

THE VALLEY AND THE HILL



Martha A. Hood

Praise for *The Valley and the Hill*

Magic meets murder mystery in a sequel as engaging as its predecessor, and once again takes the reader inside a web of toxic but fascinating relationships, set against the gentrification of a beloved community. Those who live in Valletown long enough, regardless of their social stratum, develop Senses—but are these powers advantageous (imagine what they can do for sex!), or do they make life more complicated? . A saga of disillusion and change, and an ode to small-town nostalgia.

— F. J. Bergmann, poet, editor of *Star*Line*,
winner of multiple speculative poetry awards

Praise for *The Miasma Is Not for Us to Say* (companion story to *The Valley*)

An innovative take on a classic tale, *Miasma* examines the practical side of having an eldritch monster haunting your small town. Stephen King fans will enjoy finding the answer to the question: what if the only thing standing between you and Armageddon was the city council?

— Justin Robinson, author of the acclaimed
neo-noir pulp monster series *City of Devils*

A rollicking saga of horror meeting the quotidian, and my first encounter with a dead cat lady! Paranormal high jinks are set against down-to-earth efforts to manage quarrelsome neighbors and city government in a small coastal town. Hilarious and wistful, the book engages with the petty and destructive aspects of mundane human nature, as the miasma reaches out from beyond the grave to...run for political office? Which could give new meaning to “Foggy Bottom.”

— F. J. Bergmann, poet, editor of *Star*Line*,
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This is for anyone who feels disconnected from people, but also for the person who needs more space, and also for the person who feels both ways simultaneously.

Chapter One

Cold air rushed through the door of The Hideout, and Sara Piper's blistering emotions made a beeline for me. They hit me in the ear, a sharp tingling in the cartilage just above my top piercing. I knew who it was without looking, and wished I'd gone someplace different for a change. At the very least, I shouldn't have sat so close to the door.

"Dory Douce. Thought I'd find you here." She slipped onto the stool next to me. Bartender Morrie was right there for her order. She looked at my wine. "I'll have what she's having."

On my short list of things I dislike people doing is co-opting my drink order because they're too disinterested to think of what they want. But then, Sara often rubbed me the wrong way. Her feelings hit me hard, and some of them literally pained me.

"You're working the Stonecamp thing." It wasn't a question. She knew. Sara could Smell things the way I could Feel.

"Yeah. Why?" I wasn't up for this. Sara's emotions, negative and acidic, kept my ears throbbing and clashed with the loose and pleasant atmosphere of the room.

"I found out Janie's been working for them."

Oh, man. Janie Fortune was Sara's niece. "Was she there when it happened?"

Sara peered into her wine as if she might like to try scrying, a talent none of us had. "I texted her, and she texted

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back that she wasn't. I asked where she was, and she told me to stop texting her." She looked up to the row of bottles backlit behind the bar, glittering like stained glass. "My Nose tells me something's funny."

Her Nose could be formidable, but you didn't need to be a Nose for this. What happened up at the Stonecamp house was weird as shit. A death, an amputation, and a fire of unknown origin, all said to be accidental. "If Janie was around that night, she needs to come forward."

"Maybe you should contact her."

Well yeah, that made sense. "But wasn't she working for the Lees?"

"Oh God, that's ages ago. No. She quit to work for the Stonecamps. And guess what. She's a live-in."

"Didn't she have an apartment?"

"She gave it up." She shook her head. "That Toni Stonecamp is something else." Toni had become quite the woman-about-Valleytown. She'd chaired the annual gala for the museum back in September. She was on the Chamber of Commerce and the executive board of our local theater. "She's omnipresent," Sara said. "I think she's trying to take over the town." I laughed. "Why are you laughing? I mean it."

"She's an ex-model who fills her time getting manicures, buying expensive shoes, and swanning about charity events. Not like an actual *Real Housewife*, but kind of like one."

"Having a live-in is a status thing for those people," Sara said. By "those people," Sara meant not only the Stonecamps, but all the people who lived in the hills just north of the valley part of Valleytown. Hill people were a hobby horse of Sara's.

Morrie appeared with Sara's wine. I ordered another for myself, plus some pork sliders and fried okra for my dinner. I didn't always eat at The Hideout, but I was there a lot. It was always good, but when head cook Joe was cooking, as he was tonight, it was even better.

A flush of shame burned my ears. With Sara, it was always the ears for some reason. I assumed that was because as a Nose, she took pride in sniffing things out before the rest

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of us, usually thought she knew it all, and always wanted to tell you about it. This time, though, she had missed the boat, only learning about her niece's changed circumstances after it was a done deal.

"You can't know everything, Sara."

"I know," she said in a small voice. She quickly changed her emotional state back to aggrieved, which was easier on my ears—sort of a dull ache. "What gets me is she could do so much better. If she wants to work with children, why doesn't she go back to school and earn her degree? She could open her own preschool if she wanted. I told her I'd help."

"I take it she didn't want your help."

"She thanked me in that supercilious way she has. I don't understand; she's so stubborn sometimes." She sighed heavily. The wine had taken the edge off her complicated emotions for Janie, but she boxed me in the ear with a fist of sticky, ugly animosity. "I wish those Hill people would go back to where they came from."

The Hill people—you could hear the capitalization when she uttered the word—had started moving in over a decade ago. "They're here to stay, Sara."

She brushed right by that and nattered on about the sins of the Hill people. I tried to tune her out. I did okay with her voice, but not with her emotions. I ran my hand along the old and venerable bar top. Morrie delivered my food and second glass of wine. I gave a thumbs-up to Joe, behind the counter.

I wish there were enough wine and sliders in the world to quench Sara's obsession with her niece. Sara's sister had died five years ago, right after Janie's eighteenth birthday, and Sara had promised to look after her. Janie lived with her for a while, but it didn't go well. Now that Janie was mixed up with Hill people, Sara had another obsession to add to her anti-Hill rhetoric.

"They don't patronize our downtown businesses. They built that shopping center just for their people."

That wasn't remotely true. "They'll take anyone's money. The mall couldn't survive if it was just Hill people."

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But Sara was like a dog with a shoe. “You’ve seen their houses! Who lives like that?”

I was over my limit for the evening of engaging with all-Feelings-Sara. I answered with a shrug and applied all my energy to food and drink. I Felt her frustration at my refusal to engage, to agree—so we could further wind each other up; or to argue—so she could counter-argue. My ears and my nose hurt. As soon as possible, I swallowed my last bite and downed my last drop. I laid my money on the bar and told Morrie I didn’t need change.

If Sara were a Feeler like me, my resentment at her barging in on my dinner hour would have slapped her in the face. As it was, she snapped, “Do you have to leave right now?”

“Yes. Long day. Time to go home.” I smiled and walked away, not looking back.

“Keep me in the loop!” she called after me.

Per my usual, I’d left my car at home after my shift and had walked to The Hideout. The winter evening walk, stars twinkling between branches of valley oaks, rain in the air but not quite here, settled me a bit. Visitors to our town said the air smelled different in Valleytown. They weren’t wrong. Moonlight hit the buildings and lawns at different angles and with different intensity than other places.

My house, just five blocks away, had been described as an example of post-World War II vernacular architecture. I would describe it as a two-bedroom bungalow with a small porch and a nice backyard I rarely used. I loved the peace of my house, where I could shut the door, and other people’s feelings would stay where they belonged—inside the people who generated them.



Somewhere around 3 a.m., I sat up straight in bed. I clutched the edge of the mattress with my right hand, and my blanket with my left. My bedroom looked unfamiliar, like a holding cell at the station, gray splotches where my dresser and my

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chair should be, and cold shafts of light streaming past the edges of the window shade. A nightmare, centered around Sara Piper's personal shitstorm, had its fingers in my brain. This kind of thing happened sometimes, in spite of my pretty well-developed skills managing what I Felt from others.

Sara and I had known each other in high school—wouldn't say we were friends exactly—and had found ourselves working together after college, she in Dispatch and I as a patrol officer and later a sergeant in Investigation. Neither Sara nor I had ever married. Somewhere along the line, that linked us in her mind and made us fast friends.

By definition, a Nose was nosy. By contrast, a Feeler like me craved solid boundaries. The business of a Nose was to break down personal barriers and she was good at it, good enough to overwhelm me in the first place and give me a Feeling hangover after the fact. That's what I was going through now. Sometimes, the hangover was so bad that I suffered a kind of fogginess, like someone drunk. This wasn't that bad; still, I had an upcoming week off, and it was probably a good thing I'd be getting out of town.

I got up, went to the bathroom, then out to the kitchen. The refrigerator held some orange juice and half a cinnamon roll. I opened up the window over the sink and ate my snack at the kitchen table. The chill night breeze brought no wisps of Feelings from my neighbors. If anyone on either side of me was having a nightmare, it couldn't reach through my window. I was grateful the physical range for Feeling was small.

We didn't talk about our Senses that much in Valleytown. Some non-Feelers were afraid of me, thinking I could read their minds. Other non-Feelers didn't really believe in my talent. If someone asks, I tell how it works. When most people talk about feeling empathetic, they're like the legally blind person who can see light and dark and large objects well enough not to bump into them. Me, I Felt those feelings, in my ears, my arm, my face, my hands, neck. But that didn't mean I could Feel everything, all the time. Some knew how to hide.

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Sara, with her all-the-time drama hitting me in the face, was plenty trouble, but so were those who managed to craft a veneer of cool to lay atop their inner turmoil. Between those who displayed their feelings like a beloved collection of teacups, and those who hid their feelings as if they were a sink full of dirty coffee mugs, I preferred the teacups.

I would be going up to the Stonecamp house in a few hours. The case bothered me. An accidental fire that might not have been, a death, and a maiming. Damage and injury all around, except for one resident, Toni Stonecamp, who came away unscathed. And now possibly Janie. I wondered if Feeling would help me figure out what had really happened. It didn't usually.

I went back to bed and fell into blessed sleep. When I awakened, I called Sara. I couldn't Feel through the phone, and that sometimes made it easier to talk to her. I said, "Tell me why you think Janie is involved in this mess, besides the fact she's being evasive with you."

It came out then, a tale worthy of a reality show. It certainly didn't match what I knew of Janie, who—for all her butting of heads with her aunt—was basically just a shy, plain, twenty-something. I was surprised Sara chose the quaint term, *ménage à trois*, given her own time at the commune.

Jade Commune, just south of town, had operated for a decade or so as a somewhat polyamorous spiritual community. It became known for its homemade wine and apple cake. When the community broke up, or petered out, it evolved into a more mundane venue for weddings, memorials, business seminars, and other gatherings. But Sara had been a member of the original incarnation of the commune for about four years, back in her early twenties. I said I was surprised she would be that shocked at Janie's situation.

"There's nothing wrong with any arrangement that is mutually entered into," she said, "but any arrangement can be toxic, conventional or not." She was right, obviously. "That's why I wanted you to do this with me. You're so understanding. And people can't lie to you."

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Oh, hell. People lied to me all the time. I was a Feeler, not a damned polygraph machine. I could note discrepancies between what a person was saying and what I Felt from them, but like I said, some people were good at hiding.



I drove to the Stonecamps' first thing. Out at the end of town, on Baseline Road, traffic was just past morning peak. I turned up the hill, to the main gate. It slid open in response to my police transponder, and I waved at the guard as I drove past. Once in, I drove down streets and past houses that might have been built on another planet. They were tall and white, and they came almost to the street. The narrow front yards were planted with large, thick, alien-looking plants as odd-looking as the properties they graced. Gardeners mowed and blowed at every turn; I found the dust and noise distinctly unpleasant. I wound through streets and unexpected cul-de-sacs until I found the right one. The Stonecamp house glared at me in the morning sun.

Sara tended to speak about Hill people as if they were a coherent group. In fact, a Hill person was anyone who lived up here, on the hill. There was a small core group at the heart of the original development, of which the Stonecamp extended family was a part, but they were only a small percentage of the whole. The homes up here attracted buyers, some from the surrounding area, some from travelers who decided to stay, and even some from Valleytown proper.

I pushed the video doorbell and waited. I waited a while. I raised my hand to ring again, when I heard footsteps inside. Toni Stonecamp opened the door and posed behind the threshold like a celebrity on a red carpet, hand on hip, one foot forward, head slightly tilted. She was attired in a peach satin negligée and matching robe. Even though, at five past nine, she wasn't exactly dressed for the day, she was in full warpaint—perfect eyeliner, lush lashes, predatory red lips. Her curiosity at my presence on her doorstep tickled me; and

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it was weird, because it wasn't just in my neck, or my ear, or my forehead, but kind of all over. I shook it off and resisted the urge to step back.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mrs. Stonecamp, but I need to ask you a few follow-up questions concerning what happened the other night."

She tightened the sash of her robe. "Right now?"

"If it's not too much trouble."

She rolled her eyes, waved a hand, left the door open, and walked away. I followed her through the entry, into a great room larger than my house. The scale of the place was astonishing, the massive fireplace and mantle, the theater-sized TV screen, the miles of Carrera marble in the adjacent kitchen. According to the report, the fire damage had been minor and confined to the attic area. The first and second floors had been unaffected. I detected no lingering smell.

"I apologize for not being dressed yet," Toni Stonecamp said, although I felt no apology. "I was at the hospital late last night. They're so sweet over there, letting me play fast and free with the visiting hours." She smiled. "Would you like some coffee? I just made a pot." Without waiting for an answer, she pulled out a tray and two mugs. "Ed's doing better. The doctors are optimistic about his hand."

"That's good to hear." I wasn't feeling much from Toni, neither happiness nor relief. She might have been just as happy to hear the hospital had fed Ed Stonecamp's other hand to a shark, for all I could feel. I needed to feel her to figure out what was going on with her.

She found no reason, apparently, to spare a word for her deceased housekeeper. "Have you had a chance to speak to anyone from Ms. Fontenot's family?" I asked.

Her laugh grated like nails on a blackboard. "Oh my goodness, you're trying to send me on a guilt trip, aren't you?" She sighed. "I will call her husband in a day or two." As she added sugar and milk to the tray, the doorbell rang. She picked up her phone. She glared at me and her anger hit me in the jaw. "What is this? Are you ganging up on me?"

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She headed toward the front door, and I followed. The door opened on Sara, who smiled at me, but rolled a bundle of loathing toward Toni that made my ears ring. She blurted, “Where’s Janie?”

Toni looked at her like a predator would look at prey too small to bother with. “How did you get past the gate?” She nodded toward me. “Did you sneak in with her?”

Sara shook her head. “I parked down the hill and walked in. I want to know where Janie is.”

“I don’t know. Not here.”

“May I come in?” Toni shrugged, and opened the door wide. I wondered why. I still hadn’t gotten anything off her since the curious tickle. It was like she had no feelings at all. Then there was the question of what the hell Sara was doing here. I’d only been here a few minutes myself. I hadn’t seen her walking as I drove up; I must have just missed her.

“We were just going to have some coffee,” Toni said. “Perhaps you’d like to join us.”

“Certainly.” Sara was smug, triumphant. Proud of herself, I assumed, for worming her way in. No point in speculating what she hoped to accomplish by being here; for Sara, Sniffing out details was the goal. The more details, the better.

Toni fetched another mug. Sara caught my eye and drew my attention to a magnetic knife rack. The knives, like most of the kitchen implements on view, looked expensive and perfect. One large cleaver was missing, the one, presumably, involved in the accident that severed Ed’s left hand.

Toni set the tray down on the massive ottoman that served as a table for the massive sectional sofa and settled next to me, catty-corner to Sara. “So. What can I help you with, Sergeant?” She looked at Sara. “And you, Auntie Sara?” She fanned her fingers. “Whoever wants to go first...”

Sara’s contempt for her rushed in my ear like a wave. She didn’t like being called “Auntie” by this woman. (Neither would I.) At the same time, I was still having trouble Feeling Toni, so I was having a difficult time thinking what to ask her. Odd. “Are your children at school today, Mrs. Stonecamp?” I asked.

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I got another brief sock-to-the-body of contempt before a curtain fell. Yes. She knew I could Feel, and she knew how to hide. “It’s a school day. Of course they are.”

“I’m curious. I understand you’re employing Sara’s niece as a nanny. Why do you need a full-time nanny? Do your various charity projects demand that much of your attention?”

The emotion this question triggered made me jump involuntarily—a blue-hot pain (again all over) that I had to fight to keep from flinching. “I don’t have a nanny,” she said.

I eyed her silk robe and poofy mule slippers with little kitten heels. “Did you drive them to school like that?”

She narrowed her eyes. “They rode with a friend.”

“You *do* have a nanny,” Sara blurted. “Her name is Janie.”

“Janie is not our nanny,” Toni said. “She is much more than that. She is our dear companion.”

Sara struggled to speak, words coming out as if she wanted to choke on each one, her feelings echoing as a vibration in my ears. “The way you say it sounds creepy.”

“Why, Janie is like a sister to me.” A gush of love came out of her—overwhelming, pure love that warmed me but was transmitted as part of a performance. She had conscious control over what she projected. She could project fake feelings if necessary, I was sure.

“But you’re paying her, right?” Sara said.

Toni shrugged. “A person has to live.” Sara sat back and stared hard at her. And Toni stared back. The way she clenched her silk-clad knees made her look like a cat studying a cocky bird.

“I’d like to see Janie’s room,” Sara said.

Oh, Sara. This was supposed to be an informal inquiry, but having the dispatch supervisor who was also a close relative of one of our persons of interest take over the line of questioning was a bit much, even for Valleytown-style policing.

Toni stood. “All right. Come see, then.” She walked out of the room, to the stairs near the front door. Her amusement at Sara’s demand tickled me anew. It was getting annoying. She seemed totally unconcerned at this point. She didn’t have to

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show us a damn thing, and I was certain she knew that. This was not a woman who did things just because other people wanted her to. I wondered what point she was trying to make.

The huge landing at the top of the stairs formed yet another spacious living area, easily as big as my living room. Another large TV hung on the wall, and children's books and toys lay here and there. The hallway to the right led to the master suite; the one to the left, to four other bedrooms. Toni turned to a spiral staircase in the corner of the landing.

Sara stared this way and that. I snuck a glance in the four bedrooms on this side: two equally feminine little girls' rooms and two guest rooms. Toni gathered her robe in one hand, climbed the staircase, and smiled down at us. "Come on up. Take a look." At the top we ducked through a hobbit door and into an attic, fully furnished and clearly occupied as a bedroom. A sharp pain in my right ear signaled Sara's dismay. No way was this legal for occupancy. The spiral stair was equally non-code. I didn't recall any notes in the report about that.

"We still have a bit here we haven't cleaned up. We had a little water damage, too," Toni said, glancing at some singed beams and warped floorboards, "but we're very grateful the room was left habitable." She allowed me to feel her pride in the surrounding space, a full suite, with a queen bed, yet another television (smallest of those we'd seen so far), and a full bath. "Really, the damage is quite minor."

Amazingly, it was. "Remind me again how Ms. Fontenot knocked over the candle," I said.

My question threw cold water on her proud feelings, but she quickly recovered. All feeling vanished. "Oh yes, poor Blossom. Such a tragic accident." She strode over to one of the two gable windows in the space. "I don't know why she didn't use a stepladder."

Blossom Fontenot had fallen from the window on the right. It appeared the only way she could have accomplished that was to have climbed up on the dresser underneath. Meanwhile, Sara had become transfixed by the assortment of makeup spread out on the vanity.

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“What did she need a stepladder for?” I asked.

“I asked her to give the windows a little cleaning,” Toni said.

“Inside or outside?” I asked.

Toni frowned. “A bird pooped on it, so outside, of course.”

“Why not use a regular window washing service?”

She sneered. “Do you use a regular window washing service, Sergeant?”

“I have a two-bedroom cottage. No one’s going to die washing my windows.” She crossed her arms and turned her back on me. I went on. “So, Blossom attempted to reach the outside of the window by climbing up on the dresser. She somehow lost her footing, kicked over a lit candle resting on said dresser, thereby starting the fire, before tumbling out the window to her death. Is that correct?”

She turned slowly around to face us. “As I said, a tragic accident.”

Something was wrong with Sara. She was staring up to the rafters. She was too quiet. I couldn’t feel anything from her.

“Janie likes it up here.” Toni shrugged. “More privacy. Quieter.” She gave us a sly grin. “If anyone asks, her official bedroom is downstairs. She does keep some of her clothes in one of the guest rooms.”

Sara came out of her trance, and her emotions came around and thumped between my ears like an unbalanced spin cycle. “How dare you endanger my niece’s life in this fire trap?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake. You act like it was some kind of conflagration.” She opened the top drawer of the nightstand and grabbed something. “Let me show you exactly what happened.” She brushed by me, struck a match, and lit the candle on the dresser top. Toni was lighting a candle. Really.

I tried to step over and blow out the flame. Foot in the air, I was overcome with lassitude, a feeling—not my own, but so powerful—that I *had* to put my foot down. And it came down all right, not flat, but on its edge. My ankle turned, and I fell, knocking my forehead against the edge of the dresser.

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All the way to the floor, I kept my eyes on a smiling Toni Stonecamp, and, from the corner of my eye, I could see Sara was standing oddly still, transfixed by something only she could see. And now here I was, struggling to get up from the floor, not Feeling anything from either of them. My face was numb. I tried to get up but couldn't.

Toni was a Toucher, and she had Touched me, no doubt Sara as well. When a Toucher Touches out of the blue, you're caught flat-footed. You never see him or her coming. Toni had been Touching both of us from the time we arrived.

I smelled burning hair. My hair. The candle had fallen. I rolled toward the bed and shouted for Sara. I snatched a quilt off the bed and wrapped it around my head. "What are you doing?" Sara shrieked. "Janie's grandma made that!"

Once my hair was out, I pounced on the still-burning candle with the quilt and snuffed out the flame. I elbowed my way to a sitting position. Toni was gone, and the hobbit door was closed. I pulled my phone from my back pocket and called for backup. We never had to call for backup in Valleytown. Hardly ever. We talked, and Felt, and Smelled, and Heard, and Saw. We exposed ourselves to each other. We perceived reality clearly, and could come together in truth. What Toni was doing, with rare exceptions, just wasn't done in Valleytown.

"Toni's a Toucher." I pushed myself to my feet. I grabbed Sara by the upper arms. "You with me?" When she nodded, and hit me with a quick brush of reassurance, I went to the door, which I opened.

Toni stood at the base of the stairs, and she was laughing so hard she could barely speak. "Oh, the look on your faces! All from a little fire! Are you always so jumpy?"

Sara's anger cut. I rubbed behind my ear. She turned her face toward the dormer, and flared her nostrils. She Smelled something. She went over to look out. "That's Janie's car!" She brushed by me and ran down the stairs, plowing past Toni as well. She was a one-woman stampede, although I was right on her heels.

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Janie burst through the front door just as we arrived, holding her hands over her ears. “Oh my God, will you people shut up!”

I personally would hate being an Ear. To have a sound, a noise, suddenly burst into your brain, like the squeal of tires, or tuneless whistling, or a single word, a name, spoken over and over, and to know whatever was being said concerned you. And the sound never stopped until the Ear in question found out what was being said.

Janie turned to Toni, who had sauntered down behind us. “Why the hell are my aunt and her cop friend here?” She turned to us. “You better not have been snooping around in my room!”

Toni just smiled with one corner of her mouth and took a step back, the better to view Janie and Sara as they lit into each other with remonstrances, recriminations, and the rehashing of old tensions. That went on for at least five minutes.

I was struck by Janie’s appearance. I barely recognized her behind the curtain of super-straight hair and Toni-style eyeliner she’d adopted. Janie had turned herself into Toni’s mini-me. Meanwhile, Toni herself leaned against the stair railing, arms crossed, smiling at every punch and counter between Sara and her niece. I caught her eye, and her smile widened to a grin. “Stop it,” I told her.

She gave me a perfectly raised brow. “What’s that?”

“Stop Touching us.” Janie rolled her eyes. “Why are you rolling your eyes?” I asked her.

“It’s not like she’s the first Toucher you’ve ever met,” she said. “Every Feeler is a Toucher, if you’re honest.” The affection in the glance she gave Toni positively effervesced. It felt like champagne in my chest.

“Your employer here just knocked over a candle and started a fire while Sergeant Douce and I were up there,” Sara told her.

“Oh my God, did any more of my stuff get wrecked?” Janie looked up the stair.

“And you’ve no business sleeping up there,” Sara added.

Toni looked at her fondly. “She sleeps where she wishes.”

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Janie smiled back. "And where I'm welcome."

Toni took her hand and squeezed it. "You're always welcome." Well, ick. Sara was similarly disgusted, but Toni and Janie were curiously blank.

I heard cars and radios outside. Good. "Excuse me." I turned toward the door.

Toni charged at me. "This is my house! I say who comes inside."

I paused, turning back to her. "This is true, Mrs. Stonecamp. I suggest you calm down." I opened the door, spoke with patrol, and sent them on their way.

As soon as I shut the door, Janie barked. "This is bullshit. Why are you harassing my family? You need to leave too. Right now!"

I turned back to Toni. "Explain to me again how your husband's hand was severed."

Toni gave me a one-shouldered shrug. "A terrible accident. He was using a cleaver in the kitchen when the fire broke out. The cleaver slipped from his hand."

"Your tale matches the report so well," I said. As perfectly as her nail polish matched her lip color, I thought.

"But it wasn't anybody's fault!" Janie shouted. "And anyway, they've already reattached his hand. Everything will be okay!"

"Not okay for Blossom Fontenot and her family." Janie's resentment at my comment was a slap against my sternum.

It was possible Janie had started the fire—whether accidentally or otherwise—given that she was occupying the room, but my initial line of thought was that Toni's Touching unsettled Ms. Fontenot enough to cause her to fall, knocking the candle over as she did so. Blossom's fall may have been an unintended result, but if Toni recklessly endangered her housekeeper by Touching her, she could be considered culpable in the same way a drunk driver would after an accident. And I told her as much.

I was talking out of my ass, because Touching was not enshrined in law like drunk driving was. Touching wasn't

forbidden by law—how could it be?—but it was something we just couldn't allow to happen. My pronouncement left Toni as cool as ever, but crushed Janie into tears, and pushed her into Toni's embrace. Toni patted her head and made cooing sounds. She glared at Sara and at me. "Get out. Both of you."

I had to almost push Sara out. I attempted to hide my use of force by draping my arm around her shoulder and whispering that she should drop it. Her defeat and despair pulled on my earlobes. "Just for now," I said. "This isn't over."

As we reached the curb, footsteps pounded behind us. Janie. "You don't know me, and you don't know Toni. You know nothing, Aunt Sara. You need to learn to leave me alone."

"Sweetie, I'm just worried about you. You could do anything, go anywhere in life, but not stuck up here. You need friends your own age!"

"Don't tell me what I need." Janie was pouting now, and her resentment sprinkled across my chest like acid rain. "Anyway, they need me. With Ed in the hospital, Toni needs help with the kids."

"That's not your responsibility," Sara said. "You're not family. You're a free agent."

Janie shook her head. "This is my family now. I will take care of the children. I can explain things to them." After a moment, she added, "I love Ed and Toni. Both."

"They're using you," Sara said.

"Then let them. At least I don't have to Listen to them jabbering all the time."

Sara asked, "What happened to the cleaver?"

Janie stared daggers of hatred toward her. "How would I know? The police probably took it."

I shook my head. "The police didn't take it." But I had another question. "So, Ed comes home and cooks after working at his restaurant all night?"

Janie calmed into a dark, muddy sulk. "He's an executive chef and restaurateur. He's not really on the line most of the time. Still, cooking is his life. As you would know if you ever went any place decent."

THE VALLEY AND THE HILL

Sara scowled. “Not all of us feel the need to waste money on overpriced frou-frou food.”

Janie turned her attention to me. “Some of us don’t see eating every night in a butt-ugly dive bar-slash-burger-joint as some sort of great statement of authenticity. Some of us prefer to strive for something better.”

Surprised as I was that Janie was attacking The Hideout, I also got a needle-like poke in the chest. She was trying to get under my skin, but I wasn’t going to take the bait. “Come on, Sara. Let’s go.”

I turned, but Sara wasn’t budging. She kept staring at her niece. “What’s happened to you, Janie?”

“If you want to know ‘what’s happened’ to me, all you’ve ever had to do is ask. You’ve had plenty chances before this. Talk to *me*, not to everyone else in town.” She glanced, of course, at me.

“I talked, I asked, but you never answered,” Sara said.

“I answered. But you didn’t like what I said. Your problem is I never did what you wanted me to do.”

“Well, what you wanted to do was *wrong!*” She raised her arms. “I promised your mother...”

“I was eighteen years old when my mother died. Whatever you promised my mother is irrelevant. What happens to me now is up to me.”

I turned to Sara. “We’re leaving. Now.”

Finally, Sara deflated. “Give me a ride back to my car?”

“Of course.” I handed Janie my card. “Call me if there’s a problem.” She snatched the card from my fingers and flounced back inside.

Sara sat in my car, head resting on the dashboard. “I’ve lost her, haven’t I?”

I tried to be positive. “Never say never, and never say forever.”

She turned to me. “The two little girls. Why didn’t you ask where they were when this all went down?”

Oh, crap. I should have asked that. The responding EMTs should have ascertained the whereabouts of the children. Did

they? I wasn't sure. I couldn't remember. I felt like I was losing it. "I don't know." I shot a thumb at the house. "Toucher."

"I wonder if I should call Social Services."

I held up a hand. "Let's find out what happened before you do that."

"Janie would kill me if I did." But the thought of upsetting Janie both elated and frightened her.

"Calling Social Services is in itself a disruptive process. And, for what it's worth, I can tell you, just from talking to her for a few minutes, that Janie truly loves those kids. I can't see her allowing them to come to harm."

Sara shook her head. "Toni has Touched her. No telling what will happen." She tried to gather herself together, but fretfulness fell out of her like dirty laundry from an overfilled hamper. "Somebody needs to explain to Toni Touching isn't done here," Sara said. "If she's allowed to get away with that, she could change everything. She could ruin the town."

"We'll all buy ourselves giant marble countertops, put on heavy eyeliner, and straighten our hair."

"This isn't funny, you know. Why are you making a joke?"

Oh, the pain, whenever I tried to swim against her emotional tide. "Humor is my way of coping with difficult situations."

"Your way of coping when you're not drinking at The Hideout, that is." It wasn't worth the energy to be insulted; I had no energy left.

Valleytown bestowed its Senses on those who lived here. We weren't born this way; it was the place that made us so. And what made us so special could also turn us to a living hell. Sara was right. I would need to talk to the lieutenant about Toni and her Touching.



But before I spoke to the lieutenant, I needed to talk to Ed Stonecamp. I spent a few minutes checking my hair for unsightly burns. Having extremely curly black hair hid the damage well. Off to the hospital I went.

Acknowledgments

This novella was written during interesting times. I would like to thank my friends and family, who keep me relatively sane when the emotional noise gets to be too much.

Once upon a time, an editor rejected a short story with the comment, “This might be more effective as a chapter in a longer work.” I had had the same thought, but it was nice to hear it from a third party. I took that advice, expanded the story to novella length, and submitted it to Candlemark & Gleam, where Athena Andreadis accepted it and guided it to publication. Thank you to that original editor and thank you to Athena. It is always wise to listen to editors and consider their advice.

About the Author

Martha A. Hood lives with her husband and two old cockatiels in Southern California. During the last few years, she has renewed her fickle interest in gardening and improved her pie-baking skills. Her short fiction has appeared in a number of publications, including *Interzone*, *The Sockdolager*, and *Tales of the Unanticipated*. Her novella, “The Miasma is Not for Us to Say,” appeared in 2020 from Candlemark & Gleam.

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