

VISITING THE SINS



Melanie Denman

VISITING THE SINS *By Melanie Denman*

In her riotous debut novel, Melanie Denman probes the silent sacrifices of motherhood with unflinching honesty and warmhearted amusement. Set in the Bible Belt of Deep East Texas, *Visiting the Sins* is a darkly funny story about mothers and daughters, naked ambition, elusive redemption, and all the torment it's possible to inflict in the name of family.

Down through the decades, the lofty social aspirations of the feisty but perennially dissatisfied Wheeler women — Pokey, the love-starved, pistol-packing matriarch; Rebanelle, the frosty former beauty queen turned church organist; and Curtis Jean, the backsliding gospel singer — are exceeded only by their unfortunate taste in men and a seemingly boundless capacity for holding grudges. A legacy of feuding and scandal lurches from one generation to the next with tragic consequences that threaten to destroy everything the Wheeler women have sacrificed their souls to build.

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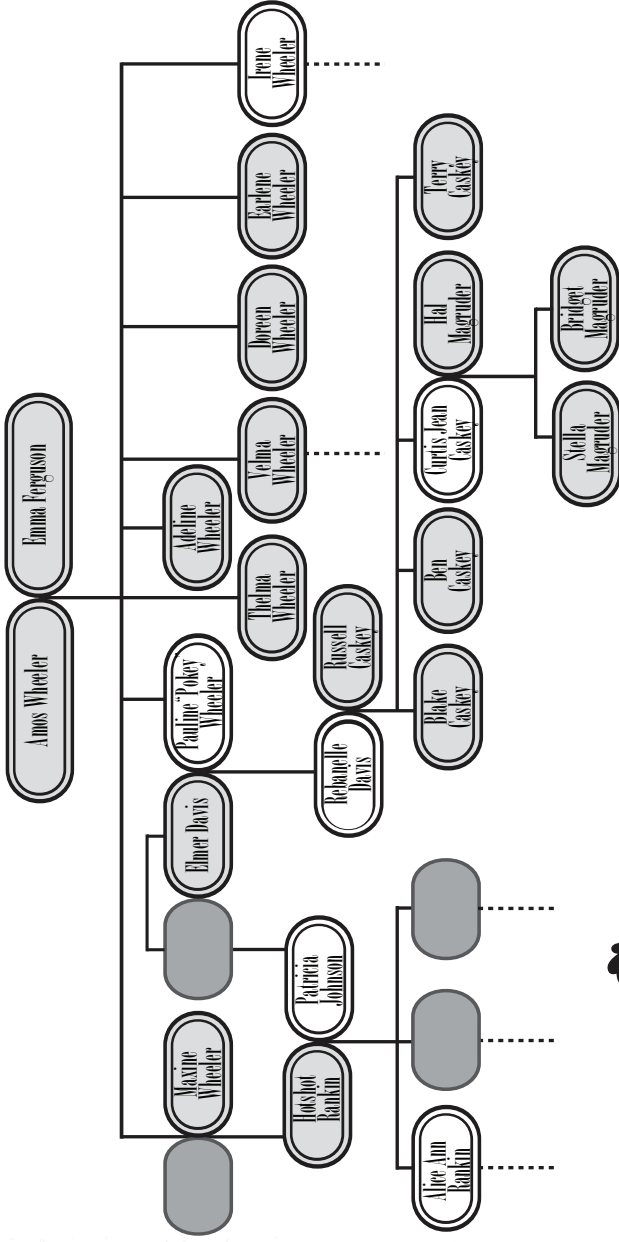
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For my parents, Baker and Frankie Denman

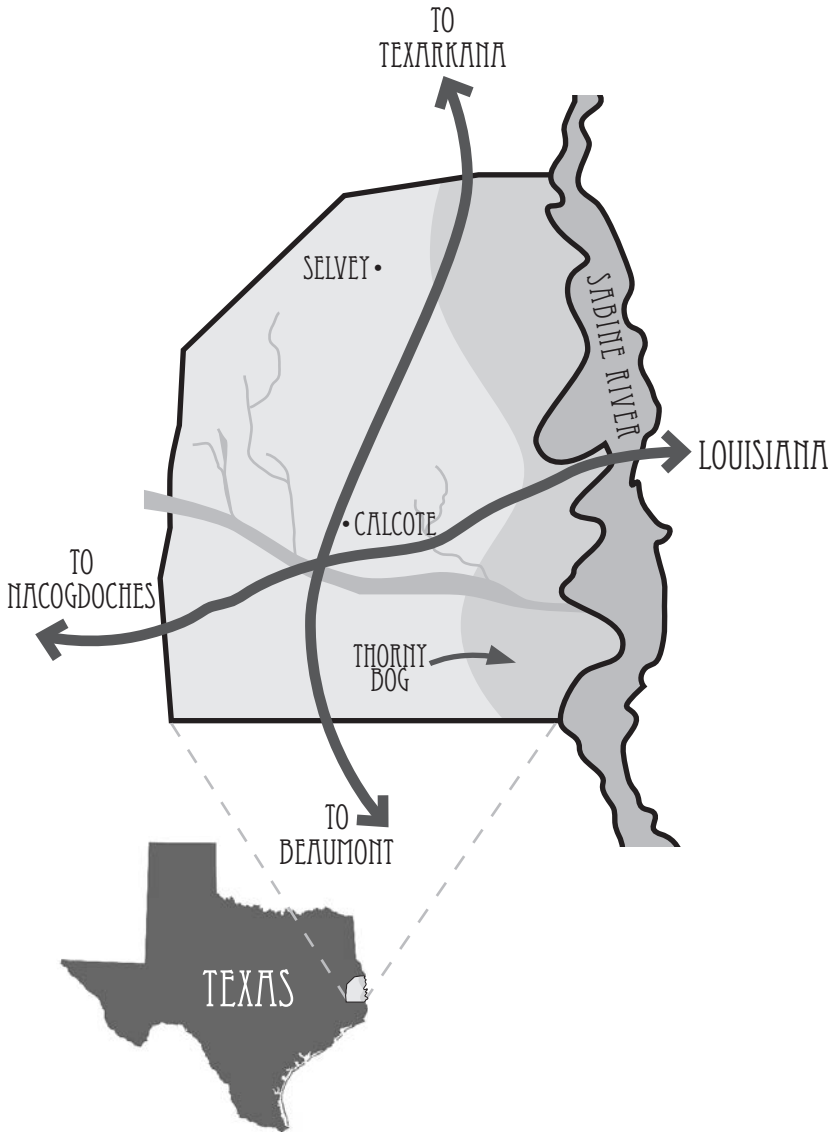


 Narrator
 Presidents Not Listed
KEY


**WHEELER
FAMILY TREE**

CALCOTE COUNTY, TEXAS

(cal•CUT•ta)



*“That were a kind of bastard hope, indeed:
so the sins of my mother should be
visited upon me.”*

– WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *The Merchant of Venice*

PROLOGUE

Good evening, Heartspring ladies! Thank you so much for that warm welcome. My goodness, these spotlights are bright! Makes it hard to see your lovely faces.

My name is Curtis Jean Caskey, and I am so glad you're here tonight.

Right off the bat, I want to make sure you realize that I'm nothing like the other speakers you've heard at the conference today. I don't believe I've ever in my life seen a more inspiring, accomplished line-up of women, have you? Yes indeed, they are truly the kind of women we all aspire to be. But I'm here, with you, tonight, precisely because I'm not that kind of woman.

Everybody sins, don't they? Of course they do. But there's sins, and then there's Sin, with a capital S. The hard-headed, habitual kind. That's my kind of sin, girlfriends.

You may know who I am, if you listen to Christian music. I sing every Sunday morning at Gateway Fellowship in Houston, broadcast on channel seven. Tonight is my eighteenth appearance as a guest speaker at Heartspring Ministries Women's Conferences. I accepted Jesus as my Lord and savior when I was seven years old. I've been lost and found several times since then, but for some mysterious reason, the devil won't let up on me. Hell must be short on throaty altos, that's all I can figure, because that rascal shows back up every cotton-picking day of my life, wearing a different disguise.

Some days he's a fine-looking, sweet-talking man, full of big

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promises. Other days, he's just a voice out there in the dark somewhere, telling me I'm worthless and everything's hopeless and I might as well just put a bullet through my head, like my daddy did.

Most of the time, though, The Enemy shows up in an amber bottle with a black label on it. He's smoky warm and syrupy smooth. A real charmer, Satan is. Father of Lies. He always promises that he and I are going to have us a big time, and that nothing can hurt me anymore, and that I'll never be scared or lonely again. And I know he's lying, but I've fallen for it anyway, more times than I like to admit.

I've learned that the only way to stop myself from falling for the devil's lies is to keep on telling this story. To remind myself of all the hilarious fun the devil and I have shared over the last forty years. We've sure had ourselves a party. Quite a few parties, actually.

Of course the party always ends, and then I wake up in a filthy pit of shame and despair, asking myself, How in the hell did I get here? What are all those flashing lights? Why are those men yelling at me through a bullhorn? Why am I strapped down to the bed?

Where are my children?

These are the things I have to remember.

These are the things I drink to forget.

CURTIS JEAN

I could have forgiven Mama for every hateful word she said at the cemetery, if she just hadn't drug the dog into it. What is it about hogs and dogs that brings out the devil in people? The Mother's Day sermon from Proverbs was still fresh in my mind. Not the usual one about the virtuous woman, it was the one about keeping the laws of thy mother tied about thy neck. Like a noose. The Bible doesn't come right out and say like a noose, of course, but it doesn't have to. 'Honor thy mother' is a commandment. That's what we were doing at the cemetery.

Mother's Day was our first time back at Mt. Moriah Cemetery since the big funeral. Spanish moss hung in weepy hanks from gnarled oak trees and the air buzzed with the songs of mosquitoes and horse-flies and crickets. I lugged the hoe and the fire ant poison. Mama carried a foil-wrapped pot of pure white roses. If she had been wearing a crown on top of that finely frosted head, she would have looked like the beauty queen she was in her glory days, more than fifty years ago. I looked like a sweaty field hand by comparison.

The cemetery visit was her idea. We were on the way home from an after-church buffet lunch when she mentioned it. "I guess we could take some flowers out to the cemetery, if you don't think it's too hot."

It was too hot, and I had distracted myself from Mama's lunchtime chirpiness by eating the filling out of two slices of

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coconut pie. This was Mother's Day in the land where Jesus is Lord, however, so we did have a duty. Besides, poor Mama is an only child, and everything always falls on an only child, even when that child is seventy years old and all her folks are dead and gone.

It turned out that Mama had already bought flowers and loaded the trunk with the necessary implements, so before I could think of an excuse, we were trudging up the crusty ruts of the country cemetery in our high heels and church dresses. Along with a dozen or so other Mother's Day pilgrims, Mama and I worked our way through the maze of crudely engraved headstones, all clustered together into tight little clans of Johnsons and Hightowers, Sykeses and McKnights. As we approached the Sykes section, Mama registered a couple of weedy patches with a sniff and a sweep of the tongue across her front teeth. "Figures," she muttered, lifting her chiseled chin just a notch and stomping right over the graves of half a dozen Sykeses on her way to the Wheeler section. I glanced over my shoulder, hoping the living Sykeses were too heathen to bring flowers to the cemetery on Mother's Day. And so far, it looked like they were.

Finally we stopped. I slapped a mosquito on my elbow and flicked it away as Mama stared at the only headstone in the entire graveyard with jumbo size wind chimes dangling over it.

PAULINE ELIZA WHEELER POLK

"POKEY"

PRECIOUS MEMORIES

JUNE 18, 1915 – NOVEMBER 12, 1999

A wilted bouquet of spring flowers lay propped against it. Someone had placed them there carefully, sweetly.

"I wonder who in the world put those flowers there," Mama said.

"A devoted husband, probably," I said with a sly smile and a wiggle of my eyebrows.

"All her husbands are dead."

"Except for one."

"Ugh, don't remind me." Mama shuddered and quickly busied herself securing the pot of roses to the ground and yanking up weeds from around the headstone. I set about leveling a basketball-sized fire ant bed near the foot of the grave. By the time I looked around for the ant poison, the wilted spring bouquet was lying discarded in the weed pile.

"Curtis Jean, can I ask you a serious question?" Mama dabbed tiny beads of perspiration from her face with the lace handkerchief she kept tucked in her brassiere. "Have you ever wanted to kill me?"

I finished sprinkling a tablespoon of poison in a curvy pattern over a colony of frenzied fire ants, then I straightened up and smiled at Mama, clearing my throat. She was not looking for the truth.

"Not that I can remember," I said, deliberately casual. "But at my tenth birthday party? When you jumped in the pool, hairdo and all, because you thought that spastic Taylor kid was drowning? And red hair dye ran out all behind you and everybody started screaming because they thought it was blood? I wanted to kill myself."

Mama ignored my attempt at levity and stared hard at Pokey's headstone. "I thought about killing her. My own mother. After that stunt she pulled in Las Vegas? I'd have done it. Swear to Pete."

"Really?" I said, searching her eyes. "How?"

She chewed ever so lightly on her lip, then cocked her head to the side and looked at me like I had jarred her awake.

"What?"

"I just wondered, you know, how you would have killed her. Sliced her throat or what?"

"Oh, with all those pills she took? It would have been so, so easy." Her voice quivered and her hands shook as she folded the foil from the flower pot into ever-smaller squares.

"I have these nightmares, where I'm walking into the living room and Mother's sitting there in her recliner, looking at

me? All of a sudden, I feel a snake crawling on my foot. I kick it away but then another one's crawling up the back of my blouse. Before you know it, there's snakes everywhere. Under the chairs, all over the piano, dangling from the lights.

"And I'm in a panic, knocking them away but more of them just keep coming and coming and snapping at me from every direction. And there's Mother. Sitting there laughing away, like it's all a big old joke. I wake up in a cold sweat with my heart racing, and when I realize it's just a dream I'm so relieved I could cry. But Lordy mercy, I swear, sometimes it makes me want to get in the car and drive all the way out here in the middle of the night, just to make sure she's still dead."

"Well," I pointed out, "Daddy's grave hasn't lost a blade of grass in thirty-two years and Harold Elwood saw him in a bar in Puerto Vallarta last summer. So you never know."

Mama rolled her eyes. She had personally scrubbed Daddy's brains off the boathouse wall, so he was not likely gallivanting around Old Mexico.

"You know what hurt me the most?" she said. "When she was sick the second time and she told everybody I stole all her money and gypped her out of her house. Her own daughter! And there I was paying God knows how much for round-the-clock nurses, out of my own pocket mind you, and cleaning up her vomit and hauling her pathetic behind to every quack pain doctor in East Texas. And she tells people I stole her money."

Mama's face started turning red.

"And you know what's so pitiful? Till the very day she died, I believed in my heart she was going to wake up one day and tell me she knew I wouldn't steal from her."

She suddenly patted her hair to make sure it hadn't collapsed in the humidity.

"But she never did. Never said she was sorry. Never told anybody she lied. Just up and died, and now I've got to walk around here the rest of my life with people thinking I stole from my own mother!"

"Nobody believes that, Mama," I said. And that was true.

"But you know they wonder." She pointed her finger at my face and I didn't argue with her this time, because then I would have to tell her that there were plenty of things people wondered about Rebanelle Caskey. Whether she was a thief just wasn't one of them.

We stood there in silence for a minute after that, staring down at the headstone, both of us weighed down with memories. I could still see old Pokey, all dolled up with her blue-black beehive and white cowboy boots, zipping off to the honky-tonk in her canary-yellow Chevy.

Back when we were little kids, Pokey used to sneak off behind Mama's back and take me and my little brother for rides, all three of us up in the front seat with no seat belts. Her favorite thing was to get out on the open highway and floor it up to about seventy-five miles an hour, and then slam on the brakes as hard as she could. The tires would smoke and screech and our little faces would slam into the dashboard. There was always blood from a busted lip or nose, and Pokey would pull over on the side of the road and we would all hoot and laugh until tears rolled down our faces and we nearly wet our britches.

I picked up the hoe, thinking we might head home to some air-conditioning, but Mama didn't take the hint.

"Well I'll tell you what," she said, brightening up a little. "When I'm gone, I don't want y'all traipsing out to the cemetery with flowers on every holiday and birthday like I've done. It's too much trouble."

A trickle of sweat and moisturizer slipped into my eye and I blinked furiously to make it stop stinging. Mama inserted a thumb and forefinger back down into her bosom.

"I mean it," she insisted, thrusting the hankie at me. "After I'm gone, y'all just forget about me. Let bird doo get all over my headstone till you can't see my name and people forget I ever walked on this earth."

The prospect of bird doo piling up on her gravestone

caused Mama's mouth to twitch, and suddenly, she wasn't lovely any more. She was old and tired and bitter. Her lips curled themselves up into a cold little smile-like position that caused my fingers to draw up tight around the hoe handle.

"I know you don't care what happens to me, or how I feel," she said, holding her lips just so, "but I want you to know that I am not up to raising another teenager."

I suppressed an eye roll and forced a smile instead. It must have nearly killed her to do it, but Mama had held her tongue for over two hours after I stood up before the congregation at the end of the Mother's Day church service and announced that I planned to regain custody of my teenage daughter, Bridget. I had given her up in the divorce without a fight, ten years ago, to save her from turning out like me. It didn't work.

Now her straitlaced daddy and stepmother were at the end of their rope with her Bible-burning and head-shaving. Besides, they couldn't have Bridget corrupting their younger, better kids. They thought it was time I got a taste of what they had been dealing with. I had been praying for the Lord to tell me what to do, and that morning, as the congregation sang "Sinner Come Home," I got my answer.

"Who said anything about you raising Bridget?" I said.

"Oh be serious, Curtis Jean," Mama said, like we were discussing whether I was mature enough to babysit. "Being a mother is hard work. It takes sacrifice. Believe me, you don't want to give up your whole life for your children. Like I did. It's a thankless job."

"Don't talk to me about sacrifice," I said. What was left that I had not given up? "What do you expect me to do?"

Mama held out her hand for the hankie. I gave it to her and she wadded it up with a clean corner sticking out. She spoke without emotion.

"What do I expect you to do? Let me see. I guess what I expect you to do is play this little loving mother game for about a month, after which time I expect to come home and find you

curled up in the bed with a liquor bottle. Then I expect I will be left with a forty-year-old drunk and an out-of-control teenage girl to take care of, at my age. Could you be any more selfish?"

"Can't you see that Bridget needs me?" My voice broke and I fought to hold my temper.

"What Bridget needs is a strong hand. You can barely take care of yourself."

I couldn't believe my ears.

"Mama, for crying out loud, I've been sober for ten years!"

"Curtis Jean, you could be sober for a hundred years and it wouldn't change what's in your blood."

I croaked out a sarcastic laugh.

"So that's it! I've got Daddy on one side and great-granddaddy Amos on the other, that's what you're saying? I'm doomed? What about Terry?"

I knew the mention of my younger brother's name would set her off. Terry was her precious baby boy.

"This hasn't got anything to do with Terry!" Mama wagged her finger at me to warn me off any further attempts to put myself on the same plane with the prince. "Every child in a family is different. No two alike. I've always said that."

I looked down at the roses for a moment, then back at Mama.

"I've made up my mind about Bridget," I said. "I've prayed about it. You saw me at the altar this morning. This is where the Lord's leading me."

Mama sighed and shook her head.

"Well then I don't know what to tell you, Curtis Jean, except that I guess the Lord's also going to have to lead you to a different place to live, because I will not have another fiasco in my home. I'm too old."

I stared burning holes right into Mama's eyes.

"You'd slam the door in the face of your own grandchild."

"Think for a minute, Curtis Jean," she said, her voice growing shrill. "How many times is it going to take before you

listen to me? Don't you think I would love to have that child live close to me? Don't you know if there was any way in the world I thought it would work, I'd jump on the bandwagon clanging my cymbals? Motherhood is hard work. And Bridget is an angry young girl. And she has good reason to be angry, if I may say so. But she needs help. She's not some... some puppy you can put out on the porch when you get tired of taking care of her."

Some puppy?? SOME PUPPY?? How dare she bring up the incident with Itchy!

"I was seven years old!" I screamed, suddenly so awash in blind fury that it felt like my eyes might pop out.

"It was twenty-eight degrees!" Mama screamed back without even looking around to see who might be listening.

I slung the hoe at the weed pile and stomped off, but I didn't get ten steps away before the Lord grabbed hold of me and turned me around. I marched back up to Mama and stopped, so close I could smell the powder on her nose.

"I'm going to tell you one thing right now," I said without blinking one time, "as soon as school's out, Bridget is coming to live with me. I'm her mother and I want her with me."

Mama nodded and put both hands on my shoulders but couldn't seem to decide whether to shake me or hug me. There were tears in her eyes.

"What you need to realize, Curtis Jean, is that everything in life is not about you getting what you want."

She sniffled and dabbed at her eyes, looking around like she was surprised to find herself in the cemetery.

"We better head back," she said, tucking her hankie back in her brassiere and straightening her skirt. "It's clouding up. We don't want to get caught in a storm."

I stood there with nothing to hold onto as Mama started for the car, patting Pokey's headstone as she passed it. The roses Mama brought were lovely. Proof that Pokey had raised up her only child to honor her mother. I walked over to the weed pile and picked up the discarded wildflower bouquet. I straightened

the ribbon and stems as best I could, then, carefully and sweetly, I placed it back against the gravestone, where we had found it.

“Happy Mother’s Day,” I whispered. Pokey’s wind chimes rustled as the breeze kicked up ahead of the storm. Random notes of “Precious Memories” floated up and faded away. There was nothing else I could do, at the moment, except pick up the hoe and the poison and head back down the hill. But I did not forgive Mama for her heartless words, nor would I forget them.

I had spent my whole life trying to live up to some elusive expectation of hers, and for what? I would do what I had to do and let the chips fall. And as for Mama, I would make her sorry she threatened to put me out of Cape Canna. I would make her sorry for trying to slam the door in my sweet baby’s face. And if it was the last thing I did, I would make her rue the day she opened her mouth about that business with the dog. Amos Wheeler was not the only one in this family who could hold a grudge.

MELANIE DENMAN



Melanie Denman is a native East Texan and a former banker. She currently lives with her family in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she is working on a second novel.

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