

Stars
Over
Clear Lake



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One



2007

I haven't been inside this place in fifty years," I say softly as I pause in front of the sand-colored brick building. The outside of the Surf Ballroom hasn't changed from when it opened in 1948, its rounded roof making it look like a roller derby from the outside. A bedrock of Americana tucked in a small town in north central Iowa, the ballroom is often overlooked, despite its contribution to musical history. But to me it's so much more. The memories are like seaweed, pulling me down and threatening to suffocate me. It's only because they're honoring my late husband that I'm here tonight.

The marquee above me reads *Fireman's Ball*. Underneath the marquee is the empty ticket booth where bobbed-haired Violet Greenwood used to work. She's been dead for twenty-five years, but the image of her dispensing tickets with a cheery smile and pop of her gum is as fresh in my mind as this morning's coffee.

I take a breath and reach for the handle when the door bursts open. My daughter stands on the other side, her blue eyes wide at the sight of me.

"Where have you been? I called your cell phone five times!"

Daisy's red sleeveless dress shows off her thin frame and healthy tan,

and complements her highlighted blond hair. Botox treatments have eliminated the inherited crease between her eyebrows. No one would guess she's in her forties.

But Daisy is standing stiff-necked, her veins sticking out on her throat as though my presence here is stressful.

"I had it turned off. Didn't want to run the battery low," I say evasively.

"Mother, what's the use of having a phone if you never have it turned on?" She shakes her head. "You shouldn't even be driving."

"What do you mean? I've never had an accident."

"That's because Dad did all the driving when he was alive. A person's reflexes aren't as good at your age."

"Why does that make me unfit for driving? Isn't that age discrimination?"

She lets out an exasperated sigh. "Oh, never mind, Mother. Come in before you melt out here."

I suck in a breath, blinking out the sunlight as my eyes adjust to the darkness.

The expansive lobby holds a gift shop, offices, a small hallway filled with pictures to the right, and the main hallway leading to the dance floor. The old coat check sits off to the left; a long counter with a red laminate top glistens in front of the numbered rows that lead to the deep recesses of hangers. I gape at the lobby's blue walls, the ones with the painted yellow pineapples. I'd forgotten about them! And the multicolored carpeting beneath my feet, bright colors that practically shout to be seen.

I grab Daisy's arm. "It's just like I remember it. The fancy lobby and swanky coat check room . . ."

"Yes, it hasn't changed," Daisy replies. "We had a terrible time trying to decorate. We couldn't use colored paper and the lighting was a nightmare, but I think it turned out okay. The bathrooms could use a renovation, though, and my husband is already on his second drink."

We pass a table full of paper flyers. I pick up one that advertises the

Winter Dance Party next February, a show honoring the original in 1959 when Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and J. P. “The Big Bopper” Richardson gave their last performances. They died a few hours later when their plane crashed just north of Clear Lake.

“Kind of early to be advertising, isn’t it?” I ask. “It’s only August.”

“Not really. The tickets go on sale in October and they sell out every year. Harry and I went in costume last year. We had a blast.”

I crinkle my nose. “Almost seems morbid to celebrate their final performance.”

“I don’t think so,” Daisy says. “You know what the Bible says: time to mourn and a time to dance.”

“Yes, it does,” I say, keeping to myself the irony of my daughter quoting Scripture when she only attends mass on scheduled holidays, and as far as I know, hasn’t cracked open a Bible since her youth.

“Besides,” Daisy says, “we went with the mayor and his wife. They might hire me to redesign their bathroom. I think they’re coming tonight, too.”

“The mayor? Isn’t he related to Lance Dugan?”

“Yes. Lance is Chad’s uncle.”

“I went to school with Lance.” I let out a soft sigh. “That was ages ago.”

I take a tentative step onto the wooden floor of the ballroom, and despite all the people mulling about, the conversations and music around me, I feel as if I’m the only person here. Off to the left is the stage, the heavy red velvet curtains drawn back. It’s flanked by fake palm trees trimmed with tiny white lights. I remember waiting for those curtains to part; how the stage would come into view, glowing under bright lights that dissolved everything else, as though I’d been hypnotized.

A band is playing a soft tune from an earlier era, “String of Pearls.” One of Glenn Miller’s hits. My kind of music. “Did you know the Glenn Miller Orchestra played on that very stage? And Jimmy Dorsey?”

“Lots of people have played here. Come on.” Daisy pulls on my arm as though I’m an errant child.

Tiered wooden booths occupy one side of the ballroom and are tucked under green-and-white-striped awnings, each booth numbered for reservations. I search for booth 110 and when my eyes settle on it I have to fight back tears. I take in a breath to calm myself.

The walls above the booths are painted with oceanfront murals that used to whisk me away from the cold Iowa nights. I get a vague whiff of salt air and see the waves washing against the shore. I blink and look away.

How easy it is for my mind to travel back in time. It must be this place. The clouds that float across the arched ceiling to look like the night sky. The ocean waves on the back wall. The wooden booths and the lighted palm trees. Nothing has changed.

Tables with white linens occupy the center of the floor. Filling them are framed pictures and posters showing the development of the fire department, including historical fires in the community. I’m drawn to a photo of the original Surf Ballroom, which burned down a year before this one was built in 1948. Next to it is a newspaper clipping showing a crowd gathered around the burned remains. My throat tightens and I can almost feel the smoke choking me again, my helplessness as the ceiling collapsed. Memories have a way of doing that to you, resurfacing despite time and distance and attempts to forget.

“Arson or natural causes?”

I jump and take a step back. “What?”

Harry, my son-in-law, hands me a glass of champagne. “I noticed you looking at the pictures of the original building. We were talking about it down at the firehouse, debating whether we could still solve the puzzle of that fire sixty years later. You were what, about eighteen when it burned down? Do you remember it?”

I fan myself with the flyer, feeling suddenly hot. “Vaguely. I heard it was bad wiring.” My voice sounds tinny, higher than it should.

“I’m not so sure about that. I think by using modern technology and interviewing people who still remember the event, well, we might figure out what actually caused it.”

As the town’s fire chief, my son-in-law has a fascination with talking about anything fire-related. He has a receding hairline and hair that’s turned mostly gray, a nice, firm chin, and a manner that puts everyone at ease. But I’m shaking, nearly spilling the champagne. I take a sip of the bubbly, which tickles my nose.

“You sound like an episode of *CSI*. You have a large crowd,” I say, derailing the conversation.

“Yeah, half the town is here. Not to worry, though. We’re within the fire code occupancy limit. That’s part of the reason we chose this place.”

“Why don’t you take Daisy on a nice cruise after this is over? Or at least a weekend in Minneapolis to visit your son.” Harry has two children from a first marriage. I don’t see them often enough, but have always considered them my own. Maybe a trip would put this nonsense of investigating the old fire out of Harry’s head.

“We just saw John two weeks ago when we went to the Mall of America. A cruise might be nice, though. If I could talk her into it, I’d do it in a nanosecond. But you know how she is.” He takes another swig of his drink.

“If she’s worried about me, she shouldn’t be. I’d be fine.”

“Maybe later. We’re both so busy right now.”

He doesn’t say it, but I know I’m the reason she won’t go.

“Mother,” Daisy taps my arm, and I’m grateful for the distraction. “I was just telling my friends that you and Dad met here.”

Her friends are all tanned and wearing dresses similar to Daisy’s, like a high school clique thirty years later. And Daisy, just as she was then, is still at the center.

“Um, yes, we did,” I say, not meeting her eyes. I feel twenty again, like I was at the grand opening of the Surf, just rebuilt after the fire. I’d

worn a forest-green dress that had a tight waist and flared at the bottom. The place had been packed. I'd sat in booth 110. Our booth.

I look down, breaking the spell. Maybe it's too much being in this place again. Or maybe it's this particular occasion, seeing photos of the burned-down Surf, reliving the memories of that day.

"Did you spend every anniversary here?" one of Daisy's friends asks.

Daisy turns to me. "I don't remember you two ever coming here. Why not?"

"We came here before you were born." I clear my throat. "The farm took all our time later on."

Harry picks up a portable microphone from the center table and speaks into it as a wide circle of people forms around him. "Thank you all for coming tonight. We wanted to have the Fireman's Ball at the Surf because it holds a special place in the community. It's a piece of our history and, let's face it, a place where a lot of people have hooked up over the years."

The crowd laughs.

"Some of you may know that there was another Surf Ballroom, one that burned down sixty years ago. As an engineer, I've always thought that studying past fires can help us learn about fire dynamics. I spent the last few years in the fire investigator training program in Des Moines. And with the help of my squad, we're going to examine the file from the original Surf fire to see if we can use modern technology to determine what caused it."

The sound of clapping fills the ballroom and I bury my face in my glass of champagne. The bubbles no longer bother me.

"This also happens to be where my in-laws met. We lost Sid last year. He was a volunteer with the department for many years, and even though I wish he could be here with us, I'm sure he is in spirit."

More clapping. I nod and finish my drink. A shadowy figure standing near the stage waves at me and I squint into the darkness. It's a young man, but I don't recognize him.

“Do you have anything to add, Lorraine?” Harry motions to me to step forward and hands me the microphone.

Maybe it’s the bubbly, but I’m overcome with an urge to set the record straight. “I didn’t really meet Sid at the Surf.”

I glance at my open-mouthed, wide-eyed daughter. I pause, wondering if I should say more. The young man is no longer there, but the attendance in the room has multiplied as people from my past mingle with the present guests. I see my brother Pete, looking like he did sixty years ago, swaying to the music. And now I see Pete’s buddy Mike Schmitt, drinking his beer off to the side, a shy smile on his face.

I shake my head. What kind of illusion is this? They can’t be here, of course. But I can see them as surely as I see Glenn Miller standing on the stage. And is that Roy Orbison? And that boy playing a guitar, I’m sure he’s Buddy Holly. They’re here, all part of this place, just as much as the maple hardwood dance floor beneath my feet.

The voices and songs crowd my head and suck all the air away, making it difficult to breathe. Flashes of light go off as people snap pictures. The room is hot and spinning. I try to fan myself but both hands are full. If only I could just breathe. The glass of champagne somehow slips from my hand. Then the microphone falls. I’m faintly aware of the shattering of glass on the wooden floor, the banging of the microphone as it hits, sending an explosion of high-frequency sound through the crowd.

My weight gives way as I fall into the arms of my son-in-law, who catches me just before my head hits the floor.

Two



July, 1944

You're too young," Mom pleaded. "Just a child. We need you here on the farm. You can still get a deferment." She sobbed and latched onto my brother, Pete.

"It's a little late for that, Mom. I already finished basic training. We're shipping out now."

He insisted we say our goodbyes at home instead of at the station, likely because he feared Mom would make a scene, which was exactly what she was doing.

Pete calmly patted Mom on the back and pried her arms off him. He handled her better than me and Daddy combined. "Mom's like a clock that's been wound too tight," he once told me. "You have to let her wind down slowly or the whole thing will explode."

Mike laid on the horn. He was waiting in his Buick with his window rolled down, his hands trying to keep out the flies that swarmed his vehicle. It was already warm, even though dew still licked at the tips of the grass and sunlight had barely reached the top of the barn.

"It was only a matter of time before I got drafted anyway," Pete told Mom in a soothing voice. "Besides, I can't be the one left behind when all

my buddies are going to fight the Nazis.” He nodded toward Mike, who was revving the engine now.

Pete turned to Daddy, who shook his hand like he was a man instead of a farm boy. Pete’s uniform did make him look a bit older.

“Sorry to leave you shorthanded, Pop,” Pete said.

Daddy shrugged it off. “Duty to your country comes first. Besides, they’re sending five German prisoners from the POW camp in Algona next week. We’ll make it through the season if this hot weather don’t kill everything off.”

Pete was leaving for war and Daddy was talking about the weather?

“Takes five Germans to make up for one of me,” Pete said, standing tall, “but I’ll be back before you know it, Pop.”

Daddy looked shrunken next to Pete in his overalls and work shirt. Daddy had always seemed taller, and I hadn’t noticed when Pete passed him by.

I followed Pete to the car. In the distance a meadowlark whistled a carefree tune.

“Wait,” I said, and straightened his tie. “Why do you want to go to the other side of the world when you’ve never even been out of your own state?” I couldn’t imagine Pete in Europe, so far away from Iowa and out of his element.

“I just gotta go, Skippy. You’ll understand when you’re older.”

Pete threw his duffel bag in the car, then tugged on my red braid. “Don’t grow up while I’m gone.”

I wanted to object that I was almost fully grown, only three years younger than him. But before I could say anything, the car pulled away, churning up a swell of dust in its wake.

“And don’t touch my record player,” Pete yelled, leaning out and flashing a quick wave.

Then he was gone.

Mom watched the car until it was only a faint dust cloud in the distance,

her arms folded so tight that her knuckles were white. "He's not a fighter," she said.

"He wants to do his duty, the same as every other boy in this town," Daddy said.

"You mean the same as all those boys whose families don't even get a body to claim because they're buried on foreign soil? Is that what you want for your son?"

Daddy hugged her as she cried on his shoulder.

"Everything will be okay," he said.

Mom suddenly pushed him away. "Okay? This is anything but okay. It's all your fault. And I'm not having a bunch of Nazis on my land!"

She rushed toward the slanted porch off our kitchen. The screen door that slammed behind her was immediately dotted with flies trying to get in.

Daddy and I followed her inside.

"We already talked about this." Daddy touched her shoulder but she jerked away.

"*You* talked about it," Mom said in a shrill voice, then put a hand to her head. "I never agreed."

"I can't do this by myself," Daddy said, his voice impatient. "There was no other way."

Mom sniffed and shook her head. "I'm not going to discuss this now. I'm going to go lie down."

Mom had taken to her bed for a week when Pete had enlisted. How long would she be there this time?

I snatched up the dishcloth and scrubbed at a splotch of dried-up jam on the counter. I hated to see my parents fight. "You shouldn't have gotten POWs, Daddy," I whispered when I heard the creak of her shoes on the stairs.

Daddy adjusted his cap over his flattened reddish-brown hair. His face was tan and leathery from years of working in the sun. "Didn't have

a choice. Not a single response to the notices I posted around town. Even women are filling in at the factories. I don't know why they put up a POW camp in the middle of Iowa, but I'll take whatever help I can get. She'll just have to get used to it."

"Maybe Mom is right about Pete staying home. He's just a farm boy," I said, wondering if we should go after him before the train left.

Daddy nodded. "Maybe when he comes back he'll be a soldier."

I didn't want Pete to change. And the house felt empty without him.

"He will come back, won't he, Daddy?" I clenched the dishcloth and felt my lower lip tremble.

Daddy readjusted his cap and wiped the back of his hand across his damp forehead. "We pray to God he will, sweetheart."

He headed toward the door. "I'm going out to the fields. Watch after your mother."

It didn't take much to send Mom to her bed. Her moods were like the weather, unpredictable and unrelenting. And I was left to take over the housework during those stretches.

I'd rather have been in the fields with Daddy, and had offered to help when Pete left. There was no way he'd get the baling done on his own. The last month he'd kept a grueling schedule: up before dawn and out late at night, managing to just kick off his work boots before falling asleep in the easy chair, sometimes not even eating, he was so tired. But Daddy wouldn't hear of me missing school and I had plenty of chores as it was.

Mom's feet shuffled across the floor above me. I grabbed a bowl off the shelf and plopped it down on the small, square wooden table in our kitchen. I didn't have the knack for making biscuits like Mom, getting them perfectly round in the pan the way she did, but it would be up to me to keep Daddy fed until she was recovered enough.

After I got the biscuits rising, I made strawberry Jell-O, Daddy's favorite dessert. Then I took out chicken and breaded it and put it in the oven. I'd learned from Mom to do the cooking before the sun got too hot and

made the kitchen unbearable. I sang as I worked, softly so as not to wake her. I imagined myself on the stage of the Surf Ballroom belting out “We’ll Meet Again” while Benny Goodman’s band played behind me.

Pete owned that record. He’d told me not to touch his record player, but I felt drawn to his room, as though his leaving was a dream and he’d be sprawled out on his bed reading a *Dime Detective* magazine instead of on a train bound for another continent.

I snuck up to his room and sat down on his unmade bed, the sheets tangled like he’d been in a hurry. I ran my fingers across the ribbing of his blue bedspread and brought his pillow to my face, breathing in his boyish, sweaty smell. I studied the pin-up of Rita Hayworth that shared wall space with a Sacred Heart of Jesus picture. A suede bag filled with marbles and an old model airplane were perched on a blue bookcase next to some worn mystery comics and paperbacks, proof to me that my brother was still just a boy. His phonograph sat atop the dresser, records stacked neatly beside it. I remembered how he’d paid twenty-five cents a week for eight months to buy that record player. How long before it would be played again, before I’d hear music seeping underneath his bedroom door?

I opened the tan luggage-style case. Pete had left a record on the grille, the needle still in position. I turned the switch and it sputtered, then came to life as Dick Robertson’s tenor reached out to me.

Oh, how I hate to get up in the morning!

Oh, how I’d love to remain in bed!

I shuddered as I thought of Pete. I missed him so much already.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

I jumped at the shrill sound behind me and flicked off the switch.

Mom stood in the doorway, red-faced, her eyes ablaze with indignation. “He’s gone one hour and you’re rifling through his belongings?”

“I was only . . .”

“You’re violating your brother’s room. Get out! Get out!”

I’d never heard her yell like that before. I ran past her down the stairs, through the stuffy kitchen with its fried-chicken smell, out the back door and into the yard, not stopping until her screams were out of earshot.

I bent over to catch my breath and vowed not to set foot in Pete’s room again until he returned.