

SEQUEL TO THE DARLINGS

A
SAFFRON
SUN



VERA JANE
COOK

A SAFFRON SUN

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“In three words I can sum up everything I've learned about life: it goes
on.”

—**Robert Frost**

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The Darlings
Book Two

VERA JANE COOK



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Chapter One

1993

Like hot ash, the foreboding blood moon smoldered in the sky, making the night surreal, threatening. Dickie had the urge to stop and get out of his car, walk right up, and touch the moon, feel the fire, welcome the burn as he tried to embrace it, tried to understand it. There was a curse beneath its smile and whispers he couldn't hear, a witch's prophecy perhaps, an ambivalently beguiling spell put upon him that would blaze and fester in his memory like a wound.

His hand shaking on the wheel, he clenched it hard, held it steady. What had his mother said to him? That Lottie was dead? That she'd died in the fire that his wife had set? No, couldn't be so. It was preposterous, ridiculous, absurd. He wiped the tears from his eyes, eyes so sodden he could barely see two feet ahead of him. Mostly he saw the glare, just the white miasmic glare of his headlights. He drove through quickly. He listened to his tires glide over the stones. The crunching sound was a welcome deterrent to the stillness of the blood moon night.

He finally saw his mother's driveway, appearing out of the macabre darkness, leaving the moon behind him, the bleeding moon, evincing the surreal, unnatural, and untimely death of the woman he loved.

His eyes still filled with tears, he made his way to his mother's door, praying she'd been fooling with him, praying this was all some cruel joke to get him to do what he didn't want to do. His mother's most contemptible desire was to break them up, he and Lottie. She thought a divorce would ruin him, the scandal of it. One can't be the brunt of scandal in a small town. Of course, what luck. The perfect solution appeared out of nowhere — death. Fate had intervened with glorious and deadly consequences. Fate would keep him in his loveless marriage. Why the hell would it matter to his mother, he wondered. Divorce was natural when the love was gone. Why the hell should she care if he took up with Lottie, his son Barnaby was a grown man, his daughter was practically out of the door, why the hell would she care?

“Hello, Mother,” he said as he walked into the parlor where she stood in the center of the room, beside an old trunk. She gave every appearance of waiting for her ride to the train station, whereupon she

would board the train and the trunk would accompany her, carried by a kindly old porter. For just a second, his fantasy soothed him.

“Son,” she said and held out her arms. He went into them because he knew he had to. “Let’s make this quick.”

“Where is she?” he asked and followed her eyes to the trunk.

Dickie dropped to his knees. “No,” he screamed. He put his hands to his head and cried deeply. “Please don’t tell me she’s in there, Mother. Please.”

He looked up at her with beseeching eyes.

“I’m sorry, Dickie.”

Dickie put his arms around the trunk and cried more bitterly. His mother’s hand squeezed his shoulder. “But she was tall, this trunk couldn’t hold her,” he said.

“It held her,” Lillian replied stoically.

“Can you open it?” he asked.

“It’s best if we don’t do that,” she said.

“I want to see her one last time. Please.”

“No! You don’t want to see her, not like that, Dickie. You can’t see her like that. Remember her the way she was. For God’s sake, she was burned to death. It’s not a pretty sight.”

“Oh, God.” Dickie wept some more before he was able to get to his feet. “Oh, God,” he repeated.

“Go get your car and bring it round to the front door and open the back.”

He looked up at her. “Maybe we should go to the police.”

Lillian bent down and spoke in a whisper. “Only a matter of time before the whole town finds out about you and Lottie. Only a matter of time before they learn that Deborah finally discovered your indiscretion. Everyone knew they were the best of friends. Dickie, your wife had reason to want to kill Lottie.”

“Whatever reason is there to kill someone?”

“Listen to me ... your wife’s car was seen at Lottie’s house, that makes her a suspect. Don’t forget, she had motive. She’ll be put away for Lottie’s murder. It would be a slam dunk. She isn’t innocent, Dickie. Lottie told me right before she died that Deborah set the fire.”

Lillian choked up. She squeezed her son’s hand. “Oh, it was awful. Poor woman.” She got out a handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes. “We can’t let anything happen to Deborah. We can’t let her go to jail, for God’s sake. We can’t let a tragedy like that touch us and tear our family apart.”

“We’ll get her off.” He looked at his mother, pleading with her even

though he knew she was right. His family would be ruined by this.

“The mother of your children is a murderer? An arsonist? We can’t have that, Dickie.”

Dickie nodded his head and got to his feet. “Yes, you’re right.”

“We have to protect Deborah now. We must protect your wife, Dickie. It’s not just about her either. Your children ... God, what will it do to them? They’ll be ostracized just as you will be. Barnaby’s legacy will be ruined. His clients will take their accounts away from him. Our family’s fortune will dwindle. Everyone in this town loves and trusts you, don’t destroy that.”

Dickie got to his feet but not before kissing the trunk that held the body of his dead lover. He got his car and pulled it up to the front door as Lillian had asked. Then he heaved the trunk onto the dolly Lillian had provided. He hoisted the trunk into the back of his car and he and his mother drove off to the swamp where a multitude of sins could be hidden under the subfuscous twilight.



The blood moon followed them all the way out to Sutter’s where the swamp waited, stinking and thick, a mud river. Dickie held his nose. He cried again and slammed his fist against the dash. The sky darkened, almost night but not quite.

“Damnit, I don’t want to leave her here. I want her to have a coffin, a decent burial.”

“We can’t give her that, Dickie. Maybe one day.”

“What difference does it make ... one day? She needs it now.”

“I’m afraid she doesn’t need anything now.”

Dickie took in a large intake of breath, despite the smell. He drove as far into the swamp as his flashy Escalade would take him. His mother sat in the passenger seat while he dragged the trunk as deep into the swamplands as possible, the shovel tied to his belt loops making him trip. He wanted to hurl the shovel into the Escalade’s windshield. He wanted to scream out, fall to his knees and weep. But he kept walking. He buried the trunk under remote and bald Cypress trees by the water’s edge, draped in Spanish Moss. He knew he would never be able to find Lottie’s grave if he wanted to; the swamp was profuse in bald Cypress trees. There’d be no way to kneel at Lottie’s grave and talk to her, no way to know where he’d hidden her because he didn’t know where he was. He had walked a straight line from the car, straight out as far as he could go before the river stopped him, but he’d never be able to remember where he parked the car, or under which tree in this copious swampland of

trees he had parked the car.

Two hours later, covered in mud and sweat, he emerged, still crying. His mother took his hand and squeezed it.

“Best to stay off the subject with Deborah. Let her go on pretending that she’s not responsible.”

Dickie looked at her as if he’d never seen her before. “Of course,” he said. “I don’t ever want to discuss this again.”

“It’s for the best,” she said. “Wash the car first thing,” she added. “Now, I’ve got to get to Greenville,” she said. “Let’s make haste.”

He should have asked her why she had to get to Greenville so late in the day, but too forlorn, distracted, to care.



Deborah, refreshed after a bath, looked silky and sweet and smelled of rose oil. Filthy, Dickie stood in the front room with mud all over him. He took his shoes off at the door to avoid his wife’s reprimands. Though she didn’t seem to notice him as he walked in, dragged himself to the leather chair by the window and sat. But then she started making small talk, as if she’d sensed his presence. After their small talk, she babbled on about their son’s wedding, discussing the guest list.

My God, he thought, she’s just killed someone, and here she is going on and on as if she hasn’t torn out my heart. Dickie responded in brief retorts though he couldn’t bear to look at her. Perhaps he should confront her, maybe even put his hands around her throat and squeeze until her breathing ended. He went to the bar and grabbed himself a scotch. Behind him, he heard her, still going on and on about food, asking what he thought of serving fine little tidbits of filet mignon.

“For the wedding party?” he asked, knowing his voice sounded odd, woeful even.

“Of course, what have I been talking about for the last twenty minutes?”

“Steak is perfect,” Dickie said. “But let’s have fish as well, a lobster bake, perhaps.” Resigned, his voice sounded so tired.

My God, he’d just buried his lover in swampland and here he is pretending his days and nights were still normal and included lobster bakes and tidbits of filet mignon, included the joy of his son’s wedding, a joy he strove to find. He had turned to Deborah when he’d suggested a lobster bake and he had smiled, pretending that the love of his life wasn’t lying in the muddy earth under a blood-red moon, emblazoning the night sky with its subtle mystery, a dead weight in his memory, threatening to crush him. Had he really done that, smiled at his wife? “I

thought you didn't approve of this wedding," Dickie said. "You don't want our son to marry a Negro." Dickie stared at her with disdain; she disgusted him. "Isn't that right, Deborah?"

"Let's not dredge up the past. Could we persuade him not to go through with it?" She avoided his eyes and stared out the window. "Of course, I don't like it but he's not going to listen to me. I'd prefer a wedding over a surprise elopement."

"Your son is part Black, Deborah. You can't change that."

She ignored him. "My God, Dickie, go take a shower, you're filthy and you stink to high heaven. Where on earth have you been?"

He finished the scotch in his glass and climbed the stairs. He turned just once and caught the look on her face: it was unattractively vituperative, as if he were an incorrigible child and the dirt on his clothes was as commonplace as the sunrise. Disgusted, she stood shaking her head from left to right. He almost heard her saying, My God, Dickie, is that mud you're covered with? What on earth have you been doing?

I've been cleaning up your mess, he wanted to say.

Also By Vera Jane Cook

The Darlings
The Fourniers: When Hannah Played Ragtime
The Fourniers: Glamor Girl
The Fourniers: The Memory of Music
Pleasant Day
Lies a River Deep
Marybeth, Hollister & Jane
Where the Wildflowers Grow
The Story of Sassy Sweetwater
Dancing Backward in Paradise

Under the pen name Olivia Hardy Ray

Annabel Horton, Lost Witch of Salem
Annabel Horton and the Black Witch of Pau
Fox Hollow
Nobody's Road

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