

T. KINGFISHER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A HOUSE
WITH
GOOD
BONES



A
HOUSE
WITH
GOOD
BONES



T. KINGFISHER



NIGHTFIRE

Tor Publishing Group
New York

[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

**Thank you for buying this
Tom Doherty Associates ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,
and info on new releases and other great reads,
sign up for our newsletters.

[Sign Up](#)

Or visit us online at
us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup

For email updates on the author, click [here](#).

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you without Digital Rights Management software (DRM) applied so that you can enjoy reading it on your personal devices. This e-book is for your personal use only. You may not print or post this e-book, or make this e-book publicly available in any way. You may not copy, reproduce, or upload this e-book, other than to read it on one of your personal devices.

Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: us.macmillanusa.com/piracy.

*This is for my grandmother,
who was actually pretty awesome*

The First Day

Winchester Cathedral: An old-fashioned English shrub rose. Grows to four feet high and four feet wide. Produces masses of large, loose-petalled white roses, occasionally with a touch of pink. Fragrant. Repeat bloomer.

CHAPTER 1

There was a vulture on the mailbox of my grandmother's house.

As omens go, it doesn't get much more obvious than that. This was a black vulture, not a turkey vulture, but that's about as much as I could tell you. I have a biology degree, but it's in bugs, not birds. The only reason that I knew that much was because the identification key for vultures in North America is extremely straightforward. Does it have a black head? It's a black vulture. Does it have a red head? It's a turkey vulture. This works unless you're in the Southwest, where you have to add: Is it the size of a small fighter jet? It's a California condor.

We have very few condors in North Carolina.

"I bet you have some amazing feather mites," I told the vulture, opening the car door. The vulture tilted its head and considered this, or me, or my aging Subaru.

I took out my phone and got several glamour shots of the bird. When I tried to upload one to the internet, however, my phone informed me that it had one-tenth of a bar and my GPS conked out completely.

Ah yes. That, at least, hadn't changed.

My mother lived on Lammergeier Lane, which made the vulture even more appropriate, although we don't have Lammergeiers—"bearded vultures"—in North Carolina either. They're a large species of vulture from Africa and Eurasia that eats bones. Why would you name a private road after a bone-eating vulture from a different continent? I looked it up one day when I was bored, and discovered that the developer of the subdivision had been obsessed with birds. His first project had been Accipiter Lane, then Brambling Court, then Cardinal Street, and so on through the alphabet until Whip-poor-will Way, whereupon he died, presumably so that he would not have to come up with a bird for *X*. (The correct answer is *Xantus's murrelet*, but I admit it doesn't exactly roll off the tongue.)

Lammergeier Lane was a type of subdivision that we have all over the South, although I don't know if they've migrated out to other areas. You'll be driving along a rural road, surrounded by trees, cow pastures, and the occasional business that sells firewood, propane, and hydraulic repairs. Then you'll see a dilapidated

trailer and a sign for a private drive. You turn onto the drive and suddenly there are a dozen cookie-cutter houses lining the street, all with neat lawns. The road either terminates in a cul-de-sac or links up to another, even more rural road.

You are required by tradition to have the dilapidated trailer, which is generally owned by a grumpy survivalist who refuses to sell. Otherwise the residents will have nothing to complain about and will become fractious.

My grandmother, that odd, frustrating woman, had bought the third house on the right side of the street and lived there for a number of years. We moved in with her for a year when I was ten, then Mom managed to get us an apartment and we moved out again. Then Gran Mae died when I was fourteen and we moved back in. Now I was thirty-two and here yet again.

The subdivision looked exactly the same as it had when I left. It had hit that stage where all the covenants have lapsed and someone has put in a chicken coop and someone else's lawn is going to seed—I approve of this, it supports far more insect life—and there's a truck on blocks tucked almost out of sight behind a shed. Subdivisions can persist in this particular developmental stage for decades before they finally pupate into their adult form and become a neighborhood ripe for parasitizing by developers.

I looked across the street at Mr. Pressley's house. Was he still alive? He had to be in his eighties by now.

Yep, sure enough, the curtains on the big window were just slightly cracked, and I could make out the outline of a pair of binoculars. Mr. Pressley was a one-man neighborhood watch, whether the neighborhood wanted it or not. He was convinced that rural North Carolina was a hotbed of murderous activity. If I didn't get moving soon, he'd probably call the cops on me.

“Put out an APB on the fat woman with curly hair,” I muttered to myself. “It was malicious standing, Officer, I saw it with my own eyes! And parking her car with intent!” There aren't many social advantages to being fat, but I'll give it this, nobody ever thinks you're a cat burglar.

So Pressley was still alive and the trailer was still there. Cell coverage still shaky. My grandmother's front yard was still covered in roses. (Despite my mother having lived here for nearly two decades, I still thought of it as my grandmother's house.) About the only thing that had changed on Lammergeier Lane was that the Bradford pear trees had mostly died and been replaced with crepe myrtles.

And, apparently, vultures.

The vulture in question was still sitting on the wooden crosspiece behind the mailbox. I had no idea if it was hostile, nervous, or about to launch itself at my

head. They don't have facial expressions like mammals. Mind you, I'm not that great with mammals either.

The screen door slammed and I heard my mother calling. "Samantha! Samantha, you're here!"

"Hi, Mom," I said, not taking my eyes off the bird. "Did you know you've got yard vultures?"

"Don't mind them. They belong to the lady down the street," Mom said.

I turned to stare at her. "They *what*?"

"Well, not *belong*, exactly. There's a tree." She waved her hands toward the end of the street. "Oh, never mind, I'll explain later. Don't worry, they're harmless."

"Don't they puke when they get upset?" This is just about the only fact I know about vultures, and only because an ex-boyfriend of mine got too close to one once and found out the hard way. In retrospect, the vulture may have had the right idea.

"Oh yes!" Mom beamed at me. "One threw up all over the Goldbergs' beagle."

Fortunately, this vulture did not seem particularly inclined to vomit. I backed away until the car was safely between us, then turned and hugged Mom.

"It's so good to see you, honey," she said. I didn't say anything, because I was just realizing that she had dropped a scary amount of weight since the last time I'd seen her. The women in our family are either fat or skeletal, and it felt like she had switched sides in the last year. I could feel her ribs and the knobs on her spine.

"Good god, Mom," I said, stepping back. "Are you okay? You don't have cancer or something, do you?" (Tact. I do not have it.)

"No, no." She smiled, but her face had gotten as thin as the rest of her, and I couldn't tell if she looked worried or if it was just the new lines around her mouth. "I'm fine. Do you know how long you're staying?"

"Haven't a clue," I admitted. "They found human remains on the dig, so we're all furloughed until it gets sorted."

"I'm so sorry." She grabbed one of my duffel bags out of the car. "I know you were excited to work on this one."

"Eh, they've promised to bring us all back on. Hopefully it won't take too long."

I'm an archaeoentomologist. It's fine, you've never heard of me. I study insects in archaeological remains. Actually, if you're in the field, you probably *have* heard of me, because there's hardly any of us. You've almost certainly heard of Dr. Wilcox, my boss, who did all that amazing work with sawtoothed grain beetle larvae found in food storage from the Viking era.

Anyway, my job is mostly spent either sitting in a room sifting through dirt from digs looking for dried-out insect husks or staring at photos somebody else took of dried-out insect husks, fiddling with the brightness and contrast to see if I can make out any details. Occasionally I do get out to dig sites, which I enjoy a lot more. My particular specialty is Pacific Northwest Paleo-Indian middens, but I get dirt samples from all over because, as I said, there aren't that many of us.

It was a dig that had brought me back home. Start of the season, the promise of a whole lot of hands-on time in the dirt instead of staring at photos. I'd told my roommates I wouldn't be back for six months, shoved my furniture into storage, and went off to play in the Paleolithic midden. And then, like I told Mom, somebody found human remains. On the *third day* of serious digging, no less.

Well, that was the end of that. The whole project was on hold until the Native American Heritage Commission could sort out what tribe the bones belonged to and if they had any living relatives who would want them back for burial. Some archaeologists get bitter about these sort of regulations apparently, but I personally don't want to muck around with anybody's ancestors. It seems rude, and just generally tacky.

Anyway, give me a trash heap over a grave any day. A grave tells you how people act when they're on their best behavior in front of Death. Trash heaps tell you how they actually *lived*.

The problem was that I'd announced a six-month absence, and my roommates had already sublet my bedroom to an exchange student. Also, I had no real idea when the litigation would get resolved—sometimes they can sort these things out in a couple of weeks, if all parties are trying hard to get along, and sometimes they drag on for years and the person in charge of the dig tells us to take other jobs and they'll call back. So, I called up Mom and told her I needed to come back home for a bit, and of course she had alternated between concern and enthusiasm, which is Mom's normal state of being.

"I'm so glad to see you, honey," she said again, giving me a worried look over her shoulder. The line between her eyebrows had grown deeper since the last time I'd seen her. "I just wish it didn't have to be here."

"Here?" It seemed like an odd thing to say.

"Oh, you know." She opened the door and waved me inside. Laden with all of my clothes and about half my worldly possessions, I inched past her and set my duffel bags down with a grunt.

"Uh..."

“Well, just because your dig was canceled.” She hugged me again. I had a feeling that it wasn’t what she’d planned to say.

My brother, Brad, had said that he thought we needed to check in on Mom more often. At the time, I’d thought he was just worrying too much. Now, seeing how thin she was and how harried she looked, I started to think he should have called me sooner.

“Are you sure everything’s okay, Mom? I don’t mean to impose, it’s just that Brad and Maria have no space, and I figured it had been a while...”

“No, no! You know this is your home too.” And she hugged me again, which is Mom all over—always anxious to make sure that no one feels unloved for even an instant.

“Sure, but I don’t want to interrupt any hot dates.” I grinned at her. “If you need me to get lost some evening...”

She swatted clumsily at me with a duffel bag. “Pff! Thank you, no. All the single men my age want either a trophy wife or a housekeeper, and I’m not doing either.”

“*Awwwright*,” I drawled. “Two sexy single ladies living the fabulous single lifestyle, then.”

Mom gave me a droll look. “So ... boxed wine and binging British crime shows?”

“It’s like we’re related or something.” I turned toward the stairs and stopped. Something had been bothering me since I stepped in, but it wasn’t until I saw the wall over the stairs that I realized what it was.

“You repainted everything.”

Mom has always loved bright colors. We’d painted almost as soon as we moved into the house after Gran Mae died—bright yellow in the kitchen, lime green on the staircase, deep blue in the downstairs bathroom. In a way it had primed me for living in Arizona, with all its rich terra-cottas and turquoise. But now I was standing in the house and the walls were ... white. Eggshell. Ecrú. All the various shades that are just white under different names.

“Oh. Well,” said Mom, sounding embarrassed. “I thought it was time for a change. And you know, all those colors, some people might think they were a bit much.”

“It’s your house,” I said. “Who cares what other people think?” Then it occurred to me that there’s usually only one reason you repaint all the walls white. “Are you thinking of selling?”

“*No!*” said Mom, nearly a yell. I blinked at her and she flushed. “Sorry, honey, I didn’t mean—I’d never sell. Of course I wouldn’t.”

“Okay. That’s fine.”

“I’m sorry. That didn’t come out like I meant.” She was getting flustered, and I tried to salvage the situation.

“No, Mom, really, I wasn’t judging. It just surprised me, that’s all. It looks very bright and airy.” I also thought it looked very generic Suburban White People Chic, but I kept that to myself.

She led the way upstairs to my old room and pushed open the door. I paused on the threshold. She’d repainted here, too, but not *ecru*.

“Antique Rose,” Mom said.

“It’s almost the same color as it was when we moved in when I was a kid, isn’t it?”

“Is it?” She frowned. “I don’t remember.”

“I think so.” I set my bags down on the bed with a *whump*. “It looks nice,” I added, since Mom had the line between her eyebrows again. I actually preferred the old color, which had been a restful blue, but I hadn’t lived here for years. It wasn’t my place to police what color Mom painted her guest bedroom. Or the rest of her house, for that matter. Still, *ecru*. It’s like if you couldn’t decide on white or beige and combined the two for maximum blandness.

There was a doily on the chest of drawers. I eyed it warily. I have nothing against doilies, but they’re a slippery slope. You start with doilies, then pretty soon it’s crocheted table runners and then it’s a short step to antimacassars. As if doilies are some kind of larval form, and the table runners are an instar in their development. But then are the antimacassars the adult form, or just a later instar? Perhaps the adult form of the doily bears no resemblance to its juvenile stages.

“Mom,” I said, cutting off this chain of thought before it got any weirder. “I love you to pieces but I’ve been driving for three days and I think I need a nap. I’m getting loopy.”

“Oh honey, of course. You must be exhausted.”

“Eh, you know.” The one good thing about the dig being put on hold only a few days in was that I hadn’t yet made the drive up from my apartment in Tucson to the dig site in Oregon. (The phone call had literally caught me heading to the car that morning.) So instead I’d taken my already packed-up car and driven from Tucson to North Carolina, which is a longer trip, mostly involving Texas.

God, there’s just so *much* Texas. I could handle all the other states, but Texas lengthwise really breaks you. I attempted to express this to my mother, which

mostly involved wild arm gestures and the words *El Paso* uttered at intervals.

“Take a nap,” Mom advised. “I was going to order a pizza for dinner.”

“You are a saint,” I said, collapsing onto the bed. “An absolute saint. Did someone start delivering way out here?”

“There’s a place in Siler City that will. Do you still like ham and pineapple?”

“Very much so.”

Mom closed the door. I rolled onto my side, still thinking vague thoughts about doilies pupating. I had just gotten to the point of wondering if I could get a grant to study the life cycle of crocheted tablecloths when sleep overtook me.