

Book Three in the Mended Vessels Series



The Secret Heart



Marie Wells Coutu

The Secret Heart

© 2016 Author

ISBN-13: 978-1-944120-06-1

ISBN-10: 1-944120-06-8

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the publisher.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any similarity to actual people and/or events is purely coincidental.

Published by Write Integrity Press, 2631 Holly Springs Parkway, Box 35, Holly Springs, GA 30142.

www.WriteIntegrity.com

Printed in the United States of America.

Chapter One

The sun should not be shining. Not on this day.

From the front row of folding chairs, Shawna Wilson could see acres of manicured grass. The tent overhead and the chair covers matched the deep green turf. Flat stones marched across the ground in symmetry, each one reflecting the rays of the sun. In vases atop the markers, bouquets of spring flowers glistened in yellow and red and purple. Sparrows flitted about and robins chirped their annual “all is new” song.

But this day was not about new life. It was about death.

Shawna sat numbly as the preacher read the Twenty-third Psalm. *The valley of the shadow of death.* That’s where she was. Again.

Maybe if she had stayed on those paths of righteousness he mentioned, she wouldn’t be walking this road of grief. But it was too late to turn back.

She clinched her hands into fists and forced them to rest unmoving on her lap.

Hunter reached over and gently covered both of them with one strong hand. She couldn’t look at her husband now, so she focused on the row of trees at the end of the drive. Beyond

them, cars sped along the divided highway, people shopped at the mall, and normal life continued. For everyone else.

Behind her, someone coughed. On Hunter's other side, his two young boys, Hunter Lynn and Cooper, squirmed. Thank goodness their grandmother Mimi could keep them in line. Heaven knew Shawna couldn't handle a nine-year-old and seven-year-old, especially boys.

Her two older sisters sat somewhere behind her, their presence a comfort even if their persistent prayers had failed.

Two men in black suits and crisp white shirts rose and took their places at each end of the gaping black hole. One turned the crank, setting the contraption in motion. Metal scraped against metal as the shiny black coffin disappeared into the ground. The box was small. Too small. Tiny, in fact.

A third man, the funeral director, gestured to her. Time to say good-bye. Hunter stood and grasped her arm. Shawna rose automatically from her chair as if a puppet master were pulling her strings.

She lifted a perfect pink rose from the flower blanket that had covered the casket. Thorns pricked her fingers as she held the blossom to her nose and inhaled the rich fragrance, just as she had inhaled the sweet smell of her newborn two weeks ago.

"Good-bye, precious Hannah," she whispered, tossing the long-stemmed rose onto the sinking casket. Hunter copied her motion.

Marie Wells Coutu

He squeezed her elbow then tucked his hand against her back. “Ready?” he murmured.

No. She would never be ready. She could not walk away from her baby girl. She watched the box lowering deeper and deeper into the earth. She hoped Hannah Lea would not be afraid of the dark.

Only when the coffin was settled did she take her eyes off of it and nod. She turned and pressed against Hunter. He wrapped his arms around her, and she leaned her head on his sturdy shoulder. She took deep breaths, fighting the sobs that hovered just below the surface. Crying wouldn’t change reality. After a few moments, she allowed Hunter to guide her out from under the canopy, out of the section formed by low hedges.

Perhaps burying Hannah Lea in the middle of that cross-shaped area meant she was in the arms of Jesus, as Shawna’s sisters assured her. But her spirit wondered whether there was any truth to the beliefs she’d held all her life.

She could hear rustling and low voices, a sign that the small crowd of mourners was following them to the line of black limousines waiting under the Bradford pear trees. As they walked down the steps to the drive, a light breeze picked up the sour odor of death from the fallen white blossoms and sprinkled it over the procession.

Their friends and staff members had shared hugs and sentiments with them at the cemetery chapel before the graveside service. There was nothing left to do now but go

home.

Shawna's heel caught on a broken piece of cement. She lurched into Hunter, who caught her and kept her upright.

The rapid click of cameras came from the crowd of reporters and gawkers that had gathered behind temporary barriers near the cars. Questions tumbled from the reporters, one on top of another.

Shawna had not asked for this constant scrutiny, and she especially hated it today. Even during national collegiate tennis tournaments, she had preferred to turn media attention to her teammates and coaches. When she chose to marry Hunter, she hadn't realized how high the price would be. The only privacy she could find anymore was behind the iron fence of the ten-acre estate she now called home.

At this minute, that's where she wanted to be—in the second-floor private quarters of the Georgian mansion. Where she could get out of the black linen dress and crawl into the king-size bed. Maybe she would never wake up.

She put her hand on Hunter's arm as they hurried for the first vehicle in line. Then she heard the shouted question, the one that burned to be answered.

“Governor, will this tragedy affect your reelection campaign?”

Tennessee Governor Hunter Wilson stopped and turned in the direction of the reporters. He held up a hand. “Please, give us privacy today. We've just buried our daughter.”

Marie Wells Coutu

Of course he would drop out of the race. Shawna needed him at home with her and the boys, not off traveling the state campaigning. She wouldn't mind moving into a modest home when his current term ended. He could always go back to teaching.

Their driver, a state trooper wearing a black suit with a lapel pin, opened the rear door of the black Crown Victoria.

Out of the corner of her eye, Shawna saw a tall, slim woman with long black hair stride toward the barriers. Johnnie Allen, Hunter's long-time campaign manager, who seemed to consume all of his time these days.

"The governor will resume his schedule in the next few days," Shawna heard before she slid into the back seat. She sank onto the cool leather, grateful that Mimi and the boys would ride separately in the Ford Escalade behind them.

Hunter put one arm around her shoulders. With his other hand, he brushed a wisp of hair away from her cheek. His lazy eyelid half-hid his left eye, but he studied her with his green gaze as he had at their first meeting nearly a year ago. "You okay?"

She leaned her head against the hard bone of his forearm. "Not really."

He picked up a bottled water from the cup holder, unscrewed the top, and handed it to her. She drank, the lukewarm, tasteless water flowing down her throat without refreshing her.

The cars moved along the drive, past the gravesites of the likes of George Jones, Porter Wagoner, and Tammy Wynette. Strange that Shawna's baby girl would be buried among so many country music legends, including Hunter's first wife. How had Shawna's life taken such a strange twist?

Network satellite trucks, and one small white car bearing the words "The Tennessean," lined both sides of Memorial Gardens drive. Cameramen filmed Shawna and Hunter's SUV leaving the cemetery then scrambled into their vehicles and followed them.

As they turned onto Interstate 65, Shawna closed her eyes, shutting out the Nashville traffic. But the voices in her head continued to whimper. Could she ever have a life that wasn't marred by the death of people she loved?

##

A decision about his campaign eluded Hunter on Monday as the black Escalade with tinted windows followed him and his running companion along the quiet streets away from the Executive Residence.

Dressed in blue nylon pants and a fitted white athletic shirt, Hunter could have passed for an ordinary businessman out for an early morning run. Except for the car creeping along behind him, its headlights pointing the way. No one would realize that his black running partner wearing an earbud was actually a state trooper.

When the trees no longer provided cover, a brisk wind

Marie Wells Coutu

amplified the effects of Hunter's two-week break. His heart thundered and he struggled for breath. He had needed to be there with Shawna and baby Hannah, as crushing as those days at the hospital had been. Hearing the doctor tell them their daughter's lungs had been contaminated during delivery. Holding the tiny pink bundle too briefly as she struggled to breathe. Reaching into the incubator to stroke her smooth head. Pleading with God not to punish his daughter for her parents' sins.

A bird circled to the west, a black spot in the brightening sky. A vulture? Perhaps, drawn to some remnant of roadkill over on Franklin Pike. Following the usual route, the two runners turned east toward Lipscomb Academy where Hunter Lynn and Cooper went to school.

The boys had been so excited about having a sister. They didn't know her death was their father's punishment. He hoped they would never know, that his actions would stay firmly buried in the past.

Time to focus on the future.

"A lot on my mind this morning, Curtis. Not very good company." They had nearly reached the turnaround point, and they hadn't exchanged more than five words. Hunter's breathlessness betrayed how out-of-shape he really was.

The trooper, taller than Hunter's even six-feet, managed to match Hunter's pace, no matter if he sprinted or strolled. And he could talk as he ran, without gasping for breath like Hunter.

“Ah don’t mind, Governor. Gives me a chance to think about the paper Ah have to write.” Curtis Woods’ southern drawl was more pronounced than Hunter’s, a reflection of his coming-up years in South Carolina.

In sync, the two men navigated the drive in front of the school then cut across the grass back to the street. The trail car would rejoin them at the street corner.

Hunter nodded. “What’s the paper about?” Curtis, who pastored a small inner-city church in his spare time, was taking seminary courses online. He often talked about his coursework during their runs together.

“This course on First and Second Samuel is the toughest yet. I’m supposed to write about the allure of power, comparing another prominent figure to Saul.”

“Shouldn’t be hard to find examples.” Hunter had seen the hunger for power ruin men that he had respected, in academia as well as in politics.

Curtis grunted his agreement. “My problem is deciding which one to use. I’m fascinated by some of the British kings, but there are many modern-day examples, too. Not just grasping for power, but the abuse of it. Entertainers, sports figures, even preachers.” He glanced sideways at Hunter. “And politicians.”

Hunter stepped on a rock he hadn’t noticed and skipped a step. “Yeah, I guess every occupation has some bad seeds.”

They turned through the wide gate in the iron fence

Marie Wells Coutu

surrounding the Executive Residence and ran up the curving drive to the three-story brick-and-stone house. While the trail car parked, Curtis followed Hunter around to the side and in through the family entrance. Hunter still had not decided about his reelection bid, but before he took his shower, he called Johnnie and asked her to come over to discuss the campaign.

As the vibrating spray massaged his back, he thought about his accomplishments as governor: the new Japanese auto assembly plant with its five thousand jobs, increased funding for roads and bridges without even a penny in higher taxes, and more innovation in state government.

But several important measures still needed to be accomplished. Like funding technology for schools, so all children had the same opportunities. And attracting a research facility that would add jobs and find cures for cancer.

So much more to do to help the citizens of his state. He wanted—no, he needed—to get back to work, both at the Capitol and on the campaign trail. With another four years as governor, he could make even more of an impact.

Twenty minutes later, he rubbed his short hair dry with a thick towel as he came out of the bathroom. Shawna lay on the king-size bed, curled into a ball just as when he left for his run. Her eyes were closed, but he knew she was awake. Her long brown hair spread like a pheasant's fan across the pale green pillowcase. He sat down next to her and ran his finger along her hairline where it framed her face. The tan she'd had when

they married had faded over the winter, stolen by limited outdoor time during the last months of her pregnancy.

“Honey?” He bent down and kissed her cheek, breathing in the aura of sadness that enveloped her. “Want some breakfast?”

“I’m not hungry.” Her words were muffled, her lips barely moving.

He moved his hand to her back, trying to rub strength into her. “You need to eat something. I think the chef’s letting Mimi make pancakes and sausage with the boys.”

She pulled in a deep breath. “I couldn’t eat anything.”

He sensed her shivering, though she couldn’t possibly be cold under the layers of blankets. She had been behaving this way since Hannah died last Tuesday, getting out of bed only to plan and attend the funeral. “Will you at least sit with me while I eat? Johnnie’s coming over to talk about the campaign, and I’d like to know your thoughts.”

She opened her eyes. Cold, hollow ovals glared at him. “The campaign? You’re going to drop out, right?”

Her question that wasn’t a question irritated Hunter. He stood and strode to the closet. “I don’t see why I should.”

Shawna pushed back the blankets and sat up, scooting to the edge of the bed. She reached for her bathrobe. “After all we’ve been through these last couple of weeks, I just thought ...”

She wanted him to pull out of the race, to hide from the

Marie Wells Coutu

public like she was doing. Had been doing for two weeks. Not a chance. “I’ve got a job to do. I’ve got things I want to accomplish for this state, important things that won’t get done if I don’t get reelected.”

“Really?” She shrugged into her robe and shuffled to the bathroom. “And I thought your family was important.” She shut the door, closing down any rebuttal.

Hunter shook his head. People reacted to grief differently, but he wished Shawna would cry and scream rather than carrying on in such a passive-aggressive manner. Maybe she needed to talk to their pastor.

Hunter finished dressing and left the bedroom, closing the door quietly behind him.

As he neared the bottom of the family’s private stairwell, he heard Mimi and the boys in the commercial kitchen, Mimi giving instructions on how to mix the batter. Having been married to an army general for twenty-two years, she ran a household with military precision, something he had appreciated when he was a single father. She even looked the part, keeping her silvery hair cropped short and tidy. But hidden beneath the disciplined exterior was a soft heart, especially for her grandchildren. If only she would give Shawna the same respect she expected.

When he entered the kitchen, Cooper was pouring flour into a bowl, and Hunter Lynn stood on the other side of Mimi, watching the link sausages sizzling in an iron skillet.

“Somebody knows how to start a Monday morning off right.” He crossed the sun-filled room and put his arms around Cooper and Mimi. Wouldn’t be long before Cooper would be as tall as his five-foot-two grandmother. He had obviously inherited Hunter’s stature, not his mother’s. “You’re being a good helper, aren’t you, Coop?”

“Yeah, Dad.” Grinning, Cooper moved a long-handled wooden spoon in a random pattern through the bowl, splattering batter onto the counter. “I’m gonna make Teddy-bear pancakes.”

“Teddy-bear pancakes huh?” Hunter ruffled his son’s hair. White-blond like his mother’s. “Can’t wait.”

He turned to Hunter Lynn. “Looks like you’ve got the piggies well under control, son.”

Hunter Lynn used a spatula to push the sausage links around. He shrugged. “They’re not alive, Dad.”

Hunter laughed. “Good thing. I don’t eat raw pork. Mimi, Johnnie’s coming over to talk about the campaign. Is there enough for her?”

“Hunter Wilson, you ought to know you don’t even have to ask. I’ll set another place.” She opened the cabinet and took out a plate. “What about Shawna? Will she be eating?”

He couldn’t answer that question, and the jangle of the bell gave him an excuse. “That should be Johnnie.” He left the kitchen and went to greet his campaign manager.

Shawna joined them just as they were sitting down to eat.

Marie Wells Coutu

She appeared to have showered, and she had wrapped her wet hair into a tight bun. Her lips turned up in a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Hey, Johnnie. You here to take my husband on the road again?"

Shawna sniggered as if she was joking, but Hunter cringed. If she was going to argue with Johnnie, he didn't want the boys to hear. "Why don't we eat? Then we can talk afterward."

As soon as the boys finished, Hunter told them they could go to the room they shared and play the X-Box. He wasn't sorry they would have one more day off school due to a teacher workday. Even if they didn't show it, the boys needed time to grieve over their half-sister just like he and Shawna did.

"Yeah!" Hunter Lynn gave Cooper a high-five.

As soon as they were out of the room, Hunter turned to Johnnie. "When can we get back out there? How much has this time off hurt us?"

"We had to cancel several events the last couple of weeks." She rose to retrieve her briefcase. Taking out a manila folder, she returned to her seat. "Governor, we have had to pass on some good opportunities, but we've got six months before the buzzer. And voters are rooting for you, even if they weren't your fans before." A former basketball star and coach for the University of Tennessee, she often used sports terminology in conversations.

Shawna set her cup on her saucer with a clunk. She had

eaten nothing, but was working on her fourth or fifth cup of coffee. “Seriously? Are you saying that losing our daughter will help Hunter’s campaign because it gets sympathy?”

“Shawna, please—”

“It’s okay, Governor.” Johnnie used both hands to gather her long, straight hair into a bunch at her neck then released it and looked directly at Shawna. “That’s not what I meant, Mrs. Wilson. I’m sorry if I sound insensitive. Just stating the facts as I see them.”

Hunter reached over and placed his hand over Shawna’s where it lay on the table. “Let’s stay focused, honey. Johnnie’s here to help.”

Shawna turned her hand over and clasped his. “I just don’t think Hannah’s death should be used as a campaign tactic.”

“It won’t be. I assure you. Right, Johnnie?”

“Agreed. It’s out of bounds.” Johnnie opened the folder and looked at Hunter. “There is an event scheduled for Wednesday that I haven’t canceled yet. You could start a full-court press to gain grassroots support for Teaching Through Tech.”

The General Assembly had adjourned in mid-April, again without including funding in the appropriations bill for computers in classrooms. “What’s the group?”

She pushed a sheet of paper across the table. “It’s a Parent Teacher Organization meeting in Black Rock. That’s in Randall County, eastern part of the state.”

Marie Wells Coutu

He picked up the letter from the group's president inviting him to speak at their annual meeting. "Will they support it?"

Johnnie drained the last of her coffee. "To be honest, I don't know. It's a mining town. The computer bill has been a hard sell in that part of the state. I think it's an opportunity for them to hear straight from you about why this initiative is important."

Mimi stood. "Sounds like a nice, quiet event to get you back into the campaign. I'll get you some more coffee." She took Johnnie's cup and went into the kitchen.

"But Wednesday?" Shawna leaned her arms on the table. "That's day after tomorrow. Does he really need to go back out so soon?"

Hunter appreciated his wife's need for him, but he couldn't sit around all day holding her hand. "I'm the governor, Shawna. The people are paying me, and this is an important issue. I've been working on this for three years."

"It's a campaign speech, Hunter." She pushed away from the table but stayed in her chair. "The bill won't come up again until next spring. It's not like you won't have other opportunities."

Mimi entered, carrying Johnnie's coffee. She glanced at Shawna then looked at Hunter. She set the cup in front of Johnnie. "I think it's a good idea. These are ordinary folks, not high-dollar donors. Show them you want to hear what they think." She picked up Johnnie's empty breakfast plate then her

own. “Seems like the ideal way to give your campaign a reboot.”

“But we haven’t even decided if you’re going to continue your campaign.”

“Why wouldn’t he continue?” Mimi set the plates down and put her hands on her hips, reminding Hunter of a Doberman facing an attacker. “If he quits now, he’ll throw away his political career and any chance of being president.”

He loved that Mimi still believed in him, even after he failed her daughter. But he didn’t need her to defend him against his new wife. “I told you this morning, Shawna.” He spoke like he would to a child. “I don’t see any reason to drop out of the campaign. There’s still a lot I want to do for Tennessee, and winning re-election is my best chance to see it through.”

Shawna stood and glared at him. The hurt in her eyes pierced his soul, but she didn’t speak.

Johnnie had been looking at her phone. She cleared her throat. “The meeting is at five their time, Governor. You could leave after lunch and be home by about seven p.m. Seven - thirty at the latest.”

The dual time zones worked in his favor this time. He stood and faced Shawna, reached out and rubbed her arms. “You see? I’ll be home before the kids go to bed.”

“Fine. I guess the people of Tennessee are more important than I am.” She moved away from him and left the room. His

Marie Wells Coutu

heart pounding in his ears almost drowned out the sound of her feet running up the stairs.

Johnnie sat waiting with one thin eyebrow arched more than usual. Her narrow eyes studied him. “Game on?”

Hunter nodded. Shawna had married a sitting governor; after seven months, she should be used to his traveling. “Let’s go for it.”

Thank you for reading this sample chapter of
The Secret Heart.

Find Marie's books on her [Amazon page](#).



Look for other books by



www.WriteIntegrityPress.com