

Excerpt from The Glass Madonna
By Donna Meredith

Prologue, June 1963

Pale morning light sliced through the Venetian blinds and laddered the top of the black enamel chest of drawers with silver stripes, pooling at last inside the object of Sarah's desire. Inside the one object in her aunt's bedroom that always commanded her eye. The glass Madonna. Every Saturday, Aunt Livvie parted with some small treasure squirreled away inside the drawers, but so far, she had refused to hand over what Sarah wanted most.

"If it broke, you could get hurt," Livvie said one weekend. The most crushing excuse of all—"You're too young"—tumbled from Livvie's lips another Saturday, and it wasn't the kind of blunder her aunt was prone to make. If anything, at eleven, Sarah considered herself too old for dolls, but the Madonna wasn't exactly a doll. More like what Sarah's mother would call a figurine.

Sarah sucked the last muffin crumbs from her fingers and traipsed behind her aunt toward the chest of drawers. Pain shot through Sarah's big toe as her sandal rammed the bedpost. It was her legs again. Her gross, spindly legs. They sent her elbows on a collision course with door frames and banged her knees into tables, causing purple splotches to bloom days later. By the time her mother asked what happened, Sarah couldn't remember. Her legs had stretched three inches taller since Christmas, making her the tallest kid in the sixth grade. A freak, except on the basketball court where having the longest reach was a good thing.

As they approached the Madonna, Sarah forgot the throbbing toe. She sensed rather than saw the celery walls, the slim stack of Aunt Katherine's books on the bedside table, the closet bottomed by Katherine's shoe collection and topped with Livvie's hat boxes, the shiny bottle of Estée Lauder cologne to the right of the comb and brush on the vanity.

Sarah offered a subtle hint. "Look how pretty Mary is. Doesn't she just shine with love?"
No reaction from Livvie.

Wispy curtains on either side of the black chest stirred with a breeze already beginning to warm though it was not yet ten o'clock. Instead of reaching for the Madonna, Livvie opened the middle drawer. The scent of lavender floated out. Anything might be inside those drawers: hand-painted fans, pink-beribboned sachet bags, beaded coin purses with scarab bracelets tucked inside. Treasures all, but not what Sarah wanted.

She twisted her torso from side to side, scratching the back of one calf with the sandal on her other foot. Her toe remembered the bang into the bedpost and protested this further abuse. A black and white photograph of Sarah's four aunts—old maids, her father called them—was propped on the right edge of the chest in a silver frame. Though Sarah had seen the photo a million times, this morning the resemblance struck her smack between the eyes.

"The Madonna looks an awful lot like you."

Livvie's laughter tinkled into the room. "Honey, this old lady could play the Wicked Witch of the West without make-up."

"No, I mean when you were young. The way you looked in that picture."

"Believe me, I wasn't much better looking then."

Despite her aunt's denials, certain similarities stood out. Narrow faces. Pronounced cheekbones. Barely upturned lips saying without words, *I am content just as I am*. Only the noses differed significantly. To Sarah, Livvie Heimbach had always seemed beautiful as she plucked the green umbel of a mayapple and offered it as an elf's umbrella along with a story. A

double-cupped acorn became a fairy telephone. A found arrowhead, the tale of an Indian princess. Sarah studied her aunt, really seeing her for the first time, comforted, that yes, she was wearing a cherry-print apron with the ever-present tissue tucked behind the bib. Yet it was a bit of a surprise to discover Livvie was pointy-nosed and so tall and thin the kids in school must have called her names, too. Toothpick. Spider legs. Bag of bones. Stand sideways and stick out your tongue and you'd look like a zipper. Sarah had heard every joke.

Livvie closed the first drawer and opened another. "Now, where did I put your little something? I'd have sworn—"

A cloud veiled the sun, and the Madonna's translucence faded to pearly gray. Sarah picked the figurine up and tried to change her aunt's focus. "What kind of glass is this?"

Livvie's eyes flicked up. She went back to rummaging in the drawer. "Satin glass. Some call it frosted."

Sarah set the statue down and traced an imaginary neckline under her collarbone. "I love satin. I'm going to have a satin wedding dress with gazillions of pearls sewn all over the top and a train so long it will take three bridesmaids to carry it."

"Here it is." Livvie held out a yellow-striped box with Bonne Bell lip glosses and cologne. "You're too young to be talking weddings, but you're about the right age for this, I expect."

Sarah whooped and hugged the package close to her chest, the Madonna forgotten momentarily. She remembered her mother's rule, and her smile collapsed. No lipstick. Not even pink. Eleven was either too young or too old for almost everything. Eleven stunk.

Her aunt seemed to know what she was thinking. "I already asked your mother and it's okay."

Sarah threw one arm around Livvie's waist, the other still clasping the cosmetics. "Thanks."

Livvie patted Sarah's springy curls. "Anything for you, honey."

Sarah loosened her hold on her aunt and tilted her head to one side, eyes cast upward. "Would you let me have the Madonna someday?"

She waited for Livvie to say, *Of course, honey, what's mine is yours*. Instead, wrinkles plowed her aunt's forehead. "The Madonna is passed to the woman in the family who needs her most."

No one could want her more, but how could you need a nine-inch tall figurine? "Hope it's me."

To Sarah's surprise, Livvie's face crumpled. Her bony fingers worried their way inside her apron bodice and fidgeted with the tissue. "Please don't wish for that. I'm going to pray right now you won't be the one." Livvie's eyes squeezed shut and her lips moved silently.

Sarah sucked in her lower lip. Holy cow, what had she done now? The injustice of the whole scene weighed upon her. She hadn't asked for anything outrageous. Only a figurine, for crying out loud.

A sour belligerence took hold in her stomach. "It's okay, I don't really want it anyway. I have lots of dolls."

When Livvie's eyes opened, her expression once again mirrored the Madonna's.