

Hope For Chattanooga

Chapter 1: The Sign

“Say, Miss Tia, have you seen *the sign*?”

“*The sign*? Lord have mercy, Icy-Pearl, I may be a Christian woman, but the Good Lord has not seen fit to show me no signs.”

Icy-Pearl raised her eyebrows and smiled. “No, I am talking about *that* sign, the one Miss Shelly-Ann is putting up now. Doesn’t she work over at Luther’s office?” Icy-Pearl pointed toward a young woman with low cut jeans that she filled out a little too amply, who was fixing a poster over a drinking fountain next to the concession.

Tia frowned at Icy-Pearl. “Lord, she is spread out like a cold supper. Those trousers are painted on her.” She turned to Icy-Pearl, “Why, you can see her religion!”

“Ooh. Merciful Heavens, Miss Tia.” Icy-Pearl cringed.

“I need to see what she’s up to.” Tia placed her hand on Icy-Pearl’s arm, and gave a gentle squeeze.

Icy-Pearl jutted her chin toward Shelly-Ann. “Go on.”

Tia hurried over to the concession as Shelly-Ann spun around.

“Oh!” Shelly-Ann shrank back, and giggled, “Afternoon, Miss Tia. You startled me.” Shelly-Ann’s eyes shifted furtively.

“What you got there, girl?” Tia tried to look past Shelly-Ann. “Is Luther Pitt sticking his nose,” Tia paused and thought about her ex-husband, but didn’t say - *and other part of his anatomy*, “into places he shouldn’t?”

“Oh it’s nothing, Miss Tia, just an announcement.” Shelly-Ann sang, as she

continued to block the poster, deliberately. Everyone knew how much Tia loved the old train station.

“Girl, move out of the way so I can read it.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Shelly-Ann conceded, beginning to scurry away.

Tia barked, “Where in the Sam Hill do you think you’re going?”

Shelly-Ann stopped in her tracks.

Tia squinted, then rooted through her purse to find her reading glasses. Once found, she placed them squarely on her nose, and leaned in toward the post. She read:

Public Notice of Demolition

on the 10th of May

1400 Market St. Chattanooga, Tennessee

is hereby authorized to be demolished.

Tia’s face went pale and as her body trembled. She turned fiercely on Shelly-Ann.

“What is the meaning of this?”

Shelly-Ann said, “Ah-er, yes, Miss Tia. HamCoCo got the job.”

“Hamilton County Contracting got the job?” Tia’s eyes went wide and wild, “What job, Shelly-Ann?”

“We’re going to build GooHoo,” Shelly-Ann exclaimed. “The Chattanooga corporate offices for GooHoo, on account of the high speed fiber optics?” Although offered as an explanation, Shelly-Ann delivered this as a question.

“Yoo-hoo?” Tia furrowed her brow. “Goo...What? Like chocolate drinks?”

“No, Miss Tia, *GooHoo*, the online shopping company?” Shelly-Ann backed away slowly.

Tia nodded slowly, trying to take this in. She squinted her eyes, and spoke slowly, “Let me see if I’ve got this...they want to tear down the *Choo-Choo*? To make room for *GooHoo*?”

Shelly-Ann nodded slowly.

“Do you have any idea what this old train station means to this community?”

Shelly-Ann regarded Tia with curiosity. “I can’t imagine I do, Miss Tia.”

“I am a Christian woman, Shelly-Ann, so I shall not tell you what I’m thinking.”

Shelly-Ann shrugged sheepishly. “I guess you can’t stop progress Miss Tia.”

“Oh, no? Watch me. You tell that scoundrel of a boss of yours I’m about to have a dying duck fit here. Luther hasn’t tangled with the likes of me for a long time. And it did not turn out well for him last time.” Tia’s face flushed. “He lost the County Seat and his political career came to a screeching halt. That when I was younger and kinder,” Tia seethed. “I’m much more ornery now.”

Shelly-Ann’s face went pale and she backed away from Tia, giving Tia a feeling of satisfaction. “It’s, it’s...imminent domain.” Shelly-Ann stammered as she turned and all but ran out of Terminal Station.

“Imminent what?” Tia called after her. “You mean Eminent Domain? Luther’s company is not the government. He has no right to expropriate property. This property is already open to the public as a museum. You are talking about private corporate use.” Tia scrunched her face. But Shelly-Ann was already gone.

Icy-Pearl hurried over to Tia, placing a hand on her shoulder. Tia squeezed it

tightly, tears forming in her eyes.

“May tenth?” Tia’s voice quivered. “Is that what it says?” Tia pointed to the poster on the marble wall.

“I believe it does, Miss Tia.” Icy-Pearl said quietly.

Tia turned to face her friend, fumbling for a tissue to wipe the tears, “Pearl, how? Why?”

“We’ve always known the train museum was in a holding company and would revert back to the city. A private party bought the Chattanooga Choo-Choo back in the 1970s. But now it’s back in the municipal government’s domain.”

“But this building is an institution. It’s protected by the National Register of Historic Places.”

“It surely is, Miss Tia.”

“I mean Terminal Station is a historic landmark. It was designed by,”

Icy-Pearl smiled, as she and Tia recited together, “That famous Ecole des Beaux-Arts designer, Donn Barber, and built back in 1908.” Tia laughed through her tears. Tia and Icy-Pearl exclaimed, “The Gateway to The South!” Tia knew Icy-Pearl’s Choo-Choo tour by heart she had been so many times.

Icy-Pearl smiled even broader “Yes, Miss Tia,” she said, and put on her Tour Guide voice, “The station opened in 1909 and was the largest Southern train station,” she laughed, “You know, Tia, it was really you that inspired me to take this job.”

As if on cue, a flock of tourists appeared from the Garden Restaurant, entering the main hall of Terminal Station. Tia doubted they knew that the grand hall had been modeled after the National Park Bank in New York City. Tia frowned at the T-shirts

depicting politics and brand names, one printed, "I'm with Stupid." Aghast at the athletic shoes and shorts, where clearly no athletic activity had happened in quite some time, Tia thought the quiet and restrained form of the lobby dictated people dress in a more elegant and refined manner. But she warmed toward the tourists when they stood below the eighty-two-foot high ceiling and gaped, uttering gasps of awe at the prismatic colors of the stained glass window in the center of the dome. As they admired the large brass chandeliers and subtle plaster embellishments of heraldic emblems, Tia smiled forgiving their poor fashion sensibilities.

Their voices carried, echoing through the main hall of Terminal Station, lending a feel of normality and comfort. This somehow assured her this building that had stood for over a hundred years, would surely stand for another hundred. *And another hundred and another after that.*

Icy-Pearl excused herself and went to tell the tourists about the antique wood-burning engine, a perfectly restored version of the very engine that made the maiden voyage in 1880 from Cincinnati to Chattanooga. The engine was painted bright green and red, but was one and the same as the black-and-white sign fixed atop the dome. Tia could hear Icy-Pearl tell them that the arched main entrance claimed to be the largest unsupported brick arch in the world. Tia could hear Icy-Pearl's excited tone as she transfixed the tourists with her rendition of the 1941 Glenn Miller song "Chattanooga Choo-Choo" and told the story of the seminal train trip from Track 29 at Pennsylvania Station in New York City through Baltimore, North and South Carolina, and arriving at Terminal Station.

Tia's breathing quickened and became shallow at the thought of her Luther

destroying this old structure, *her* old station, *her* old friend. Hadn't he taken enough from her?

Forgetting her recent hip surgery, not using her cane, she turned sharply, and marched out of the Choo-Choo, crossing Market Street, oblivious to the traffic. Cars skidded to a stop, horns blared. Tia didn't see or hear them. As if in a fugue, she felt like an apparition, a ghost out of time.

When she got to her Prius, she slid into the driver's seat without hesitation as if she'd never had the surgery. She pressed the ignition button and sped off, across the Market Street Bridge toward her home, known affectionately as the *Butterscotch Castle*, on account of the cookies, cakes, and pies Tia baked and served with specialty coffees and teas, not just to the ladies of the Garden Club, but to the young artists, writers, musicians, and poets that had been drawn to her salon turned café after she and Luther divorced some fifteen-odd years ago. Without Luther's financial support, Tia had to figure out a way to make ends meet. She'd hand written index cards on local bulletin boards advertising her baked goods, and canned goods from the garden. When customers came to the door, she'd invite them in, offering coffee or tea, and brought out board games from Clint and her daughter Miranda's childhood, setting up tables and chairs creating quiet conversation nooks, so folks could talk, catch up on local gossip, or debate philosophy. When Bo Picket came in one afternoon with his guitar, Tia asked him to play, and from then on The Butterscotch Castle became a place known not just for home baked goods, but for home spun poetry, crafts, art, and music as well.

Tia's car sprayed gravel as she skidded into the L-shaped parking lot, coming to a halt. For a moment she held on to the steering wheel. It had been years since she'd driven

that fast. Her heart raced as she pushed open the car door, and leaving her cane in the car, strode up the steps, onto the side porch. She paused to catch her breath, and fumbled for the key. A breeze that had not quite released winter to spring kicked up. She shivered and burst into the large open kitchen, lifted the hand piece of her crimson rotary wall phone she'd refused to replace since 1980. She jabbed her finger into the rotary and dialed her son's cell phone. She knew he wouldn't answer, but just had to hear his voice, even if it was a recording.

“Clint'n! Clint'n, this is Mama! Clint'n! *You have to come home!*”