



Chapter 1

TABITHA LAID her hands on the coffin and peered inside. Her arms trembled. Waiting until everyone else viewed the deceased had done nothing to soothe her troubled nerves. She had never seen a dead body before. Sure, she had watched actors playing dead in movies and viewed photos of corpses in books. But this was different. The face in front of her was a three-dimensional fact. She could touch the dead woman's cheek if she were so bold, but she didn't dare. It was too . . . too unreal.

Yes. That was it—unreal. The rag doll nestled between the woman's folded hands seemed out of place, a symbol of youth in the grasp of wrinkled fingers. And the head propped on the satin pillow looked more like a mannequin than Tabitha's great-grandmother. The face seemed stretched, smoothing out most of the deep creases Nanna had earned during her ninety-plus years of life. And besides, everyone knew Nanna wouldn't think of wearing the rouge and lipstick the mortician had painted on her face. She preferred "the way God decorates me—with spiritual war paint, not cosmetic fluff."





As she gazed at the dead woman's eyelids, forever closed to this world, Tabitha sighed. The family's aged prophetess now lay silent, and not everyone would weep at the loss of her counsel, advice that was always straightforward, sometimes uninvited, but never dispensed without love.

In so many ways, Nanna was like her grandson, who drank in her every word and restated them all in the same plain-spoken manner, the man Tabitha knew as—

A familiar hand clasped her shoulder, interrupting her thoughts.

"Daddy?" she said, swiveling to see him. "Was I standing here too long?"

"Not at all." Tabitha's father reached into the casket and slipped the doll from Nanna's fingers. "Nanna's original instructions said to bury her doll with her, but her attorney found a handwritten note that was dated later." The love-worn doll lay across his palm. "Deborah is yours now."

Tabitha tried to hide a grimace. Although she always slept with that doll whenever she visited Nanna's house, now it had been wrenched away from the clutches of a dead body.

Her father pulled the doll back. "Too morbid?"

Tabitha nodded.

"If we wash it?" he asked, leaning closer.

His warm, cinnamon breath tickled her nose. She nodded again, this time adding a smile. His bent posture and firm chin warned of another one of his practiced speeches, but she didn't mind. As an author and former pastor, writing eloquent prose had become a habit. Although the speeches sometimes sounded too rehearsed, he always meant well.

"A dead body isn't to be feared, Tabitha. Nanna's inner being simply outgrew the decaying package that held captive her ever-strengthening, immortal soul. At last the old cocoon was left behind, and



Nanna has flown to her new life above, finally to worship her Lord face-to-face. This body is merely a cast-off shell.”

“Is that from your funeral speech?” Tabitha asked.

He straightened his tie and cleared his throat. “Too obvious?”

“Uh-huh.” She reached for the doll. “You’re right, though. I’ll take Deborah now.”

After handing it to her, he gave her shoulder another comforting clasp before marching toward another room. The breeze from his departure swept his familiar scent away, and his clicking footsteps joined the low hum of mingling friends and relatives.

Tabitha gripped the doll loosely in her fingers. How should she hold it? What would people think of a twelve-year-old carrying a rag doll around? Combing back Deborah’s hair—faded orange yarn, yet clean and unknotted—Tabitha smiled. It really didn’t matter what people thought. She would love this doll in honor of Nanna.

She laid a hand on the coffin and studied the corpse again, pondering her father’s words. *A cocoon. A cast-off shell.* The shadowy figure lying on the satin bed could no longer produce its familiar noble smile. The artificially blushed lips remained frozen in ghastly pretense.

Tabitha closed her eyes and clutched the doll close to her chest, trying to imprint on her mind Nanna’s real face, the one that could smile and laugh and sing. The real image—the joyful, animated one—must never fade away.

While she meditated, a vision resurfaced in her mind, a dream from about a month before Nanna died. Tabitha had awakened from it in a fright, rising in an unfamiliar bed at Nanna’s house while visiting her for the last time.

Although Nanna had lost her ability to walk almost a year earlier, in the dream the elderly lady and an unfamiliar companion paced swiftly through hazy darkness, both wearing long white robes. Eventually they reached a garden and stopped at a narrow, primitive



gate. The surroundings blurred, and the companion's features stayed in shadows, but one image remained clear—Nanna's face, adorned with a glorious smile and beaming with delight.

With her eyes still tightly shut, Tabitha turned away and faced the door she had entered only a few minutes earlier. One more time Nanna's joyful face flashed into her memory. Tabitha nodded confidently and opened her eyes, knowing now that an old friend's smile would comfort her in her dreams rather than the gloomy specter of a sad, empty shell.

As she padded away from the coffin, her vision readjusted to the bright fluorescent lights. After viewing the specter of death, everything seemed out of place. Blazing spring flowers decorated the doors and windows. Music played from hidden speakers, a bouncy tune with happy voices singing of a glorious new world in the heavens.

She slowed her gait and brushed her fingers across the petals of a beautiful lily. Where were the muted colors, the grays and blacks? Where was the sound of gloomy violins playing the dirge of the brokenhearted? The mourners, if they could be called that, wore genuine smiles on their faces, and hearty handshakes coupled with vigorous embraces passed around the room like good news after a season of trouble.

Tabitha's brother Andrew looped his arm around her elbow. "C'mon, Sister Golden Hair. Grandma and Grandpa are here now, and so's Aunt Betty and Uncle Frank. You know what that means."

"A family photo?" Tabitha asked, shivering.

"You got it!" He pulled gently. "This way."

As they weaved through the mingling crowd, Tabitha hurried to keep up with her escort's lively pace. When they reached an adjacent room, she stopped at the door and peered inside, while Andrew bustled in and disappeared in a sea of people—dark-suited men and boys intermixed with a group of ladies and girls wearing equally dark dresses.



Tabitha smoothed out the front of her own black dress and slipped quietly into the room, hoping the shades of sadness would subdue the company and keep her fawning relatives at bay. As a dozen pairs of eyes flashed in her direction, she gave them a polite nod and a trembling smile, ready to endure the coming ordeal—a series of slack-jawed matrons welcoming her with squeals of delight and annoying, cheek-pinching fingers.

Aunt Betty began the routine, petting Tabitha's head. "Oh, John, just look at her! She's beautiful! Just like Melody and Sarah. But where did she get that hair? It's blonde to the roots!"

Tabitha's father pushed his hands into his pockets. "You won't get any argument from me, Sis. I'm kind of biased about how beautiful my kids are." Stroking his chin, he glanced toward the viewing room. "But come to think of it, wasn't Nanna blonde, I mean, years ago?"

Aunt Betty grabbed her brother's forearm, as if trying to strangle it. "Yes, of course! Remember that picture that used to hang in the hallway by the bathroom? It showed Nanna with Granddad at Mom and Dad's wedding. She was every bit as blonde as Tabitha."

Lowering her head, Tabitha slinked away, only to run into another gushing relative, a bent, wispy-haired great-aunt who laid a sloppy kiss on her cheek. Tabitha waited a few seconds for the kind old lady to turn around, then stealthily used her thumb to wipe the moisture away.

With her doll still in her grip, she folded her hands over her waist and sighed. The discomfort was tolerable. This was Aunt Cornelia, who had recently been widowed, had long since swept her empty nest clean, and now longed for the simple pleasure of a youthful touch. Tabitha vowed that she wouldn't disappoint her with a stony face or a grimace.

A tall man waved a camera over his head and called out from the opposite side of the room, "Everyone gather over here!"

Tabitha rushed forward and took Aunt Cornelia's hand. "Will you stand next to me?" she asked.

"Why, yes!" Aunt Cornelia said, her eyes sparkling. "Of course!"

As the chattering group huddled alongside a wall, the cameraman gestured with his lanky arms. "All Hansons to the left; everyone else to the right. Tall in the back; short in the front."

Aunt Cornelia pulled Tabitha closer. "We short people will stick together up front, right?"

Tabitha laughed and intertwined her fingers with her aunt's. "Just let them try and separate us!"

While the younger subjects shifted uneasily in their stiff collars and patent leather shoes, the men straightened their ties, and the ladies fussed with their hair. Tabitha leaned her head against Aunt Cornelia's shoulder. Her first funeral wasn't like what she had seen in the movies. Wasn't anyone sad about Nanna dying? Where were the gloomy faces? Where were the crying women with white hankies pressed against their noses?

When the photographer called out, "Smile!" Tabitha straightened and flashed a plastic grin, hoping it didn't look too fake or cheesy. A genuine smile seemed impossible, at least now, a day when she was supposed to weep. Someone had to grieve for Nanna. It might as well be her.

Just as the camera flashed, a familiar face peeked in the door—Tabitha's best friend, Rose. When Rose's lips wrinkled into her patented smirk, Tabitha had to restrain a laugh—both to keep from offending Rose and to maintain her grieving demeanor.

"Just one more," the photographer called, holding up his hand. "Keep smiling!"

With her gaze trained on Rose, Tabitha relaxed her face into a stoic mask. As soon as the flash dissipated, she squeezed her aunt's hand and whispered, "Thank you for posing with me."

New tears glistened in Aunt Cornelia's eyes. "My pleasure, sweet angel."

Tabitha kissed her on the cheek, then leaped toward the door. Rose had already entered with her father in tow, a man with an athletic build that belied his forty years of life. She hugged Rose warmly and led her back into the viewing room. "You came! I'm really glad you could!"

"Where'd you get that?" Rose asked, pointing at the doll.

"My great-grandmother's. She left her to me."

Rose straightened the doll's pinafore. "She must be a hundred years old! What's her name?"

"Deborah. And she might be that old. Nanna was over ninety, and she got her from her grandmother."

A deeper voice interrupted their conversation. "Good afternoon, Dr. Grayson."

Tabitha swung her head around. That was Daddy's voice.

"I'm John," her father said, extending his hand. "Tabitha's father."

Dr. Grayson accepted the handshake. "Call me Phil." His salted hair shook as his arm pumped up and down.

Tabitha's father withdrew his hand and clenched it as though his fingers hurt. "I'm glad to finally meet you."

"The feeling's mutual. Tabitha bubbles about you every time she comes to our house."

"Well, I should have visited earlier, but since my wife knows your wife, I decided . . . uh . . ." Her father shifted his weight, unsure of what to add.

"That we passed inspection?" Dr. Grayson offered.

Her father laughed nervously. "I guess you could say that. I didn't want to put it that way."

"Don't worry. I understand. It's a crazy world we live in."

“In any case,” her father said, nodding at Rose, “you and your daughter coming to pay your respects to my grandmother is a pleasant surprise.”

“A surprise?” Dr. Grayson’s eyebrow twitched, but he maintained his smile. “Oh . . . I see. Well, this isn’t really a church service. We all have to be laid to rest somehow.” He let out a short laugh, then cleared his throat. “It’s a morbid lesson, but Rose could learn something here about the end of life.”

Tabitha’s father patted Dr. Grayson’s arm. “Excuse me. The pastor’s waving for me at the coffin.” As he strode away, he called back, “I hope we can talk more later.”

Tabitha let her gaze follow her father’s progress. Grandpa Hanson joined him and the pastor, and the three exchanged hearty handshakes and laughter. She squinted at the strange sight. Why would Grandpa be so happy? After all, that was his mother’s body in the casket just an arm’s length away.

She pictured her own mother lying dead in a coffin and imagined herself standing in front of it. Would she be laughing? What a horrible thought! Tears came to her eyes, and she wagged her head to shake the image away. Clutching Deborah more tightly, she searched the room and found her mother standing next to Aunt Betty, still smiling and talking, still alive.

Tabitha scolded herself. Her silly fears had almost made her cry. Still, all these happy faces didn’t make sense. No wonder her mind was in a whirl.

Rose prodded Tabitha’s shoulder. “Earth to Tabitha. Are you still here?”

Turning toward her, Tabitha laughed. “Maybe not. I think my brain might have hitched a ride on a spaceship. I feel—”

“Ladies and gentlemen.” Her father’s amplified voice sliced through the room. “We will now line up our cars on the street out front. The memorial service will be at the gravesite in thirty minutes.”

He stepped away from the casket and marched straight to the exit. The crowd responded with low, buzzing conversation and a milling about that eventually funneled through the door.

Tabitha waved at Rose. “I’ll see you there!” Tabitha joined her family as they exited, and after a short ride, they arrived at the cemetery. A stranger wearing a carnation boutonniere ushered her and her four siblings—Joshua, Sarah, Andrew, and Jonathan—to the first of several rows of chairs lined up under a large canopy. Although they were among the first to arrive, Tabitha’s father, who had ridden with his parents, was already there, setting the closed casket in place along with the other pallbearers.

Tabitha sat between her mother and her older sister, Sarah, trying not to fidget. She pulled the hem of her dress down to cover more of her legs. Although the black, warm-weather material extended past her knees modestly, she still felt unsure of herself, crossing and uncrossing her legs a few times. What was the right posture for a funeral? Casual and laid-back? Drooping shoulders? She finally decided to stand and look for the Graysons, who had followed about a dozen cars back in the procession.

The freshly watered landscape between the cemetery plot and the parking area sparkled with dazzling greenery—lush, neatly trimmed grass and magnificent oaks with huge arching limbs, a perfect portrait of central Florida’s beauty. The trees looked like guardians as they stretched their arms to shade the little tombstones in their care. The silky lawns begged for Tabitha to come and run barefoot down the slopes, and the trees waved their branches, beckoning her to climb up and ride the wind.

It seemed a mockery. None of the cemetery’s residents could possibly enjoy the delightful fruits of the gardener’s labor. They could never wiggle their toes in the soft grass or perch high in an oak to feel the limbs sway to and fro in the breeze. Her father had been right, she concluded, when earlier that morning he said, “The people left

behind are the ones who define the last rites of the departed. Our dance with the dead is choreographed by the living.”

Rose finally arrived. The rest of the front row had been reserved for family members, so she and her father chose seats in the second row. Tabitha quietly chattered with Rose until the rest of the mourners arrived and Pastor Jenkins addressed the crowd, his thick gray eyebrows arching high as he spoke.

“The Hanson family would like to thank everyone for coming. Today we lay to rest the body of Natalie Elizabeth Hanson, an aged saint who brought blessings to all who knew her. As she requested before her death, her grandson, John Hanson, will deliver her eulogy.”

Tabitha’s father stood in front of the coffin, facing his family and friends. Tall, slender, and freshly shaved, he reminded Tabitha of a young Gregory Peck, like Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, both in looks and demeanor. Very few people knew the fun-loving Daddy hiding behind that dark suit and gloomy mask.

He began his speech in a clear monotone, reading from a single sheet of paper. “Natalie Elizabeth Holmes was born on September sixteenth, in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and ninety-seven. She married Thomas Aaron Hanson at the age of nineteen. She bore four children, Thomas Junior, Rachel, Joseph, and Matthew. Her husband died ten years ago at the age of eighty-six, and she passed away October thirtieth, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and ninety. She is survived by three of her children, eleven grandchildren, and twenty-seven great-grandchildren.” At this point, he paused and put the fact sheet down on a chair. He had been formal and straight-laced, and the onlookers mirrored his sobriety, but now his face blossomed into a radiant smile. “Family and friends, now that I’ve told you the facts about Natalie Elizabeth Hanson, I want to talk to you about our dear Nanna.”

The sober expressions broke into smiles. The mere mention of the departed’s nickname felt like a fresh breeze on a sultry afternoon.

As the mood shifted, Tabitha clutched her doll and looked back at Rose. Her grin reflected in the face of her friend. Dr. Grayson, however, sat stone-faced, neither smiling nor frowning.

Tabitha's father went on to tell about Nanna's life, how she became a Christian during her twenties and witnessed to her husband, who followed suit soon after. He related a few short tales about how Nanna raised her children, helping each of them to know the Lord Jesus at an early age and encouraging them in their faith, even as adults. He laughed as he recounted stories that proved this woman to be the originator of a spiritual lineage, and he called on his listeners to follow the Lord whom Nanna had so faithfully served.

As he finished, he walked solemnly to Grandpa Hanson and took his hand firmly. He spoke more softly, but still loud enough for all to hear. "A wise man once said, 'A true Christian rejoices when a loved one goes to heaven to be with the Lord. Grief is an indulgence for ourselves.'" He released Grandpa's hand and nodded toward the canopy ceiling. "Dad, when you picture Nanna in heaven, I'm sure you feel the joy of knowing that your mother is in a better place. Maybe she's sitting in her favorite rocker, ready to tell one of her amazing stories, and a dozen children are sitting around listening and laughing."

As her father continued, Tabitha glanced at the casket. Something caught her eye, something moving. A ghostly image appeared in front of a flower arrangement, Nanna sitting in her chair exactly as Daddy had described, only she was younger somehow, not a fragile old granny, but a vibrant, angelic woman. Yet, she was still Nanna, rocking back and forth and beckoning with a wave of her hand as if asking Tabitha to come.

Still clutching her doll, Tabitha rose to her feet, staring at the vision. Taking one quiet step after another, she drew closer to Nanna's glorious, shining face. Her father's voice fell silent. A few whispers reached her ears, but they seemed cast toward her from another

world. As the sunlight faded and all other sounds drained away, Nanna's gentle whisper became clear. "I'm glad to see you, my dear. Would you like to sit with the others and hear a story?"

Tabitha looked around. No one sat nearby. She opened her mouth to answer, but a sharp voice shattered her reverie. "Tabitha! What are you doing?" It was her father. She tried to reply, but her words stuck in her throat.

Sunlight returned. As the buzz of her fellow funeral goers sprang back to life, Tabitha's voice returned. "I see her! I see Nanna sitting in the chair, just like you said."

Her father's strong hands gripped her shoulders. "There's no one there, sweetheart. You're imagining things."

"I'm not imagining! I really see her!" She pointed again. "See? She's looking right at you!" She felt his hands pull her back, but the image's draw seemed stronger. She broke free and reached for Nanna, but the vision evaporated. Waving her arm back and forth where Nanna had been, she cried out, "She was here! I saw her!"

Her father turned her around and, stooping low, gazed into her eyes, his own blue eyes glistening with tears. "I didn't realize how upset you were about Nanna's death," he said, stroking her hair. "We'll make sure you get plenty of rest tonight."

"Rest is a good idea, John, but it won't cure her."

Tabitha swung toward the voice—Dr. Grayson. He stood at his seat, one hand in his pocket.

"Hallucinations often arise from a deep-seated problem that requires therapy," Dr. Grayson said, eyeing Tabitha from under a furrowed brow. "I'll be glad to be of assistance."

"I don't need therapy," Tabitha insisted. "I really saw her." She tapped her father on his chest. "Just like I'm seeing you right now."

Her father straightened and laid a hand on Tabitha's head. "I can't say what we'll do, Phil, but thank you for your offer."

Dr. Grayson nodded. "Feel free to call me anytime."

Tabitha lowered her head and shuffled back to her seat, feeling the weight of dozens of gazes resting on her body. Of course everyone was staring. She had just made a fool of herself. Did it matter that the image was real? Not to them. Since no one else saw it, she was the weird one, the distraught great-grandchild overwhelmed by grief. A few “tsk, tsk” sounds made their way into her ears, like the sweeping brooms of old biddies who couldn’t mind their own business.

She sat heavily in her chair, folded her arms, and drooped her head. The rest of the funeral seemed a blur of speeches and hymns. She clutched Deborah as tightly as she could. This funeral day had now become the saddest day of her life.

Sarah slipped her hand into Tabitha’s and intertwined their fingers. Her wordless touch felt good and affirming. Her one and only sister always knew how to make her feel better.

Tabitha took in a deep breath. She could get through this. As long as Sarah believed in her, not much else mattered.