

A hand holding a stem of pink orchids against a blue sky with clouds. The orchids are in various stages of bloom, with some fully open and others as buds. The hand is positioned at the bottom, gripping the stem. The background is a bright blue sky with soft, white clouds. The text is centered on the left side of the cover.

*The*  
**First**  
**Gardener**

*A Novel*

*Denise Hildreth*  
*Jones*

# Praise for Denise Hildreth Jones

## *The First Gardener*

“Jones’s latest reaches into the depths of the reader’s soul to show the light and strength God can give, even in the midst of the greatest darkness. [Her] ability to convey real-life emotion without sugar-coating, yet still providing hope, elevates this novel above the rest.”

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“[N]othing less than a spiritual odyssey of inner reckoning.”

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“An engaging read of real-life vignettes and relationships. I read it cover to cover. As Savannah discovers her beliefs, values, and passions, the reader will be looking into their own ‘mirror of truth.’”

**NAOMI JUDD**

*The*  
*First*  
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*Savannah from Savannah*

*Savannah Comes Undone*

*Savannah by the Sea*

*Flies on the Butter*

*The Will of Wisteria*

*Hurricanes in Paradise*

*Flying Solo:  
A Journey of Divorce, Healing,  
and a Very Present God*



*To those who have ever needed a friend  
to walk through life's tough places with them . . .  
and to the friends who have.*







## A Note from the Author

AS A CITIZEN of Franklin, Tennessee, I'm aware that the current occupant of the governor's mansion in Nashville is not named Gray London. I've borrowed his house and some of the many challenges faced by him and his predecessors and adapted them for the sake of my story. However, much of what you read here about the Nashville area and the governor's mansion is absolutely true—the charm of downtown Franklin, the beautiful (and environmentally sensitive) renovations completed during Governor Phil Bredesen's administration, the controversy over Conservation Hall, and Minnie Pearl's former residence next door to the governor. Sadly, the devastating flood of 2010 was also a reality—but so was the amazing neighbor-helping-neighbor spirit that emerged in its aftermath. That spirit of service was part of the inspiration for this book. I may have messed with the mansion a bit for the sake of my story, but I have never been prouder to be a part of the Volunteer State.



# Jeremiah

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THE SIDES A MY BOLOGNA gone and curled up in that cast-iron skillet when a pop a grease splattered out. Landed smack-dab on the mornin' paper I done set on the counter.

Didn't much care to look at that paper anyhow. It been totin' nothin' but hurt all week—and we all 'bout had our fill a hurtin' 'round here. I think I cried me more tears them past seven days than I cried since my Shirley died summer 'fore last. And Shirley and me, we was married fifty-seven years.

Miz Mackenzie done cried with me back then.

Now it be my turn to cry with her.

I seen her picture on the front a that paper, tryin' to hide herself behind a big ol' black hat. But can't hide that kind a pain. Photographer gone and caught her with her Kleenex held up against her li'l nose. Ever'one else leanin' in close like she gon' fall over any minute. And that chil' lookin' up at her with an eyeful a questions. 'Bout near break my heart, I'm tellin' you.

They let me stay back yesterday 'til the last limo pulled away. Two young'uns come up and stood over that open hole in the earth. They pulled up the straps and rolled away that fake green turf and put away the contraption that helped lower the casket down. Then I watched them two boys go for a backhoe. But seemed my heart would break right there if I didn't step in.

I held up my hand. "Y'all mind if I take care a that?"

Their faces was drippin' from the stiflin' heat this ol' Tennessee August thrown at us, but they was polite. "This be our job, sir."

I ain't cared one lick 'bout they protestin'. I flung off that black suit coat I borrowed and throwed it 'cross the limb a this big ol' live oak standin' over to the side. Seemed that tree stuck its arms right out, like it beggin' to hold my coat. Like it tryin' to share my load.

"Fellas, it be my job the last three years to tend the garden a this family. So I'm wonderin' if y'all could give an old man some grace today. It's purty important I tend this one. Now, one a y'all go fetch me a shovel."

Them two strappin' boys look at me. I knowed they could lose they jobs if they left. They knowed it too. I could see the debate played 'tween they faces, though they didn't say nothin'.

"Just go get me a shovel; then you boys just sit right there and watch me. That way you won't get in no trouble, and you can make sure I don't do nothin' foolish. Shoot, they watchin' me too." I pointed to the two police cruisers still sittin' by the gates.

Them boys laughed 'em some nervous laugh. "You sure you be wantin' to do this, mister? 'Cause we young and got a backhoe, and you . . ."

I chuckled and pulled my handkerchief from my back pocket. "And I be as old as this dirt I'm 'bout to throw on top a this here casket. But I move dirt 'round ever'day, boys. And I be needin' to do this. So if you just step aside . . ."

They shrugged they shoulders good and hard and went to fetch me a shovel. I took it in my hands and let it fall in the ruts a my calluses. It knowed right where it belonged. And me and that shovel, we went 'bout our work while them boys sat almost reverentlike on the ground.

After I tamped down that last shovelful a dirt, I laid the shovel down and swiped my forehead, the white shirt stuck to my back like sweat on a glass a summer lemonade. One a the boys act like he gon' do sump'n, but I raise my hand again. Not through yet. He sat back down without sayin' a word.

I put back the sod they done stacked in big square pieces over to the side—laid it down nice and smooth over the dirt and pressed it down so the roots could take hold. “You boys be sure and water it good the next few weeks, y’hear?”

Then I walked over and took the big ol' blanket a white roses that laid on top a the casket and put it 'cross the top a the grave. I stood back and studied all the other wreaths and bouquets that sat there waitin'. And like the gardener I am, I 'ranged them flowers as beautiful as the life that laid 'neath 'em.

I took the last one and let my eyes, best as they still could, take in the banner that draped 'cross it. When I poked its three metal prongs in the sod, the li'l Tennessee flag tucked up in that banner done dropped down at my feet. I gone and picked it up and brushed at the dirt that clung to it. That dirt held on for dear life. Then it come to me—that be what I really tryin' to do. Hold on just a li'l longer.

When I done patted it clean, I put it back in the droop a that banner, and it seemed like that banner gone and swaddled it in with them red baby roses.

I took my jacket back from the tree and felt like I should show that tree some gratitude or sump'n. But I just flung my jacket 'cross the top a my shoulder. I looked back at the two young men.

They watched me as curious as folks probably watched crazy ol' Noah.

I gave 'em a nod. Then I gave a nod to that mound a sod and flowers. I walked toward the car in a blur a tears and a burden a prayer.

## CHAPTER I

### TEN DAYS EARLIER

The heat of the stone bathroom floor warmed Mackenzie London's entire body as she took her first steps of the day. Beauty surrounded her. Every fixture, fabric, element in this home had been redone to perfection by the previous occupant. The day she moved in, she had determined that she would appreciate every moment she spent in this exquisite place—because she knew those moments were numbered.

There might not be much certain in this world. But in Mackenzie's world this much was certain: she would not live here forever. She had known that when she moved in. And her Italian-Irish heritage pushed her to embrace every facet of life passionately, wildly, and completely. She was determined not to waste one moment of this opportunity she had been given.

Today, however, the mansion was the last thing on her mind.

“My, my, that's a good-looking man standing in front of that



mirror.” She leaned against her side of the brown marble countertop and gave her husband a sad smile.

Gray London leaned over his sink, electric razor in one hand. The other hand tugged at the base of his neck, where salt-and-pepper stubble clung. His blue eyes met hers, and she saw their delight in her arrival. “How’s my girl?”

“Heartbroken.” She scooted up behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist and resting her hands against the top of the towel tied around his hips. She laid her head against his bare back and listened as the buzz of the razor evaporated. Her heart felt heavy inside her chest.

He laid the razor down and placed his hands on top of hers. “It’s a new stage of life, huh?”

She moved her cheek up and down against his back.

He laughed and turned so he could face her. His six-foot frame towered over her five-foot-four. He wrapped one arm around her, lifted her chin, and wiped at a tear that had left its wet trail down the side of her cheek.

“I know it’s silly.” She dabbed a tissue at her nose. She had one in virtually every pocket she owned. “It’s just kindergarten. But maybe we should have waited until she was six. You know, five is still really young.”

“She’s an old five, Mack.”

She leaned her head against his chest. “She was an old two.”

He laughed. “Yeah, she was. But we talked about this, and she wants to go. I know it’s going to be hard. It will be for me too, but it doesn’t happen until tomorrow. So let’s enjoy today and deal with tomorrow, tomorrow.”

She raised her head and batted her eyes. The tears fell freely. She knew he was right, but it didn’t change the way she felt. Natural childbirth had been less painful.

He leaned down and pressed his lips against her face, then moved

his mouth to her ear as one hand grazed her stomach. “Plus, who knows? You might have another baby here in about nine months.”

“I pray so.”

He leaned back. “So you want me to give you your shot before you get in the shower?”

She moved her hands up to the soft curve in her hips, a smile fighting with the tears. “You just want to look at my booty.”

“Prettiest one I’ve ever seen.”

The smile won. She reached for another tissue and swiped at her eyes, then walked back over to her side of the bathroom. The Pregnyl stayed in prominent sight in her top drawer.

It had taken her and Gray almost ten years to conceive their Maddie—ten years plus four miscarriages and thousands of dollars. But when Maddie came along, Mackenzie finally had the one thing she felt her life was missing—a child. And now, five years later, she was desperate for another. Wanted it like an ache in the soul wants a healing balm.

The latest round of fertility treatments had begun again almost a year ago. They’d bypassed the Clomid altogether this time and gone straight to the injections. To date, the only thing they had to show for it was her sore behind.

Mackenzie let her robe fall to the marble floor. The matching lingerie set in black was all that remained. She saw Gray’s expression change. “Just the shot, mister. You might get action this afternoon, but right now, just the shot.”

He had been a good partner in this journey. Though she knew he sometimes wearied of the routine, still he was at every doctor’s appointment, shared each piece of heartbreaking news, and was a pretty good nurse. He’d even become fairly handy with a needle. As she leaned against the cabinet, she suddenly got the giggles.

He moved the needle back. “You’ve got to be still, or this is liable to end up in your side. What’s so funny anyway?”

She could hardly talk now. The laughter had all but taken over. “Wonder what Tennesseans would think if they knew that their governor was putting shots in his wife’s booty this morning. That would make a front-page picture.”

“I’ll tell you what they would think. They’d think, ‘Man, I knew that governor could do anything. What a specimen.’”

She turned her head toward him, and that was it. She threw her head back and laughed until she was wiping a different set of tears. He crossed his arms, the syringe still between his fingers. But it would take another five minutes before the governor was able to take care of his first order of duty on this beautiful Sunday morning in Tennessee.



The twenty-minute drive from the governor’s mansion in Nashville to downtown Franklin, where Mackenzie had grown up, encompassed almost everything she loved about middle Tennessee. America’s perception of the area seemed to be limited to country music, rednecks, and the term *Nash Vegas*. But natives like Mackenzie knew there was so much more. A straight shot down Franklin Road took her from her present house to her childhood home. And along the thirteen-mile stretch, she passed twenty-one churches, acres of gently rolling farmland with grazing cattle and horses, golf courses, schools, antebellum homes, and dozens of “meat and three” restaurants offering sweet tea and chocolate pie that were so good you’d want to slap your mama.

Of course, Mackenzie could never slap her mother. Her mother would declare that none of it was even capable of being as good as hers. Mackenzie couldn’t argue because her mother was one of the best Southern cooks she knew. And Sunday afternoon dinners with Eugenia Quinn were as much a ritual as Friday night football in the fall.

The screen door of the recently remodeled Victorian home slammed against the white wood casing, the noise potentially heard two blocks over on Main Street. “Are y’all still taking my granddaughter to that church where the preacher says ‘crap’ in the pulpit?” Mackenzie’s mother asked.

The same words had greeted them every Sunday afternoon since they had taken Eugenia to their church. It just so happened their preacher used a word she disapproved of that Sunday. She had never let them forget it.

Eugenia was carrying a big bouquet of zinnias and daisies from her garden, but she still managed to reach down and scoop her granddaughter up in her arms.

Gray gave her a kiss on the cheek. “What? You don’t do that, Mom?”

Eugenia turned her pink, powdered cheek away from him in mock disgust and returned her affection to Maddie, kissing her multiple times on the face. Maddie giggled beneath the kisses. When Eugenia leaned back, a smile spread wide across her pink-painted lips.

Mackenzie chuckled and shook her head at the exuberant display. Eugenia had been almost as desperate for Maddie as she had been. Since Mackenzie was an only child, Eugenia’s hope for grandchildren rested solely on her. A load she rarely forgot.

Maddie wrapped her arms around her grandmother’s neck. “Gigi, I learned about midgets today!”

Eugenia raised expressive eyebrows above her crystal-blue eyes and turned her head, her coiffed bleached-blonde bob moving as a unit. Beauty shop day was every Monday. Tomorrow she would get it redone to look just like it looked today. “Of course you did,” she answered Maddie, looking straight at Mackenzie. “Your pastor says the *c* word, darling. Why wouldn’t they teach you about midgets?”

She put Maddie down, handed her the bouquet to hold, and

led the way through the house to the kitchen, her silver pumps clicking on the refurbished pine floor. When the door of the oven opened, the fragrance of heaven flooded out. The faithful metal pan that held their Sunday afternoon feast was placed on the counter, the aluminum foil piled up in a mound.

Mackenzie knew what was underneath that silver dome. Paradise. The aroma had already leaked into every pore of her skin.

She walked over to the cabinet and pulled out the glasses. “Smells amazing, Mama.”

“We’re almost ready.” Eugenia took the flowers from Maddie and started arranging them in the cut-glass vase that sat on the kitchen table. “I went out and cut these right before you got here. Look as good as flowers from the governor’s—”

The back door opened. Mackenzie looked up to see her mom tug at the bottom of her baby-blue linen suit jacket. She still hadn’t changed from church herself. Eugenia had attended Southeast Baptist Church since before Mackenzie was born, and at Southeast Baptist they dressed up for Sunday service—another thing she often pointed out to Mackenzie.

Eugenia reached up to pouf her hair just as Burt Taylor’s voice boomed through the kitchen. “Well, good afternoon, everybody.”

Gray walked over and extended his hand. “Good afternoon, Burt.”

Eugenia, fussing with the flowers, spoke to Burt as if he were a last-minute invite. “Hello, Burt. Glad you could join us. Now, dinner will be ready in a few minutes.”

Mackenzie stifled her smile. She hadn’t seen her mom this nervous in a long time. Eugenia had always been a symbol of strength to Mackenzie, who had seen her cry only once—when Mackenzie’s father died ten years earlier. Once the funeral was over, Mackenzie had never witnessed another tear, and she’d only heard Eugenia weeping a few times behind a closed bedroom door.

Eugenia was tough, a rock. Mackenzie envied that about her. If anything happened to Gray, she couldn't imagine surviving.

"Hey, Burtie!" Maddie squealed and took a leap into Burt's arms. He let out a half chuckle, half groan.

"Easy, Maddie," Gray said.

"I love it," Burt responded, leaning down and planting a kiss on Maddie's cheek. "I don't get to see my grandbabies much now that they have all moved away, so it's mighty nice having a little one in my arms." The edges of Burt's plaid suit jacket crinkled beneath her weight.

"Maddie," Gray said, "let's go sit outside with Mr. Burt while Gigi and your mom get dinner ready. You can tell him what you learned in Sunday school about midgets." His laughter erupted as he turned toward Eugenia.

She fluttered her hands at them. "That's a great idea. Y'all shoo on out of my kitchen."

Maddie jumped from Burt's arms, and the three of them walked out onto the front porch. "I think the midget's name was Zach something. . . ." Maddie's words faded as the screen door slammed behind her.

Mackenzie started to put ice in the glasses. "Burt has been coming over a lot lately, huh?"

Eugenia didn't even look up. "He's old. He's hungry. And I'm a good cook."

"That you are. But you and your friends are a pretty wild bunch."

Her mother huffed as she pulled the chuck roast from beneath the foil and laid it on a white platter. "I'm not wild, Mackenzie London. I hang out with old women who get winded playing Skip-Bo and think Starbucks is a newly discovered planet. Trust me. I'm boring."

Of all the adjectives Mackenzie would use to describe her mother, she was certain *boring* had never been one. She was a

quintessential lady, a master gardener, a lover of beauty, but she would just as soon cuss you as look at you—though she would *never* do it in church. She kept her husband’s 12-gauge under her bed and would shoot you first and ask who you were later. She was opinionated and her tongue could be downright withering, but she was also loyal—fiercely loyal.

And if the world ever fell apart, Mackenzie was certain that Eugenia Madeline Pruitt Quinn alone could put it all back together.



As usual, Maddie was the first one to burst through the door of the governor’s mansion when they finally made it home late that afternoon. Mackenzie heard her pounding up the stairs to the family quarters as she and Gray walked through the front door.

Following Maddie up the stairs, she was greeted first by her daughter’s skirt, draped carelessly from one tread to the next. Her eyes moved up the stairwell at the trail of clothing Maddie had deposited on her way to her room. Gray had been the first to use the word *poop* for what Maddie often did with her stuff. Mackenzie had thought the term was gross, but Maddie was five—she loved it. So it had stuck. And in less than two minutes flat, Maddie had “pooped” her skirt, then her sweater, her shoes, and her socks, leaving a trail of clothing up the stairs.

Mackenzie sighed. When Maddie was three, this habit had been cute. Now, not so much. And though they had been working with her on this for the past year, in moments like these, Mackenzie wasn’t sure what all the effort had been for.

“Maddie.” Her voice traveled down the hall as she picked up the skirt.

The tiny voice came from what she assumed was Maddie’s bedroom. “Yes, Mommy?”

“Want to go outside and play?”

“I’m getting ready to.”

“Well, why don’t you come here first and see how quickly that is going to happen.”

She heard little feet patter in the hallway. Maddie stood at the top of the steps, blue jean shorts already buttoned, yet still topless. She looked down and giggled. “Oops.”

Mackenzie held out the skirt. “Yes, oops.”

Maddie snatched up her skirt and the rest of her clothes and raced back up the stairs. “Maddie went poop,” she announced as she made her way down the hall, filling it with laughter.

Mackenzie had to smile. She was way too lenient with Maddie, she knew. Gray reminded her of that often enough, and so did her mother. But she couldn’t help it. Maddie was her miracle baby. And there hadn’t been children in the governor’s mansion since the Lamar Alexander years. Mackenzie was grateful she and Gray had been able to bring this kind of life back into this magnificent house.

Restored by the former first lady in a massive renovation project, the mansion displayed all the beauty that a governor’s residence should. But there was something about children in a home. They brought fingerprints to the artwork and syrup-covered hands to the marble side tables. They brought cartwheels to the foyer and a slight irreverence to what could be an often-stuffy environment. Formal dinners could be interrupted with bedtime stories, and hallways lined with pictures of former governors could turn into dance studios for little ballerinas. Best of all, Maddie and her friends brought a contagious laughter that the entire staff loved.

More footsteps pounded, and a camouflage streak left the smell of sweaty little boy in its wake. “Hey, Oliver,” Mackenzie said as their seven-year-old next-door neighbor ran past her on the stairs. She glanced at her watch. “We’ve only been home a full five minutes.”



“I know. I was watching ya from my driveway. Headed up to see Maddie—okay, Mrs. London?” The boy’s disheveled curls bounced on his head as he took the steps two by two.

Mackenzie laughed. “Have at it, buddy.” The fact that he had just entered the governor’s mansion without so much as knocking was lost on Oliver. But Mackenzie didn’t care. She liked having him around.

Oliver and Maddie had become bosom buddies last summer when his family moved into Minnie Pearl’s old house next door. His mother, Lacy, had tried to keep him away, but Mackenzie had assured her that Maddie loved him. And he had pretty much become as permanent a fixture around here as Eugenia. The security and house staff knew to let him come and go. Maddie adored him and he her. And Gray declared that marriage was in their future.

Mackenzie reached the top of the steps and walked into the family quarters just as Maddie and Oliver rounded the corner. “Mommy! Mommy!” Maddie said. “Oliver has a new French word.”

Oliver’s family had lived in France for two years, and he did know a little French, but for the most part he simply spoke words with a French accent. But to Maddie, who was American and Southern through and through, he might as well be a French interpreter.

“Oh, you do?” Mackenzie said. “What is your new word?”

Maddie chimed in, “He can say *lightbulb*.”

“Oh my.” Mackenzie tried not to smile. “Go ahead, Oliver. Let me hear it.”

He shook his head as if all of it was silly, but his expression gave his delight away. He squared his shoulders like a French gentleman. “*Leetboolb*.”

Mackenzie nodded, her lips pressed firmly together to keep

from cracking up. “That is wonderful, Oliver. Keep teaching those to Maddie, and before you know it, she’ll be speaking French too.”

The two smiled. Maddie threw her hand up, yelled “Bye, Mommy,” and the pounding footsteps resumed, this time headed to the backyard. Mackenzie walked to the palladium windows in the family quarters living room. The two flashes darted across thick grass and headed straight for the trampoline. Their energy could bust through brick and mortar.

Mackenzie smiled as she sank into the deep, plush sofa and picked up her pink- and white-striped folder from the glass top of an iron side table. Her assistant, Jessica, always prepared her weekly schedule on Sunday afternoons and left it here for her. She thumbed through her responsibilities for the coming week. Tomorrow she was slated to speak to state educators at a luncheon meeting about volunteerism in elementary schools.

It was a subject dear to Mackenzie’s heart, a cherished part of her heritage as a native of the Volunteer State. The term went back to the War of 1812, when General Andrew Jackson mustered thousands of citizen volunteers to fight the British in the South. It had been reinforced during the Mexican-American War, when then Tennessee governor Aaron Brown requested 2,800 men and 30,000 showed up. And it still applied in Tennessee today, at least as far as Mackenzie was concerned.

Convinced that the initiative of volunteerism needed to begin early, she had helped devise an elementary school curriculum to help even the youngest see not only the importance of volunteerism but the endless opportunities as well. She was a firm believer that if you reminded people of what they were created for, they would rise up to meet the challenge—and the earlier it happened, the better.

Her own experience as a young volunteer had started over a bowl of fried okra, which Eugenia had set in front of her at a Sunday

lunch. Mackenzie, who normally loved fried foods, had popped one of the cornmeal-encrusted balls in her mouth—and hated it. Hated it. That first complaint had resulted in a trip downtown to feed the homeless and hungry. “Next time you whine about okra that I picked from my own garden and fried with my own hands,” Eugenia had told her, “you need to think about people who don’t have food and would love some of your mama’s okra.”

That one experience didn’t change Mackenzie’s opinion of okra, but it did change her life in significant ways. Helping at the soup kitchen so touched her heart that she began to refuse food just so she could go again. Eugenia caught on after the third showdown, and they started volunteering regularly at the Nashville Rescue Mission.

Mackenzie had gone on to major in social work at the University of Tennessee and later worked as an advocate for children in crisis. Now she had the opportunity to help children themselves recognize the needs around them. That was one of the benefits of her role as first lady. She could be a mouthpiece for the issues most important to her.

Mackenzie scribbled down a reminder to review her notes before bedtime and checked to see what else her calendar held. It was going to be a full week, especially with Maddie’s first day of kindergarten and the big soiree on Wednesday night honoring the volunteers and heroes of a string of natural disasters that had hit the area the past few years.

It had all begun with the horrific flood a few years back—an unprecedented disaster for Tennessee. For the first two days in May, some areas of Tennessee had received a record-breaking nineteen inches of rain. There had been twenty-one deaths and more than 1.5 billion dollars in damages. The devastation included some of Nashville’s most precious landmarks—the Grand Ole Opry, the Ryman Auditorium, and the Opryland Hotel and Convention

Center. And because few outside the state even knew about the floods—they coincided with an oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and an attempted car bombing in New York City—Nashvillians had mostly been left to fend for themselves.

But Tennesseans had done what Tennesseans do. They hadn't complained. They hadn't blamed. They'd just dug in their heels and served . . . each other.

Mackenzie had been right in the middle of those efforts—and similar efforts in the wake of a massive tornado in northwest Tennessee and an ice storm that crippled two-thirds of the state for a full week. Each time, she had recognized the spirit that made her state special.

That was the reason for Wednesday's dinner. Mackenzie was determined to honor those local heroes she had come in contact with day after day, those heroes the national media or *People* magazine would never interview. She had been involved in every detail of the celebration, and she couldn't wait for it to get here.

"What're you doing, babe?"

She looked up. Gray was in his running shorts and red Nike T-shirt. Sweat clung to his face and glistened as the light hit it. He paced around the room, trying to cool off.

"Seeing what the week holds. Good run?"

"Felt great." He leaned down and kissed her lightly on the lips.

She closed her folder and set it down. "Getting hungry?"

He was back to pacing. "Yeah. Have time to shower?"

"Sure. Maddie's out with Oliver. She'll enjoy not being rushed."

He wiped the top of his head with the sleeve of his shirt. "Maddie figured out what kind of pizza she wants tonight?"

Sunday nights at the governor's mansion were pizza nights. Maddie's favorite. The child could smell a pepperoni six streets over. She spotted pizza deliverymen quicker than Mackenzie spotted a nice pair of shoes.

“She’s not branching out this week, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

He laughed. “I guess after almost three years of the same meal every Sunday night, I should quit hoping. But what’s life without a little hope, huh?”

She smiled. “A little hope got us a long way, didn’t it?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

The phone rang on the side table by Mackenzie. She picked it up. In a few moments she said, “Sure, Joseph, send him up.”

Gray looked at her. “For me?”

She nodded, certain the disappointment showed. “Yep.” She had hoped for an entire day to themselves without an interruption.

He looked at his watch. “Well, we made it almost twenty-four hours. Unfortunately not all of those were in the same day.”

The buzzer sounded at the entrance to the mansion’s family quarters. Mackenzie watched as Gray walked down the long, carpeted hallway.

This was a piece of the sacrifice—the only piece that really got to her. The capitol hill bickering she tried to ignore. The picketing of events outside the mansion she saw as people’s rights to their opinions. The media’s interest in Gray’s breakfast choices she simply found silly. But the constant interruptions to their life and the heavy demands on their time challenged her on her best days.

Gray opened the door to Kurt Green, his frazzled-looking chief of staff. Kurt’s white polo shirt hung loosely over his khaki shorts as he hurried through the door. He had been in a rush since Mackenzie had met him. And except for his bald head, he looked virtually the same as when he and Gray were Kappa Alphas at the University of Tennessee.

Gray closed the door and moved past Kurt. “What happened to your phone? It’s Sunday. You should be doing something. Family something.”

Kurt's flip-flops beat against his heels as he followed Gray across the thick damask carpet and into the living room. "Okay, sure. I'll call next time." He extended a folder from his hand. "But today we've got a lawsuit on our hands."

Gray reached out and took the file from his friend's hand. "I know. The lawsuit from that victims' advocacy group over the prisoner release." He raised an eyebrow at Kurt. "The lawsuit we agreed to look over next week."

"That was before the press got wind of it and decided it would make a great Monday morning headline." Kurt ran his hands across his hairless skull—a bad habit Gray jokingly claimed had led to his present state. "Stuff like this is what completely destroys reelections." Kurt had been thinking about the reelection since the day Gray took the oath of office. Maybe even before.

Gray scanned the file. "A reelection campaign won't prevent me from doing what needs to be done, Kurt."

Kurt shook his head. "Well, that's fine, Gray, but we've got to respond to this *now*. There are Democrats and Republicans alike who want you out."

"And there are Democrats and Republicans who will change their minds tomorrow. It's those same Democrats and Republicans who have left this state with no choice but cutbacks. I would prefer to not release prisoners either. But it's nonviolent offenders only, and it's better than firing schoolteachers." Gray closed the folder and handed it back to Kurt. "Though I still haven't ruled out shutting down the government and letting everybody go a couple of months without paychecks."

Kurt looked at the file in his hands, then back at Gray, his expression utterly dumbfounded. "We are just a little over a year away from an election, Gray. We have made huge progress in this state in spite of all the budget issues we've faced, and there's so much more we need to do. We can't let something like this lawsuit

prevent the voters from seeing the real impact you've made here. Remember, voters have short memories."

Gray's sigh was heavy in the room. Mackenzie felt her shoulders sag. She knew he was going to work now. "I'll give you two hours," he told Kurt.

The veins in the front of Kurt's head stopped bulging. "I'll call Fletcher. He can come over and help us draft a statement."

"You can call him from my office." He motioned toward the stairs, but Kurt was already there. Gray walked over to Mackenzie, gave her another small kiss, and ran his hand through her soft black hair. "Sorry, babe. Save me some pizza."

She puckered her lips. "Yep, I'm sorry too. And no one likes your pizza, remember?"

He laughed. He was sensitive to dairy, so his pizza never had cheese. Maddie declared it gross. Oliver found it intriguing. "Good thing, then, huh?"

"Two hours only, right? It *is* Sunday. Even the governor deserves some rest."

She watched his brow furrow, and he opened his mouth to speak.

"I know. I know," she interrupted. "We knew this part when we took the job."

"I'll be done as soon as I can."

She watched him as he too headed downstairs toward the office he kept there. And sighed. Over the last three years, it seemed, she had seen more of him going than coming.

## About the Author

DENISE HILDRETH JONES has spent the last six years writing fiction that has been hailed as both “smart and witty.” Her ability to express the heart of the Southern voice has led to her being featured twice in *Southern Living* and receiving the accolades of readers and reviewers alike, but it is the simple joy of writing stories that keeps them coming. Her previous books include the Savannah series, *Flies on the Butter*, *The Will of Wisteria*, *Hurricanes in Paradise*, and *Flying Solo*.

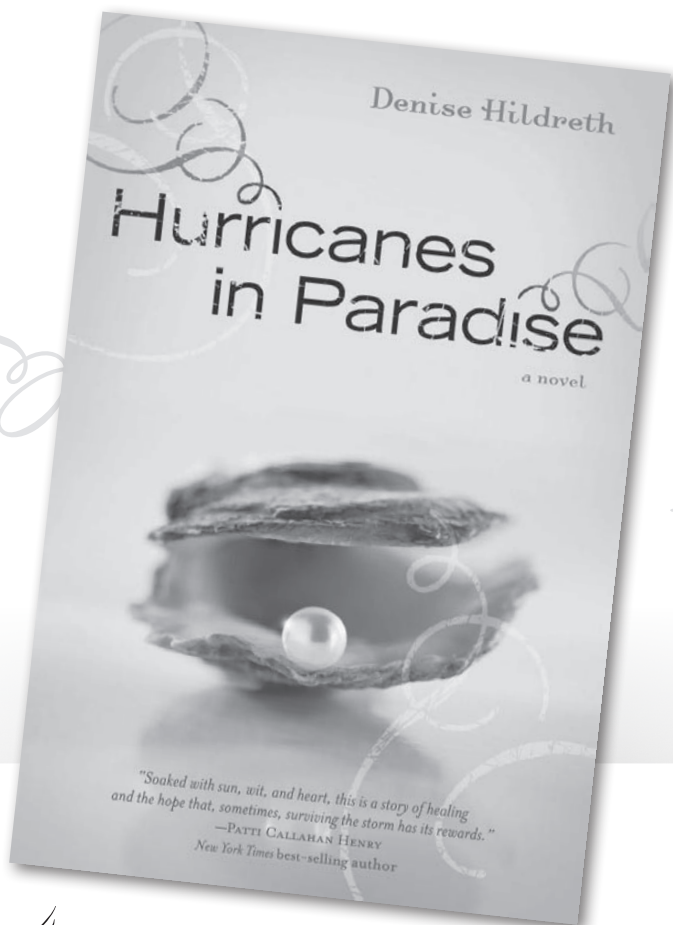
Denise makes her home in Franklin, Tennessee, with her husband, five bonus children, and two dogs. And on her days off, she will settle for a long walk or a good book and a Coca-Cola.

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