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ONLY

the

BEAUTIFUL

a novel



SUSAN MEISSNER

USA Today Bestselling Author of *THE NATURE OF FRAGILE THINGS*

NOVELS BY SUSAN MEISSNER

Only the Beautiful

The Nature of Fragile Things

The Last Year of the War

As Bright as Heaven

A Bridge Across the Ocean

Stars over Sunset Boulevard

Secrets of a Charmed Life

A Fall of Marigolds

The Girl in the Glass

A Sound Among the Trees

Lady in Waiting

White Picket Fences

The Shape of Mercy



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BEAUTIFUL

SUSAN MEISSNER

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Novels by Susan Meissner](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Part One: Rosanne](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Part Two: Helen](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[*Acknowledgments and Author's Note*](#)

[*Readers Guide*](#)

[*Discussion Questions*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.”

Genesis 1:26

PART ONE
ROSANNE

1

SONOMA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA FEBRUARY 1939

The chardonnay vines outside my open window are silent, but I still imagine the bursts of teal and lavender their summer rustlings always called to my mind. That sound had been my favorite, those colors the prettiest. The leafless stocks with their arms outstretched on cordon after cordon look like lines of dancers waiting for the music to start—for spring to set their performance in motion. Looking at them, I feel a deep sadness. It might be a long time before I see again these vines that had for so long been under my father's care, or hear their leaves whisper, spilling the colors in my mind that belong to them alone.

Perhaps I will never see this vineyard again.

The Calverts won't welcome a future visit from me. Celine Calvert has already made it clear that after today she is done with me. Done.

For a moment the words *if only* flutter in my head, but I lean forward and pull the window shut. What is to be gained by wishing I could turn back the clock? If I had that power, I would have done it before now. I wouldn't even be living with the Calverts if I had the ability to spin time backward. I'd still be living in the vinedresser's cottage down the hill with my parents and little brother.

The doorbell rings from beyond the bedroom. Shards of heather gray prick at the edges of my mind. I hear Celine cross the entry to open the front door and invite the visitor inside.

Mrs. Grissom is here to take me away.

It's almost a year to the day since I first met Mrs. Grissom on the afternoon my whole world changed, just like it is changing now. On that day my father's truck got stuck on the railroad tracks outside Santa Rosa. In one blinding instant, he and my little brother, Tommy, were snatched away from this life. The next, I was sitting in a ghostly white hospital room for the handful of minutes before my mother slipped away to join them.

"Rosie . . ." Momma's voice was threaded with the faintest colors of heaven as I sat in a cold metal chair next to her bed. She lay in a sea of bandages seeping crimson.

"I'm here." I laid my hand across her bruised fingers.

"I am so . . . sorry . . ." Her voice sounded different from what I'd always known. Low and weak.

Tears, hot and salty, slid down my cheeks and into my mouth.

"Promise me . . . Be happy . . . for me . . . and be . . . careful." She nodded as if to remind me of a past agreement between us. "*Be careful, Rosanne.* Promise . . ."

"Momma, don't."

"Promise . . ."

A sob clawed its way out of my mouth as I spit out the words: "I promise."

"Love . . . you . . ."

I don't know if she heard me say I loved her, too.

The moments after she left me seemed at the time made of the thinnest of tissue paper. I remember being allowed to sit with Momma after she'd passed. I remember being told my father and brother had been taken to the morgue straight from the crash and that I'd have to say good-bye to them in my heart.

And then I was meeting Mrs. Grissom, a woman from the county who'd arrived at the hospital sometime during that stretch of shapeless minutes. She'd asked Celine—who had brought me to the hospital—if she knew of any next of kin who could take me in. There weren't any. She'd asked if Celine would please consider speaking to Mr. Calvert about the two of them

taking on the role of legal guardians for me since I'd lived the entirety of my sixteen years on their property anyway. The county had a terrible shortage of foster families willing to take older children, and the nearest orphanages were full. It wouldn't have to be for forever. Just for the time being. And they had already raised their son, Wilson, so they had experience.

The two women were speaking in the hallway, just outside the room where I sat with my mother's body. I couldn't see Celine's face, but I could sense her hesitation.

"Oh, I suppose," Celine finally said. "I guess that makes sense. Truman and I do have that bedroom off the kitchen available. The poor thing can stay with us. At least for now."

And Eunice Grissom said she'd approve the emergency placement that very day so that I could return home with Celine, and the rest of the paperwork could follow.

I've only seen Mrs. Grissom twice since then. Once two days after my family was laid to rest—Celine and Truman had paid for the arrangements and the simple headstones—and a few weeks later when she came by to let the Calverts know the temporary guardianship had been approved.

And now Mrs. Grissom is here again.

I hear her step farther into the house and closer to where I wait in the little room beyond the kitchen.

"I'm so very sad and disappointed about all this," Mrs. Grissom says. "And here I thought it had been going so well here for all of you."

"Yes. It's very sad." Celine's voice is toneless. "Extremely disappointing."

"I've been asking a lot of questions on my end since your visit with me on Tuesday, and it seems everyone I've talked to agrees," Mrs. Grissom says, "if what you're saying is true."

"I assure you, it's true."

"Well then," Mrs. Grissom says. "We will leave this with those who can help her best."

"Yes," Celine replies. "Wait right here. I'll get her."

A home for unwed mothers, then. That's where I'm headed, since apparently no one else will take me the way I am. Seventeen. Orphaned. Pregnant.

At least it will be a home. At least it will be a place where this tiny life inside me will be protected. It scares me a little how much I am already starting to care for it. This child is the only family I have now. Surely some unwed mothers are allowed to keep their babies. Surely some do.

The sound of a lock turning yanks me from this daydream, and the door to my bedroom opens. Celine stands at the doorframe, her gaze on me like arrows.

"Mrs. Grissom is here for you," she says, and then quickly turns from me.

"Where is she taking me?"

Celine doesn't turn to me when she answers. Her voice looks an icy blue—like rock crystal. "Where you belong."

She walks away, back through the kitchen and dining room to the entryway, where Mrs. Grissom waits.

I don't reach for the bag I packed—Celine has already taken that—but instead for a sweater I placed on the bed next to a maid's uniform that is no longer mine.

Tears brim in my eyes as I move through the kitchen, and I think of Momma as she lay dying, whispering the words "Be happy, be careful." I have failed her on both accounts.

I walk to the tiled entry, where Mrs. Grissom stands with my travel bag by her feet. I see her gaze drop to the slight mound at my waist. She frowns and sighs. *It's true, then, the sigh seems to say. The orphan girl kindly taken in by the Calverts let a boy into her bed.*

"Come, then, Rosanne," Mrs. Grissom says, shaking her head. "We've somewhere to be."

I know it's pointless to apologize, but I turn to Celine anyway.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Calvert."

"Good-bye, Rosie," she says flatly, her words heavy and gray.

“Thank you for doing what you could for her, you and Mr. Calvert.” Mrs. Grissom hands Celine a piece of paper from the top of the clipboard she is carrying. No doubt the record of the Calverts’ relinquishment of me. “The county is grateful.”

“Yes,” Celine says.

I walk out to the passenger side of Mrs. Grissom’s Buick and place my travel bag on the back seat and then get in the front. Celine pulls her front door shut even before I am fully inside the car. Mrs. Grissom starts the engine, and as she eases slowly past the Calverts’ house, I reach with one hand for the necklace at my throat, feeling for my mother’s cloisonné pendant and the little key resting behind it. One is a tether to my past and the other to my future.

I look longingly at the vines as we pass them on the gravel drive, rows and rows of them. I love all the colors of this place, and the chuffing of nearby tractors and the neighbor’s roosters and my father’s whistling. They’d always been such happy sounds, happy colors. Oh, how I will miss them.

As we turn onto the road to Santa Rosa, I reach for my bag and lift it over the seat to make sure all that I put inside it is still there: the few items of clothing that still fit me, my worn copy of *The Secret Garden*, the photograph of me and Tommy and my parents, my cigar box full of my savings, the baking soda tin with the amaryllis bulb and the instructions on how to care for it . . .

It’s all there except for the bundle of Helen Calvert’s letters inside the cigar box. My money is still inside it, but the letters from Truman’s sister are gone.

Before I can even begin to mourn their loss, Mrs. Grissom asks me why of all things I have a dirty old turnip in my travel bag.

I turn to stare at her. “You looked in my bag, too?”

“We had to make sure you weren’t taking anything that wasn’t . . .” Her voice drifts off.

“Mine?”

“Safe.”

“It’s not a turnip.” I turn back to the window. “It’s an amaryllis bulb.”

“A what?”

“An amaryllis. A flower bulb.”

“But why do you have it?”

I don’t want to explain why I have it. And I don’t feel like telling her the dirty little turnip is not what it looks like. It is more. It is something beautiful, hidden but there. Helen Calvert, who lives far across the sea, wrote words like those about the amaryllis bulb when she gave it to me. I’ve held on to them and the bulb because I’ve needed to believe they are true.

“Because it’s mine,” I say. “And so were those letters I had in my bag.”

“They weren’t addressed to you. Mrs. Calvert said they were hers and Mr. Calvert’s.”

“Not all of them were. Some of them were mine. And they had given the others to me. Those letters were mine.”

Mrs. Grissom is quiet for many long moments.

“Care to tell me how you got into this mess?” she finally says, as though it doesn’t matter who the rightful owner of those letters is. We aren’t going back for them.

“No.” I reach again to touch the little key hiding behind the pendant. I don’t care to tell her. I won’t.

“Things would go easier if you told me the truth about . . .” She glances at the slight bump at my waist. “You know. How this happened.”

“Would it change where you’re taking me?”

“Well, no.”

“It happened the usual way, Mrs. Grissom.”

The county worker sighs, shakes her head, and turns her attention fully back to the road.

I remove the tissue-thin paper of instructions on how to care for an amaryllis from within the baking soda tin—which Celine obviously missed when she went through my bag—and place the only letter from Helen left to me inside the cigar box where all the others had been. I return the bag to its place on the back seat.

We drive into Santa Rosa, then through it, and then we pass over to rolling hillsides on its other side, blanketed with vineyards and scattered sycamore and bushy acacia trees.

“Is it a nice place? Where you’re taking me?” I ask as we turn onto a road I have never been down before.

Mrs. Grissom purses her lips before answering. “It’s a respected place for people who need help, Rosanne. You need help and that’s what’s important. I suppose in its own way it’s nice.”

It will be something like a boardinghouse, I imagine, run by tsking older women who will look down on me in disapproval. I’ll be rooming with other fallen girls who have gotten themselves in trouble, and we will surely be reminded daily of our failure to make good choices. Why aren’t there places like that for fallen men, I wonder, where they are tsked and told every day that their recklessness has led to disaster?

Mrs. Grissom slows and turns onto a sloping driveway. I see a high fence surrounding a multistory brick building with white trim and flanked by lawns just starting to come back to life after the winter. It looks like a school or college. On either side of the gated entry are two oak trees with limbs that reach well over the top of the fence. A sign etched in stone on the outside of the gate reads SONOMA STATE HOME FOR THE INFIRM. Below that in smaller letters are the words: CARING FOR THE MENTALLY ENCUMBERED, THE EPILEPTIC, THE PHYSICALLY DISABLED, AND THE PSYCHOPATHIC DELINQUENT.

A cold burst of alarm surges in my chest. “Is this where we’re going?”

“It is.” Mrs. Grissom doesn’t look my way as she stops in front of the closed gate. An attendant emerges from a small gatehouse.

“This can’t be right, Mrs. Grissom. Didn’t you see the sign? This is some kind of hospital for . . . for sick people.”

The smiling attendant comes around to the driver’s side and Mrs. Grissom rolls down her window.

“Eunice Grissom with County Human Services. This is Rosanne Maras.”

“Mrs. Grissom!” I shout. “This isn’t the right place. I’m not sick. I’m not . . . infirm.”

Mrs. Grissom tightens her grip on the steering wheel and says nothing.

“You can drive on up,” the attendant says. “They’re expecting her.”

Expecting me? *Expecting* me?

“No, wait!” I call out to him. But the attendant is opening the gate wide so that the car can pull through. I turn to Mrs. Grissom. “I am *not* staying at this place!”

She begins to drive slowly forward. “You need to trust the people who have been charged with your care and well-being, Rosanne.”

“But I’m not sick. I’m just . . . I just . . .” I place a hand on my tummy. “I made a mistake.”

Mrs. Grissom says nothing but keeps her foot on the gas pedal, her hands on the steering wheel.

She pulls up to a cement curb beside the building just as the large wooden front door opens and a woman in a dark blue dress steps out, along with a nurse in a starched uniform and a man dressed in white pants and a matching shirt. The man comes down the steps quickly, opens the back seat passenger door, and reaches for my travel bag.

I swing around from the front and put my hand out to stop him. “I’m at the wrong place. I’m not staying here.” He pulls the bag from my reach and takes it anyway.

The woman and the nurse have joined the man at the curb now, and the nurse takes the bag. The man returns to the car and opens the door where I am sitting.

I instinctively move closer to Mrs. Grissom. “Tell them to give me my bag back. I’m not staying here.”

“Rosanne, this is for your own good,” Mrs. Grissom says.

The woman in blue bends to look into the car. “We have your room all ready for you, Miss Maras. It’s a nice room with a bed by the window.”

“But I’m not sick! I’m not ‘infirm’ or ‘psycho . . . ’ whatever that other word is.”

The man starts to reach inside to pull me out. I scoot away from him, as close to Mrs. Grissom as I can be without climbing onto her lap.

“Rosanne! You are making this far more difficult than it needs to be,” Mrs. Grissom scolds. Her words are hot with annoyance and peppered with

flashes of topaz.

The woman in the blue dress bends further to look me full in the face.

“Miss Maras, we are all here to help you. Here to take care of you. Now, please come on out of the car, mmm?”

My heart is thumping madly in my chest. I can feel my pulse in my ears like a beating drum. “I don’t need to be taken care of.”

“Well, how about if you and Dr. Townsend have a little chat about that. Just a chat. You aren’t afraid to have a little chat, are you? If you aren’t one who needs our care, well then, we aren’t going to keep you. We couldn’t possibly. Our rooms are needed for the people who really do need our help. If you don’t belong here, I will see to it that you are on your way.”

The pounding in my head begins to ease a bit. “You will?”

“You have my word.”

I turn to look at Mrs. Grissom, who nods toward the woman. “If I get a telephone call that you don’t belong here, I’ll come back for you myself. I promise.”

“A telephone call? Why can’t you just wait here for me? You should just wait here for me.”

Mrs. Grissom sighs. “Fine. I’ll wait here.”

I stare at her until Mrs. Grissom turns the key and kills the car’s engine. Then I turn to stare at the man standing by the open door. “I don’t want him touching me.”

“Norman won’t be obliged to help you inside if you just come out of the car on your own,” the woman says.

I hesitate a moment and then scoot the rest of the way across the seat to step out.

“Well then, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” the woman in blue says, smiling brightly.

I want to tell the woman it was indeed hard. It was extremely hard to get out of Mrs. Grissom’s car and step into an enclosure with high fences and a locked gate.

“And you promise after I talk with the doctor, I can come back out to the car?” I say instead.

“Absolutely. If you aren’t in need of our care, I will bring you out myself. We don’t have the room here for people who don’t need us.”

“And my bag?” I look at the nurse, who stands there with the travel bag in her hand. Her expression is unreadable. She looks . . . bored. As if she doesn’t care that everything of value to me—other than the chain around my neck—is in that bag.

“If you will not be staying with us, your bag will be returned to you,” the woman says.

“Why can’t I keep it with me now?”

“Those are our rules, I’m afraid. Now then. I’m Mrs. Crockett. I am the matron here. Shall we go inside and have that chat?”

I follow the two women up the steps. The man Mrs. Crockett called Norman is following close behind me. Pale blue dots hover at the back of my eyes at the sound of his footsteps. We step into the building and enter a lobby. A nurse at a reception desk looks up casually when we walk in and then immediately drops her gaze to the papers she is working on.

Mrs. Crockett turns to her left and opens a door, and the rest of us follow her down a hallway with offices on either side. At the end of the hall is a set of double doors, one of which is open. Mrs. Crockett knocks once on it and then proceeds to enter.

“Dr. Townsend, Rosanne Maras is here,” she says.

This room is nicer than the reception area. There are shelves lined with books, and certificates and paintings hang on the wall. Behind the large wooden desk sits a man in a white coat. His hair is slicked back, and his hairline, just beginning to recede, is salted with tiny flecks of gray. On his desk are files and papers, a crystal paperweight of a running horse, and a photo of him with people who must be his family. Everyone in the photo is smiling.

“Miss Maras, please.” The doctor motions to one of two armchairs in front of his desk. Mrs. Crockett takes the other chair. As I sit down, I look over my shoulder to see that the nurse, with my travel bag on her lap, has taken a straight-backed chair by the door. Norman stands on the other side of the door with his arms crossed loosely in front of his chest.

“I’m Dr. Townsend,” the doctor says in a friendly but authoritative voice. “And may I call you Rosanne? Or . . .” He picks up a piece of paper in front of him. “Rosie? Is that the name you prefer to go by?”

“Rosie is fine,” I say, wishing with all my might I could see what else is on that paper he is looking at.

“Rosie here believes a mistake has been made.” Mrs. Crockett’s words are tinged ever so slightly with false sympathy.

“Is that so?”

“I’m not sick,” I say. “I’m not infirm. I’m not any of the things on your sign.”

“But you are with child, unmarried, without a home or employment, and only seventeen?” the doctor asks.

“Being with child doesn’t mean you’re sick.”

“True, true,” Dr. Townsend says, nodding. “But not every illness is characterized by a cough or a fever. There are all kinds of reasons to need the care of doctors and nurses. Let’s see if you need our help, shall we? First, can you tell me who the father of your child is?”

He doesn’t say it in a threatening way. His pen is poised over the piece of paper to supply the name as if it means nothing, is of no consequence. Just a name on a line on a hospital form.

“It doesn’t matter who the father is. It was a mistake. I’d had wine for the first time and I wasn’t . . . I didn’t . . . it was a mistake.”

“But you do know who the father is?”

I see pulsing brown obelisks cast by the doctor’s voice. But there is another voice from before echoing in my mind, too. “You’re going to need the money, Rosie,” this other voice is saying. “You know you will. I can take care of that. But you need to do this one thing . . .” I can feel the key resting against my breastbone.

“Rosie?” Dr. Townsend says.

“Maybe. Yes. No! I don’t know. It doesn’t matter.”

“So it wasn’t just one person, then? You’ve been with several men?”

My face heats with blazing shame. “I’m saying it doesn’t matter who it is! He doesn’t love me and I don’t love him. It was just a mistake.”

The doctor stares at me as though he does not believe me. He doesn't believe that I've been with only one man and only once. What lies has Celine told Mrs. Grissom about me? What has Mrs. Grissom told Dr. Townsend? I need to get out of here.

"I would like to go now," I say.

"We've a few more things to discuss." Dr. Townsend looks at the piece of paper again. "I'd like to talk to you about these visions of yours."

My heart seems to thud to a stop in my chest. "What?"

"The woman who has been responsible for you, Mrs. Calvert? She reported to Mrs. Grissom that you believe you see colors and shapes no one else can see. I'd like to hear more about that."

The room seems to close in around me with the crushing weight of disbelief. How can this man know this? How does *Celine* know?

"Rosie? Did you hear me? I said I'd like to hear more," the doctor says.

"I don't know what you're talking about." My voice sounds thin and weak in my ears.

"You didn't tell Mr. Truman Calvert and the Calverts' son about these colors and shapes that you see?"

"I never said anything to Wilson!" Not that I can remember, anyway.

"But you did tell Mr. Calvert you can see invisible colors and shapes when you hear sounds, yes? And you told him that numbers and names and places all have assigned colors that you see in your head? Mrs. Calvert said you told him this."

The breath in my lungs tapers away as if all the oxygen in the room has been sucked out of it. Truman told Celine what I shared with him in confidence. He told her! Why? Why did he do that? I told him no one was supposed to know. Especially not Celine. Unless it was Wilson he told, despite my request, to clear things up. Yes, yes. I could see Wilson sharing with his mother what Truman had to have told him. I hear again my mother's voice as she lay dying telling me to be careful. *Be careful*. But I hadn't been. I'd been stupid. Twice.

I want to remain calm. It seems important that I remain calm in this place. I breathe in deeply and exhale.

“I was just kidding,” I say.

“Just kidding?”

I close my eyes. Why is this happening? Why? I want my mother. I want wings to fly away. Far, far away.

“Rosie?” Dr. Townsend says gently.

“It’s just a little game I play,” I whisper, eyes still closed. “That’s all. It’s nothing. Just a game.”

“Why would you play a game like that?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s a very odd game to play, and for no reason that seems to be to your benefit,” he continues. “I’d like to be able to help you, Rosie. But you will need to be honest with me. No more lies.”

I open my eyes to look at him. Ready tears are blurring my vision. “I can’t.”

“Why can’t you?”

“You won’t understand.” Two tears spill down my face, impossible to stop. “Nobody does.”

“I think you’ll find that I understand a great deal about what a person can see and hear that no one else can. Don’t you think you owe it to the child to get the help you need?”

“The child?”

“Yes.”

My child. My baby . . . Oh God! What would they do with a baby in a place like this? I have to get out of here.

“I’d like to go now, please.” I flick the tears away.

“That wouldn’t be wise, and it wouldn’t be humane to let you go in the condition you are in,” Dr. Townsend says calmly. “You have no family, correct? No aunts or uncles or grandparents?”

It’s true that I have no relatives in California. My parents immigrated to the United States from Eastern Europe as children and my grandparents have long since died. Momma was an only child and Daddy had only one sibling—an estranged brother I’ve never met. I know there are some distant Marasz relatives—that being the family name before immigration officials

removed the z—still living in Poland, but I’ve no idea who they are or how to reach them. “No, but—”

“I couldn’t possibly turn you out into a world where there is no one to help you. As an orphan and a minor, you fall under the county’s care, and the county has given you to me. You are my responsibility.”

“I’d like to go just the same.” I stand, and at once Norman is at my side with his hand on my arm, his grip tight. The crushing fear from before slams into me.

“When you are well and ready to be on your own, you will be released, I assure you,” the doctor says. “But not a minute before.”

“Let me go. Let me go!” I squirm and Norman quickly puts both arms round my torso. The nurse stands, drops my travel bag, and rushes to help him hold me fast.

“Mrs. Crockett, do you have the hypodermic?” Dr. Townsend asks.

“I do, Doctor.”

I scream for my mother as the needle pierces my skin.