

One of Four

by Michelle Elvy

She stood with her sisters, pretty maids in a row, felt cold despite the scorching spring sun. Heard what the man said but didn't register; words from the Lord flew around her like the flighty trill of the robins up above. The birds made more sense.

First handful of dirt: Mother. She knew it was her turn next but could not move, frozen by the burning house, same as the night it crumbled. Everything gone, ashes to dust to thousands of trickling mudslides when the cruel rain came the following day. That was three days ago. Now she felt the elemental world closing in: earth swallowing the dead, sky wailing a dirge, water washing ashes, fire burning her heart. She laughed. Panic? Fear? Was the Lord's message funny? Or was it the preacher's rubbery voice, or the absurdly matching Franklin twins? The wide white collar on Hillary Burch's velvet dress, her tightly wound curls? The acrid stench of spring, the crocus pushing up beside the blacked smudge that was her home?

The father they just buried was gone forever (never mind what the preacher said) -- burned up swallowed down washed away. What she knew: life would be drab without his ear-splitting laugh and crushing hugs. What she didn't know: four women would weave in and out of each other's lives for seventy years more, disconnected by geography but writing the same story in four parts, a grey sorrow filled in with colors of strength and love and beauty.

