



Ghosts
of
Christmas
Past

LAURA BRIGGS

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Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

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Dedication

To all those who longed, labored, and fell short of their aspirations; and to those who have known unfinished dreams and the hardest of choices.

Praise for Laura Briggs

Ghosts of Romances Past

5 out of 5 P's ~ When this book came up for review, I knew I just had to read it and I would love it to pieces ...Laura did a wonderful job in living up to the renditions of the 'Ghosts Tale' ~Paula Phillips, The Phantom Paragrapher

Prologue

“Slee-py time, comes to you, on wings of white and blue.” The girl sang softly as she rocked the bundle in her arms. Above the collar of her hospital robe, strands of dark hair were plastered close to her face, a face thin and young beneath its pallor.

“While you sleep, dreams will come, on stars so clear and true...” As she sang, her fingers tucked aside the striped blanket from around the sleeping infant’s face, revealing tiny flushed cheeks. The slow rocking motion of the nursery chair lulled the baby closer to her body. The room was silent and dim, except for the winking lights of a Christmas tree in one corner.

The door opened, a nurse on the other side. Beside her was a woman in a business suit carrying a sheaf of papers in a portfolio.

“Ms. Libby Taylor?” she asked, reading a name affixed to the portfolio. “Are you ready?” She offered a sympathetic smile.

The girl nodded. “I’m ready.” Her mouth pressed inwards as she loosened her hold on the bundle, the woman’s arms sliding between her and the child.

“Hello there,” crooned the woman, shifting the bundle gently against her shoulder. “Ready to see your new family?”

The baby stirred slightly and whimpered.

“There’s some papers you’ll need to sign, Ms. Taylor,” the woman continued, “and if you want to

talk to them—”

“No...no, I don't. Thanks.” Arms now empty, her hands rested on her lap. She watched as the woman, carrying the baby in her arms, turned towards the waiting nurse. The door closed behind them, two shapes disappearing from behind the square of glass at the top.

The girl closed her eyes. “It's for the best,” she whispered. Once, then again, as if to convince herself it was true. Her chair began rocking again, her arms wrapped against her body.

Slee-py time, comes to you, on wings of white and blue.

1

Eleven Years Later

The crash of percussion beat a slow tempo from the cordoned-off portion of the club. Chords from a steel guitar throbbed as a woman's voice rose above them.

"Sweet dreams keep haunt-ing me," she sang, "let me be free of all these cares. I don't have time, to lose my mind in the em-brace of what we shared." It was an aching, tender tone as her hand beat time slowly against her denim-clad thigh.

Beneath a long curtain of black hair coaxed into gentle waves, her sultry gaze swept the gloomy interior with indifference. She wore a short denim jacket over her fitted blouse and tight jeans, paired with cowboy boots that had seen more than one season of performances in bars and booze halls.

"Why can't I leave it all be-hind? The way your touch makes me un-wind..." She slid closer to the microphone, her voice betraying no nervousness or hesitation even as one of the bar's patrons yelled something inappropriate from a table somewhere in the dimness.

Sometimes they threw bottles; those joints kept performers walled off behind a cage of chicken wire, screening them from rowdier patrons. Libby had seen it all in her time, almost twelve years on the road

singing country songs in every honky-tonk between here and home.

Home. There was a place she hadn't seen in a long, long time. Not that she cared to go back anymore.

"If someday I'm finally free, There won't be no more dreams for me..." The last note died away slowly to the vibrating chord of the electric guitar played beside her. The audience applauded, sounding loud enough to the band despite the number of intoxicated and indifferent listeners scattered throughout the joint.

"Thank you." Libby spoke softly into the microphone, her smile flashing beneath the glow of pink and white performance lights. Stepping away from the microphone, she glanced in the direction of the band member closest to her, the guitarist unhooking from his amplifier.

"Mind drowning me out more, next time?" she asked sarcastically, with bitterness in her voice as her eyes met his gaze.

He shrugged. "I'm sorry, Lib," he answered. "You sang it different in rehearsal."

"Rehearsal," she spat, "is where we *rehearse*. Performance is where you follow my voice, wherever it leads. Get it?" She brushed past him, making her way towards the gloomy bar waiting just beyond the lights.

Libby slid onto a stool and motioned for a drink. "Scotch on the rocks," she said, resting her face on one hand as she gazed at the rows of bottles behind the bartender, the hazy mirror lit by neon pink.

Eleven long years of life on the road, with nothing to show for it but a battered portfolio of half-written songs, worn pages of cover songs performed more times than the records Libby played as a star-struck teenager. No telling where those records were now.

Just like Libby's faith, they were forgotten relics of the past, tucked away in the attic of her mind.

It was ten o' clock on a Saturday night, still considered early by most of this south Tennessee bar's patrons, who would spend their evening carousing here and other places. Hooking up, knocking back drinks, occasionally starting fights or vandalizing property—spending tomorrow sleeping it off wherever they ended up in the early morning hours.

There was a time when Libby had spent her Saturday nights singing in a room filled with listeners of all ages, a time when she wore frilly gingham and plaid dresses sewn by her mother, when her grandfather's voice echoed through a scratchy-sounding microphone that reminded Libby of the ones she had seen in pictures of the Ryman Auditorium miles from here in Nashville.

His bass voice on Sunday morning rose above the feminine tones in the surrounding pews, the tremor of emotion breaking the resounding chords of each hymn.

"Hey there." The voice beside her oozed charm, like something foul dripping from its cracks. "You're the girl who was singing here tonight, aren't you?"

"Yeah," she answered, coldly, without turning her head.

The bartender pushed the glass before her, ice swimming in a pool of brown instead of piled as she requested.

The stranger edged closer, his plaid sleeve visible from the corner of her eye. "Your voice is real pretty," he said. "Sounded a lot like Patty Craye. You know who she is?"

Trying to impress her with basic knowledge of country music, she surmised. The reflection in the

mirror showed her a pale, narrow face hovering close to her own, an unshaven chin and knobby neck visible above the open collar of his shirt.

"Thanks," she answered, keeping her voice short as she drained her glass.

His fingers reached across to touch the strands of her hair.

Automatically, she pushed his hand away. "Don't."

He held up his hands defensively.

"Hey, just showing my devotion, Little Miss Heartbreak. You alone for the evening; me alone..." His voice trailed off as he reached for her hand.

"Excuse me." The voice interrupting was huskier, tenor tones laced with faint sarcasm. The guitarist from the band stood there, thumbs hooked in the pockets of his jeans as he surveyed the man beside Libby.

"Who're you?" The oozing voice was insolent.

"Band business," the guitarist answered, jerking his head in the direction of the door. "I need a few words with the lady here."

After glaring at his rival, Libby's antagonist slid reluctantly from his stool.

"I'm sorry about the song." The guitarist took the man's place, glancing at the drink in her hand with a meaningful look in his eyes.

"Forget it, Jake." She motioned for the bartender to refill her glass. "I'm done with this evening's set. Can't you tell?" She took a swig from her newly-filled glass. "We're switching up the songs for tomorrow morning's rehearsal, anyway."

"Tomorrow morning?" he asked.

"What?" She lowered her glass, giving him a cold stare.

His gaze drifted towards the bar.

"Sunday services, Libby," he answered. "Remember?" He raised his face, something in it making her uncomfortable. It was her turn to glance away.

"All right," she sighed. "Fine. We'll rehearse tomorrow afternoon. Happy now?"

Jake shrugged. "I'd be happier if maybe you came along tomorrow morning." He motioned for the bartender. "A Coke, please. Ice, nothing else." He ignored Libby's snort of contempt.

She said nothing else to him, although she was aware of his warmth, the brush of his leather jacket's sleeve as he lifted his glass. In the mirror, she studied his profile with a different interest than her previous companion. Tracing the curves of his angular cheekbones and jaw, the layers of thick sandy hair were cut short above his collar. Worn calluses were visible on the fingers cradling the glass.

Libby drained her glass. "Sure you don't want something a little stronger?" she asked, her voice mocking, teasing him.

He shook his head. "Nope. Got other things to be doing with my time."

Libby tightened her jaw, avoiding his eyes in a sudden state of discomfort. "Of course," she answered. She pushed her glass in the direction of the bartender and raised her hand to motion.

Jake's fingers curled around hers, pushing it down again.

"Don't, Libby," he said. "Don't."

For a moment, she said nothing. Pulling her hand away, she raised it again for another call to the bartender.

“Don’t tell me what to do, Jake Dillard.” Although something in her heart told her it was childish, she drained this third glass in a swift motion as he watched.

Libby relied on two things to drown the pain of an empty life. The first was in 750ml bottles behind the bars of her performance sites, where a portion of her paycheck always found its way. The second was a 50mg capsule of painkillers, her last resort when the world was squeezing her in a vice of failure and depression.

Rumors of something better had been strong when she was younger. Libby Taylor with her long dark hair and voice etched with sorrow, like Patty Craye’s, or the husky Southern tones of Tina Wiley.

The first few years she was on the circuit, a contract in Nashville seemed on the verge of happening. Surrounded by band mates as eager as she was for success, the sky seemed the limit; later, she formed a band to support her voice more perfectly, tasting a little of the star status she dreamed would come true.

The longer she stayed on the road, the more the dream dwindled. The Nashville contract remained a rumor; her audition tapes disappeared into a black hole in some studio somewhere. The few producers who approached her were sleazy and dishonest, more interested in making arrangements for a one night stand than making her dreams of singing at the Grand Old Opry a reality.

Curled up in the back room of the bus, she cradled

a half-empty bottle and tried not to think about a time when she lived another life. Long ago, when she first went on the road, a little flicker of her faith remained alive. The belief in God and His love sustained her during those first few months of excitement when she was desperate to believe she had done the right thing.

They sustained her through other times, too—when she made decisions that even now felt like another person had acted on her behalf. Her mind was numb to the consequences, thanks in part to the influence of bottles like the one she held now.

A sound stirred near the middle of the bus, which had been converted into a makeshift room for her band. One of its members was crawling into his bunk to sleep off a night of partying. Her drummer and bass guitar player were both fond of long nights and female company; even the steel guitarist had been known to enjoy the party lifestyle now and then.

Everyone in her band did, except for Jake, whom Greg the drummer teased with the title “family man” for the life he led in the little camper he pulled behind an old pickup truck, the faded fish symbol visible on the rear window. No liquor inside, no female company unless it was Libby dropping off new songs to cover.

A little glimpse of the faith Libby once held was still visible in Jake’s life, a kind of incongruity for a woman who surrounded herself with people who were unlikely to judge the choices she made.

Jake had never judged her, but the discomfort of his gentle counsel made up for it with a vengeance.

“What makes you bent on self-destruction?” he asked her once. “Half these people drink. Greg, Ted, all the other boys are all partiers, I know, but not one of them wants to destroy themselves half as much as you

do." His fingers held the bottle of pills accusingly, as if he'd discovered evidence of a darker crime on her part.

"I don't know," she answered. "I don't care, so I guess you shouldn't, either." She plucked the bottle of pills from his grip and stuffed it in her jacket with a defiant glance as she picked up the stack of cover songs from the bar.

That was over a year and a half ago. Since then, Libby Taylor had been doing her best to shake the dust of his reproach from her feet.

2

“The Blue Persuasion” was spray painted on the side of Libby’s band bus and on the tarp flapping over the back of Jake’s truck, which shielded the equipment that couldn’t be crammed into the bus’s storage area.

The truck’s camping trailer bounced over a pothole as it made the turn into the parking lot of the Carlyle Country Night, a bar and grill that had offered repeat invitations to Libby and her band over the years. The empty storage room in the back gave them space for rehearsal, a place to unwind between sets on Friday and Saturday nights. The pay was better than other gigs, since Libby had become popular with the joint’s regular crowd.

It was one of the few places she could persuade to hire them this close to the holidays. When Christmas approached, most joints preferred to scale back the number of country concerts.

“Looks like we’re here.” Bassist Ted Wilkins grunted as he shifted the bus into park. The vehicle was small enough to cram itself into two employee spaces behind the building, leaving little room for Jake to swivel his trailer into position.

Snow crunched beneath Libby’s boots as she hopped down from the bus’s steps. “Ugh,” she shuddered, hugging herself. “I hate wintertime. Temperature’s freezing in this place without a bulky coat on.” That was something she couldn’t wear and

still look the part of the slender, sultry-voiced singer.

"Maybe we should start performing in Florida," snickered Bob. He hauled his steel guitar case down the bus step as they made their way towards the bar's back door.

Inside was the smell of liquor and stale chips. A string of colored lights on the wall flickered as a handful of midday customers sampled beers below. The proprietor greeted them with a friendly smile as he tucked a towel over his shoulder and placed a miniature Christmas tree on the bar.

Libby groaned. "That time of year again, isn't it, Slim?"

The bartender shook her hand. "Mighty fine to see you again, Miss Taylor," he said. "Band's lookin' good. Hope you guys can get set up early tonight. Got a big crowd coming over from Greenville to listen." A blast of cold air entered the bar as Greg and Ted disappeared outside again to haul in sound equipment.

"Our reputation's spread that far, has it?" Libby asked, smiling. "You can talk to Jake about setup. He's doing sound tonight." She shot a meaningful glance in the direction of her guitarist, visible through the glass as he stood just outside the doorway.

He spoke a few words to a child in a heavy parka, who turned towards the parking lot and shuffled away through the snow. Stomping the white layers from his boots, Jake set his guitar case on the floor inside.

"Slim," he said, with a nod. His gaze took in the colored lights and cheap greenery festooning the walls. "Like what you're doing with the place," he commented, as he approached the bar and stood near Libby.

The proprietor grinned. "Thought about lettin' this

place go after this year. Feel like maybe I should start changing some things in my life. You know what I mean?" As he spoke, he opened a cardboard box and lifted out a barn with cheap resin figurines affixed inside with glue. A nativity scene.

"Never too late to start early," Jake answered. It was an old joke, but his voice was gentle as he caught Slim's eye.

The older man's glance softened. "You're right," he said, nodding. Clearing his throat loudly, he looked at Libby. "Got a good one here, Miss Taylor. Ought to hang onto him if you can." He returned to his jovial attitude as he busied himself with another strand of colored lights.

Libby found this power of Jake's irritating. Watching other people melt over a gentle suggestion, a sympathetic smile, as if they were convinced he really understood what their pain was all about. As he would say, God had given him a chance to connect with people damaged by loss and loneliness—something Libby couldn't argue with, despite her bitter wish to prove him wrong.

"Wherever I turn, you're there...softly I reach for your hand..." Libby's eyes drifted closed as she sang. "Don't think the moment between us isn't there. You are the reason I believe."

It was a soulful ballad from Alecia Allard, whose songbook had consisted mostly of bubbly, pop-infused country hits in the eighties. This particular song was one of Libby's favorites, drawing out the full timbre of her voice.