

Kathy Whitaker struggles to protect her variety store from a man seeking to obtain it at any cost, even if it destroys her family in the process. To thwart him, she must dig up secrets of the past, and of the woman who gave her everything.

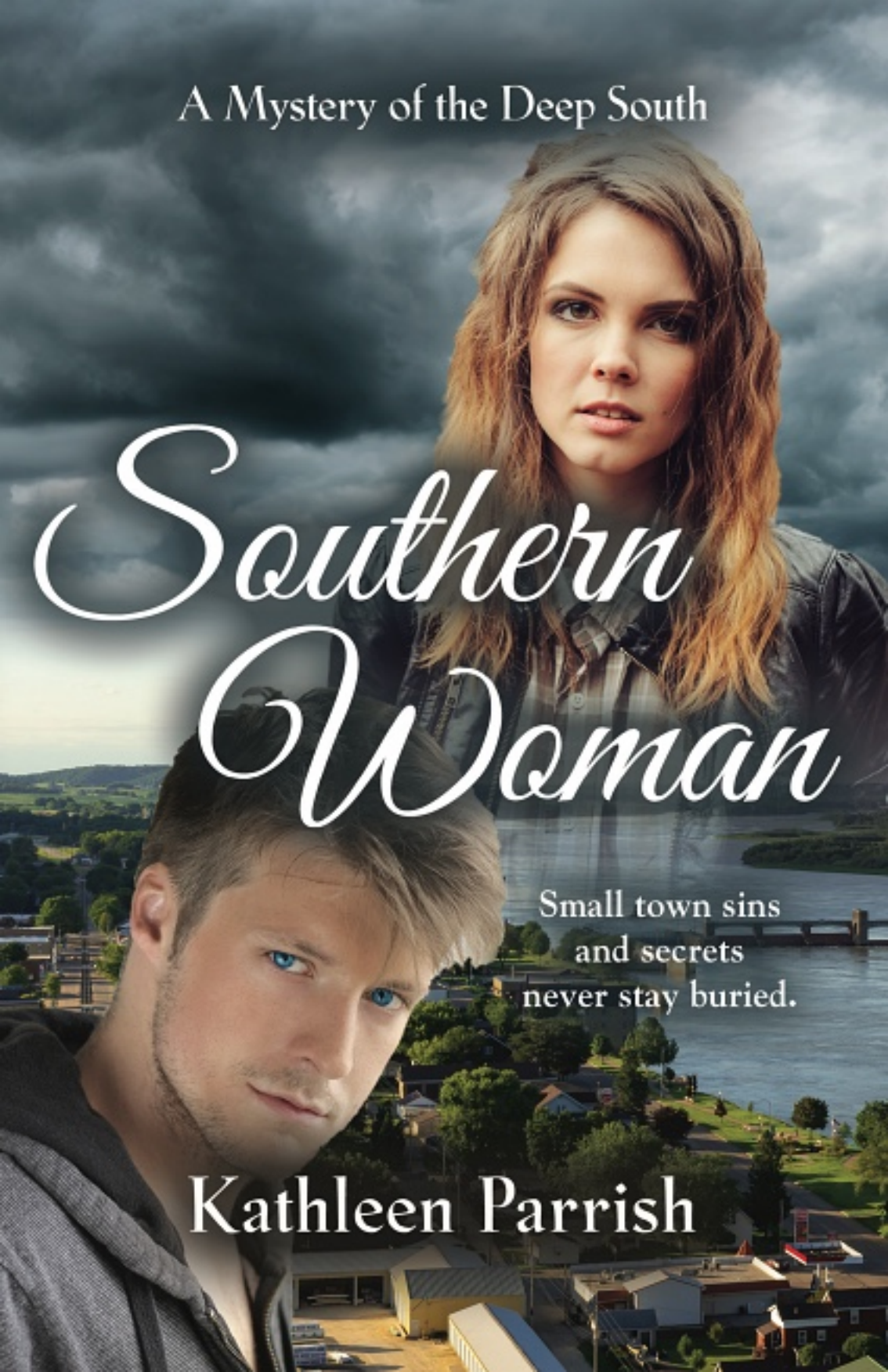
Southern Woman

By Kathleen Parrish

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A Mystery of the Deep South

Southern Woman

Small town sins
and secrets
never stay buried.

Kathleen Parrish

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Chapter 1

Too Much to Do

October 1953

THE PAINFUL THROBBING in Kathy Whitaker's lower back made her groan. Kneeling to restock the lower display cabinets was harder these days. She was only twenty-nine, but sometimes she felt like forty and all used up.

She pushed herself up and studied the sales floor of Weaver's Variety with hard-won pride. The yarn and fabric displays were fully stocked. The cosmetics display, windows, and glass doors gleamed. The ready-to-wear clothing displays, Kathy's newest additions, were already drawing new customers.

Weaver's might be a small variety store in a small southern town, but it served most of the nearby farming communities. Kathy had poured nine years of her life into preserving the legacy Minnie Weaver had left for her. After three months of furious work, she and Nellie had finally gotten Weaver's out of the financial hole that damned Randy Munson put it in. The anxious, panicky feeling that haunted her since she'd discovered how badly he'd mismanaged her store was finally subsiding.

She stretched her lower back and smiled at Nellie Bannon, her senior clerk and bookkeeper. "I'm so sorry to hear Harold's sick again, Nellie."

Nellie gave a mournful sigh. "Harold ain't sick, Kathy, just bored and lonely. He should neva' have retired. He follows me 'round the

house, pestering me to quit and stay home—the old coot. So, I have to give notice. I’m so sorry.”

Kathy patted the older woman’s hand. “You sure about this, Nell?”

Nellie nodded, her pleasant face doleful. “It’s time, I think. Maybe if we both settle down, he won’t pester so much.”

Kathy leaned forward, a glint in her hazel eyes. “Maybe you should pester the old coot back?”

Nellie tucked her tongue in her cheek. “Maybe I should.”

Kathy struggled to conceal her dismay. Nellie Bannon had kept the books for Weaver Variety since before Kathy inherited the store nine years ago. How would she ever find a replacement?

She pressed her hands against the dull ache in her back. Maybe an aspirin would help. Her monthlies were late. It happened sometimes when she pushed herself too hard. She’d been pushing hard ever since she came back to Cottdale three months ago to fire Randy Munson and clean up the mess he’d made of her store.

“I can stay on another two weeks to review the accounts with you,” Nellie said. “At least Randy neva’ had the brains to mess with them. And I can fetch you that aspirin and coffee you’re wanting.”

“It’s that obvious?” Kathy forced a smile. *I’ll miss her so much.* Nellie had backed the changes she made to the store after Miss Minnie passed, and Kathy learned she’d inherited Weaver’s Variety. She’d also inherited Weaver House, a tidy trust fund, and twelve hundred acres of prime cotton land, but the variety store was her pride and joy.

She’d started by moving the sales and notions counter to the front of the store and installing a new linoleum floor. Last year, she’d finally replaced Miss Minnie’s beautiful brass cash register with a sleek, new-fangled electric register.

That last innovation brought her trustees around, hovering and questioning if she could even operate the dang thing. She'd allayed their concerns by promising to keep the old register in good working order for backup. *Overprotective old fogies, both of them.*

"What am I gonna do without you, Nellie?"

The older woman chuckled. "You'll do just fine, my dear. You'll drive old Fred and Buddy crazy, though."

Fred Shattles had been Miss Minnie's family lawyer. Buddy Munson, a longtime friend of the Weaver sisters, owned Munson's General Store. Miss Minnie had put the bulk of her estate into a trust until Kathy turned thirty. Fred and Buddy served as her trustees.

Kathy frowned, thinking of Buddy Munson. Buddy had fired Kathy's manager shortly after she moved to New Orleans and shoehorned his ne'er-do-well nephew, Randy Munson, into the position. Randy alienated half of her suppliers and most of Weaver's customers before she came home and kicked him out of her store.

Randy wasted no time landing a new job with Delta Land Company, the largest land-holding corporation in Sunflower County. These days, he spent his time lording it over the farmers contracted with Delta and pushing independent farmers like her father-in-law, Angus Whitaker, to sign on with or sell outright to the massive company.

Kathy felt sorry for the farmers subjected to Randy's blustering, but at least it kept him out of her business. Now, she was counting down the weeks until she turned thirty, and the trust finally ended.

Come January 4th, she'd be free of Munson's inept meddling and Shattles' nosy benevolence. She'd hire another manager and move herself and the kids back to New Orleans until Towanna graduated in

May. Then, the family would come home to Cottondale, and he would start his internship in Dr. Hanes' medical practice.

Kathy grinned at the thought of Towanna's name added to Dr. Hanes' practice. His pa, Angus, had named him Towanna after a native American soldier he'd served with in the Great War. The soldier's name meant 'young lion'." Angus hadn't known it was considered a girl's name until Towanna had come home beat up from school. It was too late to change the name, so Towanna had learned to live with it. In time, he'd made the people in their little town respect it.

The tapping of Nellie's shoe caught her attention. The older woman still waited for an answer about the aspirin. Kathy flushed and nodded, and Nellie headed for the short hallway that connected the store to Kathy's apartment.

Kathy checked the big clock. They would open in twenty minutes, and she had just enough time to draft a help-wanted ad for the Indianola newspaper. *And tonight, Towanna will be home.* The commute from Tulane University in New Orleans to Cottondale was five hours, mostly by train. The best he could do was to come home on the occasional weekend.

She'd lived through worse, though, when he'd served as an army medic in the war in Europe before they were married. *We've come so far. I can do another eight months.* Kathy mustered a smile when Nellie returned with her coffee and two aspirin.

"I'll finish the books early and make the deposit this afternoon," Nellie offered. "Also, Luanne is happy to take extra shifts until you hire another clerk. That gives us time to review the accounts in more detail if it takes a while to find a new bookkeeper.

"Any chance you might have caught this time, sweetie?" Nellie adored the twins and knew Kathy and Towanna wanted more children.

“No,” Kathy said with a quick smile, but the question grieved her. Two miscarriages had convinced her she was done having children.

But I have Carlon and the twins ... and I have Towanna.

At least, she kept telling herself that. He’d only made it home twice from Tulane University since she’d moved home in June. A university education was changing him, bit by bit. He used new words when he spoke, words she had to look up later in her office dictionary. Sometimes, Kathy worried he was growing so far beyond her she’d never catch up.

She also had Julie May. Julie May Baker, Kathy’s mixed-race housekeeper, viewed her position with the Whitakers as a sort of retirement after decades of serving as a county midwife. Kathy viewed the old woman as a godsend. Julie May was a shoulder to cry on when Towanna couldn’t come home and a kind heart when she needed it most.

Kathy swallowed the aspirin and used the coffee to wash it past the lump in her throat.

I have no cause to feel sorry for myself. I have a fine boy, two healthy twins, and a husband who’ll be home to intern with Dr. Hanes in just a few months.

“I’ll just get started on that help-wanted ad,” she told Nellie. “If I call it in before ten, it’ll make the Sunday paper.”



Luanne came in at noon and took over the register so Kathy could eat lunch with Julie May and the twins. Luanne’s honey-blond hair fell past her shoulders when it wasn’t pulled back into a thick braid. Her ample bosom and rounded hips lied. The girl was barely past sixteen. Luanne had dropped out of high school with her parents’

blessing, thinking more education was a waste of time. Still, Kathy liked her. Luanne dressed modestly, worked hard, and was always on time.

Luanne signed for the new cash drawer and shooed Kathy toward her office at the back of the store. Kathy took the morning cash drawer to her office and knelt to place it in the safe. Kathy stifled another groan when she stood up and pressed both hands against the small of her back.

She turned to leave and almost bumped into the man standing in her office doorway. He seemed vaguely familiar. He dressed well, with slick brown hair and dark eyes that studied her carefully. A touch of gray peppered his temples and made him look ... powerful.

"This area is for employees only," she said mildly. "Customers need to stay on the sales floor."

"I'm not a customer, Mrs. Whitaker." The man backed into the short hall and held out a business card. She studied the neat block lettering.

Richard Coswell
TG&Y
Acquisitions Department

"I've seen you about town." Kathy tipped her head back to study the man. "And you were in my store yesterday."

He nodded genially.

"What brings you here, Mr. Coswell?"

Coswell glanced over his shoulder toward Luanne, and Kathy thought she saw a glint of interest in his dark brown eyes. Luanne wore a white blouse, a navy-blue skirt, and a clerk's apron. Coswell's eyes

swept from Luanne to the bright display of children's rainwear before he turned back to her.

"Why, I'd like to buy it, Mrs. Whitaker." He tapped the card in her hand. "I represent—"

"Tomlinson, Gosselin, and Young," Kathy said, her lips curving in a wry smile. She bought the retail trade journals despite Buddy Munson's insistence that the subscriptions were an unnecessary expense. "I'm familiar with TG&Y, but Weaver Variety is surely too small to interest them, and Cottdale is too small to make such an acquisition worthwhile."

Coswell's smile could only be called condescending, and he swept his arm out in an expansive gesture. "Cottdale is going to grow, Mrs. Whitaker, and my management takes the long view. Completion of the Interstate system, the new rail lines, and the surge in cotton demand will double business in this area. Several textile plants are looking to open new factories in Sunflower County. The Delta Land Company is even thinking of opening a branch office here. Selling your store to TG&Y could be very ... tidy for all parties involved."

Coswell moved closer and beamed down at her. His eyes were warm, Kathy decided, but his teeth reminded her of a shark just before it bit.

"I'm not interested, Mr. Coswell. Weaver Variety is a family-owned business, and we want it to stay that way." And she loved her little store.

Coswell's features hardened and then relaxed. He took another step closer, almost too close. "Perhaps I could persuade you over dinner, Mrs. Whitaker?"

Kathy fought the urge to hold her breath and fan away his aftershave. Old Spice, and just a tad too much of it.

“I’ll have to decline. The children and I are having dinner with my husband this evening. But for now, you’ll have to excuse me.”

She moved forward until he backed out of her way, locked the office door, and eased past him through the door to the family’s apartment. She closed it behind her but then waited, her hand on the doorknob, until she heard his footsteps tapping down the short hallway to the sales floor. The chimes on the storefront doors rattled as he made his exit. Mr. Coswell, she decided, was not a happy man.

Chapter 2

Spread Too Thin

JULIE MAY GLANCED UP as Kathy entered the kitchen before returning her attention to the twins. Tommy perched in his highchair, gnawing on a piece of carrot. His twin sister, Karen, stood with legs braced and arms crossed, a mule-stubborn pout on her pixie face.

“Won’t,” Karen announced.

Julie May’s light brown face held a frazzled scowl as she stared at the little demon, her generous mouth pulled down in disapproval. “That ain’t no way to talk to your nana, child.”

“Won’t,” Karen repeated, but a finger crept into her rosebud lips.

Tommy giggled and threw a carrot at his sister. “Won’t!” he piped up.

Julie May sighed and bent for the carrot. Kathy scooped it up first and took it to the sink to rinse.

“What doesn’t she want to do, Julie May?”

The old midwife-turned-housekeeper snorted. “I was trying to get Karen into her highchair, but she ain’t having it.”

“Okay.” Kathy pointed to one of the oak ladder-backed chairs. “You may sit there, Karen, but you’ll have to eat like a big girl.” Karen promptly crawled into the chair and then frowned at the table. Her plate was just out of reach. She grabbed the sides of her seat and tried to rock the chair forward. Kathy clenched her fists to avoid reaching out to steady it. Undaunted, Karen climbed down, pushed the chair closer to the table, and climbed back up. Now, she was closer but still too short to do more than get her fingers over the table’s edge. She looked doubtfully at Julie May.

“I want my sammish ... please?”

Kathy fought to keep the smile off her face. Julie May nudged the melamine plate closer to the table’s edge.

Karen leaned forward and just managed to snag a square of her peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She looked doubtfully at her plate, the grapes and carrots still out of reach.

Kathy covered her mouth to hide her grin. Karen loved grapes. Karen’s lower lip pushed out in incipient rebellion ... then she sighed, pushed the sandwich back onto the plate, and climbed down.

“I still need the little chair,” she said dolefully. She held her arms up to Julie May, but the older woman shook her head.

“You’re too big for me to carry, child ... but I’ll help.” Julie May removed the tray and steadied the highchair while Karen climbed into her seat. “Here, honey, you help me latch it.” Karen brightened at the offer and tugged the tray until the latches on its underside clicked. She sat quietly while Julie May arranged her plate and milk on the tray and began eating her grapes. Tommy giggled again and started on his own sandwich.

Kathy poured two cups of coffee and brought the platter of chicken salad sandwiches to the table, where Julie May joined her. Kathy looked at her coffee, then at the sandwiches with their neat slices of cheese and tomatoes and reached for the milk instead. The thought of black coffee made her queasy. That man—Coswell—must have upset her more than she’d realized. She added a dollop of milk to her cup and passed the milk to Julie May.

Julie May added milk and sugar to her own cup and stirred it slowly, her dark eyes somber.

“Kathy, we need to talk,” she said softly. “You need to be thinking about getting a new housekeeper. These babies? I love them like my

own, but it's gettin' harder to keep up with them. I'm gettin' on. I'll be eighty-three come December. Time I settled down and quit working while I'm still able to do for myself."

The bottom fell out of Kathy's stomach. First Nellie, and now Julie May?

"You can't leave us, Julie May. I need you—Towanna and the kids need you. Not to keep the house or fix the meals—I can do that or get someone else to do it. But you're family, Julie May. Angus would tan my hide if I let you go back to your old place."

Julie May had delivered most of the babies around Cottdale. She'd lived out on the turn row until Kathy and Towanna offered her a home with light housekeeping and cooking and two babies to watch. Kathy knew those turn row houses got cold in the winter—she'd grown up there. Julie May was too old to be hauling wood and water to her kitchen.

"Besides," Kathy added, "Angus already has tenants lined up to rent your house next spring." Angus Whitaker, Towanna's pa, doted on the old woman.

"The Whitakers have been good to me," Julie May said gently, "But I'm getting on, Kathy. You need to be looking for someone younger." The old woman smiled sadly at little Karen, who now eyed her with alarm.

"I'm a big girl now," Karen declared. "I could watch Tommy, Julie May. I'm the oldest."

Julie May chortled. "By all of two minutes." She patted the girl's arm, her light brown face, the mark of her mixed-blood heritage, soft and a bit sad. These two were the last babies she'd delivered, Kathy realized, and likely the last she would ever deliver. Kathy shivered and finished her coffee, but her appetite was gone. She took the plate of

sandwiches, wrapped them in Saran Wrap, and placed them in the refrigerator.

The phone rang, and she closed her eyes. *Bad news always comes in threes.* She sighed and picked up the phone.

“Kathy?” Towanna’s voice sounded tinny over the party line. He also sounded exhausted. “I missed the early train out of New Orleans.” Her shoulders slumped. He was going to beg off coming home; she just knew it. “I’ll take the next one, but I won’t get into Cottondale until late, maybe ten o’clock. Could you leave a plate in the refrigerator for me? I don’t want to wake you or Julie May.”

“Julie May made chicken salad sandwiches for lunch.” She twisted the phone cord around her fingers until they hurt. “There’s plenty left, and they’re delicious. I’ll make soup to go with them.” She tried to keep the tears out of her voice. All told, it had been a rotten, horrible morning. “But you wake me up when you get home, Towanna Whitaker, so I can heat it up for you. I been missing you.”

“Promise,” he said gently. “I’ve been missing you too.”



Luanne carried the afternoon till into the small office Kathy shared with Nellie. “I put the closed sign in the window, Miss Kathy. Do you need anything else?” From the way her eyes sparkled, Luanne had plans that did not include hanging around her one-room apartment above Munson’s General Store.

“You can clock out, Luanne.” Kathy tapped her desk calendar. “You’ll be on shift tomorrow morning?”

“Yes’um.” Luanne all but skipped out the door.

Kathy counted the afternoon’s take, added it to the bank deposit bag, and tucked in the deposit slip. She zipped the bag closed and

handed it to Nellie, and together, they walked back through the store. Kathy could just see the back of Harold Bannon's balding head through the big front windows. He sat hunched on one of the benches she'd placed on each side of the front door, likely scowling away any would-be, last-minute customers.

"Maybe Harold could walk you down to the bank," Kathy suggested. "Might make him feel useful."

"I'll just do that." Nellie leaned in and gave Kathy a peck on the cheek. "You take it slow tonight, honey. It's been a hard day. I'll ask around and see if I can find you a new accountant. We got us some time, yet."

Nellie slipped out the door. Harold rose and joined her, his arm looping around Nellie's waist.

Old coot.

The sight brought a lump to Kathy's throat. She couldn't remember the last time Towanna had walked her down Main Street in the late afternoon light.

Kathy locked the front doors and huffed at the fingerprints and smudges on the glass. *Carlton will clean the doors and window glass tomorrow morning.* For now, she had two weeks to find a new accountant, two weeks that loomed like a bad summer storm.

Kathy ran her fingers over her cash register and pulled out the mineral rag to wipe it free of dust and fingerprints. She also latched the empty cash drawer fully open. Thefts were rare in Cottondale, but anyone bent on mischief would have no reason to try to force the drawer, damaging the expensive machine. Pulling the day's receipts from the spindle, she carried them to her office and placed them on her desk. She'd review and file them in the morning. For now, she had soup to make.

Chapter 3

Towanna Makes it Home

KATHY SAT AT the kitchen table, a cold cup of coffee by her elbow and chicken soup simmering on the stove. Carlon, her 14-year-old son, sat across from her, brooding over his algebra textbook. She'd offered twice to help him, but he'd refused. And he'd been oddly distant and quiet during supper. Something was bothering her boy, likely something he wanted to discuss with his pa.

"Carlon, would you like me to check your math?"

He shook his head, his black curls tumbling over serious green eyes. "I'll just wait for Wanna, Ma. You're busy." His gaze slid sideways to her face and then darted away.

Kathy knew he didn't want to hurt her feelings, but he missed his pa. It showed in little ways, like declining her help, especially with the one subject that most troubled him—seventh-grade math—whenever Towanna could manage a weekend at home. She watched him push through the rest of his homework, hoping the effort would let him spend a little more time with his pa.

He'd always called his pa Wanna, Kathy thought ruefully. The Whitakers took Carlon in when he was only two days old after Joreen, Kathy's older sister, had given birth and then run off. Cliff, Towanna's older brother, had taken one look at the baby and known it was his. He'd taken off after Joreen to no avail and had come home distraught and desperate to do right by his boy. Carlon had Cliff's green eyes, but it was Towanna who named him, been mother and father to him, while Angus and Cliff struggled to keep their farm going.

Kathy's memories of Joreen hurt even now, nine years after Sheriff Conway had found her sister's thin, needle-scarred body down by the old swimming hole. Conway had called it an accidental death instead of suicide, but Hollis Conway had always been kind.

Less than a week after Joreen's death, Kathy learned that her brothers, Tommy and Ben, had been killed in the war against Japan. Hollis had softened the blow as best he could. Then the big, bluff sheriff surprised everyone by marrying her ma and adopting all ten surviving Anderson children. Kathy had stayed in Cottdale when Hollis moved the brood to Indianola. However, Indianola was only half an hour away, and she still saw her family frequently.

So why do I feel so abandoned?

Her hand tightened on her pencil. One more semester and Towanna would be able to come home and intern at the hospital in Indianola. No more long commutes between Cottdale and Tulane University in New Orleans. No more exhausting weekends, struggling to complete his studies and eke out a few hours for his family. No more late nights, listening for the bus to let him off on the street corner by the store—

Carlton's head came up, his green eyes wide. Kathy could just make out the sound of the bus rumbling to a stop.

Kathy checked the time. Ten-fifteen. She turned off the stove and got the chicken sandwiches from the refrigerator. Carlton closed his book and hurried to open the kitchen's back door.

"Dang it, Carlton, you should be in bed." Towanna stood in the doorway, his arms wrapped so tightly around their boy Carlton could barely breathe. One arm swung out to pull her into the hug. "Everything okay, sweetie?"

She turned her face up for the kiss she'd been thinking of since he'd called.

"I made soup," she said a long moment later.

Towanna ran his fingers over her cheek. "I could eat," he said quietly, but his eyes burned with a different hunger. Kathy let him go, dished up two bowls of soup, then glanced at Carlon and added a third. Then she set out glasses of milk and brought everything to the table.

Towanna went for the soup first, then reached for a sandwich. "So, what has you up so late, Carlon?"

Carlon ducked his head. "Wanted to get my homework done." He fidgeted a bit. "I could use some help with the math, though. We're starting algebra." He pulled his bowl close and started eating.

Towanna chuckled. "I can help with that. We'll have time tomorrow. I brought homework too, I'm afraid." He gestured at the canvas bag slumped by the kitchen door, his old field bag left over from the war. "Maybe we could do it together after breakfast."

Carlon's face lit up, and Kathy tried not to be jealous of the time Carlon would spend with his pa. *Only seven more months. Seven months, and he'll graduate and be home most nights.*

"I'll go to bed," Carlon said abruptly and stood. "I got chores in the morning."

Towanna glanced at his wife.

"It ain't much," she told him. "Just sweeping the store aisles and cleaning the front glass." Her shoulders slumped. "I have homework, too. Nellie has to go over the ledgers with me. She gave two weeks' notice. Harold retired, and he's driving her crazy, wanting her to stay home."

She picked up their empty bowls and plates and took them to the sink. "So, I need to hire a new bookkeeper and another clerk."

Kathy turned to collect the glasses and stared at her husband. Towanna had retrieved his book bag, pulled out one of his textbooks, and flipped it open. "Towanna Whitaker!"

He startled and had the grace to look guilty. Then he closed the textbook, folded his hands on the table, and gave her a bland smile. "Yes'um?"

Her eyes narrowed. "You did not come all this way to do homework tonight."

"No, ma'am." He brought the glasses to the sink, gave her another slow, lingering kiss, and pulled the dish towel off her shoulder. "I'll just finish these up. You ... go get ready."

Kathy headed quickly down the hall to their bedroom. She could feel the blush staining her face and neck. She quickly changed into a sheer nightgown and put her clothes away. She spent a few minutes in the bathroom brushing her teeth and cleaning her face, smoothing Pond's cold cream over her skin. A few touches of the Chanel No. 5 she'd poached from the store's sampler display, and she was ready to meet her husband.

Easing the bathroom door open, she peeked out. Light flickered through the room from the big, vanilla-scented candle on the dresser. Towanna's butane lighter lay beside it. She smiled, and the tension drained from her neck and shoulders. She pushed the door open a bit more. Lean, muscular legs and tight buttocks came into view.

Kathy slipped out of the bathroom and crawled into bed. She leaned in so Towanna would smell the perfume she'd applied to intimate places.

Rangy, naked, his skin gleaming with a sprinkling of blond hair, he sprawled across their bed in masculine splendor. It made her heart

speed up. It left her breathless. A craving began to build deep in her core, a heat she hadn't felt in too many nights.

A light snore filled the room.

Her husband was dead asleep, face lax, eyelids bruised from exhaustion. Kathy slumped down onto the bed beside him and rubbed his back. He never stirred.

Disappointment rose in her like a cloud of choking midge flies. Sometimes she hated that damned university and the lure of a medical degree that kept taking Towanna away. She sighed, pulled the comforter from under his legs, and spread it over them. She didn't know whether to laugh, cry, or smack him on the head to wake him up. She settled for cuddling close and tugging the comforter over her shoulders.

Only one more semester.

She ignored the tears spilling down her cheeks.

Chapter 4

First Skirmish with the Enemy

THE SMELL OF COFFEE tormented Kathy until she groaned and rolled over. Towanna's side of the bed was empty, but a tall, fragrant cup sat on her nightstand, a small pitcher of cream beside it. Steam rose from the cup. Two sugar cubes nestled on a saucer.

Kathy decided to forgive him for passing out last night, pushed herself upright, and reached for caffeine heaven. The clock showed 7:15. Enough time for breakfast and a shower before she opened the store.

She found Towanna and Carlon at the kitchen table over the remains of breakfast, Carlon's math book spread between them. Julie May had the twins up and eating. Kathy tucked herself in the seat between Karen and Tommy's highchairs. Tommy chortled happily and scooped up another spoonful. He'd recently mastered using a spoon to eat his oatmeal and clearly wanted no help.

Little Karen pouted in her chair beside Towanna, reaching over with sticky fingers to touch his hair. Towanna kissed her fingers, picked up a napkin, and wiped them clean. His attention, however, kept going to their housekeeper, who hovered over the stove.

"Have a seat, Julie May." He rose to top off his coffee and brought the pot to the table. He refilled Kathy's mug and poured one for Julie May. "Of course, you have to stay," he said firmly. "You're family."

Apparently, they were continuing her conversation with Julie May yesterday.

Julie May brought a plate to the table for Kathy. Scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast. Kathy started to reach for the butter but reached for

Julie May's hand instead. "We can get a housemaid to help with the laundry and cooking," she said quietly. "Towanna's right. You're family, Julie May."

"I'm not wantin' charity," the old woman said irritably. "Maybe I could stay long enough to teach someone else to run this household, but I need to be taking care of myself."

Towanna gave Kathy a brief, troubled glance. "Do you want to leave us?" he asked.

Julie May shook her head. "I don't want to be a burden. Nothing good comes of it.

"Besides," the old woman continued, "I got my Social Security and savings down at the bank, and Dr. Baker put money away for me before he passed." She crossed her arms and rocked slightly, her face melancholy. "He also left me the insurance money after his boys died in the first war. I can provide for myself. I don't need charity."

Carlton looked up, his face solemn and a bit pinched. "But we're your family, Miss Julie. We ain't got no other family, 'cept Grandpa Angus, and he done got married again."

"Yes, he did." Julie May frowned at the boy. "And Miss Amy's a right fine woman. You got no reason to be pushing her away."

"She ain't my real grandma," Carlton said, obstinance in every line of his face.

Kathy's heart contracted. He'd never warmed up to Amy Whitaker or to her own ma, Lizbeth Conway, for that matter. He saved all his love and bright chatter for her, Towanna, Grandpa Angus, and Julie May.

"You still got Grandpa and Grandma Conway," Julie May said.

"She ain't my real grandma either. She didn't want me, and she run my real ma off. That's why she died."

Kathy stared at their boy, then turned helpless eyes to Towanna.

“Well, we wanted you, Carlon,” her husband said roughly. “And she’s regretted it for years. She never meant—”

Carlon pushed his chair back. “I got chores, Wanna.” His eyes, Kathy noted, were too bright, his voice too thick. “I got to clean the counters and the storefront glass.” He all but ran from the kitchen.

Towanna, Julie May, and Kathy stared at each other.

“I neva’ told him,” Julie May said, sorrow heavy in her voice. “‘bout Miz Lizbeth, or how his ma died.”

“None of us told him,” Towanna muttered. “He probably heard it at school. Boys that age”

Towanna’s face darkened, and Kathy remembered the bullying Towanna had endured in the settlement school for being small, scrawny, and too damn smart for his age. For being given an honorable name that most people heard as a girl’s name. For being labeled *peculiar* by a vicious old man and secret pedophile who’d lusted after the slender, vulnerable boy he’d once been.

Or girls, Kathy thought sadly. Girls could be bullies, the same as boys. And old gossip never really died.

Julie May sighed. “I’d best stay, I guess, until Carlon’s a bit older.” She began to gather the children’s breakfast things.

Kathy rose and took her plate and cup to the sink. Julie May nipped them out of her hands, scraped the leftovers into the compost bucket, and began washing the morning dishes.

Kathy knew better than to help. Instead, she kissed Towanna. “I have to open the store this mawnin’, but Luanne’s coming in to help, and Nellie has the afternoon shift. They’ll be able to manage things after lunch ... and I’ll be ready for a nap about then.”

Towanna smiled and pulled her down for another leisurely kiss. “You wake me up if I’m sleeping,” he whispered. “I’ll talk to Carlon in a bit.”



The floors were swept and the counters wiped clean when Kathy walked into her store with a mug of fresh coffee. She looked about, hoping to see Carlon, but no one else was on the sales floor. Kathy glanced at the big clock. Half-past eight. Luanne should be here in a few minutes to help restock the inventory.

Kathy had fifteen customers on the floor by ten o’clock. No Luanne in sight. If Luanne had a phone at her place, Kathy would have called to remind the girl she’d agreed to take Nellie’s morning shift. If the girl wasn’t here by noon, she might need *two* new clerks. Kathy rang up the next customer’s purchases, but three more were already lined up behind her.

She hated to close the store to fetch Luanne but finally decided she had little choice. She set the *Closed, back in 10 Minutes* sign and locked the front doors. It prevented more customers from entering while allowing the ones inside to leave.

It only took a few minutes to walk down to Munson’s General Store and reach the narrow entrance to the apartments above. Buddy’s eyebrows shot up when he spotted her through his front display windows. He hurried to the big double doors as she swept past.

“Miss Kathy, about Luanne ...” Buddy’s face turned a dusky red. She gave him a lowering glare and yanked open the door.

“Oh, holy Moses,” Munson moaned but stayed inside his store. At this juncture, mild irritation turned into outright vexation. Kathy reached Luanne’s door and rapped sharply.

“Luanne, you should have been at work an hour ago. Did you forget about taking Nellie’s shift?” A muffled wail and thump echoed against the apartment door. *She probably partied half the night.* The silence that followed that initial wail concerned her, though. “Luanne, are you all right?”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, Miss Kathy—I overslept, then I fell out of bed—ow!”

Alarmed, Kathy opened the door to the one-room apartment.

Luanne lay in a naked heap on the floor, hands clasped over her mouth. An amused and bare-chested Richard Coswell lay in Luanne’s bed.

Kathy forced her attention back to the mortified girl. “If you want to keep your job, Luanne, you have ten minutes to meet me at the store, decently dressed and ready to work.”

Luanne scrambled to her feet and ran to the bathroom.

Kathy turned her attention to the smirking man in Luanne’s bed.

“You’ve overstayed your welcome, Mr. Coswell. I’d advise you to leave.” She clipped off each word, her fisted hands shaking with rage. “Are you aware Luanne is only sixteen?” That wiped the smirk off his face.

“She told me she was twenty-one,” Coswell said roughly. He threw off the covers and reached for his pants. “Besides, my business here isn’t done.”

Kathy stepped into the room and looked him up and down. Her face was probably flaming red, but she didn’t care. Then her eyes latched onto the two empty glasses and wine bottle on Luanne’s

nightstand. Beside them lay an open can of sardines and two saltine crackers. The smell of the sardines threatened to make her gag.

“It is if I call my stepfather to bust your sorry ass.”

“Your stepfather?” Coswell chuckled. He pulled on his shirt, tucked it in, and reached for his shoes. “Would you really want to embarrass Luanne that way, Mrs. Whitaker?”

“My stepfather can be discreet when it’s called for.”

“He’s not the girl’s father,” Coswell retorted.

“No, he’s not,” Kathy said sweetly, “He’s the sheriff of Sunflower County. This is a dry county, Mr. Coswell.” She pointed toward the nightstand. “You brought liquor into his county and got a young, impressionable girl drunk. The sheriff will have plenty to say about that.”

Kathy swept out the door, head high, her stomach trying to heave. She would not give Coswell the satisfaction of seeing how badly he’d shaken her. First chance, she’d call Hollis, damned if she wouldn’t.

Kathy headed down the stairs and onto the sidewalk, so disturbed by her encounter with Coswell she almost ran into Randy Munson. Randy—the Delta Land company patch displayed prominently on his shirt—stood just outside the doors of his uncle’s general store, an ugly smirk on his face. She swerved to avoid walking into the man, but he reached out and caught her arm.

“I heard someone offered to buy your store, Kathy. You gonna sell?” Randy’s voice was deep and pleasant, but the avid look on his face made her skin crawl.

“No,” she told him. “I ain’t interested in selling any more than I was when you offered, Randy.” She jerked her arm free and walked away. The light mist of rain increased to a steady downpour.

Suddenly, she wondered if there had been more than incompetence in how he'd run Weaver's Variety into the ground during his four months as manager. Had he been trying to drive down the price?



"He used protection," Luanne whispered a few minutes after she came into the store. "One of them condom things."

"We'll talk later," Kathy hissed, but she managed a pleasant smile while Mrs. Doody, one of her regulars, approached the register. Mrs. Doody's arms were piled high with skeins of yarn. She wore a straw hat and a rain slicker against the weather outside, and an unholy gleam filled her eyes and twinkled behind her bifocals.

"Looks like you're making a new afghan, Mrs. Doody," Kathy said pleasantly. "Luanne, could you please restock the yarn counter?" Luanne fled to the safety of the back wall, where yarns and bolts of fabric were displayed.

Mrs. Doody leaned closer. "It's a baby blanket," she confided. "My Marilyn's expecting." Mrs. Doody's daughter had five children, all under seven. She'd knitted each grandchild a blankie, each one a different color. This one looked to be a deep, fern green. "Your mama told Marilyn enough is enough, but Marilyn's hoping for another after this one."

Kathy's smile turned brittle. "Might not want too many," she said lightly. "My three are a handful."

Mrs. Doody sniffed. "My Marilyn stays home with her kids." She shrugged. "To each her own, but you might want to sell this place if you and Towanna want more kids." Her gaze roamed over the creamy

white counters and shelves. “It’s not good for a woman to spend too much time on her feet when she’s carrying.”

Kathy clenched her fists so hard she felt the nails dig into her palms. She dropped them below the counter, out of sight, and made a show of fetching a paper bag for the yarn.

“That’s true, Mrs. Doody,” she said evenly. “That’s why I hired extra help, both here and in the apartment when I was carrying the twins.” Not that it had helped with her second pregnancy or the third. But Mrs. Doody didn’t need to know about the miscarriages. Kathy didn’t want the old biddy’s pity.

“Will that be all?”

“For now.” Mrs. Doody eyed her uncertainly, unsure if she had offended. “I’ll just be getting on home with these skeins.” She bustled out the door.

Too late, Kathy remembered Andy Simpson, Marilyn’s husband, who was in the Marines and serving in Korea. No wonder the poor woman was hoping for another child—and a safe homecoming for her man. The rain came down harder now, and the store emptied as customers hurried out the door. Two of the women tucked into the coffee shop next door.

Luanne crept closer to the front counter, her face pale. “You gonna fire me, Miss Kathy?”

Kathy scrubbed her hands over her face. “No, I’m not going to fire you, Luanne. Why’d you sleep with that Coswell?”

Luanne’s face crumpled. “He said he was buying your store, and his company only wants mature women working here”

Kathy crossed her arms. “Did he at least take you to dinner?”

Luanne nodded. "He took me to Anderson's Steakhouse in Indianola." Her lower lip pushed out. "He was really nice. Said he had some wine in his car and asked if I'd like to try a little."

Kathy rubbed fretfully at her temples. "So, he brought you back to your place and got you drunk."

Luanne blanched. "I'm sorry, Miss Kathy," she whispered.

"Did he ask you any questions about me?"

Luanne shook her head. "He only wanted to know if he should talk to Mr. Whitaker about buying the store. I told him no, that Miss Weaver left you the store in her will, and you only had to answer to Judge Shattles and Mr. Munson 'cause she made them trustees."

Kathy winced and then studied the girl. Luanne might be young and naive, but she was a hard worker, and she knew how to work the new cash register. Kathy couldn't afford to lose another clerk just now.

"No, I'm not going to fire you, Luanne, but that Coswell is a bad man. I told him I wasn't interested in selling my store. He doesn't even want to buy it for himself. He wants it for some company up north that owns a chain of variety stores. If I sold Weaver's to them, they'd bring in their own people, and then neither of us would be working here."

Luanne burst into fresh tears.

Kathy sighed and handed the girl a tissue from the box under the counter. "You stop that caterwauling right now." She patted Luanne's shoulder. "You learned an important lesson. Now get the afternoon till, and let's swap 'em out early. You're gonna run the register today until closing."

Luanne dabbed at her eyes. "Yes'um, Miss Kathy." Her shame and misery were turning into anger. "Ain't no damn Yankees gonna buy *this* store." Luanne punched open the register and collected the receipts

and the till box. “I’ll just carry this back for you, Miss Kathy, then finish with the yarn bins.”

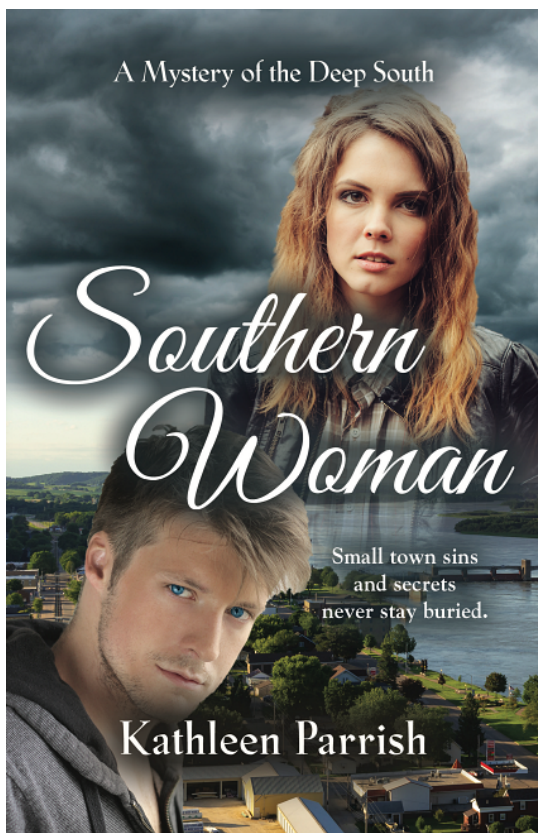
Thunder rumbled outside, rattling the storefront windows. Both women turned to look out at the rain. “I don’t expect we’ll see many customers this afternoon,” Kathy told her. “But Nellie’s coming in later. I’ll be in the apartment after lunch if either of you needs me.”

About the Author



These days, Kathleen is a wife, the mother of two grown sons, a grandmother of five, a gleefully retired nuclear engineer, and a full-time writer. She was born in Mississippi and grew up as an Army brat with a determination to succeed, a love of reading, a passion for horses, and a compulsion to write about the grand scheme of things.

You can find out more about her interests and writing projects at www.kathleen-parrish.com.



Kathy Whitaker struggles to protect her variety store from a man seeking to obtain it at any cost, even if it destroys her family in the process. To thwart him, she must dig up secrets of the past, and of the woman who gave her everything.

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