



ALL
that is
HIDDEN

A Novel

Laura DeNooyer-Moore

All That Is Hidden

Laura DeNooyer

CHAPTER 1

I always knew my father had a secret. I must have known it by the time I was old enough to recognize the embarrassed hush that fell over a room of grown-ups the moment I stepped in. That's back when folks still talked about it. As I grew older, the subject was conveniently ignored, then all but forgotten. But after fourth grade, the secret returned without invitation, and made its home with me like an unwelcome guest.

In 1968, I was ten and oblivious to changes outside my world. The radio and TV raged. The Vietnam War, hippies, flower children, assassinations, civil riots, and the space race all aroused anxiety in Americans frantically searching for answers—ones that Peter, Paul, and Mary said were “Blowing in the Wind.” But all of God's earth to my brother Nick and me were the streams for fishing, the fields for planting and harvesting, a world snugly enclosed by the blue-misted Smokies.

Other than the seasons, nothing ever changed. Until the summer referred to in major league baseball as “The Year of the Pitcher.” In our town, some folks called it “The Year of the Suicide Squeeze,” a high risk play at home plate. Currie Hill was never the same. Most blamed my father for that.

In my eyes back then, he was omnipotent and wise. So when I first saw him empty, I was afraid. But now, over thirty years later, I realize my father never tried to be a hero. Nor was he merely a victim of his silence. I guess I've grown up, for now I know wisdom and weakness sometimes walk hand in hand.

1968

My brother Nick and I raced home on our bikes, outdoing each other in our childish desire to be first as bearer of bad news. Gulping air, we dropped our bikes in the yard and stumbled over ourselves as we barreled through the kitchen door, Nick one step ahead of me. Unwilling to accept defeat, I shouted, "Marty's arm is broke!"

Mom, a streak of blue gingham whisking around the kitchen, stopped short and stared at us in dismay. "Marty Collier? How in the Sam Hill did that happen?"

"He was playing first base during scrimmage," Nick said in gasps. "He tried to catch an infield fly and crashed straight into the pitcher."

I filled in as he paused for breath. "Doc Kirby came and rushed him down to Asheville."

"That's awful!" Mom set plates on the table. "Is the pitcher okay?"

"Just a bruise. You shoulda seen it, Ma. Just like *that*." Nick smacked his hands like cymbals. "Soon as I heard the crack I knew it was gonna be bad."

"Hush now. Your father has company. Todd's here, too. Soon Marty'll be as strong as all-outdoors."

"Yeah, but our team's not," Nick said. "Marty's plumb out for the season, so we're one man short."

I sighed. "Those Grizzlies are jumping for joy already."

Hands on hips, Mom rolled her eyes. "If you two had even a lick of compassion, there'd be hope for the world."

"But we're both undefeated," Nick said. "We were fixing to face them for the league title till *this* happened."

Mom's dark hair contrasted her pale freckles that stood out prior to a reprimand. They darkened even as we stood there. "Spare me live martyrs."

Duly chastised, we slithered toward the front room. I tugged Nick's shirt. "Hey, *I* could take Marty's place."

Nick brushed my hand away. "You're a *girl*," he said as if pronouncing a sentence on me. "You can't even hit a barn."

"Not throwing, but with a bat I can hit the smallest tree in Hickory Notch. And I'm great at catching." Plus, I'd been their number one fan and scorekeeper. That should count for something.

In the front room, Dad stood with Phil Kepler and his son Todd. Dad's overalls, stained with field dirt, contrasted Mr. Kepler's pristine attire. Dad's brown eyes twinkled between weathered creases. With his face beard-covered, his eyes said everything.

Dapper Mr. Kepler held a briefcase and a tube of paper. His long-sleeved white shirt cast our walls to dingy gray. Crisp, pressed trousers defied all wrinkles. His broad cheeks were polished smooth and lustrous like Mom's copper teapot, no hint of a whisker.

Though Phil Kepler had visited town for four years and lived here for one, he was still a northerner. Rural folk with chameleon tendencies altered their speech to his, as with tourists. Phil and Dad were friends since their New York days, but after Phil bought a house and the Bear Wallow Inn, he rarely stopped by.

So I was surprised to see Phil Kepler here, practically luminous, the room getting drabber by the minute.

"Mr. Kepler's just back from New York City," Dad said, his usual southern drawl now seasoned with northern inflections.

"Did you go to a Yankees game?" Nick asked.

"Sure enough, and I got you a souvenir." Phil tossed him a set of baseball cards. Nick tore open the package. No Tigers, but power hitters, including Yastrzemski and Killebrew. Todd all but turned green. Nick would surely use them for bargaining power.

"Who needs the Yankees?" Dad ruffled Todd's hair. "I hope you're working on those curve balls, Todd. Nick's making predictions for the final Grizzlies-Wildcat game."

Mr. Kepler threw me a roll of Life Savers. I pocketed them to enjoy alone later.

Mom entered with a plate. "Homemade molasses cookies, straight from our cane patch." I was convinced she made molasses cookies more often than others because she loved the sound of the word *molasses* better than *oatmeal* or *sugar*. She was funny about words.

Our cocker spaniel, Paprika, a sprinkling of rust, scurried to Mom and waited in vain for a handout. Phil held up his hand. "This is a business call, Jennie."

Dad took a cookie. "No harm mixing pleasure with business. At least have a seat. It's just as cheap sitting as standing." He plopped on the sofa and stretched his legs, taking advantage of a rare afternoon break from working the fields.

Phil precariously settled into the threadbare chair, as if it would give way beneath him. “I’m full from lunch. Todd makes a mean tuna casserole.” Todd’s mother lived in New York, so he and his dad fended for themselves.

“Tuna casserole?” That didn’t sound southern to me.

“Tu-na-cass-er-ole.” Mom rolled the words on her tongue as if tasting them.

“A fancy northern dish with noodles, mushrooms, and cheese.” Dad winked. “So fancy even hogs turn their noses up at it.”

Sounded like a welcome change from fried pork, cornbread, collards, and grits.

Mom lured the boys into the kitchen with cookies. I stayed to listen, under guise of rummaging through the game shelf. What did Phil Kepler want? Was it news about the proposed theme park again?

Phil unclasped his briefcase and shuffled papers. “Drew, there’s more we can alter to make this park agreeable to both of us. With the council meeting vote five weeks away, I could use your influence, not to mention your vote.”

Dad laughed. “You just don’t give up. How can I convince you? My side’s on the integrity of this town.”

“The changes will strengthen its integrity, not weaken it.”

“You have a new angle? Will the park proceeds stave off starvation, wipe out big city street gangs, and provide cancer cures?” Dad munched his cookie.

“Come on, Drew. We had the time of our life on that project for Brown and Associates.” Chuckling, they recalled how they’d talked stodgy Mr. Brown into taking a financial risk by using innovative yet over-budget building designs. “That was great teamwork,” Phil said.

“Proving what a couple of desperadoes will do in a pinch. Our strategy trying to convince Brown was more ingenious than the designs.”

The laughter left Phil’s voice. “We could still be a great team, Drew.”

“Phil, building a park, another inn, and more stores is like putting a heater in the desert. We’ve got enough sightseers. I’d rather they stay down in Asheville.”

“This is less to stimulate tourist trade than for accommodating tourists we already have, and to provide jobs, especially for young people.”

“One won’t occur without the other. We’ve been through this.” Dad flipped pages in a book. “If I can’t persuade you, let the numbers do it.” He found a page and quoted statistics.

“More tourists will overwhelm us. Last year the Smokies and North Carolina had 6,500,000 of them. The Great Smoky National Park gets twice the number of visitors of any other park. Over a quarter of the people in the United States live within a day’s drive from here. Also, last year, North Carolina took in 647 million dollars just in the tourist industry.” Dad turned more pages. “And jobs? Last year in this state, 130 new industrial plants opened and 338 plants expanded facilities, creating 24,774 new jobs. Around 665,000 were employed in factories. We don’t need to top that.”

Was this how they talked in New York? I pulled out Yahtzee and Chinese Checkers, trying not to tip the tin box of marbles.

“I’ve done my homework, too, Drew, and the job problem hasn’t been solved yet.”

“Well, I don’t care to have a repeat of the Blue Ridge Parkway project. That supplied jobs and necessary revamping but built so many new roads that life here changed forever, the biggest change being the tourist draw. We’re not called the Good Roads State for nothing. And this park, to be successful, would warrant continued development.”

“The Parkway project is an unfair comparison.” Phil unrolled the tube of paper on the coffee table and pointed. “Besides, the theme park will complement, not destroy, the nature and heritage of these mountains, simultaneously improving the economy.”

Dad dismissed the drawing with a wave. “We’ll end up overcrowded with cheap souvenir shops and silly amusements. Investors will set up shop and exploit us. Fields and trees will be plowed over and we’ll be run by clocks and schedules.”

“Some things will be sacrificed, yes, but not without great reward. Think of all that land out there going to waste. We’ll make it more available to everybody—”

“And reap money from their pockets.” Dad leaned forward. “Is that how we measure the land’s value, by how many use it? By how much money we make from it?”

“Drew, you’re one of the finest members on this town council yet blind to the unemployment situation. Don’t put a bigger price on preserving that land than you do on people’s welfare.”

Cringing at Phil’s insinuations, I pulled out more games.

“That comment’s out of line,” Dad said.

“Look, when that whole rioting business blows over, both colored and whites alike can be served by this park. We could be a model town of progress, in both county and state. Your vehement opposition is unfair to those who are easily influenced by you.”

I lined up Parcheesi pawns to make sure they were all accounted for.

My father took a deep breath as if to compose himself, the way he did with me on the verge of rebuke. His pace slowed, his tone reasonable. “Phil, I don’t appreciate your inference. The list of cons outweighs the pros and I’m happy to pass that list along to any interested party. Not to mention, this is the south. Let’s face it. A park that serves both colored and whites alike isn’t going to be welcome.” Couch springs squeaked as he popped up and paced. “Even with all your Economics Research Associates feasibility studies, you’ve no guarantee of the park’s success.”

Not wanting to miss a thing, I pretended to debate between Scrabble and Dominoes.

Phil rustled more papers. “The same numbers you quoted earlier to prove that the tourist industry is alive and well are the same numbers that guarantee the park’s success.”

“But you can’t operate on idealism. Every attempt to mimic Disneyland’s success failed, a sure waste of resources. We don’t need a Disneyland duplicate.”

Disneyland? In January, one of the rare occasions Dad let us watch TV on Sunday, I saw an episode on *Walt Disney’s Wonderful World of Color* about the new Pirates of the Caribbean ride at Disneyland. It looked like fun. After Walt Disney presented a scale model of New Orleans Square, sculptors were shown creating Audio-Animatronic pirates, the brain child of Disney’s Imagineers. At the grand opening, pirates staged a victory at sea in the lagoon, then park guests took the ride accompanied by buccaneers singing “Yo Ho, A Pirate’s Life for Me.”

In the revitalized Tomorrowland, a man in an air suit somehow flew into the air and safely landed. Folks rode a sky highway through a tunnel that simulated shrinking to snowflake-size. During a film of a genuine rocket launch, men on the moon demonstrated effects of the moon’s lesser gravity by jumping around in slow motion. That last part was fake, of course. Nobody had ever been on the moon.

Disneyland seemed amazing--full of bands, rides, parades, fireworks, Mickey Mouse and his friends, and Tinker Bell’s flight. I hoped to go there sometime. But California might as well be in China. My family never traveled beyond Asheville.

And since Dad disapproved of a park in our town, it must be a bad thing.

Dad paused at the mantel where his carved wooden figures stood beside Mom's dulcimer. "I've seen what happened to the Cherokee tradition around here, adulterating real Indian crafts and customs. Something is lost when things go on display like museum pieces that tourists can walk by, point to, and remark how quaint it all is."

I stacked the games in order of priority.

Phil spoke as if delivering a diagnosis for terminal illness. "I'm sorry you've grown so opposed to progress."

"Progress?" Dad flung out his arms. "You mean marketing ourselves in order to be worthy? Is it progress to link our town to highways and big cities, the rat race, and rushing around? When kids wake up wondering who's going to beat them to the big job or the big salary? When they count money and positions instead of old-fashioned values and—"

"Baseball cards, Drew. Baseball cards and home runs. Kids can't stay sheltered. They've got to learn there's more to life than just a sandlot game. Besides, we're not cashing in small town values. We're introducing big town ideas for everyone's benefit. Now that's progress."

Maybe Phil had a good point. I re-stacked the games with Yahtzee on top.

"You may see the park as a ticket for that," Dad said. "But I see it as a one-way ticket from tranquility and plenty of things I never want my children to see."

Phil's voice sharpened, an arrow headed for its target. "Like what you did in New York?"

What happened in New York? I dropped the Chinese checkers box. An avalanche of marbles rolled, making as much ruckus--Uncle Ross would say--as skeletons wrestling on a tin roof.

Frowning, Dad glanced at me.

"It's a shame we can't work together anymore," Phil said. "I hoped there'd be a speck of the old you left."

Todd poked his head through the doorway. Nick followed him into the room. Both men exchanged looks as if realizing something had profoundly changed, then pulled themselves together as adults usually do when protecting children.

"I gotta get to baseball practice, Dad," Todd said.

"You sure do if you want to keep up with us Wildcats," Nick added. "We're counting on you-uns to make it to the final game."

"That'll be a game worth seeing," Phil said.

Dad chuckled. “Yes, but we all know there’s more to life than a sandlot game.”

Phil lifted his chin. “I’m sorry we can’t count on your support.”

When Phil stepped out the door, so did any hopes or worries about the park. Whatever this park was, it didn’t stand a chance. Dad would see to that. He had the annoying habit of always getting his way. But his wrinkled brow unsettled me.

Mom appeared. I thought she’d ask him about New York, but she said, “Why do you let him rile you so?” No answer. “Especially with such a longstanding friendship.”

Though Mom was Dad’s best audience, he hustled outside, his expression clearly stating that whatever lay buried inside him about his past, he intended to leave there, for now.

Later, I saw that moment as another chance he lost to tell us about those years, possibly circumventing the trouble to come.