



THE DISTANT SHORE

by

Debora M. Coty

Excerpt from *The Distant Shore*

Chapter 6

They arrived at the cabin just as the roiling clouds began to boil over. The sheer volume of the storm made Emma-Lee fight the impulse to hide beneath her aunt's bed. She ventured out of her closet-bedroom and was amazed to find Aunt Augusta sitting beside the open parlor window, lesson book forgotten in her lap as thunder claps split the air and spectacular lightning bolts zigzagged over the river.

Emma-Lee marveled at the wide-eyed awe and pleasure that passed over Aunt Augusta's face. She seemed to forget anyone else was there, becoming so engrossed in the magnitude of the storm that she transformed into a different person. Her eyes came alive and her tense muscle relaxed. She looked ten years younger as she lifted her face to the cool breeze sweeping in through the window, ebbing as God's natural fireworks display moved south.

And then it was over. The transfiguration passed as quickly as the thunderstorm. She became Aunt Augusta again.

That night, as she had the two previous nights since she'd left home, Emma-Lee cried herself to sleep clasping her mother's handkerchief to her chest. She awakened every few hours, startled into consciousness by a recurring nightmare.

She was being abandoned at a strange train station and a huge black locomotive was pulling away from her, gathering steam as its shiny, metallic wheels churned faster and faster. She ran down the tracks in frantic pursuit, reaching, always reaching, screaming for the white-haired conductor to stop, but he sadly shook his head from the back steps as the train continued to pull farther away...

Breathing hard and pushing sweat-soaked hair out of her face, Emma-Lee rose from her closet pallet before dawn and tip-toed through Aunt Augusta's room and into the kitchen. She quietly slid the door bolt back and let herself onto the back porch, where she sat on the wooden steps and pulled her knees up under her chin.

Encircling her ankles with both arms and tenderly draping her mother's embroidered handkerchief across her knees as a pillow for her cheek, she gently rocked herself back and forth in the twilight before dawn. Loneliness welled up inside her and spilled out in a cascade of tears.

Her mind drifted back to a happier time—the family picnic back home at the Miami shore in June with Mama, Sarah, and her three brothers. The new baby, Nannie Mae, slept under the shade of a blanket stretched between two palm trees. Papa, as usual, was working at the newspaper office.

Everything had seemed so peaceful and *normal*, at least at first. They drank mason jars of fresh lemonade and ate the cheese and sourdough bread Mama had packed in the wicker basket. Archibald chased Michael and Dexter down the beach and left Emma-Lee lounging between Mama and Sarah on the white sand. As seagulls swooped overhead, the Palmer women sat silently gazing out to the horizon where no land was visible.

That was when Mama had said something strange, something that Emma-Lee would never forget.

“Can a woman ever reach the distant shore?”

She’d said it with sadness reflected in her face, such sadness that it reached into Emma-Lee’s heart and gripped her with a hollow fear.

What did it mean? What distant shore was Mama talking about?

Sarah and Mama exchanged looks over Emma-Lee’s head and then silently looked down at her upturned face.

Emma-Lee could see something amiss in Mama’s troubled hazel eyes but couldn’t understand what was wrong. Mama had been looking paler and thinner than ever since the baby was born in March. And those strange purple bruises had been appearing more often on her neck, their dark edges peeking above the high-collared, long sleeved dresses she always wore. She hardly smiled anymore and she never, ever sang.

Emma-Lee’s gaze shifted to Sarah, whose form now had filled out to become that of a lovely, young woman. Dear Sarah, whose strength she had always depended upon when the boys picked on her, or when that frightening, stony silence descended upon the house during the darkness of the *angry* nights. The nights after Papa had finished shouting at Mama and the sounds of things crashing no longer echoed from behind their bedroom door.

“What makes Papa so angry?” Emma-Lee would whisper to Sarah as they huddled together on the floor behind her bed. There was never an answer. Just a trembling hug.

But on that sunny, glorious, summer day at the shore, there was a look on Sarah’s face Emma-Lee could not interpret. Something about her eyes was so much like the look of the beautiful deer Emma-Lee had seen trying to escape hunters in the woods last fall.

Until Papa shot it dead.

A tear dripped onto Emma-Lee's hand as Sarah leaned across her little sister to drop her head into her mother's lap and cry. The three of them sat there like that, with Sarah's body stretched across Emma-Lee's as if to protect her from...what?

As Sarah lifted her hand to brush away a tear, Emma-Lee noticed four small, round purple marks on her underarm beneath her sleeveless swim dress. They looked like the fingerprints she'd left on the kitchen table after eating a bowl of blackberries. No one spoke as Mama stroked Sarah's head and Emma-Lee patted her back. Gestures of comfort for an unseen wound Emma-lee could not understand.

The compelling fragrance of honeysuckle drew her back to Merritt Island in the present. The stillness of the pre-dawn enveloped her. Her quivering body gradually relaxed as the sobs ebbed to gulps and then to sniffles. She felt as though she was listening, waiting . . .

Are you here, God? Are you really holding me in your loving arms like Captain Stone said? If you are, sir, can you please hold me tighter? I'm so afraid.

A soft glow, the promise of light breaking through the darkness, drew her eyes to the banks of the Banana River. She looked through the trunks of tall, straight Royal Palm trees that stood like sentinels guarding the rock-ledge river just as the sun began to peek above the horizon.

Shafts of sunlight sliced through the thin fog of early morning, beaming angles of misty light through the pointed, fan-shaped fronds of the saw-tooth palmettos growing along the banks. The throaty, trilling cries of a trio of gray Sand Hill cranes pierced the quiet dawn. Their vast, majestic wings beat a slow, rhythmic pattern as they swooped to a landing on the riverbank. The birds, two of them at least four feet tall, and the other half their size, gracefully roamed the river bank, the red swatches on their narrow heads reflecting daybreak sunrays like ruby crowns.

Emma-Lee remembered Sarah once telling her, as they observed a pair on the banks of the Miami River that Sand Hill Cranes mate for life and stay together as families until their baby birds mature enough to find their own mates. Watching the smaller, leggy bird standing close to its protective parents, she felt a searing blade of longing stab her heart. *They're a family. They have each other. God, if you're listening, I need a family, too. I'm so alone.*

As the sun ascended through lacy scallops of white clouds and bathed the island in dazzling light, Emma-Lee knew it was time to stop crying. It was a new day.