

THE BOX



By
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and
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Prequel to The Misadventures of Janie and Diane

THE BOX

An Introduction to L.J. Green

and the Misadventures of Janie and Diane Series

Written by Jolene MacFadden

Part One: The House on Talisman Drive

Englewood, Jacksonville, Florida, 2018

The box sat in the middle of the living room like a period at the end of a very long sentence.

It was not a grand box. Just a plain brown cardboard square, sealed with transparent tape, the words “Odds and Ends” written across the top in Virginia’s careful hand. Not too large to carry. Not too heavy to lift. Sized, it seemed, for exactly one woman to manage on her own, which was precisely the point. Virginia Anderson Varnedoe had been managing things on her own for a long time, and she saw no reason to stop now.

The house had been hers since 1958, when Harold Varnedoe Sr. moved his young family into the brand-new development spreading south along the river. Jacksonville was growing fast in those years, pushing out from its old city bones into neighborhoods with freshly poured sidewalks and young oak trees not yet wide enough to shade a child. The house on Talisman Drive was modest, built solid, with a front porch that faced the street and a backyard deep enough for the five children who would grow up inside its walls.

Five children. Virginia counted them the way she always had, in order of arrival, the way a woman does when she has spent sixty years learning each one’s particular way of needing her.

Sandra was the oldest, sixteen that year, three weeks into her senior year at Englewood High School. The school had just opened its doors, one of those hopeful new institutions built for the families pouring into the suburbs, and Sandra wore its newness like her own. She was a serious girl who became a serious woman, the kind of firstborn who understands from an early age that she is part of the architecture.

Sherry came next, thirteen, with a talent for finding the humor in situations her older sister found merely exhausting. She and Sandra moved through the world like counterweights on the same scale, one pulling toward gravity, the other toward levity, both necessary.

Harold Jr. was nine, already showing his father's quiet steadiness. He was the child who fixed things, who noticed when something was broken before anyone else had thought to look. Craig was six and had his mother's eyes and his mother's stubbornness, two qualities that would serve him well for most of his life and would make the ending of it all the harder to accept.

And Lisa. Lisa was not yet one year old in 1958, the baby of the house, born that same year just before the move as if Virginia had known they would need one more heart beating inside those walls to make the place complete.

Harold Sr. died in 1987. Virginia had been a widow for thirty-one years by the time she sat down on the porch for the last time, and she had learned in those thirty-one years that a house does not become less of a home simply because it grows quieter. It simply becomes a different kind of home. One where the furniture holds stories rather than people. One where every room is a conversation with whoever used to be in it.

Craig died in 2013.

Colon cancer. He was sixty-one years old, and the disease took him with an efficiency that felt almost personal, as though it had decided he had no more time to waste. Virginia was ninety years old when she buried her youngest son, her baby boy, the one with her eyes. She stood at the graveside with the composure she had built over nine decades of living and she did not fall apart, because Virginia Varnedoe did not fall apart in public, and because falling apart would not have brought him back, and because she had learned long ago that grief is not a performance but a presence. It moves in and it stays. You rearrange yourself around it.

For five years after Craig died, she lived alone in the house where he had grown up. She kept his photograph on the mantel beside Harold's. She still paid grandchildren and great-grandchildren to tend the yard. She cooked her meals and paid her bills with a check and refused every suggestion that she might want someone to come in and help. She had her credit card for when she wanted something and her checkbook for everything else and her telephone for when

she wanted to hear the voices of her children, which was often, because she loved them, even when loving them required patience she sometimes had to manufacture from scratch.

But ninety-one becomes ninety-two, and ninety-three becomes ninety-four, and the body eventually begins to present its own opinions about what constitutes reasonable independence. The legs had their own thoughts. The stairs had opinions. Virginia listened to all of these with the measured attention she gave to everything and made her calculations, and by 2018, when she was three weeks from her ninety-fifth birthday, she had arrived at a decision.

The house would be sold. She would go to live with Hal and his wife in Fernandina Beach. There were things still left on her list, and she preferred to complete them somewhere she was not worrying about the yard or the declining neighborhood.



The family descended on Talisman Drive the way families do, in waves, with strong opinions about who should take what and a collective inability to throw anything away that had once been touched by someone they loved.

They came in shifts that last month. Sandra and her daughter, Sherry, flying in from Colorado, Harold Jr. with his practical hands and his father's way of assessing a situation before speaking. Lisa also flew in for a long weekend and cried quietly in the kitchen where she had learned to cook standing on a step stool beside her mother and then wiped her eyes and got to work like the rest of them.

Virginia directed the operation from the center of each room, dust rag in hand, moving from surface to surface with the focused intention of a woman who has standards and intends to maintain them regardless of whether anyone else is watching. She was not sentimental about objects. She was precise about people. The furniture she had selected and cared for over sixty years was good furniture, built to last, chosen with the eye of someone who understood that quality is its own kind of economy. Every child was encouraged to take what they wanted. The

grandchildren were turned loose to claim whatever captured them. Church members arrived and were sent away with armloads of things that Virginia had already determined she would not be needing.

There were arguments, gentle ones, about the dining room table. About the cabinet in the hallway that had held sixty years of accumulated everything. About the photograph albums, which required a separate negotiation involving Sandra's reading glasses and several hours of careful attribution.

Her granddaughter noticed how Virginia managed all of this. She stood at the center of each dispute with the equanimity of a woman who had long since made her peace with the fact that the things were not the point. The people were the point. Things were just the medium through which the people expressed what they could not always say directly, which was that they loved her and were not ready.

Virginia knew this. She accepted it the way she accepted most things, with grace and without comment.

Craig's room had been a guest room since 2013. She had changed it herself, methodically, shortly after the funeral, because leaving it untouched would have been a kind of dishonesty she found beneath her. He was gone. The room remained. These were simply facts. But she had kept one photograph on the nightstand in there, a picture of Craig at maybe thirty, laughing at something outside the frame of the camera, and she did not move that photograph when the room became a guest room, and she did not take it down when the grandchildren slept there on holidays, and when the house was being emptied and everyone was choosing their things, she went into that room alone and stood for a while and then put the photograph carefully in the box.

The box with the odds and ends. The things she could not part with and might comfort her when she reached her final stop.

An old man's pocket watch. A woman's pocket watch. Some photographs. Craig's photograph. A few mementoes of a long life, nearly a century, that she was not willing to surrender to the general dispersal.

No one mentioned the box. Everyone noticed it.



On the last day, Virginia made her final inspection of the house.

She moved from room to room with her dust rag, addressing every surface with the thorough attention that had been her standard for seventy-five years. The renovators were coming the next morning. The new owners had plans. Virginia did not judge their plans. She simply intended that whatever they found when they arrived would be spotless, because this had been her home and it had been a good home and she was not going to let it be anything less than spotless on the day she left it.

Her granddaughter walked with her through some of it and sat on the porch steps through other parts of it, and understood that some of this needed to be done alone.

The kitchen, where Virginia had cooked sixty years of meals, where Lisa had stood on her step stool learning to fold egg whites, where Sandra had done her homework at the table while the younger ones ran in and out. The hallway with the cabinet now empty. The living room with the furniture gone and the Persian rug rolled and taken and the walls showing the ghosts of picture frames in the paint. Craig's room. Harold's room, which had been Virginia's room since 1987, where she had slept alone and managed just fine and kept Harold's photograph on the dresser with the same matter-of-fact devotion she gave to everything.

When she came back to the living room, the box was waiting.

Virginia stood and looked at it for a moment. Then she looked around the room one more time, at the walls and the windows and the light coming through the glass in the front door the way it had come through that glass for sixty years, and her granddaughter watched her from the doorway and did not speak, because there was nothing to say that Virginia did not already know.

Her eyes were dry. Her spine was straight. She was three weeks from her ninety-fifth birthday and she had outlived her husband and her youngest son and she was standing in the house she had made into a home for sixty years and she was ready to leave it, because she had things still left on her list and she was not the kind of woman to leave things undone.

She picked up the box.

In a small, clear voice, she said, "I'm ready now."

Her oldest son Harold Jr. held the door. Virginia walked through the stained glass and wood front door of the house on Talisman Drive for the very last time, carrying her box of odds and ends, and she did not look back, because looking back was not on her list.

Part Two: Fernandina Beach

The house in Fernandina Beach suited her.

Hal and his wife had retired from their respective careers and bought the place with the specific intention of having room for Virginia when the time came. They were practical people who loved her practically, which meant they thought ahead. The bathroom was right next door to the bedroom. The bed was the right height. They mounted the television on the wall so there was no risk of it falling, and they cleared a path wide enough that Virginia could get all the way around the bed and reach everything without bending too far or reaching too much, because she still made her own bed every morning and that was not a negotiable point.

Her pill bottles lined up on the nightstand in a row that would have satisfied a military inspection. Every Monday, Linda came in and refilled the pill-of-the-day box for the week. Every evening, she made sure Virginia had taken them. This was done without fuss, the way Linda did most things, with the quiet efficiency of a someone who had also born and raised five children.

Getting Virginia to eat was sometimes a challenge. Her appetite had become selective in the way that happens when a body has been running for nearly a century and has developed opinions about what it considers worth the effort. Her tastebuds wanted flavor, which in practice meant she preferred her food with enough seasoning to register, and she would push away anything bland with a polite but absolute finality that reminded everyone she had not lost her opinions along with her appetite.

Hydration was the ongoing negotiation. Florida air conditioning is deceptive. A person can sit in a cool room and grow quietly parched without noticing, and Virginia was not always inclined to notice. Linda had developed a system of gentle, persistent reminders that Virginia accepted with the tolerant dignity of a woman who knows she is being managed and has decided not to object as long as it is done respectfully.

When the whole family came to visit, the house became what it had always been when the family gathered, which was full and loud and layered with the particular sound of people who have known each other their entire lives talking all at once. The grandchildren and great-grandchildren slept where they could. During nice weather the adults sent the youngest ones outside to run and holler in the yard, because the noise did not hurt the ears of people who were currently outdoors making it. There was cooking. There was remembering. There was laughter that had Craig's name in it sometimes, tucked into a story or rising up unexpectedly at the end of a sentence, the way a person who is loved keeps turning up in the conversations of the people who love them.

Virginia sat at the center of all of it the way she always had. Alert. Interested. Slightly amused by the chaos she had spent seventy-five years generating and now got to observe.



About six months after moving in, Virginia decided it was time to cross another item off her list.

She had been recording her thoughts on a phone. It had belonged to Craig. She had inherited it when he died, along with several other things that passed to her in the quiet aftermath of his estate, and one of her great-granddaughters had sat with her patiently and taught her to use the voice recorder. The great-granddaughter had created an icon large enough to locate without difficulty, and Virginia had taken to the thing with the methodical interest she brought to any useful tool.

She had been talking into it for months. Her memories. The things she wanted remembered. She had a particular way of narrating her own history, unhurried and precise, without self-pity or unnecessary drama, as if she were giving testimony to a court that she trusted to handle the information responsibly.

She called her granddaughter.

Her granddaughter was an author, which Virginia had always considered a slightly impractical profession and also secretly admired. She understood that writers had a particular relationship with stories, a sense of what a story needed in order to do its work, and she had decided some time ago that her granddaughter was the right person for what she had in mind.

There was also the matter of the bank box.

Going through her odds-and-ends box after the move, Virginia had found a small brass key with the name of a bank on it. The box had been paid for automatically from her account for years, so long that she had nearly forgotten it existed. Hal's wife had noticed the charge when she began helping with the accounts and asked about it, and Virginia had told her not to worry, because she was not ready at that point to explain it, and because she was not in the habit of explaining herself before she was ready.

Now she was ready.

She called her granddaughter and asked her to come.



They went to the bank on a Tuesday, the three of them. Virginia, Sandra, and her granddaughter.

Sandra was not well. She had broken her hip the previous year, the kind of break that changes a person's relationship with their own body, and she was still navigating that change with the determination she had inherited from her mother and the stubbornness she had refined entirely on her own. She used a walker. She moved carefully. She was seventy-seven years old and she had her mother's eyes and her mother's refusal to be defined by what she could not currently do.

Her granddaughter held the door. Sandra rolled to the nice couch just inside the entrance and sat down with the practiced economy of someone who has learned to conserve energy without appearing to. She pulled out her Kindle. She was a reader, had always been a reader, and the Kindle was one of the technologies she had embraced without reservation because it meant she could carry as many books as she wanted without carrying any weight.

Virginia and her granddaughter went to the bank officer, who escorted them to the safety deposit box area. Virginia signed her name on the card and produced her identification and her key with the unhurried confidence of a woman who has been signing her own name on important documents for seventy years and sees no reason to be nervous about it now.

Inside the curtained booth, the bank officer set the large metal box on the table and quietly withdrew.

Virginia lifted the lid.

Inside the box were twenty leather journals.

Her granddaughter looked at them and then looked at Virginia and then looked at them again. They were old, these journals. Not fragile, not crumbling, but definitively old, with the particular solidity of things that have been kept carefully for a very long time. Virginia had painted the year on the spine of each one herself, a neat, precise hand that had not changed much across the decades, and the spines formed a kind of spine of their own, a vertebrae of years standing upright in the box.

Virginia lifted the top one, the green one, and handed it to her granddaughter, who opened it carefully and began to read.

The handwriting inside was not Virginia's.

"This is going to take a while," her granddaughter said.

“Yes,” Virginia agreed. “I have a check for you and your mother to help with expenses while you work on it.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Yes, I do. You have been taking care of your mother for several years now. With her health the way it is, I know you haven’t been able to work as much as you’d like.”

Her granddaughter looked up from the journal. “I don’t know if I can finish it in less than a year.”

Virginia pulled each journal from the box and stacked them in order with the steady attention she gave to all physical tasks. “That is fine. My plan is to hang on until it is finished.” She said this as a statement of fact rather than a dramatic declaration. “I don’t need to read what you write. I just want to make sure these women are remembered the way they deserve to be remembered.”

“Who were they?”

Virginia considered the stack of journals. “Your ancestors. On my mother’s side.” She paused. “And mine.”

“You want a memoir?”

“No.” Virginia was firm on this point. “It will have to be historical fiction. No one would believe that two women in that day and age could have accomplished all that they did. Not as fact. As fiction, perhaps they will.”

Her granddaughter looked at the journals again, twenty of them, a century of women’s lives recorded in careful handwriting. She nodded slowly. “You’re probably right.”

Virginia handed her the phone. "I have recordings as well. Take them."

"Should I keep them on the phone?"

"No. Erase them when you have what you need. That way there will be room if I think of something else worth saying."

Her granddaughter almost smiled. "That's a good point."

Virginia placed the last journal in her granddaughter's bag and straightened to her full height, which was not what it had once been but was still considerable in the way of women who have carried themselves with intention for a very long time. "We had better get back to your mother. She is not looking all that good."

"I know. I am trying to get her to exercise more, but..." Her granddaughter paused. "Since we lost the RV she seems to have lost some of her momentum."

Virginia's expression shifted slightly, something that on another face might have been called grief but on Virginia's face was simply acknowledgment. She had watched Sandra change since Craig died. She had watched the hip slow her down and the loss of the traveling life they had both loved take something from her that was harder to name than mobility. She understood what her granddaughter was not quite saying.

"She will find it again or she will not," Virginia said finally. "That is not something we can do for her." She moved toward the curtain. "Child, I need you to hurry as best you can with this. I do not have unlimited time."

"You have at least three years. We could celebrate your hundredth together."

Virginia paused at the curtain and turned back. Her expression was patient, the way a woman's expression is patient when she has thought carefully about something and arrived at a conclusion that is not wishful but is not without peace. "I do not have any ambitions toward the hundred-year mark. I have said what I need to say. I have arranged what needs arranging. I have one contemporary left, and my baby sister who is a little older than your mother." She looked at her granddaughter directly. "I am not afraid. I am tired. There is a difference."

"I know," her granddaughter said. "I just... I'm not ready to lose either of you."

Virginia walked back to her granddaughter and put her hand briefly on her arm, the kind of touch that does not need words because it is itself a complete sentence. "I know, dear. Do the best you can. That has always been enough."

They closed out the bank box account. The three of them went back to the house in Fernandina Beach and had a pleasant lunch, and then Sandra and her daughter drove home to their own place, and Virginia sat in her room in the afternoon light with her box of odds and ends on the floor beside the bed, and she was satisfied.

Almost everything was in order.

She still had a little time.

Part Three: The Women in the Journals

Almost a year to the day after the bank, her granddaughter finished the first draft of what she was already thinking of as the first book.

It was not, strictly speaking, a biography. Virginia had been right about that. The truth of what those two women had done in the years between 1900 and 1914 was too improbable for the kind of earnest presentation that a memoir demands. It required the freedom that fiction allows, the latitude to say this is true in its bones even if the skin of it is invented, which is a different kind of truth but not a lesser one.

Virginia's granddaughter gave the women names. Janie and Diane. She gave them histories rooted in the real history of the family she was writing from, because a story grown from actual soil has a different quality than one grown in a greenhouse, and because the women in those journals had lived in actual cities and taken actual trains and navigated the actual machinery of a world that did not particularly want them to be doing what they were doing.

She gave them a family line that reached back to the Scottish and French ancestors who had come to the Great Lakes region in the late 1700s and built a life out of the particular combination of stubbornness, practicality, and relationship that the frontier required. She gave them a grandmother's grandmother whose name was Clementine and who had done things in her long life that the family had been quietly proud of and quietly careful about for generations.

She gave them Chicago, because Chicago was where the family had lived before they moved south in 1927, and because Chicago at the turn of the twentieth century was a city in the full complicated fever of becoming, full of German societies and labor disputes and Pinkerton men and architectural ambition and the particular energy of a place that has decided it is going to matter and is proving it street by street.

She gave them a mystery that had been waiting in those journals for nearly a century to be solved. She gave them a dead husband whose encoded notebooks held more than grief. She

gave them each other, because the journals made clear that the two women had understood something that the people around them mostly did not, which was that independence and partnership are not opposites but the same thing viewed from different angles.

She wrote it for Virginia. She wrote it for Craig, whose photograph was in the box with the odds and ends. She wrote it for the women in the journals, who had gone to extraordinary lengths and left careful records and trusted that someone would eventually find them and know what to do.

And she wrote it for the family. For all the people who had moved through the house on Talisman Drive and left something of themselves in its walls. For Sandra doing her homework at the kitchen table while the younger ones ran in and out. For Lisa learning to fold egg whites standing on a step stool. For Harold Jr. noticing what was broken before anyone else thought to look. For Craig with his mother's eyes and his mother's stubbornness, laughing at something outside the frame.

For Virginia, who had carried all of them for nearly a century and had arranged everything thoughtfully and had made her peace and was not afraid and was only tired, which is different.



Virginia Anderson Varnedoe died in 2021, in her ninety-eighth year, three weeks short of the birthday she had not particularly wanted to reach. She died the same year as Sandra, her oldest, and the proximity of those two losses is the kind of thing that does not resolve, only becomes part of the permanent shape of a family's grief.

She had paid for her arrangements when she sold the house. She had even given them a little extra, just in case.

She had her list, and when she went, she had finished it.

Part Four: About L.J. Green

My name is L.J. Green.

If you must know, that stands for Lillian Jade Green, and I am a new author with an old story to tell. I am the granddaughter in the preceding pages, though I have made myself small there on purpose, because the story belongs to my grandmother and I am only the one she trusted to carry it forward.

The women in the journals are real, or as real as I can make them. They were my ancestors on my grandmother's mother's side, a line that runs back through French and Scottish blood to the Great Lakes trading families of the late 1700s, to a woman named Clementine who never married and did remarkable things and kept careful records of all of it in twenty leather journals that sat in a bank box for decades waiting for someone to find them.

I found them. My grandmother made sure of that.

The family moved from the Chicago area in 1927, south to Florida, carrying whatever they could and leaving the city behind but not the history. The women in the journals lived their adventures between 1900 and 1914, in the years before the first war changed everything, when the country was still making up its mind about what it was going to be. They traveled on steam trains and steam boats and early motor cars. They solved problems that the official channels either could not or would not address. They did this without recognition and without apology and with, as far as I can tell from the journals, considerable satisfaction.

I have written their story as historical fiction because my grandmother was right that no one would believe it as fact. But the bones of it are true. The cities are real. The history is documented. The women who helped them are drawn from actual women who did actual work that was largely erased from the official record, as women's work so frequently is.

The Misadventures of Janie and Diane will unfold across five books, following the two women from Chicago in 1901 through the network of hotels and conspiracies and complicated loyalties that shaped the early years of the American century. Each book centers on a hotel. Each hotel holds a secret. Each secret connects to the one before and the one after, because the women in those journals understood something that took the official world considerably longer to learn, which is that nothing happens in isolation and everything leaves a record if you know where to look.

My grandmother knew where to look. She kept the key. She kept the account. She waited until she found the right person and then she handed it over and said do the best you can, and I am doing my best, and I hope it is enough.

I think she would say it is.

Hello. I'm L.J. Green, and these are the Misadventures of Janie and Diane.

I think you're going to like them.



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