

The Last Bridge: An Excerpt by Teri Coyne

I counted twelve Bundt cakes. This was part of Wilton tradition: a Bundt cake for a death, a blanket for a birth, a casserole for a heart attack. The cakes were stacking up on the card table; there were three lemon with yellow drip icing, four chocolate with coconut centers, two cinnamon swirl with coffee cake crunch topping, and three chocolate mousse which were made from my mother's favorite recipe. She invented the chocolate mousse Bundt cake after her thirtieth or fortieth funeral. She decided there had to be a different kind a woman could bring to a wake so she came up with her own. It never occurred to her that she could have brought something else, like a ham or a salad; she knew that Bundt was the tradition and she worked within her limits. Her chocolate mousse cake became so popular that we suspected some people looked forward to the next death just so they could have a piece. Today no one touched any of them, not even the mousse ones.

I tried to be polite to our guests. Many offered their condolences and all of them knew better than to wish my father a speedy recovery. Although the circumstances surrounding my departure remained a mystery, it was no secret that it might have had something to do with my father, and out of respect, no one mentioned his name all evening. It was clear from the way people checked out the place that it had been awhile since my parents had company. Although the house looked the same to me, I was aware that everything had aged, but it still gave me the feeling of stepping back in time.

Andrew Reilly, County Coroner, stopped by and paid his respects. He had been at the service as well. He introduced himself to Jared and Wendy and made a point of telling them how brave I had been at the morgue.

“Cat?” Wendy snorted. “She runs from everything.”

Andrew smiled politely and looked at me. "I don't see her running now," he said and then excused himself. As he left the room he put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed it.

I managed to get away from the crowd and found a spot in the kitchen. I opened the back door and faced the driveway as I smoked a butt and gulped Iron City beer and stared at the fat moon hanging in the winter sky.

He isn't who you think he is

Jared stood next to me and took in a few breaths of the crisp air. It was more refreshing than the moist, yeasty, moth-ball-scented atmosphere in the house.

In the living room I could hear Wendy ogling over the Smythsons' granddaughter. "She's so beautiful! Willard?" She wandered through the crowd looking for Willard, who was in the dining room skimming my mother's collection of the Reader's Digest Condensed versions of the classics.

The doorbell rang.

"Your turn," Jared said.

"I got the last one," I lied. He went to the door as I walked to the refrigerator and pulled out another bottle of the good beer I had stashed, and drank it like it was bottled water. I left the back door open, but latched the screen door to keep it from banging.

Since returning from the service there had been a steady flow of mourners coming through the front door. Although I was forced to do a few meet-and-greets, I managed to stay in the kitchen for most of the evening. It was the safest place, as everyone who wasn't family (or Ruth Igby) came to the front door when they visited. The rest of us used the back door.

I sat at the kitchen table and stared at the containers of food stacked in towers on the counters. Death sure makes people hungry. It makes me thirsty. I went for another beer. I was feeling light-headed.

There was a shuffling at the back stoop like someone was shaking snow off their shoes.

“Hello?” a man’s voice sounded through the screen door. The tone made the hair on the back of my neck bristle.

“Alex, can you get me two Cokes?” Jared yelled from the living room.

“Hello?” I shivered as I moved unsteadily toward the sound.

“Alex?” Jared’s voice was getting closer.

The screen door shook; he was trying to get in. I stepped into view. “Hello?” he said as he placed his hand to his forehead and pressed his face against the screen to get a look at who was standing before him.

The voice matched the body: smooth, tall, and copper-colored at the top. Snow swirled in a halo around the outside light as he stepped back.

“Holy shit!” Jared’s voice cracked in surprise. He had come into the kitchen in search of the Cokes and found me standing glacier-still in front of the door. There was no slow-motion revelation. There was nothing except the cold, hard drop of fear—the feeling you get when you look down from the top of the Empire State Building and suddenly know exactly what it feels like to fall a great distance.

Jared unlatched the door and pushed it open. As one foot, then the other, stepped into the kitchen, I could feel the door of my past straining to open like the screen door.

The walls of the room began to slip away, leaving nothing but the feeling of a freefall into a huge divide. I reached for the table, hoping for something to hold on to, but it was too late. I missed and fell hard on the floor. Everything went soft and dreamy. For one brief, happy moment, I thought I was dead.