



Sweet Carolina
MYSTERIES

ROOTS and WINGS

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“Charleston has a landscape that encourages intimacy and partisanship. I have heard it said that an inoculation to the sights and smells of the Carolina low country is an almost irreversible antidote to the charms of other landscapes, other alien geographies. You can be moved profoundly by other vistas, by other oceans, by soaring mountain ranges, but you can never be seduced. You can even forsake the low country, renounce it for other climates, but you can never completely escape the sensuous, semitropical pull of Charleston and her marshes.”

—Pat Conroy





Chapter One



IT WAS THE BEGINNING OF a beautiful June Tuesday in Charleston. The cool of the night had not yet given way to the heat of summer, and the ever-present sea breeze rustled the leaves of palm trees permanently bent inland. The unpredictable spring weather was behind them, and the heat of July had not yet arrived.

Joy Atkins spent the two-block walk from her home to work as she always did—praying about the coming day and being grateful for the beauty around her. Straight ahead was the Charleston Harbor. She could just see the shoreline peeking around the old wing of Mercy Hospital, her destination. Halfway there, she looked left and caught a glimpse of Rainbow Row—a line of historic row houses painted in pastel colors that reminded her of the Caribbean.

“Good morning, Mercy.” Joy smiled up at the Angel of Mercy statue that had graced the south side of Charleston’s Mercy Hospital for as long as anyone could remember—longer than anyone who walked this path had been alive. For this beautiful and modern hospital had its roots in the original building, which was built in the 1820s. The statue was lovingly situated in a beautifully landscaped area with flower beds and several benches where staff sometimes came to take their much-needed breaks.

Mercy was old by most standards but not here in Charleston, where age was a measure of pride—at least in statues and buildings. If only it worked that way for people.

Joy patted the statue's foot and winked at the beautiful stone woman, a habit she'd acquired soon after coming to Charleston and taking the job at Mercy Hospital's gift shop. For the past several months she'd been taking a detour to the south side of the hospital every morning to greet the angel before backtracking her way to the front entrance. While she no longer required daily treks past the statue in order to gather her thoughts and find solace in her new role as a widow and her new life managing the shop, she kept up the habit of visiting the old girl because she found her to be good company and an excellent listener.

Not that the ageless Angel of Mercy looked old. Rather, she was beautifully young with smiling features and a kind face that radiated happiness. A strange way to describe a statue made of stone, and yet it was true.

One look at the angel and Joy could smile, no matter if the news of the day was good, bad, or somewhere in between. Thus, it only seemed right to offer some response. And though the angel had never returned the gesture, Joy half expected to get a wink back someday.

Someone else must have agreed with Joy's assessment of the statue, for occasionally a beautiful Noisette rose, a pale cream bloom with a crimson center, was waiting when she arrived at work. Perhaps it was a tribute to the angel or, possibly, to someone else. Either way, the appearance of the rose always prompted Joy to pray for the person who left it.

She retraced her steps to the front of the building and the main entrance. As the automatic doors opened to admit her into the hospital's lobby, she shifted the bundle of freshly cut flowers from her garden so as to keep the delicate iris blooms safe from accidental jostling. Though her official job was manager of Mercy Flowers and Gifts, she often became a supplier as well when she supplemented the floral inventory with blooms from her own little patch of abundance. Wilson had called her love of gardening endearing, although he certainly must have had his moments when whatever she was growing that season took over their yard and nearly all available indoor space as well.

What a wonderful man, her husband. When questioned, Wilson would refer to all the greenery, flowers, fruits, and vegetables as Joy's Abundance. Thus, any spot where she put in a garden was her patch of abundance. Wilson had even taken to his woodshop—that small space he'd carved out of their garage where no plants were allowed—to make a beautiful wooden sign. Even now, the JOY'S ABUNDANCE sign held a place of honor in the rear garden of her new house after the movers had transported it more than a thousand miles away from the home she'd shared with Wilson.

"Good morning, Joy," her friend Evelyn Perry called as she hurried past, likely headed to her office in the Records Department.

"Good morning to you," she responded.

Evelyn paused to look at Joy. "Oh, those irises are beautiful. Mine aren't blooming yet."

Joy smiled. Evelyn was a busy working woman with a full life and a job that often required her to work long hours. Though she and her history professor husband had no children of their own, it

hadn't taken Joy long to see that Evelyn had become surrogate grandmother to uncounted numbers of the hospital's youngest patients. She loved flowers, but the growing of them was another subject. Joy had an entire section of her garden devoted to plants she had rescued from Evelyn in just the past few months.

"Did you fertilize like I suggested?" she asked her friend, already suspecting she knew the answer.

Evelyn returned her grin. "I handed that job over to James, so I don't know. Say, are you free for coffee around ten? I've got something I'd like to talk to you about, and it's not flowers. Actually, I'm thinking of putting together a wedding shower for Nancy Jones, a sweet nurse up in maternity. She's getting married soon, and I don't think she or her young man have any family here to give her any sort of send-off into marriage."

Joy nodded. "Coffee sounds great. See you then."

Evelyn offered a wave before ducking into the hall on the opposite side of the building from the elevators. Joy hurried on, her pace slowed by the people milling about the lobby, her favorite place of the entire hospital other than the gardens.

Joy looked skyward, as was her habit, and smiled. Overhead, a painted blue sky with wisps of clouds remained from the original building and made the space always sunny no matter what the weather was outside. An ancient gas lamp, now electrified, hung from the center of the ceiling, its cut crystal pieces dancing in the breeze from the air conditioner and showering the gloriously veined white marble floor with spirals of tiny rainbows.

The lobby's modern touches blended perfectly with the beautiful antique doors and stained-glass windows that marched

along walls covered in ancient cypress panels and dotted with artwork done by the patients over the years. In pride of place on the mezzanine of the second-floor walkway was an Alfred Hutty original painting depicting Mercy Hospital as it looked in the early 1900s.

Just like the city itself, Mercy Hospital had perfectly blended old and new, modern and antique. And though she missed Texas and the life she'd shared with Wilson, she was quickly falling in love with her newly adopted home. If only she could find her place here—the spot where she belonged. She chuckled when she thought of something Evelyn had told her. When Alfred Hutty first came to Charleston after serving in World War I, he had wired home to his wife, “Come quickly, have found heaven.”

Another glance at the painting above and she smiled. She'd known the move here was meant to be. Now she'd just have to muster up a bit of the patience she too often lacked to find out just why He had planted her here.

Juggling the flowers and her purse in order to retrieve her keys, Joy lost her grip on both. The keys went sliding on the marble floor while the flowers and her purse landed at the feet of Dr. Chad Barnhardt, an emergency room physician.

“Here, let me help. I'll get these. You go find those keys.”

Tall with sandy brown hair that faded to silver at the temples, Dr. Barnhardt was known for his strict adherence to the rules and his penchant for long hours and hard work. He also had a nice smile despite a reputation for being a bit of a grump on occasion.

The doctor gallantly scooped up the flowers and then snatched up her purse while Joy chased after her keys, which had become

wedged behind an oversized urn filled with greenery. A moment later, she let herself into the shop and turned on the lights.

Dropping her keys into her pocket, Joy gratefully accepted the flowers and purse from the doctor and took them to the back of the store. Stowing her purse under the antique counter that used to be the hospital's front desk during the first half of the previous century, she gently laid the irises out in front of her.

"Thank you so much." Joy gave him an appraising look and found his handsome face etched with what could only be exhaustion. "Won't you sit down and have a cup of coffee? It's on a timer so that it starts brewing just about the time I get here. There's nothing more lovely than fresh coffee on a beautiful morning."

He gave her a grateful smile as he leaned against the doorframe. "I'd like that, but I'm on my way home to catch some sleep."

"Another twenty-four-hour shift?" At his nod, she continued. "Oh my stars, I don't see how you doctors manage it. I know there are places for y'all to hide and catch a nap, but I just couldn't go that long without a proper eight hours."

Dr. Barnhardt's smile faltered. "I vaguely remember what eight hours of sleep is like. The need for it is successfully trained out of us somewhere between studying for our MCATs and the first year of medical school."

"Bless your heart," she said. "You need to take a vacation."

He straightened and shook his head. "Not while we're understaffed and there's a hiring freeze going on. No one's getting any time off. I know you believe in miracles, so maybe you should pray that the board increases our budget for the next fiscal year so we can hire some help. Even a few well-qualified interns would be welcome."

There it was. Another reminder of the hospital's budget issues and the accompanying hiring freeze. Joy mustered a smile.

"Well now," she said. "I most certainly can do that, but then you know I'm always happy to pray for you."

The doctor gave her a sideways look. The subject of prayer had quickly become a sore one between them. Joy knew the man standing before her would one day give up on his lack of faith and accept what she already knew, namely that the Lord loved him and was worthy of love from him in return.

But she had been gentle in her prodding and respectful in their conversations. Thus, while Dr. Barnhardt seemed resistant to faith, he was apparently not resistant to the occasional mention of it from Joy.

A bell rang behind her letting Joy know the coffee was ready. She held up her hand. "Wait right there," she said, her Texas drawl creeping through. "I'll be back in two shakes of a lamb's tail." She hurried to the back room and poured the doctor a cup. "Here ya go, honey. Black coffee, no cream or sugar," she told him when she reappeared.

His grin broadened. "Just the way I like it. How do you remember these things?"

Joy shrugged. "I just do. Now go home and get some rest. But take a few sips on your way so you don't fall asleep before then, please."

"Yes, ma'am," he said as he accepted the coffee and headed toward the door, weaving his way through a rush of shoppers entering the shop. "Thank you," trailed behind him.

"Anytime," she said to the retreating doctor. *And in the meantime, I'll be praying for that miracle. And a well-qualified intern,* Joy thought as she watched the doctor depart the building.

Between assisting the shoppers and answering phone calls for floral orders for patients, Joy barely noticed that the morning had passed. “It’s a pity my part-time assistant’s position is on hold thanks to budget constraints,” she muttered, using the words that HR had sent in the email she received a week ago. “Oh well. Maybe I can find myself another volunteer.”

When Evelyn called and began a lengthy apology, Joy glanced up at the clock. Almost noon. Where had the time go?

“So I promise, next time I’ll be there,” Evelyn continued. “But there was this absolutely adorable little girl who was just admitted, and her mama was having a bit of trouble getting her to settle down, so I found some children’s books, and the next thing I knew I had missed our coffee and a whole lot of other things I should have been doing.”

“Relax,” Joy said. “I only just now noticed the time.”

“So you wouldn’t have been there either?” Evelyn laughed. “We are a fine pair, aren’t we?”

“I’m glad you called.” Joy glanced around the shop to make sure it was empty before slipping into the back room. “I’ve got a prayer request. Dr. Barnhardt needs a miracle and an intern. Actually, a *well-qualified* intern,” she corrected.

“I see.” There was a long pause, and then Evelyn said, “Did he ask you to pray for that?”

“He did. Using those exact words.” The bell rang on the door, alerting Joy to incoming shoppers. “Sorry, gotta go. I’ve got a customer.”

“Okay,” Evelyn said. “I can’t wait to see what God does with this.”

“Neither can I,” Joy agreed. “I have a feeling it’ll be something good.”

The remainder of the day flew by, and the next thing Joy knew, she was locking up the shop. She loved her job, and she especially loved those days when time slipped away and then returned to surprise her hours later.

Shrugging her purse over her shoulder, she crossed the now-empty lobby and stepped out into a glorious Charleston afternoon. Her phone buzzed in her purse, likely a text from her daughter, Sabrina, asking how her day at work had gone.

She retrieved her phone and texted Sabrina back. Moving to Charleston had certainly been the right decision. With her daughter and grandchildren nearby, her life was full even if a big part of her heart was still aching over the loss of her husband.

Joy spent the evening quietly puttering in her garden until the lack of light forced her to go inside. As she went about her nightly routine of dinner and bedtime with a favorite book and some television in between, she once again prayed for Dr. Barnhardt. He would have his miracle, of this she was certain.

The next morning, Joy awakened surer of Dr. Barnhardt's soon-to-come miracle than ever. As she passed Rainbow Row, she suddenly remembered the dollhouse her father had made for her sixth birthday. He'd painted it that exact shade of pink. Deep in thought, she arrived at the hospital and was startled to find the parking lot blocked and yellow crime scene tape across the path she always took to the angel. "What's happening?" she asked an officer stationed nearby once she'd made her way to him.

He waved his hand behind him as his radio squawked. "The angel is gone."