

BETWEEN, GEORGIA

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Bestselling author of *gods in Alabama*



a novel

Between, Georgia

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I have taken some liberties with Georgia's geography; Between exists, but I have never set foot in it. If its landscape and people resemble my version, then I will pray fervently that their Bernese moves far, far away, and state for the record that it *is* a coincidence. Also, in the forties and fifties, there was not a deaf day school within fifty miles, so I grabbed a corner of the Georgia School for the Deaf and pulled it east. I wanted Stacia to grow up with her family, but learn ASL in an environment that would value her resilient spirit. I promise I put the school right back after.

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If you think a deaf-blind woman who came of age before feminism did couldn't be as strong and independent as Stacia Frett, then you need to come meet my friend Alice Turner. Although

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they are around the same age, Stacia is not anything like Alice in looks, personality, or spirit. But Alice showed me how to create a character with both a rich, fulfilling life and type-one Usher's syndrome. Alice is the president of the Georgia Deaf-Blind Association. She babysits her three small grandkids, bakes kick-butt brownies, and, when we go out to eat, *she* tells *me* where to turn by feel and timing. She was infinitely patient with my wretched finger spelling and generous with her time—thanks, Alice. Thanks for everything.

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CHAPTER

1

THE WAR BEGAN thirty years, nine months, and seven days ago, when I was deaf and blind, floating silent and serene inside Hazel Crabtree. I was secreted in Hazel's womb, which was cloaked in her pale and freckled skin, which was in turn hidden by the baggy sweatsuits she adopted so she would look fat instead of pregnant. Which was ridiculous, because who ever heard of a fat Crabtree? They were all tall and weedy, slouching around like wilting stems, red hair blooming out the top.

Hazel Crabtree was fifteen years old, and no one thought twice about her expanding waistline as she crept around the edges of rooms, watching her mother ignore her and ignoring me in turn as I kicked at her and spun and grew myself some lungs.

I never heard Hazel's side of the story. She birthed me but was never in any sense my mother. I heard an expurgated version from my aunt Genny; to hear Genny tell it, I frolicked bloodlessly into the world attended by singing rabbits. From Aunt

Bernese, I got raw medical data and a flat recitation of events in the order they occurred.

But my mother, Stacia Frett, told it to me as a love story, hers and mine. It wasn't a declaration of war to her, it was simply the tale of how we found each other. My mother's version, with every nuance communicated by her expressive face and flashing hands, dominated my imagination. Over the years, I interwove her story with what I had gleaned from Genny and Bernese, until I had an interpretation that felt like truth. It was as if my soul had been floating above the scene, watching, waiting to be sucked into my body with the air of my first breath.

I don't know why Hazel Crabtree went to Bernese for help the night I was born, and Bernese did not think to ask her. The why of things did not often trouble Aunt Bernese, but she was a master at discovering the how. Before agenting my mother's art became a full-time job, Bernese had worked in labor and delivery over at Loganville General. I like to think Hazel came to the Fretts because she knew Bernese was a former nurse and pragmatist savant who, beneath her bluster, had a kind heart. This was a distinct possibility: At that time Between, Georgia, had a population of about ninety people. Everybody knew everything about everyone.

But more likely, she was being practical. Bernese and her husband and their boys lived on the lot at the dead end of Grace Street. Her sisters, Stacia and Genny, lived together in the house next door. There wasn't another house on the block, and Bernese's backyard overlooked empty miles of Georgia pine trees. The only other nurse in town lived on one of Between's more populated streets; she had close neighbors. The last (although perhaps the

most important) factor was that Hazel had to know going to the Fretts for help was a surefire way to piss off her family.

Bernese woke to the sound of someone banging on her front door a few minutes past four in the morning. She came down the stairs pulling on her robe, getting her gun hand stuck in the sleeve. Her husband, Lou, trailed behind her, saying nervously, "Is the safety on? Is the safety on? Hand the gun to me and then put your robe on, Bernese. Is the safety on?"

Bernese got herself untangled and tucked the gun into her armpit, barrel down, while she tied her robe belt.

"Is that the thirty-eight?" asked Lou. "Lord-a-mercy, why didn't you get your little purse gun?"

Bernese opened the door and there was Hazel Crabtree, holding a wad of her mucous plug cupped in both hands and saying, "This came out. Is this a piece of baby? I hurt."

Bernese said, "Holy monkeys! You're pregnant? Lou, call for an ambulance." Tiny towns like Between didn't have 911 service in 1976, so Lou went to get Bernese's emergency-numbers card from the drawer. But Hazel shoved past Bernese and grabbed at him, falling to her knees as she yowled, "No, no, you can't call anyone. My mother can't know."

Then she let go of Lou and said in a high, panicked voice, "Something's coming. Something else. Something bad is coming." Hazel scrabbled at her belly and crotch, frantic. Her sweatpants were soggy, and she shoved them down to mid-thigh. She wasn't wearing any panties. Then she tilted and tipped over, writhing on the foyer carpet.

Bernese looked up and saw all three of her young sons huddled in a clot on the stairs. They were clutching one another on the

second-floor landing, staring down through the banisters with wide, horrified eyes.

"Never you mind," Bernese said to Lou. He was tugging at his earlobe as he watched Hazel flail and howl on the floor. He set the phone back down in its cradle on the hall table. Bernese said, "Get up there with the boys. Tell them something. I will fix this." Lou trotted obediently upstairs and picked up the toddler, herding the two older boys back toward their bedroom. Hazel's contraction subsided, and she rose up on her hands and knees, panting.

Bernese's front door opened into a carpeted entryway. A wide doorway on the right led to the den, and straight ahead was a long hallway to the kitchen. On the left, the stairs went up to a landing that overlooked the foyer. There was a heavy table, almost a sideboard, that ran the length of the staircase. The phone was on the edge of the table, close to the front door, and the rest of it was taken up by the huge glass terrarium that housed Bernese's beloved luna moths. The adult moths were awake, some fanning their wings as they posed on the perches and twigs. Others had paired off, attaching end to end to make the kind of desperate love that comes with an extremely short life span.

Bernese tried to step around Hazel, heading for the table so she could set down her gun and pick up the phone, but Hazel reared up on her knees in front of Bernese, crying, "No, you can't! No one knows I'm this way. No one can find out!"

She was grabbing for Bernese's arm, but she fell short and jerked at her hand, squeezing. The gun went off. The bullet whizzed past Hazel's head, smashing through the glass of the terrarium and burying itself in the staircase. Glass showered down, pattering onto the carpet and sprinkling Hazel's wild red hair.

Hazel and Bernese froze in the sudden silence, their eyes locked on the smoking hole in Bernese's stairs. From upstairs, Lou yelled, "Bernese? Bernese?" They heard his footsteps clattering across the upstairs hall, the little boys running in a panicked herd behind him.

"Stop!" screeched Bernese, and the footsteps stopped dead. "No one is hit, Lou. Stay with the boys."

"I asked you was the safety on," Lou called down, aggrieved.

Bernese hollered back, "Maybe you better put the safety on your mouth."

Next door, the gunshot woke up Bernese's sister Genny. Genny bolted upright, clutching the covers to her bosom. Her bedroom window overlooked Bernese's front lawn, and she saw the downstairs lights blazing and Bernese's front door standing open. Genny got up and ran on tiptoe down the hall to Stacia's room. She flipped the light switch and sat on the bed, shaking Stacia awake. Stacia sat up, her gray eyes opening wide, immediately alert. She held her fist up to her chin, thumb and pinky spread wide, asking by sign and her expressive face what was wrong.

Genny shook her head and signed back, *Heard gun*. She cut her eyes to the left to indicate Bernese's house, then signed, *Lights on, door open. What do we do?*

As soon as she finished signing, she moved her right hand to pluck at the fine dark hairs on her left forearm, tugging hard enough to lift her skin in points. One of the hairs popped out, torn root and all from the follicle.

Don't pick, Stacia signed. She gently peeled Genny's fingers away and gave her a bracing pat, then signed, *I'll handle it*. Stacia climbed out of bed and pulled on her robe. She tied the belt with savage efficiency, then spun on one heel and took off for the front

door at a dead run. Her long black hair was unbound, and it unfurled behind her like a banner.

Genny stared openmouthed for a moment and then said, "Goodness grief!" She ran after Stacia, waving frantically in a futile attempt to catch her eye, signing, *Wait! Wait! Call police! Help! Wait!* at Stacia's implacable back.

She chased Stacia in this manner all the way across the lawn to Bernese's front porch. She stopped short of the stairs and leaned down and grabbed up a pinecone, ripping up a chunk of sod with it. She threw it as hard as she could past Stacia, through her line of sight. It thunked against Bernese's siding, and dust puffed out of it all the way around, like a firework going off. It left a black smudge on the porch, like an outsize thumbprint on the wood. Stacia paused to give Genny an irked look over her shoulder before she disappeared through Bernese's front door.

Genny stood a few steps outside the glow of the porch lights, tugging at her long black braid. Her nervous fingers climbed up, following the weave of her braid, all the way until she touched the fine hairs at her nape. She gathered two or three in a pinch and ripped them out, twiddling her fingers together to shake off the loose hairs and then immediately seeking out another pinch. A luna moth came fluttering drunkenly out the front door and wafted up, disappearing into the night. Genny watched it go, and then she scuttled up onto the porch. She peeked inside.

Bernese and Stacia were helping Hazel to the other side of the foyer, picking their way through shattered glass from the terrarium. Hazel was moaning and naked from the waist down. Her sweatshirt had hiked up over her grossly distended abdomen. The rest of her body was so skinny that Genny could see her ribs. Hazel's thighs were streaked with blood. Glass fragments sparkled

in her hair, inappropriately festive. Three or four of the luna moths were dancing up around the light fixture, and one was fluttering in Hazel's wake, as if drawn by her bright hair. Genny saw the gun sitting by the phone on the sideboard.

"What's happening?" Genny squawked, jerking out another pinch of hair at her nape. "Is she shot? Was she shot in her pants?"

"No one is shot," said Bernese. "It's a baby coming, and it's coming now, very fast. Help me here."

Bernese and Stacia lowered Hazel back down to the carpet in the doorway to the den. They tried to get her to squat, but she flopped onto her back and lay there, thrashing back and forth as another contraction took her. Stacia signed rapidly, and Genny said, "Stacia wants to know, what do you need?"

"Boiled string. Scissors. Clean towels," said Bernese as Genny repeated her words in sign. "Hot water. A doctor, but that's not going to happen. I think this baby is coming now."

Stacia nodded curtly and ran down the long hallway into the kitchen. Bernese knelt by Hazel until the contraction subsided and she was still again. She was sobbing quietly on the floor: "It has to stop. Make it stop."

"It will stop," said Bernese. "We have to get this baby out is all. Genny, come sit by her head."

"Me?" Genny squeaked.

"Unless you want the naked end," said Bernese, staying beside Hazel. "Breathe," she said.

"Oh, oh, oh, oh," said Genny. She stayed right where she was in the doorway, rocking back and forth, her gaze flicking around the room, glancing off the moths and Bernese and the blood and the gun on the table, unable to light on anything. Her busy fingers sought hairs to pull as she rocked herself faster.

"Another one is coming," said Hazel. "Make it not come."

"You want it to come," said Bernese. "It will get this baby out, and then it will all stop. So let it come."

"No, no, no, I don't want it to come," Hazel moaned, but it came anyway. It came relentlessly, and she was helpless in it, with Bernese roaring at her to push.

Genny was weaving harder, panting, tugging at her hair. Bernese glared at her. "Quit that picking and get by this girl's head. Now. And quit panting. I don't have time to drag your big butt out of the way if you faint."

Hazel shook her head wildly back and forth, twisting her body as she fought the contraction. Genny, watching, dug her fingernails into her forearm hard enough to draw blood and then stared down at her arm for half a beat. The pain cleared her head, and she accessed the thread of Frett resilience buried in her, deep under her nerves. She stilled her hands and scurried over to kneel beside Hazel's head.

"There you go. You and her breathe together," instructed Bernese. Once Genny was in place, Bernese braced herself against the doorway and put the heel of her hand at the top of Hazel's belly. She leaned in to it, bearing down and saying, "And you, girl. Push hard from here."

Hazel shoved at Bernese's hand, weeping. She slumped again as the contraction ended, and Bernese said, "Next time you push like that at the start."

Hazel said, "I don't want a next time."

Genny reached out and patted ineffectually at Hazel's shoulder. Hazel grabbed Genny's wrist, looking up at her, beseeching, "Please tell her to quit it."

"Oh, honey," said Genny, pity softening her horror. "No one can make Bernese quit anything."

"I hate you," said Hazel to Bernese. "I hate you, you dumb whore."

"Why, this is Ona Crabtree's girl!" said Genny. "This is little Hazel Crabtree!"

"Course it is," said Bernese, a world of Frett contempt ripe in her voice. The two families had nothing in common and had long regarded each other with animosity. The Fretts were a proudly emotional bunch. No Frett lips ever touched liquor (they even sipped grape juice at communion), but their moods could sweep through them as fierce and fast as any drug. Their decisions came from the gut, and they didn't care one fig for what outsiders thought of their actions.

The Crabtrees, on the other hand, almost universally had the deadeye, and their emotional range ran from sullen right on up to enraged. Wary and canny, they felt nothing more keenly than the gaze of the disapproving world, a world that was out to get them. Their responses to feeling judged were shrugs and sneers followed by lashings of great, cold violence.

The Fretts were meticulous, order incarnate. The Crabtrees lived in unimaginable squalor. The Fretts lived within convention and tradition, while the Crabtrees spread like kudzu, generating chaos and more Crabtrees, generally without benefit of marriage. The Fretts had both money and the respect of the town. They were the royal fish in this tiniest of ponds, and the Crabtrees fed along the bottom.

This defied what the Crabtrees felt should be the natural order of things, because the Crabtrees, like everyone else in Between, were white. They were paper-white, pure Irish, most of them,

maybe a little French or English or German blood in some of the branches. It was merely annoying when morally solvent white folks looked down on them, but it was maddening to take it from the Fretts, the children of a white father and a mother who was, as Ona put it, “half a damn squaw-Indian.”

Hazel had closed her eyes for a moment, resting. Genny looked down at Hazel’s pale eyelids, so smooth and dewy, and said, “Goodness grief, honey, how old are you? Bernese, you be sweet. She’s a baby herself!”

Bernese said, “Apples don’t fall off trees and land all the way downtown. She’s almost sixteen, and I think her mama is my age.”

“I hate you,” said Hazel to Bernese, and then her eyes opened wide again. “Oh no, it’s coming.”

“This time you push,” said Bernese.

“I don’t know how to push,” said Hazel, looking desperately to Genny. “Oh no, please do something. Do anything.”

“Push like you’re going number two,” said Bernese, and Genny said, “Bernese! Really!”

“How many babies have you had?” Bernese barked, and Genny dropped her eyes. “So shut up and let me help this girl.”

“Do something,” said Hazel to Genny. “Talk to me. Anything. Sing.”

Genny shook her head, but she opened her mouth and started to sing in her quavering soprano. “‘There’s not a friend like the lowly Jesus . . .’”

Hazel lashed up at Bernese with one foot and screamed, “Oh fuck, please not Jesus.” Bernese caught her thrashing leg at the knee and bent it back toward her abdomen. “Get ready,” said

Bernese, anchoring the heel of her other hand at the top of Hazel's swollen belly.

"I'm not ready. Help me," Hazel wailed to Genny, and twisted on the floor while Bernese wrestled with her leg. "Help me. Sing. But not about Jesus."

Genny patted frantically at Hazel with her free hand and sang the first thing that came into her head. "'Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more, / Men were deceivers ever . . .'"

Hazel thrashed and writhed. "It's here! It's here!"

Bernese bore down, saying, "Push, you hear me? You better push."

Genny kept singing. "'One foot in sea and one on shore, / To one thing constant never . . .'"

Hazel was shaking her head but pushing anyway. Genny saw my head coming out, slick with blood and slime, and she paled and felt her head getting light. Hazel's death grip on her arm was the only thing keeping her upright. She closed her eyes, weaving herself back and forth, and sang, "'Then sigh not so, / But let them go, / And be you blithe and bonny; / Converting all your sounds of woe / Into hey nonny, nonny.'"

"It's crowning. Where is Stacia?" said Bernese. "Genny, get between her legs and catch this baby."

But Genny had reached her limit. "Hey nonny, nonny," she sang with her eyes squinched tight.

Stacia came in from the kitchen with a pan of hot water and clean dish towels, scissors, and string. She set them down and knelt between Hazel's legs as the next contraction hit.

Hazel pushed as Bernese bore down on her abdomen, and my head came out of her. I arrived faceup, staring into the light with my eyes open and angry. It seemed to Stacia that I was staring up

at her. My eyes were puffed almost shut, slitted, but she thought my gaze was meeting hers. I looked aware to her, so angry and alive. My face was framed by the darkness that was eating the edges of her vision, and in that moment there were only the two of us. Not even Hazel existed.

Stacia dipped a finger into my mouth to clear it. As she did so, my eyebrows lowered and my lips opened wider. I looked like I was squalling, but it was airless and silent, my body still compressed inside Hazel. As Stacia stared at me, I spun slowly in the birth canal, rotating, turning facedown. Stacia cradled my forehead in her rough palm as another contraction hit. I came slithering out, slick as a fish into her waiting arms.

“Is it done? Is it done?” Hazel said.

“I think so, honey,” said Genny, peeking. The skin around her eyes and mouth had turned green. “Oh please, please, I think it’s over.” Stacia looked across Hazel’s prone body, and her eyes met Genny’s. Genny signed one-handed, *Boy? Girl?*

Stacia slid her thumb down the side of her right cheek.

“A girl,” said Genny, rocking herself and nodding. “That’s good. That’s not scary. Look, you have a sweet little girl.”

“My cooter hurts,” said Hazel.

Stacia stayed where she was, holding me with the cord trailing down into Hazel.

“Is it out?” asked Hazel. “Why is it coming again?”

“Again?” Genny squawked.

“It won’t be half so hard this time,” said Bernese to both of them, and she leaned down and grasped the cord, easing out the afterbirth as Hazel contracted. Genny shut her eyes and started singing again, “Hey nonny, nonny, so weep no more, my