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Alexandra Allred

White Trash

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Chapter One

They say you can never go home again. I say, why even try? Hell, you left for a reason. In the end, however, I agreed to come home.

One month, I told Momma. One month. Just until I figured out what I was going to do about my life. I gave my hometown of Granby, Texas, one month.

On paper, it should have been an easy move and an easy decision. Room and board were free. My aunt, Cecilia, set me up to work at The Recorder, the town's paper, on a short-term basis. Cici, as I called her, had connections in some way with everyone in town. I knew every road, every face, and every name there about. It would be as easy as slipping into an old pair of shoes. But there was a reason I left in the first place.

Small-town living is often thought of as being quaint, peaceful . . . quiet. Small-town living has a romantic appeal if you live in Maine or Vermont. But small-town living in rural Texas is anything but quaint.

Since I was in the eighth grade, I had counted down the days until I could get out of that godforsaken town. Every cent I'd made from the Beanie Weenie and babysitting had been applied to the dream of escape. My grades had been less about personal growth or education and more about a ticket out.

So when the day came that I graduated summa cum laude, I made that fatal mistake that all small-town kids do. I compiled a list of everyone I loathed and told them all to kiss my ass when I left for college. I had a full academic scholarship with a partial athletic scholarship for volleyball. I was going to Duke University to major in business. I was going to make it big in the corporate world, and one day—I hoped—I was going to wipe the memory of Granby from my mind. I arranged to have Momma and Cici come to me on the holidays because I was never, I repeat never, going to go back home again.

I did what I had set out to do. I graduated from Duke in the top ten percent of my class while working full time at Kinko's. I was accepted in the master's program and had some serious talks with my advisor about the steps to take beyond Duke. He had amazing contacts and offered to help me ease my way into the corporate world.

With everything going my way, I took one little detour, following the footsteps of my ancestors. With success and financial independence all but locked up, the ancient spirits of my grandmother, great-grandmother, and great-great-grandmother awakened inside me. I ran right out and got pregnant.

Well, I didn't run. In fact, I'd been too drunk to run.

Once upon a time, I'd been a serious party girl. My roommates, a few friends from work, and fellow classmates used to go out and just get hammered. It was harmless fun, and it became part of a routine. Like most college students, we had our hangouts. We were all serious, dedicated students, committed to our academics. Then there'd been times to let our hair down, among other things.

On that night, however, there was no party time with my girlfriends. I sought peace at the bottom of a vodka bottle. The first and last time. I was upset and wanted to make the hurt go away. Funny how only after did I see the irony there.

Five weeks later, I understood that I'd fulfilled a legacy. However determined I was to succeed, history had something else to say.

I hung on into my first year in the master's program, still working at Kinko's as night manager, until Ella was born. Then everything came apart. I couldn't work the same hours, studying was impossible, bills spiraled out of control, and the father of my child was gone. Even faithful friends suddenly couldn't relate to me.

The home I had made at Duke was no longer home once Ella arrived. I'd lost my academic standing and had to give up my management position at Kinko's, but what really broke me was when my advisor—a man who'd felt more like an uncle than educator—had sat me down and said he was disappointed with my recent decisions. I had shown promise, he'd said in a saddened, past-tense manner, as though I was washed up academically. I was twenty-four years old, and the dream was dead. What was left was the very place I had damned to hell and to which I had sworn never to return.

Chapter Two

There was no great fanfare when I came home. Travis Miles saw me at the Town Pump, the local gas station, and just laughed.

“Hell, Thia, I knew you’d be back. Heard you were some highfalutin businesswoman up east. But I knew you’d be back.” He cocked his head to the side and eyed my car like an appraiser judging its worth, and then he spied Ella. “Just like all the other girls in this town,” he said.

I flipped him off.

I can’t figure why it made me so mad to have Travis say what he did. At least I got out for a while; at least I made a go of things, got myself a college education. Travis barely graduated from high school and did nothing more than patch leaky roofs and mix paint. But his words followed me for weeks.

To be likened to the other girls from Granby was like being called trash because that’s what most of the girls were.

Even though Momma was happy to have me home, Travis’s voice echoed in my brain. Cici told me that she hadn’t seen Momma this happy in a long time, but I couldn’t celebrate. I had my own room, a built-in babysitter, and a job at The Recorder, but again, no sense of relief.

The fact is that I was so preoccupied with Travis's comparison of me to the other female folk of Granby that I had become obsessed with the term "trash."

You can't live in the South, particularly Texas, and not hear that word a dozen times over in just one day. The way a body might walk, talk, dress, or smile could put you on the trash-o-meter. How you wore your makeup, touched another person, or named your baby were indicative of your trashiness.

"Trash is trash."

That was what Cici always said. You could throw it, bag it, and haul it to the dump. You could even pick through another man's trash yet be clean and fresh as baby's breath. It was how you carried yourself. That was what distinguished household garbage from human trash. I always thought she said it because she had an awful crush on Bubba Peters, but as I would come to learn, there was indeed a different kind of human trash, and my Cici didn't always have all the answers on the human condition.

I can't speak for people of color. How or what they choose to call each other is their own business. Some things tend to be more of a cultural thing. But for me, for my family, I can tell you there are two different kinds of trash. There's trash and there's white trash. Lest you think there is no difference, I offer my hometown as testimony to the recurrence and/or revival of white trashiness to the likes that leave even me ashamed. On another level, it offered me some sense of relief. As I would come to learn, a town doesn't make a trashy town—the people do.

The easiest distinction is this. Trash know they're trash. They'll laugh about it, sing songs about being a redneck, and embrace their lot in life by doing things like putting ceramic statues on their lawns and reaching for toothpicks rather than after-dinner mints. If you're higher-end trash, you might just have flavored toothpicks. Trash tends to be happier than you'd think. Block parties are cool until someone gets too drunk and pulls a knife or hits someone else, but there's no exclusion. Come one. Come all. That's just how it is.

White trash folks, on the other hand, have no idea how trashy they are. They think they're high-end. Period. They look down on other folks and operate under the misconception that the darker the skin, the dumber the person—or at least, the more prone to violence. It doesn't matter that almost every year about Thanksgiving time, Old Man Vargus—a good-for-nothing, out of work white man who still drones on about fighting in Vietnam—beat the ever-living snot out of his wife. I knew folks in town who acted as though it wasn't the same as black men or Mexican men getting drunk and beating their women.

While I tended to think of Granby as a redneck town, we had a healthy mix of black and Mexicans. A little over two hundred miles from the Mexican border, Granby was one of those in-between towns. And like most small towns, we had our own history.

Once upon a time, Granby had been a sugar refinery town where blacks were granted land but could only farm certain portions. Most farming permits had been allocated to white farmers, leaving blacks to work the refinery and get paid squat for their efforts. It was supposed to suit everyone just fine, but when the farming community had folded, unable to compete with bigger industry up North, the refinery suddenly looked better to everyone. The whites got paid more, and the blacks got laid off.

During the 1950s, there had been lynchings and terrible stories about young black men getting the crap beat out of them for simply looking at a white woman or talking out of turn. By the mid-1950s, stories had circulated of black-on-white crimes.

Funny thing, I could never find any news stories to back up such claims, and I wish I could say that it was these injustices that set me to pondering my family, white folks in the South, and in general, who we really were. It wasn't. After some time, it wasn't even Travis Miles's comparison of me to other women because I'd gotten myself pregnant. I guess I was as set in my ways as anyone else. I was kind of resigned. A better word would be defeated.

I was back and I didn't want to be. I resented having to come back and found myself looking down on other people. I was so fired up about not being

like the other trashy women in my town that I guess I needed something to shake me up.

Hell, I lived in a town where everyone knew Marla Dodson was stealing from the register at the video store, but no one dared stop her because she was married to Clyde Dodson, who got kicked in the head by a horse seven years back and hadn't been right since. I'd personally heard people exclaim, "Dammit, I got me a four dollar charge on this here video, and I didn't even rent the damned thing!" They'd go and pay the bill anyway because we all figured that poor Clyde had himself some pretty hefty doctor bills.

From time to time, goats got loose and could be seen running downtown. Everyone knew that Jared Durham was a drunk, but he continued to get cases sent to his law firm because his sister, Jessie, worked at the courthouse. Monica Tyree smoked dope, but no one did anything about it, much less talked about it because her daddy was Pastor Tyree. There didn't seem to be much that could shake this old tree.

Then came the word that turned it all 'round for me and made me rethink everything I thought I ever knew.

Niglet.

Niglet, like piglet, but it was used in reference to a little black baby. And curiouser still, it was used in a way that was meant to be a compliment.

Niglet.

I don't mind telling you it was a word that rolled around in my head for the rest of the day, all that night, and into the next day until I determined that I did not like it. More than that, I detested it. And that was a big moment, for I don't believe I'd ever detested any word before.

In the South, words are just that. We don't hold much stock in words. Spit in a man's face, shoot his horse, puncture his tires—that's something else entirely. But a word for a black baby was nothing to get all stirred up about. So, even though I knew I hated the word more than any other word I thought I'd heard, I didn't say much about it. I just kept to my work.

Niglet.

If I didn't think on it, I was fine, but it was like a hangnail. It started to fester, just getting worse in my mind, and I set to thinking about the very people who had used it and who had been there when it was used.

To set this up, you had to picture *The Recorder*. It was the town's only paper, with a circulation of five thousand—not that we had as many as five thousand living in Granby. We were surrounded by four small, dried-up towns, each sporting a few hundred residents, who also received *The Recorder*. We were in the flood plains, though we'd not had a flood since I can't remember when. As a result, the main street in Granby was built up so that the steps onto the sidewalks were a good three feet from the street. We still weren't wheelchair friendly, though one of three large signs greeting your drive into town touted us as the FRIENDLY CITY. The second bragged about our football team going to nationals three decades ago, and the grand finale is, YOUR HOUSE IS OUR ROYAL FLUSH. That sign belonged to Shelby Harrelson. She owned a thriving porta potty business, rented out to all the construction sites from here to Mexico, and was easily the richest woman in town. I'd always thought it spoke volumes that our city was in the toilet business.

Another three miles and you were right in the middle of downtown Granby and its two gas stations, Subway, Sonic drive-in, a few antique shops, a small grocery store, and *The Recorder* office. One street over was the county courthouse, the bank, and a few lawyer offices—all things I could see perfectly from my desk situated next to a large bay window. I had the bird's eye view, so to speak, of my town.

While there were four of us in the office, only two of us ran the paper. My job description was typesetter, writer, sometimes editor, and bill collector. When I wasn't collecting or reporting, LeAnn Ricks did. Vicky Jackson answered phones, and Tammi Whatley, wife of the owner, did nothing.

It just so happened the day Tasha had walked in with her baby latched firmly around her hip, she'd walked into a snake pit.

Chapter Three

“Hey, girl,” Tasha called out when she saw me, drawling out the girl part.

“Hey, girl,” I said with a smile. It was the standard salutation.

I’d known Tasha since grade school. She was naturally lean with thin, toned arms and a bootylicious backside that got her into considerable trouble. Thus, the baby on her hip. As always, her grin was wide and gorgeous. Her teeth were set off beautifully against her cocoa-colored skin, and I was jealous. Her eyes were wide set, looking even larger because of the careful eyeliner she’d applied.

“What’chu want?” I asked, flexing my fingers at her baby, the universal sign for Hand him over! She smiled and handed Darion to me. I smelled his baby powder-fresh body and rubbed my cheek back and forth over his fuzzy head. He was plump and heavy, a doughy mound of cuteness that I loved to hug.

“Girl, James is fixin’ to graduate from school, and we are havin’ a party!” She beamed.

Her baby daddy was James Otis, a classically nice guy who everyone in town just loved. A one-time hometown hero until he broke his back at the regional playoffs against the Mexia Wildcats, James was the one everyone knew would make it to the NFL, take care of his momma, and put Granby on the map. He was a terrible student but a charismatic, dominating personality, on the field and off. Teachers in Texas tend to become blind with such a fellow.

I could remember it like it was yesterday. I'd been at the game. Hell, everyone had been at that game. We'd heard it clear up in the stands, above the roar of the crowd, when he'd made that spectacular catch. James took a hit so hard, we'd all gasped as if on cue. Just like that, it was over. It was the last catch he'd ever make. For months, he'd been laid up in the hospital up in Waco. When he'd been allowed to come home, it was to a hero's welcome with a parade, signs, and loud cheers all around. Then... nothing. Six years had passed, and no one gave James much thought anymore. But he was one of our few success stories. He'd finished school, worked the local gas station, the Town Pump, and went nights to a local community college.

"Is that right? James Otis is gettin' his associate's?" LeAnn clasped her hands together.

I looked at Darion's perfect face and Tasha nodded happily.

"That's right, and we're having a party." She tossed her head, her big hoop earrings skimming her shoulders. On anyone else, those earrings would have been too much, but on Tasha, they looked perfect.

"What's his major, honey?" Tammi asked her, and I could feel my fingers tighten around little Darion. "I mean—" She gave a sweet smile, as if Tasha were too stupid to know what she had meant by that. "What was his area of study?"

"He's gettin' a technical degree in technology computers," Tasha told us, still beaming, still unfazed by what was to come, but I knew. I had to sit and listen to these cows talk all the time, and I could tell what was coming.

"Now, is that a bachelor's or an associate's?" Tammi asked, continuing her assault. "I ask because, you know, my Ryan is at Texas Tech . . ."

Tammi droned on, and my mind wandered off. Lord, but I'd heard this so many times I thought I might vomit. Yes, yes. The all-mighty, all-glorified, spoon-fed, pain-in-the-ass Ryan Whatley had gotten himself a scholarship to Texas Tech. Whoop-dee.

Tasha's smile faded, and I jumped in, standing to hand Darion back. He kicked his legs excitedly, looking thrilled to be alive. He pursed his little lips together and began ooh-ing and ohh-ing.

"He's getting an associate's," I said and turned to Tasha. "Am I invited? I better be or this announcement will cost you double!"

Even while Tasha was telling me how she wanted the announcement to read, we could both hear the remarks being made on the other side of the office, and I felt my face burn a little. Everyone knew that the Otis family didn't have two nickels to rub together, but the office cows would sit back in judgment of him because he didn't go to a big university. Somehow, I managed to get down all the words and promised Tasha it would run, but all the while, I was wishing they would just hush.

I would say I was annoyed but forgiving of how the ladies acted because it was just the way things were. It's not something I'm proud to say. It didn't matter if you were a female of ten years or eighty; there were rules for females in a cluster. If the majority of the group trashed another person, particularly a female, you let it slide. Little girls learn early on that if you want to be part of the group and ensure your chances of not getting trashed, it's better to be in on the group side.

Boys never have to worry about this because most boys don't bother having any kinds of conversations that involve the community or members thereof. They don't care if it isn't right there in their faces, directly impacting them. So when they're older and just happen into a conversation in which someone they know and like is being trashed, and they speak up, they don't realize that defending the poor soul is social suicide. Again, this kind of thing is not the same among boys.

"That's assuming that that baby even belongs to James. You know," Vicky said, emphasizing her statement with a nod and pointed stare.

After Tasha left, I nestled in my corner, watching the world, as Granby knew it, pass by and listened to Vicky, Tammi, and LeAnn talk. They would spend another few minutes talking about Tasha Williams and how she toted that baby of hers around, acting as though the only daddy could be James Otis when we all remembered good and well how there had been some questions as to the baby's daddy. To their way of thinking, the issue had never been resolved.

Cardinal chick rule number one: Don't defend those who aren't there. If you don't like what's being said, don't be a part of what's being said.

Vicky Jackson was one to talk. Her husband was Tom Jackson, owner of Jackson's Appliance, on the backside of the courthouse. He fixed everything electronic, from outdated answering machines to dishwashers and treadmills, but he did more than that and everyone knew it. How Vicky could pretend not to notice that Ms. Miranda McGhee had more broken appliances than any other woman on earth, I do not know. Everyone in town knew what was going on, yet the more obvious it got, the blinder Vicky got. So I thought it funny that she should sit there on her high horse, judging Tasha for a mistake—not that Darion was a mistake.

I don't mind saying it. I judged Vicky. I stared at her over-teased, backcombed hair, where she tried in quiet desperation to make her pie-faced head look as if her hair had some life. It didn't. Her hair was too light or her eyebrows were too dark. I couldn't decide which.

She came from an era when face powder was critical to the complete makeover, and no one had told her that natural was in, so she always looked slightly ill. In her late fifties, age had not been kind. Her body had settled into a doughy mass, nothing like Darion's, but fleshy with loose skin, which she'd tried to encase in tight clothing. Either that or she refused to accept that she was now two sizes larger than a year ago.

"But he's a cute little niglet," Vicky said, and everything inside me seized up.

LeAnn chuckled then turned to include me. "Don't you think, Thia?"

I should have spoken up. I should have been indignant. I should have demanded they explain what a niglet was—some sort of half-human, half-

animal as they seemed to imply. I should have pointed out the hypocrisy of these women who never missed a sermon, who claimed to have read and revered the Holy Bible and the word of God—the same God who created all children, black, brown, or white, to love and be loved. I should have pointed out that they missed the finer points of those teachings. Or, maybe I should have just taken pity on them for their horrible thoughts. It would have been so easy to threaten to tell Pastor Tyree about their nasty indiscretions. That would have been great. That would have fixed them but good.

Instead, I rose from my desk and went outside. It was close to lunch, and I wanted a sandwich from Subway.

I looked up and down Main Street, resigned to what I saw. This was it. This was my hometown. To the right—the Town Pump and Doc’s Veterinary Clinic. I saw people off in the distance. I didn’t know their faces or their names, but I recognized them. To my left, two blocks down, past Luther’s Garage, I saw Amber Hirsh and Lisa Gary strut along, pushing a stroller and shaking what God gave them.

I knew Amber and knew of Lisa. Neither was good. There was no telling if they were ever good girls, but boredom and the disease of little expectation had rotted them both to where all one could expect was when the next would be expecting.

Amber Hirsh was winning that race. Word around town was it was Cody Kyle’s baby. If that were true, it’d be a fine looking baby—most likely thick blonde hair, blue eyes, and creamy skin, just like the parents. That kid would also have the brain capacity of a hamster.

Fortunately for Amber, she was too stupid to know how stupid she was and that her little offspring would qualify for disability by taking an IQ test. Unfortunately for the town of Granby, Cody Kyle was said to have fathered two other little kids. At the age of seventeen, he was doing what he could to boost the town’s population. It was like watching goats breed.

Cody was an okay kid overall, but beyond intelligence, he lacked motivation. Talk to him and you’d find he had no grand plan. He had no desire or ability to go to college, no passion for anything, cared about nothing and nobody. He didn’t read the news, couldn’t discuss anything of

consequence, but loved playing video games and partying. It was hard to be mad at a kid like Cody because he generated such a buzz of non-importance about himself that you couldn't muster enough energy to care. He was just there.

By all accounts, Amber was different from folks around these parts. Her daddy was Dr. Randy Hirsh, the town vet, who was never out of work, believe it or not. They lived on a fifty-acre ranch, in a super nice house with an in-ground pool, a Jacuzzi, and a heated and air-conditioned ten-stall barn. Amber could have gone to any school she wanted, despite her intellectual deficiencies. She had the best clothes, the nicest car. Whatever she wanted, her daddy got her. The sad thing was she didn't have a clue what she wanted from life.

She rebelled against everything, which was bullshit. When you've got a great life and you rebel against that, you're just stupid. For one thing, she claimed to not like animals. The first time I'd heard that, I knew my suspicions about her were correct. She disliked the very thing that made her father happy and put the clothes on her back.

Cici once told me there is something off about a person who claims to believe in God and read the Bible but not like animals. And Amber lived as you would expect for a person who professed not to like animals. She was all about Amber. She was all about material things, and she couldn't give a rat's ass who was hurt in the process of her day.

Lisa Gary was even worse. The mere sight of her pissed me off so much, she set my teeth on edge.

Lisa had a baby some eight months ago, and she strutted around town as if she suddenly had importance because she was someone's momma. I saw it all for what it was—an act. She didn't know what the hell she wanted to do with herself, and having a baby was, she figured, the easiest way to get her own daddy off her back.

Hut Langford was the daddy. Not surprising, he was fresh from his second prison stint for running guns, another six months of his life gone, which about broke his momma's heart. He could be real funny and charming,

but he was not the kind of guy you shared tidbits with. It wasn't a coincidence that there had been a rash of break-ins and stolen guns about the same time Hut had entertained his gunrunning career.

When word had first traveled the town that she was pregnant, Lisa had cried all the time. As more and more folks had consoled her, asking her what she was going to do, I could see that she was having a good time with all the attention. She'd enjoyed her pregnancy, not because she had some great love of the life that grew in her belly, but because she loved all the special treatment her belly brought. That baby had kept her from having to mess with the two things she had had no intention of doing—college or work. After graduation, she'd spent her days with Amber, and now that Amber was pregnant, the population of losers was growing.

Lisa popped a cigarette in her mouth, careful to pop her hip and strike a pose while she lit it. She was the Paris Hilton of Granby. Talk about trash. With her cigarette poking out from her mouth, she leaned over to check the baby and blew death-smoke in the kid's face, damaging whatever functioning brain cells there were in its little head.

A sharp whistle caught my attention, and I looked across the street to find Officer Tina Wolfe pointing at me.

I grinned.

Tina Wolfe was the one breath of fresh air in this hellhole. I did a quick peek to the left and right and hustled across the street. It was a blatant jaywalking offense, and Officer Wolfe could not have cared less.