

## The Metal Grate Mystery

**Hushed** voices drifting up through the black metal heating grate on the floor of her room awoke Jamie Steele from a restless night's sleep. She threw back the tangled sheet and pushed a strand of nondescript, brown hair away from her forehead. She rolled over onto her side and propped herself up on one elbow to better make out what was being said in the kitchen directly below her. Her empty stomach growled in protest. She tried to remember the last time she'd eaten, and vaguely recalled part of a ham salad sandwich she forced down yesterday afternoon at the persistent requests of her Aunt Marty. She wanted to blame her poor night's sleep on her empty belly and the stifling heat, so unusual for this early in June, but knew immediately neither had anything to do with it.

From her position on the bed, she couldn't decipher a word of what was being said in the kitchen. She eased herself out of bed so the squeaky springs wouldn't give her away, and moved to the grate in the middle of the floor. The grate was an ideal tool for eavesdropping; she could see through it into the room below if she got down on her belly. At one time, it provided a means of discovering whatever the adults were involved in that they deemed inappropriate for her tender ears. It was how she discovered Aunt Marty and Uncle Justin would never become parents. Before that day she always thought having babies was what married people did, the same as going to work and paying taxes, until she heard Aunt Marty crying as Uncle Justin quietly explained to Grandma Cory what the doctor had said.

Lying on her belly on the floor, hovering over the grate, was where she listened to Grandma Cory argue on the telephone with the Veteran's Hospital doctors when they suggested that she put Grandpa Harlan in a nursing home where he could be properly cared for. That notion went over like a lead balloon. *Nobody* told Cory Steele she couldn't do something properly.

It was where she listened to her repentant father explain to Grandma why yet another boss "let him go", and then borrow money from her in the next breath. He always promised to stay out of the bars and the pool halls this time, but Jamie and Grandma Cory both knew that's where he'd be come sundown.

If not for the metal grate, Jamie would never know anything that went on in her own house.

"I only pray Jamie and Cassie don't hear anything about this; today of all days," Grandma Cory was saying from the kitchen below.

Jamie was instantly all ears. She dropped to the floor and peered through the grate. She easily pushed aside the fleeting pang of guilt for eavesdropping. Grandma Cory would throw a fit if she knew she was listening, but this concerned her and her younger sister, Cassie. She had every right to know what all the whispering was about. She was seventeen-years-old, for crying out loud; almost a legal adult. Regardless of her indignation, she held her breath and remained perfectly still so the floorboards beneath her wouldn't creak.

Seated next to Grandma Cory at the kitchen table was her sister, Great-aunt Emmy Lou, and a neighbor, Grandma Cory's closest friend, Fran Mendenhall. The two

women must have come by early this morning to help with the chores, like they had done for the past two days, and now they were having breakfast.

“That was so long ago, honey,” Jamie heard Aunt Emmy Lou say.

“They never did find a body,” Fran added.

“And they never will,” Aunt Emmy Lou stated. “She’s probably living it up in California or somewhere, not concerned in the least about all the trouble she’s stirred up.”

“I doubt that. She would’ve turned up after all these years if she was still alive.”

Jamie frowned and leaned further over the opening, her nose pressed against the cool metal.

“If she’s not alive somewhere, then what became of ‘er?” Fran wanted to know.

“There’s no proof she’s dead. There’s no proof she’s alive. How can anyone think James did anything to her?”

Jamie gasped and clasped her hand over her mouth, hoping they hadn’t heard.

Who was this person they were talking about, and what did she have to do with her dad—more importantly, why would Grandma Cory be discussing such a thing?

The resignation sounded loud and clear in Grandma Cory’s voice when she spoke again. “I don’t know. I was beginning to think everyone had forgotten. I should’ve known no one in this town ever forgets anything.”

“Nothin’ like this anyway,” Fran agreed.

“Well, to be fair, if James would’ve left that girl alone, they never would’ve thought he did anything to ‘er.” Aunt Emmy Lou took a sip from her coffee cup and cocked one eyebrow. “Just like the Good Book says, ‘You reap what you sow’.”

“They were only dating, Emmy,” Grandma Cory said, jumping to her son’s defense as usual. “Are you saying he shouldn’t have been allowed to date whoever he wanted?”

“Don’t go puttin’ words in my mouth, Cory. I wasn’t sayin’ that at all. But since you brought it up, she was a little out of his league, don’t you think?”

“Why? Just because she came from one of the richest families in Jenna’s Creek, she didn’t have any business with someone like James? I can’t believe you said that.”

“There you go again...puttin’ words in my mouth.”

“Well then, what were you saying?”

Fran jumped in. “Ladies, let’s not say somethin’ we’ll regret later. All that matters is those poor girls upstairs. First they lose their mama, and now their daddy. We have to think about them. They shouldn’t have to see their aunt and grandma going at it like two ol’ alley cats.”

The reality of the day came rushing back to Jamie in an instant. A sick knot replaced the hunger in her stomach. The steadily rising temperature in her tiny, airless bedroom was all but forgotten. Her father, James Steele, was dead... Today his body would be laid to rest next to her mother’s at Bishop Hill Cemetery on Bishop Hill Road.

Fran’s voice finally broke the silence in the kitchen below. “Cory, have you thought anymore about sendin’ the girls to the Sharboroughs’ this summer?”

“Yes, I have. I think it’d be a good idea for them to spend time with their mom’s folks for a while. At least till people stop talking.”

No way, Jamie told herself. She loved her mother’s parents and enjoyed spending time with them, but resented being carted off to their house in the city so Grandma Cory could make sure she wouldn’t find out whatever was going on around here. She wasn’t a

child anymore. She had every right to know what everyone in Jenna's Creek was already talking about.

Through the metal grate, she saw Fran nodding her head. "I think that's the best thing—just till things get back to normal."

"Normal?" Aunt Emmy Lou grumbled. "There's nothin' normal about this. You were wrong to keep it from them for so long in the first place."

"Maybe so, but it was my decision."

Before Jamie could puzzle too long about the decision in question, Aunt Emmy Lou's next words made the hair stand up on the back of her arms.

"When they hear he was arrested for murder, they should hear it from you."

Jamie's heart plummeted. Murder! *Her dad* arrested for murder?

"Who says they ever have to hear it? And besides, he was questioned, not arrested."

"No, he was arrested," Aunt Emmy Lou insisted. "Wrongfully so, but arrested nonetheless."

Fran seemed to agree with Aunt Emmy on this point. "Cory, you can't keep tellin' yourself they'll never hear the stories about James and that poor girl. It's no small wonder they haven't heard anything before now. Nobody in this town can keep anything quiet. I remember when Vesta Purdy's husband went to fight in Korea and she started running around with that Johansson boy. What was his name? Victor? No, that's not right..."

Grandma Cory interrupted Fran before she could get so far into her story she forgot the point she was trying to make. "The girls haven't heard anything because I've been careful. They've had enough troubles to grow up with, without listening to a bunch of unfounded rumors."

"His arrest wasn't an unfounded rumor," Aunt Emmy Lou exclaimed, forgetting all about Vesta Purdy and her alleged boyfriend whose name no one remembered after all this time. "It really happened. You should've told 'em about it years ago."

"And I'm telling you, right or wrong, it was my decision to make," Grandma Cory hissed. "Now, kindly keep your voice down before you wake Harlan. He's been a trial in himself the last few days and I want to keep him asleep as long as possible."

*Streams of Mercy* is the first in a series of "Jenna's Creek Novels by Teresa Slack. ISBN#0972548653 available in most bookstores or by visiting the Publishers website at: [www.TsabaHouse.com](http://www.TsabaHouse.com)