



*The
Tapestry Baby*

CAROLE WATERHOUSE

She stood by the kitchen window that morning and looked at the distant hillside, slicing up banana truths that she dropped across her cereal. In another moment, she would begin making theirs, but with a different twist, lacing the bananas with arsenic.

Lacing. Where had such a word ever come from? She pictured herself working with tiny embroidery needles, converting the arsenic into a fine filigree. But lacing was what it said, giving her no choice in the matter.

And furthermore, there was the arsenic. What a trite, mundane way of doing it. If she were to murder someone, and she wasn't at all convinced she ever would, why not choose some method that would make use of her domestic skills? If it were up to her, she would try a heaping-sized serving of unpitted prunes—it takes only one to lodge itself in a throat—or use a triple dose of Clorox to clean the woodwork, allowing the fumes to overwhelm them in their sleep. Even the dishwasher provided its possibilities. She could let an invisible but toxic build-up form on their glasses, created by too many trips through the wash cycle and not enough through the rinse.

But no, it had to be arsenic, the one household product she actually had no idea where to buy. Once more it had come through all wrong, this perception of her, just as distorted as the milk-drowned banana pieces that would never again be capable of adding up to a proper whole.

And that thought set her to wondering. Where did the counterpoint of all these mistakes go?

Staring at the hillside once more, she chose a spot and said, *There, right underneath that violet shadow, that's where the truth must collect.* Then a phrase came into her mind— she wasn't sure from where—but she sent it off, hoping it would find its true audience along the way.

"There has to be meaning in the universe."



The Tapestry Baby



CAROLE WATERHOUSE



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

THE TAPESTRY BABY

© 2011 by Carole Waterhouse

ISBN 978-1-61271-000-6

Cover art © Natalie Draney

Cover design © April Martinez

All rights reserved. Except for use in review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means now known or hereafter invented, is prohibited without the written permission of the author or publisher.

"Zumaya Embraces" and the dove colophon are trademarks of Zumaya Publications LLC, Austin TX. Look for us online at <http://www.zumayapublications.com/embraces.php>

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Waterhouse, Carole, 1957-

The tapestry baby / Carole Waterhouse.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-61271-000-6 (print : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-61271-001-3 (ebook : alk. paper)

1. Pregnancy—Fiction. 2. Mother and child—Fiction. 3. Psychological fiction. I. Title.

PS3623.A8684T37 2011

813'.6—dc22

2011004831

For the lovers of horses



**“There has to be
meaning in the
universe”**



Vonnie

"I'd never seen anything like it. This huge bird just came swooping down on the highway—I swear its wingspan was broader than my car—then picked up a snake that must have been a good five feet long and dragged it up over the windshield. You should have seen this snake against the glass, its body perfectly limp, a thick black line that just kept coming. I remember thinking something like he must have accepted his fate, though looking back, all I wonder is how I kept from wrecking the car."

Vonnie said nothing, waiting for the rest. They had been driving less than fifteen minutes, and already her windshield was covered with white halos from Karin's breath. She glanced into the back seat at the baby, saw she was still sleeping.

"The first thing I did was look back at Anna in her car seat, make sure she was all right. Call it a mother's instinct, since there was no reason to think she was in danger. But when I looked at her, it was as though she wasn't even there. I mean, she was. I could still see her. But the shadow from those creatures covered her so completely, it was as though she had become lost in their black. I kept thinking, they're going to absorb her into themselves, then carry her away.

"It wasn't until I turned back and was looking at the road again, searching for a place to pull off, that I realized the shadow couldn't have been there. The snake and bird were long gone. It was as if they had disappeared, but their darkness stayed.

"I kept looking for some other explanation but there simply was none. And then, for no apparent reason, no sudden change in

the sky, no grand disbursement of the clouds, I looked back again, and Anna was smiling at me, her face completely bathed in the purest, pinkest light.”

Karin stopped talking for a moment and looked around her. Vonnie wondered if she was looking for something to show her, to give some idea of what the “purest pink” looked like.

“I felt at peace for a moment. Then I looked at that light and realized it was just as unnatural in its own way. And that’s when I became afraid, truly alarmed. I mean, first the shadow and then this bizarre light—they seemed as ungodly as the snake. And that’s when I knew it was something more, that a message was being sent telling me my baby was in danger.” Karin looked out the passenger window long enough that Vonnie turned her head, to see what she was staring at. There was a whole field full of longhorn cattle that looked oddly misplaced in the lush Pennsylvania farmland. Karin stared, long after the cattle were gone, then turned her head back.

“That was the first sign, the snake.”

Vonnie nodded, remaining noncommittal. She didn’t know much about Karin. They said now they had been friends in college, but that wasn’t really true. “On the verge of becoming acquaintances” would have been a more accurate description of their relationship back then. Vonnie had taken a couple classes with Karin’s roommate, had sat with her a few times in the dining hall. That was about the extent of it.

She had been taken aback when Karin walked up to her a little more than six months ago, hugely pregnant—as it turned out just days away from having her child—and sat next to her in a coffee bar, started talking to her as though the fifteen-plus years that had passed since they’d last seen each other had never occurred. Karin wasn’t necessarily what most people would call beautiful, but was striking in her own way, tall and red-headed, with a slightly ruddy look about her, a woman more at home in a Jeep than a Mercedes. Vonnie didn’t remember her, even after she explained who she was, but pretended to all through that meeting and a second chance one that took place a few weeks later.

She looked back at the baby again, thinking she wouldn’t be sitting there so quietly if she knew what this trip was about. Anna was awake, staring back, and she was struck again by just how much she looked like a caricature instead of a real child—face oval-shaped, not round like most infants’; forehead and chin curv-

ing back sharply. *Going through one of those stages*, was what she said to herself in more tactful moments, but the flat-out truth was that Anna's appearance was almost startling.

She knew it was an awful thing to think but couldn't help it. And she wasn't the only one. She saw the surprised expressions that appeared on other people's faces, the way they would quickly look away and then, when curiosity got the best of them, turn again with a stare they just didn't seem to be able to stop.

Vonnie's foot eased up on the accelerator, an unsettling thought just now occurring to her. If the baby had been born pretty, would Karin still be thinking of giving her away?

"Clarissa calls it all hogwash, but it's a sign. I just know it. There isn't anyone who can tell me otherwise."

Vonnie had no idea who Clarissa was but didn't bother asking. In their few times together, she had come to expect Karin's conversations to be full of unanswered whos and whats. In fact, they knew so little about each other, she wasn't sure why Karin had chosen her, of all people, to accompany her. But she had said yes right away. It was the kind of request you just couldn't turn down.

"I mean, the whole world is communicating with us."

Karin stretched out her arms, swooping them upward in a birdlike motion that practically consumed the entire car. A giant osprey, Vonnie thought, its wings flapping beside me.

"Every creature has its message. It's just a matter of learning how to listen."

Rocks have souls, the changing colors of leaves are a reflection of their personalities and nature creates its own paths, accessible only to those who truly know how to look for them. These were the lessons Karin had to teach, each of which she preceded with the expression "Don't laugh," a sure sign that someone in the past had. Her side of the conversation presented like a series of course descriptions for a community college catalogue, her personality a combination of Stargazing I, Self-Introspection II, III and IV (any instructor worth his salt would be able to tell in five minutes that she was advanced enough to skip I), Basic Floral Design—all that time living in the south had clearly left its mark—and, finally, Changing a Flat, because despite all her whims and flighty ideas, this was a woman who knew how to survive alone.

Most of Vonnie's friends just raised their eyebrows when she described Karin and her assorted topics of conversation. Their lifestyles couldn't have been more different.

When Vonnie had left this morning, it was from a larger than necessary house in one of the newer developments on one of the ridges that stretched eastward from the town of Four Gayles. She'd had to backtrack to pick Karin up at her rented trailer, small but clean—even the most gossipy of the friends would admit that—on a little corner of land located at the crossroads of two nondescript back roads. What most people wouldn't have understood was that Karin made Vonnie feel embarrassed about where *she* lived.

Whenever she listened to her friends' words of criticism, Vonnie always remembered that lull in their first conversation when Karin had paused unexpectedly during one of her long monologues about herself. Vonnie wasn't sure if she had been in the middle of describing one of her brilliant successes or dismal defeats—they all sounded the same after a while—but Karin had interrupted herself to say, "So, what about you? What have you been up to for the past fifteen years?"

The question was clearly meant as a joke. But what Vonnie found frightening was that a viable answer had actually come.

"I went to graduate school, married the same guy I dated in college, wrote for a while, now I'm teaching instead." She had listened to the silence that followed her words, knew Karin was expecting more. But all she could think of adding was, "Last week I ate healthy. This week not."

It wasn't that her life was terrible and empty. In fact, her problem was the opposite—it could almost be described as relentlessly happy. Vonnie and her husband had the house and cars they had always wanted, took many of their vacations abroad, always spoke kindly to one another, even had perfect respect for each other's need for personal space—except at night when their passionate and frequent love-making exploded all the daytime boundaries.

It wasn't that she didn't have the occasional longing, a few scattered disappointments. For instance, a full three years after the fact she was still convinced she should have painted the bedroom yellow instead of that overly mild green, that their last vacation would have been happier spent in Greece rather than Rome. The one true tragedy others saw in her life was the lack of children, but that had been by choice. Simply put, she was that person who not only checked for but actually found forgotten quarters in the coin returns of pay telephones, had drivers on fully parked streets

pull out of spaces just at the moment she needed one, would throw away sales flyers from department stores then just happen to show up on the right day.

The truly miraculous always seemed to miss her—she was not a winner of sweepstakes or lotteries—but the small details remained on her side. While no one could accuse her of having a free ride in life, she did seem to sail through with a hefty ten-percent discount.

Other people found her happiness not only boring to listen to but downright aggravating.

And that's how she had come to her present predicament. In terms of what she could say without annoying anyone, her life was pretty much reduced to a single sentence, a problem that carried over into her writing. Of course, there was the question of Martha. That remained her one great mystery, if not exactly a problem. But Martha, in her own way, was just as unspeakable.

Karin, on the other hand, had gone on and on, describing the series of relationships that kept her body moving geographically even if they had left her heart and soul hanging inert. She had been married to a poor man and a wealthy man and one who knew how to play all the roles in between. There had been something about a photography exhibit, a series of negative prints. Vonnie hadn't entirely followed her—Karin babbled on so—but there was one part that did capture her attention, something about the reversed photos showing a truer sense of reality by revealing the darker side of people's souls. She remembered looking at her own reflection in the window, superimposed over the other coffee drinkers, wondering whether others saw her as primarily light or dark.

She tried looking at her reflection now in the windshield as they drove along, decided it was mostly light. But the sun was shining brightly, the air crisp and cool, making it impossible for anything to look otherwise.

The car hit a pothole, and Karin came to life again; the bump seeming to jar the words out of her.

“And then there were the eggs.”

Vonnie thought, what eggs? Is she saying that's what's in the center of our souls? Then she realized Karin was just continuing her story.

“That was the second sign. It came with the ringing of the doorbell just a week ago, actually heralding itself in as though it understood its own significance.”

Karin turned her head so she was talking directly to Vonnie, and it struck Vonnie just how rarely she did that. Her eyes hardly ever made contact, instead seemed to skirt around the edges of people as though focusing on the souls of all the unseen beings she said existed around them.

“I opened the door, and there was this little girl standing there. I swear I’d never seen her before and haven’t since. She was standing there holding these two bright blue robin eggs, one in each hand, her arms outstretched. She was holding them carefully, almost as though she was afraid of them, their weight very carefully balanced in her palms.

“I didn’t know what to make of it. Full minutes passed while I just stood there, staring first at the eggs, then at the wisps of blond hair sticking out from her head. They gave her this odd, airy quality, as though I was to understand that she couldn’t be real.

“Then, without saying anything, she placed the eggs very slowly and carefully into my hands, turned around, and was gone. I was so frightened, so utterly terrified, I dropped both of them, felt these little spheres of potential life slipping through my hands.” She paused a moment. “And of course you know what that reminded me of.”

Without turning her head to check, Vonnie could feel Karin staring at her again. Yes—the phone call two weeks ago, Karin’s screams, her hysterical words. Really, she had suspected something much worse. She looked back at the baby, saw it was sleeping again, a series of tiny bubbles forming at its lips.

“So now there has to be a third sign.”

Karin didn’t say any more, didn’t need to. That’s what they were both waiting for, and presumably what the couple on the other side of the state was, too, although they didn’t know that part. The woman was some cousin of Karin’s. She and her husband had agreed to take Anna in—Karin’s idea, as a way of protecting her from herself—unless something happened during the trip, like this third sign Karin was waiting for, telling them to stop. If they did leave Anna there, everyone was calling it a temporary arrangement, but Vonnie was sure once Karin decided her child was safer elsewhere, there would be no bringing her back.

As for this mystical occurrence that was supposed to happen, Vonnie wasn't so sure, never being much of a believer in fate and the idea of the preordained. Even if it were possible, she thought Karin was trying a little too hard to control destiny. If a third sign hadn't come yet on its own—Karin had been waiting for a week—she didn't see how this drive could force the issue.

Of course, you've always been the skeptical one, haven't you.

She heard the words the way her mother always used to say them.

"If I hadn't been, and would have let you simply tell me about Martha, would I be on this journey now?" She said the words so softly, she was certain Karin couldn't hear them. But when she glanced over, she saw Karin watching her, clearly interested, as though she had caught her whispering some secret incantation.

Of course, Vonnie's mother would have been pleased she was trying to help Karin with her problems, unlike her husband Duane.

"You have no business getting involved. You know that, don't you?" That was his take on the situation, an opinion that had been freshly expressed just that morning, and for one brief moment, Vonnie's hopes had soared. They were going to have a fight, an out-and-out brawl of words. She imagined him expressing an ultimatum—she would not leave the house unless it was for good—maybe even strapping her wrists to the table or throwing her clothes in a suitcase, threatening to toss both it and her out the door.

But just as quickly as his temper lit up red, it extinguished itself.

"But of course, I can't tell you what to do. You have to decide that for yourself." And then he turned his back, the argument averted, his attention focused once more on the breakfast egg he was flipping in a pan.

Yes, she did have to go. But not necessarily for the reason she knew he suspected.

"You tell us how perfect your life is then exploit all of our problems." The comment, made at one time or another by just about all of her friends, was true. As far as anything about her own life providing inspiration for her stories, relatively-content ended up translating into without-a-doubt dull. How she envied the prison writers whose work she had picked up at a garage sale for fifty cents—they knew about suffering.

She was certain her life would have been filled with turmoil if she had just been born in a different time. The Gold Rush era, for instance. Nearly everyone failed then. Or in the Twenties she could have been a gun moll, spent her days riding around in a big black sedan eating peanuts while firing shots. She imagined herself taking a bullet next to her heart just before dying in her lover's arms, poetry and blood mixing together in her mouth.

Instead, for inspiration she turned to her friends' lives—their sons who vandalized cars, husbands who drove drunk. She had no problem collecting these kinds of details.

"You have this face that just seems to consume catastrophe," a stranger once told her, in this case, a woman on a bus who unexpectedly and without invitation started listing her life's tragedies.

Vonnie hadn't been the least surprised—everyone did it. Waitresses would pour themselves cups of coffee instead of her, stir in an extra spoonful or two of sugar to sweeten their disappointments as they described the details of each. Even doctors would bare their souls while examining her body, collecting their fears and their frustrations and disillusionment and slipping them underneath the paper of her throw-away gown.

And Vonnie would feel what they described, cry for their tragedies, experience a surge of real anger for each slight and injustice incurred. Their losses would be mourned, each and every one. Only occasionally did she feel that what she might actually be regretting was the side of her that had escaped all these problems, that her tears were for some lost vision of sadness in her own life.

As for her friends, she would try to console them by transforming their experiences into brilliant opening paragraphs and substantial enough second ones before their lives would slowly fizzle out, lost in a trailing line of blue ink. If they were frustrated that she used them for material, what would they have thought if she told them most of the time they weren't interesting enough to carry through to a second page?

Even the ones she most claimed as her own—the family stories she privately called her heritage collection—were based on borrowed lives. There was the one about the grandfather who could play the violin behind his back, the aunt who had mistakenly taken her future daughter-in-law's dentures home, neatly wrapped up in her morning newspaper. They were her stories, but by default, ownership claimed through lineage. Her publications,

those few she'd had, were mostly in obscure literary magazines, a venue she thought would at least offer her complete freedom in subject matter because no one much was likely to read what she wrote.

But people, she had discovered, had an uncanny ability to gravitate toward words that reflected themselves. They would find that one copy going for a quarter in a library book sale, randomly pick up the magazine in a store they had stopped in just to buy gum, or stumble across a tattered issue just lying there on a sidewalk, where it must have slipped out through a hole in some anonymous reader's trash. And they never, ever, were pleased with what they saw.

For a while, when she realized her own life was failing her in terms of ideas and that her friends were sick of her borrowing theirs, she had turned to newspapers instead. There were stories of twin sisters having twin abortions of twin daughters, a man who trained his pet falcon to swoop down from the sky and pull strands of hair out of only blond people's heads, a case of road rage that resulted in casualties but fortunately no deaths when a driver became frustrated because the one and only blue M&M from a package he was eating rolled inaccessibly underneath the back seat.

But the truth, editors seemed to think, was too contrived.

"You need to write about real people in real situations," one wrote back in purple ink.

And that's when Vonnie had decided the only way she was going to pick up a pen again was to mark student papers. Brushing off her old teaching certificate, she applied at the local high school.

"There to get material," she would whisper in a confidential-sounding voice, as though she expected few to actually understand. Giving myself an escape from those stories that just won't write themselves was the answer she offered herself, and then only in rare moments of absolute honesty.

But whatever inspiration she had hoped for was clearly nonexistent—that was the revelation she came to in less than a week. From the bored students sitting silently in her class to the whispering faculty members exchanging ratty lies in the teacher's lounge, it was clear these were storyless people. Martha remained her only interesting possibility, but she continued being her elusive self.

Then, out of nowhere, came Karin, the first person in ages who had tempted her with life's possibilities, even before this whole business with the baby started. Of course, she kept telling herself, material for a story wasn't her only reason for being on this drive. She was concerned about Anna, too. At least as much as anyone could be about a baby that was almost frightening to look at.

Everything deserves a home, no matter how ugly it is. Hadn't her mother actually said that once, talking about a stray cat? *And the best home is always with the mother.* That one she had definitely said—many, many times. It was one of her staple comments. Though in this case, Vonnie was inclined to agree with her. What a shame her mother was no longer here. At last they would have looked at something through the same eyes, maybe even to the point where Martha could have been relegated to the past.

As though she were capable of reading Vonnie's mind, at that moment, Karin again started listing her reasons why she thought what she was doing just might be right.

"There's no doubt they would be able to provide her with a wonderful life. They're educated people with lots of money, involved in all the right community organizations. They have the perfect resume for parents."

"But are parents' lives supposed to read like resumes?"

She hoped Karin's silence meant she was thinking this over but knew it probably didn't. She tried to think of the right words for telling her it was all wrong, that they should turn around and go home, but nothing really convincing came.

"It was an accident, that's all. One that actually never happened. Don't you think those people ever have accidents? Or close calls, which is actually what you had?"

Karin opened a bag of pretzels; a few fell out over the side that she didn't bother picking up. She took out a handful but didn't eat them, maybe just wanting something to hold onto.

"Maybe some calls are just too close. A second later, don't you realize what could have happened?" She was quiet for a moment, then continued. "I don't know the answer. That's what I've been waiting for. But I know something's going to happen. A third sign will come today—it's simply time for it—and then I'll know what to do, whether to drive on or have you turn around and take us home."

Vonnie wondered if maybe the whole thing was just a ruse. Maybe Karin was lonely—in fact, Vonnie was sure she was—

wanted to guarantee that someone would be here with her on this particular day. It could have been some anniversary she hadn't told anyone about, a date that held some significance.

But it was just as possible Karin really was thinking of giving her child away, had come to the conclusion she was an inept mother. And then there was the baby's appearance. Those eyes!

But Vonnie refused to let herself think that. Instead, she looked out the window, wondering what she should be searching for. Trees with babies falling out of them? Wild animals carrying diaper bags? Or maybe little girls sitting on nests hatching blue eggs instead of abandoning them. What was a surefire sign that a mother should keep her own baby?

The rural two-lane highway they had been following was beginning to evolve into a commercial strip. Over the top of McDonalds and Dunkin' Donuts signs, stretching out even farther into infinity than Walmart's parking lot, were the gentle foothills, the mirror image of the countryside they had just passed through. There was a shadow lingering over the most distant mountain. Did that mean they shouldn't travel any farther, that any future for a baby on the other side would be a dark one? Or what about the Toys R Us store right behind a sign saying that portion of the highway's cleanup was sponsored by a suicide watch group. Should they give that some ominous meaning?

Vonnie stopped at a red light.

"Maybe all you really need is a husband."

Karin pulled the ring off a soda can. The *sffpt* sound that followed came partly from the can and partly from Karin as her response.

"Just what I need, another disaster in that department. Maybe another one like the last, singing hallelujahs and praise the Lords the whole time he pushed me out the door."

Vonnie knew at least part of the story—the marriage on the East Coast and the marriage on the West Coast, with one final dip into the deep South. Three phases in three different moods in three separate locations. Karin's past formed a perfect triangle on a map.

From the bits and pieces Karin had offered about her marriages, Vonnie had come to the conclusion this final relationship was the one she still longed for, at least the way it had been in the beginning. She had joked about their ten acres, calling it her Southern Scottish Plantation, although she had never given a full

explanation of what that was supposed to mean. Vonnie guessed it was because they'd had to run it so frugally.

This husband apparently had come from a lone line of gentility mixed with poverty, of which he was the final descendant. The Scottish plantation was the remaining ten acres of a tract that had originally been a quarter of a county, this last little section populated by the two of them, one slightly swaybacked horse, lots of cats, and a handful of sheep. But even if his clothes were tattered and his pockets empty, apparently he had been able to play the gentleman part well. He possessed charms—Karin made that much clear—although what they were, exactly, remained unspecified.

But in the end, the conservative South had just been a few too many steps backwards for Karin. Theories about herbal remedies and emerging life forms that exist but are hidden to our eyes and the interior and exterior of people's souls being reversed just started popping out of her mouth for no apparent reason other than utter boredom. At the same time, her husband was being given a hefty dose of religion from a deacon's wife with whom he later confessed to having a spiritual affair.

"I guess their spirits accompanied them into the bedroom," was how Karin described it. "She apparently whispered Bible verses in his ear while he banged his heart out."

But their real love for each other, he said in tears, was a product of the mind. And during their joint soul-searching, the deacon's wife, also in tears, had opened his eyes to the potential evil of his wife's ways.

"So, what kinds of things do you and your husband fight about?"

Vonnie sighed. "Nothing."

Karin looked at her, actually appearing interested again.

"Nothing? You mean you never disagree?"

"We don't always see things exactly the same way, but neither one of us is ever intense enough about anything to fight. I've even tried sometimes to get it going, just to see what it would be like. But he doesn't really care all that much for shouting, usually gives in right away. And the few times when we have had a full-blown argument, he's taken the blame later, come home with flowers."

"So, what's the last thing you received flowers for?"

"He put his dirty dinner plate on the counter instead of in the sink."

Karin laughed. "That was it?"

"Yes. That was it."

"And for that you were given flowers. What a perfect little marriage."

Vonnie cringed at the words. Yes, a perfect marriage. Or at least a peaceful one. A relationship that thrived on the diminutive. How much more interesting even that argument would have been in Karin's world, where it probably would have turned out to be some mistress's dish, mysteriously mixed in with her own, the porcelain marked by a whole series of secret codes.

Once more that sense of longing occurred, that desire to stretch out toward life's possibilities. Maybe the house had burned down while she was away. Her memory had been bad lately. All it would take would be one forgotten burner. Or Duane could be meeting with the local news media right now trying to explain his surprise arrest that morning. Yes, stealing ladies' panties right off backyard laundry lines. It had been his secret, lifelong obsession.

The red light changed, and they rode on in silence. Vonnie rolled the window down a tad.

"What do you say we play a game. The first man we see will become your next husband."

Karin remained noncommittal, and Vonnie thought, What am I saying? Wanting her to keep the baby and now get married, as though these were the things that would solve all problems. She was starting to sound like her own mother. Was Martha haunting her to that extent?

They were in the outskirts of Four Gayles, the buildings dingy in the morning light. Despite the quaint name—most people who heard where she lived expected some cute little crossroads—the town was medium-sized and fairly industrial with a worn but at least surviving downtown. The name was a source of speculation, a point on which local historians still disagreed. Some said it was a variation of four gells, a reference to an Irish farmer's much sought after daughters in the early 1900s. Others said the town had always been a bit boisterous, enough that at one time it required four gaols. A couple of old-timers vaguely remembered a summer of unusually high winds and fierce storms.

Vonnie hesitated at a yellow light then stopped too abruptly when it turned red, causing Karin's can of soda to spill out all over the place, the jolt waking the baby with a whimper that any second now would become a full-blown cry. As they sat there, a man

passed before them in the crosswalk, a bundle of clothes rolled up beneath his arm.

“What do you think of that one? He has an eligible look about him.”

As though he had heard what she said, he stopped and turned his head and looked at them. His hair was slicked back into some kind of twenties style, although the clothes were nothing but contemporary shabby. Vonnie looked closer. On his lips – was there a touch of lipstick, the cheeks a dot of rouge?

He wasn't bad-looking, actually, as long as you restricted your vision to the neck up. It was a wonderful movie-screen face hovering over a Goodwill body.

She looked around, wondering where he had come from. The shabby hotel on the other side of the street, where a half-falling-down sign said single rooms were rented out as efficiencies one week at a time?

Then she saw another figure, a woman dressed in white, also clearly from the past, standing on the curb waiting for him.

“Did you see that –” She stopped in mid-sentence, uncertain exactly what it was she *had* seen. A funny-looking man, that could be said for sure, but now he seemed like so much more. And then, suddenly, she knew who he was.

Ted – was that his name? The strange little music teacher all the other faculty whispered about being a eunuch? Students made fun of him because his zipper was always half undone, sometimes with his white shirttail partially sticking out like a slightly worn flag. Most likely he bathed, but his hair perpetually had the look of being one day late for a shampoo. He had a rich baritone voice, though, one that sounded as if it couldn't possibly go with him. People who first met him were always looking over his shoulder trying to see who was talking. Joe Deitmahler did an impression of Ted in the faculty lounge the day he cracked up, said he had walked right up to him and announced he was having a nervous breakdown in B-flat.

Was this really him, in some new slicked-down version? And that woman waiting for him. Wasn't that just how she had imagined Martha in one of her more recent reincarnations?

Karin was bent over, cleaning up the spilled soda with a spare cloth diaper, the presence of which seemed to be the biggest concession toward being a mother she had made so far that day. She appeared to be completely unaware that Vonnie had said any-

thing. The baby's murmurings had steadily grown into a high-pitched wail in the backseat, the sound of which even tugged at Vonnie's motherless heartstrings.

But Karin just sat up and stared straight ahead, holding the soda-soaked diaper in one hand as it dripped everything she had cleaned up back onto the floor. She didn't look back at the baby, not even indirectly in the mirror, gave no sign that the now-piercing cries even reached her ears. For the first time, Vonnie started to believe that Karin just might be capable of giving up this child.



**“There has to be
meaning in
Mama’s universe”**



Neddie

He didn't know the name of the dance they were doing, just felt Mama's big sweeping motions carry him along, occasionally lifting him so that his toes dragged lightly across the floor. One, two, four, he counted, leaving out the third step to keep up with her.

She laughed and picked him up, giving him a kiss square on the lips, then gently pressed his face into the creases of breasts he swore smelled like milk. There was a taste that came into his mouth, and he made small sucking sounds, remembering.

"Make Mama happy. Please Mama. Keep being Mama's precious boy."

The words came to him in echoes, like the sound of the notes he'd heard playing in his mind before she even sat him down at the piano.

"Play for Mama. Make Mama proud."

And stretching out fingers that couldn't quite reach the chords, skipping over notes that didn't fit his hands, he conjured up an image of Mama in the music, F# bringing her smile, G for the green green green of her eyes. He played and played, constructing her one note at a time until she was there, his image of her and the actual woman standing side-by-side—except the face on the one he created was a slightly purer white, the hair curled more perfectly around her chin, the skin smelling faintly like the lilac bush out by the back porch swing instead of last night's dirty dishwater.

"Play for me, my little love."

She lit a cigarette and paged through a magazine, hearing the music only when it stopped. Her foot tapped out a rhythm that had nothing to do with either the music he was playing or the tick tick tick of the clock behind her—the poor man’s metronome, she called it in her rare laughing moments. Mama lost in her own world again—he played to bring her back—a lonely E to reach out to her, then the A-minor chord of his arms wrapping all the way around her.

Then, gradually, it all changed. Mama was wearing a white hat with a lacy veil that she lifted to show a smile full of slightly yellowed teeth.

“Come kiss me.”

For the first time, he didn’t want to. She ignored the way he turned his head, pushed her lips up against his, pressing hard, until he was certain he was licking the lemon-yellow stains right off her teeth, their bitter taste ebbing into his mouth. Then she put her arms around him and started the dance steps, pushing his legs along the floor even though there wasn’t any music. He stumbled backwards, missing the third step and then the fourth, until Mama pushed him away, rubbing her skirt with both hands as though his presence had turned to bread crumbs she had to brush away.

“Well.”

It was all she said, the word coming quick and sharp like the tail of a whip, and he patted her, trying to make up, caressed her, sang a song in his mind to cover up the sour smell of her dress until she finally relented and whispered softly “Touch me, touch me.”

Years later, as she sat frail in a nursing home, he asked the question, phrasing it gently, carefully. Even then, weak enough that she could barely lift her head from the pillow, the fear she created in him was enough to set his blood tingling.

At first she was off-hand.

“The Depression, women nursed longer back then, a simple matter of dollars and cents, especially when raising a child without a father. It couldn’t have been long. You developed teeth before most babies—that I distinctly remember.”

“I wasn’t raised during the Depression.”

“No, but I was.”

But we’re talking about my weaning, not yours. He never said that, of course, by then willing to let the subject drop, curious even why he had asked about that and not the absent father. He must

have questioned that openly, too, at some point in his life, but he honestly didn't remember.

His mother, though, refused to let the subject drop, becoming more agitated, as though in silence he was still arguing with her. She sat up—her whole body shook with the effort—and she wouldn't let him ease her back down, refused to let him touch her.

"You've made it all up. Every bit of it. Why, we never even had a piano. Where would the money have come for something like that? And these things you are saying. How could you accuse your mother of such things? You're the monstrous one, not me."

But he did remember. Distinctly in some ways, a blur in others. And it all changed the day he discovered he could make her cry by biting on the breast, actually pulling the nipple through his teeth, although at first he thought the tears dripping down his cheeks were his, not hers.

He couldn't say for certain whether it took weeks or months or years, but she went from smelling like milk to a slightly over-ripe peach and finally stale cigarettes, the point at which she finally stayed and the awareness of which marked his true rebellion. Instead of conjuring her, the piano became a way of erasing Mama, replacing her with images of other women. Long-legged movie stars, a redheaded actress on TV—he played one series of arpeggios after another, each note creating a certain smile, or a tilt of a head or, sometimes, in his more aggressive moments, hips so full his arms would extend to opposite sides of the keyboard trying to grab them.

But Mama always interfered, coming up behind and laying a hand on his shoulder, one finger lightly tickling, sliding down his arm, then the other hand on the other side, working it all into a caress. Once, he had stopped playing, turned around and slapped her hard across the face. It was the last time they touched, other than in occasional awkward moments, usually by mistake.

But that was all in the past. Supposedly forgotten. Sitting here in the high school principal's office, perhaps, had brought it all back, although he was a music teacher with a problem, not a child being admonished.

"I'm sure you can manage just fine. Seems to me a man with your talent should be able to make wonderful music with eighty-five notes. How much could three more possibly offer?"

The high school principal cracked him jovially on the back, and now, twenty-three years later, he felt the sting of his hand

against his mother's face, imagined that same slap finally making its way full circle.

"I knew when we hired you we were getting a man of real talent. If anyone can work around it, you're the one."

"But no one can." His voice sounded weak, even to himself.

The principal's laugh, on the other hand, was strong and robust.

"Well, you know the key word around here – budget, budget, budget."

The principal stood, and Ned did the same. Then the hand that had slapped him on the back reappeared at waist level, where it gently guided him out the door.

But when Ned reached the hallway he didn't move, just stood there listening to the rising echoes of the screams and laughter of the students. He felt a sudden urge to cry out, adding his frustrated voice to theirs. He turned and stared at the PRINCIPAL sign on the door that had just slammed shut behind him, remembered looking at it for the first time twelve years ago while he waited for his interview.

A temporary job. Just to get him through music school. And then he'd stayed – the comforts his salary offered were small, but there. Slowly, the compositions he started creating, and then just dreamed of creating, disappeared altogether, until the music he heard most often was the sound of cracked plaster falling from the ceiling and the high-pitched clang of the radiator pipes as the school slowly continued to deteriorate in both body and spirit.

Budget cuts. It was the reason they had given him four months earlier not to repair the one key on the piano that had broken before the Christmas concert, what they were still saying now that two more had followed suit, no matter that his biggest event, the Spring Pageant, was just three months away.

What difference can three little notes make? What difference, since no one ever comes, was what he probably really wanted to say. And it didn't help that what crowd there had been were swept off their feet at the Christmas concert, a true standing ovation despite the one missing key that had plagued him at that time. Middle C. He had actually managed to arrange around it. He told himself even its name suggested all that was mediocre in life, convinced himself that pauses would be more effective.

And the ovation – he was certain it was real, not just the result of all those tired backsides squeezed into stiff auditorium chairs.

Ten full rows of hands all clapping, keeping him there a moment longer, refusing to let him go. Even Rita McAlester, who had called him up angrily the week before, her daughter Danielle overlooked for one of the lead parts, had been there in the front row, tears rolling from her eyes.

His inspiration had a name – Dorothy. He let the syllables sing across his tongue. She was the only reason he had been able to do it. It had all come as a result of her daisy-like skin, hair that stuck out in gentle wisps like a smoke halo that perpetually surrounded her head. She was there every moment he played, her hands lifting his fingers, leading them lightly across the keys. He would play arpeggio after arpeggio, working his way down the keys, extending the pause at the end ever so slightly while he imagined her sweet lips against his.

And then his moment of brilliance, extending the pause just half a second longer, raising a slight “oh” of anticipation within the audience as he kept his head turned in Dorothy’s direction. It was a heavenly pause, one that not only raised his playing to a spiritual level but also gave him an opportunity to make sure Mama wasn’t peaking around the stage curtains.

The one missing note had, oddly enough, added to the music, its absence lending a soulful sound, a sense of longing and mystery, like two hands reaching out to one another but never quite joining. Two notes had been workable, bringing it all back to the point of being even. But three notes were too much. Three notes were erasing her, taking the smoke rings of her hair and quietly blowing them away.

That’s what enabled him to bolster up enough courage to go back into the principal’s office, seat himself in the chair while absently rolling his necktie up and down on his finger, the words for what he wanted to say coming no easier than the missing notes on the piano.

“But I’m losing her.”

The principal leaned forward with his elbows on the desk, gave the appearance for the first time that he might actually be listening.

“Losing whom?”

Ned heard the emphasis in those words, that “oom” syllable booming, creating a hopelessly low harmony sound to which his words of melody just wouldn’t come.

But while he couldn't voice the real reason, he clearly had to say something—even the most artful use of spaces and silences wasn't going to get him out of this one.

"It's the flats. They've all been lost." He didn't intend it to make any sense, just had to say something to get out. But the principal nodded his head as though he finally understood, looked out the window as though he, too, could see the lost notes making their way across the distance.

Ned took the moment to escape from the office, went into the silent auditorium and opened the keys to the piano. A round of applause filled the room, just as it always did, a replay of the standing ovation that had taken up permanent residence in this room, filling up the cracks in the floors, illuminating the darker corners ever since the night of the Christmas concert.

He didn't bow like he sometimes did, instead just gave a sad nod of his head and sat down. He played one note and then another, his hands filling up the keys. Dorothy was there for a moment, even offered a smile, as though she saw what had been happening over these last few weeks.

He played on, each note he skipped adding a new wrinkle to her skin, converting the satiny threads of her fine dress into a skirt and sweater made of over-washed wool. A cracked button dislodged itself from her blouse. Another quickly followed. Then the whole image seemed to droop, the heels of her shoes, flats now, became run over, the stockings sagged.

And there she was, the transformation complete. He hit the last note hard, two thuds of a D-minor chord and the image stood before him, its lines more solid, more clearly defined than anything he had created before. He looked into her gray washed-out eyes, gazed at her thin, colorless lips. There was nothing wisp-like about her, just a general brown haze that seemed to cover her from head to toe. His heart beat out the sound yes, yes, yes, its steady rhythm tapping away any other feelings that had been there before, erasing that other image entirely from his soul.

And then he recognized her, the new love of his life. His heart was beating in pangs for the dowdiest of librarians, Mrs. Brown.

TITLE: *The Tapestry Baby*

SERIES:

VOLUME:

AUTHOR: Carole Waterhouse

GENRE: Fiction/General/Women's Fiction

PUBLISHER: Zumaya Publications LLC

PUBLISHER WEBSITE: <http://www.zumayapublications.com>

IMPRINT: Embraces

RELEASE DATE: April 2011

ISBN: Paperback: 978-1-61271-000-6; ebook: 978-1-61271-001-3

FORMAT: Trade paperback, perfect bound; \$16.99; 332 pp.; 6x9;
ebook, \$6.99

For review; publicity@zumayapublications.com