

Saving CeeCee Honeycutt: A Novel

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Steel Magnolias meets *The Help* in Beth Hoffman's New York Times bestselling Southern debut novel, *Saving CeeCee Honeycutt*

Twelve-year-old CeeCee Honeycutt is in trouble. For years, she has been the caretaker of her mother, Camille, the town's tiara-wearing, lipstick-smeared laughingstock, a woman who is trapped in her long-ago moment of glory as the 1951 Vidalia Onion Queen of Georgia. When tragedy strikes, Tootie Caldwell, CeeCee's long-lost great-aunt, comes to the rescue and whisks her away to Savannah. There, CeeCee is catapulted into a perfumed world of prosperity and Southern eccentricity—one that appears to be run entirely by strong, wacky women. From the exotic Miz Thelma Rae Goodpepper, who bathes in her backyard bathtub and uses garden slugs as her secret weapons; to Tootie's all-knowing housekeeper, Oletta Jones; to Violene Hobbs, who entertains a local police officer in her canary-yellow peignoir, the women of Gaston Street keep CeeCee entertained and enthralled for an entire summer.

A timeless coming of age novel set in the 1960s, *Saving CeeCee Honeycutt* explores the indomitable strengths of female friendship, and charts the journey of an unforgettable girl who loses one mother, but finds many others in the storybook city of Savannah. As Kristin Hannah, author of *Fly Away*, says, Beth Hoffman's sparkling debut is "packed full of Southern charm, strong women, wacky humor, and good old-fashioned heart." Beth Hoffman was the president and co-owner of an interior design studio in Cincinnati before becoming a full-time writer. She is the author of two New York Times bestsellers: *Looking for Me* and her debut, *Saving CeeCee Honeycutt*. She lives with her husband and two cats in northern Kentucky.

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This book is dedicated to Marlane Vaicius,
the best friend a girl could ever hope to find. Marlane, you are my Dixie.

And:

In loving memory of my great-aunt, Mildred Williams Caldwell
of Danville, Kentucky, the remarkably generous and wise little woman
who ignited the flame that inspired this book.

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Often in life there are last things to say, and I'd be remiss if I didn't seize this opportunity to tip the brim of my hat in the direction of a man named Dan. He knows why.

One

Momma left her red satin shoes in the middle of the road. That's what three eyewitnesses told the police. The first time I remember my mother wearing red shoes was on a snowy morning in December 1962, the year I was seven years old. I walked into the kitchen and found her sitting at the table. No lights were on, but in the thin haze of dawn that pushed through the frostbitten window, I could see red high-heeled shoes peeking out from beneath the hem of her robe. There was no breakfast waiting, and no freshly ironed school dress hanging on the basement doorknob. Momma just sat and stared out the window with empty eyes, her hands limp in her lap, her coffee cold and untouched.

I stood by her side and breathed in the sweet scent of lavender talcum powder that clung to the tufts of her robe.

"What's the matter, Momma?"

I waited and waited. Finally she turned from the window and looked at me. Her skin was as frail as tissue, and her voice wasn't much more than a whisper when she smoothed her hand over my cheek and said, "Cecelia Rose, I'm taking you to Georgia. I want you to see what real living is like. All the women dress so nice. And the people are kind and friendly-it's so different from how things are here. As soon as I feel better, we'll plan a trip-just you and me."

"But what about Dad, will he come too?"

She squeezed her eyes closed and didn't answer.

Momma stayed sad for the rest of the winter. Just when I thought she'd never smile again, spring came. When the lilacs bloomed in great, fluffy waves of violet, Momma went outside and cut bouquets for every room in the house. She painted her fingernails bright pink, fixed

her hair, and slipped into a flowery-print dress. From room to room she dashed, pushing back curtains and throwing open the windows. She turned up the volume of the radio, took hold of my hands, and danced me through the house.

We whirled through the living room, into the dining room, and around the table. Right in the middle of a spin, Momma abruptly stopped. "Oh, my gosh," she said, taking in a big gulp of air and pointing to the mirror by the door, "we look so much alike. When did that happen? When did you start to grow up?"

We stood side by side and gazed at our reflections. What I saw was two smiling people with the same heart-shaped face, blue eyes, and long brown hair—Momma's pulled away from her face in a headband and mine tied back in a ponytail.

"It's amazing," my mother said, gathering her hair in her hand and holding it back in a ponytail like mine. "Just look at us, CeeCee. I bet when you get older, people will think we're sisters. Won't that be fun?" She giggled, took hold of my hands, and spun me in circles till my feet lifted off the floor.

She was so happy that after we finished dancing, she took me into town and bought all sorts of new clothes and ribbons for my hair. Momma bought herself so many pairs of new shoes that the salesman laughed and said, "Mrs. Honeycutt, I believe you have more shoes than the Bolshoi Ballet." Neither Momma nor I knew what that meant, but the salesman sure thought he was clever. So we laughed along with him as he helped us carry our packages to the car.

After stuffing the trunk full with bags and boxes, we ran across the street to the five-and-dime, where we sat at the lunch counter and shared a cheeseburger, a bowl of French fries, and a chocolate milk shake.

That spring sure was something. I'd never seen Momma so happy. Every day was a big celebration. I'd come home from school and she'd be waiting, all dressed up with a big smile on her face. She'd grab her handbag, hurry me to her car, and off we'd go to do more shopping.

Then came the day when Dad arrived home from a three-week business trip. Momma and I were sitting at the kitchen table, she with a magazine and me with a coloring book and crayons. When my dad opened the closet door to hang up his jacket, he was all but knocked senseless when an avalanche of shoe boxes rained down on him.

"Good Christ!" he barked, turning to look at Momma. "How much money have you been spending?"

When Momma didn't answer, I put down my crayon and smiled. "Daddy, we've been shopping for weeks, but everything we got was for free."

"Free? What are you talking about?"

I nodded wisely. "Yep. All Momma had to do was show the salesman a square of plastic, and he let us have whatever we wanted."

"What the hell?" Dad pounded across the kitchen floor, yanked Momma's handbag from the hook by the door, and pulled the square of plastic from her wallet. "Damn it, Camille," he said, cutting it up with a pair of scissors. "How many times do I have to tell you? This has got to stop. No more credit cards. You keep this up and you'll put us in the poor house. You hear me?"

Momma licked her finger and turned a page of the magazine.

He leaned down and looked at her. "Have you been taking your pills?" She ignored him and turned another page. "Camille, I'm talking to you."

The sharpness of his words wiped the shine right out of her eyes.

Dad shook his head and pulled a beer from the refrigerator. He huffed and puffed out of the kitchen, kicking shoes out of his way as he headed for the living room. I heard him dump his wide, beefy body into the recliner, muttering the way he always did whenever he was in a bad mood. Which, as far as I could tell, was pretty much always.

My father didn't smile or laugh very much, and he had a limitless gift for making me feel about as important as a lost penny on the sidewalk. Whenever I'd show him a drawing I'd made or try to tell him about something I'd learned in school, he'd get fidgety and say, "I'm tired. We'll talk another time."

But another time never came.

He was a machine-tool salesman and spent much of his time in places like Michigan and Indiana. Usually he'd stay away all week and would come home only on weekends. And most times those weekends were filled with an unbearable tension that sprung loose on Saturday night.

Momma would get all dolled up, walk into the living room, and beg him to take her out. "C'mon Carl," she'd say, tugging at his arm, "let's go dancing like we used to. We never have fun anymore."

His face would turn sour and he'd say, "No, Camille. I'm not taking you anywhere until you straighten up. Now go take your pills."

She'd cry and say she didn't need any pills, he'd get mad, turn up the volume of the TV, and drink one beer after another, and I'd run upstairs and hide in my bedroom. Whole months would go by and I'd only hear an occasional kind word pass between them. Even less frequently I'd see them touch. Before too long even those things faded away, and my father's presence in the house faded right along with them.

Momma seemed glad that Dad stayed away so much. One day I was sitting on the floor of her bedroom cutting out paper dolls while she sat at her vanity and put on makeup. "Who needs him anyway?" she said, leaning close to the mirror as she smoothed on bright red lipstick. "I'll tell you something, Cecelia Rose. Northerners are exactly like their weather-cold and boring. And I swear, none of them has one iota of etiquette or propriety. Do you know that not one single person in this godforsaken town even knows I'm a pageant queen? They're all a bunch of sticks-in-the-mud, just like your father."

"You don't like Daddy anymore?"

"No," she said, turning to look at me. "I don't."

"He doesn't come home very much. Where is he, Momma?"

She blotted her lips with a tissue. "That old fool? He's not here because he's down at the cemetery with one foot stuck in the grave. And that's another thing. Never marry an older man. I mean it, CeeCee. If an older man ever sweeps you off your feet, just get up and run away as fast as you can."

I set down my scissors. "How old is Daddy?"

"Fifty-seven," she said, rubbing a smudge of rouge from her cheek. "And look what he's done to me." She scowled at her reflection in the mirror and shook her head. "I'm only thirty-three and I already have lines on my face. Your father is nothing but a Yankee liar. I can't tell you how many promises he made just so I'd marry him and move up here to this god-awful excuse for a town. But all those promises amounted to nothing but a five-hundred-pound bag of dog breath."

As I was about to ask her what that meant, a strange, icy expression moved across her face. She gazed down at her wedding picture and slowly lifted it from the vanity. With her tube of lipstick she drew a big red X over my dad's face, then shrieked with laughter, fluffed her hair, and walked out the door.

What caused it, I didn't know, but after that day Momma's moods began to spike and plummet like a yo-yo. One day she'd pitch a fit and break everything she could get her hands on, and the next day she'd be as calm as a glass of water. Then, out of nowhere, she'd up and vanish. I'd panic and run down the street, calling her name while my heart hammered against my ribs. Eventually I'd find her going from door to door in the neighborhood, asking for donations for some charity nobody ever heard of. A few people felt sorry for her and would drop a coin or two into the jar she held in her hands, but most people closed the door in her face.

She became so unpredictable that I never knew what would be waiting for me when I got home from school—a plate of gooey half-baked cookies or muffled sobs leaking from beneath her closed bedroom door. I didn't know what was wrong with her, but I did know

that none of the other mothers in our town acted the way she did. They'd come into school carrying trays filled with freshly baked cupcakes, and I'd see them walking along the sidewalks with their children and sometimes a dog. The other mothers were happy and seemed like they were fun to spend time with, but Momma wasn't fun anymore, and there were times when she acted so strange that she scared me.

Each year I watched her grasp on reality loosen as she slipped further away, but the worst part of her descent began on a breezy spring afternoon when I was nine years old.

I was headed home from school, enjoying the way the wind tickled my face, when three boys ran by. One of them skidded to a stop and poked me in the shoulder. "Hey, Honeycutt, it's not Christmas, so how come there's a big fruitcake in you..."

Other Books

The Christmas Collector. A woman uncovers family secrets and romance while liquidating an estate at Christmastime in this novella by the author of *Sold on a Monday*. Toss, repair, sell, repeat. Most of the time, people are grateful for estate liquidator Jenna Matthews's organizing services. Not Reece Porter, her new client's handsome but grouchy grandson. As far as he's concerned Jenna is a vulture, picking through his late grandfather's treasures, during the holidays, no less. Personally, Jenna isn't one for Christmas nostalgia, or any kind of nostalgia. Plus, she's just doing her job. But when she and Reece are drawn together in an emergency, it becomes clear there's a whole other kind of tension between them, one that's pure electricity. And when Jenna discovers keepsakes that suggest an intriguing Porter family secret, unwrapping the mystery leads both Jenna and Reese to the greatest gifts of the holidays—and the truth in their hearts . . . Previously published in *A Winter Wonderland*. Praise for the writing of Kristina McMorris "Will grab your heart on page one and won't let go until the end." –Sara Gruen, #1 New York Times–bestselling author on *The Edge of Lost* "An absorbing, addictive read." –Beatriz Williams, New York Times–bestselling author on *The Edge of Lost* "Impeccably researched and beautifully written." –Karen White, New York Times–bestselling author on *Bridge of Scarlet Leaves* "An absolutely lovely debut novel filled with endearing characters and lively descriptions." –Kristin Hannah, New York Times–bestselling author on *Letters from Home*

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