

*[Excerpt near the beginning of the story – no spoilers]*

...Chessa stole to the window. Birds of all shapes and sizes crowded the various bird feeders in the yard. A family of squirrels dined at a munch box. A twinge of worry pierced Chessa's heart. Who would restock the feeders while she was gone?

*Don't think about them. Run!*

Chessa refocused on the grounds. She had a clear path and plenty of thick trees for cover. None of the sheriff's men were scouting the backyard. The guy in the baseball cap and the few gawkers that had doubtless remained were nowhere in sight.

To mask the sound as she unhinged the lock on the bathroom window, Chessa grunted loudly. Then she tiptoed to the door leading to the living room and listened.

Deputy Keegan was tapping his foot on the floor, probably trying to block out her sounds of distress.

*Perfect.*

Chessa removed her gown, every hook and eye on the bodice difficult to undo. She let the gown slide to the floor and noticed a silver grommet clotted in a splotch of blood on the skirt. The sight sent a shiver through her. Where had the grommet come from? Not from her gown. Not from Zach's costume.

*Don't think about it. Move!*

She threw on the bra, T-shirt, and shorts, shoved her sore feet into sneakers, climbed onto the toilet, and eased out the window.

For the first few hundred yards, Chessa zigzagged from tree to tree, focused solely on keeping hidden. In the shadow of a pine, she paused to catch her breath. Her skin crawled with dread. What was she doing, running from the law? Because of her father's

history, she had spent her life obeying the law: full stops at stop signs; crossing at crosswalks. But, now, because of her father, she was fleeing. Guilt swept over her. What kind of wife was she? How could she leave her husband at a time like this? She considered turning back, seeking her stepfather's help, and throwing herself on the mercy of the court.

A chorus of *guilty* rang out in her mind, the children from her youth taunting her, their words tearing into her soul.

She had to run. Had to learn the truth. She couldn't be naïve any longer. Her fantasy life with her husband was over.