushes this out of her mind with thoughts of Elliot.

The next day, Avery and Trent go into Trent's grandfather's office. On the way, Avery reads an article about Georgia Tann, who ran the TCHS and abused many of the children who passed through the system—many of whom were kidnapped from poor families. In the office, Trent learns that his grandfather was one of these children, but Avery is left with more questions than answers. She decides to go back to May and Trent goes with her. May tells Trent that she knew his grandfather because the two of them were at the same orphanage in the TCHS together, back when Trent Turner Jr. was called Stevie. May tells Avery that Judy was simply writing an article about the TCHS, but Avery doesn't believe her. In light of the possibility that her family has a dark secret, Avery begins reevaluating her entire life, including her engagement to the passionless Elliot.

Trent calls Avery one day and asks her to lunch. On her way to meet him, Avery sees a taxi sitting in the driveway of Judy's house and decides to check it out. The driver says there has been a standing appointment for Judy to be picked up every Thursday for years. Confused, Avery asks Trent to go with her to find out where the taxi goes. The taxi drops them off at a house in Augusta. Trent and Avery knock on the door and walk in when nobody answers. Inside, Avery sees an old picture of her grandmother with three other women, all wearing matching dragonfly bracelets. They hear a man outside and go out to meet them. The man brings them to his mother, Hootsie, who cares for the house. Hootsie gives Avery the beginning of a memoir that Judy was writing. In it, Judy reveals that she is the daughter of Queenie and Briny Foss—and that she was kidnapped and sold to Christine's father to replace her stillborn daughter. The other women in the picture in the cottage are Judy's siblings, one of whom is May.

Back in 1939, Rill Foss is 12 years old and struggling to take care of her younger siblings—Camellia, Lark, Fern, and Gabion—by herself after her parents, Queenie and Briny, go to the hospital so that Queenie can deliver her twins. A family friend, Old Zede, returns from the hospital to let Rill know the twins were stillborn and to drop off Silas, who will care for the siblings until Queenie and Briny can come back. After Zede leaves, a group of policemen board the family's shanty boat and demand that Rill and her siblings go with them to see their parents. Rill agrees to go and, using her eyes, tries to tell Silas to go tell Zede. The policemen bring the siblings into Memphis, near where their boat is tied up. They are handed over to Georgia Tann, who already has two children that she calls Stevie and Sherry with her. The seven children are brought to an orphanage run by Ida Murphy with the help of Mrs. Pulnik. At the orphanage, Tann gives Rill and her siblings new names: May, Iris, Bonnie, Beth, and Robby Weathers. They are sent to the basement, where they'll sleep until Murphy thinks they

deserve to move upstairs. Although the five Foss children are terrified, they are happy to be together. In the middle of the night, the groundskeeper, Mr. Riggs, comes in and leaves peppermints on their pillows.

A short time later, Rill, Lark, Fern, and Gabion (the four Foss children who have curly blond hair) are dressed up and brought to a viewing for prospective adopters. The three younger children catch the attention of couples rather quickly, but Rill is left mostly to herself and tries to keep her eye on her little sisters and brother. At the end of the viewing, however, the couple who has been playing with Gabion don't want to let him go. Georgia Tann allows them to pay for him on the spot despite Rill's attempt to tell them he already has parents. Rill is shocked by what happened and is silent on the way back to the orphanage. When they get back, Rill immediately searches for Camellia and finds her crying by a bush. Rill asks what happened, but Camellia won't talk. Rill opens Camellia's hand and finds that it's full of peppermints. Seeing this, Rill realizes Camellia was sexually assaulted by Mr. Riggs and tries to calm her sister down. During their next bath, Camellia screams and fights back. She is taken away and doesn't return. Several days later, still reeling from the loss of Gabion and Camellia, Rill sees Lark being taken away by a couple. Rill tries to stop this, but Miss Dodd suppresses her. Rill tells Miss Dodd her story and Miss Dodd promises to help, but she's caught by Murphy. Rill is locked in the basement and not allowed out, leaving Fern alone. When Rill is let back up, she finds out that Fern was adopted and slips into a deep depression. Several days later, however, the same couple who adopted Fern—Darren and Victoria Sevier—adopt Rill because Fern won't stop crying for her. Reunited with Fern, Rill decides it's time for them to run away and find their parents. They do this with the help of a young woman named Arney, who knows how to get to the Mississippi River. When Rill and Fern find their family's shanty boat, the sisters learn that Queenie passed away and that Briny has become an alcoholic. One night, Briny drunkenly releases the boat into the river during a storm and the boat is destroyed by a floating tree. Rill decides she must bring Fern back to their adoptive family where they'll be safe.

As Avery learns in the present day, Queenie's twins were not stillborn, but were sold to different families. As adults, Rill and Fern were able to reconnect with Judy and Lark. Although they kept their relationship a secret, the women spent as much time as they could together in the house in Augusta. Avery decides to reunite Judy and May—the sole surviving Foss children—and tell her parents about the family secret. When Wells finds out, he is stunned but agrees that the sisters should be reunited. To that end, the Staffords arrange for May to move into the same facility as Judy, where the two sisters enjoy spending as much time together as possible. Avery is transformed by her the discovery of her family's true history and decides to change her own life plans—she takes a job as a lawyer for a senior rights

PAC and breaks up with Elliot in favor of starting a new relationship with Trent.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Avery Judith Stafford** – The protagonist and one of the narrators, along with May. Avery is a lawyer and the youngest child of Senator Wells and Honeybee Stafford. Throughout most of the story Avery is being groomed to take over her aging father's seat in the U.S. Senate. Avery is also engaged to Elliot, her long-term boyfriend and one of her closest childhood friends. During a publicity event at a senior care facility, Avery is approached by a mysterious woman named May Crandall who calls Avery "Fern" and steals the dragonfly bracelet Avery is wearing. When she realizes it's missing, Avery is anxious to get the bracelet back because it belonged to Judy Stafford, her grandmother. When she returns to the facility, Avery discovers an old picture in May's room of a man and a woman who bears a striking resemblance to Judy. Avery tries to get answers from May but fails. Instead, she takes a picture of the photo and goes to the memory care facility her grandmother is in to ask her about it. Judy suffers from dementia, but seems to recognize the woman in the picture, calling her "Queenie." This inspires Avery to go through her grandmother's old papers and account books in search of clues about how her grandmother is connected to May. In Judy's papers, Avery finds a phone number for a man named Trent Turner and calls it. She learns that the man her grandmother called, Trent Turner Sr., died, but that he left Trent Turner III some papers. Trent is initially reluctant to share the papers, but eventually he and Avery discover that both of their grandparents were victims of a child trafficking ring led by Georgia Tann—and that May is one of Judy's biological sisters. During this process of discovery, Avery and Trent grow closer, and Avery realizes that she is making a mistake by marrying. After Avery reunites Judy and May, and shares her discovery with her parents, Avery breaks up with Elliot and begins dating Trent. She also decides to get a fresh start in her career by taking a local position at a senior rights PAC.

**Rill Foss/May Weathers Crandall** – The second protagonist one of the narrators, along with Avery. At 12 years old, Rill is the oldest child of Briny and Queenie and takes care of her younger siblings: Camellia, Lark, Fern, and Gabion. Queenie goes into premature labor and Briny is forced to leave the children on the family's shanty boat to bring Queenie to a hospital with the help of Old Zede. The next day, Zede returns and tells Rill that Queenie is alright, but that her twin babies were stillborn. Zede goes back to the hospital but leaves Silas with them. Silas realizes there's someone in the forest nearby and indicates to Rill that she and her siblings should hide, but they come out when Rill hears a man who sounds like a police

officer choking Silas. The man tells Rill he's bringing them to the hospital. Although Rill doesn't believe him, they go with him in his boat. In Memphis, Rill and her siblings are given to Georgia Tann, who drops them off at an orphanage under the care of Ida Murphy. They are given new names (Rill is renamed May Weathers) and offered up for adoption. One by one, May is forced to watch her siblings disappear: Gabion, Lark, and Fern are adopted, but Camellia mysteriously disappears after being sexually assaulted by Mr. Riggs, a groundskeeper. Later, May is adopted by the same couple who adopted Fern. Determined to return home, May takes Fern to find their parents on the river. Unfortunately, when they find the boat, they learn that Queenie has died, and that Briny is an alcoholic. One night, Briny unties their boat from the shore during a storm and it's destroyed; Briny is never seen again. Shaken, May decides to take Fern back to their adoptive parents. May has a happy life (her last name changes to Crandall at some point, so she presumably gets married) and she eventually discovering the whereabouts of Lark and Judy Stafford—one of Queenie's twins that was supposedly stillborn. However, she never finds her other siblings. After learning this about story—and about the deaths of Fern and Lark—Avery Stafford (Judy's granddaughter) arranges for May to live in the same senior care facility as Judy.

**Trent Turner III** – The grandson of Trent Turner Sr., whom Rill Foss cares for in the orphanage. After the death of his grandfather, Trent takes over the family real estate business on Edisto Island, where Judy Stafford also has a cottage. Avery Stafford finds the phone number of Trent Turner's real estate office in Edisto while looking through Judy Stafford's papers and calls, hoping it will give her a clue about her grandmother's past. Trent tells Avery that he has a packet of papers from his grandfather for Judy, but refuses to give them to Avery because of a promise he made his grandfather. After Avery shows up at his office, however, Trent relents and the two open the packet of papers together. In it are files about the birth and adoption of a newborn boy named Shad Arthur Foss through the Tennessee Children's Home Society. Trent then brings Avery to his grandfather's office, which is full of paperwork, pictures, and files pertaining to the Tennessee Children's Home Society and the children who were trafficked through it by Georgia Tann. Trent joins Avery on her quest to learn what her family's connection is to Shad Foss and Georgia Tann. Together, they discover that Avery's grandmother and Trent's grandfather were both kidnapped and abused by Tann and her employees. Furthermore, they learn that Judy Stafford has a living biological sister, May Crandall (born Rill Foss), who took care of Trent's grandfather (whom she knew as Stevie) during their time together in the orphanage. As adults, Rill and Trent's grandfather reconnected and then discovered the whereabouts of Rill's other sisters, Lark (renamed Bonnie) and Judy. Rill and Fern were adopted by the same people, but they are never able to find their other siblings, Shad, Gabion, and

Camellia. Armed with this discovery, Trent and Avery work together to bring Rill and Judy—the last surviving sisters, both of whom are living in senior care facilities—back together to enjoy whatever time they have left together. During this process, Trent and Avery begin a romantic relationship. Trent is also a single father to a toddler son named Jonah.

**Judy Myers Stafford** – Avery Stafford’s grandmother and the youngest daughter of Queenie and Briny Foss. Judy has dementia and lives in the memory care unit of an upscale senior care facility. Queenie and Briny were told that Judy and her twin brother, Shad Arthur Foss, were stillborn. In reality, the babies were trafficked and sold to wealthy families. Judy marries a prominent U.S. senator and member of the distinguished Stafford family. It’s only after she has children and is established in life that she learns the truth about her past. Rill Foss (renamed May Weathers) is Judy’s oldest sister and, with the help of Trent Turner Sr., reconnects with Judy. The three also reconnect with Fern Foss (renamed Beth Weathers) and Lark Foss (renamed Bonnie Weathers), but fail to discover where the other Foss siblings are. As a member of a prominent family, Judy kept the truth about her history a close secret. However, Avery discovers the truth and helps reunite Judy with her last surviving sibling, Rill. Although Judy still keeps her history a secret from the public, she and Rill live happily together in the care facility.

**Trent Turner Sr./Stevie** – One of the children kidnapped by Georgia Tann and a close friend of Rill Foss. Trent was renamed Stevie by Tann after being kidnapped with his sister (whom Tann called Sherry) on the same day that Rill and her siblings are taken from their family’s shanty boat. When Sherry abruptly disappears, Rill takes care of Stevie. Rill is adopted before Stevie, but eventually Stevie is adopted by a Memphis police officer. Trent and his adoptive parents are never close, and Stevie decides to cut ties with them after learning that he was adopted. Fortunately, he reconnects with his biological family and reclaims his birth name, Trent, after being called Stevie for most of his life. Later, he reconnects with Rill (who is renamed May) and tries to help her discover the fates of her siblings. Sadly, Trent never discovers what happened to Sherry. Instead, he dedicates his life to helping Tann’s other victims discover their biological families, in some cases reconnecting siblings that were forcibly separated. When Trent dies, he leaves his grandson Trent Turner III in charge of his files about the victims, with strict instructions to only give them to people whose names are on the folder.

**Fern Foss/Beth Weathers** – Rill Foss’s younger sister. Fern is about three when she and her siblings are kidnapped by Georgia Tann and put up for adoption through the Tennessee Children’s Home Society. Tann renames Fern, Beth Weathers. Rill often notes that Fern is the sister she is closest to, and Fern is the second to last Foss child to be illegally sold to a wealthy but childless couple, Darren and Victoria Sevier. Fern is

inconsolable when she is adopted without Rill and has a number of behavioral issues. Darren and Victoria decide to adopt Rill (whom they know as May Weathers) as well, which puts Fern at ease. Fern and May run away to try to find their family’s shanty boat only to discover that their mother (Queenie) has died and their father (Briny) is an alcoholic. In a drunken rage, Briny unties their boat from the shore, and it is destroyed by a tree floating down the river. May decides to bring Fern back to their adoptive parents because it is in Fern’s best interest. Fern and May have a happy life with the Seviars. They reconnect with their sisters Lark (renamed Bonnie Weathers) and Judy Stafford (who was stolen from Queenie and Briny as a newborn). Fern and May live together as old women until Fern’s tragic death—May is found living alone with Fern’s body and a number of pet cats and is taken to live in a senior care facility.

**Camellia Foss/Iris Weathers** – Rill Foss’s younger sister. Camellia is about 10 years old when she and her siblings are kidnapped by Georgia Tann and put up for illegal adoption. Unlike her other siblings, Camellia does not have curly blond hair, but dark hair and dark eyes. Of all the Foss children, Camellia is the most combative and most like their father, Briny Foss. When Camellia and her brother and sisters are taken to the orphanage run by Tann and Ida Murphy, Camellia gets into fights and is frequently in trouble for being disrespectful. Camellia takes a liking to the groundskeeper, Mr. Riggs, who gives the children peppermints. One day while all of her siblings are at a “viewing” (an event where Tann shows off her most attractive children to wealthy potential adoptive parents) Camellia is sexually assaulted by Mr. Riggs. When Rill and the others return to the orphanage, she learns what happened and tries to take care of Camellia. Rill even tells a worker, Miss Dodd, about what happened. However, Riggs is not punished, and Camellia is abruptly taken away. A short time later, Rill asks Tann and Murphy where Camellia is, but Tann tells her that Camellia never existed, possibly indicating that the rumors of children being killed by Tann to keep them quiet are true. Either way, Camellia is never seen or heard from again.

**Lark Foss/Bonnie Weathers** – One of Rill Foss’s younger sisters. Lark is about six when she and her siblings are kidnapped by Georgia Tann and put up for adoption through the notorious Tennessee Children’s Home Society. Tann uses the TCHS to traffic kidnapped children, taking them from poor families and selling them to rich. Lark is a very sensitive child and is closest to her older sister, Camellia Foss. After being kidnapped, Lark is renamed Bonnie Weathers and is quickly adopted by a wealthy family and thus separated from her sisters and brother. As an adult, Lark is reunited with Rill, Fern Foss, and the sister they believed was stillborn, Judy Stafford. The four remain close for the rest of their lives. Lark dies of cancer about five years before the present-day events of the story.

**Gabion “Gabby” Foss/Robby Weathers** – Rill Foss’s younger brother. Gabion is called Gabby by his siblings and parents, Queenie and Briny Foss. He is about two years old when he and his siblings are kidnapped by Georgia Tann and put up for adoption. Tann is captivated by Gabby’s angelic face and perfectly curly blond hair. She renames him Robby Weathers and predicts that he will be adopted quickly. After being kept in an orphanage with his siblings for a while, Gabby and three of his sisters (Rill, Fern, and Lark) are brought to a “viewing” for wealthy potential adoptive parents to see them. As predicted, Gabby is a favorite with the potential adopters and at the end of the night, Tann allows a couple to pay for him and bring him home. Rill tries to get Gabby back but is taken away. Although Rill reconnects with a couple of her siblings later in life, she never discovers what happened to Gabby.

**Mary Anne “Queenie” Anthony** – Rill Foss’s biological mother. Queenie ran away with Briny Foss when she was just a teenager and the two are deeply in love. Queenie loves being a mother to Rill, Camellia, Lark, Fern, and Gabion, and living on the family’s shanty boat on the Mississippi River. She is Polish and Catholic, although her family does not share her beliefs and she is the only one of them who speaks Polish. Although Queenie has no trouble delivering her first five children, when she goes into labor with twins it’s discovered that they are breech. This forces Briny to take Queenie to the hospital to deliver the babies. Queenie delivers a boy and a girl, but nurses tell her and Briny that they were stillborn. This is, of course, devastating to Queenie, and her heartbreak is compounded by the discovery that her first five children were kidnapped while she was in the hospital. As Rill and Fern discover later, just weeks after they were kidnapped, Queenie became ill with blood poisoning and died. Old Zede, a neighbor on the river, theorizes that she actually died of a broken heart. Briny buries Queenie on the banks of the Mississippi River and refuses to sail south without her. In the end of the story, it’s revealed that Queenie’s twins were not stillborn, but were sold by Georgia Tann. The baby girl grows up to be Judy Stafford, whose granddaughter Avery is one of the story’s main protagonists. The other baby was named Shad Arthur Foss but is never found.

**B. A. “Briny” Foss** – Rill Foss’s biological father. Briny and Queenie got married when Queenie was just a teenager and soon began having children. Briny calls his wife Queenie because he considers her the queen of their shanty boat, the [Arcadia](#). Together with their first five children (Rill, Camellia, Lark, Fern, and Gabion) they lead a happy life on the Mississippi River until Queenie’s difficult labor with twins forces Briny to bring her to a hospital. When the twins are born, a nurse tells Briny that the twins were stillborn. Briny sends his friend, Old Zede, back to the shanty boat to tell Rill and others about what happened. After Old Zede leaves, however, the Foss children are kidnapped and brought to an orphanage. It is revealed that

Briny unwittingly signed some papers relinquishing his rights to the children and is unable to get them back. A short time later, Queenie dies of blood poisoning and Briny becomes an alcoholic. Years later, not even the sudden reappearance of two of his children—Rill and Fern—is enough to make him happy again. One stormy night, he unties their boat on the river and it is destroyed by a floating tree. Although a rescue party promptly arrives to save Briny, he is never found. Rill thinks she sees him on the shore, but the man walks away before Rill can determine whether it was Briny or not.

**Georgia Tann** – A notorious child trafficker. Georgia Tann runs the Memphis branch of the Tennessee Children’s Home Society. In conjunction with a loyal group of partners that include police officers and the owners of orphanages, Tann arranges for lower-class children to be kidnapped from their parents. She frequently uses fraudulent paperwork to legitimize her ownership of the children, relying on the ignorance of the lower-class parents who can be convinced to sign them. Tann then gives the children to the highest bidder. Tann not only tricks Queenie and Briny Foss into believing their newborn twins were stillborn so that she can sell them to wealthy adoptive parents, but she has the other Foss children kidnapped and brought to one of her orphanages. Tann works with Ida Murphy to keep the children away from their biological families until they are adopted. Tann and Murphy routinely abuse the children in the orphanage and misrepresent the children’s pasts to make them more appealing to adopters. Eventually, Tann’s crimes are discovered, but she dies before she can be tried and punished for them. Later, one of the children that Tann kidnapped, Trent Turner Sr., devotes his life to helping Tann’s other victims discover what happened to their biological families.

**Ida Murphy** – One of Georgia Tann’s partners in the Tennessee Children’s Home Society. Murphy runs the orphanage where Tann brings Rill Foss and her siblings along with Trent Turner Sr. (called Stevie) and his sister Sherry. Murphy is also Mr. Riggs’s (the orphanage’s groundskeeper’s) cousin and protects Riggs while he preys on the children in the orphanage, including Camellia Foss. Murphy locks Rill and her siblings in a damp basement instead of allowing them to sleep with the other children on the second floor. After Rill tells a new worker at the orphanage named Miss Dodd about Riggs assaulting Camellia and the other crimes Murphy is committing, Dodd is fired and Murphy locks Rill in the basement alone. For weeks, Rill is only given minimal food and water. Eventually, Murphy brings Rill back upstairs to meet with her and Tann. Murphy and Tann tell Rill that her last remaining sibling, Fern Foss, was adopted. Rill is heartbroken, but determined to take care of Stevie, who has bonded with Rill at the orphanage. A short time later, Murphy makes Rill get dressed up and brings her to a hotel. Murphy tells Rill not to tell anyone and to be good and not cry, leading Rill to believe she is about to be hurt in some way. Instead,

Murphy is surprised to discover that the man who asked for Rill, Darren Sevier, wants to adopt her—he has already adopted Fern and wants to adopt Rill now because Fern is inconsolable without her. Sevier takes Rill home and she never sees Murphy or Tann again.

**Mrs. Pulnik** – An employee at Ida Murphy’s orphanage, which is co-run by Georgia Tann. Mrs. Pulnik has a heavy accent that indicates she is possibly from Norway. She helps gather the children in the orphanage for their baths, helps dress them for viewings, and generally keeps an eye on them. Mrs. Pulnik spends a lot of time with Rill Foss and her siblings, but she is not kind and sometimes hurts Rill or one of the others to make them stop complaining or keep them from telling other people the truth about life at the orphanage. Mrs. Pulnik is the one who drags Rill away when she tries to tell the people who want to adopt Gabion Foss that their parents are still alive.

**Mr. Riggs** – The groundskeeper at Ida Murphy and Georgia Tann’s orphanage and Murphy’s cousin. Mr. Riggs is a frightening character for most of the children at the orphanage and there are rumors that if he can catch a child alone, he will hurt them. When Rill Foss and her siblings are brought to the orphanage, Mr. Riggs sneaks into their room and leaves peppermints on their pillow. Because of this, Camellia Foss thinks Riggs wants to be their friend. One day, however, Riggs gets Camellia alone and sexually assaults her. When Rill finds out, she tries to tell Miss Dodd, but Murphy denies that her cousin did it, fires Dodd, and punishes Rill by locking her in the basement for weeks. Later, when Rill is the last Foss child in the orphanage and moved to the upstairs bedroom with the rest of the kids, Riggs catches her out of bed and tries to force her down the stairs, but another staff member catches him and Rill gets away.

**Old Zede** – Briny Foss’s friend and neighbor on the Mississippi River. Zede becomes a father figure for Briny and teaches him and Queenie how to live on their shanty boat and navigate the river. Zede helps Briny bring Queenie to the hospital in Memphis when she is unable to deliver her twin babies on the boat. When Zede returns, he brings Silas, a homeless teenager he is caring for, with him. He tells Silas to look out for the young Foss children, but Silas is unable to stop the police from taking Rill Foss and her siblings away on Georgia Tann’s orders. After the Foss kids are taken, Zede takes care of Queenie and Briny. After Queenie’s death, however, Zede only has Briny to care for until the sudden reappearance of Rill and Fern Foss. Although Zede tries to take care of them all, Briny’s heartbreak and alcoholism make him self-destructive and he unties their boat during a storm, which leads to it being destroyed by a floating tree. After this, Rill decides she and Foss must return to their adopted parents—even though it breaks his heart, Zede agrees because he is too old to care for them all. Still, he takes care of Arney (the young woman who helps Rill and Fern find their family’s shanty boat). After going back to her adoptive parents,

Rill never sees Old Zede again.

**Silas** – A homeless teenager whom Old Zede takes care of. Silas is told to look after the Foss children while their parents and Zede are at the hospital. However, Silas is outnumbered when police board the boat with the intention of taking the children away. Even though the police tell Silas that they are bringing Rill and her siblings to their parents, Silas doesn’t believe it. He only agrees to leave the kids after Rill asks to him to. Later, Silas helps discover the whereabouts of Rill and her siblings. When he learns about Ida Murphy and Georgia Tann’s orphanage, he spends weeks watching the yard hoping to see them. When he finally sees Rill, he tries to help her escape. However, she insists on staying one more day because she hears a rumor that her sister Fern is being returned by her adoptive parents and because she doesn’t want to leave Trent Turner Sr. (known as a Stevie) behind. Unfortunately, the next day Rill is abruptly brought to a hotel where Darren Sevier—the man who adopted Fern—pays for her and brings her home to comfort Fern, who has been distraught in Rill’s absence. When Rill and Fern escape and find their family’s shanty boat, Silas helps take care of them because Briny—who is now an alcoholic—cannot feed them. After the boat sinks and Briny seemingly disappears along with it, Silas reluctantly agrees to bring Rill back up the river to her adoptive family. He asks Rill to stay with him and get married but leaves Rill with the Seviere when he sees them warmly embrace her. Silas and Rill are never reunited.

**Senator Wells Stafford** – Avery Stafford’s father. Wells’s mother, Judy Stafford, adores him—he is her pride and joy, especially after he followed in his father’s footsteps by becoming involved in politics. During the events of the story, Wells is suffering from cancer, which motivates him to call his daughter Avery back home. Avery is Wells’s favorite daughter and he wants her to follow in his footsteps and win his seat in the U.S. Senate if his fight with cancer forces him to step down. Wells relies on his assistant, Leslie, to help him prepare Avery to take on the role one day. Wells is happily married to Honeybee (the nickname he gave his wife early in their relationship; this is also what their grandchildren call her) and they have two other daughters together, Allison and Missy. When Avery tells Wells about Judy’s real birth family and secret relationship with her sisters, Wells helps arrange for Judy and her sole surviving sister (Rill Foss, renamed May Weathers Crandall) to live in the same senior care facility together; however, he and his family agree to keep the relationship secret.

**Honeybee Stafford** – Wells Stafford’s wife and Avery Stafford’s mother. Honeybee’s real name is never shared; Wells gave her the nickname early in their relationship and it is what their grandchildren call her. Honey has a perfectionist personality and struggles with not being in control of situations, which is why she insists on having the family Christmas picture taken in July while Wells (who has cancer)

still has all of his hair. Honeybee also tries to take control of Avery's wedding plans, but ultimately fails—Avery breaks up with her fiancé, Elliot, in favor of beginning a relationship with Trent Turner III. Of all the Staffords, Honeybee has the hardest time accepting the truth about Judy Stafford's biological family and secret relationship with three of her biological sisters. Still, she has total respect for Wells's judgment and supports his decision to make sure that Judy and her remaining sister, Rill Foss (known as May Weathers Crandall) can spend as much time together as possible in the final years of their lives.

**Darren Sevier** – The adoptive father of Rill and Fern Foss (renamed May and Beth Weathers). Darren is a wealthy music composer who adopts the girls to help alleviate his wife, Victoria's, pain after several miscarriages and stillborn babies. Darren and Rill bond over Rill's musical talents, although they initially struggle to find common ground. After Rill and Fern run away to find their biological parents and then return, Darren welcomes them back with open arms.

**Victoria Sevier** – The adoptive mother of Rill and Fern Foss (renamed May and Beth Weathers) and wife of Darren Sevier. Victoria suffers from extreme depression after suffering several miscarriages and delivering several stillborn babies. She adopts Rill and Fern to help fill the void created by the loss of her biological children and difficulties in conceiving another. Victoria is especially fond of Fern, who is close in age to what one of Victoria's stillborn babies would have been if they had survived. However, she also comes to love Rill, who is adopted later to help comfort Fern.

**Miss Dodd** – A worker at Ida Murphy and Georgia Tann's orphanage in Memphis. Dodd is hired at the orphanage sometime after Rill Foss and her siblings are brought there. Because Dodd is so new, Rill tries to ask her for help by telling her about the abuse, forced separations after several of her siblings are removed, and how Camellia was sexually assaulted by Mr. Riggs. Dodd tries to help, but is fired by Murphy and sent back home with the threat that her own young siblings will be taken by Tann, as well. However, Dodd manages to find Zede and Silas, and tells them where Rill and the remaining siblings live.

**Hootsie** – A young maid at Darren and Victoria Sevier's home. Hootsie is also Zuma's daughter. Hootsie initially doesn't get along with Rill and Fern when they are adopted, but after the sisters run away Hootsie realizes that she likes having them around. Decades later, Hootsie helps maintain the quaint cottage where Judy Stafford, Rill, Fern, and Lark meet every Thursday to have sister time. Hootsie is the one who tells Avery Stafford the truth about Judy's past—she was one of the twins Queenie delivered and believed was stillborn.

**Elliot** – Avery Stafford's fiancé. Elliot and Avery grew up together and slowly became boyfriend and girlfriend as teenagers. Elliot and Avery decide to get married because it seems like the next logical step and they do love each other, but

there is no real passion between them. Elliot is a busy lawyer and his mother, Bitsy, is a busybody who tries to take control of the couple's wedding plans. Elliot discourages Avery from investigating Judy Stafford's past and especially from sharing details of that past with anyone. Avery begins rethinking their relationship and ultimately breaks off their engagement to date Trent Turner III instead.

**Zuma** – A maid at Darren and Victoria Sevier's house. Zuma is Hootsie's mother. Zuma initially resents Rill and Fern when they are adopted because the Seviars spend no longer buy presents for Hootsie and because it creates more work for Zuma. When Rill and Fern go missing, though, Zuma has a change of heart and is ecstatic when they return.

**Leslie** – Wells Stafford's busy assistant. Leslie manages schedules and appearances for both Wells and Avery in addition to grooming Avery to follow in her senator father's footsteps. Leslie hires Ian to help her, and Avery, in turn, enlists Ian to check in on Rill (initially known to them as May) while Avery investigates Judy Stafford's past. Leslie is very strict with Avery's schedule and tries to control her ever move, but Avery asserts her independence and frequently turns her phone off to avoid Leslie's calls.

**Arnelle "Arney" McCamey** – The young woman who helps Rill and Fern run away from the Seviars to find their biological parents. Arnelle goes by Arney and dresses like a boy to hide her sex so that it will be socially acceptable for her to help her father and brothers do hard manual labor. However, Arney is abused by her family and Rill easily persuades her to run away with them and find a better life on the Mississippi River with Old Zede. Arney also helps Silas bring Rill and Fern back to their adoptive parents. Rill gives Arney credit for helping her embrace her new identity as May Weathers. Many years later, Rill receives a letter from Arney; she tells Rill that she is happily travelling the world and says that Rill saved her life.

**Ian** – Leslie's intern. Ian is well-meaning and enjoys helping Avery. Avery uses him to keep tabs on May Crandall (later revealed to be Rill Foss) after May is admitted to the hospital for a minor problem. Ian gives Leslie this information to help her find Avery after she refuses to answer Leslie's calls.

**Jonah** – Trent Turner III's son. Jonah's mother was married to another man when she had an affair with Trent and conceived Jonah. Jonah's mother died in a car accident and Trent only found out that Jonah was his son when he received a call from her family saying that Jonah needed a liver donor and none of the family was a match. This confirmed Trent's suspicions that Jonah was his and he successfully took custody of him. Avery and Jonah become fast friends, which helps draw Trent and Avery closer together. During the events of this story, Jonah is about three or four years old.

**Allison** – The middle daughter of Wells and Honeybee Stafford, and Courtney's mom. Allison also has triplet boys and is



frequently overwhelmed with the task of taking care of them. Because of this, she relies on Avery for help with Courtney, and the two sisters are very close. Allison fills the role of “sweet daughter” in the Stafford family.

**James** – An older boy with whom Rill bonds in the orphanage. James asks Rill to be his girlfriend and she agrees. They talk and hold hands, but James is abruptly sent away when Ida Murphy finds out. This is one of the first times Rill notices how children who cause problems in the orphanage mysteriously disappear without a proper explanation.

**Sherry** – Trent Turner Sr.’s sister. Sherry and Trent are picked up off the side of the road by Georgia Tann. Shortly after this, Sherry disappears, leaving Trent alone in the orphanage. As an adult, Trent tries to find out what happened to his sister, but she is never heard from again.

**Christine** – The woman who gives birth to a stillborn child in the Prelude of the book. When Christine gives birth, the doctors give her drugs that make her forget everything. The doctors tell Christine’s father that she will never be able to have more children. When her father expresses his deep sorrow, they suggest he go see a woman in Memphis who can help. The woman turns out to be Georgia Tann, who sells them Judy Stafford, also a newborn.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Bitsy** – Elliot’s mother. Bitsy and Honeybee Stafford are close friends and belong to the same social circles. Like Honeybee, Bitsy wants to control the wedding plans for Elliot (her only child) and Avery.

**Courtney** – Avery’s 10-year-old niece and Allison’s oldest child. Avery and Courtney are very close, and Avery frequently mourns the fact that Courtney is growing up so fast. Avery tries to spend time with Courtney as a way to destress after public appearances.

**Missy** – The oldest daughter of Wells and Honeybee Stafford. Missy has teenage children and fills the role of “perfectionist daughter” in the Stafford family.

**Shad Arthur Foss** One of the twins born to Queenie and Briny Foss. He is stolen in the hospital from his parents, who are told that he was stillborn, and then he is sold via adoption.



## PERSONAL IDENTITY

Lisa Wingate’s *Before We Were Yours* is a fictionalized account of the true crimes of Georgia Tann, who operated a child trafficking ring in Memphis, Tennessee (called the Tennessee Children’s Home Society), from 1924 until her death in 1950. Tann and her squad of corrupt policemen, judges, and politicians habitually kidnapped children and newborns of impoverished families and single mothers, changed their names to prevent birth families from tracking them down, and then essentially sold them (along with fraudulent adoption papers) to powerful politicians, Hollywood celebrities, and wealthy socialites. For very young children, this loss of identity went largely unnoticed; however, in the novel, Rill Foss is 12 years old when she and her younger siblings are kidnapped and either adopted out to families all over the country or made to disappear entirely. When Rill is taken, she is renamed May Weathers and soon finds herself struggling to exist with two distinct identities: Rill Foss the strong-willed “river gypsy” with loving parents, and May Weathers the submissive and abused orphan. Seventy years later, Avery Stafford—youngest daughter of Senator Wells Stafford and presumed heir to the Stafford political dynasty—finds herself similarly conflicted when she learns that her grandmother, Judy Stafford, is one of Tann’s victims: taken away from her lower-class family as a newborn, Judy was sold to a wealthy politician. This discovery shakes Avery’s commitment to living up to her family’s expectations of her as she grapples with the truth about their past. In *Before We Were Yours*, Wingate explores the trauma of shedding one’s former identity and forging a new one.

Rill struggles to retain her personal identity under the pressure and abuse she experiences in Tann’s orphanage, as Tann renames her, gives her a new family history, and forces her to conform to that new identity. Rill and her siblings are prohibited from using their real names, but Rill thinks to herself, “These people can control everything about me, but they can’t control where I go in my mind.” In this context, Rill means that they can’t stop her from maintaining her true identity in her mind even if she externally answers to May. Rill gradually begins to wonder who she *really* is—May the orphan or Rill the beloved daughter. She wonders if “Rill is only a story [she] read,” beginning to doubt if she truly knows herself anymore. Furthermore, by at least partially adopting an identity as May, Rill protects herself from abuse. She notes, “Rill Foss can’t breathe in this place. [...] Only May Weathers does,” meaning that she can distance her true self from the trauma of her experiences by hiding that self behind a fictional identity.

Unlike Rill, Avery Stafford has no childhood trauma—the name of Stafford is universally respected, and it has helped pave the way to Avery’s success. When Avery discovers that Judy was sold into a wealthy and respected family instead of born into it, many of Avery’s hidden insecurities about her identity bubble



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

to the surface. On some level, Avery has always wanted to be recognized for her personal qualifications rather than her family name, as shown by her statement that she's "been fighting it all [her] life—the idea that [her] only qualifications are a cute blond head and the Stafford name." Avery says of the Stafford family that the "collective identity is so overwhelming, there's no room for an individual one." This highlights the fact that simply being born a Stafford means that Avery has always been expected to be a certain type of person, and it has left her "no room" to explore an alternative or perhaps more natural identity.

Ultimately, Rill and Avery both take their individual lives into their own hands, opening themselves up to "a life that can be" rather than allowing external circumstances and other people to determine their futures and identities. When Rill and Fern briefly run away from their adoptive parents to find their biological ones, they discover that their mother died suddenly, and that their father has become an alcoholic. The short time the sisters spend back on the family shanty boat ends when their father drunkenly releases it into the river, and it is destroyed. Watching the boat sink, Rill thinks to herself, "Rill Foss has to die with it. I'm May Weathers now," meaning that she accepts the loss of her past life and is ready to accept a new identity before returning to her adoptive parents. Likewise, as Avery learns more about her family's true history, she begins questioning her own role in it. She announces, "I want to be who I am at the core," meaning she wants to follow her heart instead of molding her identity to fit her family's expectations. Both women, then, come to the same realization: "A woman's past need not predict her future. She can dance to new music if she chooses. Her own music." This means that Rill and Avery get a fresh start in life by making new identities that reflect their inner growth and desires for the future.



## FAMILY SECRETS

In Lisa Wingate's *Before We Were Yours*, the Stafford family is widely known for their political prowess, dedication to public service, fabulous wealth, and moral uprightness. However, a scandal involving the abuse and neglect of elderly people in nursing homes that some of Senator Wells Stafford's friends have ties to threatens the Staffords' otherwise pristine reputation. With this scandal looming over her family, Avery Stafford (Well Stafford's youngest daughter) begins to question her long-held belief that her family's conduct has always been beyond reproach when she finds evidence indicating that her grandmother, Judy Stafford, may have had something to do with the infamous criminal Georgia Tann. The truth, however, is much more tragic than what Avery believes; Judy did not help Georgia Tann get away with running a child trafficking ring—she was one of the thousands of children Tann kidnapped and sold to wealthy and powerful members of America's upper classes. Avery is even

more surprised to learn that Judy has not only known the truth of her birth for decades but has kept in regular contact with her surviving sisters: Rill (renamed May), Fern (renamed Beth), and Lark (renamed Bonnie). Judy kept the knowledge of her history and relationship with her sisters a secret for decades to protect the Stafford family reputation. Through Judy Stafford, Wingate explores the emotional burden of carrying family secrets and illustrates how sharing those secrets can be liberating for the whole family.

Avery begins to wonder about Judy's past after finding a picture of a woman who looks exactly like a younger Judy in May Crandall's nursing home room. After investigating further, Avery discovers that Judy was secretly trying to learn more about Georgia Tann, which makes Avery wonder if her family was somehow involved in Tann's crimes. When Avery first reads about how Tann abused and sold children after learning of Judy's secretive interest in it, Avery struggles to reconcile her view of her family's conduct with the possibility that they weren't always so upright. She wonders what it would mean if "all these years, I've been wrong," highlighting how simply knowing a family member has a secret is enough to shake one's faith in the family as a whole. This is particularly devastating for Avery, who has long been proud of "the stalwart stronghold of the Stafford name." This means that she's always felt safe in her family, but this safety is perhaps contingent on knowing the truth about them. Right now, she's not sure what the truth is, making it difficult to see her family as a safe "stronghold." More importantly, Avery wonders what Judy's possible involvement with Tann would mean for her own life. She wonders, "Do we carry the guilt from the sins of past generations?" Avery's concern is that whatever her grandmother's secret is, Avery herself will be in some way responsible for righting past wrongs.

Still, Avery holds out hope that the truth is not as dark as she believes, and that Judy and the rest of the family are innocent of wrongdoing. This is primarily because, "In the world [she] know[s], a polished exterior and an unblemished reputation are paramount." This means that if the public discovers her potentially devastating family secret, it would mean total social ruin for her family—they would no longer feel pride in their family name, but shame. Because of this, Avery asserts that she "want[s] the truth to be innocent." This highlights the fact that she is holding out hope that Judy's potential involvement with Tann did not extend to being complicit in her crimes. Still, Avery knows that "The truth always comes out sooner or later." Because this, she desperately wants to learn the truth for herself, before it falls into the vindictive hands of a political opponent.

When Avery discovers that Judy is actually one of Tann's victims, not an accomplice, she is horrified by the realization of all that Judy must have gone through to keep her secret. When Avery finds out that Judy not only knew the truth of her past

but was secretly meeting with her sisters, Avery also realizes that “For all these years since [Judy’s] sisters found her, there have been two people inside the body of Judy Stafford.” This highlights how keeping secrets fragments one’s identity, thus making it doubly difficult to achieve happiness as a whole person. However, Avery sympathizes with rather than blames Judy and Judy’s three secret sisters. This is shown by Avery’s realization that “the barriers that created their need for hidden lives and secret meetings seem almost as cruel as those of brokered adoptions, altered paperwork, and forced separations.”

Ultimately, because Avery discovered the truth of the family secret, she is able to reunite Judy and her sister May (Rill), giving them a chance to bond even more over the last few years of their lives. Even though Judy suffers from dementia, her sister’s presence brings some degree of peace to her declining years. Furthermore, learning about the sacrifices Judy made to protect the Stafford name helps Avery realize the importance of being honest with herself—she doesn’t want to be handed a seat in the US Senate just for being a Stafford, she wants to work for it from the bottom up. To that end, Avery takes a position as a lawyer for a senior rights PAC that gives her a sense of fulfillment and purpose.



### INJUSTICE AND CLASS DIVISIONS

In *Before We Were Yours*, the Stafford family is among the wealthiest and most well-respected families in South Carolina—they are a political dynasty with a sterling reputation. The Foss family, on the other hand, belongs to the lower classes and struggles to make ends meet. The two families are separated by time and place, but Avery Stafford stumbles upon a connection that changes the course of her life—her grandmother, Judy Stafford, was born to Queenie and Briny Foss, but was kidnapped and sold to a wealthy family as a newborn. In fact, Judy is just one of thousands of lower-class children, including the other six Foss children, that were kidnapped and sold to wealthy families by the nefarious Georgia Tann, head of the Memphis branch of the infamous Tennessee Children’s Home Society. The longevity of Tann’s career as a child trafficker (she operated the TCHS from 1924 to 1950) sheds a light on a dark period in America’s history when helpless children of the lower classes were quite literally treated as objects to be sold to American elites for their enjoyment. However, this practice also calls into question how “pure” some of the most well-respected bloodlines in America are. Through the stories of the Foss children, Judy Stafford, and Trent Turner Sr., Wingate exposes a horrible wrong that was done to America’s lower classes and illustrates how America’s upper classes directly benefitted from this injustice.

For the Stafford family, reputation is everything, and part of their reputation involves the uniform respectability of every

member of the family—even those who just marry into it. In fact, Avery initially struggles to conceive of a scandal more serious than the possibility of lower-class relatives threatening to step into the spotlight. Avery recounts her mother Honeybee’s story of meeting Wells Stafford (Avery’s father), saying that “When she learned that [Wells] was a Stafford, she set her cap.” This highlights the fact that many people desire to be a Stafford—Honeybee resolves to marry Wells simply for his family name, even before she knows him personally. However, Avery believes they must have “woodpile relatives”—in other words, distant relatives that belong to the lower classes—after learning that there is someone named “Queenie” that Judy doesn’t want her to know about. Avery’s concern highlights just how distant her upper-class family is from the lower classes, and their opinion of poverty as somehow scandalous and shameful, something that would threaten their family’s reputation.

The children Georgia Tann preyed upon were uniformly poor—they belonged to shanty towns or impoverished single mothers. When Tann gets hold of them, they are immediately treated as objects to be molded and sold, highlighting the perception of lower-class people as subhuman. When Trent Turner III learns that his grandfather was also one of the children Tann kidnapped, he wonders how things might have been different “if his [grandfather’s] parents hadn’t been poor.” This emphasizes the fact that it was poor children who were targeted, not middle- or upper-class children. Notably, Tann would habitually tell potential adoptive parents (who were typically wealthy and well-respected) that the children’s biological parents were college graduates, professors, or other members of the educated classes. This means that Tann also recognized the stigma attached to poverty and sought to hide the truth, knowing upper-class Americans would never risk their family’s reputation by adopting children born to poor parents.

Because Tann is only interested in profit, she doesn’t evaluate the families who want to adopt children—if a person has money, Tann will sell them a child. In other words, Tann’s fraudulent adoption service caters to the desires of the upper classes at the expense of the lower. The Seviers adopt Rill and Fern to fill the void that several miscarriages and stillborn children have left, shown by Rill’s observation that Victoria Sevier “only wants the dead.” The irony is that the wealthy Seviers filled that empty space with children who were kidnapped from their loving parents; in other words, Tann created a void in Queenie and Briny Foss’s lives in order to provide the means for an upper-class family to fill the empty space in theirs. Furthermore, the Sevier family’s maid Zuma tells Rill and Fern that they will be sent back to the orphanage once Victoria conceives again, saying she’s “seen it all befo” already. This reinforces the idea that Rill, Fern, and the other children in the TCHS are seen as little more than tools to be used and possibly discarded by the

upper classes for their own gratification.

In the written account of her early life, Judy also shares that she was purchased by a wealthy man to give his daughter after her biological child is stillborn. This means that even though Judy went on to have a happy life, she was originally only an object meant to bring comfort to a grieving upper-class family—and this was only accomplished through the victimization of her lower-class biological parents.



## CHILD TRAFFICKING, HERITAGE, AND REWRITING HISTORY

Lisa Wingate's *Before We Were Yours* provides a glimpse into the dark, abusive, and criminal world of Georgia Tann. Although the specific events and most of the characters in Wingate's novel are fictional, Georgia Tann was a real woman who operated a child trafficking ring in Memphis, Tennessee, from 1924 until 1950. In 1939, Rill Foss and her siblings—Camellia, Lark, Fern, and Gabion—are kidnapped by men who work for Tann and brought to live in one of the Memphis orphanages that Tann operates out of. In the orphanage, Rill and her siblings not only witness horrific abuse and neglect but become victims of it themselves. Through Rill and her siblings, Wingate provides an emotional glimpse into the grim world of child trafficking in mid-20th-century America. In *Before We Were Yours*, Wingate examines child trafficking as a dark form of rewriting history, removing children from their true homes and families and forcing them to adopt new names, heritages, and lives.

Children—and especially young ones—are malleable, which makes it possible for Tann to rewrite their personal histories in order to make them more appealing to potential adopters. Tann tells reporters and charitable women interested in her orphanage that children “can become anything you want them to be.” While this is meant to send a positive message to adopters, it also contains a sinister one—that children's true histories and natures can be ignored and rewritten. Tann does this through systematic abuse (such as locking kids in a dark closet) that scares children into conforming to her wishes. After losing three of the four siblings Rill was brought to the orphanage with, she writes that “This pain is changing me into a girl I don't even know.” This highlights how the pain of forced separation also helps Tann get her victims to conform to her expectations—as the children lose ties to their personal histories, they lose sight of their personal identities and begin to accept their new lives.

The children in Tann's orphanage that do not allow themselves to be molded or conform to Tann's expectations are systematically victimized. Fearing punishment, many allow their pasts to be obliterated just to survive. Rill notes that “The helpers here like to thump kids on the head where it won't show” to punish them. This comparatively mild form of

punishment is meant to remind the children that they are expected to adapt to every detail of their surroundings, including their new personal identities. However, there is also a more sinister method of forcing the children to accept the changes being made to their personal lives: the children who prove stubborn and do not submit to Tann's demands are made to disappear, thus eliminating them from history entirely. After Camellia mysteriously disappears, Rill asks Tann where Camellia went and Tann says, “There never was any... *Camellia*” and asks Rill if she understands this. This denial of Camellia's existence both implies that Camellia is gone forever (she is presumably dead) and serves as a challenge to Rill: either accept Tann's assertion that Camellia never existed, or risk meeting the same fate. Rill accepts and is therefore allowed to live.

The long-term result of Tann's child trafficking and abuse is that thousands of people don't know their true heritage (although they might believe they do), but others triumph over Tann by reclaiming their personal histories later in life. Though Georgia Tann renamed Trent Turner Sr., calling him Stevie, he grew up to “reclaim a birth name and a heritage” after discovering he was adopted and hunting down his birth parents. His story is the most successful because he was able to openly reclaim his name and live happily. Rill, on the other hand, accepts her new identity as May Weathers even though she also harbors memories of her true identity. When she finally shares her entire story with Avery Stafford, she says, “I've always wondered how you young ones would feel.” This indicates the concern Rill and many others (including her sisters) have that their children and grandchildren would be devastated to learn the truth about their family history and helps explain why Rill, Judy Stafford, and others kept their histories a secret. However, the greatest tragedy of all is that many of the victims of Tann's child trafficking ring were simply lost, leaving their parents to wonder what happened to their children. As Rill tells Avery in the present day, “There are no stones to lay flowers on,” meaning that these parents don't have the closure of a grave—they must perpetually wonder what became of their children. In this way, the novel highlights how Tann rewrote the personal histories of entire families by simply removing their children from existence, leaving no trace or visible evidence for their families to mourn over.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## DRAGONFLY BRACELETS

The dragonfly bracelets that Judy Stafford, Rill Foss, Fern Foss, and Lark Foss all wear symbolizes

their common heritage and shared identity as Queenie and Briny's children. The dragonfly bracelets contain three dragonflies (one for each of the lost Foss children: Camellia, Gabion, and Shad) and represent the sisters' connection to the Mississippi River. When Judy was diagnosed with dementia, she left her granddaughter, Avery, her bracelet with a note saying that the stones (garnet, sapphires, and onyx) represent love and remembrance. Because Judy, Rill, Fern, and Lark keep their relationship and personal histories a secret, wearing the dragonfly bracelets is how they keep each other close when they can't physically be together. The bracelets provide a constant reminder of where they come from and all of the hardships that the sisters have had to overcome in their lives after Georgia Tann kidnapped, separated, and sold them. Notably, Judy leaves her bracelet to Avery, who is the only one of Judy's grandchildren to have inherited the Foss family's characteristic curly blond hair. In other words, because Avery looks like a Foss, Judy decides to give her a visible symbol of the secret connection between the Staffords and the Fosses. Although Avery doesn't know it, whenever she wears the dragonfly bracelet, she is also keeping that heritage alive because of what the bracelet represents.

to. As a member of a political family, Avery is very aware that, at any time, her family's entire reputation and her future career might be destroyed by a serious enough scandal. This visit to the nursing home is Avery's chance to help her father get the best of the current scandal, nipping it in the bud before it gets more serious. Avery is also uncomfortable because during this time she is actively being groomed to take her father's place in the US Senate if his cancer worsens and forces him to step down prematurely. This means that Avery is finally confronting the future her family has been planning for her for years, even though she loved her previous career as a lawyer. Over the course of the book, Avery will continue to grapple with conforming to her family's expectations while also wanting to follow her own path in life.

Avery notes that "Stafford women do what must be done, even when they don't want to." This implies that it's not just Avery who finds herself compelled to do things that go against her nature for the family name, but also her mother, sisters, and grandmother. This calls into question just how worth it the luxurious lifestyle they live is, if they feel like they *must* do things that they don't enjoy in order to maintain that lifestyle.





## QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Ballantine edition of *Before We Were Yours* published in 2017.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

☝ I'm wearing one of her favorite pieces of jewelry this morning. I'm dimly aware of it on my wrist as I slide out the limo door. I pretend I've selected the dragonfly bracelet in her honor, but really it's there as a silent reminder that Stafford women do what must be done, even when they don't want to.

**Related Characters:** Avery Judith Stafford (speaker), Judy Myers Stafford

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 9



#### Explanation and Analysis

Avery and her father prepare to face the cameras on their way into a nursing home to make a public appearance and celebrate a resident's 100th birthday. Avery doesn't want to go inside because nursing homes make her uncomfortable, especially since a scandal involving cases of elder abuse and neglect in facilities that one of her father's friends has ties

### Chapter 5 Quotes

☝ The nursing home director walks by and frowns, probably wondering why I'm still here. If I weren't a Stafford, she'd undoubtedly stop and ask questions. As it is, she pointedly looks away and moves on. Even after two months back in South Carolina, it's still strange, getting the rock-star treatment just because of my family name. In Maryland, I often knew people for months before they even realized my father was a senator. It was nice having the chance to prove myself as myself.

**Related Characters:** Avery Judith Stafford (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 49

#### Explanation and Analysis

Avery decides to go into May's room to visit her even though the director told her it was a bad idea. As she is leaving, the director notices and frowns at her but does not say anything about it. Avery knows that the only reason the director chose not to say anything is because Avery is a Stafford—one of the most important and well-respected political families in America. This moment highlights just one of the many privileges Avery has because she's a member of the upper classes—in a way, she is above the rules and is



granted special privileges that other people (the lower classes) are denied.

Despite her privileged position in life, Avery shows that she prefers being anonymous when she says of her life in Maryland, “It was nice having the chance to prove myself as myself.” In a way, the very privileges that enable Avery to go against the nursing home director’s wishes make her somewhat insecure. She wants to prove herself apart from her family because doing so gives her a greater sense of accomplishment and sends the message that she is capable of doing great things on her own without relying on her family’s name to move up in the world or be liked. In other words, Avery doesn’t *want* everything to be handed to her—she wants to work for it and to be judged on her individual merits and accomplishments, not by the things other people in her family have accomplished.

## Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ I scroll to the photo, look into the face of the young woman who reminds me even more of my grandmother now that I’m right across the table from her. “She had this picture. Do you know the person in it?” Maybe these are woodpile relatives? People my grandmother doesn’t want to acknowledge as part of the family tree? Every clan must have a few of those. Perhaps there was a cousin who ran off with the wrong sort of man and got pregnant?

**Related Characters:** Avery Judith Stafford (speaker), Rill Foss/May Weathers Crandall, Judy Myers Stafford

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 72

### Explanation and Analysis

Avery visits Judy in her nursing home the day after she meets May Crandall and shows Judy the picture she took of the photo in May’s room. Avery is still in the early stages of exploring the possibility that her family—specifically her grandmother—has a dark secret that’s been buried for years. Because there is already a scandal involving mismanaged nursing homes that her father has been linked to, Avery is particularly sensitive to any hint that there is something more going on. This is part of the reason why she’s so fixated on the picture in May’s room.

It is notable that Avery thinks the worst scandal her family might be involved in is refusing to acknowledge “woodpile relatives,” meaning relatives who are not wealthy and do not live up to the same lofty standards as Judy, Wells,

Honeybee, Avery, and the rest of the immediate family. Even though Avery thinks the world of Judy, she doesn’t hesitate to believe that Judy might disown relatives just because they are poor or because a cousin “ran off with the wrong sort of man” many years before. Whoever the people in the photograph are, the age of the picture indicates that if there was a scandal, very few people would remember. However, it also highlights the general belief that having impoverished relatives, no matter how distant, is somehow shameful—it would cast a shadow over the entire Stafford family and political opponents could use this new information to attack Wells or Avery in a political race.

## Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ *Why haven’t Elliot and I ever come here?*

The answer tastes bitter, so I don’t chew on it very long. Our schedules are always filled with other things. That’s why.

*Who chooses the schedules we keep? We do, I guess.*

Although, so often it seems as if there isn’t any choice. If we aren’t constantly slapping new paint on all the ramparts, the wind and the weather will sneak in and erode the accomplishments of a dozen previous generations of the family. The good life demands a lot of maintenance.

**Related Characters:** Avery Judith Stafford (speaker), Elliot

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 114

### Explanation and Analysis

Avery goes down to Edisto Island to find out for herself what papers Trent Turner has for Judy Stafford. As she arrives at Trent’s office, she admires the natural beauty of the area—it’s full of Spanish moss-laden trees with the scent of the nearby ocean wafting over in the breeze.

Furthermore, the area is important to Avery because she made so many happy childhood memories on the island, which is why she wonders why she never brought Elliot there for a visit. The answer to this question reveals a lot about Avery’s relationship with Elliot—they are too busy to spend real, quiet, quality time together. They’ve prioritized their lifestyles and careers over their relationship. Furthermore, their schedules are self-imposed, meaning they choose to have busy schedules that prevent them from spending much quality time together.



Still, Avery wonders if she and Elliot are really in charge of their lives, saying that “it seems as if there isn’t any choice.”

This highlights the pressure they're both under to live up to their families' expectations for their careers and lives. Avery explains that they have to keep busy "slapping new paint on all the ramparts" (in other words, doing things that reflect well on their families) because "The good life demands a lot of maintenance." However, it seems the "good life" comes at such a heavy price that it's not so "good" after all. In order to maintain the family reputation, both Avery and Elliot are forced to give up a lot of personal happiness.

☞ "I'm sure you're used to getting what you want."

His insinuation burns. I've been fighting it all my life—the idea that my only qualifications are a cute blond head and the Stafford name. Now, with the speculation heating up about my political future, I'm incredibly sick of hearing it. The family name didn't get me through Columbia Law School with honors.

**Related Characters:** Avery Judith Stafford, Trent Turner III (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 118

### Explanation and Analysis

Avery refuses to leave Trent's real estate office, in the hope of wearing him down enough that he will agree to give her the papers his grandfather kept for Judy. Her persistence leads him to guess that she usually gets whatever she wants. Avery notes that Trent's "insinuation burns," which is evidence of how sensitive she is about how other people perceive her, especially because she comes from such a powerful and important family. The topic has evidently come up more and more since she returned to Aiken, South Carolina to be groomed as the next Stafford to enter Congress, if her father's illness forces him to step down. What Avery is most proud of are the things she accomplished as herself, not as a Stafford. After all, it was not her surname that got her "through Columbia Law School with honors," but her own hard work, dedication, and intelligence.

Despite Avery's desperation to be recognized for her accomplishments as herself, she's just as protective of the family name as her parents and sisters are. This is shown by the fact that she's in Edisto at all; she's concerned that whatever her grandmother is hiding will have consequences for the whole family. However, Avery's motives are more complex than just protecting the family name. She also wants to protect her ill father and stressed mother from the



worry she's experiencing about what the papers Trent is holding say. In other words, Avery is not just acting for her family's reputation, but for her parents' best interest. This reveals just how loving and family-oriented Avery is. Even with a wedding to plan and a career to consider, her primary concern is taking care of her family.

## Chapter 12 Quotes

☞ "Poor little waifs," she says to the man. "We take them in when they are unwanted and unloved. We provide them with all that their parents cannot or will not give them."

I bolt my eyes to the ground and make fists behind my back. *It's a lie, I wish I could scream at the man. My mama and daddy want us. They love us. So did the father who came to see his little boy, Lonnie, and ended up broke down on the porch crying like a baby when they said Lonnie'd been adopted.*

**Related Characters:** Rill Foss/May Weathers Crandall, Georgia Tann (speaker), Mary Anne "Queenie" Anthony, B. A. "Briny" Foss

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 132

### Explanation and Analysis

One afternoon a few weeks after Rill and her siblings are taken to the orphanage, a bookmobile and some reporters come for a visit to watch the kids pick books to borrow. While Rill waits for her turn to pick out a book, she listens to Tann tell lies to the reporters about the kids in the orphanage. This is one example of how the real-life Georgia Tann lied to the public to get away with kidnapping, abusing, and selling children. Rill is particularly struck with the fact that Tann says the children are both "unwanted and unloved" because Rill still has clear memories of her biological parents and knows that what Tann is saying isn't true. This presents the question of just how many children in the home *are* actually "unwanted and unloved."



Georgia Tann also misrepresents how the kids find their way to the home. She says the kids are "taken in," but the truth, as Rill knows, is that they are simply *taken*. While it is true, at least in Rill's case, that her parents couldn't give her a luxurious life, they did give her a good one—she didn't go hungry, she went to school, and she was loved by her family. The fact that Rill doesn't tell any of this to anyone there is a testament to how afraid she is of Georgia Tann—she knows that if she speaks up about the truth, she (or worse, her

siblings) will be severely punished. In fact, Tann has terrorized all the children to such an extent that *nobody* speaks up about the living conditions in the orphanage.

“ I lose track of her voice as the car goes over a hill and comes within sight of the river. May fades like a speck of sun on the water, and Rill comes out. She stretches toward the crack at the top of the window, and pulls in air and catches all the familiar scents.

For just a minute, she’s home.

**Related Characters:** Rill Foss/May Weathers Crandall (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 137

### Explanation and Analysis



Rill, Lark, Fern, and Gabion are bathed, dressed, and loaded into a car bound for a viewing party. Camellia, who is not blond like her siblings, stays behind at the orphanage. This is the first time Rill sees the Mississippi River—the river she grew up on and had a happy life on—since being taken from her family’s shanty boat. She has a visceral reaction to the sight and, for the first time in weeks, feels exactly like herself. This is also the first real indication that Rill is experiencing a type of dissociation in which she loses sight of her personal identity and begins to adopt the identity that Georgia Tann assigned her (that of May Weathers). This highlights one of the most insidious elements of Tann’s crime—the children she abducts lose sight of who they are as the fear of punishment and pressure being put on them by orphanage workers drives them to conform to their expectations.

The Mississippi River is “home” to Rill. She associates it with the happiest time of her life, which is part of why the sight of it evokes such a strong response in her. However, even in this moment her identity as May is still there, shown by the fact that Rill immediately slips back into this identity once they’re over the river. However, there is a sense of hope in this because it means Rill isn’t irretrievably gone—she’s still there, and if she ever loses sight of that, then she can return to the river and find herself again.

## Chapter 14 Quotes

“They’re perfect in every way,” she says to the guests over and over. “Wonderful physical specimens and mentally advanced for their ages as well. Many come from parents with talents in music and art. Blank slates just waiting to be filled. They can become anything you want them to be.”

**Related Characters:** Georgia Tann (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 150

### Explanation and Analysis

Tann brings Rill, Lark, Fern, Gabion, and a bunch of other blond-haired children to a special viewing party for prospective adoptive parents to meet and get to know the children. Tann is in her element at the party, talking about the kids and how special they are. Tann portrays the kids as being somehow superior. They’re “mentally advanced” for their ages and the detail about their parents having “talents in music and art” is meant to imply that the kids, too, will be extremely talented as they grow up. The hidden implication here is that the kids come from remarkable people, which is a far cry from how Tann talks about them and their biological parents when there are no cameras or powerful people around. In fact, she typically calls the kids “river rats” and their parents “vermin.” Tann’s description of the kids here highlights how she tries to cover up the truth of their lower-class origins to make them more appealing to upper-class adopters.



Furthermore, Tann strips the children of their identities and encourages adopters to believe that they can, too, by calling the kids “blank slates.” This denies that the kids have their own individual personalities already—they are little more than objects that can be molded into whatever these prospective parents want them to be. This is important to Tann because she knows adoptive parents won’t want a child that has developed negative habits, no matter how physically cute they are.

“ Inside my skin, I’m empty and cold, like the Indian caves where Briny took us camping one time when we hiked up over the bluffs. There were bones in the caves. Dead bones of people who are gone. There are dead bones in me.

Rill Foss can’t breathe in this place. She doesn’t live here. Only May Weathers does. Rill Foss lives down on the river. She’s the princess of Kingdom Arcadia.



**Related Characters:** Rill Foss/May Weathers Crandall (speaker), B. A. “Briny” Foss

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 156

### Explanation and Analysis

After the viewing party, a couple decides they want to take Gabion (whom they know as Robby) home right away. Rill realizes this and tries to get Robby to come to her, but he doesn't, and Georgia Tann orders Rill and Fern to go to the car waiting for them outside. When the car leaves without Gabion, Rill's head begins to spin. From the beginning of the story, Rill has felt a good deal of responsibility for her brother and sisters—it was her job to take care of them and she wanted so badly to believe that if she could keep them together then Briny would come get them eventually. However, now she's failed: Gabion is gone, and she doesn't know where he's being taken or who is taking him. That makes this separation much harder for Rill than when they were taken off the boat. When all the kids were together, they still felt like a whole family. Now that Gabion is gone, however, Rill is confronted with the possibility that the rest of the kids—whom she still feels responsible for—will be separated as well.


As herself, Rill might fight back against this. However, as she notes, Rill “can't breathe in this place” because it is too restrictive. She's not worried for herself, but for her siblings—the threats that work to keep her quiet are those that involve punishing Fern, Lark, Camellia, or Gabion. And so, in Rill's mind, she now only truly exists on the Mississippi River, harkening back to the feeling she had of finding herself again when they crossed the river earlier that day.

Her hand is knotted in a fist between us. I take it in mine, pry open her fingers to see what she's holding, and the minute I do, all the cookies and ice cream from the party come up in my throat. Dirty, round peppermints are stuck so tight to my sister's palm, they're melted into her skin.

I close my eyes and shake my head and try not to know, but I do. My mind drags me kicking and screaming to Mrs. Murphy's cellar, into the dark corner behind the stairs where ash coats the coal bin and the boiler furnace. I see thin, strong arms fighting, legs thrashing around. I see a big hand closing over a screaming mouth, the dirty, oily fingers squeezing so hard they leave four round bruises.

**Related Characters:** Rill Foss/May Weathers Crandall

(speaker), Mr. Riggs, Camellia Foss/Iris Weathers

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 158

### Explanation and Analysis

When Rill returns from the viewing party, she initially dreads seeing Camellia because Rill will have to explain why Gabion is gone. However, when she finds Camellia in the yard, it's obvious that something is very, very wrong—she's quiet, jumpy, and covered in coal dust. Furthermore, Camellia won't answer any of Rill's questions about what happened. When Rill sees the peppermints in Camellia's hand, she immediately realizes that whatever happened had to do with Mr. Riggs because he has been slipping the Foss children peppermints every day since they arrived at the orphanage. In light of Camellia's victimization, this seeming kindness now looks like he was grooming them—Mr. Riggs was trying to get them to trust him so that it would be easier to get one of them alone.

The coal dust on Camellia indicates that she was assaulted in the basement of the orphanage, and because Camellia is so stubborn there is no way she did not try to fight Mr. Riggs off. This would have made a lot of noise—as Rill says, Camellia must have been “thrashing around” trying to defend herself—which could indicate that although the other adults in the house can hear what goes on, they don't try to help and they don't punish Mr. Riggs for his actions. This, then, is why so many of the kids are afraid to go near Mr. Riggs.

### Chapter 16 Quotes



Even the name sounds strange in my mind now. People keep calling me May. Maybe Rill's still on the river someplace with Camellia, and Lark, and Fern, and Gabion. Maybe they're drifting down in the lazy low-water summer currents, watching boats pass and barges go by and Cooper's hawks circle wide and slow, hunting for fish to dive after.

Maybe Rill is only a story I read, like Huck Finn and Jim. Maybe I'm not even Rill and never was.

I turn and run down the steps and across the yard, my dress sweeping up around my legs. I stretch out my arms and throw back my head and make my own breeze, and for a minute, I find Rill again. I'm her.

**Related Characters:** Rill Foss/May Weathers Crandall (speaker), Gabion “Gabby” Foss/Robby Weathers, Fern

Foss/Beth Weathers, Lark Foss/Bonnie Weathers, Camellia Foss/Iris Weathers

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 175-176

### Explanation and Analysis


Rill thinks of the last thing Briny said to her and how he called her “Rill.” She’s surprised to find that the name almost seems foreign after being called May for so long. This disconnect, however, goes beyond feeling like her real name “sounds strange”—she’s beginning to lose sight of her former self entirely. It’s not just the name that’s now strange, but her entire past. She wonders if “Rill” is a fictional character, which means she’s losing sight of all the things that made her Rill. All this can be attributed to the conditions she’s living in at the orphanage. Rill and her siblings are surrounded by misery and the threat of severe punishment looms over them if they refer to their real names, parents, or personal histories. In other words, Rill has to outwardly deny her true history to save herself from being punished. Unfortunately, this is what Georgia Tann and Mrs. Murphy count on—by abusing the children they scare them out of holding onto their heritage and identities, making it easier for Tann to rewrite their histories to make them more appealing to potential adopters.

Just as Rill was able to find herself again when she first saw the Mississippi River on the way to the viewing party, she’s again able to regain a sense of self by running through the yard. Rill only feels like herself when she has some sense of freedom, which she gets by “mak[ing her] own breeze” or even just by catching sight of the river.

☝ I drop her on the cot and turn away and grab my hair and pull until it hurts. I want to pull all of it out. I want a pain that has a beginning and an end, not one that goes on forever and cuts all the way to the bone.

This pain is changing me into a girl I don’t even know.

**Related Characters:** Rill Foss/May Weathers Crandall (speaker), Fern Foss/Beth Weathers

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 180-181

### Explanation and Analysis

After seeing Lark being taken away from the orphanage by a

couple, Rill has an intense emotional breakdown and yells at Fern when she begs for Lark. This episode highlights just how helpless and desperate Rill feels. As the oldest and the one who was left in charge when Queenie and Briny went to the hospital, Rill feels responsible for the loss of Camellia, Lark, and Gabion. As she watches her siblings disappear one by one, she also begins to lose her own identity and ties to her past. This is the pain that “goes on forever and cuts all the way to the bone.” The loss of her family is changing everything about Rill, but there’s nothing she can do to stop it and nowhere she can go for help.



When Rill causes herself physical pain, she is trying to replace the deeper emotional pain she is experiencing, or at least to distract herself from it. She does this because she knows that physical pain ends, which highlights how desperate Rill is for a feeling of relief (in any form) even if it only lasts for a moment. Furthermore, this reveals the deep emotional and mental scars that Georgia Tann and her employees caused the children who fell under their power and how those scars also served to make the children easier to control.

☝ “Perhaps you should have thought of *that* before you invented some ridiculous story about your fictitious sister and poor Mr. Riggs.”

Blood pounds in my head. I try to make sense of what she’s saying, but I can’t.

“There never was any... *Camellia*. You and I both know that, don’t we, May? There were *four* of you when you came here. Two little sisters and one little brother. *Only* four. And we’ve done a marvelous job in finding homes, thus far. Good homes. And for that, you are *most* grateful, aren’t you?” She motions to Mrs. Pulnik. [...] “There will be no more of this nonsense out of you. Do you understand?”

**Related Characters:** Rill Foss/May Weathers Crandall, Georgia Tann (speaker), Gabion “Gabby” Foss/Robby Weathers, Lark Foss/Bonnie Weathers, Fern Foss/Beth Weathers, Miss Dodd, Mrs. Pulnik, Mr. Riggs, Camellia Foss/Iris Weathers

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 185

### Explanation and Analysis

After Rill tells Miss Dodd about life in the orphanage and what happened to Camellia, she is locked in the basement by herself for so many days that Rill loses count. When she’s

allowed back up the stairs, one of the workers brings Rill to Georgia Tann and Mrs. Murphy. Tann says that Camellia is “fictitious” and never existed, even though both she and Rill know this is a lie. In this way, Georgia Tann is not only openly trying to rewrite Rill’s family history but is trying to make Rill complicit in it as well by forcing her to accept the new story. Furthermore, if Camellia never existed then Mr. Riggs never really committed a crime and therefore cannot be punished, nor can Mrs. Murphy for allowing it to happen.

Not only does Georgia Tann manipulate the truth about Rill’s history, but she tries to tell Rill how she must feel, as well. Tann is writing an entirely new story for Rill—both for her personal history and her personal feelings—that Rill must accept and abide by if she wants to escape further punishment, perhaps even death. After all, Tann can make Rill disappear just as easily as she made Camellia disappear if Rill refuses to adopt this new story and identity.

## Chapter 17 Quotes

“I come from a world where we would never openly admit to such things, certainly not to someone who’s practically a stranger. In the world I know, a polished exterior and an unblemished reputation are paramount. Trent makes me wonder if I’ve become too accustomed to the constraints that go with upholding public appearances.”

**Related Characters:** Avery Judith Stafford (speaker), Jonah, Trent Turner III

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 194

### Explanation and Analysis

Trent tells Avery more about his life, particularly with his son Jonah. He tells her that he was never married to Jonah’s mom and only found out that Jonah was his after her death. The story is not only tragic, but it’s also the stuff scandals are made of in Avery’s world. This is why she can’t imagine ever openly sharing that kind of story with a near-stranger. In Avery’s world, the actions of one member of the family reflect on the rest of the family, and Trent’s story would cause an uproar in their entire social circle. This harkens back to Avery’s fears that Judy’s secret might involve a baby being born out of wedlock, one of the most serious sins a member of their social circle could commit.


Avery’s surprise at Trent’s openness leads her to question her own identity. Trent’s story reminds Avery that there are

worlds where one mistake—in this case, a child born out of wedlock—isn’t enough to condemn someone to social ostracization. Because Trent doesn’t have these fears, he can be more open and genuine. The “constraints” Avery is under because of her social class prevent her from being so open, which in turn makes it hard for her to truly connect to other people. Avery’s fear is that if she’s become “too accustomed” to these constraints, then she won’t be able to truly open up to other people for fear of what they’ll think of her and her family.

“The truth always comes out sooner or later. I’m of the belief that you’re better off knowing about it first.” But even as I say it, I wonder. My entire life, I’ve been so certain that we were above reproach. That our family was an open book. Maybe that was naïve of me. What if, after all these years, I’ve been wrong?

[...] Do we carry the guilt from the sins of past generations? If so, can we bear the weight of that burden?

**Related Characters:** Avery Judith Stafford (speaker), Trent Turner III

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 199

### Explanation and Analysis

Just before Trent and Avery walk into the office where Trent’s grandfather kept files on people who sought his help finding family, Trent gives Avery an article about Georgia Tann’s crimes in the Tennessee Children’s Home Society and asks if she’s sure she wants to see the other files. Although Avery believes that it is generally better to know the truth, the truth that she might find in these files threatens everything she thinks she knows about her family. Although she wants to know the truth so that she can protect them from a scandal before it breaks, Avery is also confronted with the possibility that whatever she finds out might be so horrible that she herself might struggle to forgive them. Avery has always taken for granted that her family’s actions have been “above reproach.” It is something she is very proud of and works hard to live up to in her individual life, but if her family is guilty of some crime then it would call into question all of their other accomplishments and actions.

Furthermore, Avery realizes that if her family did commit some horrible wrong in the past, then it might fall to her to make it right. Still, whatever this wrong is would weigh on

her individual conscience, which is why she wonders if she's strong enough to "bear the weight of that burden." In Avery's mind, if Judy or someone else in the family helped Tann get away with her crimes then the "burden" she would carry is the knowledge that her family was complicit in ruining thousands of families' lives, and she would no longer have the right to be proud of past generations. This is especially scary to Avery because her entire identity and all of her life plans are rooted in the work that the generations before did; if she finds out that they were not as upright as she supposed, then it would force her to question all the choices she's made for her own life as well.

safety and security of believing that her family is above reproach.

Avery's thoughts, however, highlight the fact that a glaring injustice was done, and it was perpetrated by members of the same social class as the Staffords. Avery believes it's plausible that one of her grandfathers "turned a blind eye" to Tann's crimes to appease "powerful families," which indicates how open she is to the possibility, even though it's so unpleasant for her to consider. Interestingly, even though Avery knows that Tann catered to rich and powerful people by selling them children, she never considers the possibility that her own family may have bought a child, even though Judy Stafford looks so much like members of the Foss family.

## Chapter 19 Quotes

☝☝ I crave a simple answer to all of this. One I can live with. I don't want to find out that my grandmother was somehow paying penance for our family's involvement with the Tennessee Children's Home Society—that my grandfathers were among the many politicians who protected Georgia Tann and her network, who turned a blind eye to atrocities because powerful families did not want her crimes revealed or their own adoptions nullified.

☝☝ I try to imagine having a history like hers, having lived two lives, having been, effectively, two different people. I can't. I've never known anything but the stalwart stronghold of the Stafford name and a family who supported me, nurtured me, loved me.

**Related Characters:** Avery Judith Stafford (speaker), Georgia Tann, Rill Foss/May Weathers Crandall, Judy Myers Stafford



**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 224-225

### Explanation and Analysis

Avery and Trent go to visit May at her nursing home to ask her what her connection is to their grandparents. May admits that both she and Trent's grandfather—whom she knew as Stevie in the Tennessee Children's Home Society—were both adopted out of the TCHS and shares her story, but she doesn't mention Judy until Avery asks. Earlier in the story, Avery's worst fears about a possible family secret involved "woodpile relatives," but now her fears are far darker: her family may have helped Georgia Tann victimize thousands of people. Avery has been raised to believe in the integrity of her family above all things—it is the one thing she is supposed to be sure about. The possibility of their involvement, however, threatens this belief, which is why Avery "crave[s] a simple answer," which could be that her grandma and May simply met on the beach a few times or played cards together on Edisto Island. If Avery has a "simple answer" then she can return to the

**Related Characters:** Avery Judith Stafford (speaker), Rill Foss/May Weathers Crandall

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 228

### Explanation and Analysis

After hearing May's account of her life in the Tennessee Children's Home Society and how she and her sisters kept their true histories and relationship a secret from their families, Avery wonders at how difficult it must have been to balance two different identities. May had to be two different people because she and her sisters chose to keep their histories a secret. This implies that, to some degree, she had to pretend to be something she wasn't for years. While she could share all of her experiences—the good and the bad—with her sisters, she couldn't share details of her other life with her husband or her children. In a way, May had one life that was natural (the one she led with her sisters) and one that was somewhat unnatural, although that doesn't necessarily mean it was unhappy or unfulfilling.



Avery, meanwhile, seems to believe that having one family name means she's never had to live two different lives. As a Stafford, she was born into a certain set of expectations that have defined her childhood and young adulthood. For example, because Avery is a Stafford, she will dedicate her

life to public service by taking over her father's political career one day. What Avery fails to consider is that she is *already* living two lives. She's expressed her desire to prove herself as herself, which means there is a disconnect between Avery as an individual and Avery as a Stafford; or at least, she wants there to be. Although her family nurtures and supports her, they restrict her freedom to explore her true self with their expectations for her as a Stafford. While Avery's two identities aren't as clearly divided as May's, they still exist, and she begins to feel the tension between her two halves more and more.

☝ In the end, I'm a Stafford through and through. I tend to assume that I'll get what I want.

Which, I realize with a shiver, makes me eerily like the adoptive parents who inadvertently funded Georgia Tann's business. No doubt some were well-meaning people and some of the children really did need homes, but others, especially those who knew that exorbitant fees were being forked over for made-to-order sons and daughters, must have had some idea of what was happening. They just assumed that money, power, and social position gave them the right.

**Related Characters:** Avery Judith Stafford (speaker), Georgia Tann

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 230-231

### Explanation and Analysis

As Avery and Trent say goodbye, Avery remembers how pushy she was with Trent when she showed up at his office. Avery's thought that she "tend[s] to assume that [she'll] get what [she] want[s]" echoes what Trent told her at the time, when he said he's sure she's used to getting what she wants. When he said this, Avery was offended and got defensive. After hearing May's story about her life in the Tennessee Children's Home Society, however, all Avery feels is shame even though now *she's* the one thinking that she's used to getting what she wants. For Avery, this is also the first time she sees how her privileged position has quietly corrupted her and created qualities in herself that she doesn't like.

This passage also emphasizes the fact that many of the wealthy men and women who did business with Georgia Tann must have known what was going on, which means they didn't believe her lies even though many of them pretended to. However, this also means that they just didn't care; the pain and devastation of the thousands of lower-

class families whose children were stolen from them meant nothing to Tann and her customers in comparison to their personal desires to have the children they wanted.

## Chapter 21 Quotes

☝ Maybe I never realized how much being a Stafford is an all-consuming thing, especially here in our native territory. The collective identity is so overwhelming, there's no room for an individual one.



Once upon a time, I liked that... didn't I? I enjoyed the perks that came with it. Every path I stepped on was instantly smoothed down before me.

But now I've had a taste of climbing my own mountains my own way.

Have I grown beyond this life?

The idea splits me down the middle, leaving half of my identity on each side of the divide. Am I my father's daughter, or am I just me? Do I have to sacrifice one to be the other?

**Related Characters:** Avery Judith Stafford (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 262

### Explanation and Analysis

When Trent calls and asks Avery to lunch, she is too afraid to accept until he mentions that he has his son Jonah with him—nobody will think twice about Avery having lunch with a strange man if there's a child there, too. Avery's caution about seeing Trent—who is just a friend—for lunch leads her to think about how "all-consuming" being a Stafford is. Avery can't do anything without first considering how it might reflect on her family, especially in their hometown of Aiken, South Carolina. When Avery says that "The collective identity is so overwhelming, there's no room for an individual one," she means that there's no room for individual mistakes (even just perceived ones) because the actions of individual members reflect on the family as a whole. This means Avery can't ever be selfish or stop thinking of her family and their reputation. Even when she knows she's not doing anything wrong she has to consider how *other* people will see her actions.

When Avery moved away from Aiken to pursue her own career in a big city where she wasn't very well known, she was able to be somewhat selfish for the first time in her life. She was freer in Baltimore because not everyone knew who she was, and she didn't have to be afraid of gossip. This

helped her grow and live in a way that's simply not possible in the small, judgmental town of Aiken. Unfortunately, Avery feels like she has to choose between being the person she is in Aiken (a Stafford) or the person she is in Baltimore (herself). Either way, she will have to make some enormous sacrifices that will leave either herself unfulfilled or her family disappointed.

## Chapter 23 Quotes

☝☝ So this was my grandmother's destination. It's easy to imagine that she enjoyed coming here. This would've been a place where she could leave behind her obligations, her cares, her duties, the family reputation, the public eye—everything that filled those carefully managed appointment books.

**Related Characters:** Avery Judith Stafford (speaker), Judy Myers Stafford

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 289

### Explanation and Analysis

Avery learns that Judy had a standing appointment for a taxi to bring her to a mysterious location in Augusta and decides to take the cab there herself. Trent accompanies her and after following an overgrown path past a dilapidated plantation, they discover a secluded cottage by the Savannah River. Although Avery has experienced a growing sensation of dread since she got in the taxi, suddenly she is able to understand why Judy would want to spend so much time in this cottage. It is so far from the rest of civilization that Judy wouldn't have to worry about putting on a show for the public or behaving a certain way. She could simply be herself and do whatever she wants to do without fear of what other people would think.

The fact that Avery is so quick to understand why Judy would value her time at this cottage reveals a lot about her own feelings. Like Judy, Avery values having a place to go where she doesn't have to be a certain way or follow a certain script when people talk to her. This reflects Avery's earlier statements about how much she enjoyed living in Baltimore because of the relative anonymity it afforded her. Just as Judy's appointment books are "carefully managed," so are the lives of all the Staffords; although Honeybee and Avery's sisters seem to thrive in this lifestyle, Avery and Judy do not—they are drawn to places where they can shed their public identities and enjoy their personal ones.

☝☝ "I only took it fo' safekeepin,'" the woman says. She hands me the tin piece and the papers separately. "That cross been Queenie's, long time ago. Miss Judy write the other. It's her story, but she never write the rest. They decide they all gon' carry it to they graves, I guess. But I figure somebody might come askin' one day. Secrets ain't a healthy thang. Secrets ain't a healthy thang, no matter how old they is. Sometimes the oldest secrets is the worst of all. You take yo' grandmother to see Miss May. The heart still knows. It still know who it loves."

**Related Characters:** Hootsie (speaker), Avery Judith Stafford, Rill Foss/May Weathers Crandall, Mary Anne "Queenie" Anthony, Judy Myers Stafford

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 296

### Explanation and Analysis

Hootsie lives near the cottage May, Judy, Fern, and Lark used to spend time together in. When Avery comes up to her house, Hootsie decides to give Avery Judy's unfinished memoir so she can finally learn the truth. Hootsie is the daughter of a maid who worked for May and Fern's adoptive family and then helped take care of the cottage for the four sisters. Hootsie repeats that secrets aren't healthy because she was able to see firsthand how the sisters struggled with keeping their relationship a secret. By harboring such an important secret, the sisters had to live double lives, which calls into question which life was happier—the one they lived together or the one they lived apart.

Hootsie also writes that the heart "know[s] who it loves." Staffords, however, love with their heads because that's what they have to do to protect the entire family's reputation. This isn't to say that they don't truly love each other, but it's a love that has to take a certain shape because they live under certain constraints. This is clearly seen early in the novel when Avery feels like she can't reach out and fix her father's hair in the limo because it breaks from protocol. Unfortunately for Judy, it's her head that is affected by her dementia, which causes her to forget her own children and grandchildren. The love of the heart, however, is more primal, which is why Hootsie tells Avery to bring May to Judy—she knows that Judy's heart (which remains untouched by her dementia) will recognize May and that their connection will bring her more comfort than anything else.

☛ I think of the way May explained their choices: *We were young women with lives and husbands and children by the time we were brought together again. We chose not to interfere with one another. It was enough for each of us to know that the others were well...*

But the truth is, it wasn't enough. Even the ramparts of reputation, and ambition, and social position couldn't erase the love of sisters, their bond with one another. Suddenly, the barriers that created their need for hidden lives and secret meeting places seem almost as cruel as those of brokered adoptions, altered paperwork, and forced separations.

**Related Characters:** Avery Judith Stafford (speaker), Judy Myers Stafford, Fern Foss/Beth Weathers, Lark Foss/Bonnie Weathers, Rill Foss/May Weathers Crandall

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 298

### Explanation and Analysis

Because the four sisters (May, Judy, Fern, and Lark) were adults with lives, husbands, and children by the time they all reconnected, they chose not to tell their individual families about their relationship. For Judy, at least, this also helped protect the Stafford family name. The sisters thought it would be “enough” for each sister to know the others were okay, but, as Avery notes, it wasn't. By keeping their relationship and shared history a secret, the sisters had to pretend to be different people in their public lives. Because of this, they were never as happy or fulfilled as they could have been if they had chosen not to keep each other a secret. In the life they had together, however, they didn't have to pretend to be anything other than who they were, which was liberating. Even that, however, came at a cost, because it was still a half-life in which their beloved children and spouses couldn't take part.

The “barriers” that keep the women apart are purely social ones. As Avery has revealed, appearances are *everything* to the Stafford family, and the revelation that the family matriarch is actually a kidnapped “river gypsy” who was bought to replace a stillborn baby can only hurt the family's reputation. While much more overtly evil forces initially separated the siblings, the social barriers that keep them apart are far more insidious, because they are entirely self-imposed. The women can rightly rail against Georgia Tann for separating them in the first place, but the only people they can blame for their continued separation as adults are themselves. Still, as Avery knows from her own experience, it doesn't always feel like there's a choice when the family reputation is at stake—it isn't just Judy or just May that

might be hurt if the truth about their relationship got out into the world, but the rest of their families as well.

## Chapter 24 Quotes

☛ The trees lean close after we turn, and I take one look back. I let the river wash away something inside of me.

It washes away the last of Rill Foss.

Rill Foss is princess of Kingdom Arcadia. The king is gone, and so is the kingdom.

Rill Foss has to die with it.

I'm May Weathers now.

**Related Characters:** Rill Foss/May Weathers Crandall (speaker), B. A. “Briny” Foss

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 311

### Explanation and Analysis



When the *Arcadia* sinks on the Mississippi River after Briny drunkenly unties it from shore, Rill realizes that she has to let go of her past and return to the Seviars. On the way back up the river, Rill notes that it “wash[es] away something inside of [her].” This is the exact opposite of what happens the first time Rill catches sight of the river after being kidnapped by Georgia Tann; back then, the sight of the river made her feel like Rill Foss instead of May Weathers. Now, however, she lets the river take her identity as Rill away and decides to embrace her new identity as May. This is because Rill realizes that it's not the river that was her true home, but rather her family and the happiness they shared together; now that that's gone, Rill must go as well.

By becoming May Weathers, Rill is also honoring the last thing Briny told her to do before she and her siblings were kidnapped: he told her to take care of the little kids. Although Camellia, Lark, and Gabion are gone, Rill can still take care of Fern by returning to their life at the Seviars, even though it means she won't be Rill anymore and even though there's a chance the Seviars will only want Fern to stay with them. Ironically, in becoming May Weathers, she's embodying all of Rill Foss's best qualities: her selfless love of family, a determination to do the right thing, and the strength to deny herself her own desires to promote the happiness of those she loves.

## Chapter 25 Quotes

☝☝ May turns to me with purpose, stretches intimately close as if she plans to impart a secret. “A woman’s past need not predict her future. She can dance to new music if she chooses. Her own music. To hear the tune, she must only stop talking. To herself, I mean. We’re always trying to persuade ourselves of things.”

**Related Characters:** Avery Judith Stafford, Rill Foss/May Weathers Crandall (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 317

**Explanation and Analysis**

After Avery gets May to tell her the rest of her story, May leans in and gives Avery this piece of advice. Throughout most of the book, Avery has been torn between her family’s expectations and her own inclinations and desires. She has not been able to talk to anyone about this internal conflict, but May seems to sense it without needing to be told. May is able to give Avery this advice because of her own experiences. After enduring so much abuse and trauma, if May (as Rill) had continued to keep a tight hold on her past, then she never would have found happiness. Similarly, if Avery keeps holding onto her past—in this case, her sense of duty to the Stafford name and her parents’ wishes—then she might lose her chance at a greater happiness. Already Avery has begun to question everything about her life and what she’s doing with it, from preparing to take over her father’s seat in the Senate to her wedding plans with Elliot. Avery has some unique obstacles to overcome because her family has always had such high expectations for her, and she’s simply never considered that she can pave her own way to happiness.

Avery has also actively tried to talk herself out of disrupting the status quo too much, which reflects May’s statement that women need to “stop talking” to themselves because they are “always trying to persuade [themselves] out of things.” In other words, Avery needs to start talking herself *into* things rather than out of them—what she needs to get out of is the mindset that she *must* do what her family wants her to do.

☝☝ My father moves tentatively to a chair, looks at his mother as if he’s never seen her before. In a way, he hasn’t. The woman he remembers was an actress playing a role, at least partially. For all the years since her sisters found her, there have been two people inside the body of Judy Stafford. One of them is a senator’s wife. The other carries the blood of river gypsies.

**Related Characters:** Avery Judith Stafford (speaker), Senator Wells Stafford, Judy Myers Stafford

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 329

**Explanation and Analysis**

Wells is stunned to learn about Judy’s secret history, but he quickly accepts it and decides he wants to talk to May some more, too. Just like Avery, Wells is confronted with the fact that he never really understood his mother because he never really knew her. For his whole life, she was “playing a role, at least partially” and now he has to try and reconcile his memories of her with this new revelation about her identity. However, Wells is firmly established in his place in the world and he seems to genuinely love it—he is a senator and he finds fulfillment in that role. Avery, on the other hand, is preoccupied with the fact that Judy had to split her identity and how that prevented her from being a whole person. This is not what Avery wants for herself, but it will be her fate if she continues to limit her dreams to what her family wants her to do. Fortunately, she’s already chosen to pursue her own dreams anyway.

Judy is unique because she embodies two entirely different worlds—that of a “senator’s wife” and that of a “river gyps[y].” Suddenly the fact that Judy ran a society column and is known for creating controversy (according to Elliot, anyway) makes sense—try as she might, there were times when one part of her identity would bleed over into the other, and there is no place for a river gypsy in the world of upper-class politics. It’s only by being open about her complex identity that Judy can finally connect completely with all her various family members.





## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## PRELUDE

It's August 3, 1939. The narrator writes that her story begins in a room she'll never see, but which she frequently pictures in her mind. There's a woman being held to the table while she screams and sweats. The narrator says that what happens next isn't the woman's fault. She delivers a stillborn baby girl, but she's on so many medications that she's unaware of what's happening. The nurses talk about the tragedy of the situation while they whisk the baby out of the room. A doctor goes out to where the woman's father is waiting. The doctor tells him that the baby is stillborn, and the woman will never be able to have children again. Distraught, the man says that Christine is his only child and that everyone had been so excited for the new baby. The doctor leans in and suggests the man see a woman in Memphis.

*The Prelude foreshadows many of the events that will take place during the story, including the practice of buying babies from a mysterious woman in Memphis (Georgia Tann) to replace lost ones. This passage also leads the reader to wonder which character in the book is actually the narrator of the Prelude.*



## CHAPTER 1

It's the present day in Aiken, South Carolina. Avery takes a breath and prepares to exit the limo—which is surrounded by cameras—with her father. She wishes she could forget why she came back to Aiken, but she can't. Her father's hair is standing up a little in back and Avery wishes she could reach over and fix it but doesn't because it'd be "a breach of protocol"; although Avery knows her father loves her and her sisters, he doesn't vocalize it very often. Avery knows she's his favorite daughter, but that he's also confused by her because she went to college for a degree instead of to catch a husband. However, for this same reason it's become a silent understanding in their family that Avery will follow in her father's footsteps. In her thoughts, Avery tries to convince herself that this is what she wants.

*Avery is in a limo, which immediately indicates that she is someone important and a member of the upper classes. She also notes that it would be a "breach of protocol" to fix her father's hair, implying that there are a number of strict rules in her life that she has to follow to keep up appearances. She is trying to fill a role, but the fact that she has to convince herself that she wants it is evidence that she actually wants another kind of life.*



Even though Avery is certain she wants to take over for her father, she still hopes that she won't have to quite yet, that both Wells Stafford's (her father) cancer and his political opponents will be beaten so she can return to her former life for a little bit longer.

*Avery accepts the fact that she will have to take over her father's position one day, but she wants the chance to live her own life first. However, this moment brings up the question of why she would choose to follow in her father's footsteps if it won't make her happy.*



Wells asks Avery if she's ready and she says she is. To herself, she says that she hopes she won't have to become her father's caretaker and be faced with the same tough choices that Wells recently had to make for Judy, Avery's grandmother. Judy has been put into an upscale "facility," but Wells and Avery can't talk about it in public due to a recent scandal involving other senior care facilities in South Carolina. Avery knows that political opponents would accuse Wells of turning a blind eye to the plight of lower-class seniors in these facilities if it helps his friends and contributors. This makes Avery mad because she knows the decision to put Judy in a facility was very difficult and even embarrassing.

Thinking about Judy prompts Avery to think of the **dragonfly bracelet** she's wearing. It used to be Judy's and Avery is wearing it as a reminder that "Stafford women do what must be done," no matter what. Avery needs this reminder because she's about to enter a nursing home, which makes her uncomfortable. She and Wells are there to help one of Wells's long-time contributors celebrate her 100th birthday. As Wells and Avery pose for photos with a few people inside the nursing home, Avery realizes she's having fun. Still, she worries about the scandal involving undermanaged nursing facilities, one of which has been tied back to one of Wells's best friends. Wells and Avery walk into the common room for the birthday party.

From inside the room Avery sees an old woman standing alone outside. Avery watches her for a while but forces herself to pay attention to the party so none of the photographers catch her looking distracted. The director of the nursing home talks about the woman whose birthday they're celebrating and her decades-long marriage to her husband. While she listens, Avery wonders if she and Elliot will have a similarly happy marriage. While the party attendees sing "Happy Birthday," Avery watches the woman outside slowly turn back towards the building. Her father's assistant, Leslie, whispers to Avery that she needs to focus. When the cake comes out, Avery feels someone grab her wrist—it's the woman from outside. The woman looks at Avery and says, "Fern?"

## CHAPTER 2

May describes the difficulties she's been having with her mind, which occasionally conjures up old memories while obscuring others. She knows this is because she is occasionally triggered by something, which is what happens when she sees the young woman at the nursing home. The woman's face initially reminds May of Fern, but then May realizes the woman looks more like Queenie. This sends May's mind back even further to a night long ago when May was 12 years old and living on the Mississippi River.

*Avery is evidently very sensitive to how others see her family's behavior. She's both hurt and angry that some people are saying Wells would allow helpless senior citizens to be neglected or even abused just to get political support from powerful people, because this accusation implies her family lacks compassion or humanity. This, Avery knows, is not the case.*



*Avery notes that "Stafford women do what must be done," which presumably means that they make personal sacrifices for the greater good of the rest of the family. In this situation, Avery is sacrificing her comfort to help boost her father's image by going with him to the party. However, being in a nursing home is a reminder of the scandal that looms over her family, thus adding to her discomfort. It's not yet clear what the details of these various scandals and sacrifices are, but it's already clear that they'll be significant to the story going forward.*



*The fact that Avery has to consciously try not to look distracted highlights the level of scrutiny she and her family are under. Not only do they need to control their emotions and words, but even their facial expressions are likely to be judged by others. If they don't keep careful control over themselves, then they make themselves vulnerable to criticism which can snowball into scandal.*



*The woman May is referring to is Avery Stafford, the narrator of the previous chapter. The connection May draws between Avery's appearance and Queenie's foreshadows what Avery will discover on her quest to discover her family's real history.*



In a flashback, May is sitting on her family's shanty boat watching her sister Fern, who is nearly four years old. Fern is trying to count fireflies and May (who is called Rill in this flashback) welcomes the distraction. The night, which is usually so comforting, has an air of danger about it as Rill listens to Queenie groan inside the shanty. The midwife tells Queenie not to push anymore because the baby is facing the wrong way. Rill is worried—Queenie has never had a difficult time delivering any of her five children. Suddenly, Rill hears the midwife say Queenie is having more than one baby and that there's nothing the midwife can do—Queenie must go to the hospital. Briny doesn't reply to this but punches the wall. Rill hears Queenie's cross fall to the ground but doesn't dare go inside to pick it up.

Rill sees Briny look out the window of the shanty while the midwife yells at him to bring Queenie to the hospital. However, Briny is worried about a coming storm and is confused by how hard it is for Queenie to deliver her twins after giving birth to their first five children so easily. Rill brings Fern to Lark (who's six) and tells Camellia (who's ten) to watch them. Camellia doesn't like this but agrees. Rill is worried about Briny and Queenie, who isn't supposed to be in labor yet. However, Rill knows this time is different because Queenie is having twins. When Rill walks in, the midwife grabs her and tells her to talk to Briny. Rill realizes everyone is looking to her to save Queenie, so she tells Briny to take Queenie across the river to the hospital. Briny looks dazed but agrees.

## CHAPTER 3

Avery's mother calls to her to come downstairs, which makes Elliot chuckle on the phone. This comforts Avery because it's so familiar. She notes that between her mom and Elliot's mom, neither of them had a chance to rebel and so they "were more or less doomed to be good. Together." Avery tells Elliot she is supposed to be taking a Christmas picture with her family while she tries to fix her unruly curls. Elliot asks why they are taking Christmas pictures in July so Avery explains that her mom is worried that Wells's hair might start to thin when he starts chemo. Avery chokes up as she thinks about the possibility of losing her dad, while Elliot goes silent. Avery hears him typing quickly on his computer. Avery worries that she's doing no good by being home, but Elliot reminds her that she must reestablish residency.

*This passage reveals that May has two different names: May and Rill. It also reveals that Avery reminded May of both her sister and her mother—in other words, there is a strong family resemblance that opens up the question of whether Avery is actually related to them.*



*Briny's hesitation in deciding to bring Queenie to the hospital is the first indication of just how poor the family is. Even though his wife and unborn children are in huge danger, going to a hospital is a hard choice because doctors charge more money than midwives do. This passage also highlights the fact that Rill is the responsible one in her family: she not only takes care of her younger siblings, but in a sense she is taking care of her own parents by telling Briny to bring Queenie to the hospital, and his willingness to listen to her after arguing with the midwife about it shows just how much her influence matters.*



*Avery notes that she and Elliot have always been "doomed to be good. Together." This is not only the first indication that they have essentially been together all their lives, but it also highlights how they are each living up to the expectations of their parents—including their decision to get married. Although Avery is clearly upset by her father's illness, all Elliot seems to be focusing on is his own work and Avery's political future; the note about reestablishing residency suggests that Avery is planning to run for office in the place where her family lives. This reveals how little Elliot seems to understand Avery, which means they might not be on the same page about other things as well.*



Avery thinks about how often she's wanted to go back to her old job in Maryland until Elliot briefly puts her on hold. Her thoughts turn to May and how certain May seemed that Avery was actually Fern. Avery wanted to be Fern just to make May happy, but of course she couldn't be. When the attendants took May away, they told Avery that May was a new resident and had been found alone in her home with her sister's dead body. Avery wishes she could help May somehow. Suddenly Elliot gets back on the phone and tells Avery to stay strong and not to be hard on herself, before saying goodbye so he can get back to work. Avery tries to fix her hair and worries that the stylist will get mad at her for wearing a store brand dress instead of a designer label.

Avery's niece, Courtney, bounds in to tell her Honeybee (Avery's mom) is tired of waiting for Avery to come down. Avery jokingly messes with Courtney's hair and then calls to Allison that Courtney is holding up the picture. Avery and Courtney race down the stairs to take the picture. After the shoot, Avery grabs one of her sister's triplets and starts wrestling. Honeybee gets mad at her because it messes up her hair and Leslie tells Avery to change into something less formal for the town hall meeting they have scheduled that afternoon. Avery would rather spend time with her niece and nephews but goes to get changed anyway. In the car, Wells scrolls through his phone while Avery thinks about the nursing home scandal and how it might be used against Wells in a political race.

Avery's thoughts turn to her childhood and how she used to attend public appearances with Wells, who was always beaming with pride at how well-behaved Avery was. Now, as an adult, Avery is even more involved, as she and Wells listen to a voice memo about the topics they'll discuss, questions they will have to answer, and what those well-scripted answers should be. Leslie tells Avery to prepare to go on stage with Wells to talk about her wedding plans and her return to Aiken to be with her family after Wells's diagnosis. Avery is confident in her ability to face the crowd because of her success as a state attorney in Maryland. Still, Avery wishes she had more of her father's charisma. Avery and Wells make it through the forum without a hitch, although Avery notes that her father is a bit slower to respond to tough questions.

*Although Elliot is clearly preoccupied with work matters, Avery thinks instead of how she can help people (in this case, May). Avery, it seems, is drawn to positions in which she can help and do good in the world. Her concern is not prestige or fame, but whether what she's doing is worthwhile and meaningful, which will come to be important later in the book.*



*Avery clearly loves her family, especially her niece and nephews. This reveals her love for children and hints at her own desire to be a mother. However, she is called away from having fun with the kids so she can put on a different face for the world. Both Leslie and Honeybee are concerned about Avery's appearance, highlighting the importance they place on how other people perceive them. Avery must wear clothes that reflect the position her family hopes she will walk into by taking over Wells's seat in the Senate.*



*Avery's memories show that many of the bonding moments she's had with her dad involved political experiences, which explains her anxiety to fulfill his expectations of her—she associates political success with earning her father's pride and love. Avery is proud to do this because she knows that by making appearances with Wells, she is doing her part to help maintain the family's reputation and popularity.*



When Avery steps off the stage, Leslie tells her that a nurse from the nursing home they visited earlier called to say that a resident there was found holding Avery's **dragonfly bracelet**. Avery realizes May must have taken the bracelet when she grabbed Avery's arm earlier. Avery tells Leslie she will go get the bracelet herself despite Leslie's protests. Avery argues that she wants to get the bracelet herself because she wants to visit her grandma later, and Judy would enjoy seeing the bracelet again. As Avery gets ready to go, she worries that May is in some kind of trouble and thinks about May being found alone with her sister's body. Avery wonders if May's sister's name was Fern.

*It is telling that Avery has to hide her real motive for wanting to go get the bracelet back herself. She tells Leslie it's so Judy can see the bracelet later, but her thoughts reveal that she just wants to know more about May. This shows just how difficult it is for Avery to break rules, even subtle ones like Leslie's wish for her not to go—she'd rather tell a lie than risk being told she can't do something.*



## CHAPTER 4

Queenie is laid out on the shanty porch while Rill and her siblings watch her moan and scream in pain. Lark tries to distance herself, but Fern and Gabion creep closer to see—Queenie looks and sounds like a different person, not like their adoring, bubbly mother. Queenie grabs Rill and hangs on while Rill begs the midwife to help. However, the midwife refuses to help because Briny refuses to pay her. Rill wonders if Briny has money to pay the doctor and worries that he'll be arrested if he doesn't. Rill and Camellia notice that the midwife is stealing Queenie's hat, so Camellia steps forward to take it back. After a scuffle, the midwife leaves the hat, but steals the catfish that the siblings were supposed to have for dinner.

*Briny's refusal to pay the midwife confirms that the family is very poor and indicates that Briny is running a risk by deciding to bring Queenie to the hospital; they can get in trouble if they go and Briny refuses to or cannot pay.*



Rill tries to comfort Queenie while she screams and thrashes around. Briny left to get help, but it is a while before he returns with Old Zede, one of the family's closest friends. Rill tells Queenie that Zede is there, which seems to comfort her. Briny leaps onto the boat and scoops Queenie up. Zede follows and leans in close to Queenie. He tells her to stay strong while he and Briny get her to the hospital. While Briny lowers Queenie into the motorboat, Zede tells Rill to get the younger kids fed and put in bed. Camellia protests, but Zede tells her to listen to Rill and gives them strict instructions not to leave the boat. Briny tells Rill to keep everyone together until he gets back, while Zede gets the motorboat started. Zede, Briny, and Queenie disappear into the night.

*Both Briny and Zede evidently trust Rill to take care of the younger kids, which further emphasizes the fact that Rill is very responsible. Camellia's protest after hearing that Rill is being left in charge indicates that she is very independent, stubborn, and doesn't like being treated like a little kid.*



Once the motorboat is out of hearing, the kids wander into the shanty. Rill finds a chunk of cornpone and some pears that they can all share for dinner. Rill, Lark, and Fern each give Gabion (the youngest sibling at two years old) an extra piece of cornpone, but Camellia eats hers up quickly. After dinner, the youngest kids fall asleep, so Rill and Camellia load them into the big bed their parents usually sleep in. Rill worries about whether Briny, Queenie, and Zede got across the water alright. Before she gets into bed, she grabs Queenie's cross and tries to pray.

*Although there isn't much to eat, most of the kids share some of their food with the youngest, Gabion. This shows how close the siblings are and indicates that they're willing to make sacrifices, albeit a small one in this instance, to help each other.*



## CHAPTER 5

Avery tells Ian to wait for her in the car when they roll up to the nursing home. Avery walks into the nursing home director's office and sees her grandmother's **dragonfly bracelet** sitting on the desk. Avery and the director talk for a bit and the director tells Avery that May is struggling to adapt to life at the facility. Hearing about May's struggles makes Avery think about Grandma Judy and how confused she must be in her facility sometimes. Avery asks if May has family that visits and the director tells her that although she has living family, they live far away and don't visit. Avery asks if she can see May just for a few minutes, but the director thinks it would be a bad idea. However, when Avery is walking out of the facility, she sees May's name on a door and walks in.

May isn't there, so Avery looks around the mostly bare room, silently comparing it to Judy's luxurious mini-apartment full of furniture and family pictures. Avery spots a picture and steps forward to get a closer look. Avery justifies her nosiness by telling herself she needs to make sure May is okay; this sense of duty, Avery tells herself, is a Stafford family trait. When Avery gets a good view of the photo, she immediately notices that it's very old. The picture is of a young couple on the shore of a lake—the man has dark hair, but the pregnant woman has curly blond hair. Avery is struck by how much the woman in the photo looks like Judy and decides to take a picture of it.

Avery struggles to get a good picture of the photo in the dark. May walks in on this and tells Avery that going through someone else's things is rude. May tells Avery the people in the facility are keeping her in prison, which makes Avery think again of how May wound up in the facility. May points out that Avery has her **dragonfly bracelet**. Avery tries to explain that it is her grandmother's and asks if May ever had a bracelet like it. May says she used to before the staff gave it away. May stares hard at Avery and suddenly asks if she can meet Judy. Avery notes a change in May's attitude and the atmosphere and, to protect Judy from a potentially dangerous woman, tells May it's not possible for her to meet Judy.

*The scandal over poorly managed nursing homes with residents whose needs are not being met has Avery on edge and could be contributing to her desire to make sure May is okay. However, she is also motivated by her basic desire to help May; it is something she's been thinking about since May first grabbed her hand earlier that day.*



*If a strong sense of duty is a Stafford trait, then it would explain why Wells is drawn to politics (which enables him to serve the community) and why Avery was drawn to the law (which enables her to help both individuals and groups). The Staffords are a powerful family, so they also believe they have a responsibility to use their power to help people whose lives aren't so privileged. However, this scene also suggests that Avery might have an ulterior motive for looking at the picture; she might be wondering if there's anything to May's insistence that Avery looks like a family member.*



*When May mentions feeling like she's in prison, it plants the seed in Avery's head that May perhaps belongs in prison—perhaps she actually killed her sister. This thought is the reason Avery is so unwilling to allow May near Judy.*



May asks if Judy passed away and Avery explains that Judy had to be moved to a nursing home. May seems really interested and asks if Judy is happy. Avery is struck by the desperate tone of May's voice and wonders what her life is like. Avery reassures May that Judy is happy, to which May responds that she knows Judy from a bridge club. Avery asks about the photograph, explaining that the woman in it looks like Judy. May admits they have the same hair but doesn't offer more information. Avery's phone buzzes and she says she has to go. May tells Avery, "You'll come back, and I'll share the story of the photo then," before leaving the room. Avery quickly snaps a picture of the photo and begins walking out. The nursing director notices but doesn't say anything; Avery knows it's because she's a Stafford.

*May's statement that Avery will come back for answers implies that there is a question and May knows what it is. Avery noticed the resemblance between the woman in the picture and Judy, which means the answers May has likely have something to do with the picture and Judy.*



Avery calls Honeybee, who wants to know if Avery can stop at the house and make an appearance at a DAR meeting to start winning over female voters. Avery asks if Judy ever played bridge with someone named May Crandall. Honeybee says Judy only played bridge with close friends and that they don't know anyone by that name. Avery says she wants to visit Judy, but Honeybee gets her to stop by the DAR meeting—Elliot's mother, Bitsy, is back in town and wants to see Avery, who knows that, unfortunately, this means she's about to be grilled about wedding plans. Avery also realizes this means she won't be able to visit Judy until the next day.

*Avery dreads talking about her wedding plans, which is not what one would expect from someone who is excited about getting married. The lack of excitement about wedding plans indicates a larger lack of excitement about being married, calling into question why Avery is marrying Elliot if she's not excited about it.*



## CHAPTER 6

Rill dreams that she is on the boat with Briny and Queenie. Queenie is singing into the wind and Briny says she looks like a queen. Turning to Rill, Briny asks what that makes her, and Rill says she's the princess. Rill wakes up from her happy dream when she hears a knock on the door. She looks out the window and sees Zede, who is obviously distraught. Rill opens the door and pulls a shawl around her, then sees that there is a teenage boy there, too. Zede lays a comforting hand on Rill's shoulder and tells her that Queenie's babies were both stillborn. Rill is in shock, having believed that nothing bad could happen to them on the river. Zede tells her that Briny is really upset, but that Queenie hasn't woken up yet; Rill knows Queenie will be devastated.

*Although the Fosses aren't rich, Rill's dream reveals that they are still very happy together. This highlights how money and social position don't necessarily equal happiness. The death of Queenie's twins is the first real tragedy Rill has ever known, but her primary concern is for Queenie and how hurt she will be. This emphasizes that Rill feels responsible for her whole family; because Queenie is hurting, Rill feels it will be her job to fix it somehow.*



Zede says he must go back to the hospital to help Briny, but leaves the teenager, Silas, on the boat to help take care of the younger kids. Rill and Camellia don't like this, but Zede insists upon it and warns them one more time not to leave the boat because something happened back in the shanty town that scared a lot of people away. Rill suddenly becomes worried and picks up both Gabion and Fern when they wander over to the door. Zede tells Rill she's in charge, gives her some food for their breakfast, and leaves Silas behind to take care of them. Rill offers to make breakfast for Silas, and they all go into the shanty while Rill cooks.

After everyone's eaten, Silas and Rill start talking. Rill tells Camellia to help clean Gabion up, which irritates Camellia. Silas asks Rill if she's ever going to get dressed and she realizes she's still wearing a nightgown. Rill tells him to leave the shanty and not to peek and he jokingly says there wouldn't be much to see because she's still a kid. This upsets Rill and she starts yelling at Silas to leave. Camellia gleefully joins in as Silas saunters off the boat to the shore. Once there, however, he hears something and indicates that Rill and Camellia need to be quiet. Suddenly frightened, Rill pushes Lark and Fern into the shanty and then grabs Gabion and Camellia, who gets mad at Rill for telling her what to do until Rill points out a figure walking in the woods. They go inside and lock the shanty doors.

Just as Rill is beginning to think the person in the woods is gone, a voice calls out to the boat. All the younger kids look to Rill, too scared to make a noise. Camellia whispers that the person isn't Zede when the person steps onto the boat. The man continues calling into the boat and tries to open the door until Silas appears and asks what the man—who appears to be a police officer—wants. Silas says the boat is his and the man asks if any children live there. Silas tries to convince the man to leave, saying no kids are there and that his father is nearby. The police officer doesn't believe him and insists that he needs to bring the kids to their parents. Silas tries to stop him, but Rill decides to come out when she hears the man choking Silas.

Rill tells Silas to leave so she and her siblings can go see their parents. Rill asks the man if Queenie and Briny are okay, even though she knows he's lying about having seen them. Rill hears a creak in the boat and realizes Camellia is trying to sneak out the back. She tells the man she must clean up her little brother, who just used the toilet. Just as Rill turns to go inside, a group of men notice Camellia and start yelling. Chaos ensues as the little kids start screaming and the men close in on Camellia, who is quickly captured. With Camellia subdued, Rill quietly gets herself and the other kids ready to go with the men. One man notes that "she" will like this batch.

*Even though Rill's life on the river is happy, it makes her and her family vulnerable because it is so obvious that they're poor. This makes them an easy target for people who might hurt them. Rill knows this and it's why she feels the urge to hold her youngest siblings close when Zede tells her about how scared the other people in the shanty town are.*



*Because Rill and her family live on a shanty boat on the river, they are easy targets for both criminals and even bored policemen who want to rough someone up. Because of this, Rill can't afford to trust anyone and immediately becomes suspicious just because someone is walking in the forest. This highlights the fear many lower-class families feel that they might be attacked just for being poor.*



*The man on the boat who chokes Silas is evidently a police officer, which further emphasizes the fact that the lower classes in the 1930s were thought of as subhuman and could therefore be treated with unwarranted cruelty. Furthermore, the fact that the man is a police officer means he will likely never be punished for choking a teenage boy without reason—there is nowhere the lower classes can turn for justice.*



*Rill sees that the only way to avoid being hurt by this man is to do what he wants them to do, even though she knows he's lying about her parents. This is contrasted with Camellia, who would rather risk being hurt by the men while she tries to escape than allow herself to be taken away without putting up a fight.*





Having captured all the kids, the men set out by boat for Memphis. Rill considers calling out for help but realizes nobody will help them because they are with police officers. One of the men tells Rill to keep her siblings out of trouble as they get out of the boat by a warehouse. The man in charge tells another man to hold Camellia (who has dark hair) back until Miss Tann has seen the four blond children. Tann gets out of a car that's waiting and looks at the children—she is delighted by Rill, Lark, Fern, and Gabion's blond curls, but is less impressed with Camellia's dark hair. However, she says she'll manage to "find a taker for her." Tann tells the children to get in the car, where two other young children are already seated on the floorboard.

Once in the car, Tann holds Gabion and admires his hair, but says he needs a bath to get rid of the smell of the river. Rill wonders why Gabion would need a bath if they're going to see their parents and tells Tann they call him Gabby. Tann tells her not to answer questions unless she's asked and then pulls Lark to her side. Rill looks at the other two terrified kids and then at Camellia, who has evidently realized the truth that Rill is trying not to acknowledge: Tann isn't bringing them to see their parents.

## CHAPTER 7

As Avery pulls up to Magnolia Manor—the nursing home Judy lives in—she remembers what it was like before it was converted into a nursing home. In fact, Magnolia Manor is where Honeybee first set eyes on Wells Stafford and decided to pursue him, thus uniting two powerful political families. The estate is still beautiful but has been modified to make sure the residents—many of whom have dementia—can't slip away. Avery walks into Judy's room wondering if Judy will recognize her or not. Although Judy politely greets and hugs her, Avery knows Judy doesn't quite recognize her. Aside from being upset that Judy is losing so many of her memories, Avery is worried that Judy is having a rough day and won't be able to answer questions about May Crandall.

*Tann appraises the Foss children the way one might appraise a piece of furniture or something else which can increase or decrease in value based on how beautiful or ugly it is. This sends the message that the kids aren't totally human to Tann, but rather objects. Tann's statement that she can find a "taker" for Camellia offers a clue about what is going to happen to the kids next—they will be taken by other people.*



*Rill holds onto the hope that she and her siblings will be brought to their parents even though she's known the adults were lying ever since the policeman told them they were going to the hospital. This shows that she's still in denial about what is happening—she's been kidnapped and Tann is not going to just give them back to their parents.*



*The living conditions in Magnolia Manor are a far cry from those involved in the recent nursing home scandal that Wells has been loosely linked to. This contrast highlights the fact that the Staffords belong to a very privileged upper class. This means they never have to worry about whether or not Judy is being properly cared for. Especially taken alongside the total vulnerability of Rill's family in the previous chapter, this scene highlights the enormous extent to which socioeconomic status can shape families' lives.*



Avery fills Judy in on the family news and they talk about the town hall meeting Wells and Avery attended the day before. Judy speaks glowingly of Wells and disparages his political opponents, saying that they'll never catch a Stafford "meddling in the dirt" no matter how much they want to. Avery shifts the conversation to May Crandall and asks Judy if she knows the name. Although Judy acts like she's thinking about the name, Avery can tell that Judy recognizes it. Judy stares intently at Avery and asks why Avery wants to know. Avery explains that she met May the day before and Judy says that May probably just knows of the Staffords—and that people look for a scandal. Avery is stunned by Judy's words about a scandal and asks if the family has any skeletons in the closet. Judy assures her they don't.

Avery shows Judy the picture she took of the photo in May's room and asks Judy if she recognizes the people in it. In her mind, Avery wonders if they're "woodpile relatives." Judy murmurs the word "Queenie" to herself and tears well up in her eyes before she turns back to Avery and tells her that they can't let anyone know about [Arcadia](#). Avery's mind swirls as she tries to get more information about what "Queenie" and "[Arcadia](#)" mean, but Judy shushes her as a nurse comes in to give them coffee and cookies. Avery theorizes that Arcadia might be a town as she gathers her stuff to leave. As she gets ready to go, Judy says, "Be careful, Rill" and explains that there are ears everywhere. As Avery leaves, she decides she must start digging to find out what Judy's words mean.

## CHAPTER 8

The car carrying Rill, her siblings, and the two other children pulls up to a large house in Memphis. Rill sees kids playing in the yard, but the house has boarded windows and peeling paint. Camellia asks if they're at the hospital and Tann says they must let Mrs. Murphy wash them before they can go to the hospital. Rill tries to believe this but can't. Tann tells the kids to get out of the car and assures them they'll be fine if they're good. Despite Rill's pleas, Camellia refuses to get out of the car and Rill notices that she's trying to sneak out the other car door. Tann grabs Camellia and drags her out of the car, telling her that she must behave. Camellia reluctantly nods in agreement. Tann leads them into the house.

*The fact that Judy won't just admit to knowing May even though Avery sees she recognizes the name indicates that there is some kind of a secret. If anything, Judy is worried that Avery might know too much about what this secret is if she already knows May's name, which is why Judy asks Avery to explain her curiosity. However, Judy unwittingly reveals the fact that there is a secret by alluding to the possibility of a scandal, something that Avery hasn't seriously considered as a possibility yet.*



*By "woodpile relatives," Avery means people related to the Staffords who do not share their wealth, power, and privilege but who might want to. Avery thinks that the existence of such relatives would be a bad scandal because having poor relatives is somewhat shameful in her social circle. Judy calls Avery Rill, which is the second time Avery's been mistaken for someone else that she doesn't know in two days. This is unsettling to Avery and adds to the sense that there is something more serious going on that her grandma is hiding.*



*Though the connection isn't yet clear, the setting in Memphis harkens back to the Prelude, when the doctor tells Christine's dad to see a woman in Memphis who can help him. Rill keeps trying to convince herself that someone will bring her to her parents and this belief helps her justify her decision not to fight back, but the truth is that she's afraid of what will happen if she does fight back. Tann's treatment of Camellia justifies Rill's fears.*



Inside the house there are two more kids and Rill begins to wonder where all these kids came from and why they're there. Tann leads Rill and the other kids into an office where a woman is waiting for them. The woman, Mrs. Murphy, warmly greets Tann, but wrinkles her nose at the kids. Murphy asks where they came from and Tann explains that they were "removed [...] just in time" and asks if Murphy has room for them. Murphy steps forward to get a closer look at all the kids, admiring their blond hair and criticizing Camellia's dark hair. Tann explains that Camellia has also been fighting back and Murphy explains that those who don't follow rules can't live upstairs. Tann also explains that the other two kids were "found" while she was out. Tann predicts they'll be "in great demand."

Tann asks Rill how she got her name and Rill says it reminded her father of the river. Tann says Rill will need a proper name: May Weathers. Tann shoos the kids out the door and Rill does her best to get them all to sit quietly by the stairs. Rill notes that Camellia is looking for escape routes and whispers to her to stop because Briny, who is sure to come looking for them soon, would want them all to stay together. Camellia agrees and they all settle into their spots to wait.

From her spot by the stairs, Rill can hear Mrs. Murphy and Tann talking. Tann says something about surrender papers at the hospital and the struggle to find the right shanty boat. Murphy asks about the other two children and Tann explains they were picked up while they were picking flowers near a group of shanty boats. Tann also mentions their papers will be "issued" soon and that the kids are called Sherry and Stevie. Tann also says that Rill and her siblings will go by May, Iris, Bonnie, Beth, and Robby Weathers. Murphy is to make sure all the kids are ready for a viewing party the next month. Murphy walks Tann to the door and then goes back into her office without another word.

Rill does her best to keep the kids quiet, but they're hungry, and nobody acknowledges them for a long time. Mrs. Murphy comes out of her office smelling like whiskey and gets mad at Camellia for asking where Briny and Queenie are. Murphy says that Camellia is the reason the kids must sit instead of going outside to play and then storms off. The youngest kids fall asleep until Fern wets herself. A worker finds them, washes Fern's clothes, and lets the other kids go use the toilet. Afterwards, they sit back down and wait for a long time before a worker leads them into a washroom. She tells the kids to take all their clothes off and have a bath in front of everyone else.

*Tann describes finding and removing these kids the way one might talk about pests, but her observation that they will be "in great demand" sends the message that they are also products for sale. This would mean they have value, but only a monetary value, not as human beings.*



*By giving Rill a new name, Tann begins rewriting her entire history. If Rill becomes May Weathers, then anyone who comes looking for a Rill won't be able to find her, which helps Tann get away with kidnapping them.*



*Tann openly admits that she's taken Sherry and Stevie without any paperwork, which indicates that she's confident in her ability to get the paperwork. This would mean that she has help from someone with judicial power who can help Tann get away with kidnapping children after the fact, indicating how deep the corruption in this scheme goes.*



*The first hours the kids spend in the home makes them understand that they can't expect to be treated well—they are little more than objects here, and the best they can hope for is to escape notice. By doing this, they can also escape punishment.*



## CHAPTER 9

Avery asks Honeybee again if the name May Crandall is familiar. Avery explains that May was the woman who took the **dragonfly bracelet** Judy gave her. Honeybee writes this off, saying May might have seen Judy wearing it at a public appearance and remembered it. Honeybee asks Wells if he recognizes the name, but he doesn't recognize it either. Desperate, Avery asks if Judy has any connection to Arcadia and Honeybee notes that Avery seems really concerned with the situation. Avery nearly pulls out her phone to show Honeybee the picture but thinks better of it when she remembers how stressed Honeybee already is over Wells's health. Instead, Avery assures Honeybee she's not concerned, just curious. In her thoughts, Avery tells herself she should let it go, but thoughts about Judy's words and May's picture continue to nag her.

Avery and her parents arrive at a local country club to make an appearance and shake the right hands. However, even though Avery is in her element talking about legal issues, she can't shake her thoughts about what the words Arcadia and Queenie might mean to Judy. Unable to get her mind off them, Avery makes up an excuse to slip away from her family when they get back home so that she can go see May Crandall again. Honeybee thinks Avery wants to talk to Elliot to settle wedding plans and tells her that the azalea garden at their house should be beautiful around the end of March, which Avery recognizes as a subtle hint to get married then. Avery writes this off and tells herself she has more important things to think about.

Avery is driving to May's nursing home when her sister Allison calls her and asks her to pick Courtney up and drop her off at a friend's house. Avery agrees and turns around to get Courtney, who's overjoyed to see her. On the way, Avery realizes they'll pass right by Judy's house, which the family still owns. Avery decides to stop by the house to look for answers after dropping Courtney off. The house hasn't been lived in since Judy left and all her belongings are still there. Judy was always very organized, and everything is carefully labelled with details of its origins, including the **dragonfly bracelet** that she gave Avery (which Judy got in 1966). Avery realizes she has no idea who gave Judy the bracelet.

*Honeybee's attitude towards the family's fame is a sharp contrast to Avery's. Avery struggles with being in the limelight because it means she has to carefully control everything about herself to avoid criticism. Honeybee simply accepts that the family is very important and thinks it's only natural that a woman like May would remember the details of the clothes they wear (such as the bracelet). However, this same fame makes Honeybee paranoid—she seems to assume that anyone could be out to get them, even a seemingly benign old woman in a nursing home.*



*Honeybee's hints about Avery's wedding show that she, like Elliot's mother, is anxious for Avery and Elliot to make definite plans. In other words, both of their families are counting on them. Because Avery was raised to believe she must live up to her family's expectations, she remains committed to making plans for a wedding that, at the moment, seems very unimportant to her.*



*Avery has accepted that Judy has some kind of secret and she is desperate to find out what it is. In Avery's world, a family secret has the potential to destroy the family reputation unless it is handled correctly. So by finding out what the secret is, Avery is preparing herself to defend her family, but it would also help her understand the family better.*



Avery settles on looking through Judy's detailed appointment books, remembering that once Judy told Avery she'd be able to read them all and find out all Judy's secrets. In the most recent appointment book, Avery sees a note with the names Trent Turner and Edisto. Avery doesn't know who Trent Turner is but keeps going through the book to look for May Crandall's name. When she reaches entries for January of that year, Avery again sees Trent's name. Avery becomes more curious about who Trent is and decides to call the phone number Judy wrote next to the name. Nobody answers, but the voicemail recording reveals that Trent Turner is a real estate agent. Avery wonders if Judy was going to sell her cottage on Edisto Island, but doesn't believe it.

Avery decides to look at some of Judy's oldest appointment books. In one entry, Judy wrote about meeting Avery's grandfather and how Judy didn't doubt at all that she should marry him. Avery struggles with her emotions as she wonders if you're supposed to have a "lightning bolt moment" when you find the person you're meant to be with, because she's never had that with Elliot. Instead, they grew up together and simply moved from friends to dating to engaged because it always seemed like the right thing to do.

Avery's phone rings, interrupting her thoughts—it's Trent, returning her call. Avery confusedly asks if Judy was selling the cottage and Trent explains that he's recently taken over since the death of his grandfather, who was also named Trent Turner. Avery asks Trent why Judy was contacting his grandfather. Trent hesitates before saying that his grandfather had some papers for Judy. Avery immediately becomes suspicious and asks what the papers were about, but Trent refuses to tell her because he made a promise to his grandfather. However, he says he can give the papers to Judy if she comes down herself. Avery states that it's not possible for Judy to come down in person so Trent says there's nothing he can do and hangs up.

## CHAPTER 10

Rill wakes up confused about where she is and what's happening. Once she opens her eyes and notices the high window and a bush outside of it, she remembers everything that's happened. She and her siblings are in the basement. Rill remembers being relieved that the five of them were alone together, but now she feels sick as she remembers being taken from the boat and forced to take a bath in front of everyone. Rill thinks about her parents and realizes she's responsible for protecting her little sisters and brother even though she doesn't know how to protect herself. Fern has crawled into Rill's cot in the night, so Rill curls herself around Fern and tries to stifle her sobs.

*Avery chooses to look for May's name, but not for the name "Rill," which is what Judy mistakenly called her at the nursing home. At this point, Avery believes that if there is a family secret, it will be something so innocent that it's recorded in an appointment book, which means she's not yet ready to discover anything too serious in her family's past.*



*In this passage, Avery transitions from a simple lack of excitement about planning her wedding to actually questioning whether she loves the man she's going to marry. Avery compares her feelings for Elliot to Judy's feelings for her husband and Avery finds that genuine love in her relationship might be lacking.*



*Trent's unwillingness to share details about what papers he has for Judy only makes Avery more suspicious. To her, this is the first clue that the family secret might actually be serious and not just something easy to deal with like poor relatives.*



*Rill has always been responsible, but now she has to grow up very quickly. Although she's used to caring for her siblings, she's also used to having her parents there to help her and comfort her. Part of protecting the kids means Rill can't show her own fear or negative emotions because she knows doing so would make it harder to protect the little kids from the horror of their situation.*



Rill dozes off until she notices a man in the room walking from one cot to the next. Rill pretends to be asleep until the man leaves. When she opens her eyes, she sees peppermints on everyone's pillows. Rill carries Fern back to her own cot while Camellia pops up and begins crunching on her peppermints. Rill takes the rest of the peppermints and hides them in her dress pocket to pass out later. Camellia asks what they are going to do, and Rill tries to convince Camellia—and herself—that if they're good and do as they're told, then someone will bring them to Briny. Camellia theorizes that the man who gave them the peppermints might be able to bring them to Briny, but Rill is suspicious about why the man was in their room.

A worker comes in and orders them all to get out of bed and fold their blankets. The worker leads them out of their room, past the man (whom the woman calls Mr. Riggs) who gave them the peppermints. Camellia smiles at him as the nurse, Mrs. Pulnik, marches the kids up the stairs. Mrs. Pulnik gives Rill and her siblings old clothes to wear and a small scoop of cornmeal mush for breakfast before leading them outside with strict orders not to go near the fence. Rill leads her sisters and brothers through the yard. She spots Stevie, but not his sister Sherry. Rill tells Stevie he can stay with her and he gratefully reaches out for her.

A group of older boys tries to stop Rill and the younger kids from passing. Camellia wants to fight them, but Rill decides to offer them the peppermints in exchange for being allowed to pass. The boys ask where Rill got peppermints and she tells them about Mr. Riggs. Camellia tells them Mr. Riggs is her friend, thinking it will scare the boys out of messing with them. However, one of the boys leans close to Rill and tells her not to let Riggs catch her alone because he “ain't the kind of friend you want.”

## CHAPTER 11

Two weeks have passed since Avery talked to Trent Turner on the phone. She is driving down to Edisto Island to see him in person after her sister Missy encouraged her to take a vacation. On her way out of town, Avery stopped to visit May only to learn that she was hospitalized for an infection and hasn't been released yet. Since their initial conversation, Trent has refused to take Avery's phone calls, which makes Avery worry that the papers he has are some kind of blackmail. Furthermore, Avery learned from an entry in one of Judy's appointment books that the **dragonfly bracelet** has something to do with Edisto, although it's unclear what the connection is. Avery wonders if it means Judy was having an affair and used to meet her lover on Edisto. To Avery, one thing is clear: Judy wouldn't keep a secret unless it could hurt the family somehow.

*Rill keeps trying to convince herself that everything will be fine because that makes it easier for her to cope with her fear and anxiety about what's actually happening. Furthermore, it's simply inconceivable to her that kids can be taken away from their parents, so she maintains a childlike faith that her dad can and will save her from this situation.*



*The disappearance of Sherry is the first example of siblings being forcibly split up that Rill encounters in the orphanage, and it foreshadows what will happen with her and her siblings. The fact that siblings are being split up highlights how cruel Miss Tann can be and how little she cares about the emotional trauma she causes the children in the homes.*



*The boy's statement that Riggs isn't the “kind of friend” Rill and her siblings want to have is also the first clue that there is widespread and not-so-secret abuse going on in the home. Camellia's pride in her so-called friendship with Riggs makes her particularly vulnerable to him.*



*Even though Avery's family's wealth and power comes with a lot of privileges, it also makes them vulnerable, which is why now Avery's worst fear is that someone could blackmail Judy. This would be particularly cruel because Judy has dementia and can no longer defend herself. This means it would be up to Avery and her parents to defend Judy, but Avery is reluctant to share her worries with them because of Wells's illness.*



Avery has also been researching Trent Turner. She's learned that he's actually Trent Turner III and the real estate business Trent now owns is a family business that he's taken over since his grandfather's death. Despite how nervous Avery is, she enjoys her drive to Edisto and all the happy memories it stirs up. It doesn't take long for Avery to find Trent's office. She pulls up and looks around with envy at the beautiful scenery surrounding the office. Avery wonders why she's never brought Elliot to Edisto and notes that the answer "tastes bitter": their self-imposed schedules keep them too busy, and they must keep up with those schedules to maintain their families' reputations.

Avery walks into the office and calls out, but nobody is there. She notices a popcorn machine and goes to get some because she's very hungry, but before she can, Trent comes in. Avery thinks he is attractive and charismatic. Avery tells him that she called him a couple of weeks ago, but Trent doesn't remember her. While Avery watches him struggle to recall who she is, she feels "a spark of...something" and smiles, which makes her feel guilty. Avery reluctantly tells Trent she called him about Judy's papers, knowing that he'll be irritated with her. Trent tells Avery she's wasting her time—not even her power of attorney for Judy is enough to make him give Avery the papers because it's not a legal matter. Avery tells him she won't leave until she has the papers and sits down, much to Trent's chagrin.

Trent again tries to explain that he made a promise to his grandfather and says it's better that he doesn't give Avery the papers. Avery threatens to sue for the papers on the grounds that they might do her family real harm. Trent tells her good luck, but Avery sees on his face that she's not wrong that the papers might be bad for her family's reputation. Her heart sinks as she realizes there is a dark family secret. The phone rings and Trent answers it, talking longer than normal in an evident attempt to make Avery leave. However, she stays put and when Trent gets off the phone, he tells her again that it's no use. Still, Avery stays while Trent silently works at his computer.

After a while, Trent states that Avery must be used to getting what she wants. Avery is hurt by this because she doesn't like it when people assume her only real qualifications are her family name and pretty hair. She proudly tells Trent that she works for what she gets. He only snorts in response. Avery insinuates that Trent's grandfather was trying to blackmail Judy. Trent is furious with Avery for implying this and the two stand up and stare at each other. Avery asks him what his grandfather wanted with Judy and Trent insists it's not blackmail. As Avery demands the papers, someone comes into the office—it's a game warden and Trent tells him Avery is leaving.

*Edisto Island is clearly very meaningful to Avery, so it is peculiar that Elliot has never been there with her, especially because they've grown up together. Like planning their wedding, it seems that sharing the experience with Elliot wasn't important until now, when Avery realizes that their lifestyles prevent meaningful trips together. Instead of prioritizing their relationship, this moment indicates, they have dedicated themselves to their careers and upholding their family names.*



*In Avery's mind, simply feeling a "spark" for someone else is some kind of betrayal of her relationship with Elliot. This shows that she takes her commitment to Elliot seriously, even if she's unexcited about their impending wedding and is beginning to question whether they truly love each other and are getting married for the right reasons.*



*Avery has already decided that the papers might be important enough to warrant a trip to Edisto, but she's still grappling with the possibility that the information Trent has can damage her family. Perhaps even more importantly, it might damage Avery's perception of her family. One of Avery's major characteristics is her sense of right and wrong, which can be seen in her initial concern for May's welfare. If her family has really committed some wrong, it would devastate her because she puts so much faith in their collective morality.*



*Both Trent and Avery find the weak spots in each other: Avery is sensitive about being perceived as a spoiled brat, and Trent is sensitive about how people perceive his grandfather. This is why they both jump to their feet as soon as Trent insinuates that Avery gets whatever she wants and Avery implies that Trent's grandfather is a blackmailer.*



## CHAPTER 12

It takes Rill two weeks to learn that all the kids in the house are wards of the Tennessee Children's Home Society. Every day she sneaks to the window of Mrs. Murphy's office to listen even though she knows she'll be in trouble if she gets caught. After listening to Murphy's conversations for a while, Rill realizes that "wards" are kids whose parents don't come for them, and so they are given to new parents. Rill thinks this must be what happened to Sherry and considers herself lucky—Rill has parents who will come for her. One day Rill hears Murphy and Mrs. Pulnik talk about Stevie, who's been wetting the bed. Murphy says he must be tied to his bed until he learns not to wet it.

Rill also learns that she and her siblings are being saved for a viewing. She doesn't know what this means but thinks it might mean that Briny is coming to see them. However, this worries her because recently a man came to see his son, Lonnie, only to find out that Lonnie was adopted out even though the man wanted to bring him back home—the devastated man cried on the porch for his son until Mr. Riggs carried him away.

When Rill leaves the window, she takes care to hide her tracks both to avoid being caught by Mrs. Pulnik and because she's afraid of what will happen if Mr. Riggs ever finds her alone there—there are rumors that Riggs hurts children and that if they talk about it then he kills them. Rill is becoming more and more worried about Riggs, who continues to leave peppermints for her and her siblings by their door (which is now locked every night). Rill is worried about what will happen if she and the younger kids are moved upstairs where there is no locked door between them and Riggs.

Once she's back with her siblings, Rill holds Stevie, who has a painful goose egg under his hair from a nurse hitting him. Camellia asks Rill what she heard at the window. Rill says she didn't hear anything about Briny and Camellia says he must be in jail and Queenie must be dead. Rill yells at her and the two get in a fight. Camellia is about to punch Rill when one of the big boys comes out and shoves Camellia down. Rill gets mad at him and he threatens to hurt Camellia again if Rill doesn't agree to be his girlfriend. Rill agrees, although it makes her uncomfortable. They hold hands and talk for the rest of the day—Rill even begins to like him and the protection he offers. However, the next day he is missing, and the nurses say he was sent away.

*Stevie is about three years old, so it's not surprising that he might wet his bed, especially after the trauma of being separated from Sherry. The extreme punishment Murphy prescribes for him shows just how unfair her expectations are for the kids and how far she's willing to go to try to correct their behavior.*



*Even though Rill wants to see Briny, she doesn't know if she, her siblings, or Briny would be able to deal with trauma of seeing each other again, but still being prevented from staying together. The episode with Lonnie's dad shows Rill that even when parents come back for their kids, sometimes the kids are already gone. This means that Briny must find them before they disappear like Lonnie.*



*The rumors about Riggs and Rill's fear of being caught alone with him imply that he's guilty of sexual abuse. Rill recognizes that he is leaving peppermints for her and her siblings to earn their trust. Still, rather than talking about what kind of person Riggs might be, Rill just does her best to prevent him from catching her or the other kids alone.*



*Rill feels helpless in the orphanage even though she knows her siblings are counting on her. She has such a violent reaction to Camellia's statement that Briny is in jail and Queenie is dead because if it's true, then nobody is coming to save them, and it would mean the end of life as they know it. The disappearance of Rill's "boyfriend" is another example of how kids simply disappear from the orphanage; first Sherry disappeared without explanation, and now this boy has disappeared. However, in the boy's case, it seems that his leaving might have been connected to his behavior with Rill, which sends the message that if you break certain rules then you might disappear, too.*





One afternoon the kids are bathed and dressed for a special occasion: a bookmobile is coming, but only the most well-behaved kids can borrow a book. Mrs. Murphy makes Rill leave her siblings in the house while she picks a book for them to share. While Rill waits her turn at the bookmobile, she hears Georgia Tann tell reporters that all the kids in the home were “unwanted and unloved,” but are well taken care of while they wait for adoptive parents. In her mind, Rill screams to the reporters that she has loving parents and that they should go into the house and see the poor living conditions. Outwardly, she patiently waits until one of the women calls her over and helps her pick out a book—[Adventures of Huckleberry Finn](#), which reminds Rill of her parents and former happiness and offers an escape from life in the orphanage.

About a week later, Rill sees Tann’s car pull up at the home again. Rill finds a safe spot to hide and listens to Tann and Mrs. Murphy talk. Tann talks about an advertisement she placed in a paper about available blond children and that people are already calling to ask about them. Tann tells Murphy to have all the kids bathed, dressed, and ready to go to the viewing party on Saturday. She emphasizes how important it is for the kids to understand that they can’t do or say anything to embarrass Tann at the party because some of the best families in the nation will be there. Murphy agrees and Tann gives her a list of kids. Murphy is surprised to see the name “May” on the list.

Rill goes back to her siblings but doesn’t bother telling Camellia they might need an extra bath—Rill has a bad feeling Camellia won’t need one because she doesn’t have blond hair. When Saturday comes around, Rill realizes she was right. She, Fern, Lark, and Gabion take an extra bath, but Camellia doesn’t have to. Rill begs Camellia to be good as a worker yells for Rill to line up with the other kids. Once they’re dressed, the kids are loaded into cars and they silently drive over the river. As they cross the bridge, Rill senses “May fade[]” and her true self emerge as she stretches toward the window to catch the smell of the river.

The car pulls up to a large house and the kids are herded through the doors. Inside, couples mill about, talking to Tann and the children. Rill sees Lark coloring with one woman, Gabion playing with a couple, and a woman reading to Fern. The woman calls to her husband, Darren, and says that Fern is “perfect.” Darren excuses himself, saying he must talk to someone. He sits next to Rill, points to Fern, and asks if they’re sisters. Rill says they are, and he asks her how old she is as he sets his hand on her back.

*Of all the lies Rill hears Georgia tell, the one that sticks out to her most is that the kids are “unwanted and unloved.” Rill knows she and her siblings have always been wanted and loved, so if only “unwanted and unloved” kids belong in the home then it is proof that Rill doesn’t belong there and should be allowed to go home. However, she realizes that Tann is lying to make herself look good, even though evidence of her villainy is just steps away in the orphanage.*



*“May” is the name Tann gave Rill when she first got to the orphanage, so this conversation tells Rill that she is going to have to go to the viewing party. The mention of an advertisement means that people at the party are expecting to be able to buy the kids there. In other words, Rill is now officially for sale. The mention of the best families in the nation also subtly hints at families like the Staffords, indicating that this viewing party might somehow relate to the mystery Avery is trying to solve.*



*While Rill is not particularly worried about going to the party, she is worried about leaving Camellia behind. Camellia is stubborn and violent, and if she talks back to a worker, a big boy, or Mr. Riggs then something bad could happen to her and Rill won’t be there to protect her. Briny’s last words to Rill were to take care of the younger kids, and she takes this responsibility very seriously.*



*Rill takes special note of Darren’s hand on her back because she’s becoming increasingly self-conscious about her body and how it’s seen by others, particularly men. She’s been humiliated by being forced to strip naked to bathe in front of boys and girls, and her suspicions of Mr. Riggs have also made her suspicious of other grown-up men. So to Rill, Darren’s possibly innocuous gesture has an insidious, hidden meaning.*



## CHAPTER 13

Avery walks into the empty cottage on Edisto Island and is overwhelmed by a sense of nostalgia. She's on the phone with her uncle, talking to him about how often Judy brought him and Wells to the cottage when they were kids. Avery's uncle tells her that Judy usually went to Edisto by herself—it was her favorite place to write an anonymous society column, which surprises Avery. Avery's uncle suddenly asks why Avery is asking so many questions, so she tells him she just regrets not asking Judy more questions before she was diagnosed with dementia. Avery hangs up the phone and thinks about the conversation. She decides Trent Turner might not be holding blackmail, but she is still suspicious that there's a dark secret.

Avery tosses around theories about what the papers Trent Turner has for Judy might be while she gets ready to take a shower. Just as she's getting ready to get in the shower, however, she remembers what her uncle said about Judy's writings and decides to search the cottage for them. Avery remembers that there's an old typewriter in one of the rooms and that whatever Judy last typed on it will be imprinted on the ribbon. Avery pulls the ribbon out and sees the last lines of a letter to Trent, meaning Trent senior. Judy expresses her frustration with not knowing more about the records from the Tennessee Children's Home Society, which immediately sets off alarm bells in Avery's mind. Avery connects this to the picture in May's room of a pregnant woman and wonders if the woman is a relative who gave up her baby to the TCHS.

Avery realizes that the papers the younger Trent has probably shed more light on Judy's interest in the Tennessee Children's Home Society. Even though it's midnight, Avery grabs her phone and calls Trent. When he answers, he's groggy and Avery immediately launches into questions about the TCHS and asks why Judy was interested in it. Trent is a little irritated, but Avery begs him for answers. He tells her that he can't tell her—not just because of the promise to his grandfather, but because he himself hasn't read the papers. Avery pleads with him to tell her what the papers must be about. Trent goes silent for a moment before telling her to come over before he changes his mind. Avery tells him she'll be right there (Trent only lives four houses down) and darts out the door.

*Avery has chosen not to share her concerns with her parents because she doesn't want to add a new stress on top of the nursing home scandal and Wells's illness. However, the fact that she won't share her concerns with her uncle either sends the message that she's also afraid of what her family might say if they find out she's looking for a family secret or has any reason to believe that there is one.*



*Avery discovers Judy's interest in the Tennessee Children's Home Society. Notably, the doctor in the Prelude mentioned that there was a woman in Memphis, Tennessee who could help replace the distraught grandfather's stillborn granddaughter. This could indicate that the baby Avery believes was given up is in some way connected to the family in the Prelude.*



*Trent's sudden willingness to give Avery the papers meant for Judy reflects his own growing interest in the case. Although he takes his promise to his grandfather seriously, Trent evidently wasn't really interested in what the papers might say until Avery started asking about them. This could reflect his growing interest in Avery due to the "spark" they experienced when they first met face-to-face.*



As Avery is walking to Trent's, Elliot calls to tell her about a conversation he had with Bitsy—she's anxious to have grandchildren and Elliot jokingly says Allison should let Bitsy babysit the triplets to "cure her" of her baby fever. Even though Avery knows he's joking, his words sting because she loves her nephews and she realizes that Elliot might never want kids. Elliot changes the subject to Avery's weekend at the beach. She jokes that Leslie will hunt her down if she doesn't go home soon and Elliot reminds Avery that she is home to be seen in public and Leslie's just trying to help. Avery wants to tell Elliot she returned home to talk care of her dad but knows he won't understand because he's such an "achievement-oriented person." They say goodbye and Avery enjoys the scenery as she continues her walk to Trent's cottage.

Avery walks up to the back porch of Trent's cottage and he opens the door before she can knock. Avery apologizes for calling him so late and asks again how their grandparents are connected. Trent tells her that his grandfather might have been doing a job for Judy. Avery asks him what that means, and Trent says his grandfather was a "finder" of people.

## CHAPTER 14

The viewing party winds down later in the night. Rill isn't ready for it to end because all day she's been able to eat cookies and sandwiches, color, and play with new toys. Rill feels bad for Camellia but thinks it's better that she didn't come because she doesn't like cuddling and the adults all wanted to cuddle the kids. As much as Rill has enjoyed the party, it was a struggle for her to keep quiet while she listened to Georgia Tann tell all the adults that the kids can "become anything" prospective parents want them to be.

As Rill and the others are getting ready to leave, Rill notices that the couple who has been playing with Gabion all day don't want to let him go. Rill tries to tell him that they must go so they can read their book at the orphanage, but Gabion doesn't want to let go of the woman who's holding him. Tann tells Rill to be silent while she talks to the couple. The husband steps up and asks if they can make arrangements and Tann smilingly says they can. She orders Mrs. Pulnik to bring Rill and Fern outside. Mrs. Pulnik grabs Rill's arm and pulls her out of the house as Tann explains that Gabion actually has a newborn sister that was adopted by a prominent family. Mrs. Pulnik throws Rill and Fern into the car while Rill wonders if she really does have a new baby sister.

*The conversation between Elliot and Avery reveals that even though they are about to get married, they struggle to really understand each other. Presumably, Elliot would never have made that joke about Avery's nephews if he knew it would hurt her feelings, but she doesn't tell him that it does, either. Nor does she voice her concern that Elliot's attitude towards children might mean he doesn't want to have any, even though Avery does because she loves kids. Furthermore, Elliot doesn't sympathize with the idea that Avery would return home just to care for her father, which shows that Elliot himself is likely not a very warm or emotional person.*



*Trent's revelation combined with Judy's interest in the TCHS seems to support Avery's budding belief that Judy was looking for someone—probably a relative—who was given up for adoption long ago.*



*Rill is old enough to understand what Tann is telling the adults at the party—kids don't have their own identities and so they can be forced into any shape by new parents. Rill, however, feels like this isn't true and she doesn't want the adults to think it is. However, she knows that if she speaks up then she will be punished.*



*Tann unwittingly plants the idea in Rill's head that at least one of Queenie's babies didn't actually die. This could also mean that Queenie is still alive, despite Camellia said earlier about Briny being in prison and Queenie being dead. However, to Rill the possibility of having another sister out there in the world means that a piece of herself is missing, too.*



While Rill, Lark, and Fern sit in the car waiting, Rill tries to convince herself that Tann was lying about the baby sister. Before she knows it, the car starts and begins driving away without Gabion. Mrs. Pulnik tells Rill she must behave or else she and her siblings will be put into the dark closet. The younger kids don't say a word as the car drives away and Rill stares out the window until she can't see the house anymore. Rill says she feels empty and lifeless. She notes that she "can't breathe" here—only May Weathers can.

When they get back to the house, Rill starts thinking about Camellia and how Rill is supposed to tell her about Gabion. Rill dreads the anger Camellia will feel towards her, but nonetheless, as soon as Mrs. Murphy lets her go Rill tries to find Camellia; however, she's not in any of her usual spots and the older boys refuse to tell Rill where Camellia is. Suddenly Rill spots her—she's dirty and sitting quietly by a porch. Rill goes up to her and asks what's wrong, but Camellia doesn't answer. Rill realizes that Camellia is covered in coal dust and again asks what happened. Rill notices her hand is balled into a fist, so she opens Camellia's fingers and sees that she's holding a bunch of peppermints. Rill tries not to know what this means, but she can't shake the image of Camellia kicking and screaming out of her mind.

Rill grabs Camellia's hand and pulls her over to the rain barrel to wash her up so the workers won't think Camellia's been fighting. Rill tells the younger kids to leave Camellia alone and tries to take care of her, but that night Camellia refuses to eat and doesn't say a word. When the workers try to bathe her, however, Camellia puts up a huge fight and Mrs. Pulnik asks Mr. Riggs to bring a rope. Camellia is taken away and Rill doesn't see her again. That night, Fern wets the bed for the first time in over a year. When Rill tries to hide the dirty clothes outside of their basement window, she thinks she sees Zede and Silas across the street.

## CHAPTER 15

The folder Trent gives Avery is thin, so she knows there aren't many papers in it. She wants to open it before he changes his mind but decides to thank him again first. Trent explains that his grandfather helped other people find lost family members after he found out he was adopted and had a falling out with his adoptive parents. Trent says his grandma always said it would have been better if his grandfather had never discovered his adoption records and wonders if she was right. Avery tells him secrets have a way of coming out and opens the folder. Before she can read the documents, however, a little boy walks into the room. Avery realizes Trent has a son and wonders if he has a wife, too. A wave of jealousy washes over her, but she pushes it from her mind.

*Mrs. Pulnik's threat highlights the fact that she knows Rill must be incredibly upset about leaving Gabion behind. This means that Mrs. Pulnik knows they are hurting the kids by separating them, but supports Tann anyway by scaring the kids out of saying anything about it. Rill's thought that she can only exist as May also highlights how her new life is eating away at her sense of her own identity.*



*Mr. Riggs always gives the kids peppermints, so the fact that Camellia is obviously hurt and there are peppermints in her hand indicates that Riggs is the one who hurt her. This confirms all of Rill's fears about him, and not only does she feel terrible for Camellia, but she also feels guilty herself because she's supposed to take care of her siblings. Yet, despite her best effort, Rill was unable to keep Gabion with her or protect Camellia from being violated by the groundskeeper.*



*Camellia's disappearance right after being assaulted by Riggs seems to confirm the rumors that Riggs would get rid of any kids who talked about how he hurt them. Although Camellia didn't exactly talk about it, it would have been convenient for Riggs to get rid of her when he was called in to restrain her while she threw a fit over taking a bath.*



*Avery doesn't want to be jealous of Trent's possible wife because it would mean that she has to admit to herself just how attracted she is to him. This would be an even greater betrayal of her relationship with Elliott than shooting Trent a flirty smile or thinking that he's charismatic. More importantly, being attracted to someone other than Elliot could complicate Avery's life—something she can't afford with how complicated it already is between her father's cancer, the nursing home scandal, and her new concern about Judy's secret.*



The little boy, Jonah, tells Trent that he had a nightmare about a dinosaur in his closet. Trent tries to soothe him, but Avery—who has plenty of experience with kids thanks to her niece and nephews—suggests they buy a flashlight so Jonah can shine it in the closet when he gets scared and see that nothing’s there. Jonah and Trent love the idea and Avery is surprised to find that she forgot all about the papers she’s holding. She looks back down at them and sees that it’s paperwork for a newborn named Shad Arthur Foss who was surrendered by his unwed parents—B. A. Foss and Mary Anne Anthony—at birth and given to the Tennessee Children’s Home Society. Avery is confused because she doesn’t recognize any names or any obvious connection between this baby and Judy. Still, Avery knows it must have been important to Judy.

Avery asks Trent if there are other packets. Trent looks guilty but admits that his grandfather kept a few with the names of people they should be given to written on them. Trent explains that his grandfather took on jobs to find people for decades, but that Trent didn’t know why his grandfather took some cases and not others; some of these jobs were done for high-profile clients. Avery says she’s still confused as to what any of this has to do with Judy and she asks if he has files for May Crandall or someone named Fern or Queenie. Trent says he doesn’t know and that his grandfather only kept files for people who asked for them, which means Judy must have sought out help finding someone.

Avery asks Trent if he can show her the other files, which are in a separate building on the property. Trent agrees and says he must put Jonah to bed. Before he turns away, his and Avery’s eyes meet and Avery “feel[s] something” that she doesn’t want to. Trent smiles at her and she feels something “like lightning crackling far off.” For moment she’s stunned, but the moment ends when Jonah stirs sleepily. Avery mentally chastises herself and says she has to go, just as her phone starts to buzz. She suggests they meet tomorrow to go through the office and Trent agrees, saying he’ll send his son to an aunt’s house to play for the day. Trent steps out to watch Avery walk home to make sure she gets there safely.

While Avery walks back, she’s conscious of Trent watching her. Suddenly, her phone buzzes again and she sees it’s one of her friends from Baltimore. The two chat about a new case that’s come up in Baltimore and Avery notes that “whatever nonsense” she felt at Trent’s is dissipating, which she is grateful for. As Avery talks about the new case, she realizes that she misses her “old life.”

*Rill’s last name is Foss, so this paper reveals that at least one of Briny and Queenie’s twin babies (a boy) survived and was adopted. The comment Tann made about Gabion’s baby sister being adopted also implies that the other twin (a girl) survived. This means that both of Queenie and Briny’s twins survived even though nurses told them they were stillborn, according to Zede. This is an example of one of the real-life Georgia Tann’s most well-known tactics to get her hands on valuable newborns—simply tell the parents the babies have died, and then turn around and sell those babies to the highest bidder.*



*The papers in Judy’s packet are about Shad Arthur Foss, which would indicate that this is who she was looking for, but not why. Avery groups May, Fern, and Queenie together, which means that she is beginning to believe (correctly, it will turn out) that the three women are somehow connected to each other through the Tennessee Children’s Home Society.*



*Earlier when she was reading Judy’s appointment books, Avery wondered if she’s supposed to have a “lightning bolt moment” to know that she’s in love; because she never had that with Elliot, she questions her love for him. On the other hand, she has a feeling “like lightning crackling” with Trent. This implies that it’s Trent Avery can truly love, not Elliot.*



*Avery calls what she experienced with Trent “nonsense” to downplay its importance, because she’s still in denial about her own true emotions. Similarly, the phone conversation reveals that Avery’s heart is in being a lawyer, not a politician. If she follows in her father’s footsteps, then she will have to give up being a lawyer even though it makes her happy.*



## CHAPTER 16

Miss Dodd unlocks the basement door and cheerfully greets Rill, Lark, and Fern. Miss Dodd is a new worker and is nicer than the others, so Rill hopes Miss Dodd might tell her where Camellia is. One of the older boys told Rill that he heard Mrs. Murphy tell Mr. Riggs that Camellia died in the closet, but Rill didn't believe it. Rill hopes that Miss Dodd will tell her the truth. Miss Dodd can smell that Fern wet the bed again and Rill begs her not to tell anyone. To herself, Rill notes that it's been four days since Gabion left with the couple and since Camellia was taken away, which means Lark and Fern are all that she has left, and Rill is terrified of them getting punished. Miss Dodd sees how scared Rill is and agrees not to tell anyone about the wet bed.

Rill worries that Miss Dodd—who has four little siblings to support—might get in trouble for hiding the mess, but likes that she can rely on Miss Dodd. On the way upstairs, Miss Dodd asks Mr. Riggs to mix up some cleaner so she can clean the bed. She tells him the basement isn't a good place for the kids to be sleeping and he agrees. Miss Dodd tells him that he's a good man and Rill realizes Miss Dodd doesn't know anything about Riggs. Rill starts to wonder if Camellia really is dead and remembers the last thing Briny told her: "You watch over the babies, Rill." She notes that even her name sounds strange now because everyone calls her May, and she wonders if "Rill" is on the river with her family or if she ever existed at all. Rill starts running and momentarily feels like herself again.

Rill runs around the yard until she hears Fern and Stevie screaming. She rescues them from an older boy who's twisting Stevie's arm and starts walking away with them. Suddenly Rill realizes that Lark is missing. She asks Fern where Lark is, and Stevie tells her a lady has her. Rill tells them to stay by the teeter-totter and then runs into the house just in time to see a couple step out with Lark. Just as Rill is about to come forward, Miss Dodd pulls her into the kitchen and tells her she must let Lark go with her new parents. Desperate to stop the adoption, Rill tells Miss Dodd everything about being kidnapped and life at the orphanage, including her fear that Camellia died in a closet. Miss Dodd is stunned and tells Rill to stay strong while she "make[s] this right."

*Losing Camellia and Gabion makes Rill even more protective over Fern and Lark, and all the more terrified of losing them. As Rill loses her siblings, she loses ties to her past and is forced to question her own identity, since she always defined herself in terms of caring for her family.*



*Rill notes that her own name is starting to feel unfamiliar because everyone calls her May now. This is an example of how the real-life Tann was able to rewrite children's histories—she not only separated them from all ties to their pasts, but by forcing them to go by new names Tann made the children question their real identities. This disconnect made them easier to adopt out to wealthy parents.*



*If Rill got the attention of Lark's adoptive parents, then she would have inevitably been punished by Mrs. Murphy or Tann, but doing so might have also brought Tann's crimes to light if the couple believed Rill. However, Dodd stops Rill from stepping forward and Rill is forced to see another sibling taken away without being able to stop it. Miss Dodd's claim that she will "make this right," brings up the question of how it could be made right—Rill and her siblings are already traumatized and most of them have been taken away or disappeared without a trace. In other words, the damage has already been done, and none of the Foss children will ever be the same again.*



That night Fern is inconsolable and begs to see Lark. Rill loses patience with Fern and threatens to spank her, which terrifies Fern. Suddenly, Rill realizes what she's doing, turns away, and pulls on her own hair until it hurts. To herself, Rill says she wants to feel a new kind of pain that can end instead of the pain she feels now that just goes on and on and is turning her into a new, unfamiliar person. Rill collapses on a cot and Fern silently sits next to her, patting her back until Rill falls asleep.

When Rill wakes up, she's happy to see that Fern used the "slop pot" instead of wetting the bed and hurries to fix the cot. Mrs. Murphy appears and tells Rill she's not going anywhere. Murphy grabs Rill by her hair and chastises her for telling lies about life in the orphanage and Mr. Riggs. Murphy tells her that Miss Dodd has been fired and her siblings will be taken by Tann because of what Rill said. Murphy says Rill needs "some time alone," throws her to the floor, and grabs Fern. Murphy tells Rill that if she argues, Fern will be punished, and then locks Rill in the room. Rill waits all day, but nobody comes to feed her, nor does Fern come back. The next day Mrs. Pulnik brings water, but it's three days before she gives Rill food.

Rill loses count of how many days she stays in the basement before Mrs. Pulnik brings her to Mrs. Murphy's office. Pulnik throws Rill to the floor in front of Tann and Murphy. Tann tells Rill she is a "wretched, ungrateful little thing" for telling lies about Mr. Riggs. Tann asks Rill if she's just looking for attention, but Rill doesn't know how she's supposed to answer and says both yes and no. Tann grabs Rill by the chin and asks if she's "seen the error of [her] ways." Rill nods and Tann says she should have thought about that before making up stories about her "fictitious sister." Confused, Rill tries to make sense of this, but Tann tells Rill that they both know Camellia never existed—only four children were brought to the orphanage, and Rill is very grateful that so many of them have found homes.

Tann asks Rill if they understand each other and Rill nods even though she hates herself for it. She is desperate to find Fern and terrified of what will happen if she doesn't agree. Tann leaves and Mrs. Murphy tells Rill that she needs to be grateful from now on. Rill agrees and asks if she can see Fern. Murphy tells Rill that Fern was adopted, but that Rill can go outside with the other kids. She also tells Mrs. Pulnik to give Rill a bath before moving her to the upstairs bedroom. Pulnik leads a stunned Rill outside where she sits on the porch for a while before crawling under a bush near the fence to be alone.

*Rill's helplessness and fear turn to guilt and then anger. Fern's cries for Lark seem like accusations to Rill, because she feels guilty for letting so many of her siblings get taken away after Briny told her to take care of them—even though there's nothing she could have done to save them. Rill is unable to cope with this trauma and it transforms her into a much bitterer, angrier person than she ever was before.*



*Miss Dodd is punished for trying to do the right thing after hearing Rill's story of abuse and forced separation. Instead of physically hurting Dodd, Tann takes her siblings away. This highlights how perceptive Tann is—she knows how to find out a person's weak spot and attack them there to punish them for threatening her business at the Tennessee Children's Home Society.*



*Rill is still valuable to Georgia Tann because of her attractive blond hair and good looks—surely someone will pay to adopt her. This is why Tann doesn't simply make her disappear the way Camellia—who had a less desirable appearance, with her dark hair and eyes—did before. However, she forces Rill to adopt a new life history: she must deny Camellia's existence and adopt Tann's version of events. By denying that Camellia ever existed, Tann is trying to rewrite the entire history of the Foss family.*



*Rill knows that moving to the upstairs bedroom means she'll be in a room that has no lock to keep Mr. Riggs out. Murphy adds insult to injury by choosing to move Rill upstairs right after telling her that Fern is gone forever because she's been adopted. Without Fern, Rill has nothing left to tie her to her identity and past life.*



Rill falls asleep under the bush until someone on the other side of the fence touches her arm: it's Silas. He explains how Briny was tricked into signing surrender papers for all the kids. Silas says they looked for them for weeks before Miss Dodd found them and told them where to find Rill and the others. Silas has been watching the house waiting to see them. Silas says Queenie and Briny are back at the [Arcadia](#) and strokes Rill's hair while she cries and tries to explain what happened to the others. Silas says he can help Rill escape that night and Rill agrees, but during dinner someone tells her Fern's adoptive parents are returning her because she keeps wetting the bed. Rill realizes she must delay her escape until she can bring Fern and Stevie, too.

*Briny was an easy target for Tann: he absolutely heartbroken over the apparent death of Queenie's twins and willing to sign anything if it meant he didn't have to pay the exorbitant hospital bills. Furthermore, Briny simply trusted that people in a hospital would not lie to him that way; one is supposed to be able to trust a doctor or a nurse. Rill's decision to stay and wait for Fern shows just how hopeful she is that she can somehow get her family back together.*



## CHAPTER 17

Avery enjoys her free time on the beach but begins to worry that Trent has changed his mind about showing her the other files later in the day. Avery starts walking towards his house to see if he's home, but he calls her and says he's at her house. Avery goes back to meet him and then they set off for Trent's cottage together. While they walk, Trent talks about his life—he moved to Edisto from New York so Jonah could be close to family after his mother died. Avery says she's sorry about his wife's death, but Trent explains that they weren't married; he only found out Jonah was his after his mother died. Avery is surprised by Trent's openness because people from her "world" would never openly talk about these things, and she wonders if she's getting too used to maintaining appearances.

*Trent's story lets Avery know that he's not only unmarried, but that he is a dedicated father. Avery loves kids, so this is an attractive quality for her (and one which Elliot, who doesn't like kids very much, lacks). It also shows that Trent values family as highly as Avery does, which explains why he's so protective over his grandfather's reputation. But unlike Avery, Trent manages to be devoted to his family while still speaking openly about his personal life, which prompts her to contemplate a way of being that's very different from her own.*



Trent leads Avery up the path to his grandfather's former office. Trent becomes somber as they get closer to the office and says he wishes his grandfather were still alive to tell him what to do. Avery says she understands and that she feels a lot of guilt over nosing around in Judy's past, but asserts that she thinks discovering the truth is what matters. Trent jokes that talking like that will hurt Avery in the political world, which sets Avery on edge as she explains that her family values public service. Trent says that means she won't like what she's about to learn about the Tennessee Children's Home Society—it was well-respected and Georgia Tann, who ran it, worked with very powerful people, but the TCHS was corrupt and sold kidnapped children. Trent hands Avery an article about it that he printed for her.

*Avery truly believes her entire family is dedicated to public service because she's seen their commitment to it herself. However, if there is a connection between them and Georgia Tann, it would make them look hypocritical. How can a family say they're dedicated to public service and yet benefit from the kidnapping, abuse, and sale of lower-class children even if it happened in the past?*





Avery says that nothing shocks her after being a federal prosecutor for so long, but she is nonetheless unsettled by the article as she reads it. The article says that Tann may be responsible for up to 500 deaths and that many of the kids she put up for adoption weren't orphans; in fact, they were kidnapped and any paperwork identifying them would mysteriously disappear. Avery also reads about the allegations of abuse in Tann's orphanages and how many kids were brokered to Hollywood celebrities and other prominent families. Avery expresses her horror and then remembers that she has family from Tennessee and wonders if they had anything to do with Tann's crimes. Specifically, Avery worries that Judy was working with Trent's grandfather to "right the family wrongs."

Trent asks Avery if she's sure she wants to go through more files. Avery tells him that the truth always comes out and it's her opinion that it's better to know what the truth is ahead of time. Trent shares his fear that he'll find out his grandfather was one of the kids from the TCHS, especially because his adoptive father was on the Memphis police force. Avery sees a mirror of her own fears in Trent's eyes as she wonders if they "carry the guilt" from the actions of past generations. Trent opens the office door and they walk in. On the walls are bulletin boards full of pictures dating back to the 1940s. Looking at the faces in the pictures, Avery wonders what their stories are.

Avery notices a picture of four blond women on the beach—one of them is Judy and all of them are wearing **dragonfly bracelets**. Avery reaches for the photo and Trent helps her get it. When he takes out the thumbtack, a smaller photo falls to the ground. Avery picks it up and realizes it's the same photo from May Crandall's room.

## CHAPTER 18

The house is dark and quiet as Rill slips out as quietly as she can to meet Silas at the fence. On the way, she worries that Briny and Queenie won't want her when they find out she lost her four siblings. When Silas sees her, he whispers excitedly for her to come over because he's cut a bar on the fence that they can pull out so Rill can climb through and they can get away. Rill tells him that she must stay because Fern is coming—their escape will have to wait a night or two. She also wants to bring Stevie with them. Silas argues with her but agrees to come back the next night for her and Fern.

*Trent previously described his grandfather as "a finder" who searched for people. So, if Judy was trying to "right the family wrongs" with him, then it might mean she's trying to reunite children with their siblings or other family after they were separated by Tann, possibly with the assistance of someone in Avery's family. However, if this is true then it would threaten everything Avery thinks she knows about her family's morality. They are supposed to be above reproach, but being complicit in Tann's deeds would make them criminals.*



*While Avery is worried that her biological family had something to do with Tann's crimes, Trent worries that his grandfather was a victim. This reveals the real opinion each has about their family: Trent truly believes his grandfather is above reproach, but Avery can't deny that her ancestors might have committed some serious crimes for personal gain. In other words, Avery doesn't totally buy that her family is as moral as they always claim to be.*



*Avery knows the dragonfly bracelet is very important to Judy for some reason. The fact that the other three women in the picture have identical ones implies that they are all deeply connected to one another and that the bracelets represent that connection.*



*Rill's fear that her parents might not want her if she shows up without any of the little kids is part of her motivation for waiting until she can bring Fern with her. It's also clear that the abuse and horrors at the orphanage have not been enough to stunt Rill's sense of loyalty and compassion, as shown by her decision to bring the helpless and friendless Stevie instead of leaving him behind.*



When Rill slips back into the house, she runs into Mr. Riggs on the stairs and he tries to force her down another staircase. A worker sees him, but Riggs blocks her view of Rill. The worker wants to know why Riggs is upstairs since he shouldn't be there. Rill slips away unnoticed while Riggs tries to convince the worker he was just checking on the windows, and he tells the worker that if she's not nice he'll tell his cousin Ida.

The next day Mrs. Murphy lines the kids up because she found muddy footprints in the kitchen that indicate someone snuck out during the night. Rill is nervous because she knows her feet made the prints. Before Murphy can check her feet, though, the phone rings—Georgia Tann is on the line and tells Murphy to get Rill cleaned up, dressed, and ready to meet a client. Mrs. Murphy protests, but Tann insists. Mrs. Pulnik gets Rill ready for wherever she is going with Mrs. Murphy. They take a car downtown and Murphy tells Rill she has to behave and do exactly as she's asked without crying or saying no; if she doesn't follow these rules, Stevie will be punished. They get out of the car at a hotel. Rill wants to call for help but is afraid of what'll happen to Stevie if she does.

Mrs. Murphy brings Rill into one of the rooms. Tann is there already, and they leave Rill alone in one room while they talk in another. Rill hears a knock on the door and a man's voice talking to Tann, who says he's welcome to take Rill if he wants her but says they have better girls available. However, the man says he wants Rill in particular. Rill listens to this in horror as the man explains that he's taking Rill for good. Mrs. Murphy is surprised and mentions that she thought he wanted Rill for something else. Tann says it will take a year for the adoption process to be finalized and the man says he just wants Victoria to be happy. The man walks into the room Rill is in—it's the man whose wife read books to Fern at the viewing party.

## CHAPTER 19

Avery is driving to May Crandall's nursing home—Avery got Ian to call ahead to make sure May is out of the hospital—with Trent following her in his own car. Avery feels a little like a kid skipping school because she's not answering any of Leslie's calls and Trent has closed his real estate office for the day to go with her to see May. Leslie calls again as Avery pulls up, but she still doesn't answer. Avery knows Leslie probably just wants her to come home early to go to a press op or something, so she puts her phone on vibrate and gets out of the car.

*Mr. Riggs openly uses his relationship to Mrs. Murphy (his cousin Ida) to get away with hurting people. He knows that as long as he works for Murphy, she won't let anyone bring attention to his crimes, thus enabling him to continue committing them.*



*Mrs. Murphy's threats indicate that she thinks someone is paying to do something to Rill at the hotel, not to adopt her. This adds a new layer to Murphy and Tann's villainy—they are willing to let adults pay to do whatever they want to the children's bodies, in addition to outright selling kids to adoptive parents. Even Rill senses that something especially unpleasant is about to happen, which is why she wants to call for help even though she's looking forward to seeing Fern back at the orphanage that night.*



*The man, Darren, made Rill uncomfortable at the viewing party with the way he set his hand on her back, so she is terrified when she realizes that he just adopted her. However, the memory also brings with it one of his wife reading to Fern, which tells Rill that she may be kind and nurturing. Meanwhile, Rill still thinks Fern will be back at the orphanage soon—she's desperate to be there to meet her.*



*In her quest to learn the family secret, Avery is committing a major sin by not answering Leslie's calls; Leslie is the one who makes sure everyone keeps up the family's public image. Just weeks ago, Avery wouldn't have thought of ignoring Leslie, because she was dedicated to letting Leslie groom her for the Senate. Now, however, Avery is starting to lose interest in the process—she misses her old life (as she noted when she was on the phone with her friend from Maryland) and doesn't feel fulfilled in her new role in Aiken.*



Trent greets her at the curb, and they joke around about Avery's driving. Avery likes Trent but knows they can only be friends; she let it slip that she has a fiancé just to send the message that she's not romantically available. As they walk into the nursing home, the conversation turns to how hard it is to see a loved one living in a facility like this. Once they get to May's room, Avery realizes she doesn't know what to say and pauses at the door to think of how to start the conversation. Suddenly May calls out and asks who is by her door before throwing a slipper through the doorway. Avery hesitantly approaches the door, introduces herself, and asks if May remembers her. When Avery mentions Judy, May tells her to come in.

May is in her bed when Avery comes into the room. Avery tells her that Judy didn't remember May's name but could remember there was someone named Queenie. May is unsettled by this and acknowledges that it must be difficult for Avery. Avery agrees and says that she was always close to Judy; as May points out, however, Avery and Judy were not so close that Judy ever told her about the people in the picture. Avery says she's hoping May will tell her, but May gruffly says that it has nothing to do with Avery. Trent makes a noise outside and May tells him to come in. Avery says Trent is her friend and May says she doubts he's just a friend.

May looks intently at Trent and asks what his last name is. When Trent tells her, May says Trent has "his eyes," but doesn't say whose. May reaches out to touch his face and Trent blushes when May tells Avery that he's "a keeper." Avery mentions that she's engaged to someone else and May retorts that there's no wedding ring yet. Avery's phone buzzes and May frowns at her, so Avery puts it on silent and pulls out the pictures from the office to show May. When Avery mentions the TCHS, May snaps at her. Trent gently takes May's hand and tells her what he knows about his grandfather's past and the files he left behind after his death. At this, May's eyes water up, and she asks if Trent's grandfather passed away. When Trent confirms this, May kisses him on the cheek and says his grandfather was her friend.

*Even though Avery is determined to remain just friends with Trent, they continue to connect in ways she can't with Elliot. Their conversation here about their loved ones is a direct contrast to the earlier moment when Avery got choked up about her father's illness and Elliot ignored her and continued working. With Trent, Avery is able to be more open and express herself, knowing that Trent will respond in kind. In this way, Avery's budding friendship with Trent seems to be more fulfilling than her relationship with Elliot.*



*May's point that Avery and Judy are not close enough for Judy to tell her about the picture is meant to challenge Avery's firm belief that she truly knows Judy. Similarly, May challenges Avery's belief that she truly understands her new friendship with Trent by implying that they're far more than friends. May's words here hint at the way that Avery is starting to have to reevaluate much of what she thought she knew about her life and her relationships.*



*When May tells Avery that she hasn't got a wedding ring yet after Avery brings up her engagement, she means that Avery isn't bound to anyone yet—she can still change her mind. May's reaction to Avery's mention of the Tennessee Children's Home Society indicates that May has personal experience with it and it is a painful memory. Trent demonstrates his ability to be sympathetic and warm—unlike Avery, who is acting more and more businesslike by the minute—and this helps May open up to both of them.*



Trent asks May if his grandfather was adopted from the TCHS and she tells him he was; furthermore, she says she herself was adopted from the TCHS as well. She tells Trent that his grandfather had a different name in the TCHS and reclaimed his real name after finding out he was adopted. May shares her story with Trent and Avery, starting with the names of her parents (Queenie and Briny) and her siblings (Camellia, Lark, Fern, and Gabion). Avery is mesmerized by the tragic story of how the family was broken up in the TCHS—all except May and Fern, who were adopted together. May tells Trent she knew his grandfather as Stevie, and originally thought he was a fraud when he contacted her.

Avery shows May the picture of the four women on the beach and asks if they are May's sisters. May looks closely at the photo and says the picture is of herself, Lark, Fern, and Judy at Edisto Island. Avery asks if that's where May met Judy. To herself, Avery admits that she wants an answer that doesn't involve Judy doing penance out of guilt for the role their family played in the TCHS. May confirms that she met Judy at Edisto and that they became good friends, but Avery realizes this doesn't explain why Judy was concerned with the TCHS. Avery decides to show May the papers about Shad Arthur Foss that Trent gave her. As soon as she tells May about them, however, May says she's exhausted. Avery begs May to tell her if Judy was involved with the TCHS, but May says she'll have to ask Judy.

Trent tells Avery they should leave but Avery pleads with May to tell her if her family is involved in the TCHS. May tells Avery that Judy was just helping May write her memoir until she decided to keep the story to herself. Avery asks if that's everything and May says it is, but also that she wishes she could tell Avery more. This sets off alarm bells in Avery's head because her experience as a lawyer says that when witnesses are lying, they "have a hard time stopping on an absolute yes or no." May looks to Trent and tells him that his grandfather helped reunite her and Fern with their sister Lark. Lark and Fern, however, have since died and their families don't know about the past. May wants Trent and Avery not to bother their families and tells them that she's at peace with the past.

Avery tells May that she's sorry for what May had to go through as a child. May tells Trent and Avery they should let her sleep before the nurses get her for physical therapy and makes a joke about how at 90 years old, she has no need for muscle tone. Trent chuckles and says his grandfather wanted to just be put in a boat to drift down the Edisto River. At this May smiles and says she'd like to go "home to Augusta" and float down the Savannah River. As they leave, Avery wonders what it must be like to live two different lives like May and wonders why May didn't talk about her life with her adoptive family.

*Interestingly, May talks about her family using their birthnames, but doesn't share her own. This foreshadows the moment near the end of the book when Rill decides to embrace a new identity as May in order to let go of her tragic past and move on to a hopefully happier future.*



*Avery thinks to herself that she's craving an easy answer about Judy's connection to May and the Tennessee Children's Home Society. However, when May tries to give her one, Avery doesn't believe it. This shows that although Avery wants the answer to be easy, she's still not willing to turn a blind eye on the truth just to get the easy answer. More than anything, she wants the truth, no matter how hard it is for her to swallow it.*



*Once again Avery asks for an answer, is given an easy or "innocent" one, but rejects it because she knows it's not the truth. When May says she wishes she could tell Avery more, she hopes Avery will take it as meaning that May wishes there were more to tell; however, Avery realizes that it means there is more to tell, but May won't tell it.*



*May drops a very important clue when she mentions that her home is in Augusta. Avery doesn't think anything of it until later when she finds out that a taxi driver has been bringing Judy to Augusta every Thursday for years.*



Trent tells Avery that the revelations May made about his grandfather make him wonder what his grandfather's life would have been like if he hadn't been kidnapped. Avery thanks Trent for helping her, but when their eyes meet, she blushes and wonders at the chemistry between them. Suddenly, a random thought enters her mind that she might be making a mistake with Elliot. As soon as it enters her head, however, she realizes it's not random—it's actually a question she's been avoiding. She considers the possibility that she's getting married for the wrong reasons, but also knows that it will look bad if she breaks up with Elliot now—their families are both excited and would be hurt if the wedding were cancelled.

Trent says Avery's name, calling her out of her thoughts. She asks him what he was going to say, and he apologizes for being rude to her when they first met. Avery excuses him and to herself thinks that he wasn't rude considering how pushy she was, and notes that she truly is a Stafford who assumes she'll get what she wants. It occurs to Avery that this makes her a lot like the parents who bought children from Georgia Tann, who must have known how some kids were being kidnapped but believed their social status justified their decision to buy the kids anyway. This thought makes Avery question if she really deserves any of her privileges just because of her birth.

Trent tells Avery that he should get back to Edisto. As they say goodbye, Avery hears a car pull into the parking lot. Trent thanks her for helping him find the truth and leans in to kiss her on the cheek. As Trent pulls away, Avery sees Leslie walking over out of the corner of her eye. Avery realizes how intimate the moment between herself and Trent looked and abruptly thanks Trent as Leslie walks up. Trent watches Leslie scold Avery for not answering the phone and then leaves. Watching Trent leave, Leslie tells Avery to be more considerate of her public image and remember to avoid scandal. Leslie then tells Avery that a news article about the difference between Magnolia Manor and the nursing homes being sued for mistreating residents. Avery is furious to learn the article includes a picture of Wells and Judy at Magnolia Manor.

*Avery's feelings for Trent enable her to finally confront the question she's been avoiding for a while—whether or not she and Elliot actually should get married. Elliot makes such logical sense to Avery, but that is part of the problem. She doesn't genuinely want to get married just because it's the logical thing to do. However, she is afraid of what it would mean for her (and her family's) reputation if she backed out of the wedding, highlighting the fact that she's still very concerned with appearances.*



*Although Avery has already considered the possibility of her family's involvement with the Tennessee Children's Home Society and Georgia Tann, she has put distance between herself and whoever the involved family members were. When Avery realizes how used she is to getting what she wants, however, she is forced to confront the fact that she's not all that different from them. She's not actually going out and buying kidnapped children, but she possesses the same privileged mindset that they did, which is unsettling to Avery.*



*Wells's picture in an article about the nursing home scandal changes pulls Avery's attention back to her family's present-day priorities—she knows she will be responsible for helping repair the family's image and trying to nip the backlash in the bud. When Leslie scolds Avery for her public moment with Trent, it is a harsh reminder of just how strict and constraining the life of a politician can be—Avery can't ever just act naturally; she must always assume she has an audience.*



## CHAPTER 20

Victoria and Darren Sevier tell Rill to call them Papa and Mommy. To Rill, this doesn't seem like a betrayal because they're just words. The Seviers live near an oxbow lake that leads out to the Mississippi River. Rill learned this from the family of servants who work there, Zuma, Hoy, and Hootsie. Rill doesn't want herself or Fern to be alone with Darren even though he tries to take them out on a pony at Victoria's request; he only offers to do this to make Victoria happy so she won't wander into the little cemetery they have for their miscarried and stillborn babies. Still, Rill notes that sometimes Victoria only wants her dead babies.

Zuma doesn't like Rill and Fern because the Seviers buy presents for them instead of Hootsie now. Sometimes Zuma will tell Rill and Fern they'll have to go back to the orphanage once Victoria gets pregnant; Zuma says she's seen it happen before. Rill decides she and Fern won't ever go back to Mrs. Murphy's, not when the river is so close. Rill decides that as soon as she gets a boat, she and Fern can run away and find their parents. The Seviers think Rill and Fern's mom was a college graduate who died, and their father couldn't keep them. Rill doesn't try to tell them the truth.

One morning Victoria tells Rill she doesn't have to get herself and Fern up so early in the morning. Rill doesn't explain that after growing up on a boat, waking up with the sun comes naturally to them. Victoria is upset that Darren isn't at breakfast yet, so Zuma goes to get him. When Darren comes in, Victoria reminds him that he should eat meals with them to make them feel more like family. Rill gets upset when Fern giggles watching Victoria and Darren flirt. Victoria watches Fern eat and talks about how happy she is to be a mom. Darren agrees and Rill gets mad. In her mind, she yells that Fern already has parents and then clenches her jaw so much that it hurts, because it is a pain that she has control over. She thinks to herself that Fern can't be allowed to become Beth "on the inside."

*The fear of men that Rill developed in the orphanage carries over into her life with the Seviers, although she doesn't talk to them about it. Victoria, it seems, adopted Fern and Rill to fill the void in her heart left by so many miscarriages and stillbirths, although she's still haunted by them.*



*If what Zuma says is true, then the Seviers have a history of using children and then tossing them away. This is a new level of the objectification that began when they entered Tann's orphanage and were treated like furniture. Furthermore, Tann has given Fern and Rill a new history that makes them seem more appealing (because their mother was supposedly educated), highlighting how the stigma attached to lower social classes even extends to innocent children.*



*In the orphanage, Rill's greatest sorrow was losing her siblings. At the Seviers' house, however, Rill's sorrow is rooted in the fact that Fern seems to be moving on from the past and even forgetting it. When Rill clenches her jaw to hurt herself, it echoes the time in the orphanage when she pulled her own hair because she wanted to experience a pain that could end. This means that the process of watching Fern internalize this new identity is as painful as physically losing her siblings.*



Victoria tells Rill that she is going to bring Fern on an outing alone so that Fern will get used to being alone with her without crying. Although Rill is nervous about Fern going to Memphis with Victoria, she embraces the opportunity to explore on her own. After Fern and Victoria leave, Rill sleeps for a while before lunch. When she wakes up, she slips into Darren's music room when she's sure he's not there and starts playing a phonograph that's out. Rill likes the music and decides to recreate it on the piano, which she successfully does. Darren claps, scaring Rill. She apologizes but Darren sits down next to her and starts teaching her how to play the whole song. Before she knows it, Rill is having fun until Darren says they can be friends. This reminds Rill of Mr. Riggs and she darts from the room to hide.

*Rill and Darren begin to bond over their shared love of the piano and Darren's admiration for how quickly Rill learns. However, this episode highlights the lasting effects of the abuse and fear Rill experienced in Tann's orphanage. Rill associates grown men saying they want to be friends with Mr. Riggs, who sexually assaulted Camellia and later caused Camellia's disappearance. Although Darren evidently means what he says—he wants to be friends, and he doesn't want to hurt her—Rill can't recognize that anymore after her experience in the orphanage.*



## CHAPTER 21

For almost three weeks the Stafford family has been fighting off the press, since the publication of the article about Magnolia Manor. Avery wants to remind the reporters that follow the family around at public events that Judy can afford to live at Magnolia Manor, but knows she can't say that. After church one Sunday Avery spots her sisters, niece, and nephews hanging out by the stables and goes down to see them. Allison explains that they just wanted to get some pictures of the triplets with the new foals to post on social media to distract from the negative press. While they talk, Avery feels as if a "ten-pound barbell lands on [her] chest" when she notices Bitsy's car pull up; however, it's Elliot who gets out of the car, not Bitsy. Avery excitedly runs over to greet him.

*Since the news article was published, Avery has been thrown back into the world of politics and appearances. Even her sisters are trying to do damage control by posting cute pictures of babies and foals. This highlights how the work of keeping up appearances for the Staffords permeates every part of their lives, even when they're not out in public. The dread Avery feels at seeing Bitsy's car is due to her fear of having to discuss wedding plans with her—wedding plans for a wedding that Avery is no longer sure that she wants.*



Elliot explains that his flight got laid over and he wanted to see Avery for a few hours. Avery sees her parents pull up and quickly leads him away before Honeybee can drag them into a conversation about wedding plans. Elliot suggests they take a walk together and they catch up with each other as they head toward the riding trails. While they walk, Avery tells Elliot about May Crandall and her story. Elliot asks her why she's taking such an interest in ancient history and why any of it would matter. Avery says it mattered to her grandmother and is bewildered when Elliot says Judy is the reason Avery should be careful. Avery asks what he means, and Elliot says Judy is too outspoken and loves controversy, which only makes Avery angry. Elliot says he doesn't want to fight, but his opinion of Judy still bothers Avery.

*Elliot's decision to share his less-than-flattering opinion about Judy shows just how little he knows Avery, because he clearly didn't realize how much it would hurt her. Rather than genuinely apologizing and trying to make it better, however, Elliot and Avery end the conversation by saying they don't want to fight. This indicates a lack of communication and understanding that prevents them from being honest with each other.*



Elliot and Avery start talking about their wedding but can't settle on any plans before Elliot has to catch his flight. When Avery gets home, Honeybee is upset that Elliot couldn't stay to talk to her. Honeybee says she's worried that Avery is putting off her wedding because she's worried about the family, so Avery explains that she doesn't feel that way. To herself, Avery wonders if she and Elliot are being selfish by not making solid plans yet and then tells Honeybee they'll settle on something soon. In the back of Avery's mind, she still hears the words Elliot said about Judy and Avery realizes that Elliot doesn't see how similar she and Judy are. Honeybee tears up as she tells Avery how lucky Elliot is. Avery sees how much Honeybee is looking forward to the wedding and decides it's time to make plans for it.

The next morning Avery goes to Magnolia Manor to tell Judy about her wedding plans. When Avery arrives, Judy greets her right away and tells her that she has a request—she wants Avery to burn the appointment books in her house. Avery expresses her reluctance, but Judy waves her off and says there are names and numbers that she doesn't want other people to find and reiterates that Avery needs to burn all the books. Avery says that it's dangerous, but Judy says, "Don't worry, Beth." Suddenly Avery realizes Judy doesn't recognize her, and Avery doesn't recognize the name Beth. Avery is somewhat relieved because it gives her an excuse not to do what Judy is telling her to.

After talking to Judy for a while, Avery says she has to go and that her dad will be there later. Judy asks who Avery's dad is and gets confused when Avery tries to explain that Wells is her son. As Avery walks out of the facility, she is tempted to call Elliot to talk to him about her feelings about Judy's confusion but remembers what Elliot said about Judy and decides he's not the one to call. Just then Trent calls her—they haven't spoken since they went to see May together because Avery thought it'd be better not to see him again, but she decides to answer his call. Trent says she's been on his mind since her family has been in the news so much and patiently listens to Avery as she explains her frustration with the situation.

*It seems that not even Elliot is particularly enthusiastic about his upcoming wedding to Avery. The lack of excitement on both ends indicates that getting married is just something they're doing, not something important to them that they're looking forward to. Avery's decision to make solid plans after seeing how much Honeybee wants it to happen only confirms this—the wedding is for everyone else, not for themselves.*



*Beth is the name given to Fern in the Tennessee Children's Home Society, which is why Avery doesn't recognize it—she knows of Fern, but not of Fern's assigned name. Judy's desire for someone to burn all of her appointment books is also suspicious—it implies that there are clues in the books about her secret. However, it also means that Judy officially no longer has a need for them—that period of her life is over and she wants to make sure someone eliminates it entirely before her dementia makes her forget to ask.*



*Since her last conversation with Elliot, Avery no longer feels safe talking to him about her concern over Judy's declining mental state. In light of Elliot's negative opinion of Judy, Avery worries she'd be opening her grandmother up for unwanted judgment by telling Elliot more about her. However, Avery does feel safe talking to Trent, highlighting the fact that she can be more herself around him than she can be around Elliot.*





Trent tells Avery that he's in Aiken and invites her to lunch so he can tell her about some discoveries he made while digging around trying to find May's brother, Gabion. Avery is surprised that Trent has taken such an interest in May's story, but in a good way—she feels like he's a better person than she is because she's been distancing herself from May to avoid starting any rumors. For this same reason, Avery realizes going to lunch with Trent would be a bad idea until he mentions that he has Jonah with him—with Jonah there, it looks less suspicious for them to have lunch together. Avery tells Trent about a drive-in near Judy's house that has a playground and they decide to meet there.

Avery thinks about her situation while she drives back towards Judy's neighborhood. She wonders if she got "spoiled" in Maryland because she was able to be somewhat anonymous; no constituents or contributors to worry about or a support staff to schedule her days for her. Avery realizes that she never really understood how "all-consuming" being a Stafford is, especially in Aiken—it leaves no room for her to be an individual. Avery knows she used to like this, but she wonders if she's outgrown it. This leads her to question if she must choose between being Wells's daughter or being herself. Avery tries to dismiss these thoughts as a reaction to the stress she's been under lately.

While Avery sits at a stop sign by Judy's house, she notices a taxi in the driveway and gets curious. Avery decides to go see what he's doing in Judy's driveway. Avery knocks on the taxi window and tells him he must have the wrong address, but the taxi driver tells her that it's not the wrong address; in fact, there is a standing reservation for every Thursday at 10:30 in the morning and has been for years. Avery asks where Judy goes, and the man says she always goes to a place on the water in Augusta. Avery suddenly remembers that May mentioned that her home is in Augusta and decides it's not a coincidence. She asks the driver to take her there and he agrees.

Trent texts Avery to let her know that he and Jonah are waiting for her. Avery calls him, explains what's happening, and asks if he'll follow the cab to Augusta. Trent agrees so Avery directs the cab to the drive-in before they leave town. Avery senses that something important is about to happen, but she doesn't know what it will be. They stop at the drive-in so Trent can hand Avery some food; he asks if she's all right and she assures him that she's just nervous about what they will find. On the way, Avery and the driver talk about Judy's weekly drives until they arrive at their destination—there's nothing there but a dilapidated iron gate and a pathway that the driver says Judy always walks down. Avery feels like she's in a dream as Trent pulls up, but when she looks up she realizes it's all real.

*Even though Avery feels like she can be more herself around Trent, she is still constrained by the need to keep up appearances. Because of this, she can't really be herself as long as they are in public together. Trent's continued concern for May and the time he's spent picking up her search for Gabion highlights how genuine and thoughtful Trent is—qualities Avery wishes she had more of herself.*



*Because Avery must dedicate so much of her energy to keeping up appearances, the line between who she is and who she's supposed to be is getting blurred. This makes her wonder how much of her personality belongs to herself and how much of it was taught to her in order to keep up appearances. When she was living in the big city, there wasn't as much of a need to keep up appearances, which gave her the opportunity to develop a sense of the person she might be if she were to develop her own qualities rather than the ones her family wants her to have.*



*Avery is stunned to learn that her grandma has been going to Augusta every Thursday for years because it is something Avery thinks she should have noticed. Once again, Avery is confronted with the question of how well she really knows her own grandmother—and her family more generally.*



*Avery is a very perceptive and intuitive person, which is why she realizes that she's really about to get answers now. Something in Augusta was so important to Judy that she kept going back up until the Staffords put her in a nursing home. Presumably, she would still go back every Thursday if she could, which is why she has a standing reservation. Trent agrees to go with Avery, which shows how willing he is to go out of his way to provide moral or emotional support for her, unlike Elliot, who criticized her for digging around in her family history at all.*



## CHAPTER 22

One day Fern suddenly freezes in the middle of a room and wets herself—Victoria is talking to Georgia Tann in the parlor. Rill tells Fern to go hide and then sneaks closer to hear what they're talking about. Tann tells Victoria that she and Darren will have to pay several thousand dollars for lawyers or else Rill and Fern's grandma will get custody of them. Rill knows this isn't true because she doesn't have a grandma, but she's afraid that if she speaks up Tann will take her and Fern back to punish them. Victoria is sobbing, but Tann tells her the only thing to do is come up with the money by the next day. Tann gets ready to leave and Rill sprints up to where Fern is and promises she won't let Tann take them back.

That night Victoria tells Darren about what Tann said and Darren is furious. Victoria begs him to pay Tann, but he says he refuses to be blackmailed and decides to go to Tann himself that night. Victoria says that they should move to Augusta, but Darren doesn't want to do that either. Instead he gets ready to leave. Rill hurries into the kitchen and grabs a basket of food that's meant for the people working on a building for the Seviars. Rill takes the basket to the construction site and sits to eat with a boy named Arney, who's helping build a studio. Rill decides that she needs to ask Arney to help her and Fern escape to the river to find their parents. Rill feels bad about how sad Victoria will be, but she's desperate to get away before Tann takes them back.

Rill talks Arney into running away with them by saying Zede will take care of him. Arney reveals that he's actually a girl, but Rill says that doesn't change anything and promises to make sure Arney is taken care of. That night Victoria says they will have a pajama party with movies and hot cocoa. Rill is disappointed because this will make escaping harder, but she's determined to find a way to get herself and Fern down to where Arney will wait for them. Victoria is worried that Rill is sick because she wants to go to bed so early and her concern makes Rill wish Victoria were Queenie. Rill gets to her room early in the night, but has to wait for Fern.

*Tann is evidently trying to exploit Victoria's love of Fern and Rill in order to get more money because, as Rill notes, she doesn't have a grandma who would be trying to get custody of her. This shows how Tann even tried to victimize her customers after selling them children. Nobody is safe from Tann's greed and treachery.*



*Rill believes that getting back to the river is the only way she can keep herself and Fern safe from Georgia Tann, even though Tann originally kidnapped them from the river. However, this also reveals Rill's confidence that once she gets back to her biological parents, everything will be okay and return to the way it was—even though Rill also knows on some level that she's been changed by the trauma she's experienced.*



*Now that Rill has definite plans to get back to the river and her parents, she fiercely holds onto her memories of and loyalty towards them. Rill resents Victoria for mothering her because Victoria isn't Queenie. This reveals that Rill is unwilling to truly accept a new mother figure as long as there's a chance she can get back to her biological mother.*



Victoria sings a lullaby to Fern while she carries her up the stairs and Rill notices that everything is getting “tangle[d]” in her head—her adoptive parents and biological ones, the shanty boat and the Seviere’s house. After Victoria tucks Fern in, Rill dresses them both in warm clothes and carries Fern down to the water. Arney is waiting for them and she quickly loads Rill and Fern into the boat so they can get away as quickly as possible. Arney hesitates for a moment, but Rill convinces her to keep rowing towards the river and promises Arney will be part of the family there. They travel through the night until the moon sets and then fall asleep in the boat together a short distance from the river. Rill sleeps deeply until the next morning.

When Rill wakes up, she is exuberant because she knows they’re close to where the [Arcadia](#) must be tied up. When Rill throws cookies to some kids who help them push their boat back into the water after sleeping on the shore, Arney gets mad, but Rill assures her that Queenie will make them dozens of cookies. Rill tells herself over and over that once they get back to the [Arcadia](#), their lives will be truly happy again, but she begins to worry a bit as they get closer—what will Briny and Queenie think when they see it’s just Rill and Fern? As they approach the [Arcadia](#), Rill realizes something is wrong even though Fern shouts excitedly. The boat looks uncared for, and Silas runs out to greet them. However, he tells them that Queenie died and Briny “took to the bottle.”

*Even though Rill has tried hard to maintain her loyalty to her biological parents, the love and kindness that Victoria and Darren have given her makes it difficult for Rill to separate her past life from her present. Because Darren acts like a dad, Rill gets him “tangled” up with Briny, and because Victoria acts like a mom, Rill gets her “tangled” up with Queenie. This scares Rill and fuels her desire to get back to her “real” parents.*



*Rill was afraid that her parents would resent her for only being able to keep Fern with her, and her biggest fear was their disappointment. What Rill failed to consider was that Briny and Queenie didn’t think any of the kids would come back, and she didn’t fully realize how devastating that thought would be for them. Rill herself had been so sure that Briny would never stop looking for them that she is entirely unprepared to confront reality—Briny did stop looking for them, and he became an alcoholic. This illustrates how Tann’s child-trafficking ring ruined the lives of parents who lost their children and who lost hope of ever finding them again.*



## CHAPTER 23

Trent and Avery stare at the ruins of what was once a large plantation and wonder who used to own it. Trent calls Jonah down off of the decaying veranda as Avery wonders why Judy would come to such a dangerous, dirty place. Trent notes that it is a good place to hide from the outside world because it’s impossible to see it from the road, and Avery notes that the fact that Judy took a cab instead of her driver means she didn’t want anyone to know where she was. In her thoughts Avery says that it’s no coincidence that May mentioned her home is in Augusta and that Judy was sneaking off to Augusta every Thursday for years—Avery thinks it indicates a relationship more meaningful than what May described. Trent points out that the path leads somewhere else, so they start walking down it.

*It is fitting that May and Judy carried on the hidden part of their lives in this hidden place. As Trent points out, one can’t see it from the road. In a similar way, none of Judy’s family was able to see the secret life she was leading right under their noses.*



Avery, Trent, and Jonah follow the path until it comes out into a well-maintained yard surrounding a quaint riverside cottage. Looking around, Avery realizes that this is the exact kind of place where Judy could relax and find freedom from her obligations and the public eye. Trent admiringly observes that one wouldn't even know the cottage is there and Avery agrees. Privately, she wonders if this is where May was found with her sister's body. They climb up the steps and knock on the door, but nobody answers. The door is unlocked so Trent tells Jonah to stay on the porch and walks into the house with Avery. Trent notices an envelope with May's name, but Avery zeroes in on a painting of May, Lark, Fern, and Judy over the fireplace. Trent points out that there are more photos of the four women all over the room.

A dog starts barking right outside of the screened-in porch so Trent hurries to take care of Jonah. A man on an ancient tractor pulls up by the cottage and calls the dog away before asking Trent and Avery what they need. Trent says that they know May and Avery and asks the man if the cottage is May's house. The man confirms that it is and asks how she's doing—his mother, who lives nearby, told him that May is in a nursing home. Avery asks if she can talk to his mother about the pictures inside the house and the man says she'd be excited to have guests. Jonah excitedly hops on the tractor and they go up to the a nearby house. An old woman on the porch asks Avery who she is, so Avery introduces herself. The woman asks if she's "Miss Judy's daughter," which surprises Avery.

When Avery tells the woman that she's Judy's granddaughter, the woman knowingly says that Avery wants to know about the cottage and why Judy goes there. Avery says she does and then the woman says Avery wants to know about "the sisters," but that it's not her secret to tell. Instead, she goes inside and grabs an old crucifix and some papers. Avery stops inside the doorway as the woman explains that she kept everything for safekeeping because she knew one day someone would come to ask. She says the crucifix belonged to Queenie and the papers contain the beginning of Judy's memoir. The woman explains that secrets aren't healthy and tells Avery to bring Judy to see May.

*Once Avery sees the beauty of the cottage, she is able to sympathize more with her grandmother and understands why she would choose this spot to escape to. It's so far away from the hustle and bustle of society life in Aiken or politics anywhere. The pictures in the cottage indicate that all four women belong to the building—this is all of their spot, not just Judy's or May's spot.*



*Avery is relatively unsurprised that Judy would spend so much time at the secluded cottage, but it is surprising for Avery to find out people nearby know Judy enough to recognize Avery as one of her relatives. This emphasizes the fact that Judy didn't just come here to be alone; rather, she did have a secret life here, which included other acquaintances outside of May, Lark, and Fern.*



*The woman groups Judy with the other three as "the sisters," which is the first indication that Judy is in fact related to May, Lark, and Fern. The woman seems to understand that keeping such a big secret for so long must have hurt Judy and May, which is why she's encouraging Avery to reunite the two women and give them the chance to connect with each other openly instead of secretly.*



The woman gives Avery the papers and a chair to sit in. The paper says “Prelude” at the top and begins on August 3, 1939 in Baltimore, Maryland—Judy’s birthday and birthplace. Avery reads about Christine’s stillborn daughter and the distraught father’s decision to buy a replacement from a woman in Memphis. The replacement, as it turns out, is Queenie’s newborn daughter—the one Queenie believed was stillborn—who grows up to be Judy Stafford. Avery cries while the old woman rubs her back and tells her that it’s better for her to know the truth. Avery thinks about how May described their decision not to tell their families and realizes that the powers that kept them apart are almost as cruel as the ones that separated them. The old woman tells Avery to tell May and Judy that Hootsie says it’s time for them “to be who they is.”

*Here, the old woman is revealed to be Hootsie, the young servant from the Serviers’ house. The papers that Hootsie gives Avery are the same Prelude from the beginning of the book. This means that they have officially come full circle and Avery now has the whole truth about her grandma’s past and connection to the people in the photos. Hootsie wants May and Judy to “be who they is” because they deserve to have the peace of loving one another openly after finding each other against all odds. Hootsie sees being honest as the one thing Judy and May need to do in order to finally be truly happy with their lives.*



## CHAPTER 24

Rill has a dream that she, Lark, Fern, Gabion, Camellia, Queenie, Zede, and Silas are all together on the shanty boat heading down the river. When she wakes up, however, it’s just her and Fern curled up together where Briny won’t find them. Rill hears Silas fake a whippoorwill call to let her know he’s outside, so she tells Fern to stay under the canvas where Briny won’t find her and hurries off to meet Silas. When Rill gets to Silas, he gives her a bundle of food to share with Fern because Briny has been too drunk to feed them. Silas wants Rill to bring Fern to Zede’s boat so they can start going down the river in the hope Briny will follow—it’s getting too cold and unsafe for them all to stay where they are. However, Briny refuses to leave the spot where Queenie is buried.

*Now that Rill has her wish and is back on her family’s boat, she is confronted with a reality she never considered—life has not simply returned to normal and nothing has truly been resolved; indeed, nothing can ever be the same again because they’ve lost so many of their loved ones. Even the return of two of his beloved children is not enough for Briny to return to the person he once was. This sends a powerful message about how severe trauma can change everything about a person and how some things are irretrievably lost because of it.*



Silas tells Rill to let Briny know that Zede is leaving in four days and if Briny isn’t ready to leave at that point, then Zede is going to take Fern and Rill with him. Suddenly they hear Briny asking who’s in the woods nearby, so Rill shoos Silas away and sneaks back to her boat with the bundle of food. Rill pretends she just cooked the food when Briny comes onto the boat and scoops Fern up. Rill tries to tell him that Zede is leaving soon, but Briny says he won’t leave without Queenie, grabs his empty whisky bottle, and leaves. Rill thinks about how she thought finding the shanty boat again would make everything go back to normal. Instead, it’s made everything that’s happened more real—too much of their family is gone.

*Rill believed that getting back to the [Arcadia](#) would mean her and Fern would be safe, but now that they’re there, they find themselves hiding from the person who is supposed to protect them the same way they did in the orphanage. Furthermore, Briny seems to be running from Rill and Fern because without Queenie, he doesn’t know how to really be himself anymore; therefore, he cannot really be their dad.*



Rill and Fern go to bed and fall asleep before Briny comes home, but Rill wakes up later when she hears Briny shouting into the violent storm that's rocking their boat. Suddenly, Rill realizes the boat isn't tied up anymore—Briny is drunk and has untied the boat himself despite the storm. Rill tells Fern to stay in bed while she goes to see what's wrong. Outside of the shanty, Rill tells Briny they have to get the boat tied up, but he doesn't hear her. Rill notices that a tree floating down the river is about to hit their boat and yells for Fern, but the impact breaks the boat apart and sends Rill flying into the water. She swims back in time to grab Fern, a picture of Queenie and Briny, and Queenie's crucifix before the boat sinks.

Rill gets herself and Fern to a drift pile but knows they won't be safe there for very long. Looking over the river, Rill sees the shanty boat in flames and desperately calls out to Briny. A voice answers, but it's not Briny's—out of the darkness, a small boat full of men sails over to Rill and Fern. The men row the sisters to the shore and ask who else was on the boat. Rill tells them about Briny, so they row out to search for him. Looking down the shore, Rill thinks she sees Briny watching and calls to him, but the man turns away and leaves. Just then, Silas rows up and scoops Rill into his arms. Rill tells him about the boat but doesn't tell him she thinks Briny left them on purpose—this isn't how she wants Kingdom Arcadia to end.

Silas tells Rill that Zede will bring the boat down and they can all live on it happily together. Rill tries to believe this, but she can't—Zede is too old and too poor to take care of them all. Fern pulls on Rill's leg and says she wants her mommy, and Rill knows she's not talking about Queenie. Rill tells Silas they have to get away before the men take Rill and Fern back to the orphanage. Back on Zede's boat, Rill tells Silas and Zede that she and Fern must return to the Seviars, where Fern will have nice clothes and toys. Neither Zede nor Silas likes it, but Silas agrees to bring them up the river. Arney also comes along to return her family's boat. As they row away, Rill looks back and realizes she can't be Rill Foss anymore; she must be May Weathers.

*Briny is as miserable at the loss of their past life as Rill is, but his solution is to destroy all evidence of that past life—including himself—by releasing the boat during a storm. Because he can't have his past life anymore, Briny sees all life as pointless and sets out to destroy it even though it means destroying his remaining kids, as well. For Briny, the presence of Rill and Fern serves as a reminder of all that he lost and has pushed him over the edge rather than bringing him peace.*



*If the man Rill saw was Briny, then his decision to walk away indicates his intention to let go of the past entirely and make a new identity for himself, one that doesn't include his children at all. Rill sees this as a tragic ending and she decides to rewrite that ending by keeping what saw a secret from everyone.*



*Rill knows that she has a responsibility to act in Fern's best interest even if it's not what she wants for herself. Fern is still so young that she may yet forget her identity as Fern Foss and all the trauma she endured as a young child; she has a chance to live a happier life, but Rill is the one who has to decide whether she will or not. However, Rill realizes that returning to the Seviars means cutting ties with her old identity forever. On the other hand, by doing this she will give herself a second chance, too.*



## CHAPTER 25

May ends her story and asks Avery if she's happy or if it's too much of a burden. Avery admits that it's a little of both while she thinks of how hard it's been to reconcile this story with her knowledge of her family history. She told Elliot about what she learned from Hootsie and he told her to think of how this knowledge might change how people see the Staffords—Avery knows Elliot meant Bitsy, but she also knows that Bitsy wouldn't be the only one to be appalled. Still, Avery wants to do whatever is best for Judy. May asks Avery if she'll tell the rest of her family and Avery says she'll tell Wells and let him decide what to do from there.

Avery says she agrees with Hootsie that the truth is valuable. May snorts and says Hootsie just likes to stir the pot. May tells Avery that Hootsie is the reason she stayed with the Seviers—May initially meant to hide in the bushes and return to Silas once the Seviers found Fern in their yard, but Hootsie saw them first and started yelling until everyone came out of the house. Despite May's fears that she'd be sent back to the orphanage, the Seviers welcomed her back and the four lived very happily together, although it was never quite the same as with Queenie and Briny.

Avery asks May if she ever saw Silas again; in her mind, Avery knows she's asking about May's first love story because she's been thinking about Trent—who is waiting in the hallway nearby—more and more lately. May looks intently at Avery and then says she never saw Silas or Zede again, although many years later she heard that Arney was married and traveling the world. May explains that she is still thankful to Arney for bringing her and Fern back to the [Arcadia](#) because otherwise May would never have been able to let go of the past and move forward.

May turns to Avery and tells her that a woman's past doesn't have to determine her future—that women can change their lives for themselves to find real happiness if they stop trying to talk themselves into doing something else. Avery wonders if May senses that she's been rethinking everything about her life since learning about Judy's history. Avery asks May if she wants to go out for the day. May starts getting ready before Avery can tell her where they're going. Trent meets them in the hall, and they head out to his car and take off. May tells Trent the rest of her story until they pull up to the cottage in Augusta. May tears up when she sees where they are.

*Although Avery wants to embrace the truth about her family history, she knows she can't because it will affect every other member of her family, particularly Wells. This is why she wants to let Wells, as the head of the family and Judy's son, decide what they should all do with the truth.*



*May reveals that she did in fact have a happy life after losing her parents and most of her siblings. This also means that she really did embrace her new identity instead of allowing the past to haunt her by hanging onto it so tightly, like Briny did.*



*When May says that when Arney brought her back she also helped her move forward, she means that by getting May off the river and into a safe environment, Arney helped May get a second chance at life. If May had returned to living on the river, she would have been haunted by her past, even though much of it was happy. As painful as it was, May had to leave the place she once equated with happiness in order to find the safety and security she so badly needed after her experience in the TCHS.*



*May is very intuitive, so she can sense an internal conflict in Avery that resembles the same internal conflict she felt when she shed her identity as Rill Foss and embraced a new one as May Weathers. What she's really telling Avery is that it's okay for Avery to let go of being a perfect Stafford and embrace her individual identity so that she can have a happy and fulfilling life.*



May asks what they are doing at the cottage since she's already told them the rest of her story. Avery hears her parents' car pulling in and tells May that they're coming to visit, too. May is horrified that she's about to meet Wells because she's not dressed up, but Trent persuades her to go into the cottage before Honeybee sees her. As soon as Honeybee gets out of the car, she demands to know why Avery asked them to drive out so far. Wells reminds Honeybee that Avery rarely asks them for favors and winks at Avery. Avery wonders how Wells will react when she reveals the family secret. She also worries about how he'll take the news that she's taken a position as a lawyer for a senior rights PAC and won't be going into politics right away. However, she's sure their relationship will survive the inevitable arguments.

Honeybee again asks Avery to explain why she wanted them to bring Judy out to the middle of nowhere. Avery says she wants to see if Judy will remember something or someone. Honeybee is incredulous, but as Avery walks Judy down the path Judy states that she's missed the place. Honeybee and Wells are shocked but follow Avery and Judy into the cottage. As soon as Judy sees May, she lets out an exclamation and hurries over to hug her. May has to remind Judy that Fern and Lark passed away, but then they chatter happily about the day they got the **dragonfly bracelets**. Honeybee demands an answer from Avery again, so Avery walks them out to the porch to talk.

Avery tells Honeybee and Wells about Judy and May's history. Although Honeybee tries to question the story's plausibility, Wells seems to accept it rather quickly and is just shocked that Judy kept it a secret from all of them for so long. Avery recognizes that Wells is struggling with the same question she did: should they bury the secret, or bring it to light so Judy and May can be together again? Honeybee tells Wells not to worry about it because it's all in the past, but Avery tells him that she wants Judy to have time with May and that they deserve it; Wells nods. Honeybee talks to Wells, not Avery, about how political opponents could use this secret against them; Avery sees this as an indication that things are going back to how they were and hopes it will make it easier to tell them there won't be a wedding.

*Avery begins experiencing the same fears Rill did when she returned to the [Arcadia](#) with only one of her siblings with her. Like Rill, Avery fears disappointment and rejection from the people she loves the most. However, she still feels compelled to follow her heart rather than her family's desires and feels secure in the knowledge that her relationship with Wells is strong enough to make it through his initial anger and even embarrassment.*



*Avery wanted her parents to see May and Judy's first meeting so that they could also see how genuine the love between Judy and May is. After all, even though Judy struggles to remember her own child due to her worsening dementia, she immediately recognizes May. This speaks to how deep the love is between the two women and, as Avery knows, it's not something that can be faked. This will help Avery convince her parents that the story she has to tell them is true.*



*Honeybee's main concern is still with the family's image, not Judy's feelings or desires. In this way, she is a lot like Elliot, who said similar things to Avery early on in her investigations. Wells, however, is more like Avery: he can accept the truth and then his only question is how much can be done to help Judy and May without hurting the other people he loves.*





Wells says he wants to talk to May, and Avery says May would like that. The three of them head back into the house. Wells looks at Judy like she's a stranger and Avery realizes that she kind of is, because she spent so much time living two different lives. Trent asks Avery to walk outside with him and she agrees, knowing that he's anxious to ask how the conversation with her parents went. Once they're out of earshot of the cottage, Trent notes that Avery isn't wearing her engagement ring. Avery explains that she and Elliot decided they are better off as just friends. Avery wonders if Trent feels about her the way she feels about him and how he fits into her future, until he asks to hold Avery's hand and they walk "into a life that can be."

*Avery knows she took a big risk by breaking her engagement off with Elliot—it will reflect badly on her and devastate her family, but it's something she needs to do in the process of taking control of her life and identity. When she and Trent walk "into a life that can be," it means that they are walking into a life that they control and which is not controlled by their fear of ruining the family reputation or their wish to meet anyone else's expectations.*



## CHAPTER 26

In the present day, May says that their story might have begun in a distant white room, but it didn't end there. She wonders to herself if she would change the course of her life if she could while she holds Judy's hand at Magnolia Manor, where they both live now. Although they can connect as sisters whenever they want now, May reminds Judy to keep their relationship a secret still. May talks to Judy about their biological family and they share stories of their experiences together. Sometimes Judy doesn't know May, but May still senses the love between them. Judy points to a couple walking in the garden and says they look sweet. May tells her it's Avery and Trent so Judy waves to them. Judy and May giggle together when the couple disappears behind an arbor for a little too long.

*In the end, May is still Judy's big sister and by staying with her in Magnolia Manor, she is continuing to honor Briny's request from so long ago: to take care of the younger kids. This shows how even though Rill accepted a new identity as May, she is still fundamentally the same person with the same values and the same deep love and sense of duty towards her family. May's presence in the facility also means that Judy, for the first time, gets to have her sister with her in public, even though they don't admit their relationship. As Hootsie believed, being reunited was the key to both women's happiness, and their relationship provides a much more positive model of family loyalty than the Staffords' rigid expectations did throughout the book.*





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