

A LIFE AFTER WAR BACKSTORY

MARC
AND ANGIE

ANGELA WHITE

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Marc and Angie
by
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Title: Marc and Angie
A Life After War Backstory
Edition: 2025
Length: 542 pages
Author: ©Angela White
ISBN#: 978-1-945927-09-6

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Prologue

Marc

I think you should know a few things about me before we go any further.

I'm lonely. Growing up, I spent almost every second that way. Existing in a home where there was only indifference and coldness caused me to long for someone who could brighten my life before I was even old enough to recognize friendship as a need. Isolated and forced to deny who I was, I lived a very different life from the other kids in our small Ohio town.

The second thing you should be aware of is how badly my mother crushed my faith with her rabid hatred of our heathen roots. Despite being the grandson of Roma immigrants, I was raised Christian. Everything changed after my dad abandoned us, from clothes and furnishings to our regular attendance of every choir meeting, prayer chain, and baptism we were invited to. Instead of the wild freedom to explore the world I'd had for the first years of life, there were now crosses and plaques, and so many scripture lessons that I got lost in them. Some of it made sense, but most of it went against the beliefs I had already been learning.

My constant companion during the adjustment years was confusion. Why had my life flipped? Where had my mom gone? Even her name had

changed. She'd once been Rosemary, but now, I had to call her Mary or Mother Brady. Why had she been replaced with this hateful matriarch? Why had my dad left? Instead of love and family, I now had the new business of selling things to anticipate for my future. We had to be respectable, not heathen trash. I struggled with it for a decade.

I said the words and went through the motions, but I didn't care about our roots the way my mother did. It wasn't that I didn't believe in a higher power. I just didn't know which one to pick—our natural heritage or the new lifestyle that didn't fit me. I loved our forbidden culture, (the small bits I'd been able to keep learning behind her strict back) but I didn't cross my mother openly. I knew who the boss was.

As I grew older, it was impossible not to think that I was being tested with temptation by both sides of my life—religion and love. If that was the case, then I failed more of the trials than I won, but some things are a fire in your blood and nothing can ever change that.

The last thing you need to know about me is that I was determined to escape. I had decided I would have a different future than those around me. I would be a Marine, a hero who helped people and was respected for it. My determination to get out saw me through the early mornings that began on my knees, praying to a deity I hadn't even heard of until my dad left.

The rest of our clan seemed to love the new system, especially the men. They were sent away to learn the business, which allowed for months of unsupervised exploration of the world. It was mother's way of convincing the males who were too old to be cowed like I was, and it succeeded. How to sell things and be respectable, that's what the Bradys became known for. Not for being gypsy spawn, as my mother referred to those who refused to hide our heritage.

Mary Brady hated anything that reminded her of our caravan history. For one of the family to flaunt it openly was a sin never forgiven. We had relatives that were missing from the holiday gatherings for years over breaches of her rules. Some were never allowed to return and others, like me, simply refused to go back under her thumb. Her own parents had been killed by an angry mob after an immigrant couple had robbed a bank and murdered a clerk in town.

My grandparents had been in the wrong place, at the wrong time. It had given my mother a fear that only grew when my dad wiped out the accounts and abandoned us. From that moment on, she and everyone under her control had to conform or they were driven out. Considering that she inherited all the family loan notices and property deeds in the divorce, there wasn't much argument. In fanatical defense, my remaining parent grew into a cold person afraid to love or show emotion, even to her own children. Appearances were all that mattered.

As a result, we didn't have many feelings for her either, other than fear.

A house with no love was all I'd ever known, and I didn't understand the power of what I was missing. I just accepted that my elder brothers and sister held value, while I was a potential embarrassment waiting to happen. I stayed out of trouble as best a boy can, and kept grades and friends that were approved of. The neighborhood kids, I rarely spent time around. They danced on the sidewalks in front of their parent's gaudy shops. My mother would cross the street to avoid these reminders of her past and she fully expected us to do the same.

The only person I ever knew to challenge her and win was her brother. Georgie married without her approval, to a *business woman* who ran a rustic fortune telling shop as her cover for taking in male clients. It was exactly the type of person my cold-as-ice parent hated. It shocked everyone when Georgie's wife was officially allowed to enter our family and attend the gatherings and services. I never understood why my mother gave in, but I'll always be grateful to her for that one thing. Because Georgie's new bride had a little girl I instantly felt something for. It wasn't love at first sight, not at those ages, but it was just as powerful.

My time with Angie has been recorded in my mind under years and holidays. That's how I view our past, and every second is burnt into my brain. When you only get to see your reason for breathing

a few times each year, you imprint every moment of it to hold you through those hundreds of other lonely days. It was like that for me from almost our first meeting. I gave Angie a part of my soul and I never really felt like it was enough to reward her properly for loving me back.

As I've gotten older, I recognize that life is full of terrible irony. Lying undetected on the fringes of our day-to-day schedules, it's everywhere-like the love that blindsided me and brought down my entire family. I had spent long, hard years waiting and longing for the time to come when I would be allowed to leave home, to finally escape my tyrannical crime boss mother. Then Angie filled my heart with her love and I hated it each time I had to leave. When we were torn apart, the sun went out. Life is splashed with irony and streaked in pain.

Angie

There are things you need to understand about me before Marc takes us any deeper into hell. The most important is that I'm older than my age at any given time. I always have been. People might say it's because of what I've been through during my life, but it's really because of who I am, deep on the inside. I know things, even when I don't want to. I guess I've had a lot of excitement, but I don't mean the kind you giggle about with friends. I mean the kind of things you carry your whole life in shame—like my mom being a whore.

Don't frown. It's only the truth. I've been hearing it since I can remember. I can't tell you how many of her *friends* patted my curls on the way out our door. That's how I ended up with a stepfather and my first awful secret.

Georgie wants me...like a man wants a woman! He said I'm his prize for being a good man, but I don't understand that. Georgie is big and loud, and likes to have me sit on his lap and wrestle. I don't like him, but at least he doesn't beat on me much, like he does to my mom. I figured out if I don't tell him no, he doesn't get mad at me. I still get scared, though. He's waiting for me to grow up. I have to pretend I don't know what he's thinking.

But I do.

That's the second thing I'm hiding. I can hear people's thoughts... Yes, even yours. I talk to ghosts. Well, one ghost. The witch inside has been

whispering to me for as long as I can remember. The neighborhood lady, Patty, told me my gift will get stronger as I get older. That's scary, 'cause it's pretty strong now. It's as if I have two rooms in my brain and both of them are constantly racing, questioning, discovering. It lets me think twice as hard, for twice as long, without actually spending twice the time. But it can't protect me.

My stepfather targeted me right away. As long as my mom doesn't have to do anything but read her trashy books, she doesn't interfere. As I got older and Georgie became more open about what he wanted, I suspected she'd sold me out. I know she hates me. When your parent wishes you hadn't been born, it's kind of hard to miss.

I try not to listen to her and Georgie's thoughts. People don't like it when you can get into their head, so I've learned to be careful around them. I know how delighted Georgie would be. I would never get any peace from him. In my entire childhood, only a few people ever discovered my secret.

Being at home was bad for me. I spent my time out exploring. Sometimes, when I was bored or upset, I would follow thoughts. I liked to track people down. On one of those adventures, I found a boy sitting in the rows of corn that lined one side of our trailer park. I'd followed his thoughts because they were a mirror of how I was feeling. This was someone like me. I'd never known that before.

The boy was angry, and ashamed because he had to pretend he wasn't gypsy, and because his

family was so cold to him. He had all sorts of hard rules, like only being around the right people. Even at six, I knew that wasn't me.

He stayed in the corn all day, sometimes muttering, but mostly quiet and thinking, trying to find an escape. It was how I spent most of my own time; the urge to come out was strong. It forged a bond that was unbreakable.

When he finally got up to leave, I was careful to stay still, but my heart called out to his. I didn't want him to go.

And he looked at me! Or at least it felt that way and I realized I knew him. I'd noticed his picture on the wall of my new stepfather's hallway. The boy was my family, a forbidden side of it that I hadn't met yet. Despair, thick and smothering, settled over my heart.

The boy peered through the corn, trying to find me. His thoughts weren't ugly, but when he came toward where I was, I left, not wanting him to know anyone had been there. What would I say to him?

Less than a week after first spotting Marc, I was trailing him around the neighborhood. I couldn't resist whenever I picked up one of his thoughts. His mind was so soothing! It didn't matter that he didn't know I existed, or that his mother loathed gypsy kids, or that my new stepfather had put his hands up my dress yesterday. As long as I got to see my Marc, I was okay. He quickly became my unknowing light in the darkness.

I would linger behind the bushes and watch him read on his porch or hang out with his approved friends in empty, weed-covered lots. In church, he would stare out the windows with an expression I longed to ease with the comfort of my little arms. To say I was obsessed would be an understatement.

So, those were my burdens, my secrets. It was as if all nine planets had collided at my birth, creating an inescapable horror that followed me most of my life. Can you guess which secret I would have given up the quickest?

My gift. The very thing that made me who I was.

Why?! Because hearing into people hurts! I get up and pass my mom's door, hearing her jealousy of my youth and my looks. Then I sit across from her husband and try to choke down a meal while he thinks of his plans to spy on me in the shower later or peak under the blankets while I sleep. To start every day that way! If I hadn't known, I could have at least stolen a few hours of happiness without worrying over what was coming later.

As it was, I spent the years between four and eight in a blur of fear and loneliness, praying for someone to be my friend. When I finally found it, I couldn't let go. I needed Marc. When I realized he also needed me, I never looked back in my quest to make him mine. It's the one choice I've never regretted.

1989

Chapter One
Cookies for Apples
Late October

Marc

“**T**his is your uncle’s new wife. *Frona*.”

My mother’s tone told me she didn’t like the loudly dressed woman filling her doorway. I kept my voice cool. “Nice to meet you.”

The woman wasn’t large, but the colors of her skirt and top were confusing to me. We never had red or purple clothes in our house. Mother barely tolerated blue jeans.

I knew not to put my hand out to her, but the fortuneteller didn’t notice the insult. Her greasy hair hung over her face, covering pasty skin that rarely encountered sunlight. I wondered if she was ill.

“You must be Marcus. Maybe you can help me?”

I felt the matriarch beside me tense and kept my mouth closed. I wasn’t sure why this strange woman was here or why my mother wasn’t throwing her out. It made me uneasy.

“Angie needs the bathroom. Can you take her?”

“Humph!”

That one snort from my mother told me I shouldn't agree. I opened my mouth to give directions instead, but a stunning little girl stepped from behind my new aunt. I gawked in fascination.

The girl was paler than paper, with tangled black curls that hung to her tiny waist, and wide blue eyes that glowed. I instantly knew she was my own kind, but I didn't know how or why. At the time, I wasn't sure what drew me so strongly. It could have been how she looked at me, as if I were already hers, or maybe how cute that little face was, but I've always suspected it was the warmth in her expression. I was helpless against it.

“Please?”

Her angelic voice snapped me back into the cold reality of my world, where I felt the waves of disapproval filling the hall. Mother wasn't happy. I immediately disobeyed the unspoken rules, knowing I'd pay for it later. “Come on.”

Mother watched us all the way down the long corridor, sharp gaze no doubt filled with surprised speculation. I'm almost certain she began laying plans right then. I think maybe she knew, observing that beautiful gypsy girl lead her least wanted child down the hall, that later, when we were older, there could be trouble. That's the kind of parent she was—sharp, merciless.

“In there.” I waited outside the bathroom door, wondering if I could escape my coming punishment until later. Mother wouldn't let it go, but I could for a while. I wanted to be outside, away from here.

Standing there daydreaming, I had almost forgotten why I was in trouble. When the bathroom door opened, I jumped.

She giggled and the sound of it drew a rare grin from me. She was a cute kid. Too cute for this family.

“Sorry.”

“S’okay.” I started to take her back.

“Do we have to? She doesn’t like me.”

I had been thinking about escaping for a while. Did this matter? I shrugged. “Probably not.”

That made her smile, a burst of happiness no boy would have been able to resist, let alone one as isolated and lonely as I was.

“Where can we go?”

I was running through the options when her stomach growled. “The kitchen. Come on.” I looked over to find her studying me with those odd eyes. What was it about them, besides the fact that they were violet? “How do you like being a Brady?”

She shrugged, but didn’t answer. I felt a kinship I couldn’t find a reason for with her so close. I figured out later that it was something we had in common. I didn’t care much for being a Brady either. “You go to school yet?”

She nodded, little hands shoved into the pockets of her white dress as if she was afraid to touch anything, even by accident.

“Crosby.”

That meant my mother hadn’t really accepted her or she’d be going to private classes with the rest

of us. It also meant I would hardly ever get to see her and even then, the sense of loss was there for me.

We moved quietly down another huge hall, surrounded by saints and dark colors, but neither of us paid attention to these things yet. There would be time for guilt later. Right now, talking to females was hard for me and I'd promised to try harder. My mother expected me to date Jeanie Hornstader in the next couple of years. I wasn't looking forward to it, but I was a dutiful son. I decided this little girl wouldn't be so intimidating to practice on. The females at school were another matter entirely, even the teachers I sometimes caught staring at me in longing. My mind said desire was another word for it. I wasn't sure exactly what desire was, but it sounded like trouble and I'd been raised to avoid that. "You're quiet for a girl."

That pleased her, but didn't draw the reaction I'd been looking for. I prepared to try again.

"Momma said to be quiet and...Mother Brady scares me some."

She blew me away with the emotions that brought. For the first time in my life, I felt the urge to protect someone other than myself. It was a world away from the boy who just got by so he could get out. I grinned uneasily. "She likes bigger food. You're too small."

That friendly face frosted over and her small chin formed a stiff V. She didn't tell me she hated

those words or not to ever say it again, but I felt both as if she had.

Her age is a touchy subject. I didn't know it would become one for me, as well. "I won't say it again. Sorry."

Our gazes locked. When she stopped, so did I, very confused by how she seemed so much older than her age. Her power held me. Outside, thunder crashed heavily, making the ground shake. We only stood there for a few seconds, but it felt like forever. I saw so much in those stunning blue eyes! There was another world in there, one I desperately wanted to be a part of. In there, I would always be wanted.

Angie looked away (let go of me) and I yawned, instantly tired and more confused. What happened? Her eyes were blue again. How was that possible?

"I'm sorry." She hesitated, sounding miserable. "You can take me back now."

Her hair was lit up like a city skyline and her skin glowed like a jewel. No way was I letting her go yet. I wanted answers first. I shook off that sleepy feeling as best I could and got us moving. The last minute was already blurring and I struggled to remember all of it. Later, when I was alone, I would figure out what it meant. I was positive it was important. It had been too strong to ignore.

I could feel Angie stealing looks at me as we walked. I realized she was keeping secrets. It was easy for me to recognize that since I saw it in the

mirror each morning. That was where I put on the mask my mother insisted we all wear.

The cook looked as shocked as I felt to be leading that little girl into his perfectly polished kitchen. I didn't ask him to do anything that might get him fired. I led Angie by the steaming pots of chicken soup that were destined for the small town shelter, fighting the urge to ask what she thought of the grand house my parent had put together over the years. Was she impressed? Jealous? I was ashamed.

I waved a hand at the table where a large plate of cookies and two baskets of fruit sat with perfectly matched precision. "Whatever you want."

The words had a ring of familiarity that made my insides twist. Did I know her already?

Angie pulled an apple free with nervous caution.

I handed her a napkin to hold under it. The cook approved of her choice, but it made me uneasy. Who turned down cookies for apples?

I watched her, unable to look away as she bit into the fruit. Years later, I recognized it as an Adam and Eve moment, but right then, all I could see was the future. I wanted to dismiss it as a daydream, but that pull tightened, drowning me in the ebbs and flows. When she grew up, I wanted to be there.

I pulled out of the daze with a groggy scowl. I had hair under my arms, a moustache starting, a playboy under my mattress, and a duplicate on the top shelf of my closet. I considered myself nearly grown. What did I want with a baby?

Angie's face squished up. "I won't always be this little!"

The cook smiled at what he assumed was baby talk, but I froze. *She heard my thought!*

"Of course not, child." The cook tried to soothe her. "You will grow and be even prettier."

We ignored him, lost in that first discovery. I opened my mouth without knowing what was coming out...

"Marcus Brady!"

Glad of which way I was facing, I snapped my mouth shut and cleared my expression before rotating to face both of the parents now in the doorway. Their clothes clashed in a vivid warning to be careful.

"Yes, mother?" My tone was perfectly normal, but my pulse had tripled.

Two sets of narrowed eyes swept us and then went over the cook, who flinched back against the table, terrified.

"What are you doing?"

Mary's voice was like stone, but before I could dig the hole, Angie saved us.

"He gaves me apples!"

The little girl let out a different giggle, this one so annoying that I took a step back.

"Gave me one apple," she corrected herself, sounding exactly her age.

I hoped she knew I didn't mean it as I rolled my eyes. "Can I go now?"

It sounded like I couldn't wait to escape.

I left under my mother's curt nod, but I could feel the weight of the little girl's pain.

That was my first meeting with Angie. I was already craving more before she was out of our mausoleum.

Instead of slipping down to the rope swing over the cornfield as I usually did on a Saturday, I hid in the front tree and stayed there, waiting and studying these new emotions.

When she and her loud parent stepped from our house, her gaze came straight to mine, as if to say it was the same for her. Even across the distance, there was a spark, a sense of us being connected. It said there were things coming that we weren't ready for, but I didn't look away, even after mother found my hiding place with her stern glare. That little girl was someone I wanted to know. I set my mind to it right then that I would.

What I didn't count on was how determined my parent was to keep us apart. With her years of being in charge, I stood little chance against her manipulations. In fact, I didn't recognize many of them for what they were until it was too late.

Angie slipped from our ungracious steps with dainty, careful movements that didn't fit the age of the girl I'd spoken to. Angie hung back from her parents, waiting until they told her what to do. *Timid*. That was a new vocabulary word I had learned this week. *Fearful and hesitant: problems that call for bold, not timid, responses.*

Yes, that fit us both, but why did I care? I spent my time reading and playing sports. I had a girl I was supposed to start dating. Why was I drawn to a baby? Because we were both alone in our minds? Because she was special? Did I want her power?

That thought scared me. I'd watched enough movies to understand I could use her to get what I wanted. Was that something else we would have to be careful of? Was she in danger from me?

My wording instantly bothered me. Would have to be careful of... I already planned to do this, no matter the risk. *Was* it for her gifts?

No, I realized. I didn't need anything she could give me. I already knew what people around me were thinking. I'd learned that skill at home.

"People will think what they see, Marcus. If you always look and act like a proper Christian boy, they'll always see one."

"But... What if I don't feel it? On the inside?"

"You will. In time, the other life will fade into a vague, shifting picture without sound. Then it will be gone for good and you'll forget."

Those words had hurt me then and they still did years later. The idea that I could forget my dad or Angie, the notion that I could ever be as callous as my family, was utterly crushing. I would never do that. My mother would try to keep us apart, but I wasn't going to let my first taste of wonder, of happiness, be stolen.

Already dripping sweat from the humidity, I watched Angie climb into the old wagon, brain

thudding with new emotions and ideas. I was flooded with hurt and pain, and an aching loneliness that I couldn't ease as the engine fired up. *I don't want her to leave.*

As if she heard me, she spun around in the seat and waved.

My Brady.

I don't know if she said it or I thought it, but from that moment on, my heart belonged solely to her and it was never even brushed by another woman. It was only 10 minutes in time, but it set the path for everything that came later. It was the beginning of us, of Marc and Angie.

Angie

That was the first time I'd been in Mother Brady's home. The perfection made me feel out of place, as it was meant to. Those paintings and suffering idols were right to be so stiff, foreboding. I was the aberration here, not them.

That was also the first time I'd spoken to *my Brady*. I'd always thought of Marc that way. He didn't belong with those awful people any more than I did. We were different.

Standing there, eating the rare treat of an apple, I could hear his thoughts clearly. It wasn't an accident that he discovered my secret. Marc was nice to everyone else. Why not me? I did wonder if I'd scared him, but as we left, I realized I'd made him curious.

I was satisfied that he knew who I was, which was more than I'd had when we arrived. I didn't listen to my mom and Georgie trash-talk him and his siblings on the way home, but I did notice that not one bad word was said about Mother Brady.

Georgie flipped on the radio. Welcome to the Jungle blared from the speakers. It was perfect for my mood. I always felt like a small cat in a gigantic jungle, but more now than usual because I wanted to be at that awful house with my Brady, not trapped in this car. I rolled down the window to escape the heat and the noise.

When we got to our trailer, I slipped away while Georgie tried to explain what a promissory note

was. My mom wasn't bright. Such conversations often ended with a fist and a grunt of annoyance at her tears. I didn't want to hang around for that.

I wandered down into the humid cornfields instead of hitting the local area where most of the neighborhood kids played. They didn't like me. I was afraid of them, of what I sensed they could push me into doing. I wasn't always a quiet, little gypsy girl. Sometimes, I was dangerous.

Today however, I was excited and a bit sad that I hadn't gotten more time with Marc. He had no idea that I'd been following him around for years while dreaming of the time when I would be old enough to prove the things I needed to say. Lost in my desperate thoughts, I sat on the edge of the cornfield, watching the old tire swing move in the breeze. Large bees and wasps flew in and out of the rows. The drone of insects among the eight-foot corn was hypnotizing. Maybe that's why I didn't hear the footsteps behind me. I was usually extremely observant about things like that.

I spun around to find Marc standing there.

"Are you okay?"

I lowered my head instead of answering, busy saying *thank you* to fate for sending him.

"Angie?"

My name coming from him in concern was already more acceptance than I was used to. A tear spilled down my cheek. I wiped it away angrily. The hormones of my body were difficult on a good day, and this one had been stressful. I'd been certain

Mary Brady would know I had the family curse. But she hadn't. That scared me, too.

Marc knelt down. I was glad he didn't do more. If anyone saw him touch me, his mother would ground him forever or maybe something worse. His older cousins, Rodney and Scot, were vocal about Mary's lack of goodwill toward her own kin. I'd even heard that she sent some people away, but I didn't know if it was over the curse or for breaking her rules. I suddenly didn't want to take the chance on her discovering my secrets now that Marc finally knew I was alive.

“Can I do anything for you?”

I didn't know what to say. He didn't understand that I wasn't just a cute kid who had put a spell on him. I would be his wife someday. I'd already dreamed of it. That future was set. How could I explain the visions of us in my room and in some sort of hut, where we crossed adult lines and sealed our souls? How did I try to tell him all that?! There was no way he would believe me yet, but the witch was never wrong. It was terrifying to know that this boy would come to mean so much to me.

I choked. I didn't say anything. I watched him scowl and listened to him mutter about having no babysitting experience. It was heaven and it was hell.

Marc

I understood she was shy, and I thought maybe she was a little scared of me because we were alone. I figured silliness would help, so I started speaking super-fast, covering what could be wrong in a goofy blur. “Shoes too tight, hair too flappy, dress too snappy, nose too full...”

Angie laughed.

I stopped as the sunlight faded into a dark, smoky sky and my body shuddered with needs that I didn’t want to acknowledge. The sound of her pleasure sank into my guts and made me shift uneasily. I liked it way too much.

Our eyes met. I forgot to breathe as the world shifted. I read things in those sparkling orbs, things that I wasn’t ready for yet. I could see both of us, older and so in love that nothing else mattered. I stared in horror at my future, frightened of the pain.

I stood to go.

Angie reached out to take my wrist.

I stared down at her, at the girl I’d just seen in a wedding gown and a shroud that combined to create a desolate widow. She was cursed.

“It doesn’t have to be.” Angie clenched her eyes shut. “Forget it. Let it go.”

Drowsiness settled over me. I began to doubt that I’d witnessed anything.

“Just the heat.” Angie looked back up with a shy smile, once again adorable. “Stay?”

Even then, there wasn't a choice. I dropped down next to her with tingling skin. The place where she'd touched me was covered in goose bumps.

Then the odd moment was over as if it didn't matter. I didn't stare at her, but I was aware of every shift, every sigh. She sounded happy in those moments. It confused me because I felt the same even though we weren't doing anything but sitting here. *Why?*

"You need a friend."

I gaped at her.

She gave me a half-excited, half-wary look. "I can do other things..."

"Like what?"

Angie held out her hand. I felt like I was sitting next to an engine as the ground rumbled with life. I saw a tiny blue spark at her fingertip and then the corn stalk by her began to get bigger. It didn't grow much, but it was enough to convince me that it was all true. I also had enough child left in me to ignore the chills on my skin and the sense of danger that it had produced. "Cool."

She beamed at my acceptance, blinding my heart. Angie showing true happiness was another moment I never recovered from. It sent a wave of longing into my soul that still echoes 20 years later. "Why do your eyes change color?"

"I get...tired." Her hands clenched defensively. "It's not weird.

"It's pretty." It was also fascinating.

Her fists relaxed and she gave a curt nod, as if she had made a choice.

“I’ll be your friend.” Angie put a hand up to shield against the glare as the sun moved directly over us. “But you can’t tell anyone.”

That suited me fine, except for the slight nagging of my conscience. “Okay. Maybe we need a code?”

She studied the dusty ground in concentration. I knew she had an answer when she straightened.

“Hand signals, like on shows.”

“Like the soldiers use?”

“Yes, but easier so the adults don’t recognize them.”

Impressed, I leaned on my elbows. “I’ll come up with a set for us. What should we cover first?”

Her pale cheeks turned pink. “When and where to meet?”

I swallowed a lump of excitement. I never willingly broke mother’s rules, even in the spur of the moment, and here I was planning it.

Angie glanced toward the tire swing. “You can show me how to have fun.”

I knew instinctively it wasn’t something she was allowed much of. I agreed that we could be friends.

“Can we start today? We might not be here tomorrow.”

Wise. I nodded. “Sure. What’s first?”

We spent the rest of that first afternoon swinging and joking, and pretending the rest of the

world didn't exist. Except it did, and eventually, I had to go home. My curfew was earlier than hers, I assumed, because she hadn't once mentioned going home, even when it began to get dark. "I have to go."

Angie's lower lip actually quivered, like I'd seen in the movies, but she controlled it to flash me a bright smile.

"Thank you. For today."

I grinned, relieved and touched. "Sure. We'll do it again as soon as I can."

"How will we know?"

Her question couldn't be answered to our satisfaction. I shrugged. "Between the family gossiping and your...listening skills, we'll figure it out. I'll get the code ready."

Angie let another sad smile spread, then dropped her head so I couldn't read her expression anymore. She was letting me go because she didn't want me to get in trouble. That made me like her even more.

Leaving that little girl was incredibly hard. I could actually feel her wishing we were older. Right at that moment, I wasn't as scared of it. Spending the afternoon with Angie had affected me deeply, given me new and terrible ideas that simmered as I trudged home. I would have to face my mother when I got there and I needed to be ready for that, but it was hard to concentrate with Angie's laughter still ringing in my guts.

I didn't sneak into the family house, but tossed my bike down outside the door, and left my ball glove on the front stoop where mother would trip over it. Hopefully, she would assume I had spent the day with the other preteens on the hill behind the four-street trailer park. I had to be clever. I went straight to my room to face whatever judgment had been chosen. I was only there long enough to kick off my muddy boots and brush the corn silks from my hair.

"I saw the way you were leering at her, Marcus."

I flinched as if I hadn't heard my mother's sensible shoes outside my door.

"I always make you jump." Mary moved into the room, an imposing figure in her black and white pantsuit. "I wonder why you're so easy to scare."

Right now, it was because her cold gaze had gone first to my bed and then to my closet. "Sorry, mother."

She was silent for a short pause. I tried not to tense up.

"Do you like her?"

"Sure." I added nothing for her to build on, no lie to be trapped in.

Her eyes narrowed under those thick glasses. "You'll stay away from her."

I will not! My thoughts were often the opposite of the words forced to come through my lips. "Okay."

I continued to comb my hair, trying not to look at her. Did she know about my magazines?

I barely heard her move before my mother appeared behind me in the mirror, cold gaze trying to dig into my heart to discover what evil I might have allowed into our lives.

“It’s a sin. Lusting for your family is incest. I’ll not stand for it.”

I didn’t try to tell her that it wasn’t like that. She wouldn’t have understood, and by the time it was over, she would have twisted my words into a confession.

“You’ll be punished.”

I tried to ease the damage I was about to take. “I am sorry, mother. They were so bright!”

Her lined face softened a bit, thinking I hadn’t liked that either. “Yes, but temptation is everywhere. You must be strong enough to resist. How can I send such a weak boy out to train?”

That was hitting below the belt, but with her studying me, I hung my head and pretended a shame that I did feel. It was for allowing her to treat me this way. Eventually, the day would come when she couldn’t keep me here.

“You’ll spend this year laboring for your Aunt Judy. Maybe longer”

I looked up in surprise. I’d been asking to go since I was ten. The decision threw me off, distracted me. “What?”

“You’ve been a good son, an obedient son, and I’m being lenient with you this one time. It’s still punishment.”

Her expression never changed, but her tone was as warm as I’d heard in a long time.

“There are cows to be branded, hay to be baled, and pigs to be cared for. You’ll work, but you’ll also have fun with your cousins. Soon, you’ll enter the family training. Best get those other silly notions out of your mind now.”

“Yes, mother.”

She drifted from my room a few minutes later, with plans set for me to leave in two days.

My mother kept me running the entire time. She wasn’t taking any chances that I might steal a few minutes with that strange little girl. Not wise enough to recognize how I’d been tricked, I was vaguely unhappy to be leaving Angie so soon after meeting her, but I was overjoyed at getting to go to Judy’s farm. Being set free meant everything to me.

I was played like a banjo around a campfire. Clever, simple, it began a pattern of hurt that repeated throughout all of our years together. I was always being ripped out of Angie’s life. My mother saw to that, devotedly.

Chapter Two
Alone in a Crowd
November

Marc

Working on my aunt's farm wasn't fun.

My cousins were wild. I wasn't and we didn't mix well. My first encounter with them on the farm didn't help. Upon my arrival, all the cousins flooded from the house to drag me into the sweltering barn where they tore my clothes off. It was their way of telling me that my jeans and nice shirt weren't acceptable here.

They dressed me in a pair of scratchy blue trousers and a stained black shirt, and then sniggered while I figured out how to use the suspenders to hold it all together. The clothes were too big, as were the shoes and farming hat I was forced to wear. I looked like I was a Beverly Hillbilly, except there was no black gold to make me rich. I wasn't even going to be paid for this work. I mourned my favorite pair of jeans.

The farm was a sprawling 10 acres of woods and flat grassland bordered by two other farms and a main road that was still dirt instead of pavement. Cows, pigs, chickens, horses, and other animals

called this area home, but it was nothing like what I was used to. The house here was big, but that's where the similarities ended. This one was falling down, had peeling paint, and carried a very...used odor. Our home was neat and clean, pristine in places, and smelled like cleaning supplies. I shuddered to think of what the barn would be like in the height of summer. I guessed shoveling shit wasn't done very often. I couldn't blame them for that, but the entire farm had the feel of owners who only cared enough to do the basics. The only attraction was being away from my mother's relentless control.

The cousins were so wild because they were unsupervised for most of their day. Chores on the farm were doled out in the mornings and people labored on their own—even the kids. Everyone gathered at the house for the evening meal. After that, they were on their own again for getting themselves to bed. I had been denied that lifestyle of freedom and personal choices since my dad left. My mother controlled all my waking moments. I figured hard work and ill-fitting clothes were a small price to pay for not having to censor my every thought and action to fit what she thought was appropriate.

Once I was properly dressed, I had to be given a tour of the farm so I didn't get lost. This meant being run from one building to another until I was pouring sweat and confused. Intentional? I became certain of that when I was told the garden was the

place to milk the cows and the barn was where they were supposed to shit. I knew better of course, but it was also suggested that I play with the animals instead of doing my chore list, and at least goof off a little so that the rest of them didn't get in trouble. They knew the work ethic my mother insisted on. They didn't want me to show them up.

As someone who'd come to relearn to be wild, that wasn't in my plans. After taking a shot at milking the cows and shoveling the crap that I'd been so surprised by upon arrival, the need to cool off was nearly overwhelming. We all took off running for the swimming hole when I insisted on viewing it, but their words of caution flew right by me. The swimming hole was actually a wide creek the family used for fishing and laundry. They couldn't tell me how deep it was when I asked and I didn't care. I was going in.

I quickly outdistanced the farm kids, despite them being stockier and having more muscles. I had regular meals, medical care, and a determination they were lacking. "Come on!"

I ran faster as we hit the edge of the swimming hole my escorts had been boasting about all morning. Despite the November month being here, it still felt like September and I couldn't wait to cool off. They'd sworn the hole wasn't safe now, that the currents had changed even if the temperatures hadn't, but I was determined to prove who I was. I didn't fear the water at any time. I swam through it

like a dolphin, thanks to lessons at the private school I attended.

“Wait!”

I ran for the edge as hard as I could to be certain I would clear any rocks below.

“No, don’t!”

I flew off the edge with a scream of freedom I was sure my mother could hear in our home, 30 miles away.

I hit the chilly water and plunged under with a huge splash. I had gone in feet-first to protect myself from unknown objects on the bottom, but I realized my mistake as soon as I hit the nets. I shouldn’t have jumped at all.

My feet tangled in the ropes. I sank like a stone as I twisted and kicked. The cold water closed over my head, pulling me down with my own weight, and I opened my eyes so I could work on getting free. Those lessons had included an emergency course.

I was only under the water for about 20 seconds, untangling my ankles as I slowly let out my breath, but when I surfaced, all of my cousins were on the bank, shouting frantically.

I swam to the side of the swimming hole and hefted my water-logged weight from the muddy liquid. “That was great!”

I walked by my stunned cousins with pride, but I knew I wouldn’t do it again until they said it was safe. If those ropes had tangled any worse, I might

not have been able to get loose before my air ran out. I'd been lucky.

My cousins thought I had a death wish after that and studied me like a bug under a jar. I couldn't go anywhere without them tagging along or spying for my aunt, but I adjusted to the audience without too much trouble. I was used to being checked up on. Occasionally, I evaded them and explored on my own, but I always completed the chores on time so my mother wouldn't bring me home early. I assumed Aunt Judy would tell her if I didn't do my share.

The only time I saw Judy was during the evening meal, when 22 of us crowded around a long table set with the same three dishes in the center, night after night. On my first evening, still slightly damp and beginning to chafe, it was meatloaf, with mashed potatoes and gravy. We drank tepid water from the well, and it was the one of the best meals I've ever eaten. Mary Brady hated any type of loaf made from meat.

After the meal, the adult males ambled out to the barn to smoke and drink moonshine while the adult females cleaned the table and took the younger kids for their baths. The rest of us were supposed to wash up and get into bed. I lingered at the table, studying the content kids, the lightly chatting adults, the happy postures that were surreal. I wondered who was right. My Aunt Judy ran things one way and though mother disliked it, she'd recognized the need for a place like this. It kept the public out of our

affairs, and allowed the adults in our family to ship their kids off for months of peace. It didn't seem bad or wrong, but it also wasn't right to me. I wasn't going to be happy here. It would be better than home, but that was it. This wasn't where my heart could belong.

As darkness fell, I followed the other kids to the stairs and climbed into a chaotic room with pallets on the floor, lining both walls. There was a small bathroom at both ends, marked for each sex by the clothes tossed onto the floor around them. The bathrooms were filthy. I wondered if crapping outdoors would add to my wild image or diminish it in favor of a reputation for being gross.

My cousin Scot pointed at a pallet that wasn't taken.

I dropped down on it without washing up. So did Scot and his older brother Rodney, one on either side of me. Across the hot, narrow room, the younger boys were playing a dice game. I wondered what the stakes were. Judy barely got by, according to the financial reports. It couldn't be cash. I found out a few minutes later, when the loser whined about the extra chores.

In the corner, two oil lamps burned from hangers in thick ceiling beams. I noticed the lack of windows. There was only one. Was it because glass was expensive or was it because of kids like me, who came here to leap before they thought?

I shrugged off the unease and tried to get comfortable on the scratchy blanket. I didn't want

to know what the beds were made of, but from the feel, I was guessing a wooden frame and chicken feathers.

The lamps were dimmed after the rest of the kids came up. I listened to the house settle down around me. It wasn't fully quiet yet when Scot and Rodney got out of bed.

"You coming?"

Both cousins were staring at me. I felt that Brady pride rise. Rod and Scot were both big, hulking boys, but I wasn't scared of them like I was their father. Larry carried his weight as if he knew how to throw it around upon command. I respected that as much as I feared it. "Where?"

"We like to take in a show before bed."

I didn't answer Rodney's joke because I didn't understand it.

Scot snorted. "He's scared of his mommy."

"Am not!"

"Then let's go."

I followed them down the rear stairs and out into the warm air without another word.

We took a path I found eerie because of the lack of light. I think my cousins felt it too because their customary jokes and quips were absent. No one said a word until we reached the end of the field.

A large farmhouse with no barns or sheds came into view. Scot pointed toward the rear of the home. "Dogs are there. Be quiet."

The boys trotted toward the opposite side of the house and I followed, suddenly wishing I'd stayed in the bed.

We emerged behind a row of short bushes. I ducked with them as a small bathing area came into view. Set up outside, the wooden stalls were in use. I stared at the naked women. I'd never viewed one, let alone five. My magazines had black bars over all the best parts. The guy in town said it was the only ones he could sell without my mother having him removed.

Next to me, the cousins were staring too, but they were also getting set to enjoy the view in another way; my stomach flipped.

For a moment, I held my ground, not wanting to seem like I was afraid. But I was. I knew deep down that if I did this, it would break something inside of me that I wouldn't be able to fix.

I left, ignoring their jeers.

The cool wind blew the images and the taunts from my mind. I enjoyed the trek back alone. It was easy to imagine I was older in that moment, that I was making one of those hard choices my mother was forever warning me about.

Reality set in before I reached the farm. I wasn't always going to be able to do the right thing, and Angie would be one of those issues. If I were smart, I would avoid her like my mother wanted me to and hope this need went away. I would escape and become a Marine. From there, I wouldn't need anyone. I would be able to take care of myself and I

would have a code to live by that I considered worthy. If I was smart, I would refuse the future I saw with Angie.

You'll be alone forever. She is destiny.

That voice in my mind terrified me. I squeezed my eyes shut in concentration. "Go away!"

There was an awful mental shudder. I swayed on my feet as silence fell in my thoughts and from the crickets. I didn't like hearing voices. If my mother found out, who knew what she'd do? Maybe have me locked up somewhere...like she had Aunt Peggy.

Ahead of me, the road narrowed into that patch of almost complete darkness...and a shadow emerged, staggering toward me.

I stiffened in fear. As I recognized my uncle Larry, I vowed to work harder on that. No one wanted a Marine who was spooked by every shadow he saw. I needed to have nerves of steel in dangerous situations.

"Who is that?"

"Marcus." I cleared my throat, spotting the bottle in his hand.

Around me, the crickets began to chirp again and my heart settled into a normal rhythm.

Larry came closer and then stopped, peering at me with bloodshot orbs.

I waited respectfully, wondering what type of punishment I would get for being caught out of bed and half a mile away. *Anything but being sent home.*

Larry wiped a hand across his nose and scratched at his cheek. "Been out with my boys?"

"No, sir." I wasn't about to rat them out to their father. I hoped they would do the same for me with my parent.

Larry chuckled, frown easing. "Widow Morgan has some pretty sisters. They've been staying with her this year to help on their farm. Husband got the cancer, you know, from working in that feed plant."

I nodded as if I did. Larry was tall and dark, with a pointed nose and green eyes that were always bloodshot. He made me nervous.

Larry leaned in, breath coating me in whiskey fumes. "Why are you here, boy?"

"To work and help."

"And to spy?"

"No, sir!"

Larry belched in my face, making me backup to avoid gagging.

"Good. Your mother..."

I waited, but he didn't finish.

I didn't ask him to. If he said something awful, I might have to do something about it, but I was too young to cross her yet.

"Did you leave? Where are the boys?"

"I left." I didn't give him more.

Larry tried to smile at me. It came out in a grotesque mask that sent chills over my sweaty skin.

"You're a good son, Marcus. You do exactly what Mary tells you. As long as you never step out of line, you'll have this life."

I wondered if he knew those words instantly made me want to break every rule my mother had set down.

Larry regarded me knowingly, then took a long swig of his bottle.

I struggled to keep quiet, not sure if I could trust this drunken, angry man.

Larry wiped his mouth on his hand and let out another loud belch. “Yep, a good kid. She’ll use you right up.”

Larry staggered away from the farm where his sons were openly doing the things I had only started experimenting with this year. The thought of doing it while standing next to them had been horrifying.

Larry stopped a bit away. “Hey, good kid?”

“Yes, sir?”

Larry chuckled bitterly at the politeness. “Don’t tell your mother about tonight, huh? She’ll give the wife hell and that’ll trickle down.”

“No, sir. I won’t.” I hadn’t been planning to.

“Good.” Larry glanced over his shoulder. “Don’t go in the way you came out. The hens are listening for creaking floorboards.”

I suddenly decided to try to like this uncle, despite his miserable behavior. “Thanks.”

“Need all the help you can get in this family.” Larry grunted. “Good luck.”

Sneaking back in without using the front stairs meant either climbing to the window or using the backdoor to get to the narrow fire steps. I chose to

climb. I was good at that and I didn't care for cramped spaces.

The warped wood gave me plenty of hand and footholds (and splinters), but I was only halfway to the single second floor window when I heard voices. Glad of the shadows, I held still and hoped whoever it was kept going without noticing the boy clinging to the side of the farmhouse.

“Where did Larry go?”

“Chasin' down those wild sons of his, guess.”

“Hope he gets the still fixed.”

“Shh! You know the wifie don't like that.”

The two drunken men were also my uncles, but I couldn't pull up their names right then.

I waited until the men were out of sight and began climbing again. The window wasn't far above me now, but it was in an alcove without footholds. I would have to leap.

As I got set, planning where my hands would land, I heard more voices, but it was too late to stop. I lunged.

“Look at that!”

Scot sounded shocked. I wanted to glance down, but I'd barely caught the hold and was struggling to keep it.

Rodney laughed in awe. “He is crazy!”

I hefted myself up and into the open window, glad my aunt was too poor to afford screens. As I thumped to the floor next to a sleeping form that came awake with a soft shriek, Rod and Scot cheered. I winced as the noise echoed upward.

The adults in the room below went outside while I hurried to my pallet, hoping Rodney and Scot didn't tell on me.

I listened to my cousins lie their way out of trouble by saying they'd been going to the bathroom and weren't feeling well. The adult females fell for it. Heavy steps tromped up to the sleeping area a few minutes later.

Rod and Scot dropped down on either side of me, exclaiming about my bravery, but I didn't feel that way. I'd been shaking the entire time and grateful to make it in without falling.

"You're all right." Scot yawned. "We'll take you around while you're here. Let you meet the skanks."

"The skanks?" I frowned. I didn't know what that was.

"There's a big dance once a year." Rodney crawled under his blanket. "The girls you can have stand on one side, and the girl who won't are on the other."

My frown grew. "The girls who won't what?"

"He doesn't know!"

"I told you he was a virgin!"

My cousins snickered cruelly as my cheeks flamed. The teasing continued, but with that one word, I understood and didn't care. I wasn't obsessed with girls.

My thoughts flashed to Angie.

I rolled onto my side, pulling the blanket up. Was she thinking about me? Had anyone told her I left?

As I lay there listening to the others shift, fart, moan, and mutter, it occurred to me that I'd expected to be greeted by my aunt, but I hadn't even spoken to her. Mother would ask if I'd delivered her messages and made my manners. I hadn't. She would punish me.

I got up and took the rickety stairs to the first floor, ignoring the surprise of the sweaty kids around me. I was noticed by the single adult in the room as soon as I hit the bottom floor.

“Go back to bed.”

I spotted my uncle Larry on the sofa, beer in hand now. “I forgot to give mother's messages and thank you for—”

“Give them to your aunt tomorrow. Go to bed.”

I climbed the stairs in a hurry, wondering if Larry was always so surly. For a moment outside tonight, I'd liked him. Before coming, I hadn't thought to ask what my uncle was like or even what he did on the farm. It was clear that Judy was in charge, but her husband was intimidating.

The other kids stared at me again as I returned. I shrugged when Scot asked me if I was crazy. I hadn't been trying to impress them further, but I had. Why? Were the rules here stricter than I'd thought? I would have to ask some careful questions. Mother did want some details on the setup, and now, so did I. I'd been led to believe this

was where boys were sent to become men, but so far, it had fallen short in every way. I fell asleep pondering the differences between perception and reality.

I dreamed of Angie. We were in my mother's spotless hall and her violet eyes held blue lasers that cut through the distance. She stared at me in longing, but she couldn't hear me no matter how loud I shouted. It was unsettling. I snapped awake as just the rooster began to crow.

It wasn't a good start to my day as shouts echoed from people trying to quiet the big bird. I'd viewed it in the front yard upon arrival and gawked at the size. Even the barn cats wouldn't come near the chickens with that big boy on guard. It sucked to find out he had a mouth to match.

I groaned at the stiffness of sleeping on nearly nothing and slowly sat up, aware of sweat coating my skin. The other kids were also complaining, but it was from being woken so early. I understood how they felt, but I was anxious to begin my free life here on the farm.

Waiting in line for the disgusting bathroom made my mood worse. I vowed to do something different tomorrow morning. As it was, I had no choice today and I used the facility without touching anything more than I had to. Then I spent a long time washing up, causing the other kids to wait, which they paid me back for by tripping me as I went down the stairs.

I told them the bruise didn't hurt.

Breakfast was scrambled eggs, biscuits with gravy, and an apple. The same three big bowls as last night graced the center of the long table. I assumed they ate this way all the time. The warped marks on the wooden surface were the proof. They were in the shape of those dishes.

I swept the people at the table. Was everyone here, except me, poor? Were they also here for training and punishment, or was this a normal life for them? I had more questions than answers.

I went outside after I finished eating, scanning for another bathroom I could sneak into when I needed to do more than pee. As I did, I spotted my Uncle Larry lying in the hammock behind the house. Hoping he wouldn't mind, I strolled that way.

Larry inspected me blearily as I joined him, taking a seat on the nearby stump. When I didn't speak, he leaned his head back and let the silence drag out.

As I scanned this overgrown area, I found an old outhouse and relaxed a bit. Anything was better than that upstairs horror. I'd never known anyone to do that with curtains, but I assumed my aunt never went in there. If she had, her screams would be loud. It was disgusting.

"That's my private space, boy." Larry didn't lift his head. "You leave it like you find it."

I grinned. "I will, sir. Thank you."

"Uh-huh."

We stayed quiet for the next 10 minutes, listening to the noises of the house. It was chaotic, but in a good way. No one ever said good morning or asked how you slept at my house. No one cared.

Insects flew through the tall grass as the sun came out, warming my face. I inhaled deeply, sensing I was about to learn something important. I didn't know where it was going to come from, but I hoped it wasn't gross. I didn't have a strong stomach in the morning.

“Why did she send you to the farm early?”

I was unprepared for the question. “Uh, I don't... I mean, I'm not...”

I flushed when he glanced over with a brow lifted. “I didn't do what she wanted.”

Larry grunted, clearly expecting more details, but I wasn't going to spill my guts to a stranger. Angie already meant more to me than that.

“You gonna do it again and get sent back? Most of the boys do. They like it here.”

I shrugged, but didn't answer. He was trying to pull details from me that I wasn't willing to give.

After another minute of silence, Larry sat up and faced me with a grim expression. “I'm gonna take a chance with you, boy. Mostly because you didn't stay and join the circle jerk last night. You're smarter than the others and I admire that. But you'll lose it before long. This family uses a man up until he's nothing but a rooster crowing for no good reason.”

I didn't understand what he was trying to tell me, but at the same time, I did. "I'm leaving as soon as I can." *I didn't mean to say that!*

"Good," Larry stated, surprising me again. "I thought you were smart. Nice to know I'm right."

He didn't say anything else, just went back to snoozing in his hammock.

I returned to the house, wondering if all the uncles hated their lives. Larry clearly did—enough to risk mother's wrath by warning me. If I hadn't already been positive that leaving the family was the right thing to do, the short conversation with Larry would have convinced me. I didn't want to end up a bitter drunk hiding behind his house to avoid his life. I wanted a happy, loving family...with Angie.

That morning set a routine for me on the farm. I avoided my uncles during the evening, when they were most likely to be drinking, and rose early to spend time with them in the mornings, before the rest of the family was out and about. The second morning, I found all five of my uncles gathered around Larry's hammock, each of them bloodshot, unshaven, and grouchy. It was great. I learned more about life and women during that hour than I ever had from school or my magazines. These men weren't afraid to talk in front of me as long as I was careful to keep my mouth shut. I had a million questions, but I sensed if I listened, I would be able to glean enough to make up my own mind.

During one of these mornings, when the chill had finally arrived to coat the ground with frost, the

uncles were discussing spring branding and breeding. My face stayed red at the conversation and jokes, but I finally discovered a reason for my attraction to Angie.

“Men always want what they can’t have.” Jerry inhaled on the cheap cigar. “Gets us in trouble, but there’s no fighting it.”

“Like Georgie.” Larry snickered. “He’s got that hot one about to grow up.”

Bobby frowned. “Think he’ll hurt her like the one before?”

“Hard to tell. He might be better now.”

The conversation drifted to other things, but I stayed on the image of wanting what I couldn’t have. Was that why I needed to spend time with Angie? To rebel against my parent? If so, that was okay. I wasn’t a sick boy who would grow up to do sick things. I was a normal teenager fighting the control of his parent.

In that moment of revelation, I decided it was okay for me to have a friendship with Angie and later, maybe more, because I didn’t want her for bad reasons. It wasn’t her power or how cute she was. I didn’t want her for *branding and breeding*. I hated Mary and I wanted to strike out. That was fine.

I had expected to be working all the time while on my aunt’s farm, but I quickly discovered they had a laidback approach. They often let the big chores build up all week and then spent the weekends knocking it out. I was lost. My mother would never tolerate that and through the week, I

had no idea what to do with myself once the basics were covered. Many of the other kids didn't even have to go to classes. It was called homeschooling. I was shocked by it.

There were no teachers to slap your hand with a ruler, no bullies or clubs, or girls that followed you to gym class. In fact, there was no gym class. These kids got exercise on the weekends, where everyone worked until they dropped. The rest of the time was free after feeding and watering the animals. I was jealous of them at first. The things I wanted to do would take years and I couldn't imagine getting bored like the older boys complained of.

That was the first few weeks. After a month, I'd gotten tired of the talks and walks, of the smells, and of that rooster crowing for no reason. I wanted to accomplish something during my time here, something more important than baling hay until midnight. So, I explored the area for people who were more like me.

Daniel Glass was the boy from the trailer park where Angie lived. I knew him on sight because he rode his dirt bike everywhere he went, even to school. I'd witnessed the short, stocky boy practicing tricks up on the hill behind the trailers and thought he was determined to kill himself. I also admired his courage. There wasn't a ramp he wouldn't shoot across, a space between the boards he wouldn't try to jump. Daniel was fearless.

I'd also witnessed one of his wipeouts. It had been ugly, sending the boy sprawling in painful

positions as he slid across the gravel, but Daniel had picked himself up and returned to the ramp. On his second run, where he got more speed, he made the jump, dripping blood from his arm all the way up the wooden ramp.

On this morning, we hadn't officially met yet. I hung back as I came across him riding through the unplanted field by my aunt's farm. Daniel was quiet and smart, with brown hair and sun-darkened skin that caused the girls to stare. They liked my dark hair and pale skin, but they were drawn to Daniel's adventurous spirit and I was glad. I didn't have any interest in girls—something I was tired of telling my cousins. I also didn't have any interest in boys, though they both liked to call me queer whenever I did something right and got praised for it. I knew jealousy when I heard it. I didn't care what they thought anymore.

Daniel sped across the dirt, throwing dusty clumps in scattered piles. I wondered again if Angie had a bike. I could take her down to the creek for our time together. Adults never went there.

I frowned. Normal adults didn't go there. Sometimes the homeless wandered by, but I'd never had problems with them. For some reason, I was suddenly sure that Angie would.

Daniel stopped nearby. "You wanna ride?"

I was startled by the friendly voice and the offer. I'd been considering Angie in danger and not liking the feeling. "I'll watch."

Daniel shrugged, twisting the throttle. “Whatever.”

I hung out for hours, watching from the shade of a nearby tree. I was joined a while later by a few other kids I hadn’t met yet. I didn’t think they were from my aunt’s farm, but I wasn’t certain. There had been more than a dozen teenagers at the dinner table last night.

The boys who found a spot near my seat on the wooden fence were tall and thin, with shaggy yellow hair and bright green eyes. Like Daniel, their clothes were K-Mart at best and their shoes were probably Goodwill or Salvation Army. I suspected my mother wouldn’t approve and immediately chose to make friends if possible. I certainly didn’t have much in common with Rodney and Scot.

After that first month, I had a full routine. In the morning, I listened to my uncles talk about bitterness, beer, and broads—in that order. In the afternoon, I joined Daniel and our small group at the flat field. Most of the time, we watched Daniel practice his tricks and talked about life—much like with my uncles. We also swam, fished, and hunted small game, though I was the only one who knew how to do that last item. My mother had insisted I learn and help keep our larders stocked during deer season. It gave me a slight advantage, but mostly, it allowed me to fit into the group as a much-needed member.

Daniel was our entertainment and we were his audience. I was the teacher and they were my

students. It quickly became common for the other kids to ask me to help with their projects. I taught Dennis to skin a rabbit so that he could make the hat his mom couldn't afford to buy him for his birthday. I showed three of our gang how to hunt for worms to hide in their sister's beds. I even helped little Tony get his father a job, by telling him what my mother would want to hear during the interview. She often recommended people for work in the town shops and businesses that owed her money.

In the evenings, I labored on the hand code, ignoring the taunts of the older boys as they left to peep at the widow and her sisters. I created another life on the farm, one that was the opposite of what my mother had planned for me.

And I dreamed of Angie every nearly night.

Chapter Three
Fate Listens
December

Angie

I sat in silence in the cold backseat.

My mom fussed over her coat and Georgie muttered about having to go out so soon after the storm. Mother Brady had insisted we come. She didn't care that it was still windy or below freezing.

The icy snow was hard to crunch through. The winds blew harder as Georgie tried to get to his door. Frona snickered as we heard him slip and fall. My mom was odd like that sometimes. Georgie called it human nature.

Hoping to stop the coming fight, I hurriedly climbed over the front seat and pulled on the driver's side handle. It clicked right as he snatched the door open. I tumbled into his seat, dress flying up.

I tried to peddle backwards, but his big hands went to my butt and jerked me out of the car. I landed against his hard body and cringed at his thoughts. I was relieved when he shoved me toward the rear door.

I struggled to get it open in the wind. Georgie impatiently shoved me aside to jerk the door open. As I climbed in, now cold and soaked from the knee-high snow, Georgie delivered a stinging slap to my butt.

“Stay where I put you!”

Now wishing that I’d let him see Frona’s smirk and slap it off her face, I held in the tears and buckled my seatbelt.

As if fate were listening, Georgie reached over and delivered a nasty slap to my mother’s leg.

“You should have opened my door, not the kid!”

I cringed lower at Frona’s teary glare in the frosty window.

We made the rest of the trip in tense quiet. I spent the time thinking of Marc. We were going to his home for the family Christmas party. Georgie had tried to get us out of it and failed. I was glad Mother Brady had insisted all of the family be present. We would be surrounded by people who didn’t like me, and Marc wouldn’t even be able to talk to me unless we could sneak out, but just being in the room with him would make me happy. He was good. I needed that balance.

Georgie slid to a stop near the front door of the modestly decorated home. Servants rushed out to help him. I was mostly forgotten in the greetings from other relatives who were also arriving. I slowly edged toward the door, hoping to spot Marc.

The servants backed away, behaving normally for their station, but I knew it was more than that

with me. They sensed my curse. The Cherokee men and women Mary often bragged she was helping to find civilization were an exotic mystery, but I never spoke to them. I didn't want to get them in trouble. Mary had brought them here through something called a sponsorship. She gave them a job and paid their rent, and they had to do what she said. It sounded like legal slavery to me.

I'd now been to this horrid house four times, the last two while Marc was gone. It looked the same, except for the Christmas tree and mound of presents piled artfully around it. Even the somber, lowered voices instead of people enjoying the holiday were the same.

I stayed by the coat rack as the outside groups merged. I observed the people who were supposed to be my family, but there wasn't a single thing I could find in common. Having the same shade of hair didn't make them my...

Marc entered the room, smiling, waving at cousins and uncles. My heart skipped. *That* was my family. We didn't share blood, but I already loved him like a brother. Later, we would be much more, but right now, a brother was exactly what I needed and I set out to snare him. After all, that was what a witch did, right? I would become the very thing Mother Brady hated the most—a temptress who would steal her son's mind and heart. I sighed in happiness, sure Marc would approve.

Marc

I knew Angie had arrived before I got downstairs. I could feel her. I was careful to ignore her under the sharp gaze of my mother, but I needed to spend a few minutes in the same room. It did wonders for that dark place inside me to be around her. I wished I could hear her laugh and then immediately wished that I wouldn't. If the evil people around us felt that pleasure, they would know. The family curse was only whispered about on dark nights now, but it *was* still whispered about.

The Christmas party, which I considered boring, wound down long before midnight. I was upset as I watched Georgie herd his precious cargo toward the door. I hadn't even gotten to say hello. Angie had been placed in a chair in the corner, one that would become her perch of shame. Mary had put it there for her and directed the little angel into it. Then Angie had been forgotten. I hadn't witnessed a single person speak to her. When dinner was served, one of the house cleaners made Angie's plate and took it over. She didn't get a drink at all, and she held her dirty dish on her lap until Georgie called to her. She looked around uneasily, not sure what to do. I noticed the servant she approached shied from her before taking the plate. Did he know?

They have old legends.

I jumped, looking around, before realizing it was Angie, in my mind.

“Is something troubling you?”

I spun around to find my Aunt Judy staring down with an expression of eager glee. She was hoping I would slip up and confess some awful secret that the rest of the family could use to break Mary’s hold over them. After two months on her farm, I was still very close-mouthed.

“Yes.” I leaned in. “I saw Rodney intentionally break the widow’s window with a rock last week. Should I have told mother?”

Judy paled. “We don’t need to upset her with such a small thing. Rod will work it off.”

I smiled at her, trying to act a bit shy, like the soft voice in my mind was advising. “Is it okay if I come back? It was fun.”

Judy, who rarely heard any good comment from a male, beamed. “Of course. You’re so polite!”

She bent over to pinch my cheek like old folks were always doing. I grimaced but didn’t duck.

As Judy moved away, I realized Angie was gone. Georgie had whisked her and her loudly-dressed mom out the door and into the frosty night.

I sighed as the door swung shut. I missed her already. How was that even possible?

I could try to explain it sometime.

I hid my face and swallowed my surprise to respond. *When?*

There was a pause and then faintly, *Next gathering, I guess. Gotta go now.*

Okay. I sent it as if it was natural to be talking this way. *Bye.*

In the lonely sadness that washed over my heart, I heard her wishing for time to go by faster so she could be with me again.

I hurt over that for months.

Angie

I had to let go of the connection because of the energy. I didn't have anyone feeding that side of me with love and care, and it made me weak. I lay down on the seat and snoozed for the entire ride home. I heard Georgie say I must have had a great time because I was worn out, but I knew better than to correct him. Holding mental doors open was exhausting. I vowed to get better at it as I drifted off.

I was so tired that I didn't wake up until I was roughly slid into my bed and hands went to my shoes. I quickly sat up and took over the chore from my clumsy mom. It was an automatic reaction in case it was Georgie. He wouldn't stop with my shoes.

Frona left the room without saying anything. I tried hard not to cry. "Goodnight, Mommy."

I heard my mom and Georgie go into their bedroom and relaxed. After they did their body thing, he always slept and Frona would sneak out to the front room for a quick cigarette. I liked to study her then, try to get into her thoughts. I used to search for her feelings about me, but I learned to keep that door shut after a while. What I wondered now was if she was happy living this way. Even if she had no feelings for her child, shouldn't she at least have hope for herself?

I tried to think of exciting things to keep myself awake, but I fell in too deep and missed their bedroom door opening. It was the heavier steps that

snapped me from sleep. I struggled to control my breathing. It wasn't my mom.

I could feel Georgie's leer crawling over me... I thought about the math sheets from school and how I was so good at them. I loved arithmetic. It added up and made sense to me. It was this life of cringing in fear that I didn't understand.

Georgie left my doorway after a long time. I didn't try to get into his thoughts. My mom's mind was safe sometimes, but Georgie was dark and cruel and I knew better than to go strolling through there. I'd done that before and had nightmares for weeks. I can still see those nasty images, the desire he has for me. I get so afraid...

When I woke, dawn had lightened my walls. I rubbed at my eyes, not thinking of anything except needing to pee.

I put my foot in something cold and wet near the door, and lifted my foot to view the squishy substance. I didn't know what it was or how it had gotten there.

Worried that I would get in trouble for it, I hurried to the bathroom for toilet paper and cleaned it up. By the time I made it to the toilet, I was leaking. I sank down on the toilet in relief. At my age, I didn't recognize the start of a bad day.

By the time I made it through breakfast, dressing, and ran for the bus stop, I'd already burnt my fingers while getting Georgie's toast, spilled my milk, and gotten a minor kick in the butt when I held

up the line going out the door. When the bus rolled by before I made it to the end of the long street, I stopped, shoulders slumping. That was my last tardy for the month. They would send a letter home in a few days and then Georgie would get his belt out.

Standing in the middle of the snowy street, I drew attention. I could feel the neighbors staring at me. I worried over Georgie's reaction to that too, but not everyone ignored my plight.

“Can I drive you to school, Hun?”

I would have said no on any other day. Georgie had once told me an awful story of a kid named Adam who'd been taken and had all sorts of ugly things done to him before he was killed. I never forgot that. I usually avoided strangers anyway, but if I missed school, Georgie would hurt my butt again and it was hard to put on bandages by myself. “Yes, please.”

Patty gently guided me to the passenger seat of her already running pinto. Patty was short and stout, with a slight limp I assumed was from an injury during her younger years. I didn't know exactly how old she was, but at least 70 was the answer my witch gave. Patty liked to wear Indian dresses while she ran her shop, and sometimes she even put on a headdress to get people to come in and browse. Mother Brady hated that. Patty ran the Indian artifacts shop in town, the one Mary wanted gone because they sold heritage items.

“Here, let me—”

I slid into the seat and buckled myself in before Patty could use her prepared offer to help. I felt her study me harder. I wanted to be gone so word didn't get back that I'd taken a ride from a stranger. I met her eye, vulnerable at that moment.

Patty paled.

I didn't try to read her thoughts yet. I was certain some of them weren't good simply because she was an adult.

Patty got into the driver's seat and had us rolling along so quickly that I would be early for school. If I could find the quarter that fell down in my locker, I could get a milk and sip it while I waited for class, maybe even read a little more of the book I'd gotten from the library. It was called *101 Dalmatians*. I loved it that the dog was telling the story. I'd never thought of people as *their* pets.

As we passed Marc's street, I spotted him standing at the bus stop, waiting with his brothers and one sister, Tracy. I didn't care for her. Over the summer, she had held me down and made me drink hot sauce. Marc's oldest brother, Daryl, had sneered and told me I was a baby for crying. They weren't like me and my Brady. They were mean.

I shivered as he got out of sight.

Patty flipped on the heater, thinking I was cold. I was a little, but mostly, I was curious about the woman driving me to school. I tried to pry into her mind and immediately found a brick wall.

"Only with permission."

I stared in confused wariness. "What?"

Patty didn't take her eyes from the road. "It's rude to do that without permission."

My heart pounded as I realized she knew my secret. Some people were very aware of mental tinkering. I'd made a big mistake!

"Easy, child. Just forget it, okay? I'm not mad at you."

She thought I was scared and I was, but only of Mary's reaction when she found out.

"I wouldn't tell that old biddy anything!" Patty spat out the window. "Always tryin' to close me down since I worked off her chains. Got some nerve, she does!"

I stared in shock. "No one talks bad about her."

"Yes." Patty glanced over at me. "But they think it, don't they? You hear them."

I nodded slowly. The family all secretly wanted Mary Brady to die.

"So do I, child, but there's decades of unrest between us. You don't seem old enough to know her true wrath yet."

I thought about sitting in that hard Christmas angel chair for hours and ending up with bruises on my butt from it, but didn't say anything.

Patty pulled into the empty side of the school to let me out.

I gave her a small smile. No one would see us here right now. I stepped from the car, yanking my book bag along.

Patty held out a hand. "Take this and have a donut with the milk. You're too small."

I took the dollar in surprise. She pulled away before I could do more than gape at her kindness. As she drove out of the parking lot, causing the car door to slam shut, I hurried away, shoving the gift into my pocket. I'd noticed Patty in town. I'd been in front of her shop while my mom browsed the sidewalk racks for her latest eyesore. Patty was nice.

So far. I wouldn't allow my hopes to get high and I wouldn't go to her shop unless I had a cover for being there. Right now, a kid my age reading about Indian lore or family bloodlines would attract attention I didn't need.

I hurried into the school through the employee door that wasn't supposed to be unlocked, wondering why the principle even made the rule if he was going to leave it open after he came out to smoke. Mr. Reed never remembered to shut it. Or maybe he did it on purpose to have someone to yell at. I wasn't certain. I was learning to avoid digging into people too deeply. Sometimes it was hard to get out before the slime got all over me.

I saw a bus pulling in and then two more behind it. I hurried to the cafeteria before the rush, to have my choice of the food in the glass cases. I felt the cashier frown as I chose the apple next to the donuts. Georgie didn't like fruit, so we never had much of it in the house. I loved it.

I took my treat to the far end of the cafeteria and sat down to dig out my book. While I fought with the zipper that was stuck in the strings around a hole, I heard a fight break out in the hallway.

I turned with everyone else and found one of the older bullies throwing wild punches. His target was a first grader in my class. I didn't like the little boy much, but it bothered me to ignore his pain when I was able to help. The employees and teachers weren't going to because the bully was a sixth-grader who was already the size of a man. No one argued with Dean Combs.

Sighing, I took a big bite of my apple and narrowed in on the fire alarm nearby. A second later, it began to ring without anyone pulling the handle and my chance for a few minutes of peace and quiet to read was over.

Panic ensued, students screaming and fleeing. Dean let go of the younger kid to run toward his locker. He had a bb gun in there he used during recess to hunt the birds. Everyone cleared a path for him to get to it. Even the teachers let him go by, disrupting lines of kids waiting to go outside to finish the drill. I suddenly wondered if it had been Dean who hurt the animals I'd found in the woods this summer.

I took my things and tried to still eat and read, but it was cold and I soon gave up. I huddled in the haphazard line with the other kids while we waited to be let back in, trying not to hate Dean for shooting squirrels from the surrounding trees.

Sometimes I couldn't leave things alone and I always paid for it in one way or another. Being cold and hungry was little compared to saving the boy from a beating though. I passed the time counting

lumps and clumps of snow. I also tried to avoid being hit with the occasional snowball that came flying through the air as the crowded lines of kids grew impatient.

A piercing tornado testing siren suddenly roared to life, blasting our ears. *It's Wednesday.*

By the time I got into a seat for my first class, my head hurt, I was shivering, and hoping Dean Combs would miss school for the next week with some kind of a cold. Everyone needed a break from him. He was a menace.

I held out my wrinkled, stained homework when Ms. Young came around. She took it without glancing at my bruises or dirty clothes. She knew she couldn't do anything for me. So did I. That's why I never told anyone or asked for help. Even at my age, I understood the suffering would increase if I ever made that mistake. I didn't know what I might end up doing to be free, but I knew it wasn't begging a stranger to take on Georgie and Mary Brady. No one in this town was crazy enough to do that.

The rest of my day was the same—do what I was told, duck when I needed to, and dread going home. I had my own bully on the bus—a big redheaded girl from the high school who liked to make me cry—and my mom's list of chores would be waiting on the kitchen table, preventing my roaming. School cut deeply into my exploring. I hated that. By the time I finished the chores, there might be half an hour before Georgie would be home and I would stay in

my bedroom with door shut until dinner and then go right back there afterwards. It was a great life—one I often wished I hadn't been gifted with.

1990

Chapter Four
Confirmation
April

Marc

The party mother put together for my sister's wedding was a big success.

She floated through the crowd of family and friends who had been forced to come like a benevolent benefactor. I couldn't stand much of it. As soon as the supposedly happy couple cut the cake, I made my way to the rear yard, where the younger kids had been stashed. I'd been happy enough on Judy's farm over the last four months, but Angie was here and I wanted a few minutes alone, no matter the cost.

Angie's attention clung to me as I entered the fenced field that was normally full of cows. I ignored her as usual, stopping to greet the aunts and uncles I recognized. Angie was sitting at a table without an umbrella in the far corner, skin already changing color. I assumed my mother had once again directed her there.

I struck up a conversation with a cousin who had recently had his first child. I kept my back to Angie, only turning when another relative joined the small

group in this area. During these quick glances, our eyes would meet and spark. It was as if we were a magnet and metal, being drawn together with no thought of anything else.

When I left the field a bit later, I knew she would follow me. I hadn't taught her our code yet, but my thoughts were full of where I was headed.

When I entered the side patio, Angie was already waiting. I closed the door and faced the little girl I'd thought about every time I heard Judy chuckle.

Welcome home.

Her voice in my mind confirmed her gift and my sanity. "It's great to be here."

Worlds spun in her gaze, tempting, pulling... I reluctantly tore my gaze away from her sweet face.

Angie was wearing a short, white skirt and a blue top that was too adult for her in my opinion. Her eyes darkened to the exact shade to match it as she picked up my thought. Her little hands fastened her coat buttons over the top, making me feel bad for my observation.

"It's okay. Georgie picked it."

Why did that bother me so much?

Angie moved closer; the air parted, teasing my nose with vanilla. She smelled good.

She came within a foot of me, ebony ringlets swaying against pale skin. I understood what she wanted with a shiver of anticipation and a shudder of fear.

She stopped because of my reaction.

I slowly opened my arms.

I expected the usual quick hug of family, and was shocked into stillness when she slid those tiny arms around my neck and placed her soft hair against my chin. Then the sensation hit and I melted, hugging her back.

I'm sure she knew how rarely I was shown physical affection, but I didn't know how to tell her I would need this again now that I'd had it. It was as if the entire world had vanished, leaving calm and an edge of everything being almost perfect.

We stood there for a long time, just holding onto someone who understood how important the contact was. When she slowly moved away—I couldn't. I didn't have the will power—it was as if a cloud had come over the sun.

I realized that was her reaction, not mine. She had a deep need for me, though I had no idea why, and that sealed the deal. I had never been this wanted. I needed to keep contact with Angie even while I was on the farm. Maybe I could sneak back a couple times a year.

“How long will you be gone this time?”

“Most of the summer, I think.” I liked my time away, but I didn't want her to be hurt.

“Early again?”

“Yes. She sensed something, I think.”

“And then back to the farm again, come fall?”

“Yes. She's been talking about moving me there...permanently.”

Angie swallowed her agony. “Then we’ll have this moment, at least.”

I was lost. It was exactly how I felt.

I know. It’s how I found you.

It was a relief to know I hadn’t imagined any of it. She could read my mind and make the corn grow. She could talk to me without saying anything. She had the family curse, and I was the only one she trusted enough to tell. That made me smirk.

We settled into the cold patio chairs, blocked from sight by tall bushes and snowy trees. Our eyes remained on each other in fascination. With no prying adults to observe our every expression, I stared at her pale skin and the violet orbs that had been blue a minute before. She was like a perfect china doll I could never admit to wanting to play with.

My gaze swept over her again. My heart tightened. She was amazing, beautiful, and when she was older, I might beg to kiss her.

She blushed, sparkling at me. “I’d let you.”

I blinked in surprise. “Okay.”

I had asked Uncle Larry some careful questions about girls during our mornings. I’d left him with the impression I meant my soon-to-be girlfriend, Jeanie. He’d left me with an image that filled my thoughts every night after that when I tried to sleep. He told me to be careful about age.

“Men get old, Marcie. We age and grow bitter. Get a younger woman, and be sure you really like her. You’ll be together a long time in this family.”

Now, staring at the forbidden fruit, I thought I understood. Angie had a face I would never get tired of.

My chest thudded in real pain. It was a face I would miss over the coming years. There was no way my mother would let this happen. There would only be so much sneaking around I could do before she found out.

“I might be able to make it go away...”

“No!” My quick answer drained the misery from her face. I wanted to hear her laugh, but it was a risk. Mary could be anywhere by now.

“She’s helping your sister with her dress.”

I was relieved to hear it and didn’t doubt the information. As we stared, there were so many things I suddenly wanted to say, to ask, and Angie knew them all without me having to speak a word if I couldn’t figure out how to put it. It was great.

“You won’t tell?”

“No. How can you do it?”

“I just always could.”

“Born with it?”

“I think so.”

Which meant she had questions too, yet she’d never been exposed. She was smart. My mother would have her shipped off the same day she found out.

I saw Angie wince. “Sorry.”

She shrugged. “Not your fault.”

“Not yours, either.”

Her eyes darkened again. I shook my head firmly. “You didn’t choose to have it.”

She was silent, but I caught her thought.

Then why are they so mean to me?

I didn’t have a good answer for that. All the punishments that should have gone to my uncle Georgie were being dealt to his wife and stepdaughter. “She’s trying to run you off.”

“Yeah.”

My gaze swept Angie again, this time lingering where it wanted. I felt my pulse increase. Angie was a baby compared to me, on the outside. On the inside, she was where I was—a lonely preteen who couldn’t wait to grow up.

“She’s searching for you now.”

“Okay.” I didn’t hurry off, though. I’d chosen this place carefully. I used to be allergic to the plants out here and I still avoided the area. It was among the last places she would search. First, she would find out if I’d discovered the dirt bike in the garage and taken it out for a spin. I would tomorrow when it might be warm enough to stay out all day. I wondered if Angie had ever been on a dirt bike.

She shook her head.

“Tomorrow, down by the old tire swing?”

“Yeah! When?”

I thought fast and tried to account for any extra chores. “Noon.” We would be alone for hours, away from everyone.

Angie grinned at me, showing those dimples, and again, her happiness jerked me into a world

where only the two of us existed. It wasn't weird, like when I flipped through the magazines in my closet, but I knew the sensations were connected.

When she leaned over, I held my breath to keep from touching her hair.

“I made this for you.”

It was a grass ring, the kind you handed to a friend and then yanked the top off as a joke. Except this one had been repeatedly woven around itself until it was a solid object, able to be worn.

My hand went out as if it was someone else. Our fingers touched...and sizzled, like ice meeting fire. I winced at a sharp flash of lightning. Where had that come from?

“Me. Sorry. It gets out of hand when...”

I wanted to know what she'd been going to say, but I could sense her unease with the subject. She was afraid someone might overhear.

“Did you miss being home?”

That was a hard question to answer. I shrugged as I slid the ring into my pocket. “Parts of it.”

“You don't belong with them.”

There it was. Honesty. And I would be expected to use it with her, I could tell. “It's more like they don't belong with me.”

Angie wanted to ask if she did, and I didn't know what to say at first. If I got a vote, she would, but my parent wasn't going to give me one. I would have to steal it. It wouldn't be much, but it would be better than nothing. The idea of not being around this little girl at all hurt. She'd already found a way

into my heart, and I was looking forward to tomorrow in a way that I knew to be wrong, but couldn't help. "I'll fit you in somewhere. I'll make you a place that no one can remove you from."

"You promise?" Angie demanded, little hands clenching.

"Yes, Baby-cakes, I do."

"She's coming!"

I waved toward a gap in the bushes. "That goes back to the field."

Angie hurried out of sight without even a glance back, telling me Mary was here. I controlled my breathing as the patio door opened.

"Marcus?"

"Out here, mother."

"There you are. Why did you leave the party?" She scanned the patio for signs of any bad behavior I might be hiding.

I bit down on a stupid remark. "I've got a problem. Maybe you can help me?"

I never asked her for anything anymore. She eagerly listened to me explain that I was nervous about asking Jeannie on a date like she wanted me to do. It was the perfect excuse to use, but I hoped Angie wasn't able to hear us. I didn't want her to be upset and I knew instinctively that she would be over this.

I left that conversation ahead of the game, except for the part where I had to ask out a girl I didn't know. But I had to do that anyway and after I promised to try, I went to play with the seat on my

new bike. I wanted Angie to be able to sit on it and reach the bars while I drove us around. I couldn't wait for tomorrow. I spent the rest of the evening in a haze of low-key anticipation I still don't know how I managed to hide from everyone. It felt like guilt was plastered across my face in neon paint.

I was out of the house just after dawn, riding that dirt bike as if I was as good as the kid down the street. I still didn't know Daniel very well, but I was certain he would be there for the marathon I was organizing. I wondered if Angie would join and then realized she probably didn't have a bike. Not many of the poor kids did. Whenever one of them got a bike, it inevitably broke from being loaned out. That was one of the things I liked about the side of town I was forbidden to trespass—they cared about each other.

As the morning of chilly breezes and carefully timed jumps drew closer to the magic hour, I ducked out of sight of the other children who were also enjoying the day. I flew through the woods to get to the field. Only the braver kids found their way down here, for several reasons. The biggest was the rage of the farmer who owned it. Tall and lean, he was here every year without fail. We called him Farmer Brown because his skin had turned crispy under the sun.

I didn't know where his house was, but I assumed there would be a wrinkled wife and more

dogs waiting there for him. Farmer Brown knew the teenagers spent hours tramping down his perfect rows and ruining his harvest totals with bonfires. He and his big hunting dog, Ticker, were regular visitors that one might run across. Ticker was as high as my waist and twice as thick. With a massive head and a long tail, he was a terror to any vegetable-loving animal or child. Except, me and a few other kids had figured out that the old tractor couldn't run by the rougher tree line on the far edge of the field. Over the years, a large overhang of trees and wild corn plants had grown up to provide cover. Someone had put up a tire swing, and made it the place to be and meet for generations of children.

Except Angie wasn't coming.

I felt the instant that something went wrong, but I couldn't do anything about it. I lingered in the warmth of the unplowed field until 2pm and then slowly made my way toward town. I planned to go by the restaurant for a warm drink, and salvage the afternoon somehow. When I got to the main road and saw the flashing lights, I forgot about my drink.

A house on the edge of town was in flames. The shack was engulfed. Smoke billowed from it like a chimney. The heat was melting the garden. I watched the vegetables pop and sizzle in horror. I hated fire. All the kids raised by Mother Brady's punishments did. I had a few old wounds on my feet, but there were cousins who had their entire bottoms covered in angry red scars. That type of punishment made a lasting impression.

I spotted a cluster of kids on bikes near the flaming home, ones I was approved to be with. Nearby was another, larger group of raggedy children on foot—the K-Mart kids. I scanned them for signs of Angie, though I knew she wasn't their kind either. I'd made some subtle observations now, and it seemed like neither side cared about her. I didn't understand that after my brief, unforgettable interactions with her.

I joined my own kind at the edge of the police tape and listened to their chatter. I stayed quiet, like I usually did, and learned what had happened.

“Was he in there?”

“Who was it?”

“Is he dead?”

“It was that old man who worked at the plant off 128.”

“You mean the feed production place?”

“Yeah. He quit last year. My dad runs the front gate. He said old man Rudder was bitchin' about keeping secrets and they fired him for stirin' up trouble.”

“Your dad don't run the front gate.”

“He does so.”

“Does not. Tommy's uncle runs it. *Your* dad orders the pizza.”

I drifted away from the fight that always came when the two popular boys disagreed about something. I already knew Alex would come out on top and Ricky would spend the next week telling everyone he had let the shorter boy win. It was how

our lives were, except that I was growing up faster. I assumed it was because of who my family was to this town, but there was also the chance that it was related to my secret friendship with Angie. I never intentionally disobeyed my mother. It was a big change for me.

I stared in guilty fascination as the ambulance crew rolled the cart from the side yard and moved away. I heard my approved friends calling for them to lower the sheet so they could view the charred body. I didn't understand why they would want to and it brought another moment of comparisons. It didn't take long for me to reach the conclusion that I'd already come to several times. I was different.

On a hunch, I scanned the stopped traffic that was waiting for the ambulance to pull out and found a familiar brown wagon. My heart thumped.

I picked out Angie's mom in the passenger seat, leaning against the window, and Georgie in the driver's seat, appearing nervous. I peered harder, noticing Frona had a bandage on her neck and felt the hair on mine stand up. That's why Angie hadn't come. Her mom had been hurt.

I saw the traffic was about to be let through and quickly wheeled my bike toward a side street. I got out of view quickly, not sure why I was upset. People got hurt all the time.

I sped toward Angie's home, trying to remember if I'd ever been there. I must have, because I knew she and her parents were in the front of the trailer park. Maybe I'd come here before

Georgie married Angie's mom. Was his former wife the shadowy woman I sometimes saw in my mind when I thought of the days before Angie? I knew he'd been married before Frona.

I skirted the main streets for the wooded paths that surrounded the tin cans. I lived on the opposite side of town. For a moment, I was embarrassed to be here.

I forgot that feeling as I parked my bike behind a big tree and crept into the tall weeds around the trailer. The wagon pulled in a minute later. I spied on my uncle as he got out of the car.

Georgie had always scared me a little. He was a large man with arms the size of my head. He was also noisy. Easily excited, was what my mother called it, and I'd always been careful not to tick him off. As I witnessed him grab his wife by the arm and haul her up over his shoulder, I realized that had been wise.

The door to the trailer swung open. I listened to the words with a slight frown.

"She's fine."

"Do you want me to—"

"No! Get out of here for a while."

Angie fled the trailer as Georgie disappeared inside with Frona. I expected Angie to go to the field, but she circled back right away and slipped under the trailer. I suspected she wanted to listen, but I understood what she was doing when her hand settled on the stabilizer brace.

I ran for my bike, suddenly certain that's what she would need. I didn't care about trouble right then. I had to help her. There was no other thought.

I heard the creaking of a heavy object and then a loud thump, followed by a thud and some hissing. I didn't turn around. I swung a leg over the bike and waited with my heart in my throat. Had she gotten out from under it? Trailers were known to fall all the time, without serious damage. It usually only took a tire jack to raise them back up, but a person under there would be in big trouble.

The instant the bike dipped slightly with added weight and arms slid around my waist, I got us rolling down the incline without starting the bike. I didn't want anyone to be drawn in this direction.

Behind us, shouts came. I rolled into the woods in relief. "Did anyone see us?"

I felt a hum of power at the same time I realized she was clinging to me like a second skin.

Nervous laughter burst from her. "No!"

I was captured by her excitement. I started the bike with an easy movement. It came to life and I sped toward the cornfield with her against me. It was amazing. I never did things like this.

"Faster!"

I hit the throttle, taking us up to 30mph. I shivered as she rested her hot little face on me. It felt like she was crying.

It's okay. I'm happy.

Why do girls cry when they're happy?

I felt her shrug.

No idea. Why do boys like to hit each other?

This time, I didn't have an answer. We finished the ride without saying anything else. I wanted to wait until the bike and wind wasn't drowning out her voice. And I wanted to gaze at her uninterrupted.

She smiled against me again, grip tightening as I took us up another 5mph, staying on the path that ran along the road. We flew by the empty trailers waiting for an idiot to rent them and then out onto the edge of the old highway that hardly ever saw traffic. I shot over the mill road. We both glanced at the gated driveway to the Feed Production Materials Plant. Several of our neighbors were employed there, but no one knew exactly what kind of feed materials they supplied.

I took the path by the plant, studying the belching smokestacks curiously, and then shot down the creek line to enter the cornfield that would tower over both of us in the coming months. I drove straight to the side the farmer avoided and did a sliding halt, hoping she would like it.

Angie rolled off the bike and into the corn, arm over her face as she giggled. "That was fun!"

I tapped the kickstand down in the way that always made me feel cool and got off the bike. I joined her under the shaded overhang of the tree branches and stared at her expectantly. "What happened?"

"She told him she might be pregnant."

I was confused. "That's a good thing, right?"

Angie slowly shook her head. “Georgie doesn’t like kids. When momma...fell down, he had to take her to the hospital.”

I didn’t like Georgie in that moment, but no less than I already had. Hitting women to keep them in line was what my mother called home correction. She not only allowed it, she encouraged it. I blamed her. “I’m sorry.”

Angie’s lower lip quivered. I braced for tears, but she didn’t shed one. I watched a V come out on her chin, a mark of utter determination, and then the sadness was gone and she stared at me as if I was everything to her.

I knew exactly how she felt.

“Thanks for helping me.”

“Won’t you be in trouble?”

Angie shrugged. She didn’t say it was worth it to protect her mom from a second beating, but I knew. I gently reached out and held her hand. “Maybe it’ll get better.”

She sighed unhappily. “There’s only darkness when I search.”

Her fingers curled around mine. We stayed that way for a long time. My mind went over what Angie had done and already dragged me into, but I couldn’t find the fear with her skin against mine. It was as if I didn’t have any concerns at all. “Why is it like this?”

She didn’t answer. I tried to be patient. “You know, don’t you?”

Angie gave a single nod, but still didn’t speak.

I let her off the hook for now. “Before I leave today, okay?”

“Okay.”

I slowly withdrew my hand from hers and instantly missed the contact. I knew she did too because her brows drew together in an effort that I assumed was her trying not to protest.

It occurred to me right then that I was in over my head. If I was worried over her unhappiness already, I cared about her. I’d honestly never thought about a wife and children until she came into my life, and I still hadn’t figured out how I would have her and be a Marine too. For now, I was just Marc, walking through my life alone.

She stared at my hair and face, not interrupting my thoughts, but she caught it all. How did it make her feel?

“Scared for you. Be careful.”

I knew that was sound advice. If my mother found out, we were doomed.

“No one can know! Georgie the most.”

I understood. I’d once heard mother threaten to have Georgie locked up after he got into a fight. Georgie was the one who walked away. The other man was currently living in Florida, where he had to roll himself to church in his state-issued wheelchair. I still missed Uncle Ralph some days.

“Am I bad? Is that why I like you?”

Angie reached out and placed her small hand over mine. “You’re all good.”

I began to tell her that she didn't know the secrets I was keeping, and felt my cheeks go red. She did know.

“Some things. I see what's in front. I don't snoop through the rest.”

It was a relief to know. I pushed those thoughts from my mind. She was way too little for that stuff.

Angie shoved away from me, glaring.

I didn't know what I'd done wrong. She started tossing small rocks into the slowly greening canopy overtop us. I had to duck as leaves and sticks showered the area. “Hey!”

She giggled and I joined her in the mirth, rubbing my shoulder. She had a good aim for not even trying. I jogged toward her, faking a roar, and her reaction stunned me.

Angie cried out, backpedaling in terror.

I froze. She was scared of me?

Angie realized I'd been playing and flushed, but I didn't say anything yet. I couldn't. I was too busy trying to recover. The thought of someone hurting this little girl for any reason made me furious.

“I'm sorry.”

I waved it off. “Don't be. Let's go swing, okay?”

She stayed right behind me as I led the way through the field and to the top of the embankment. The tire on the rope was old and used. It had been there a long time, but neither of us hesitated to take turns swinging out over the 30-foot drop.

Angie squeals of delight filled the rest of the afternoon and we didn't care when the bright sunlight faded. We worked on hand codes then. It wasn't until she spotted the dusky shades of evening rolling over the sky that Angie became worried.

"Should I drive you home?" Georgie might hear us now, but I didn't want to leave her.

"No, please." Angie straightened her shorts and top, and then wiped the dust and weeds from her hair. She smoothed her wrinkles and tidied herself like an adult about to meet company. I was struck again by the difference in her age and her mind. When she grew up, she would be...

Angie looked over with glowing red orbs. I supplied the correct word with an uneasy feeling. *Dangerous*. Angie would be dangerous when she was older.

"Will you still like me?"

"Of course." I was positive that was true. "Friends stick by each other."

"Forever?" she asked, gazing up at me.

"Yes." I smiled. "Forever, but not a minute longer."

She chuckled at my joke and came to my side with that V showing on her little chin again. She wanted something and she was determined to have it. What?

"This." Angie slid her arms around my waist and hugged me—quick and hard. "Thank you."

I hugged her back awkwardly, worried about being spotted now that all the kids were going home

for the evening, but the feel of her holding me was too good to push her away. “That reminds me. You said you’d tell me before we left.”

Angie turned toward the darkening path that would take her to the trailer park. “It’s like this because you’re mine. I asked for someone to love and fate sent you.”

I couldn’t think of anything to say to that, not even a question. It was so sad, so pathetic, so utterly right, that I couldn’t fight it. Angie wanted me. Was there a better feeling in the world?

I followed her most of the way to her home because I wanted to stare at her while I considered what she’d told me. As she climbed the small hill and dutifully trudged on, I realized she understood my life so completely because it was hers.

Angie disappeared into her trailer without a wave. I slowly went home, walking the bike to have more time to think. I considered the things we’d talked about and the way being around her made the rest of the world just disappear, but underneath, I was also making plans. My mother wouldn’t keep me away from Angie. *I won’t let her.*

Chapter Five
Forever
July to December

Marc

The 4th of July was a big deal for us.

My mother insisted on having the entire town draped in red, white, and blue. From store curtains to painted awnings, Mary wanted the world to know our town was patriotic. I would have supported that fully if she hadn't also used the holiday as an excuse to raise money for her private causes.

In the summer of 1990, I decided I didn't want to ride in the parade and wave at the town people who hated me because of my last name. As soon as mother was out of sight, I grabbed a few things and jogged to the cornfield. Most of the town kids had to participate in the festivities. Their parents owed mine money. Mary would make me pay later for skipping out, but it would be worth it to have the entire day with Angie. I was hoping her parents didn't care about patriotic duty. I was almost certain neither of them knew what it meant. I was counting on her being free.

Angie was already at the cornfield, waiting for me with a powerful glow of happiness that said she didn't want to be anywhere else. When she hugged me quickly and then retreated, I felt like the world was right. This was what I wanted, what I *needed*.

Catching my thought, she smiled again, bright enough to make the summer sun fade and my heart thump in a rhythm I suspected no one else would ever cause. I still didn't know why we were such fast friends or had this bond, but I no longer questioned my need for it.

"I brought something." I dug through my bag. "I swiped some sweets and a decoration."

Angie took the shiny flag with another smile, but this one hurt. In it was an almost fanatical glint that I knew might be a problem when she was older. We had skinheads and rednecks here, along with Christians, Indians, and a few remaining gypsies, but there were also the people who only came to town for their basic supplies. They lived off the land and left the town to its own devices. I respected those hard men and women, but I didn't want Angie to become like them. All they ever talked about was their guns and their god.

"I just love America." Angie twirled the flag. "And it's pretty!"

I chuckled at her innocence, but she didn't. I wondered how old she was now, mentally.

"The witch says I don't need to be measured by years." Angie moved toward our place in the corn. "Come on. Let's plant our flag."

“Plant? A flag?”

Angie laughed.

I followed the sound, sweating. It would be hot today.

I joined her in the field. “The farmer’s plow will tear it up if you put it in here.”

“Can we get one that it won’t tear up? I like having our own flag.”

“Me too. It’s not a clubhouse without a flag.”

She waited patiently with those beautiful eyes.

“We’ll figure something out for next year.”

Happy with that, Angie planted the flag between the rows. It would be harvested with the corn, but I didn’t tell her that. It was too much fun watching her dig. She used the animal method, sending wild sprays of dirt sailing through the air.

After she was satisfied the flag would stay up, we went to the creek. It was nice here—cooler—and we lingered, wading in the ankle-deep water that ran clear and was sweet to drink. This was where all the kids came during the hot weather. Many of their parents were like Angie’s. The neighborhood was always running with dirty, hungry, thirsty children searching for something fun to do. Most of the time, they found it here. Today, they were in town and we had it all to ourselves.

“Hey!”

I swiveled to catch a splash in the face.

A war immediately broke out that left us both drenched. As we played, I was careful not to splash too hard. I would do the same with any snowball

fights we had. She was so small! She needed to be protected. I couldn't understand how she or anyone else could come to any other conclusion. "Wanna go get an ice cream?"

Angie's good mood vanished. "No thanks."

I knew what the problem was, but I had it covered. "Come on."

Angie followed slowly, pulling at her shorts and top until she appeared to have dried. I had no idea how she could do that, but it was great. We now appeared as if we'd been in different places, doing different things. *Perfect.*

Angie blushed under my mental awe. She was so cute. It was hard to imagine a time when I wouldn't be happy around her.

The ice cream truck came around almost daily during the warm weather, and sometimes even into fall if nature was slow sending the chill. The loud music was audible from the other end of the park. It brought kids running from all the streets.

Angie stayed hidden as I strode forward and took a place in the line. I wished I'd asked her what she liked. Hoping it was right, I chose two Strawberry Crunches and vanished into the trees that lined the road toward my home.

I quickly circled back and found her waiting for me nearby. Angie took the treat with a red face that I assumed was embarrassment at not having her own money yet. I thought about telling her that would get better when she was older, but her sigh caught my attention.

“Is it wrong?” I was disappointed I’d chosen the wrong flavor.

“No. I’ve never had one. Thank you.” She tore off the wrapper and bit into it without hesitation, face lighting up at the sweet taste. “Vis is goov!”

We strolled back toward the creek, enjoying the ice cream and company. What we didn’t do was keep an eye out for anyone who might be spying on us. No one was, as far as I knew, but deep down, I was aware that I would have to be more careful during my visits. If my parent found out, life might end for us both.

“Are you starting Jr. High in August?” she asked, trying not to drip down her blue dress.

“Yeah. My brother will be in 10th.”

“You looking forward to it or scared?”

As soon as she said scared, my shoulders stiffened. “I’m not afraid of anything.”

“I am,” she whispered, sounding her age.

“You’re a girl.” I squeezed water from my t-shirt.

“So? Girls can be brave.”

“But they don’t have to. That’s what men do.”

“I guess.”

I studied her, attempting to be serious. “Do you want to be a hero? When you grow up?”

Angie shook her head, ebony curls swaying. “No. I just want to be able to fight.”

I didn’t ask her why. We all had bullies.

“The other girls don’t like me,” she whispered, ice cream dripping, forgotten, over her hand. “It’s the way I look.”

As soon as she said it, I understood. The other girls knew Angie was prettier and they suspected that when she was older, she would outshine them by miles.

“I don’t want to. I just want to be normal.”

Again, I understood. To ease her mind and distract her, I smiled. “I’ll bet the boys like you, right?”

She frowned darkly. “Yes.”

Her tone suggested she’d had a problem. I felt anger rise. The rage was a side of me I didn’t like. I was old enough to know it was from the bitterness over my life, but I was careful to control it. Usually I had to be repeatedly provoked and even then, I only let the steam vent in small bursts. Now, I could kill without blinking at the thought of her having trouble with a boy.

“Yuck!” Angie slung the melted cream from her hand, along with the spider that had come down from the branch over us.

She stepped on it angrily for ruining her treat. When she washed off in the creek, bent over instead of kneeling down, I automatically turned my back. Where Angie was concerned, I knew I could be dangerous too, but I wasn’t around enough to protect her. I needed someone we could trust.

“No.”

I didn't argue with her denial of my decision to find her a friend for when I was away. It made me feel good to know she didn't want a substitute.

"Do you smell smoke?"

I sniffed the air. "Smells like wood burning."

We scanned the sky and found a black geyser rising over the town. That much smoke meant a fire.

The town siren began to wail as we stood there trying to decide what to do. As it blared from speakers all over the neighborhood, we took off running. That alarm was a call for people to come and help. We were used to it happening about once a year. Last time, the clothing shop had been totally gone, with not even a frame left. The shop owner had been killed trying to save the register that had held her monthly balance. Brea hadn't trusted the bank or Mary Brady to hold her cash. She thought her dog was enough, but the Doberman had run off during the fire.

People flooded toward town. Angie and I split up to keep our cover. Picking different paths, we rushed toward the town well, where people were lining up to pass buckets. Our town hadn't acquired a firetruck yet. The small ambulance that had been purchased with town funds a few years ago glinted condescendingly from the corner by the clinic as the café burned.

The café was directly across from the restaurant Georgie owned. It was already without glass, tiny shards scattered all over the sidewalk and road. Flames shot from the roof and out of the two front

windows, keeping anyone from going inside. If the owners or any customers were still in there, it would be bad news for them.

I got into the line to pass the buckets now coming down the row, scanning the growing crowd for my mother. Whenever there was a crisis, she usually showed up to organize and direct help. As I had the thought, I spotted her car flying through dimming day to stop by the line of vehicles that were being moved off the street and away from the fire.

The café suddenly let out a horrible popping noise, making some residents duck as if they were under attack. Fresh flames shot out of the cellar door, spitting heat and fear onto those trying to reach the structure with dripping buckets. The people pushed forward anyway, tossing water that was clearly not going to help, but we kept trying, as we would have wanted our neighbors to do for us.

Two hours later, the fire was down to a smoldering, resentful pile of what had once been a lively shop. Groups of people stood around, muttering and murmuring, sitting in depressed silence on the curbs and car hoods. The owners still hadn't been spotted; everyone was assuming they had perished inside. A few of the more grisly people were even claiming they could smell burning flesh.

The town holiday celebrations had been cancelled out of respect, but with main street clogged and debris covered, and the entire area now

dusted in ash, we wouldn't have had a place to hold the ceremony and parade anyway. At a loss as to what to do with themselves, most people stayed to witness the bodies being brought out. My sister, with her bruised arms and her tattooed husband, lingered with them, but I didn't. I also didn't join my brothers near the door to Georgie's restaurant, where there was free beer for those who had helped.

My mother was busy collecting names to find out who all might have been inside. She'd been pleased that I was already on the water line when she arrived. She wouldn't care where I was now, so long as it didn't embarrass her or distract her from the attention she craved. I had no intentions of it. I hadn't seen Angie since I'd gotten in the bucket line and it had finally occurred to me that she wasn't big enough to be able to help that way. I'd searched, but hadn't spotted her in the milling crowd that had slowly grown to over 300. Five times as many people would be celebrating their holiday at home. I was certain there would still be fireworks tonight from those who didn't know there had been a fire.

I hurried to the last place we had been and was able to follow Angie's tracks, thanks to the ash on them and the rocks she had used to cross the muddy water instead of splashing through. I tracked her to the clubhouse area we'd chosen, and found her sifting through the small pile of boards and branches we'd collected so far.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded without turning around. “Just sad.”

I knew how she felt. It was almost as if it had been a family member. When you fought for someone's life, even vainly, it connected you to them. I knelt down by her and carefully slid my arm around her hunched shoulders. I didn't realize Angie was already crying until she buried her head against my chest and let the sobs flow.

I'd never held a girl while she cried. Other than my whiny sister, I'd never even been around a girl who was crying. The awkwardness was there, but her pain was heavy and I patted her arm as I tried to comfort us both. As I rocked, I realized how softhearted she was to fall apart this way over strangers. It made me worried that I had to leave her so soon. I held on far longer than was appropriate. Comfort, being given for no reason other than caring, was a blessing I was wise enough to recognize and be grateful for. If I ever needed an emotional release like this, she would be there for me.

Despite the situation, that knowledge was powerful and wonderful. It gave me the hope to tease her out of her misery and get us back on our clubhouse plans. As we worked and chatted about anything except what had happened, I promised myself that we would be extra careful with our campfire. I didn't like how it felt to have accidents happen to strangers. I didn't ever want to know what it felt like to have it happen to someone I loved.

Still young, I didn't question loving Angie. In fact, it sometimes seemed like the only thing in my strange life that did make sense.

When we parted that evening, we didn't know it was for the next five months. I didn't get to see her again until after my birthday, and like usual, I didn't get to say goodbye.

Angie

It was another long hard summer and fall without Marc, where I tried to survive on the fringes of everyone else's life. I did have a few bright spots over the year, and they allowed me a few moments of joy that countered some of the hell. One of those was Dean Combs being suspended and put into Hillcrest, a behavioral school for troublemakers. I didn't know what he'd done, but it had to be bad. Everyone was glad he was gone.

Another high point for me was Patty and her shop. Through her, I gradually learned about the power I had. Not enough to understand what I was or why I was like this, but enough to help me control it better when I got mad. I loved the hours we spent digging through fragile papers and relics of our heritage.

Patty never mentioned my abuses. We both knew our limits there. She had enough trouble trying to keep her shop open. With the Bradys pushing out all the old ways, Patty's store had few customers in 1990. The guilt was overwhelming because I was a part of the family that was treating her so badly. I wished all of them would disappear the way Dean had. They were awful! Rodney and Scot, who pulled their man parts out and touched me. Tracy, who was always pinching me or tripping me. The dozens of aunts and uncles who viewed me like shit on their shoes because Mother Brady told them to. And then, there was the ruler of our

sprawling family, the spider with her bible and her glasses, always ranting about how uncivilized the gypsies were and how they embarrassed her. Her cruel glances scanned me with contempt anytime we were in the same room. I was worse than just a gypsy. I was the tainted offspring of a gypsy whore.

All of the Bradys were like that—uncaring, harsh, selfish people who only cared for themselves. Except Marc. I was never *the breed* or *the freaky kid* with him. His mind was missing the ugliness that his family shared and I was drawn to him with a need so strong there was never a choice of resisting. Because of that obsession, the months we were apart felt more like years.

I waited for the Christmas gathering in anxious longing. When it finally came, I was disappointed again by how little time we were given. It seemed to be the story of my life.

Marc

I hated it that I'd been born in the same month as Christmas. Most kids liked the idea of two holidays together, but mine was used as an excuse to proclaim our religion. Our family was required to host my birthday whenever my mother didn't feel like it. This year, Uncle Georgie *volunteered*. Whoever hosted it had to provide a cake and presents, along with the expected decorations and refreshments. Bible hymns were acceptable music. It sucked.

In 1990, Georgie hosted the party at his restaurant. I didn't care, but mother was furious. I didn't know what she had expected him to do, but he lived in a trailer that wouldn't hold half of our family.

Georgie took the public scolding better than I'd thought he would and then the cake had been brought out. It broke the tension and drew focus away from Mary's displeasure. I thought Georgie would pay for timing it that way.

The party lasted three hours and I didn't see Angie at all. I had hoped for a few minutes alone with her, but it wasn't until we were leaving that I got an answer to where she was. I'd been afraid that asking would draw too much attention. The family ignored her and that meant I had to also. As we advanced into the chilly December darkness, I saw a small figure in the rear of the restaurant, bent over a deep sink.

The rear of the restaurant was actually two buildings that had been connected by plastic panels to form the cooking area. It took longer to walk orders out to the large main floor, but it also kept things cleaner and there was less chance of a patron mistaking it for a bathroom and causing trouble. Georgie had bright lights, a karaoke machine, and a jukebox. There were arcades in the lobby and a small glass case of souvenirs. It took him and Frona a lot of work to run the place. As Angie got older, she had to be here more.

Angie's mom was next to her. I realized Georgie had made them work the party instead of attending it. I was willing to bet that had been my mother's idea.

"Thank you for coming, Mother Brady." Georgie was escorting us through the snow to the car.

"It would have been nice if you had sent someone out to warm this beast." Mary slid onto the cold seat. I was holding the door open as I'd been trained.

"Sorry, Mother Brady." Georgie spotted my quick glance toward the two laboring females and grinned. "Gotta keep your women in line, Marcie. Don't forget that."

"Yes, sir." I climbed into the passenger seat, trying not to shiver or look again. Once was simple curiosity. Glancing twice was interest and my mother could scent that like a dog.

Mary shifted the car into drive, but it didn't move. "I don't..."

She hit the gas harder and the car rocked, engine rumbling unhappily, but we still didn't go forward.

"Oh, what now?!" Mary snapped angrily. "Get out and see."

I climbed into the cold air and spotted the problem right away. "We're stuck in the ice."

Mother joined me. I could feel her trying to control the urge to shout. She didn't like losing her cool in public.

"I can ask Uncle Georgie if he has a shovel..."

Mary snorted, stomping back through the snow toward the restaurant. "Your uncle will drive us home. Bring my things inside while I sober him up."

Once she was out of sight, I jogged to the rear door of the restaurant. As I slipped inside, Angie came from the sink to greet me.

I didn't think to check if her mom was still in here with her. I just opened my arms. I'd been waiting for this for five long months.

Angie was tight against me an instant later and the world shifted into that place I craved. The hug lasted longer than it should have, but she didn't let go and I didn't want to. In Angie's little arms, I wasn't hated by the town or an outcast on the farm. I wasn't mother's spy or her workhorse. I was just Marc.

Footsteps brought us back to reality. Angie shoved a slip of paper into my hand and then returned to the sink.

I eased out the door and hurried to the car for mother's things. As I bent over to get the large purse and extra wrap, I used the light to read Angie's note.

I'll be at the cornfield tomorrow, after church. I may be late. It's okay if you can't come.

Feeling like a secret agent, I wadded the slip of paper up and ate it.

Grimacing at the taste, I carried the stuff inside, trying to plan it so I would be free all day. My aunt's farm was fun for me now that I was used to it and the cousins knew to leave me alone. Over the summer I'd finally used the threat of my mother to get some peace. I would be going back soon, but spending minutes alone with Angie was better than watching Daniel on his bike or listening to the uncles for hours. Being with Angie topped everything.

The early afternoon shadows were rising when I spotted Angie coming through the woods the next day. She had a small bag in one hand and a book in the other. Reading as she walked, her steps took her across weeds and foliage that should have tripped her.

"Hi!"

"Oh!" Angie flinched, dropping the book.

I sighed. "Sorry."

Her face was red as she picked up the novel and slid it into a pocket. It was big enough to make her

skirt sag. I wondered what it was. Had to be something good to be worth carrying that weight.

“I had extra chores.”

She didn’t say what they were, and I didn’t ask, but I was a little curious as to how she spent her time.

Angie came toward me. I expected a hug, but she held out a small box instead. I opened the gift with a polite expression, ready to be happy with whatever she’d thought I might want. When I saw the matchbox car, my jaw dropped. I was missing this one from the set in my bedroom. “How did you know?”

She’d never been in my room and I didn’t usually think about collecting cars while we were together.

“Mother Brady was talking about it with Georgie. You’ll have to say you bought it.”

“I will.” Pocketing the treasure, I gave her the hug I could feel her hoping for. I made my first mental note to get her something for her birthday from now on. Because she was born in October, I wouldn’t be here to give it to her on time, so I would get it ready each July. And then a reason occurred to me why she had given me a gift at all—a side of my mother showing through—and I wasn’t wise enough to keep it to myself. “You don’t have to buy me.”

She didn’t speak until I gently stepped away. I was always scared we’d be spotted if we lingered in these moments.

“I want you to have things and be happy,” she said, shoulders stiff. “Let’s swing.”

Unaware that I had offended her, I kept up a steady stream of chatter while she got the tire. We kept it tied to the trees on the flat ground. If we let it go, it was hard to reach with sticks and branches.

Angie didn’t need help with the tire. She was strong for her size. She lugged it to the flat ground we used for a starting point and then leapt onto it with a wild shout that made me laugh. She floated out over the drop, giggling. The sound wrapped me in stars of awareness.

We took turns for an hour before she was tired and settled in the grass nearby. The wind had begun to blow harder while we’d been here, bringing another deep chill that said we wouldn’t be able to do this again until spring.

I took a few more swings and Angie watched me intently, eyes bright with emotions. At moments like this, I could almost accept the future my mother had planned if it meant I got to stay.

When I’d had my fill, I joined Angie in the grass, thinking by the next time we got to hang out, I would have the hand code finished. I’d been working on it steadily, but I kept forgetting what motion meant which letter.

“How long until you have to leave again?”

“Probably this week.”

Angie sighed unhappily. “We shouldn’t waste it. Let’s start the clubhouse.”

I glanced around uneasily. “Here?”

She shrugged. “Wherever you think.”

“Well, we’ll need a lot more wood.”

She scanned the area around us, shoulders slumping. “We can’t cut down trees.”

“But we can gather more debris. Come on.”

She followed me without complaining. We spent the next hours scouring the woods and cornfield for anything we could use to build our shelter. We both refused to use the wood from the café fire, though I thought we could find other piles at the dump.

As the shadows of evening set in, we evaluated the small pile we’d gathered. It was under a pile of loose branches, but not hidden. I wondered if it would still be here the next time we were able to make it.

“I’ll watch over it. Maybe I can find some nails.”

I shoved my hands into my pockets against the chill. I didn’t want to leave yet, but it was cold and my mother would wonder where I was if I didn’t show up soon.

“I understand. I’ll see you at Christmas dinner.”

I thought of how my mother had hinted she might invite my future girlfriend. I wasn’t looking forward to being introduced and having to dance with her.

Next to me, Angie growled.

I gaped in surprise and was further confused when a tear rolled down her small cheek.

“I won’t always be too little for you.”

Her emotions were upsetting. I started to comfort her with a lie, but she held up a hand.

“When I’m older, you’ll be mine and I’ll love you forever.” She walked into the woods with her head held high.

I couldn’t stop the fool’s grin that spread over my face. After that, there was a hollow ache in my gut whenever anyone mentioned the tire swing.

As I went home, I felt the first waves of true guilt. They became a constant companion over the years, but I couldn’t stay away. The best I could manage was to pretend she didn’t exist unless we were alone. It was the only cover I thought might succeed. As a result, I only got to see Angie twice more in December. One of those was the family gathering for the dinner where we stole a quick hello. The second time was the after Christmas bike ride that I’d helped organize. I intentionally put her name near the bottom of the list, as if I was taking pity on the little baby. It hurt me to treat her that way, to ignore her, but Angie was just happy to be included. She didn’t complain about bringing up the rear of the 50-bike convoy. She stayed so far behind on a borrowed bike that we didn’t see each other until the end, but she was willing to accept any place in my life that I could give her.

Because I’d spent my winter break mixing with the neighborhood kids, Mary punished me by sending me out of town again. I would now live on Judy’s farm. Mother shipped me out the same night she told me.

We were less than 10 minutes from my aunt's farm when my mother spoke.

"I know what you've been doing, Marcus."

I jumped guiltily, mouth falling open, but I did manage to keep from saying anything.

"Mixing with those children, being nice to the whore's offspring, ignoring my rules. I can't have that."

I heard the underlying rage in her tones and tried to think of something I could say or do to throw her off the scent. "I got lonely. I'm sorry."

"Too late for sorry!" Mary snorted. "All that riff-raff clogging the sidewalk. I had a hard time getting to the car! And then to find out my own son had arranged it!"

I let her rant without interrupting, glad she had overlooked my being nice to the whore's offspring. *That's one I can't forgive her for. When I'm older, I won't even pretend to.*

As if she picked up the thought, Mary glared over at me. "Be very careful about the choices you make, Marcus. Don't force me to be cruel."

I didn't understand the difference. "I'm sorry, mother."

Not satisfied, but unwilling to have me crying upon arrival, she ended our conversation. "If I thought for one instant that you liked that little girl, I would be forced to send *her* away. Do you want that?"

Sensing the trap, I knew I had to be honest. “No. She’s nice.”

“You will stay away from her!”

“I will.”

Maybe she didn’t like how fast I’d agreed, or perhaps she didn’t believe me, because her free hand grabbed my arm in a claw-like grip of iron.

“Are you sick, like your father?”

“No!” I hated her in that moment. “I don’t run from my responsibilities!”

Satisfied she’d gotten through, Mary let go of my wrist and straighten behind the wheel. “Good. Enjoy your stay with Judy.”

“Yes, mother.” Except now, I wouldn’t and she knew it. I would spend the entire time worried about Angie. I wouldn’t know if she’d been sent away. My mother knew how to be abusive without ever laying a finger on me.

1991

Chapter Six
Those Long Months
January to August

Angie

I waited eagerly for summer.

I hoped for at least a week of secret visits, but things got ugly in May. Judy needed Marc to stay on the farm and Mother Brady had agreed. I wouldn't see him until the next big holiday gathering for Christmas, seven more months at the earliest. The joy fell from my life. A haze descended that I didn't know how to fight. When I saw Marc again, a year would have passed.

To kill the time, I began to frequent Patty's shop, despite knowing I could be caught. I couldn't help the wild streak. I was a gypsy. I did hope the need to avoid the heat would be a good excuse at least once, though. The loneliness was crushing. I had to take the chance.

Patty's shop had two large rooms merged together to create a small library with a few seats for those who wanted to read their book right away. She also kept coffee out. I thought all the rugs and paintings made it very cheery.

At first, Patty ignored me when I came in. I wandered the dusty, strange tombs and relics, and she stayed behind her counter, writing or dealing with the occasional customer. It was as if she hadn't driven me to school and revealed that we were both special.

After a week of peeks and glances, she finally approached me. It was a good thing, because I hadn't figured out a way to bring up what I wanted from her.

"I have cookies."

I glanced up from the book of Indian lore in true surprise. Patty usually ushered everyone out for her noon break. I'd been getting ready to leave. "Sure."

I followed Patty into the rear of the store, noticing she didn't bother to flip her sign over. The townspeople knew she would be closed for an hour. It was how all the shops here operated.

The rear of Patty's store was her home. I hadn't realized that. I stared in surprise at the Indian-decorated rooms. There were paintings of maidens and warriors, some from real subjects. She had dreamcatchers, headdresses, and feathery objects I didn't have names for. I spotted knives, axes, tomahawks, spears. I expected such a collection to be in the store itself, not hidden back here.

Patty motioned to her small kitchen table. I sat down while still staring at the furnishings. One corner of the bedroom I could glimpse through the narrow hallway held an actual teepee. The leather was piled in a corner, but because it was so tall, it

seemed like it was set up to me. I could easily imagine a family like those in the pictures living in it, caring for each other. I was impressed by the Indians I'd been reading about. The tribe cared for everyone—well, most of them. I wouldn't want to be a part of some tribes, but most of the natives loved their camp members. They treated their elderly with respect and the men could be trusted. Those ideals appealed to me.

“Milk?”

I nodded, waiting for her to start the conversation. I expected questions about my home life or even Mother Brady.

“I could use someone to sweep the walk out front a couple times a week. More when the leaves are everywhere.”

A job. Would Georgie like that? I flashed to one of his fights with my mom.

“Get a damn job, woman, or work for me! Earn those ugly skirts!”

“Thank you.” I tried to keep it from my voice. I really didn't want to talk about my home life.

“Come by after school. I'll pay you when you've finished each day.”

“Cool.” Georgie would take most of it, but I would at least get a quarter for my morning milk.

“Maybe you should tell your family the wrong number.”

I considered that, understanding what she meant from the images in her mind. I wasn't snooping, but

she didn't have a wall up right now, so it didn't feel wrong to search a little.

"It's not." Patty sat down with her coffee. "Digging is where that crosses a line."

"Okay." I had no problem accepting her instructions. She wasn't shouting or telling me I was useless.

"And I won't!" Patty growled. "Damn animals."

I liked her for that. I thought that maybe I could be brave enough to lie to Georgie about how much money I got. I wouldn't hold much back, but if I could keep saving until I was grown up, I might have enough to leave.

Patty's face glowed with a satisfaction I didn't understand. I was too busy exploring the options a job would give me.

"Have another cookie."

I could hear her thinking I needed to gain some weight. I took a second cookie hesitantly. I really didn't like sweets much.

"There are some rules about working for me. But they're not hard. And when you're older, you can have a better job in the shop if I'm doing well enough to afford it."

I felt like crying. I wasn't used to people being nice and my wariness spilled out. "Until you can't use me for anything else, right?"

Patty's expression went through several changes while I waited tensely for a shout or even a blow.

Patty stood up and limped down the hall toward her bedroom, sending a wave of cool air over me. My first thought was that she wanted a belt. I trembled. Did I have to take it from her too? I'd been taught not to disrespect those older than me.

Patty came back with a large book instead and I tried to relax. "I'm sorry."

Patty wore a hurt expression. "So am I, child." She put the book in front of me. "I want you to read that. If you have trouble with the words, I'll help you."

I glanced at the title. "How to defend myself?"

"You won't be able to do much until you're bigger, but at least you'll know how when that time comes."

I scanned the book as she took her seat and started on her cookies and coffee. It was a long time before I looked up.

When I did, Patty was back out in the shop. I waited until she was alone to join her. The thoughts from the book were swirling in my brain, tempting me to think of something I'd never done. Fighting back.

Patty didn't say anything as the last customer filed out, and I wasn't sure how to thank her for her kindnesses. Sweeping wasn't enough. "I'll come by tomorrow."

Patty locked her register and then flipped the sign in the window.

That got my attention. I hadn't realized it was so late. "Bye! Thank you!"

I hurried home, hoping I beat Georgie. I liked to be in my room when he pulled into the driveway.

Luck was with me as I slipped into the trailer without my mom hearing me. I'd done my chores before I left, but she probably had a new list for me by now.

A few minutes later, I heard Georgie arrive and buried myself in the homework I'd already finished in case he stopped by my door. He sometimes did, peering in at me with cruel, needy leers I never knew how to handle.

How to Defend Yourself.

The book came to mind. I spent the rest of the evening dwelling on it. So much that I got cuffed in the ear for letting my cup overflow while pouring the milk. It didn't matter. Patty had implanted a new, dangerous idea in my young brain and it stuck with me throughout the misery. Eventually, at some point, I would be able to defend myself and then no one would ever be able to hurt me again. I would live for that. *Someday, I'll be free.*

The rest of those long months without Marc didn't fly by, but I did like working for Patty. The family, to my surprise, didn't care that I had a job. It kept me busy and out of trouble. After I finished sweeping the walk, Patty always had me come in and cool down, and then gave me cookies with icy milk. We would look through whatever book caught my attention. She spent hours trying to explain the meanings to me. For some reason, I had an extreme

interest in survival and preparing for bad situations. I was drawn to those titles above the others.

I flew through the book on self-defense and the remaining three in the series that she gave me. I didn't know it at the time, of course, but as I got older, I realized Patty couldn't afford to buy those books and no one had ordered them, but she'd gotten them for me anyway. Patty was great like that. She actually cared.

In the fall of 1991, Patty ordered a book called *One Hundred Ways to Survive*. I was enraptured from the instant she opened the box. I spent the next three weeks reading and searching the list of words I hadn't understood. Once I finished, I read it all again. It became my favorite book in her shop and it was always available when I wanted it.

I learned a lot of things from the novels in her store, things I didn't know were important until after I'd researched my list of the words. One of those things was how to control the voice inside. I hadn't known that was possible. I thought we were supposed to be fighting.

The witch didn't like listening to me. When she got angry, bad things happened and I was always fighting her for the lead. Patty directed me to a book called *Myths of Witchcraft*, and I learned that if I threatened the demon with locking her up forever, I could get control. It wasn't easy, but the witch and I came to an agreement after that.

“Some people are born different,” Patty told me that day. “It doesn’t make them good or bad. You understand?”

“I think so.” I glanced at her warily. “Like me.”

Patty patted my hand. “Yes, like you. You’re not evil. You’re different.”

I stewed on that as she got our cookies. The drinks were already on the table in front of me. Patty had been very careful not to spook me on this subject, but by August, I wasn’t afraid of her telling on me anymore. She had more reason to hate the Bradys than I did. Mary Brady owned the mortgage on the shop. Whatever that was, it gave Patty bad headaches. “Can you tell me why?”

Patty sat the plate between us and took her seat. “Sometimes there just is no reason for things. You’ve learned that already, I think.”

I had. Georgie’s attention had no reason. I didn’t understand what drove him, and I didn’t want to.

“And sometimes, it can be because fate has plans for you.”

“What kind of plans?” Even at my age, I knew that word. Fate was often cursed in our house and I was usually the reason why.

“Some people do great things as they grow.”

“And bad things too, right?”

“Yes.” Patty stared at an old picture on the wall. “Sometimes people are as bad as they come, no matter what fate tries to offer instead.”

It gave me hope to think that fate could also offer good things. I ate a cookie and drank some of my milk, pondering.

Patty waited for me to be ready. She sipped her tea and nursed a sweet, but her eyes stayed on me in concern. I knew what she was worried over, why she'd felt the need to bring this up now. I'd been wilder while Marc was gone this time. Like when I'd rushed in front of the tractor to save our flag or tossed rotten eggs at Mary Brady's car over her petition to ban Halloween. Those were two of the littlest ways that I was acting out. The loneliness was making me reckless.

"Yes, you are." Patty tried not to sound scolding even though I needed it.

I thought about lying to her. I could hide things mentally. I knew how to keep a secret, but it wasn't needed. Patty understood. "I'll try harder."

"You could practice your gift. That would keep your speedy little brain occupied."

My mouth dropped open.

Patty chuckled a little. "Your mind may be able to hide things, little one, but your face gives you away every time. Always stick to the truth."

I immediately became determined to conquer that weakness.

Patty studied me slyly, sipping her tea.

After a few minutes of drinking and crunching, I was ready for the next level of questions. "What can *you* do?"

“So smart!” Patty patted my hand again. “In my youth, as much as you and more. Now? I can teach, if you like.”

I beamed at her offer. “Thanks!”

Patty froze as my innocent pleasure trapped her in a haze that demanded she please me again. I’d had this happen before. I immediately refocused on thoughts of school. It had a sobering effect that snapped the hold I had accidentally taken on her mind.

Patty blinked, slowly coming back to herself. She knew what had happened. She was just used to being on the other side of it.

The gypsy woman muttered, rising, and disappeared into one of the rear rooms again.

I followed to apologize, but also to make sure that she was okay. Patty’s hallway held so many photos I was distracted halfway through. Once I realized they were in chronological order, I realized I was following her life. It was mesmerizing.

The photo that held me the longest was the largest one. I recognized the main street of town, though in the image, it was a dirt road and people were riding horses. There was damage everywhere. A tornado had been drawn in deep, black circles that gave it an evil life.

“I lost my daddy that day.”

I jumped. Patty was right next to me.

Patty didn’t notice, staring at the images on the canvas in pain. “We didn’t have alarms back then.”

I'd always thought the siren was loud and scary, but it gave me a chill to view them through Patty's sight. Alarms might have saved her family.

"Maybe." She answered my thought without realizing it this time. "Except the tornado didn't kill him. A Brady did."

Patty glanced down at my shocked face. "I was hoping you knew which one, at first. That's why I befriended you."

I shrugged at her confession and delivered one of my own. "I hoped you'd teach me stuff. That's why I let you. I'm sorry I don't know anything about your past."

Patty gaped at me this time. My giggles floated through the hallway shrine, calming old ghosts. I turned back to the picture, to what had grabbed my attention. "Is that Mary behind the trees? Helping clean?"

"Yes, child. She was once a member of our town. She bled with us, lived and died with us. When her husband...took off, she changed."

It was interesting to know. From my inside view, I didn't think that could be true. The woman I knew didn't have a heart at all.

"That's what happens when it gets ripped out." Patty led us back to the table. "Losing your love is almost worse than dying."

"How can that be?"

"Because you have to live every day without them."

“Oh...” I winced as I realized she probably knew that because it had happened to her. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I, all these years later.” Patty took a deep breath. “But that is the past. This, my young friend, is the future.”

I hadn’t seen a real crystal ball before. I was immediately disappointed. That tiny little globe wasn’t anything like what I’d imagined.

“I had the same thoughts myself when I first beheld the magic in physical form. But a small package wrapped in boring colors can sometimes be a priceless treasure.”

I knew she meant more than just the ball, but I was too young to follow it any further.

“Are you going to search my future?” I was eager. Being certain that it held something better than what I was surviving now was information I needed. My witch couldn’t do that very much yet.

“Yes, but more than just yours. I’m going to search for the future of the town.” Patty glanced over. “I’ll need help. I’m a bit old for this.”

I put my hand out for the ball, sensing this was what she had wanted all along.

“When it glows, tell me what you see,” Patty instructed, but I didn’t really hear her. The feel of the small wooden frame in my hand was alien. The clear orb in the center didn’t react. I didn’t like it.

I let the ball thump to the table and wiped my hands on my dress. As I did, a new door appeared in my mind and swung wide open.

“Imprinter!”

Patty’s word meant nothing to me as I mentally approached the open door. Gray fog rolled out and covered my boots.

“What do you see, child?”

I didn’t want to speak. I was trying to concentrate on keeping the door open. I grabbed her wrist, linking us. Other than Marc, I’d never done this with anyone.

I peered through the foggy door...and it exploded.

When I woke, Patty was sitting at the table. I was on her couch, covered in a sweet-smelling quilt. “What happened?”

“We saw more than the future of this town.” Patty was digging through a stack of books. “You should rest.”

“Does the world blow up?” My heart thumped. “Is that the fire?”

“Something like it, maybe.” Patty didn’t glance up from her research. “When you feel strong enough, we have to get you home.”

I realized it was almost dusk and clumsily got to my feet. Georgie would be home any minute!

“Thank you!” I staggered through her door. Even the end of the world wasn’t going to make me late. He would use the belt this time.

Behind me, I heard Patty mutter, but I was most of the way home before the words sank in.

“Is she supposed to stop it, start it, or just survive it?”

Chapter Seven
Gratitude
August to December

Marc

Now that I was living on the farm, I took a different bus to the same school.

I went through my classes with longing for the afternoon, like the other kids I served time with. I didn't like comparing Jr high school to a jail when Angie asked, but it was hard not to. Being a male didn't make it any easier. I ended up in fights to prove my manhood to people who didn't understand the definition of the word. I argued with teachers who thought kids should be seen and not heard. I tolerated my friends, and wished my brother had already graduated so I didn't have to deal with him. I didn't like it when my brothers lived at home. We weren't the same type of sons. They were yes-men to my mother's face and utterly useless. I didn't know what part of the family business they were responsible for, but I was willing to bet it wasn't doing well.

Thanksgiving came and went with a nice breakfast feast on the farm and an afternoon of wonderfully cool swimming at the hole, but no call

from my mother or a visit, which meant no way to sneak out to the cornfield or clubhouse.

For months, we baled hay to be ready for the winter. I grew lean and hard under those conditions, something I was proud of. When I had to run in gym class, it wasn't a problem anymore. Pushups? No sweat. Chin up bar? Kiss my ass, I've got it beat. The other kids I hung around with at school hated that.

As winter arrived and there was no call from mother, I realized the farm was truly my home now. Mother probably liked not having me underfoot, but it was a crushing blow to the part of my heart that still wanted her love and approval, even after so many years.

I tried to be happy. There were many ways for a teenage boy to find an outlet there, but it never really felt like the bedroom I had at the Brady house. The rest of that big mausoleum hadn't been home to me, but I missed my room and the cleanliness I'd kept it in. The kids on the farm were a lot like the pigs we helped the neighbors care for.

My birthday that December was held right there on the farm. Georgie didn't attend. Neither did my mother, but that was a blessing. It turned out to be one of the strangest birthdays I've ever had.

My aunt Judy was an odd woman. She had long, black hair streaked with gray and a pear-shaped body that swayed as she walked. She wore overalls and men's shirts. I'd never noticed makeup on her. She ruled the farm, assigning chores and

destinations for the boys who left, but my uncle Larry handled the training. They didn't discuss the jobs with each other, that I was aware of. They didn't even seem to like each other. I often wondered why they stayed together. The day began with me discovering that answer by accident.

I had come down the stairs early, hoping for extra time listening to the uncles, but as I neared the door, voices froze me. Coming from the kitchen, the argument sounded ugly.

"It is tradition, woman! I can't change that. Nothing can be changed in this damn family, including our marriage."

"He's a boy."

"He's 14. It's past time he became a man."

"I don't thin—"

Slap!

I knew that sound too well. When it came a second time, I reluctantly walked toward the kitchen. I knew what I would see and I didn't want to. Mother wouldn't be happy if I got involved.

"Apologize."

"I'm sorry."

"You'll send him like we planned."

"Yes."

"Good. Get the food done. I have people waiting for me."

I quickly ducked behind the tall coat rack mother had given Judy for a past holiday. Larry stormed by without noticing me. In the kitchen,

Judy wasn't crying or muttering. I didn't hear anything.

I went to check on her.

She was sitting at the table when I came in and she didn't look up. I was glad. I didn't want to see Larry's handprints on her cheek. "Can I do anything for you?"

Judy wiped away the light tears with the scarf she donned each morning to fight the cold as she trekked out for wood. "No."

"Can my mother?" I didn't know if I had enough leverage to get my parent to interfere, but I would try.

Judy snorted. "She's the reason for all this. We'd both go if we could, but we can't."

I was confused, and I didn't want to anger her by asking more questions. Instead, I went to the stove to flip the corncakes so they didn't burn. While I did it, I realized she meant my mother wouldn't let them get a divorce.

That didn't surprise me. Mother hated change, of almost any kind. I layered the thin corncakes onto the huge platter, aware of the temperature in the steamy room rising even further. Judy was staring at me and it was beginning to draw a reaction from my body. I'd always thought she was pretty, and she'd been in one or two of my private fantasy moments over the years since I'd learned what pleasure was. Today, I felt connected to her in ways that were terrifying.

“You should get out of this family, Marc. Before it destroys you.”

Since I already had that plan, I ignored the advice. “What’s happening with me tonight?”

“A family tradition.” Judy lit a cigarette. It was the first time she’d done it in the house since I’d been here.

“They’ll take you hunting, probably get you drunk and maybe even take you town to visit the Reading Rainbow.”

“Reading Rainbow?” I repeated, thinking the rest of it sounded good.

“A bawdy house, boy.” Judy studied me in ways I wasn’t comfortable with yet. I studied the food.

“You have a girlfriend?”

I nodded.

“Your mother pick her out?”

“Yes.”

“Figures. Don’t let your uncles spoil you, Marc. My boys are already worthless. Don’t follow their example. Be your own man.” She stood up and took the spatula from me. “Get out of here.”

I slipped out in confusion. She shouldn’t be so upset about my being given the birthday of a man. It was what I might have chosen for myself, if I’d ever been allowed to pick.

I joined the uncles in the rear of the farmhouse with more on my mind than usual. I didn’t realize they were already drinking until I’d sat down and pulled my jacket tighter against the chill. I usually avoided drunken people, no matter who they were,

and the uncles usually waited for the cover of nightfall. The change in behavior made me nervous.

The uncles didn't talk to me at all. They nodded when I said hello, but their conversation stayed centered on the coming trip out of town. A popular convention had been scheduled and it was going to last months as it toured the east coast. It sounded amazing. I listened in longing to them discuss skylines, food, and plush hotel rooms. I'd only been taken to the towns close enough for us to return to the farm each night. I wondered if any of the trainees would get to go.

A short while later, the breakfast bell rang. The uncles moved toward the house.

Larry stood up, pointing at me. His breath was visible in the chill. "You're with us tonight."

I nodded, grinning. Whatever they had planned, I would handle it like an adult and then I would ask to go to the convention. Larry seemed to like me, and there wasn't anything holding me back, not even fear of my mother. I was 14, almost a man. I wanted to be treated like one.

I woke up in the barn the next morning, freezing and spitting straw from my mouth. I couldn't remember if I'd asked about the convention, but I did have a vague memory of Larry clamping me on the shoulder after I'd downed the third beer.

I belched—a nasty smelling expulsion that triggered my stomach. I leaned over to vomit. After the bar, we'd spent three hours in a pizza parlor,

gorging on thick crust supreme pies. When we left there, I'd almost been sober again, but the uncles weren't finished. We'd stopped in Covington next, at a strip club.

I hadn't thought they would let me in, but Larry pressed money into the hand of the woman guarding the door and I was ushered into a booth that was out of sight of the main counter and stage. Things were hazy from there. I knew they'd bought me a lap dance and I refused. I'd asked for more beer instead, drawing laughter, and that was all I remembered. I didn't even know how I'd gotten into the barn.

"Did you have fun?"

I looked over to find Judy standing in the doorway, milking pail in hand.

I shook my head and it split open, sending pain rushing down my face and into my stomach. I vomited again.

Judy left without saying anything else, but I felt her disappointment keenly. For some reason, her opinion mattered to me. I vowed not to earn that from her again. When I got drunk, it would be lightly or not at all, so I still had control of myself. I also didn't want to wake up like this again, with no memory of what I'd been doing. For a Marine, that was dangerous behavior and I would stop the habit right now. *I am not my uncles.*

On Christmas morning, mother finally called, but only to wish me a happy holiday and tell me the presents were also for my birthday. I hung up in

such a bad state that Judy took me into the kitchen and held me while I cried.

That was the last time I ever shed tears for the woman who called herself my mother. Over the years, I still had warm moments here and there, but the bitterness of not being wanted had finally sank in and festered. That day, I began to hate her with an adult loathing that nothing would ever change.

With the end of the year came the family training. It wasn't at all what I'd expected. The boys were gathered in a tent and taught the best ways to approach a potential customer. The Bradys were involved with Amway and the amazing number of products available was supposed to mean that we never took no for an answer. There was always something our customers needed. It was up to us to discover what that item was and then close the sale.

I excelled, though not for the reasons I was taught in the three tent lessons. I never lied to the people I was sent to. They liked that. It made it easy to drop by each week with a new catalog of products. My uncles were jealous, but when their income increased through me, no one protested.

Four days a week, the boys in training traveled with the uncles to meetings and nearby towns to do door-to-door presentations. I saw and heard things on those trips that shocked me and opened up a different world—one that I was only three and a half years from claiming now. When I learned mother had left me on the farm for an undetermined amount

of time, my only regret was not being able to tell Angie in person. I had toughened up, and wised up, enough to accept that despite it not living up to my expectations, life with the aunt and uncles was infinitely better than life with my mother.

The year passed into 1992 quickly for me, but I didn't forget the feeling of completeness I'd experienced with Angie and I didn't forget her words to me. I knew my mother hadn't sent her away when no family gossip came. I assumed she would be there when I returned. Angie was the only part of my home life that I missed now.

Angie

It was a long year, where I counted the days until Christmas, assuming Marc would be home.

He was, but I didn't get to see him. Georgie decided to keep the restaurant open for the holiday. My mom and I worked the entire time.

As soon as I could get free, I ran to the cornfield and checked on our pile of supplies. I found a gift box on top of it. Marc hadn't been able to wait for me, but he had shown up; that meant more than any present.

I opened the box to find a small snapshot of him and a message on a tiny slip of paper.

Now you can see me, even when I'm not there.

I spent an hour crying, not sure if I was upset over missing him or shedding tears of happiness.

I hid the picture in an old coffee can with a lid, and buried it under our pile of wood and bricks. I couldn't take it home where it might be found, but I could come here every day and stare at it until the pain became easier to handle. It was the perfect gift.

We'd been apart for a year now, but my feelings for Marc had only grown stronger. I listened for details of his life from our relatives, even spending time around people I didn't like in hopes of gleaning any little trifle of information. I was starved for news by the time Christmas came. With Marc on the farm, my stalking had been stopped and I was edgy, grouchy. I understood stalking hadn't been good for me though and I tried to adjust.

The other kids had games and television shows to occupy them. I still spent hours roaming the town and the land around it when I wasn't with Patty. I already knew the trailer park as well as I could for my age and size. Now, I explored the alleys and creeks, the garbage dump, and the gated area that led to the old Fort property. No one was allowed in there, but the best night crawlers were in their grass after a rain. Plenty of the older kids had been in trouble for climbing the fence to see what was on the other side. I didn't. I was nervous about the 10-foot drop to the ground once I made it to the top. Climbing was easy. Falling hurt.

The snows put an end to my wandering as the year closed and I stayed in my room as much as I could. I kept my black and white tv down low and dreamed about what the future would be like. Every scenario included Marc. I imagined us swinging and bike riding, talking and laughing. He was the friend I needed. I was the escape he needed. Why couldn't we be together?

It took me a long time to understand why Mother Brady hated me so much. When we were in the same room, I could feel her dislike, her dark and dangerous thoughts. I avoided searching her mentally. I was scared she would notice. Those hawk eyes behind wire frames saw so much! And she was mean. Mary didn't like much of anything that wasn't strictly Christian or progressive, a word that also took me a long time to understand. Mary didn't want kids enjoying football games and

bonfires, or trick or treating. She wanted us lined up single file, in matching clothes, never speaking or thinking for ourselves. It often shocked me how many adults felt that way, especially teachers. I hadn't been in school long, but I had already learned to keep my mouth shut. Anything else earned me trouble and I already had enough of that.

I spent New Year's Eve with Patty and had a wonderful evening. It was a great start to 1992. We read some of her old books, talked about the stories in them, and had hot chocolate while we watched the fireworks that Mother Brady had helped fund. We could hear the crowd of people outside the shop, but we stayed in the back and it was as if we were in a different world—one that was better. What we didn't do was get her crystal ball out. She flatly refused to answer any questions about what had happened and I didn't want to anger her by busting through her mental walls. Considering how great she was to me, it seemed like a small price to pay.

Georgie and Frona had wanted to go out this year, but they had me to deal with. After slickly implying the old woman I worked for was also a babysitter, I had my first sleepover, and Patty got to make \$10 I knew she needed. Georgie liked the fact that I had gotten a job. My mom didn't, but only because Georgie liked to remind her that even at my age, I knew money was important and she still didn't.

I stayed the night on Patty's couch. Waking up in a strange place was great. We made toast and tea,

and sat on her couch to watch the news, something I couldn't do at home unless I wanted to draw attention to how mature I was for my age. I was fascinated by the news. I often snuck Georgie's newspapers in and out of the trash.

While Patty got ready to take me home, I finished the last article in her paper and flipped the page over, hoping for the funnies. I saw the picture of Marc right away. He was standing in front of the new Christian bookstore that had opened up directly across the street from Patty. In the article, it said Marc was volunteering on the town council's youth involvement program. I didn't know what it meant exactly, but I thought Marc was very unhappy in the photo. I wondered if Mother Brady had noticed Marc's glower and clenched fists under his jacket.

I ran a loving finger over the picture, wishing he would come home soon.

Patty came in. I quickly put the paper away on the shelf she used for storage. I normally threw it away for her. I hoped she didn't notice the difference. I wanted to clip that picture.

Patty didn't speak until we were in the car, buckling our belts. "She won't ever let it happen, girl."

I knew what she meant. I could have pretended not to, but I desperately needed someone to talk to about this. "Why does she really hate me?"

Patty carefully eased out of the small driveway, and drove toward the main road. "She can't control you the way she can other people."

“Is that all? ‘Cause I can be better around her.”

“It’s deeper than that, but the basic problem is that you’ll control Marcus, not her. She can’t have that.”

I frowned darkly. “I wouldn’t do that to him.”

Patty chuckled. “It’s a part of life. Men want women. Women control men through their want. Mother Brady has to find him a meek wife who will do what *she* says. Then she’s still controlling him.”

I considered that for a minute. “What are the other reasons?”

Patty stopped the car near the entrance to the trailer park so I could collect our mail from the community box.

“She’s jealous.”

“Of me?”

“Your mom actually, but she can’t punish that tired soul any more than she is already punishing herself. So Mary takes it out on you.”

I ran to get the mail, using the key Georgie had given me yesterday while grabbing my butt and growling at me. I hated that! I didn’t understand it. Was I supposed to growl back? Why? And what would that lead to? Distracted, I got in the car and didn’t speak.

As Patty pulled into the driveway I had helped to shovel all winter, she looked at me in concern. “You won’t tell them, will you? Or ask them?”

I was horrified. “No.”

“Good.” Patty smiled. “Then I’ll tell you something else, little girl. That boy doesn’t need a

meek wife or another mother. He needs an equal. Don't let that old cow keep you two from happiness if that's what you both want. You hear me?"

I gave her a fast hug. I could tell she didn't get many of those. Shame on her kids for never visiting. Patty was sweet. It wasn't until I was inside, handing the mail to my hungover parents, that I replayed her words about Mother Brady.

She's jealous.

I studied my mom, but I couldn't understand why Mary would hate her unless they'd fought over something when they were younger. I considered it more proof that adults didn't have it all figured out, no matter what they said to keep kids in line. It wasn't encouraging to think I would grow up and still be as stupid as I was right now, or worse, as stupid as the grownups around me. Maybe there was some way to skip that part of adulthood. Patty clearly had.

I don't know what might have become of me if not for that sweet woman. Maybe I would have been corrupted or died of the abuses, but she lent me her strength whenever I needed it and she never asked for anything in return. Sort of like a mom.

1992

Chapter Eight
The Best Days
June

Angie

I didn't see Marc or have any contact with him for a long time.

During Christmas, he stayed at the farm to help with a wave of births no one had been expecting for months. In the spring of 1992, the next round of babies kept everyone busy. By July, I wasn't sure I could stand it much longer, but I kept up a great act. I don't think anyone except maybe Patty knew how much I missed him during those 19 months.

Because he needed older help that he had to pay for, Georgie didn't want me in the restaurant this summer. He wanted the chatty teenagers with their bubble gum and their groups of friends who hung around and ordered food and drinks all day while playing the games in the lounge. I was ecstatic. I would have two full months to build on the clubhouse. I had gathered a lot of material from the rubble piles, though I still skipped the ones that had come from the café where five people had lost their lives.

It was a couple weeks before the fireworks would be shooting high above the corn again and I was hoping to watch it from the sort of hidden safety of the clubhouse. Thanks to the extra weeds and bushes this year, you couldn't tell there was even a path until you got right up on it, and the clubhouse area was no longer visible from three sides. Only the farmer on his tractor might get an occasional glimpse as he rolled by. Since we weren't on his property, I didn't think he would care, but whenever I saw him, I always ducked out of sight. Marc and I both liked it that we had this place to go to. We didn't want it to be ruined.

As if I'd conjured him with my thought, Marc's musky smell hit me in a thick wave.

"Hello?" I was afraid to say his name.

There was only bugs and crickets of the June afternoon in reply.

"He's been here." I wondered if he'd left anything for me. I hurried inside to find the fire going. My heart pounded. Marc wouldn't have left the fire going. He was coming back!

I went outside to wait and spotted his jacket hanging in the branches. We'd agreed our coats would be camouflaged that way, but it was also a code. If they were turned inside out, we had company.

I hovered in the clearing around the frame of the clubhouse I'd finished just last week. I hoped Marc still liked me. During the time we'd been apart, I had begun to develop a female body.

The lip licking and peep shows I had no choice but to accept from Georgie, but as puberty slapped me and I had to have a bra, the neighborhood boys also noticed. I had spent most of the spring indoors or at Patty's shop. I was grateful for the days that she felt well enough to drive me home.

School was no better. I had to change clothes for gym, run and jump. It drew attention to how fast I was maturing and caused me problems from both the girls and the boys. Even the teachers gazed at me in funny ways. The pale child with a teenager's body. The freak.

Any place I went, there was tension or danger. Carrying so much in my young heart was hard because I didn't know how to get rid of the nasty moods or the anger at the unfairness. Many of my jumps on the tire swing might have killed me if I'd missed and landed in the ravine below. I'd also been sleeping in my classes this year, the result of repeatedly jerking awake to the sound of footsteps outside my bedroom door. It caused my grades to fall, which earned me punishments.

At home, I sat on the couch for hours without moving, replaying my short moments with Marc. I was alone in my head, but nothing could take away my pain. When Marc finally returned, I was able to feel the sun again, taste the food. For that one moment, I was alive. The rest of the time, I existed in hell.

I had no one to turn to and before I could get old enough to run away, Georgie would have me. I

knew the scene in vivid detail now. He'd described it while my loving mother lay in her bed with her trashy novels and let me wrestle her new husband on the couch for my panties. Georgie didn't like me to wear any so he felt things better when he made me sit on his lap.

I can't tell you how much I hated them, how I hated my life. The easiest way out scared me. I'd had a blade against my wrist more than a few times, but the power inside had refused to let me take the final step. That left enduring it until I could run. I knew I needed help. I had hope that Marc might when I was older, but I knew deep down that he would probably end up hurting me too. I wasn't good enough for him, even if our ages and family issues hadn't been between us, but I wanted him! My obsession worried me.

Patty helped there.

"Some people call to us girl, on the inside. Ain't no fightin' that pull."

I nodded as if I understood and she smiled, golden scarves winking in the light from her small stove fire.

"Think of it like a puzzle. Each piece fits in one spot. Hearts are like that. For each puzzle, each person, there are a set number of pieces. Your home, friends, children, lovers. Some fit perfectly, but some, you have to bend the edges to make them fit."

Patty leaned in so I could hear her over the howling snowstorm that no one cared if I was out roaming through.

“Don’t do that more than you have to. If it’s not a fit, then move on.”

“But how do you know?”

“If you have to change to keep someone, that’s bending corners. So is stealing and lying for them.”

“What if I did those things on my own? Without the other person knowing?”

Patty seemed to understand. “Judge by how much you feel for them. If you can’t stand to be apart and you both lie so you don’t have to be, that’s not bending. It’s stealing happiness.”

As Marc appeared on the path, taller and even more handsome with longer hair, he smiled when he spotted me and I finally got it. Marc was my happiness. I was stealing him and that was okay because he was stealing me too. What Georgie wanted would break my corners off and that was wrong. The difference was in my willingness.

It was a relief to know that even though Georgie was the adult and Marc and I were just kids, we were right and he was wrong. It was also incredibly frustrating because as kids, there was little we could do fight the injustices that were always being forced on us.

Marc

I had suffered through movies where people fell in love in seconds and thought it was a crock. I'd read books where the hero swept the princess off her feet to live happily ever after and I'd snorted. Even now, it was hard to believe that the reaction my magazines had drawn was little compared to the welcome on Angie's sweet face. It was as if nothing else in the world mattered to her but me.

I soaked up that feeling like a fish out of water. To her, I *was* the knight sweeping away the princess. I *was* the soulmate. I knew she viewed me that way, but I came for the feeling of being with someone like me for a little while. With Angie, I didn't have to pretend to be something I wasn't. "Hiya, Baby-cakes!"

Her giggle in response sent butterflies into my stomach as if to mock my denial of any attraction, but her pleasure always had that effect on me. I came forward with open arms, hoping she was ready for a hug. I hadn't had a real one in over a year.

Angie ran to me, still giggling, and I spun her around as I sometimes did with the younger neighborhood kids. Her amusement floated over the corn and healed the wound her absence had caused.

I sat her on her feet and held up a small bag. "Want to have a picnic in the corn?"

She agreed eagerly and I prepared the meal that I'd planned. I had even brought one of Judy's lunch bags to carry it in.

While I cooked the two hamburger patties Larry had let me pay for by chopping wood while he relaxed, Angie told me about the things that had been going on in town. I always felt out of the loop now.

"Another fire in the trailer park and we'll have enough wood to finish the first wall."

I scanned the pile she'd brought over to work with and then the edge of the hidden pile I could barely view from where we sat. She'd gotten a lot done.

I flipped the burgers and laid the towel out to prepare the sandwiches on. It would be great to have protection when it rained or snowed. Then we could still come here and be together.

Guilt came with that thought.

Angie met my eye, pausing midsentence about the charity drive to buy the fire survivor a bus ticket to where their relatives lived.

"Please."

I didn't know exactly what she was begging for, but I wouldn't have said no to anything at that moment. She was so sad.

"I need you. You need me. Why does it have to be more right now?"

"It doesn't." I pushed away the side of my nature that had clearly come from my parent's

constant harping on evil and sins. “Let’s have a picnic and then we’ll swing if you want.”

“Can we go to the creek?”

That suggestion made me uneasy. There would be other kids there. “How late?”

“Georgie and mom will be at the restaurant until 10 tonight. I’m free for a while.”

“It’ll be dark probably.”

“You’ll bring a light?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I need some worms. The man at the IGA said if I catch the right fish, he’ll buy them. I’m going to try it.”

I liked that about Angie. She was resourceful and ambitious, but not in the bad ways. She didn’t want to be prom queen or control the town. She wanted to make money to take care of herself. I wished more girls were like that. If they were, I wouldn’t be so nervous about dating.

Angie stiffened.

I cursed myself for letting my thoughts run down that path. “It’s ready. Help me pack it up.”

Angie pretended as if she wasn’t hurt as we hurried off to have our picnic in the forbidden cornfield. Adults would have asked how we could stand the heat, but laying in the dirt row was about the coolest place we could be, aside from the creek. It was one of those little secrets the adults had known before they became adults. I could feel myself slipping into that sometimes and it scared

me. I wanted to keep my imagination or whatever it was that allowed me to have hope.

After the food was gone and we'd belched enough to scare the crows away, Angie bagged up the mess while I lit a cigarette. I'd recently picked up the habit. I hoped it wouldn't bother her, but I really enjoyed it.

"Can I try that?"

I shook my head, giving the reason she would come to hate hearing. "You're not old enough to make up your own mind about it yet."

Angie shrugged, nose wrinkling as she caught the small puffs the wind carried toward her.

"Does it taste good?"

I considered the question. "Not really. It just feels good."

"Okay."

A minute later, we heard the tractor coming and stared at each other in fear.

"Come on!"

We rushed out of the corn to collapse on the ground by the clubhouse, laughing even as we hoped we weren't spotted. If the farmer told our mothers, we would be in big trouble.

I saw the sky above us had changed and frowned. "I don't think we can go to the creek later."

Angie saw the clouds rolling in. "Damn it!"

I stared at her in surprise. "What did you say?"

I sounded so much like a grown up that we both burst out laughing again. Around us, the buggy weeds and trees sway harder.

“I guess we should go.” I didn’t want to.

“Can we stay?”

Angie didn’t ask for much. Adding please onto it might have killed me. “Let me think on it.”

Our clubhouse wasn’t ready and trees were sometimes more dangerous than being out in the open. We got strange weather here.

“We could go find the old haunted cabin.”

She surprised me again with that. I didn’t know she’d even heard of it. “You’re not old enough to be up there yet. I’m almost not old enough.”

I scanned the area again. During storms, most kids returned to their trailers and hoped to be let in. On the poor side, anyway. In town, there were shops and public areas to take shelter in. For those caught out here in the open and the kids who refused to go home until there was no choice, the options were limited. “We could fish.”

Angie stared. “In the rain?”

I felt the first drop hit my arm and stood up, shrugging. “We’re gonna get wet anyway.”

“Okay.”

“Let’s go!”

I ran for the creek, but not so fast that she couldn’t keep up on her shorter legs. By the time we got there, the rain was coming down hard and fast, and the other kids were gone. We ducked under the cover of the thick trees that lined the creek and I

took her up a path I doubted she'd been on before. It wasn't exactly hidden, but only the older kids came here.

"Careful." I held out a hand to help her across the thick log we'd been using for a bridge to the other side for as long as I'd been coming up here.

Angie slid her hand into mine and the world shifted—not a good time for it. I swayed, trying not to fall.

Angie let go of my hand and grabbed my waistband, pulling me up.

Smiling a little, we hurried across to the ground, now soaked. Our clothes clung to us, hair slapping in quick stings as we jogged further up the creek.

I took her to the giant tree that was over the deeper place in the creek and settled her in the thickest spot. I was glad she wasn't scared of the height.

When I took the string from my pocket, Angie broke into a wide smile I forced myself to ignore. No, I wasn't attracted to her at all.

Below us, the water was rushing into a small culvert and washing away the sides of it to expose the worms Angie wanted to collect. Once we were done fishing, we would do that. I'd even remembered to bring the picnic bag. I would wash it out before I returned it to my aunt's kitchen.

I used a paperclip on the string for a hook and showed Angie how to hold it so the fish snapping at the falling worms would get our hook instead. It took her a few minutes to get the hang of it and then

she was catching them faster than I could drop the guts into the water below. In another situation, I might have used the guts for something, but I suspected Angie kept fishing to avoid the sight of me cleaning them.

After she got tired, Angie stayed on the log as I took a shot, neither of us caring about the steady rain still falling now. We were together. That was all that mattered.

A short while later, her small hand came up to touch my arm. “Can you stay this time?”

I wanted to. “No. Not until you’re older.”

She understood without me saying more, but it wasn’t easy for her. I delivered a funny face that made her giggle.

“Silly.”

“That’s me.”

“Just today?”

“Yes. We have to keep her from finding out.”

“So she doesn’t send me away?”

“Yes. She’s forgotten by now. We can’t remind her.”

“Okay.” Angie forced away the gloom. “It’ll be a good day.”

“And I’m yours for all of it, Baby-cakes. I’m not going home until dark.”

It was one of the best days of my childhood. I’d missed her and the happiness that was so addictive. Her laughter shot out repeatedly. I willed the hours

to pass slower. I was with Angie. For one day, the world felt right.

When the rain stopped, we waded in the muddy creek. It easy for me to overlook the way her wet clothes clung to that ripening body. I knew other people were noticing. It had made my stomach twist to listen to Judy's boys talk about her while we baled hay or branded cattle. I had learned a lot about sex that should have had my hormones screaming right now, but I refused to see Angie that way. I believe that's how we managed to hide it for so long. Our innocence gave us cover.

For the next years, our time was spent almost exactly the same, except we actually began to build the clubhouse walls. We had separate lives that only crossed during the holiday gatherings she was invited to—where we exchanged identical stares of need to hold us through until we could be alone. Summer was about the only time we could count on a short visit, making June and July my favorite months of the year. My Angie months.

Chapter Nine
Pushy Tushy
August

Marc

“**C**an I ask you something? About women.”

Larry pried his lids open in the humid morning glare to peer at me.

“Which one caught you?”

I flushed. “I just have...questions.”

Larry stared at me.

I hoped I held still enough to pass the test he was giving me mentally. Was I old enough, did I really care, could I be trusted.

“What?”

Taking that as a good sign—he usually yelled curses at kids who bothered him—I sat down on the stump. “How do you know when a girl is the right one?”

To my shock, Larry laughed, drowning out the faint tornado warning siren test that sounded each Wednesday.

“Ain’t none of ‘em the right one, *good boy*. Women are trouble.”

I pushed, carefully. “Even Aunt Judy?”

Larry glanced toward the house where Judy and the other females were cooking breakfast.

“Yes.”

I wiped sweat from my brow as I wondered if Larry had been forced to marry her since he was being forced to stay with her. Had there ever been love between them? My mother often arranged the matches in our family.

Larry spoke again, reluctantly. “There might be good ones. I just never met them.”

I have. I didn’t say so.

Larry sobered up a little more. “You serious about this?”

“Yes, sir, I am.”

“Thought so.” Larry grunted. “That’s why we never get away, boy. Some piece of ass grabs us and we don’t realize how fast things are going until it’s too late to change it.”

“What if...” I grew flustered, still not completely sure I could trust this drunken, bitter man.

“Spit it out, boy.” Larry snorted grumpily. “Ain’t no one here but me and I don’t care about your mother and her damn rules.”

I wanted answers and decided to take the risk. “She’s too young, the one I want.”

Larry grunted. “Keep going.”

I opened my mouth to give him the barest details. “Mother hates her. I have to sneak out.”

Ashamed of myself for revealing too much, I dropped my head, but Larry sat up all the way to stare at me in surprise.

“Really?”

I nodded, cheeks on fire.

“Well, you got more balls than I thought you’d have before you got here, I’ll tell ya that.” Larry stared at me for a moment longer and then gave me the best advice of my life.

“Ain’t nothing wrong with a younger man or a younger woman. People get old, Marcie. We age and grow bitter. Go after your younger piece of ass, but be sure you really like her first. As I’ve told you, you’ll be together a *long* time in this family.”

I stared at my uncle, a bit relieved. “You mean that?”

Larry sighed, head going back to the chair, eyes shutting. “More than you can understand yet, boy. But you will. Guard those secrets more carefully than you did today. No one else here would hesitate to tell on you.”

I knew that. I added another vow to do as he’d said—on both subjects.

“Sounds like your momma comin’.” Larry settled deeper into the seat as crunching gravel echoed. “Best go meet her.”

I ran for the front of the house in a blur, not wanting Mary to catch me spending time with my uncle. I didn’t know what she might make of it and that was reason enough to hide the behavior. I didn’t

see much of her out here now. That made me rusty at reading her and reacting correctly.

Mother ignored me until she was out of the car and settled on the porch with a cool drink. When she finally spoke to me, the words were not what I wanted to hear.

“You have your first date tonight, Marcus. You are having dinner with Jeanie and her parents. You’ll clean up first, of course, and then Douglas will drive—”

“Do I have to?”

Mary stopped talking to gape at me as if I were an alien that had landed on the porch in front of her. “Marcus, is something wrong?”

Now, I gawked. She actually sounded as if she cared! “I’m sorry, Mother. It’s just that we’re baling hay tonight and tomorrow, and I’ll feel bad for missing it. They need every hand.”

Did she know I was laying it on thick to skip the dinner in favor of the barn dance tonight? Was she intentionally keeping me away from what Rodney and Scot had called the grooviest gig all year?

“Georgie already has the reservation.”

Those words delivered panic and joy that I did a decent job of controlling. I might get to see Angie, but it would be while I had an unwanted girlfriend with me for our first date. “I really don’t want to. Is there something else we can do?”

I’d heard her use that line on people. I waited politely, as she usually did. When confusion came over her wrinkling face, I discovered a weakness.

Mother thought I would jump at the chance to visit with Angie, so it *was* a test. That meant she hadn't forgotten about Angie, but she was trying to find out if I had. The weakness was that she couldn't understand how embarrassed I would be to take Jeanie there and put us all through that. My mother had no empathy. She couldn't examine a situation from someone else's point of view and understand their actions.

"What did you have in mind?" Mary finally asked, still staring in suspicion.

"Can I bring her here, to the dance?" I'd chosen honesty and cleverness over lying. I was glad that I had when she slowly agreed.

"I don't see the harm in that. You'll call Georgie and cancel the reservation."

"Okay."

When mother left an hour later, I was relieved and proud of myself. I thought I had handled that well. Then I remembered I had to call the restaurant. What if Angie answered?

I decided there wasn't anything I could do about it. I went to the area in the hall that held a rickety table and the phone, and dropped down onto the rough stool while I dialed. The farm and the restaurant were the only numbers I knew.

"Hello?"

I winced as Angie's pleasant voice rang in my ear. With all the people around the house, there was no way I could spend a few minutes talking to her.

“Hello? This is Georgie’s Diner.”

“I have a reservation I need to cancel.”

Stunned silence came from the other end of the line for almost a full minute. It made my stomach ache as I imagined Angie freezing at the voice and then finding my name on the sheet.

“Uh, yeah. I’ll mark it off. Thanks for letting us know.”

I could tell by the tone that she had figured out I would be with Jeanie tonight. I expected an angry click in my ear.

“Thank you.”

I heard the pain in her whisper, but also her gratitude that we weren’t coming.

“Sure.” I hung up before my mouth could get me in trouble. I hoped Angie didn’t dwell on it. As far as I was concerned, Jeanie Hoffstader was just another of my mother’s hoops I had to jump through. I didn’t think for a minute that I would like anyone Mary approved of.

I prepared for my date by going swimming with the other kids. My mother could set out all the honey traps she wanted. I was smarter than that.

Jeanie climbed from her parent’s shiny Ford. Conversations around the party fell into forgetful pauses as everyone stared in surprise. Platinum hair hung to her shoulders in a soft wave that glinted with the fire as she turned to talk to the man driving.

I assumed it was her father from his matching shade of hair, but that was all I noticed about her parent.

Jeanie was wearing a short blue dress with red and white lace that accented her legs and the low-cut front of her top. The amount of makeup she wore was also surprising considering that my mother had set this up, but I wasn't upset over that. It was the striking contrast to Angie that I instantly resented. My mother had sent this girl here to remind me of what an acceptable female looked like. I think I hated Jeanie from that minute.

Jeanie and I shook sweaty hands when Larry introduced us. I tried to play the perfect gentleman for my audience, certain my mother had requested a full report. Jeanie didn't say much, but she did stare at me with brown eyes I found dull as mud.

“Do you like dancing?”

Even the sound of her squeaky voice was wrong. I turned it around, too used to my mother's manipulations to be led into asking this girl to dance like a trained monkey. “I can dance with you, if you want.”

Jeanie flushed, drawing more attention. “I'd like to.”

I stood up and held out a hand, making us the center of the circus.

Her skin met mine in normal boredom. I sighed heavily as I led her onto the hastily nailed platform where a few other couples were trying to keep up with the off-pace music. It was going to be a long night.

Angie

It was hard to act as if I wasn't hurt. I led people to their table and I smiled, but all I could think about was *my* Brady being out with a girl. I wondered what she looked like, if she was as old as he was. I'd spotted the name Brady on the reservation sheet this morning, but I'd thought it was Marc's older brother, who brought guests to the restaurant a few times a month. I wasn't allowed to take reservations yet, so I hadn't spoken to whoever had called it in.

Knowing Marc was dating was one thing. Having to seat them and wait on them was another. Now that I was 11, Georgie wanted me here after school to help with the evening rushes. I liked it so far, but I would have taken off the instant I'd seen them come through the door together. I was grateful Marc had cancelled before I gave us away.

"Did he say why?"

"No. I heard there's a barn party tonight." I shrugged at Georgie, pretending my stomach didn't ache. "Maybe they went there."

"Yeah. Makes sense." Georgie did a quick scan, but there were already too many customers for him to have a minute alone with me. Despite the pain of knowing where Marc was, I couldn't help but feel like it might be a lucky day for me. Two ugly scenes had been avoided. If the luck held, I would have an hour left after the shift to go the clubhouse and do some work on it while I cried.

Ding!

The door opened with the next large party of customers ready for Georgie's cooking. We stayed busy all day and into the night—long after the time I thought the barn dance should have ended. I was too occupied to worry if Marc was kissing his date goodnight. That would come later.

Ding!

Ding!

Two more groups came in half an hour before closing and even Georgie frowned a bit. He was usually very generous and stayed open late, but tonight he informed them the menu was limited, claiming the crowds had wiped him out.

“How about a burger and coke?”

Marc's voice stunned me. I stood by the grill without moving. He'd brought her here anyway?

Suddenly angry, I did what Georgie had told me not to and layered burger patties over the patches of browned onions. He didn't let me handle the grill yet.

I cringed away as Georgie came over, remembering that I wasn't allowed, but he only nodded tiredly, swiping sweat from his meaty neck with a faded dishtowel. “I didn't think you could reach it yet. Guess you can. Be sure to flip them when the timer goes off.”

Relieved, I hurried to set the timer. Georgie was careful about letting me do things because of my size. This restaurant was the one thing he protected.

Georgie vanished through the double doors as I read the order ticket slowly, not wanting to get it wrong when I was just being given a new job. Sweeping and seating was boring.

As I gathered the tray and began to fill the glasses with ice, I tried to listen to the conversations taking place, but there were too many voices to separate from the din. Too curious and upset to wait, I shoved into Marc's thoughts.

She looks tense. At least I got rid of Jeanie before Larry decided to come here.

I instantly felt better as I put the napkins and condiments on the tray. When the timer dinged, I was right there to stop it and flip the sizzling patties over. It was a nice moment for me that was ruined as I heard a voice I'd missed earlier.

"Where are our drinks?! The service here got worse when he put little miss goodie out front."

It was Marc's sister, Tracy. She was big and loud, with brown hair she'd bleached blonde and forced into curls. I always thought she looked like Miss Piggy from the Muppets. We hadn't ever had a good moment.

Georgie frowned as he came out with his arms full of buns to restock the shelves for tomorrow. "Take 'em over, girl."

I reluctantly picked up the tray and walked into the main dining area. I remembered to sit the tray on a nearby table instead of serving one handed and spilling. I kept my attention on the drinks. It helped that they were all the same. I didn't have to talk to

anyone. I also didn't have to look at them, but I couldn't help the fast sweep of Marc as I finished.

He'd been waiting for me to look at him. He flashed a brilliant grin that stole my breath.

I hurried behind the counter to finish the order, heart pounding. *He's so cute!*

The school films on puberty hadn't even gotten close to the way I felt for Marc.

The next hour was slow torture. Marc's group was the last to leave, and they lingered, forcing Georgie to stay open until they were done. He believed in the customer being happy and wouldn't tell them to go. I, on the other hand, didn't need to be there. He sent me home with a warning to stay on the main road.

I didn't need the reminder. I hated the dark, and the report of an attack on a woman last week had heightened my worry. I didn't know exactly what it meant to be attacked, but I knew I didn't want it to happen to me.

I got my coat from the rack where customer coats also hung. I caught a whiff of Marc, of his smell, and spotted his leather jacket on the far peg. For a brief second, I let my fingers caress the material and then I left before anyone could try to talk to me. At this moment, I was glad I was the pariah they ignored. It made hiding my emotions easier.

Instead of going straight home, I enjoyed the fall evening and took the road that would lead me by the

new fountain. I didn't want to make a wish. I wanted to enjoy the water shimmering at night in the streetlights.

"Got a minute?"

I spun around to find Marc behind me, but fear was my first reaction. Were we alone?

"I have to get Larry's pipe from the car."

"Oh." I calmed down a bit and let him see how much I still cared.

Marc shivered as my heat flew over him. "I miss that when I'm away."

I smiled. "Really?"

"Yes. Did you have a nice birthday?"

I shrugged. "It was okay."

The small talk and desperate stares continued until Marc looked toward the restaurant door and I knew our time was up. After a fast scan to be certain we were still unobserved, I rushed forward to hug him.

Marc held me tightly and then shoved a small box into my hand before hurrying to collect the pipe and go inside. I could tell he was embarrassed by the gift, but I didn't understand why.

I stuffed the box into my pocket and left it there until I reached the fountain, thinking the night couldn't have gotten any better. So what if Mother Brady forced Marc to date? In a few years, I would put a stop to that. Until then, I knew he didn't want a girlfriend. He wanted me. I longed for the day when he would say it, but knowing the feelings were there was almost enough.

I opened the box under the street lamp and had to fight the tears. Marc always knew exactly what I needed to get me through until we could have time together.

Marc

I hoped she liked the little locking diary that I'd picked out for her birthday. I'd heard Judy say every girl should have one. I was reasonably sure that Angie didn't. Her parents weren't able to give her things like that, but even if they could have afforded it, I doubted they would have. Angie was more like some kid who spent the night a lot, as compared to being a daughter. At least that's the way I'd begun to view Frona and Georgie.

The diary also held a surprise for her. I'd included our hand code on the last five pages of the small book. She could practice while we were apart, like I did at night. I hoped she would be pleased, but I also hoped the gift didn't make her cry. I still wasn't okay with that, even when the tears were happy.

Larry wanted to leave soon after I came back in. We all piled into the car that smelled like his pipe. As I sat in the rear corner, squeezed against the door handle hard enough to leave a bruise I found later, I realized Larry hadn't lit the pipe once I brought it in.

Larry dropped people off on a long route. The car slowly emptied. As we got rid of the last relative who wanted to stay but not work, Larry waved me to the front seat.

I took it quickly.

We rolled toward the farm with the October moon hanging low in the purple sky. It was a nice

night and we kept the radio off in favor of the cooling wind coming through the rear windows that had been left down. Over the ride, I had figured out I owed this odd man a thank you, but I didn't know how to say it. He had sent me outside to give me time alone with Angie.

“Did she like your present?”

I shrugged slowly, smiling. “I didn't stick around to find out.”

Larry steered the car down the next road with views of farms and vast fields waiting to be farmed. “She's a good girl. Always liked that one.”

I instantly wanted to know more and again, didn't know how to ask.

Larry glanced over at me. “She'll make a man happy someday.”

I couldn't help but chuckle at his observation. I'd had the same one, but I wasn't allowed to say it. I still wouldn't, but he had given me the courage to ask a burning question. “Why do you stay anyway? You're miserable.”

Larry grunted. Quiet fell for so long that I was sorry I'd asked. Then he gave me the answer I was afraid of.

“I'm broken, boy. They used me up, took all my *give a damn*. I'm too tired to fight and too old to start over. When you get there, might as well give in and try to die in some sort of peace.”

I gazed out the window instead of shouting that I would never give in or be used up. I liked Larry too much to disrespect him that way.

“I didn’t approve either, son, when I heard those words from my old man, but over the life we were handed, I came to understand. I pray that you never do. That’ll mean you managed to escape.”

I couldn’t help feeling sorry for him, but I also couldn’t help the contempt that came with it. We finished the ride in silence that was no longer sweetly pleasing. I wasn’t going to settle for the future my mother wanted to force on me. I would die first and it pained me that Larry couldn’t have the same strength. He claimed youth was blinding, but I thought his bitterness had crippled him even more than the unhappy life he was leading. He had given up. I would never do that. Angie and I would have a great life together. I would be a Marine who could protect her and provide for her.

“I asked your momma to let you come along for the big tour. She said yes.”

“Thanks!” I would finally get to tour those big cities. It would mean another year before I could see Angie again, though. I told myself it would be a good for us in the end. It would be hard to be apart, but mother wouldn’t discover my plans this way. I was taking the smart line and doing it all right. I would try to be satisfied with that.

1993

Chapter Ten
Twisting and Turning
January to September

Angie

I got my period in the spring of 1993.

I went to Patty for help. As if she'd been expecting it, she handed me a book from the shelf. It made my life easier with advice about pain medications and what pads to wear. Unfortunately, it wasn't something I could hide from my parents.

Georgie's reaction was frightening. He bought me a new wardrobe that consisted of short skirts and very low-cut tops. It was the talk of the family this year, how well I was growing up, and I hated every second of it. If it wasn't for the clothes Patty gave me that covered more of my skin, I might have spent the entire year in my room. Being a girl was hard.

In July, I planted a flag in the corn while I cried for Marc, and then I went fishing. I also cried during that, but I did manage to catch enough of the right fish for the market man at IGA to give me cash each week. It was a good deal until the river flooded and the creek rose too high to get out onto the log Marc

had shown me. I tried to keep up with the weekly order from the shallower areas, but when I fell behind, the man wouldn't deal with me anymore. It was another hard lesson learned. When I made a deal from now on, I would have to account for things that could go wrong. I would plan further ahead and hope there was less tears in the future. I couldn't even handle the good things now. Like with the hand code I'd discovered in the rear of the diary Marc gave me. I cried like a baby over that. Puberty brought too many tears. I didn't always understand why I was crying, but I always credited it to missing Marc.

The little diary was quickly filled in the front, but I didn't write on those precious rear pages. When I mastered the codes Marc had put in the diary, I began to add my own. I hoped to give him the new pages next time I saw him. I carried the diary on me, in my bra. It was safe there from everyone except Georgie, but he stayed away from me after buying the clothes. I was grateful, but I was also suspicious.

He hadn't left me alone in years. Why now? Maybe his wardrobe present had been noticed by Mother Brady and she'd told him it was bad. That's what the other people at my party had been thinking. All I'd cared about was that Marc hadn't been there to witness my embarrassment. I'd heard he hated New York City and loved the hunting cabins in Maine. I wondered if he'd had company during all those long nights, but I would never have asked.

Thanks to the curiosities of puberty, I knew more about the sex thing now. I even knew what I'd stepped in all those years ago, but the final part of the act was still a mystery. I'd been reading snatches from my mom's books when I could steal one from her, but words like *manhood* and *iron flesh* didn't mean much and there was no official definition in the reference books. I assumed I was still too young to understand and waited impatiently for that time to come.

I got to enjoy my first trip to the Drive-in in the fall of 1993. Georgie splurged after a busy month and took my mom and me to see a double feature. I loved listening from the window speaker while I watched the huge screen, but I hated the dark and Georgie wouldn't leave the car light on. I had to settle for the tiny flashlight Patty had pressed into my hand last Christmas.

I did fine with *Son in Law*, and even found it funny the same way the adults did. The idea of getting away from my hometown made it a good movie for me, but then the second show came on and I spent the next two hours huddled in the meager light of the backseat, waiting for it to be over. *The Good Son* was a bad movie, and that ending! Who wrote that stuff? I could do better.

I was even thinking of trying. Most of the films and books I'd gone through so far were disappointing. I was considering being a writer when I grew up. I could make nice stories people liked, and I could escape inside them. However,

because of the things I could do, I often thought I should pick a career that helped the world somehow. It also made me want a job as an adult where I could keep hiding.

With puberty, my gifts also became harder to control. I had to practice shutting them down once they got rolling and I couldn't stand to be around a crying child. Trips to the doctor were awful. I knew what was wrong with the baby in the next room, but no one would believe me if I told them. Sometimes I left notes on the desk for the nurse, but most of the time, I had to ignore it and that hurt me. Surely a power like mine should be used to help people, not hidden away until I forgot how to use it?

I always had questions and even Patty didn't have enough answers. Her knowledge was limited to what she'd gleaned from books and old papers. She'd been orphaned at a young age and sponsored as a house-girl for Mary Brady's mother. I assumed that meant she knew a lot of our history and secrets, but I didn't ask her about them. I already knew some bones just weren't worth digging up.

Just like the years before it, 1993 was long and hard but it was also boring. The most exciting town moments were the shops that closed, rumors of a wolf eating the cats and small dogs people were reporting missing, and the two small tornadoes in neighboring communities that caused slight panic here until the locations were confirmed. There were fights and fires, and rumors of an investigation into the feed plant, but that was about it. The only other

memorable thing that happened was that I found a bike. It was in the cornfield not far from our clubhouse area. It didn't occur to me until later that the spring floods had probably washed it down here.

Once I got the hang of the badly bent bicycle, I flew through the corn like a wild thing, screaming as if I'd found buried treasure. In a way, I had.

The bike remained at the clubhouse pile for a month and then it disappeared. I didn't find any evidence of someone being there, but the bike was gone and so was the rest of my happiness until Marc came home.

Marc

I didn't like it when Jeanie visited me on the farm. Everyone spied on us, all eager to give my mother a report whenever she requested one. I hadn't been back from my city tour a full week before my mother was sending Jeanie out to visit. After the six-month trip I'd had, I wanted to be left alone to enjoy some peace and quiet on the farm. The tour I'd been looking forward to had been a disappointment in almost every way. Douglas, our driver, had been my escort as we'd gone with the uncles to each seedy bar and barely legal deli my family owned a share of. At each stop, I was plied with women and liquor to curry favor with my mother.

It didn't succeed. I reported every infraction she'd told me to search for because they hated me.

I knew lies when I was face-to-face with them. I didn't sleep well in the hotels, always worried someone might retaliate for my reports, but I was still stalked by uncles and distant cousins who thought I could be bought. As for our other product, I was told my mother wanted to wait another year or two to be positive I was mature enough. At first, I hoped my reporting would convince her, but I quickly realized that was why she'd agreed to let me go in the first place. It had been a test.

I'd passed it as far as I was concerned. Where my mother was concerned might be another thing all together, but I hadn't been back long enough to ask her if she was pleased by how I'd handled things. If she was sending Jeanie already, that meant the testing of my loyalty wasn't finished. It made me angry.

When Jeanie came, I always had to play the perfect gentleman and be her escort. Yesterday, I had taken her to my favorite places on the farm and she'd disliked all of them except for the field where Daniel and his friends liked to ride and do their tricks. After watching them, she'd asked me to walk her back through the woods and then she'd insisted that we kiss. I told her not to wear lipstick and I would do it next time.

I sighed as the shiny Ford turned onto the farm driveway. Today was next time.

The rest of the family was baling hay in the adjoining field. I'd been left here to greet Jeanie and her parents. I respectfully shook her father's hand

through the window and said hello to her mom, who also had that same shade of hair. It made them look like brother and sister instead of husband and wife.

Jeanie climbed out after I opened the door for her. I could tell by the sparkle in her spiteful green eyes that she also remembered what today was. I swallowed nervously. My first kiss. I'd hoped for it to be with someone else, but I'd always known that was unreasonable. I forced a cheerful expression onto my face. "Hiya, Jeans."

Jeanie scowled as her father snickered and drove away. Jeanie hated nicknames. She also hated nature, sports, cars, dirt, and all the other things I loved. Resigned to spending the day in sweaty chairs, trying to talk, I led Jeanie that way. Judy had guided me through setting up a picnic on the small outside table. I was proud of how nice it was. I was also resentful Jeanie would enjoy it and not Angie.

"Let's go to the barn first. Judy said you guys have kittens."

I reluctantly took Jeanie into the humid barn, sure she was using it as an excuse to get me alone for the kiss. Already tired of her reaching these milestones before of me, I slammed the doors shut and stalked toward her like I was angry. I was.

Jeanie didn't flinch, but she watched me warily, unsure of my intentions.

Glad I'd scared her a bit, I kept coming until she began to back up. When she bumped into the wooden stall wall, I reached out and jerked her against my chest. I didn't talk, but I did spend a

moment studying her features. I tried not to compare, but it was impossible. She wasn't my Angie. That upset me even more.

I leaned down and kissed my first girl in anger.

And Jeanie liked it! Her arms curled around my neck. She moaned, melting against me.

Confused, I shoved her away. "That's enough."

Jeanie didn't know what to make of my actions, but I did. The taste of her lips was fine, and I knew we were compatible because that fleshy part of me was hardening, but I didn't want this girl. I didn't *like* her.

I left Jeanie standing in the barn and climbed the fence to the field where everyone was still staring at the door. They'd obviously watched us go inside.

I glowered at Rodney and Scot to warn them I wasn't in the mood for teasing, but then I noticed the sky and the strong, cool winds pushing against me.

I turned to find the sky beyond the house had gone black. When had that happened? It was blue and beautiful out here a minute ago.

The family ran for the house as the rain started to fall. I resentfully ran back to the barn for my girlfriend. I found her in the same place, crying

"What?" I grabbed her arm to lead her to the house.

"You don't like me!" she whined, crying harder.

Guilt came, but it was light compared to the other types I'd already been carrying. I pushed her

toward the window, glad of an excuse. “There’s bad weather coming. We have to get in the house!”

But it was too late for that as the storm barreled down on us. The winds picked up and the open barn window showed swirling mire in the sky. Rain pounded on the tin roof as I took Jeanie into a rear stall without windows. We hunkered down while the walls shook and hay fell from the rafters.

Jeanie was still crying, though I thought it might be from fear now. I put an arm around her shoulders. “Shh. It’s okay.”

She clung to me gratefully, whispering how sorry she was that she’d pushed me to kiss her. I told her it didn’t matter, but it did. I wanted to be the lead in any relationship. I was the male. That was part of my job.

I glanced around the musty stall as we waited for the storm to pass, spotting feathers and shredded notebook paper. I wondered who was hiding out here with the chickens and then forgot it as Jeanie’s lips found mine. I hadn’t seen her attack coming. My body betrayed me when she slid a hand between us and rubbed me. I’d never had anyone else’s hand there.

I held still, letting her do what she wanted. The storm flew by before I knew it.

My jeans stuck to my shriveled skin as I walked her out of the barn with a silly grin on my face.

Jeanie curled onto my arm and chattered about how brave I’d been.

All I could think of was how much I wanted a cigarette.

Angie

I'd never actually seen a tornado before. I couldn't now either, but I felt it coming even before the witch inside shouted at me to take cover. The pressure in the air changed, making my ears pop. The pain was enough that I dropped to my knees near Mother Brady's table as wind slammed against the front windows.

"What are you—"

"Look out!"

The front windows shattered as something big and heavy came through and slammed into the minibar where three patrons were having a liquid lunch. People were knocked further into the restaurant, screaming.

Mother Brady ducked as more debris flew in through the broken window. I felt others from the table crowd under it around me. The pain in my ears receded. I glanced around, not sure what to do.

Get in the back! the witch ordered.

I grabbed Mary's arm. The others would follow her. "Come on!"

The wind increased, bringing us the sound of a brutal engine searching for someone to hurt.

Shocked by what was happening, Mary didn't argue. The rest of the family and patrons followed, including Patty. She'd been here to pick up her one weekly beer. She wouldn't allow herself any more than that.

The rear of the kitchen was made of brick, so I took everyone there, but I didn't think it would matter. When that tornado hit—

The building shifted as the twister struck.

Most of us were knocked to the ground. I didn't try to get up. The witch wanted to bring up a shield, but I was fighting with her, not wanting Mother Brady to discover my secret even during a moment of terror. The secret was more important than my life.

Wind whipped through the double doors, slamming them against the walls. The banging didn't muffle the awful screams and moans now coming from outside on the main street.

I thought of the people out there without any protection and winced.

The noise increased, indescribable to my ears. I slid from under the body pile and scooted toward the doors. No one stopped me. Most of them had their hands over their ears or their heads between their legs like we'd been taught in school. Mother Brady was busy praying for mercy from her angry God.

I ducked under the banging doors, fighting the wind to discover darkness. It was like the middle of the night. I struggled to see anyone in the debris.

“Help...”

The voice was weak. I scooted to where I thought it had come from. I found the man who'd been closest to the window. I could tell he was dead by the way he felt and the lack of sounds. My heart

beat faster as I left him there. I didn't like death. Death scared me.

“Please...”

I found the injured man under the rug, where it had blown over. Instead of uncovering him, I ducked under, hoping the wind was done with us now.

I groped around and clasped the man's bumpy hand, not sure what I should do for him. Before I could consider my gifts, the witch was already shooting a stream of power into him that I forced myself to allow. There was no way anyone was watching us right now, not with all the screams I could hear out on the street. It had been years since we'd had a tornado in this town. Everyone was terrified.

I wondered if it was over when the wind dropped to nothing. Relieved, I broke the stream of power, hoping it helped. The witch had done this once before to a wounded deer I'd found and cried over, but I didn't know if I was strong enough to help a person. Even the deer had still been wounded, though it had survived the bullet wound. I still saw it sometimes. I recognized it by the jagged scar down the throat. I lifted my head, pulling the thick carpet up...

Bam!

Something exploded near the restaurant, sending fresh screams and panic through all of us, including the man who had apparently recovered a little because he was squeezing my hand hard

enough to break it. I jerked free, sliding toward the debris pile that was blocking the main door. There was too much jagged glass on the window to go through it, but I had a sudden urge to get out that was impossible to refuse.

“Get out of here!” I waved furiously to the people coming back through the double doors. “Here it comes!”

I pointed at the darkening sky that was coming up the street like a bad driver, swarming over yards and the street. Horror swam over my skin.

Mother Brady grabbed Tracy and dragged her toward the rear door before I could say anything else. She didn’t help anyone, just got her family out.

I was angry over that, but I was also relieved. This was a bad time for them to be watching my every move.

Patty was still in the doorway, holding the doors so they couldn’t keep banging. She motioned to me, but I pulled the carpet up, hoping she could see the man from where she was. There wasn’t much light.

Patty came over to help, but she tripped on the rug and landed on the man.

He screamed.

I understood we weren’t going to be able to move him. I remembered we needed to get under something. I ran to the table and shoved it as hard as I could to push it over the rest of the way. As I dragged it toward the injured man, Patty grabbed an end. We took cover under it as the tornado hit the

restaurant and then all I could do was listen to myself scream.

Marc

I felt it.

Angie's terror, her panic, every second of her ordeal with the tornado, I felt.

Jeanie had just been picked up by her nervous parents. I was sitting on the hay wagon we'd finished loading, ignoring Rodney's teasing when the first wave of fear hit. My stomach boiled, my heart thumped, and in the deep of my soul, I could hear Angie begging me to save her. Being too far away to help was the worst feeling of my life.

Everyone stared as I stumbled from the wagon, running for the house.

"Too many apples or kisses?" Rodney made a graphic gesture, drawing laughter from the others.

I didn't hear the rest. I staggered to the rear of the house and dropped down, hands coming up to cover my head. When I shut my eyes, I could see the damage surrounding Angie as she huddled in terror. I opened them to find myself still on Judy's big farm, closed them to be with Angie, opened them to see hay, closed them again as a tornado slammed into the diner and the lights went out.

They found me in the same position an hour later, but their worry over me vanished in favor of the tales slowly coming from our town. We'd taken a direct hit. None of it surprised me. I had already witnessed it, live, through Angie's gift. I tried to act

shocked, agreeing that the apples had gotten to me, but inside, I was a wreck. I needed to get home.

“Your mother is coming!” Scot slapped the side of the house to get attention as the uncles dragged me to my shaky feet. “She said to have you ready.”

They took me to the house where Rod and Scot helped me pack. Both boys were eager because they were hoping Mary would allow them to stay with her for a week of helping the town recover. I thought there was an excellent chance they would get it. Mary adored being there to get gratitude for her resources.

“It’s a total loss!” One of the younger girls groaned in morbid delight. “The news said it was an F2!”

I followed my bags out to the porch. My mother would want to know that she’d kept me waiting and stopped any last-minute enjoyment I may have had here. I didn’t mind. I wanted to make sure Angie was okay. I was busy searching for a way to make that happen.

It felt like fate was with me when my mother arrived. She got out and gestured me toward the car, along with Rodney and Scot as she told Douglas to drive us all to town to help with the cleanup. She wanted to sit down and have a drink.

I was on my way home, without my mother, mere minutes later. It was one of the few times that I’d ever felt lucky.

Douglas lifted his nose into the air as he spoke to Scot and Rodney. “She wants you boys at the

restaurant.” He glanced at me in the mirror. “She wants *you* at the house to protect it from looting.”

I was happy with that. I could sneak off for an hour and no one would know. “Are you going back for her soon?” I hoped he wouldn’t tell her that I’d asked.

The hard man sighed unhappily. “Yes.”

I didn’t stare in shock like my cousins were doing, but I guess I should have. Later, when they told my mother, both boys made sure to mention I hadn’t defended her honor. It didn’t matter to me. I’d always thought Douglas was my mother’s happy little gremlin. I was busy reveling in the delight that he wasn’t.

When the car stopped in front of the Brady home, I made myself exit and walk to the front door casually. The tornado hadn’t come in this direction. Everything still looked the same to me—uninviting and too elegant to belong to our family.

I heard the vehicle make it to the end of the street and then the engine faded into the distant wails of sirens. I immediately ran toward the cornfield.

I didn’t notice my mother’s car stopping at the corner. All I wanted at that moment was to find Angie.

Angie

I ran straight into his arms, not caring that we were both dripping sweat from the fresh humidity that had come after the storm. We hadn't seen each other in 13 months. My soul screamed for him.

I'd felt Marc getting closer and knew he would go to our club site first. I'd been hiding here since escaping the destruction at the restaurant. Patty had ushered me through the rear door when it was over. I'd gone gratefully as the paramedics tried to reach the man I'd helped.

Marc's arms slid around my shoulders. His head rested against mine. Magic flew over us. The witch warned me it could be seen, but I didn't care. We stood there for a long time, not speaking, just feeling. For me, it was the first time I'd ever felt safe. I immediately craved that sensation.

Marc had to be feeling the same things because he tightened his arms and gave a heavy sigh laced with a deep relief. Knowing that he'd heard my panicked calls, that he cared enough to risk us being seen, eased all the panic I had been feeling during our time apart. He still cared!

Marc reluctantly let go of me and I did what I had to. I locked my little arms around his waist and refused to let him move away yet.

Marc chuckled, hugging me again. "Okay, Baby."

Inside my heart, that one term of endearment sank into the walls and spread a warmth I knew right

then I'd do anything to keep feeling. I needed him so much!

Marc patted my arm, and moved out of my grasp. "You okay now?"

I nodded. I was. My Brady was here.

"I have to go back to the house for a while. I'll try to come later."

Pain again, brought me back to our reality. He couldn't stay. I nodded, holding in those stupid tears.

I watched him as he jogged away, heart breaking all over. These stolen moments were as hard to endure as they were wonderful.

Knowing I had to be seen to give us an alibi, I went home, listening to the wails of the ambulances that were being sent in from other towns. Ours was already busy.

When I entered the trailer, I found my mom on the couch, fighting to get her shoes tied. I picked out the glassy stare and the smell of liquor in the air from her breath. She needed coffee.

Instead of rushing to get it or helping her, I slid toward my room. I needed some alone time or I might just run to Marc's house and ruin everything.

"Where *you* going?" Frona shouted, words slurring into an insult before she spoke one. "Nasty brat." She returned to her drunken attempts.

I shut my door and listened to her grumble. I couldn't make out the exact words, though I could have read them in her mind if I wanted to. I often wondered exactly why she hated me, but until I was

old enough to understand, it was just confusing. And scary. Wasn't a mom supposed to protect you? Why even have a kid if you were going to hate it?

“Stay in there until your daddy comes home!”

I didn't respond, other than to mentally shout that I didn't have a dad. If I did, maybe my life would be better. *Instead, I have you and Georgie. Some luck, huh?*

I thought about crying a little, but I wasn't feeling that way now. Marc had come to make sure I was okay. He cared and I now had the proof of it. My happiness filled the room like foreign matter.

Marc

“Oh, are you in trouble!”

Rodney and Scot were standing on the porch. The car was in the driveway.

“He’s calling your mother!”

I ignored the deliriously happy teenagers in favor of following Douglas. He was still dialing when I entered the room. I rushed over to plug the cradle with my finger, ending the call. “Let’s make a deal.”

Douglas was mostly harmless, other than being mother’s spy. He was tall, thin, bitter, and very beholden to her—the way she liked it. But I knew one of his weaknesses. “I have the entire collection. I also know where to get videos.”

He knew what I meant as soon as I said video. A few years ago, I’d caught him with a dirty film in the guesthouse when he thought we were in town, but I hadn’t told on him. I was hoping that had earned me some credit I could use here.

“No.” Douglas slowly looked toward the porch, where Rodney and Scot were still being jerks. “They know you went somewhere. I have to tell her.”

“I wanted to see the damage. I was gone for five minutes.”

The driver wasn’t convinced that’s where I’d been, and it had been more like 15 minutes, but I could tell he didn’t want to get me in trouble. “Tell

her more hard work should sort me out. She'll love it."

Douglas sighed in defeat. "Two videos, and you go out there and tell them."

"They'll never keep the secret. Just tell her I went to look. I'll handle the rest."

"So you really were...viewing the damage?"

I thought of how worried I'd been for Angie. "Yes. I had to see if I lost anything dear to me."

Understanding fell into the driver's aging face. He motioned toward the door, raising his voice. "I'm telling her! Get out."

I fled to the porch, properly chastened for trying to prevent him from telling on me. I quickly launched into a description of the neighbor's missing roof to prove to the boys where I'd gone. I knew it would get back to my mother and verify her spy's story. The roof being missing was easy. I'd witnessed it with Angie's terror as it blew over the restaurant. I didn't tell them about the utility box smashing through the window and almost killing her and my mother. That was information I wasn't supposed to have.

I was careful with my words. I hoped Angie would be too. My mother would be on high alert right now because of all the attention on her, expecting her usual help to right the town whenever something went wrong. They hated her in the peaceful times, but in a crisis, Mary Brady was pure power.

Angie

I waited for my mom to leave the trailer before I was out the door again. I couldn't stay inside that tin can where my life was being crushed. My mom wouldn't remember telling me to stay anyway. She never remembered anything when she got that drunk. It was one of the reasons Georgie had begun to bring home pills. She took them and managed to function most days, but drinking was where she always fell back to when life got hard.

The damage to the town was supposedly only bad along the path of the tornado. According to the live news reports starting to take place, the twister was on the ground for 10 minutes and injured 20 people. I was glad the man I'd helped would survive. Patty had heard the paramedics say he would make it. The tornado was so rare that news crews were already swarming over the damaged areas with their cameras to capture the tragedy for the rest of the world to view. I didn't see it as a tragedy. In fact, other than being terrified while it hit, I didn't understand what all the fuss was about.

Then I returned to town and saw it for myself.

When I left the restaurant, I had been panicked and fleeing for a safe space. I hadn't noticed the devastation, but now, as I stood at the end of town where the small buses had come for as long as I could remember, I couldn't identify the exact place where the little benches had sat. Roofs were gone; chunks of plaster littered the ground, along with

personal items like coats and purses. There were long drag marks carved in the stone and dirt from where the tornado had been on the ground, and glass was everywhere, except in the windows here it all belonged. Mailboxes and garbage cans were bent into new shapes, wrapped around telephone poles that now leaned south on both sides of the street.

The power here had been off since the tornado hit. The setting sun had people in a panic to get lights up for search and rescue teams. Main Street had taken the worst hit and I wondered how these people would survive. Mary wouldn't give them more time to pay...would she?

An ambulance went by, rolling over timbers I thought were from the laundry service across the street. The sign was gone, as was half the front wall. The man who owned it was standing outside, staring in horror and disbelief at the damage. I could feel him thinking this was it. There was no money to pay Mother Brady and do the repairs. I began to hate her a little more.

The object of my dislike appeared at the end of the street, flanked by two policemen. She had one of their bullhorns. Other people noticed her as well. Everyone stopped to listen to whatever demand she was about to make. None of us were expecting good words or encouragement. I ducked out of sight as she came down the street.

“All payments are suspended for those in the damage zones. Two months! Fix your shops, tend to

your families. If you need more time, bring me the proof and we'll talk.”

I gasped. I wasn't alone. That was the reason it took so long for the cheer to start. When it came, it sounded across the town and filled the air with the first good vibes since the tornado. Because of Mary Brady.

I left.

She would be here all day, being thanked and snooping in everyone's business. I would be spotted and that wouldn't do after anything she may have sensed during the chaos at the restaurant. I needed to stay out of her line of sight for a while.

Besides, I had to get to the cornfield in case Marc was able to make it.

Marc

I couldn't make it. My mother had believed the driver, but my punishment wasn't hard labor in town where I might have been able to sneak away from for a short time. She wanted our yard mowed early and then for me to help the police identify people who lived in town. Thanks to looters already coming in to take advantage of the situation, I would be with a policeman all afternoon and most of the evening. I didn't have any way to let Angie know.

I spent the day trying to catch a glimpse of her in the people who came and went from the only road open to the town right now. Tall trees and part of a house were blocking the other two roads. It was a long, hot shift where I didn't see Angie or any of the destruction I honestly did want to view. It wasn't every day that a tornado took out the main street of your town. All the other kids would have great stories.

The officer gestured at me for about the 300th time. "You know this woman?"

I scanned the nervous woman who used to play Bridge with my mother and father and nodded. "She lives near me."

The officer waved the jeep through and moved on to the next car in the short line. When the sun set, then this road would be closed to all traffic until dawn unless they had a pass. The officer had only given out one of those to a man from town who was headed to the hospital to be with his wife. She

caught a window in the face. I had shuddered at the blood on the man, the panic that covered him. That was how I'd expected to find Angie. I understood how the man was feeling to find out that his heart had been hurt.

“That’s your ride.” The officer motioned to a distinctive set of headlights coming from town. “Thanks for all your help.”

He held out a hand, which I shook while hoping Rodney and Scot were watching enviously. “No problem. Let me know if you need me again tomorrow.”

“We’ll have the volunteers here by morning, but thanks.” The cop studied me thoughtfully. “Have you thought about being a policeman, son? You’d probably be good at it.”

I chuckled. “I have. Sorry, though. I chose something else.”

I could tell he wanted to ask what, but my mother had Douglas stop by us with her window down so she could give orders.

I climbed into the passenger seat, as directed. It was the only empty spot. I was happy to discover that Rodney and Scot were green with jealousy because I’d gotten such an important responsibility. It drove my pride. I rolled down the window, letting some of the precious air conditioning escape. “Thanks again.”

The officer saluted me as we pulled away.

I don’t know if he had guessed my choice, or if he just wanted to make me seem important in front

of my family, but that action sent a rush of heat into my stomach that made my balls swell. *Yes. That's what I need, what I want for my future—Angie and the Marines. It'll be perfect.*

Chapter Eleven
Like a Bad Penny
October to December

Marc

The day after the tornado, my mother accidentally let me escape by sending me to help around the town.

After I cleared her too-short list of people to assist, I took off for the cornfield, unable to wait any longer to be with Angie. My recklessness that afternoon almost saw me in the hospital and our fragile game of hide-n-seek exposed to the world.

As I cleared the row of corn, I heard someone yell, but it was already too late for me to avoid the problem. The corn parted to reveal the farmer's huge dog. He spotted me and darted forward against his master's calls.

Panic coated my limbs as I scrambled to reverse direction. I darted for the biggest tree by our chosen area, hoping Angie was already high in it. Ticker could jump farther than I could. As I came around the last curve of corn, I tripped and hit the ground hard.

Dazed, I could hear the big dog catching up to me, snarling as it pounded through the tightly packed rows.

Angie's scream told me he was close and then pain flared in my leg. The world shifted into a slow-motion blur that flipped my stomach.

I looked over to find Angie standing at the trunk of the cherry tree with her hands out toward the dog. Brilliant white light flowed from her fingertips as her ebony hair splayed back in fiery ringlets from an invisible wind I could almost hear. It sounded like an engine.

Ticker let go of me and stared at Angie with a mournful expression that implied she'd called him a bad dog.

I was stunned as the huge animal padded into the corn and returned to his master with my blood dripping from his muzzle.

My haze cleared a little. I saw Angie's hair fall onto her shoulders and her breathing become normal. Then, she was just my girl again.

I glanced down to find that I had tripped over a piece of wire. My ankle was really going to hurt tomorrow. I could see blood through my jeans.

Angie stared at me, but she didn't speak. I think she was worried about my reaction, but all I could feel was gratitude. Ticker was enormous. If he'd been able to get a better hold on me, not only would I have been hurt worse, but my mother would have learned about our clubhouse. All of our secrets would have been exposed next. No, I wasn't mad.

Angela read that and was happy. She was used to keep secrets and not freaking out over the smallest thing. Plus, she had used her magic in front of me and I was reacting as if that was normal. She was fine now, but I wasn't after that display. She could cause trouble. She was great to have around, but we would have to be more careful.

I gently put weight on my leg as I stood up. Pain flared. "I may need to go put some ice on this."

As I started to walk away, Angie slid her arm around my waist to help, shoving that new body against me. The innocent contact was enough to fire me up despite the pain. I carefully dislodged her sweaty arm. "Why don't you keep working and I'll try to come back?"

"Sorry, Brady."

"I'm not." I forced a grin. "It's all worth it. I'll be back."

An hour later, I was there with snacks and a bandage around my ankle, pretending as if it didn't hurt because I didn't want to miss my Angie time.

We exchanged gifts, and she surprised me with the additions to the hand code. They were good. I promised her I would practice them. The new wallet, I tucked into my pocket.

The locket, Angie put in a coffee can under our rubble pile and that sweet smile didn't leave her face the entire time. It was more than worth the pain.

When I returned to the farm the next day, I pretended to fall from the barn ladder to cover the injury that needed stitches, but I still helped with the baling and branding. I didn't want the farm to suffer—which explained why I hadn't told my mother about the things that went on here. After some of the conversations I'd been around when I first arrived, I had gotten the impression she already knew and ignored it because Judy kept it quiet. I no longer thought that was true. Mother hated drinking, gambling, and fornication—three pastimes that were standard here. I wasn't a big drinker yet, but I did like to wager and unfortunately, Jeanie liked to fool around. I discovered that on our fourth date.

We'd had a nice, short dinner in a neighboring town and I thought she was bored. When she suggested we drive around for a while and search for damage from the twister, I didn't understand what she wanted. Our driver slid the tinted window up between us after winking at me, but by then, it was too late to invent an excuse. Not that I could have found one Jeanie would have accepted anyway. She was extremely stubborn, but not in the cute ways that Angie was. Jeanie was selfish.

Jeanie slid over and put herself under my arm, and then she groaned!

Did I smell bad? I'd had Douglas crank the air conditioning to make certain I wasn't sweating and stinking.

“Great cologne.” Jeanie moaned again, cold fingers going to my hair.

Uncomfortable, I grabbed her hands and took a deep breath. What had Daniel said? Oh, yeah. Lots of kissing. Girls liked that.

I wasn't sure what came after and just hoped I got some of it right.

Fifteen minutes later, I exploded inside my jeans with Jeanie wriggling on top of me like a snake. She had already screamed out her happiness, making me lose my momentum. She'd sounded like a cow bellowing.

It had then taken some effort on her part to get me there, which was odd since I could knock myself out in just a few minutes. I realized the difference at that moment, but there was no time to explore it as Douglas tapped on the window.

I assumed that meant we were almost out of alone time. I tried to be a gentleman. I helped her fix her shirt and kissed her cheek as I whispered thank you.

"Yeah, sure." Jeanie waved off my gratitude as if she did this a lot. "Next time I'll warm you up first. It'll be better."

I didn't know how I felt about those words. I wasn't sure I had wanted it *this* time.

I walked Jeanie to her door a short time later, not impressed with her big house any more than I was with mine. I placed a chaste peck on her lips in case her parents were watching us through the windows.

Jeanie giggled as if she wasn't carrying some of my skin under those red nails. I was relieved when she disappeared inside.

Walking to the car, I sighed. I didn't like having a girlfriend so far. The girls got everything they wanted on the dates and the boys were left in the cold. I was more interested in someone who would be my equal.

I slid into the seat, grimacing at the smell. I lowered the window and put my head against the seat as Douglas got us rolling. *I'm sorry, Angie.*

Douglas had lowered the panel while I walked Jeanie to her door. He glanced at me in the mirror now. I could sense he wanted to say something. I lifted a brow. "What?"

Douglas cleared his throat, watching the road. "Some girls are for practicing. Others are for marrying."

I snorted out laughter, making him frown, but I couldn't help it. I'd just been thinking that Jeanie would do as a substitute for my loneliness when I couldn't get back to Angie. "Thanks. I'll remember that."

Douglas, insulted by my amusement, glowered and drove me to the farm without saying anything else. To show him I honestly did appreciate his advice, I went to his window when I got out.

He rolled it down with a sullen glower. "Yes, sir?"

"Will you please tell *Rosemary* that I enjoyed her hooker?"

Shocked, Douglas cracked an unwilling grin and shook his head. “No, sir, I will not!”

I was still laughing as he drove away. My words had told him which type of girl I considered Jeanie to be. She was easy, a pushy-tushy was what my cousins would call it, and tonight had proved we weren't on the same level. That was okay, though. She could teach me powerful things that I would use to please the woman of my dreams someday, and even if that didn't happen, I would still know more than my lying relatives who thought spying made them experts on sex.

Neither of them had ever had a date that I was aware of and it was about time I used that. The kids here still didn't know exactly what to make of me, but I had decided I wanted to be a leader. That was also practice for when I was older. The Marines needed men who could take an injury and still convince others to work and fight. I would see if I had what it took for that before I ever signed up.

Angie

Mother Brady hated Halloween. Claiming it to be based in witchcraft, she spent two months of every year trying to convince the town council to ban it. Each year she seemed to come closer to that goal, but in 1993 she was voted down unanimously. Everyone wanted to attend the show that the seniors from the prissy high school had been promising.

The flyers were hilarious. We all wanted to know which kids would dress as the opposite sex. Many of us had never seen a man in a skirt and supposedly, teachers were participating. It was called the Backward Senior Halloween Show and everyone was looking forward to half an hour without hearing a tornado story. The last 10 days had seen a lot of improvements. People just wanted to get on with their lives now.

I used some of my precious job money to buy a ticket and create an outfit that would completely disguise me. I wanted to be able to watch the show without worrying over Georgie or Mother Brady. I didn't know how they could do it every time, but they seemed to know when I liked something because they took it away.

I told Georgie I was going trick or treating, and slipped off to get into my costume. He didn't care. Halloween was a busy night for the restaurant and unlike the past few years where it had been too cold or too hot, tonight was beautiful. People would be

out for hours and the repairs on the restaurant were finally done.

I had chosen to be a witch because it would let me paint my face green and put warts on. I figured that would be safe. Many of the other girls my age were also going as a witch or a magician. I hoped I would blend in and be overlooked in my puffy black dress.

The music pouring out of the doors of the town hall was loud and spooky, with eerie creaks and groans. Neon-painted signs pointed people to the haunted house or to the area where chairs had been set up. The haunted house took people through two of the shops that had been damaged by the tornado, giving it a very realistic feel. I had helped to paint it, but I'd hated it the whole time. I could feel the ghosts watching us in disapproval because we were still alive. I'd only gone because Georgie said Mother Brady was complaining that I don't do anything to help the town. I hadn't liked how that felt. I wanted to help everyone. I just couldn't be caught doing most of the things I thought of trying.

The school also had a bake sale going. I grabbed a popcorn bag to go with my PepsiFree, and then made my way through the crowd of costumed people to find a seat in the rear. I had the row to myself at first, but as the hour approached for the senior show, the seats all filled up with neighbors I identified by their thoughts. Some of the costumes, like mine, were designed for complete secrecy and

I couldn't tell who they were unless I got into their minds.

A wave of musky cologne floated over the chairs as the lights dimmed. I sat up straighter, peering around. *I know that smell!*

I couldn't spot him in the darkened room and I sat back to enjoy the show, heart thumping. Marc didn't know my costume. How could I let him know I was here? I couldn't risk a mental message right now. There were too many people around. One of them might be sensitive to my gifts. I was discovering the hard way that my power pulled people as much as my looks did.

The stage that had been set up was short and rickety, but no one care about that once the curtains opened. Even longing for the man that went with that musky smell couldn't stop my mirth as the seniors came out dressed as women and proceeded to act out a date. It was the funniest thing I'd ever seen. My stomach was aching by the time they took their backwards bows and mooned the entire crowd.

Mother Brady would hate it, but the rest of the town already couldn't wait for next year's show. They were discussing which teachers they hoped would participate as they strolled out. The town dance was next, and few people were staying for that. It wasn't just for couples, but that was who mostly showed up.

I waited for the crowd to thin before going to the garbage can, ready to be out of the room that had

heated up with so many bodies in it. I was almost there when a tall Batman grabbed my arm. “Boo!”

Marc!

He snatched my garbage and disposed of it, then pulled me toward the dance floor before I could protest.

“Shh...”

As always, I gave in and tried not to act as if I was in heaven and hell at the same time. I hadn’t expected Marc to be here. I’d heard he was still on the farm, helping with the tobacco crop Mother Brady was trying this year.

Marc was a good dancer.

I wasn’t. We stumbled around the floor with the other people, bumping and twirling into them. We weren’t the only ones who couldn’t navigate the steps together, and the dance floor was a fun place to be as *sorry* and *oops* became more common than *Happy Halloween*.

When the dance ended, Marc led me outside and around the rear of the hall, toward the haunted house. I didn’t really like the idea of being around the ghosts in the darkness, but I wasn’t about to argue.

We passed the entrance to the haunted house and slipped down the small embankment toward the police station. The officers were giving out candy. We ran over for a tootsie roll before going toward Mother Brady’s office. She’d opened it a few months ago, much to the displeasure of the town

that already felt like she was recording their every step.

Marc stopped behind the garbage cans by the bridge and wishing pond, pointing.

Under the awning, Mary's car was shining in the streetlight. Next to it, darkly dressed teenagers were tugging a tall Rumpke can toward the trunk.

Marc raised his arm and pushed a button on a small black box.

Across the street, the trunk flew open.

"She just had this installed and thinks it will ruin the car somehow." Marc laughed in a whisper. "I thought I'd help her with that."

"Does she know you're here?"

"Nope. Swiped her keys from the office. I'll put them back before I go to the farm and she'll never know how we got in."

I narrowed in on the giggling teenagers. "What's in the garbage can?"

The teenagers tilted the can. I saw something flow into the trunk that splattered all over the ground as well, but I couldn't tell what it was.

Marc fought not to laugh again. "Frogs."

I began to smile.

Marc leaned down to cover me in his scent. "The best part is that she doesn't know how to work the fob yet. She'll use the key to open it when the noise gets her attention."

I dissolved in silent giggles that hurt to hold in. The thought of Mother Brady screaming in fear of a

frog attack was terrific. After a few hours in that trunk, the frogs would be hungry and hoppy.

Marc moved us away from the scene as the teenagers quietly shut the trunk and vanished into the shadows. I wondered if they would find a vantage point and watch the fun. I wouldn't. I didn't want to be anywhere near so I couldn't be blamed.

"Come on." Marc tugged me behind the Chinese artifact store.

There was a *closing soon* sign that made me frown. Mary Brady just couldn't leave people alone. She deserved all the frogs in the world on her head.

"I can't stay."

Since I hadn't expected him to be here at all, it wasn't a disappointment. I gave him a fast hug and then stepped away. "Thank you."

Marc slid his mask off, beautiful eyes shining. "Hi, Baby-cakes!"

I snickered. The size on my costume was Young Miss. I wasn't exactly a baby anymore.

Marc may have caught that thought because his eyes darkened and the muscles in his jaw pounded. He flashed a toothy, white grin. "Nice warts. Same smell, though. Nice."

Laughter changed the tension back to our friendship. I stomped my foot in mock protest. "You damn bats!"

Caught off guard by the curse, Marc chuckled sexily, making my insides quiver. What had caused that?

Marc noticed my unease and made a silly face that drew the sound and reaction he'd been hoping to carry back to the farm. He loved it when I laughed. I wanted to give him something more to take, but all I had on me was this outfit and a few dollars.

Loud voices echoed from the street. Marc sighed. "I should go now." He stared at me, growing serious. "You keep getting older, okay?"

I nodded, feeling the double meaning I didn't completely understand yet. "I will. You keep torturing your mom for the town, okay?"

Marc chuckled, slipping his mask back on. "It's my honor."

He waited for an opening and then darted down the street, grabbing at candy bags without true intent so people would think he was one of the wilder kids the town always had trouble with during the holidays. He was so smart. It made me proud. When I got older and he accepted his feelings for me, I would tell him that every day to make up for all the times his mother hadn't said it.

"She wants everyone at the mausoleum for Thanksgiving."

Behind the counter, I perked up. It had been two weeks since I'd seen Marc on Halloween.

Frona stopped working. "Why?"

“Call and ask her!” Georgie slung a wet dishtowel in her direction.

Frona ducked and vanished into a rear room to finish setting up for tomorrow.

Georgie wasn't in a good mood. The restaurant hadn't been reopened for long and business was bad as everyone tried to dig out. The nice Halloween rush of customers had been the last we'd seen and when money was tight, we left Georgie alone. Except, I wanted to know if *everyone* meant Marc. I was trying to figure out how to get that information when the buzzer sounded over the door, alerting me to a customer. I hurried to seat the two men. Georgie had told me to be extra nice and make people feel welcome. I flashed a bright smile at the patron. “Welcome to Georgie's Diner.”

“Hello, young lady. We'd like a table by the window.”

I led the two men to our best seat, wondering where they were headed in the ugly suits and ties.

“Coffee?” I was now in training to wait on the tables. Snow, the main waitress, hadn't liked it, but Georgie had insisted that my looks would help business. It was safe to say that Snow hated my guts because of it.

“Yes. Two, black.”

“Your waitress will bring it right out!” I simpered, hoping it was enough to make them feel very welcome. I assumed men with briefcases could afford to come back if they liked it here. Georgie said that was how businesses succeeded. Please the

customer, count the money. It made sense to me, but then, I had always felt like you had to give something to get something. It was one of the few things Georgie and I agreed on.

I got the drinks together for the waitress who was covering the main floor today, hoping she wasn't in a bad mood too. Georgie kept threatening to fire Snow for being rude, but she worked under the table. That meant she was cheaper than the other girls. It gave her a lot of leeway to be a pain.

Snow came through the swinging doors in a rush. "Why didn't you tell me!" She flew toward the table to get their drink order.

Must need cash for another abortion. I finished with their drinks as she learned that I already had the order and came hurrying back over. Now she was angry *and* embarrassed.

"You nasty little thief!" She glowered at me from behind smeared makeup. "You're not old enough to wait tables!"

She snatched the tray from me, and spun around. As she went, her apron string caught on the grill handle and jerked her backwards. The tray of drinks tilted...and then slid down her blouse.

Positive I would be blamed, I fled while she was gasping from the hot liquid against her skin. I hurried through the kitchen, forgetting to look ahead of me. I slammed into Georgie's big body.

He lifted me onto my feet, frowning. "What's going on here?"

I opened my mouth to explain. Snow began screaming for me to come back, that she was going to beat me until I cried.

Georgie's displeasure faded into a smirk. "Guess you've got the day off."

He steered me toward the rear door with a sharp slap to my butt. "Stay out of trouble, will ya?"

Grateful despite the slap, I took off just as Snow slammed through swinging doors, looking like a wet dog. Now I just needed an excuse to miss the next month.

When I woke up the next morning with a rash and a fever, I was delighted I wouldn't have to go in and face her. Snow would still be just as mad today.

The fever and rash got worse over the next week and I had to go to the emergency room. Georgie said I was screaming in my sleep, but I didn't remember anything after the third day. I'd been miserable before I passed out. That time, the darkness had been a cool relief from the burning itch.

The chicken pox swept through our school and neighborhood for the next month. The adults were positive it had come from someone who'd been here because of the tornado. I couldn't help remembering the rash I'd felt on the man that I'd helped. The adults had said it had to be spread by a kid, that grownups didn't get chicken pox, so I wasn't certain enough to speak up. Besides, other than the itching,

it really wasn't so bad once they started giving me the medicine. I got two more weeks off work and school, and it cleared up in time for us to attend the mandatory Thanksgiving gathering at Mother Brady's house. I felt blessed.

When we arrived, however, I found out Marc now had the chickenpox and wouldn't be joining the rest of us for dinner. Besides being disappointed, I also felt guilty. I was sure that I was the one who had infected him. When he'd come to the clubhouse that day, I had hugged him right after touching the stranger. It was hard to sit downstairs knowing I was the reason he was sick, but I did my best to act normal and not draw attention. The last thing we needed was for anyone to become aware of our friendship. I didn't realize someone already was.

Marc

“Am I dying?”

Mary frowned at me as I lay here sweating and shivering at the same time.

“The doctors weren’t sure at first. They say you’ll live now.”

I was relieved to hear it, but too miserable to be happy. I only wanted two things right now and neither was under my control. The shivering would have to go away as I healed, and there was no way I could ask for Angie to come up and visit me. Deflated, I turned my head toward the window to stare at the dying leaves. If I were about to croak over, my mother wouldn’t tell me.

“Why don’t you want to talk to Jeanie? She’s called twice a week, like a good girl should.”

“Just let me die if that’s what’s happening.” I forced out some truth around my pity. “It’s better than this life anyway.”

I must have sounded bad off because she heaved a huge sigh and rose from the corner of my bed.

“I simply can’t take this anymore. What will it take for you to get well? What do you need to pull out of this and move on?”

She’d shot down my idea of being a Marine right after I’d helped with the tornado. My getting deathly ill from a reaction to the chicken pox hadn’t been planned. What was she talking about?

Seeing my confusion, she left the room, slamming the door.

I was glad she was gone so I could adjust positions and groan without her scolding me for being weak. She had no idea how bad I felt and it sucked even more than it normally would have because Angie was downstairs. We'd only had two short moments this year and it wasn't nearly enough. Most of the time, Jeanie was an unsatisfying substitute. The only area she had covered was sex.

She kept my needs covered and then some. For my birthday this year, she was supposed to give me *the works*, whatever that was, but I'd thought of a few ways to avoid it. The first time I went all the way, which is what I assumed she meant, I wanted it to be *my* idea.

The house below rang with subdued laughter and life that I wanted to be a part of for a change; frustration burned in my gut. Normally, I would have been glad for time alone, but not today. Today, every chuckle and clink of silverware reminded me that I was missing my last chance to see her again for a long time. I might make it back from the next tour for Easter, but that would only be a quick stop for the holiday and mandatory gathering.

The rest of the year would be spent finishing school and traveling with the uncles to the various venues that bought our other products. I would finally get to learn what our secret product was and make more money, but I would be gone for six months. I really didn't want to leave at all this time, and it wasn't just because of Angie. I had a slowly

growing business here now. All the old customers on my route that had been so happy to have me return from the city tour were once again in the neglectful hands of Rodney and Scot. I hated not having that income source to depend on for the future, but I was too sick to do it. At moments like this, it didn't matter. I was miserable enough to welcome death if he came.

Something creaked outside the door.

It sent a fresh chill up my spine and restarted the shivers that had begun to calm. I huddled under the damp blankets, waiting for it to pass.

“Marc?”

Angie's voice brought me up too fast and I coughed violently, trying to get air. The reaction was so severe because I had the chicken pox on the inside, where it could do serious damage and was impossible to treat with ointment.

Angie hurried over, but I waved her off. If she healed me, my mother would know.

Angie ignored my protests and slid onto the bed next to me. Her eyes changed to a vivid violet. “Just a little.”

I arched in pain as she took my swollen hand... My eyes closed at the sensation of being drawn through a small tube.

When it stopped, I was too drowsy to keep my eyes open. I fell into the grayness with her name on my lips and her vanilla scent in my nose.

Angie

I slipped from the room in confusion, not lingering even though there was nothing more I wanted than to care for him.

I'd been going to the kitchen to refill a pitcher of tea when one of the house servants had reluctantly touched my arm and pointed toward the top of the stairs. Not about to miss the opportunity, I'd followed Marc's misery to his room. Now I wondered why the houseman had directed me there. Did the man know I could help Marc? If so, we were in trouble.

I watched out for the servant as the family gave thanks and ate, but I didn't see him again until it was time to leave. He was holding the front door open for everyone.

We all came outside together. In the din of fake goodbyes and promises to visit that were blatant lies, the Indian houseman subtly nodded upward.

I found Marc at the window of his room, a smile on his pale face.

I gave a tiny wave and climbed into the car before we were spotted. There were things I wanted to say, but I was too tired to make a mental connection. I settled for a funny face through the foggy window as we pulled out, causing him to smile again. It was the best I could do.

In my weariness, I missed his thoughts about being gone for half a year or longer. I should have known by the way Mother Brady smirked the next

day in the restaurant, or by how there was no Christmas gift at the clubhouse. But I didn't, and when the time continued to pass without word, I grew very lonely. Then, I heard that Marc and Jeanie had danced at Christmas, that he'd held her hand and told her she looked nice. I walked around with sunglasses hiding puffy eyes for days. I'd healed him so he could go be with someone else. Jeanie was good girl, a *Mother Brady* girl. I would never fit into that life and Marc would never be able to escape it.

From that realization on, the feeling that we were doomed followed me like a bad penny.

1994

Chapter Twelve

Driven

January to August

Marc

In the spring of 1994, my mother decided I needed a license and a car.

I wanted that badly, but I sneakily hadn't demanded it for my birthday in December. For four months, I pretended I had no interest in a vehicle. Because I didn't take the bait, my mother shoved it in my mouth, just like I'd thought she would. Instead of begging for my freedom and having to agree to her terms, I came home to find a Buick with a blue ribbon on the hood and keys in the ignition. Her only terms now were no wrecks, no drinking and driving, and obeying my curfew. I agreed easily since those were all things I'd planned to do anyway.

I learned to drive on our backward country roads in preparation for the test. Douglas was given the task of instructing me. We spent hundreds of hours flying down State Route 128 while both of us screamed, though not for the same reasons. Douglas was always relieved when the lesson was over. He

said I was a combination of Mario Andretti and Evel Knievel.

I loved being behind the wheel, the magic that I could do with a car, the freedom it would provide. A vehicle was the first big step in getting out of here, concrete proof that time was going by even when it didn't feel that way.

As I pulled into my mother's driveway that April with my license and my used blue Buick, it surprised me to realize I wasn't as eager to leave Harrison anymore.

It instantly hurt to think that I was doing what Larry had—accepting my fate.

To prove that I was still as wild as any other 16-year-old, I hit the gas and ran over my mother's precious rose bushes.

Repeatedly.

Now, sliding into the passenger seat of Jeanie's spicy red car, I was sorry I'd done something so stupid. When Jeanie drove, we had to make multiple stops and she liked to multitask to the point of danger. Applying lipstick while going around a curve was showing off in my book. I'd mentioned that to my mother when she grounded me from my car, but she hadn't cared. Those rose bushes had been in front of our home for a long time.

"Hi!" Jeanie beamed, as usual scanning the windows to see if Mary was watching.

Why did it always feel as if Jeanie was one of my mother's spies?

“Hi. Good day at school?” I gave her the expected peck on the cheek in greeting. I tried not to make a face at the heavy fumes coming from her. She didn’t believe in a spritz. She wanted her flowery scent to be detected in other countries.

Jeanie shrugged, shifting into drive. “The medical classes will be a bitch. They’ll make this morning’s chem. test look easy.”

That told me she hadn’t done well. I offered polite condolences. Inside, I wondered how long this date would take from my free time. I didn’t know how long I’d be home for this visit and I definitely didn’t want to spend it with Jeanie. The last four months on the farm had been cold and lonely.

“Say, do you mind if we swing by Woolworths? They have the best ice cream.”

I shrugged to show my indifference, silently groaning. I was wishing something would interrupt us when the tornado siren began to wail.

Now covered in goosebumps, I took note of the murky sky. Pale green light behind gray and black clouds was never good. “Is this Wednesday?”

“Friday.” Jeanie nervously slowed down as heavy rain began to fall. It hadn’t even been drizzling when she picked me up.

The storm we expected didn’t come though, and the siren faded. Jeanie got us rolling again at high speed.

I tuned-in the radio for an update. I hadn't spotted a funnel cloud, but the siren meant one had been spotted.

The news covered Tonya Harding, the Northridge earthquake cleanup, and rumors of a baseball strike, but I'd missed the weather report. I flipped the radio off as we pulled into the small strip mall.

Woolworths was in the center, between Sears and Toys R Us. Jeanie parked in front of the store so she wouldn't have to get soaked. Before I could come around and escort her like I usually did, she darted toward the protection of the businesses, leaving me to close her door.

Sighing, I slammed it and hurried toward the shop my mother had declared off limits. This was where the poor people often found bargains and she didn't want me to mingle with them. I'd made it a point of coming here for the last few years just to prove I wasn't a snob. And they honestly did have the best ice cream.

Proving I'd been successful in my rebellion, the flirty clerk began scooping out my usual dessert before she even asked Jeanie what she wanted. That didn't go over well with my girlfriend. How could my mother have ever thought she was a match for me?

Jeanie huffily ordered a complicated sundae while I sipped my coke and dragged my spoon through chocolate sauce. I'd actually wanted strawberry, but it was better this way. There was no

chance of getting lost in the past with Jeanie studying me, ready to report my behavior.

“You’re awfully quiet today.” Jeanie suddenly swiveled toward me on the stool. “Should I tell your mother you still aren’t feeling well?”

Nice to have that suspicion confirmed, I thought darkly. “No.”

It had taken a full month for Mary to let me out of the house after the chicken pox, despite what Angie had done. I’d been stir crazy. And so lonely!

For some reason, I couldn’t think about much but Angie and the future these days. The bond we shared had strengthened when she saved me from the farmer’s dog, but this time, it wasn’t good. Over the rest of the miserable Thanksgiving, I’d had my first wet dream and it scared me. In the dream, instead of rubbing against Jeanie, it had been Angie under me. At 12!

I was being forced to accept the bonds between us, but I was still able to separate right from wrong and not cross any lines that would damn me. The guilt had finally grown strong enough to cause trouble. I had to stay away from her until I had these feelings under control. That meant not being in the dark any longer about the whole sex thing. I wanted to wait, to save it for Angie now that I could admit to myself that I wanted her, but these emotions! All Jeanie had to do was press her lips to mine after that dream and I hardened like superglue.

“Are you going out with someone else?”

Jeanie's question startled me back into the present. I scowled at her. "What?"

"I mean it." Jeanie shrugged, voice not carrying her usual whiny tone. "I know you're not into me the way some of my other...friends are."

"That's why I don't care if you have other *friends*. We talked about this already."

"Yeah, but we agreed to make it appear like we're being faithful and I have."

"I'm not going out with anyone else," I repeated dully.

"Do you want to be?"

I had to lie and say no, but at that moment, I just couldn't. "Yes."

Jeanie considered that for a moment and then kept going. "Is it me or your mother in the way?"

Because Janie had pushed this, and she was being calm, I chose to be honest. "Both." I sighed deeply. "But it doesn't matter. You're a good girl who does what she's told, and apparently, *so am I*."

Jeanie didn't know what to say to my bitter sarcasm. We finished our ice cream in tense silence only broken by the door buzzer and the announcer on the intercom.

As we stepped outside to find a beautiful blue sky, Jeanie put a hand on her hip. "Are you gonna fool around with me later?"

I shrugged. *Not if I can avoid it. You stink in every way.*

As Jeanie grew older, she got uglier. Her nose had become pointed and her cheeks puffed out like

a blow fish. Her breasts had gotten a little bigger, which was a plus, but then so had her ass. I was forever hearing about her newest diet.

Reading it all on my face, Jeanie tossed her platinum braid over her shoulder and stuck her nose in the air. "Then our date has ended. You can find your own way home, right?"

She didn't wait for me to answer and I didn't stop her from driving off.

Neither of us waved.

I stood on the sidewalk outside Woolworths for about five minutes, trying to decide what to do. In the end, I chose nothing. Jeanie was a skank. She was lucky I stayed with her. If not for my mother, I would have dumped Jeanie for cheating right after we first started going out. She hadn't told me she had other boyfriends at the time. I'd thought we would be exclusive. Scot and Rodney had clued me in, another strike for her since it had given them fresh ammunition to use in their constant attempts to drag me down to their sleazy level.

Pushing Jeanie out of my thoughts, I surrendered to temptation and went to the main street, to the payphone. With about \$12 dollars in my pocket, I called a taxi and had it take me as far as the money would go. The driver didn't recognize me and I didn't tell him who I was so I could get the ride for free. Most of the time, it was better that no one knew where I was going.

When the money ran out, I jogged and walked to the neighboring town to get what I wanted. These items, I planned to put on my mother's account.

By the time I arrived, hours later, I was hoping to run into anyone I knew so I could get a ride. I couldn't run for very long without stopping now. I needed to improve that. My mother's hatred of the Marines had been expected, and I hadn't paid attention, other than to bob my head and nod in the right places. When I turned 18, she couldn't stop me. Only my feelings for Angie were in the way, but I now believed I could have both.

I lingered outside the hardware store in Cleves until a neighbor came through and let me hitch a ride to the entrance of the trailer park. Fighting the need to tell Angie I was here, I went to the clubhouse. I planned to put in a few hours on the structure, and then I would repair the damage to my mother's rose bushes to get my car back.

After that, I had to make a trip into the city. I'd never gone to Cincinnati on my own, but I had to this time. Douglas would never take me to the Marine recruiting office. I was positive my mother had already forbidden it. I had no idea if the people running the office would be okay with teenagers asking questions, but I had to find out if I could balance a wife and service to my country.

If the Marines said it wouldn't work, I planned to talk with the Army recruiter next door. Joining that branch would take me longer to reach my goal,

but either way would eventually make me a sniper if I had the aptitude and earned the spot. If both offices said I couldn't have a family and that career, then I might do exactly what I'd sworn to myself that I wouldn't. If it meant I could be with Angie, I might accept the awful deal my mother should offer soon. I'd almost made that impossible choice now. If I couldn't have both, I wanted Angie more than I wanted the Marines.

It was bitter knowledge to carry, but there was no denying which one I wanted, needed, more.

Angie

I wasn't happy that Marc had come by. I hadn't gotten to see him. He'd done so much work without me. I wasn't happy at all.

Over the last four months, I had flipped into a slightly older, bitter kid who had no idea what was going on with her life. I felt like I was being held back by all the adults, abandoned by Marc for his coming of age, and I loathed Mother Brady as the family gleefully passed the rumors of Marc and Jeanie's romance. In my jealousy, I still felt like I'd healed him just so he could go to her. I was tired of our ages and family being between us, tired of Georgie rubbing against me as we ran the grill, tired of witnessing my mom passed out across her bed like the prostitute she used to be. Tired of it all.

It wasn't just me, though. Everyone was unhappier than usual. Thanks to the strike, there were no baseball games to excuse hours of drinking or to get men out of the house. Mother Brady's petition to ban the Senior Backwards show had been successful. So was her attempt to ban trick or treating. Between the baseball strike and the Brady bans, there would be no sales rushes for any of the businesses to look forward to this year, which meant no extra cash for bills, other repairs, or a better way of life—which Georgie said was the single biggest reason a person opened up a business in the first place. It was one of the few times I ever heard him say anything negative about Mother Brady.

As June came, the flirty teenage girls were free for the summer, and I was once again out of a job. I spent a little time at the clubhouse Marc had worked on without me there to care for his bangs and splinters. It was more than half finished now, with a full frame and two walls. The tornado damage had provided a lot of debris for building, but it hurt me too much to hang out there this year. We hadn't had real time together in so long!

I also tried the cornfield, dutifully replacing our flag from the town's subdued Fourth of July party, but it had stung the worst. None of my old haunts provided any peace, not even Patty's shop. She was busy packing up old books to sell at auctions and didn't have time for my misery. She was having trouble making the payments now that Mother Brady's tornado reprieves were up. Patty expected to be at flea markets and auctions all summer, and maybe even into the fall as well. That left two places for me to be. One was home, which I couldn't stand. The other was an area forbidden to me because of my age. The top of the hill.

Our trailer park was nestled into a tall, wide hill that ran the length of the property. It had provided sled riding for generations of poor kids raised in these tuna cans. Atop the hill, behind the line of thin trees, was another playground that was shared between the older teens and the new adults. It was empty property and owned by no one as far as I knew. It ran for miles in three directions—a dusty stretch of dirt that was splattered with thistle weeds

and led into a thickly wooded forest that even the bravest teens avoided. Supposedly, an old man with a bloody hatchet lived in a cabin back there. Marc had told me it was just a place for older teens and new adults to go and hang out. He'd started to say *make out* and then censored it. I'd caught the thought and blushed. I had dreamed about kissing him for years. I wasn't sure what all was involved in making out, but I knew that was how it started.

I climbed the sledding hill in a quick run and made it almost all the way to the top before I had to stop and clutch my sides, gasping for air. It was a big hill and I was barely used to my longer legs. I'd shot up a full inch over the winter and spring.

Ducking behind the first row of trees, I swept the dirt stretch for people and didn't see anyone. I hurried forward, hearing the engine of a truck on the highway that lined the final side of the hill.

I made it across the barren area quickly, though I didn't understand why it was called that when the thistle weed flowers were half my height and covered the area thickly enough to hide any number of animals. Everywhere I looked up here, there was purple, yellow, green. I couldn't call that barren.

I slipped into the forest with a small chill of rebellion that I knew was addictive. I was a good kid, even if the adults didn't think so. I did what I was told and I didn't expose anybody's secrets. Why couldn't they just accept me? Completely into my thoughts, I failed to hear the other engine.

The dirt bike flew by, loud enough to make me jump. I tripped. Stumbling around to catch my balance, I looked up to find the kid on the bike staring back at me instead of where he was going. “Watch out!”

He turned and whipped the dirt bike to the right, barely missing the tree. Sliding neatly, he spun around and came back to where I was standing. As he stopped, he slid the kickstand down in a cool move that drew a reluctant smile from me. He knew how to ride, like Marc.

The boy took off his helmet to reveal a kid I went to school with, though we’d ended up in mostly different classes. The only thing that stood out about him to me was a poem he’d recited for an English project. It had been all about bikes. Some of the other kids had laughed. Since I’d witnessed the biking group heading up the hill behind my trailer many times, I had sort of understood and clapped.

“I’m Daniel.”

It was nice that he’d given his name. I wondered if he knew how many boys talked to me at school nearly every day, but forgot to tell me that important detail. “Angie.”

He swiped his hand on his jeans and held it out.

Realizing my hands were filthy, I did the same to mine and then repeated the motion on my once-white shirt. “Nice to meet you.” I said it automatically as I shook his hand. Few boys

bothered with that either. I waited for a reaction from the power inside.

There was only a warm palm against mine.

Daniel let go and stepped back. "You too."

As we stood there, I didn't worry over being alone with Daniel, like I might have with some of the boys at school. He wasn't threatening. I was worried about being spotted. Georgie had become more possessive since school let out for the summer. He'd told me not to be running with any boys, that when I was old enough for that, he would show me what it was all about.

A shiver of fear went over my skin.

"Hey, you're okay. I can go away."

I forced myself to shrug. "Do what you want." I went around him, positive he would follow me since he was a boy and that's what boys did.

Daniel began checking his tires. When I glanced back a few seconds later, he was still at it. "Is it broken?"

"Nah. Just need more air."

"Oh. Okay." I went on, listening for the engine or his steps, but there was neither. A bit annoyed that I couldn't predict his movements, I shoved into Daniel's thoughts and found a life much like my own. It was bad enough to stop my feet and send me hesitantly back to where he was still messing with the bike.

Daniel glanced up. "You get scared to go any further?"

“No.” I leaned against a tree, peeling the bark with my broken fingernails. “Are you scared?”

Daniel paused, frowning. “When I have to be.”

“Me too. I don’t like it.”

The magic of friendship swirled around us. “I could give you a ride, if you want. It takes the scared away.”

“No, I...” Bitterness flooded me. “Yes, I can. I mean, I’d like that.”

Daniel grinned. I was suddenly sure his loneliness was why he’d stopped. The other kids his age didn’t understand his love of bikes and the kids who did wouldn’t let him join their fun because he wasn’t old enough. I understood having age used against you.

“Now?”

“Okay.” I came over to the bike, but I waited for instructions.

Daniel got on and handed me his helmet. He laced it up without meeting my eye. His shyness was cute. It was also boring. I didn’t feel that special heaviness like when I was with Marc. It was actually something of a relief. Maybe Daniel and I really could be friends.

Daniel directed me to the seat behind him and wrapped my arms around his waist. I tried not to giggle. I was still learning to control these stupid female hormones.

“Hang on.”

Daniel was a great driver and he was right—I wasn’t scared. He weaved us in and out of the trees

and thistle weed like we were on television. Once I got over the first few seconds of trusting him, I loved it.

The ground whizzed by as we jumped potholes and shot around in dizzying circles that drew peals of laughter from my gut. Other than my time with Marc, it was one of the best moments I'd ever had. What made it so good was how Daniel didn't ask me questions or try to kiss me. In fact, he didn't say much at all. It was nice.

After that, I climbed the hill nearly every day. Daniel always showed up to take me for a ride. I don't know what he thought of the girl who ignored him during school and clung to him afterwards, but I never explained it. I hoped he understood that while I was at school or in public, I couldn't reveal any weaknesses—not even a friendship that would be viewed that way by the people who ruled my life. All my pleasures had to be attained in secret and enjoyed the same way.

Over the long, hard years, that never changed.

Chapter Thirteen

Don't Cry

September

Angie

Daniel and I both hated Junior High, just like we had feared.

We talked about it sometimes, between bike rides. Daniel was bullied because he wasn't as quick, athletic, or smart as the other boys. I was bullied because I wasn't as confident, flirty, or fashion-aware as the other girls. We tried to fit in, but it was hard. The other kids didn't have the stresses that we did.

I found out that Daniel's mother was a drinker too, but she liked to hit people. Daniel's father had the same problem as Georgie, wanting what he couldn't have and Daniel was forever getting between his parents and his younger sister. Daniel often brought her along for our rides so she would be safe. I understood. It made me wish I had an older brother to protect me, but then I realized being a boy might not make Daniel safe. He wasn't clear on what type of abuse he was suffering, but he would have told me if I'd asked.

I didn't.

I, on the other hand, wouldn't name my terrors at all and claimed everything was fine. Daniel was nice enough not to call that bluff. Despite Georgie threats, I refused to stop spending time with him. Georgie and Mother Brady were awful people and I wasn't going to let them dictate my life anymore. I would do what I wanted and handle the consequences as they came. Other than concerns over the adults, the only other thing I worried about was Daniel wanting more than I could give, but I never once found anything in his thoughts or actions that said he desired me.

By my birthday in October, the rumors had spread that Daniel and I were going out. We denied it, but people don't usually like hearing the truth. No one believed us. I got my first real beating from Georgie over it. I tried to explain through the slaps, but I could have saved my breath. Georgie didn't like the idea of anyone touching me except him.

After I screamed that he was the sick pervert, not me, and Georgie slapped me hard enough to knock the beret from my hair, he calmed down. At first, I was forbidden to have any more contact, but when he made that demand, he did it in front Mother Brady. He had to relent when she spoke up. I hated her even more for that. She wasn't trying to help me. She was doing it to be sure that I stayed away from Marc. And the thing was, that's exactly what I was doing on my own. I'd switched my obsession to Daniel in some ways. He needed me to lend him peace and happiness, the same things I needed from

Marc, but without the future secrets lurking between us. In fact, I thought maybe Daniel liked boys. If that was true, the other kids might hurt him when they found out.

I met Daniel at the top of the hill on my birthday, once again not important enough for the family to gather in celebration. I thought 13 was a big deal, but I'd forgotten my place. The family never failed to remind me of it with their snide remarks or indifference. The only one who paid attention to my birthday was the stepfather just counting the days until he could kiss me and do everything else in his sick mind. My revulsion didn't matter to him and neither did my pleas to be left alone. He would have his way.

It had gotten me thinking about what would happen in a few years when I did reach whatever age he had set for his line of control. I needed to be gone from here by then. With no job and very little money, there were few options open. We had a large family. Some of them might hate Mary enough to help me run, but they were also too scared of her not to tell where I'd gone. Plus, I still wouldn't have a way to care for myself and that would lead to this same mess all over again, just with some other pervert.

I settled on trying to make more money to save for the run, but I never doubted that I was going to try. I wasn't going to submit when the time came. I was going to run for my life.

Marc wasn't in that scenario at all and I spent many afternoons crying over it. I didn't want to leave Marc, but he had obviously moved on with his life. He'd already left me. Even if he hadn't, when he graduated, Mother Brady would send him off on the country tour. He wasn't here now and he wouldn't be here in a few years when Georgie tried to take what I refused to give. Marc probably still didn't know what my life was like anyway. As much as I wanted him, I was being forced to admit that he wasn't *the one*. If such a person even existed. Whoever they were, they'd have to be really broken to love me.

Daniel didn't comment on my tears as he handed his handkerchief over a shoulder and waited for me to give it back before he got the bike moving. I'd been like this once before and he'd known not to ask what had upset me. Maybe he knew. Maybe he thought I was crying over my home life. I don't know and we never talked about it. Daniel was great that way. Feeling particularly grateful to have a friend at all, I hugged him tightly and sent out a burst of the pleasure I was still learning to control.

Daniel was unprepared for my action, but he didn't wreck. He wobbled and slowed, then righted us and sped up. I could sense his grin as my emotions settled over him. We blasted down the dirt stretch, uncaring about anyone or anything else in that moment.

Marc

Angie was on Daniel's bike with him. They looked like a couple enjoying time together. The rumors were true.

I forgot how to breathe, shocked by my reaction. I wanted to throw an arm out and catch Daniel in the throat.

Angie's laughter rang across the hilltop. My anger tightened another notch. As I chose to go with a punch instead of a clothesline move, it occurred to me that I couldn't do anything. There were kids all over the hill—some sledding in the mud from yesterday's rains, some riding and walking. Everyone was up here today. I had to pretend that I didn't care and I wasn't capable of it. Angie melted to Daniel, Angie's pleasure flowing out, *my* Angie... I'd been gone too long.

Eleven months.

Crushed, I forced my feet to take me back down the hill. I'd already been to the clubhouse and the cornfield, but both had the feel of neglect, telling me she hadn't been there much. It had only left one place left to search. I had avoided it since Rodney and Scot began talking about Angie's boyfriend.

I wandered the cornfield, full of things I hadn't wanted to face. I still didn't, but there was no denying that Angie was wanted by the other boys. I had competition in every way and because I couldn't make an open claim, I would have to watch her date. I hadn't considered that. Was this heart

wrenching emptiness how Angie had felt while observing me with Jeanie over the years?

I thought the answer was yes and I was ashamed of myself for never explaining to her that I didn't even like Jeanie. She'd just become the perfect cover and a quick, dirty release I looked forward to each weekend.

Once Jeanie learned to let me lead, it had gotten better, but I still didn't have feelings for the blonde. The other guys said I was a lucky man to be with her. People expected us to announce an engagement eventually. The comments were always along those lines from the adults. We were told we'd make good parents more times than I could count. My mother certainly agreed. She'd had Jeanie over to the house for dinner several times and she was currently making certain Jeanie got an internship at the local hospital that had been built over the summer. It wasn't open yet, but my mother was making sure that when it did, my girlfriend would be there from the beginning. I hated it all. I wasn't positive, but I thought I might even hate Jeanie. I didn't think I'd ever met someone so self-centered.

And now, I'd lost Angie.

I wanted her arms around me, her laugh in *my* ear and heart. And I wanted her lips against mine. I finally allowed myself to say it. "I want her in every way."

I'd never told her any of that. Angie had no reason to wait for me. I replayed the last years as if I were her and cringed at how callous I'd been, at

how much I'd been gone. I'd only thought of my own happiness, so she'd gone out and found her own. I couldn't blame her for that. She'd survived in the way open to her.

Come dusk, I was still stalking the cornfield, determinedly examining my options. I wasn't giving up without a fight, but we always had to walk those family lines. It took hours of thought for me to be convinced that I wasn't wrong to try. Angie had loved me once. I'd always known that. Maybe I could get it back.

When it got too dark to see, I went to the clubhouse to wait. I was only there for a few minutes before I heard the dirt bike coming. I ducked behind a tree as Daniel dropped Angie off at the top of the path.

It pleased me when she didn't bring him down to our place. I tried hard to listen over the wind.

Daniel smiled at her. "Are you better now?"

"Yes." Angie got off the bike and gave Daniel one of my hugs, making my anger flare again.

"Thanks for being there for me."

Daniel blushed and ducked his head. "Same to you."

Daniel sped off without kissing her, but Angie stared after him with a soft smile I wanted for myself. I studied her face and realized she'd been crying. Her lids were red and puffy... Fresh tears rolled down her cheeks as I watched. Why was she

so unhappy? It didn't appear that she was fighting with her new guy.

Angie stumbled toward the clubhouse and disappeared inside, missing my jacket hanging on the branch.

Angie.

I sent it mentally, nervous about her reaction. If she didn't want me anymore, I wouldn't let her know I was actually here.

"Marc?"

Catching me off guard, Angie came from the clubhouse with her nostrils flaring, as if she'd scented something.

"I did." Her eyes roamed me feverishly as I stepped from behind our tree. As her joy swarmed over us both, I understood she wasn't dating Daniel. She was *using* him, the way I was using Jeanie. "I'm sorry."

She could have been mad and shouted at me. I would have taken it. What she did instead broke my heart all over again.

"You're here!" She threw herself into my arms, not caring about my apology. "I wasn't sure you were coming back this time." She sobbed, clinging to me.

I tightened my grip. "I'll always come back to you."

Against my will, the feel of her in my arms was incredible. I was helpless against the emotions. Angie had claimed me all those years ago, right here, when she'd told me that she would be my wife

someday. Now I would mark her the same way by confirming it.

Angie finally let go so she could peer up. “You’re bigger again.” She wiped at her face.

“Yeah.” I grinned proudly, happy she’d noticed. My gaze went over her quickly. I felt it all that time. I blushed. “You, too.”

I faltered in my search for small talk.

Angie swept us both away by stepping forward to kiss me.

It lasted for half a minute of delirious pleasure I could tell she felt too by the way she gave a slight gasp against my lips. In the far distance, a siren wailed unnoticed.

Angie slowly retreated, hand coming up to touch her lips. We were both feeling it now.

I stayed still as my brain and body told me we could get away with doing that one more time.

Angie’s eyes darkened. She leaned forward eagerly to make me prove the thought.

This time, I kissed her back, lost in what I wanted most.

I won’t even try to describe it, but I will say that one kiss was better than every moment with Jeanie, all stacked together.

I ended the kiss, but not the embrace.

Angie trembled in my arms. “I have to go. Tomorrow?”

“Yes.” I ran a gentle thumb across her cheek. “I’d like to talk to you...about us.”

She reddened and flashed a smile I would have died to make her repeat.

“Okay.” Angie took off running to be in by curfew.

I went into the clubhouse and began constructing a bed. I’d told my mother I was going camping in Oxford. I had originally planned to do that, but having the rumor of Angie’s boyfriend disproven wasn’t enough to send me on my way yet. It wasn’t Daniel, but at some point, some other guy would get my Angie despite all the control and patience I was showing in waiting for her to grow up. If I didn’t tell her how I felt, I could lose her while I was gone.

The mere thought was excruciating. I would never recover.

Angie surprised me by coming to the clubhouse before dawn.

“I’m ditching today.”

She stated it calmly, as if she did it all the time. Sitting up to reach for my shirt, I wondered if she did.

Angie blushed and went outside so I could dress, but not before she saw my bare chest. Instead of passion or the embarrassment that I experienced with Jeanie in these moments, all I felt was amusement. Did that mean I was growing up again? It couldn’t happen fast enough now.

“How did you sleep?” Angie smiled as I came outside.

“A little here and there.” I took a minute to use our bathroom path, able to hear her humming. The happiness was such a contrast to the girl I’d seen get off Daniel’s bike that I frowned. I needed to be more aware of her life, her needs, so I could make her happy.

When I joined her at the fire she was carefully tending, I asked the question I wished I’d thought of last night. “Why were you crying?”

Angie instantly teared up. “I miss you. You’ve been gone a long time.”

“I’m sorry. I have to be.”

“I know.”

We stared at each other until she began to blush again and tore her eyes away. I kept staring at the waves of ebony flowing over her shoulders. No longer tight curls, it was long and beautiful in the morning sunlight.

I took a seat on the log stool she’d added, watching as she made two cups of instant coffee she’d obviously filched from the restaurant.

“Sugar?”

“Black.” It was my first cup of coffee, but I wasn’t going to tell her that. I was going to drink it like Larry did and pretend I liked it, even if I didn’t.

Angie lifted a brow. “Why?”

I’d forgotten how easily she could get into my mind. I shrugged. “I’m a man. It’s expected.”

Instead of the confusion or correction that someone else might have given, Angie flashed a glance of sympathy.

“Like me pretending to like pink because I’m a girl.”

I chuckled. “Exactly.”

Angie settled onto the other log stool and sipped her cup in a way that told me she’d been drinking it for a while.

I took a large gulp.

Coffee flew over the leaf-covered ground, causing Angie to snicker. I put my cup down. *Yuck.*

Our eyes locked as the funny moment passed and in her blue depths, I once again saw the future. This time, I welcomed it. I let my heart say something I’d fought myself over since first meeting her. “I love you. I think I always have, and when we get older...when you’re old enough, I want to marry you and build a life together. Will you go away with me then and be *my* Angie?”

To my horror, she burst into tears and nothing I could say would make her stop.

When Angie could speak, she told me she would have suffered through 1000 beatings to hear those words.

It was wonderful and more than a little surreal. She was so young, so forbidden to me, and I loved her so much.

“I’m not going to act like your boyfriend yet. Maybe next year I will, or the year after. I still have to go on the tours and see Jeanie, and do what I’m told, you know? You have to wait for me.”

She agreed without any protests, which was another balm to my heart. Jeanie would have had a dozen conditions.

“We’ll leave together?” Angie confirmed repeatedly, easing my concern for asking her so soon. It was clearly the right time.

“I’m already saving money for it. I have been for a while. You’ll be a Marine wife.”

Angie didn’t mind that as much as she did my being in danger, but she knew I wasn’t going to pick a different career. I’d been set on this one too long for any other plans.

“I’ll wait, but I’m friends with Daniel. I need him for...”

“For when I’m not around?”

She lowered her head in shame. “I’m sorry.”

“I understand. That’s the reason I still have Jeanie.”

Angie gaped at me in renewed happiness that made me even sorer I hadn’t told her sooner. I’d been so worried about her age and not wanting to hurt her or get caught that I’d forgotten how lonely she was too. Feeling the need to make it official to both of us, I slowly leaned toward her and pressed my mouth to hers.

Heaven and hell merged in that moment, stealing my soul as I became hers. Later, when we married, the world would know, but for me, it would always be this kiss that bonded us forever.

“Forever?” Angie whispered, crying again as we parted.

I nodded, brushing a thick curl from her damp cheek. It felt like silk. “I do. Do you?”

“Yes.” Angie put herself in my arms and squeezed me tightly. “In every lifetime.”

As I sent her home with a lingering hug, I couldn’t believe I’d done it. I also couldn’t believe that she’d said yes. Terror and guilt warred in my heart. Now that the words had been spoken (and we kissed!) there was no going back for me. I hoped it was the same for her as she finished growing up. It would crush me to have her rip my guts out a few years from now.

I had ideas on how to keep that from happening, such as letting the physical sparks grow. I also considered the sneaky moves, like denying her the company of other males. All I had to do was ask and she’d give in, but both of those options came from the side of me that I inherited from my mother. I chose a third avenue, where I swallowed my jealousy and actually encouraged her friendship with Daniel so she wouldn’t be alone. I also needed it to prove to my jealous heart that she really was mine.

The week of my birthday, I took her to Daniel’s house so we could all spend time together. They seemed to be okay with each other in ways that made me worry. That was reason enough to put them together. I wasn’t testing Angie exactly. I was testing this bond. If she and Daniel became more

than friends, I would understand our love wasn't meant to be and I would peruse the Marines with a determination I found lacking now. I assumed Angie knew what I was doing, but she didn't protest.

"I don't mind, if it makes you feel better," Angie stated from my side.

We were bundled up against the cold as we waited behind Daniel's house in a weed-covered lot where a trailer had caught fire a few years ago. When he wasn't at his grandmother's house near Judy's farm, Daniel was here in the trailer park with his mom and father.

I was here all month, thanks to my sister's divorce and the resulting death threats she'd gotten. I didn't care for being in the same house with her and my mother, but I was told it was my manly duty to protect them. I snuck out every chance I got. If Tracy's ex-husband came to our house, my mother would beat him to death with her bible and then shoot him. He had no idea who he was messing with.

I'd mentioned that to the Marine recruiter, who hadn't minded talking to me at all. We'd chatted for about two hours before I'd gotten around to bringing up my main concerns. The answers had been reassuring. My wife could live on the bases I was assigned to here in the US and I wouldn't be shipped out for a while. I would have to be trained, and during that time, Angie could adjust to being a Marine wife. She would be very young for that, of

course, but the recruiter had assured me the wives looked out for each other.

I started to duck out of sight as a group of kids came up the hill path to mud ride, but they didn't even glance our way. The hill was behind the tree line from us and covered in children enjoying the day. When the new arrivals got in line and disappeared from view, I tried to relax. Even if we were spotted, all we were doing was watching Daniel ride. My mother would still be unhappy, but I could pass it off as a coincidence.

Angie flashed a quick question with our hand code as Daniel swung around in circles on one wheel.

I motioned. *No, please don't.*

She beamed, and I finally did relax enough to enjoy her company even in public. No, I didn't want her to leave. I never wanted to be away from her again. The bond we had was incredibly strong.

"I'm glad you can have both."

"Me too, but I know which one I can't live without."

She blushed, smiling.

Her reading my thoughts reminded me of something I'd been meaning to ask and kept forgetting. "That day you came to my room, my mother said Samuel was caught stealing and she fired him. She said he stole some things while you guys were all eating, but he was holding the door when everyone left. Do you know anything about it?"

Angie paled a bit. I immediately hated the sight of her fear.

“He pointed me to your room. I didn’t know how sick you were. No one still does.”

My chest hurt. “Mother had to make sure they believed her heir was alive and well so it didn’t weaken her.”

Angie frowned. “What?”

I waved it off. “I’ve noticed some things, but I haven’t put it all together yet. I’ll tell you when I do.”

“So she sent him away because he let me into your room?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. Or maybe she needed a scape goat.”

Now Angie’s face drained of color. I slid a comforting hand to her wrist. “It’s probably because he broke her rules over you. Chill out.”

Angie nodded, but didn’t regain that healthy glow even when Daniel showed up and we took turns teaching her to drive our dirt bikes.

As we finished the lessons and Daniel rode into the center of the field to do some new tricks, Angie settled on the ground near my feet. When she glanced up, her irises were violet and I knew she was using her gift for something. I held still and tried to figure out what it was, curious if Daniel knew what she could do. Had she trusted him enough to give up that huge secret?

“No,” Angie murmured. “I want to know why he’s upset.”

I hadn't realized he was. I studied Daniel, noting the subtle glances he kept throwing toward Angie. *He's jealous. He likes you too.*

Angie blushed, letting go of the connection. "I thought he liked boys."

I chuckled. She was still so innocent. If we were lucky, life would let her stay that way for a few more years.

"What should I do?"

That told me she hadn't had any feelings for Daniel or she would already know how to handle it. My worry eased; compassion came from my mouth. "Still be his friend, but tell him you're not interested if it comes up. It's that easy."

Angie smiled, relieved. "Good. Okay. I can do that."

"But only if you want to," I forced myself to add. "If you like him—"

Angie smacked my arm, grinning at me, and I let it go right then. I had no reason to fear her friendship with Daniel. She was mine.

Angie's cheeks grew redder as her confirming smile sent heat into my cold heart.

Across the frozen field, Daniel watched us unhappily.

1995

Chapter Fourteen
Dangerous Decisions
January to June

Angie

“**H**old still!”

Georgie had me wedged behind the supply shelves, hands roaming my body while the employees and my mother covered the busy lunch shift. I squirmed low to duck under him, but his growl of delight said that was what he wanted.

His hard flesh smacked me in the cheek. I tried not to gag as he held me down by my shoulder, increasing the pressure when I only stayed there like a cowered dog. If I wanted to get out of here, I would have to yell, bite, or do what he wanted. The first two would cause bad things.

I opened my mouth.

“That’s a good girl...”

As Georgie abused me, I sent my mind to better places, slamming the door on the witch. She wanted me to use my gifts on him now, but I was terrified of him, of Mother Brady, and of the laws that said I

wasn't allowed to be on my own yet. They would lock me up somewhere and do things with my power or they would send me around foster homes until I was of age and then I'd never be with Marc. Not to mention having to face all those strangers at the police station, in court, in town afterwards. I didn't have the ability to transfer schools. I would always be known for this if we were caught.

When he finished, Georgie shoved me away from him, as if it had been my idea. "You...get out of here!"

I fled, spitting and crying from the shame. I heard Georgie tell someone he'd just caught me stealing and the fury burned brighter. Each time afterwards, I got closer to the witch's point of view. Georgie wasn't going to stop. I really might have to kill him if Marc couldn't get me out of here. Since New Year's, the attacks had become more frequent. Sleeping at home was nearly impossible now. With my mom always passed out, Georgie was unsupervised. Peeling back the covers to stare and touch me were his favorite things to do.

I ran for the newly-planted cornfield, not caring when I knocked a woman out of my way. I had to get out of here before I did something I would regret. Not that it wouldn't feel good to fight. I was sick of having to take it because of my age, sick of people waiting for me to reach the right age to be taken. When did it get to be *my* life and *my* choices?

I detoured around the bus stop where Rodney and Scot liked to wait for the kids they'd chosen to

terrorize. I ran across the main road, then jumped the embankment and let myself roll down to where the rows of corn started.

Bruised and dirty, but still cleaner than I'd been five minutes ago, I scrambled to my feet and took off running again. I kept my arms in automatically, like I did when there were plants here to keep from doing damage. I forced my legs to keep going until I was half the distance to the Sticker's Grove gate. Someday, I wouldn't stop, gasping for air, while I stared at that fence. *Someday, I will get out!*

"Hey!"

I turned to see who had yelled, hoping it wasn't the farmer and Ticker. The dog might tolerate me and then again, he might not, and I was too upset to concentrate.

Judging by his outfit, the man was from Fernald. He lumbered through the rows, snapping plants that were just starting to come up. "You can't be here!"

Surprised to find someone way out here dressed like a giant bug, I had frozen.

"Girl!"

If he told anyone, Mother Brady and Georgie would know about the clubhouse and the cornfield. They would find my stash of things from Marc!

I had already jerked up my hood to keep people from seeing me crying as I left the back of the restaurant. Maybe he wouldn't remember what I looked like. I spun around and fled toward the clubhouse as the Fernald man shouted again, this time in fear.

I heard an awful growl and tried to go faster. There was no way I could calm Ticker down while he was attacking someone I didn't know. Only my love for Marc had made me strong enough the first time.

“Help!”

“What are you doing in my cornfield?!”

I got away from them as quickly as I could, wondering if the arriving farmer might shoot the man. I hid inside the clubhouse we'd done a good job of disguising, waiting for the chaos, but it didn't come.

Sometimes life was like that, I was learning. When I expected fireworks, nothing happened, but the minute I thought I had earned peace, blam! It was hard to accept that as an adult I wouldn't have any control over that part of my life either.

As I huddled in the rear of the clubhouse by the exit, I wondered what Marc was doing right now. I would have given about anything for him to come in. He had no idea how much I missed him when he was away. There was a small room in my heart that ached and throbbed at the mere thought of him. The future, so close and yet so far away, was now my nightmare and my salvation. How could one person be so afraid all the time? And how could so many people be evil? Even Patty didn't have an answer for that.

Over time, I had realized she was a perfect example of the other side. I learned many things from Patty, but the most important turned out to be

that there were good people, good adults. She was kind and loving, and protective when she could be. If Patty had been my mom, my life would have been completely different. I would have been wanted.

The second most important thing I learned from Patty was control. As I grew older and the hormones flowed openly, it was harder to keep my secrets. Patty taught me ways to get a release, to refill the energy I used, and to respect what I could do. If not for her books, I would have been discovered and then who knows what would have happened? She gave me the two things I needed most—compassion and guidance. I didn't know what Patty got from helping me, but she never asked for anything in return. She also refused to tell me about her life or why she was alone when there were pictures of family on her walls. She said the past had to be let go of and you couldn't do that if you talked about it. It was an area we disagreed on. If you forgot the past, you ended up repeating it in the future. The witch was very clear on that point.

My witch was growing stronger by the day, but it was harder to direct and often came in bursts I couldn't manage. I got far from the town and people when I practiced, finally taking Patty's advice. I liked being by the creek in case things got out of hand. Wading in the cool water was soothing when I got frustrated. Making the doors open so I could search ahead was hard. A lot of the time, it wouldn't work for me at all. The witch said that was a concentration issue, but I didn't understand yet. My

age was always holding me back in one way or another.

The only time I felt at peace was when Marc and I were together. I spent years being spied on, touched, and forced to do things that made me throw up afterwards. The days passed in an ugly blur for me, but I'm positive that if I tried, I could recall every moment of fear and desperation. Like the days when a can of corn was my dinner or the evenings that I shivered in fear at the sound of Georgie's car pulling into the driveway. His control over himself was failing. He couldn't wait to enjoy his toy. That's how he thought of me, and I hated the nights, the darkness, because of his visits.

During the day, however, I still wasn't allowed to be in the house where I might disturb my mother. Despite Georgie's order for her to keep better track of me, I continued to roam our small neighborhood alone, getting further from safety each day. I'd already found the haunted cabin (a falling down shack with condoms on the floor. Ew!) and kept going to the thickly wooded property the older kids swore held a camp of homeless men. I didn't find any signs of that, but I wasn't hunting for people. I was searching for peace.

I did see a few people during my treks. Most of the time, I heard them coming and ducked out of sight, but not always. Twice, I got in trouble and had to be rescued. The first time was a stranger who found me in the woods. If not for Daniel, Georgie would have lost his prize right then. Not much

bigger than I was, Daniel had screamed until the man ran off. Then he'd taken me to the cornfield and helped clean me up. He didn't offer to take me home or tell my parents what had happened. I was grateful. If Georgie found out someone had almost taken what he considered his, I'd never be let out of the house again, no matter what my mother wanted. But it didn't stop me from going back. Reckless.

The second time I had to be rescued, it was from family. Put a girl in front of me, and I would draw blood. Change it to a male and I froze, becoming a quivering ball of fear. The day my cousins caught me was no different. I was already fending off Rodney and Scot at the gatherings, and avoiding them whenever I could. As I roamed after Georgie's abuse in the restaurant, I was lost in misery, wondering why Marc hadn't been at the Easter gathering, praying that he would be here tomorrow for the July parade. I was in the deep woods again, well passed the haunted shack and the place where the homeless people were supposed to be. I didn't realize I'd gone so far until I came to the remotest farm in our town. I was so isolated that only fate could have saved me.

Marc

I stayed on the farm for the first half of 1995, branding and baling like we'd always done, occasionally helping the neighbors, but this year, I didn't enjoy it. After kissing Angie, I couldn't stop thinking about her. I knew I had to keep distance between us, but it hurt. I told myself it was for our own good when I skipped the Easter gathering at the Brady home in favor of taking Jeanie to a couple's event that the church had organized. We rode in the wagon, and snuggled under blankets with the other teens, but all Jeanie cared about was her new habit of drinking. I never got into her car anymore. We always took mine.

By June, the headaches and stomachaches for no reason finally got it through my thick skull that I was feeling Angie's misery. She was just a kid and kids had to be reminded of things, but I still stayed on the farm. I didn't trust myself not to kiss her again.

I held out until July and then the flags started going up and I broke. All it took was my imagination pulling up an image of her planting our flag alone—again. I couldn't keep doing that to her. I would strictly mind my behavior and give us both a much-needed visit. We'd done longer stretches, but these last six months had seemed to be harder. I assumed it was because I'd declared my feeling and intentions. There were still times when I couldn't

believe she'd said yes. I was going to be a very lucky man.

Once I decided to see her, I went right then, taking along a baseball and bat for our entertainment. To make this work, I had to sneak out. That was easy, but I had a long bike ride that took me through the deep woods at the top of the hill. I was almost to the summit, trying to decide if I should stop somewhere for snacks, when I realized the woods had gone quiet. That's what I called it when the birds and bugs stopped making noise. It meant I wasn't alone.

As I had that thought, a female scream echoed from behind me, followed by excited male voices.

“Grab her!”

“Watch the feet!”

The sounds were urgent, bad.

“Get off me!”

The shriek was piercing.

I didn't want to get involved, but my honor wouldn't let me drive off. I quickly killed the quiet engine of my bike and rolled it behind a tree. I took the bat in case it was needed and ran toward the struggling.

“Stop!”

“Shut up! Hold still!”

Getting close, I suspected what I'd find. I'd recognized the male voices. My cousins were bullying the neighborhood during their summer break, as usual.

As I came around a thick tree trunk, I couldn't see the struggling female's face, only her bare legs, but it was indeed my big cousins pinning her to the ground. They were shoving her shirt up, pinching her and pulling at her jeans. These two had become terrors during gatherings. My mother had already handled a similar situation last week.

"Flip her over!" Scot lowered his pants as Rodney squirmed on top of her.

I moved forward, hoping I could distract them... I froze, unable to breathe around the rage. It was Angie on the ground, Angie's eyes wide with terror, *my* Angie... I glanced down at the bat still in my hand.

Crack!

The impact from the bat knocked Rodney aside as blood splattered. I swung again.

Rodney crumpled to the dirt.

Fury peaking, I punched Scot in the mouth before his surprise faded.

He fell. I swung the bat a third time, splitting his cheek open. I wanted them dead! Everything would have ended there if not for Angie.

"You have to stop!"

I didn't want to, but clearly, she was right. The two boys were bleeding and groaning.

I tossed the bat to the ground. "Scum!"

My cousins struggled up with narrowed glances of hatred that I expected to fill with rage. I braced myself as they began to understand what had happened. I'd never crossed them before. We'd

almost become friends until I'd had to spend years listening to them talk about the things they wanted to do to Angie and every other female they knew.

The brothers stood together, holding bleeding wounds as their slow brains worked through what had happened. Their glowers went from me to Angie as the anger grew, and for the first time, I used the authority that was my birthright. "Does my mother need to hear about this?"

It was a warning and an escape for them, if they were afraid of me at all. They should be.

"No," Scot, the eldest, answered sullenly. "But it ain't over."

"Get lost."

They went slowly. The glares they threw at Angie said she was now a bigger target than she had been. Those sharp glances were already planning revenge and she would be the one to pay because I was off-limits. Hurting me might bring my mother's wrath, but if they took it out on the whore's kid? She'd probably send them to Disney Land as a reward. I turned to see if Angie was okay.

The fear in her expression hurt me. She was sitting with her knees to her chest, cowering against a tree, and those eyes! I couldn't stand for her to feel that way.

"Thank you." She tugged her shirt down.

I stayed where I was. "Sure." It was a timid response compared to what I had just done to help her, but nothing I was thinking would have been

better. I wanted them dead. That would never change now.

I scanned Angie for injuries and couldn't help noticing that she'd grown up again while I was gone. She looked my age now.

“Are you gonna get them in trouble?”

Like any male staring into that sad, beautiful face, I stumbled. “No...maybe... Do you want me to?” I would try if she did, but it could get ugly.

“No, not unless it will make you safe.”

It was still so strange to hear someone caring about me. I sometimes went years without it. “*I'll be fine either way.*”

Angie looked away.

She tensed when I dropped down next to her, but she didn't run. That was another thing about Angie that had always impressed me. She hated to run from anything.

Silence hung between us for a long moment where I accepted that she was in real danger. We had years to go still before I could even attempt to get her away from here. Rodney and Scot would catch up to her a lot sooner than that. I would have to do something about this.

Frustration and sadness permeated the air, but I couldn't stop myself from staring. Two years ago, her new body had begun to emerge. I'd been able to ignore it because she was just Angie then, my friend. Now, I had felt the passions of a man and to say that I wanted her that way was like saying water was important to living. I could drink other things,

sleep with other females, but only Angie's well would be perfect and I knew it.

Angie wasn't scared now, but her sadness hit me in waves. She had never asked me to defy the family for her, but she was desperate for my protection. I was always being ripped out of her life. I'd begun to hate myself for the pain she suffered whenever I was gone, but I was scared to be here with her. Even now, I was afraid of giving in to the need of this man's body, to the love I held in my heart for her. I wanted to be disgusted by my attraction, to deny it and mean it, but Angie chose that moment to look at me.

"I love you."

The world shifted, and then there was no tree against my shoulder, no bloody bat at my feet. There was just the brilliant July sun, and my Angie.

"Are you okay?"

I nodded like an idiot, but speech wouldn't come. Her words had stunned me this time.

I slowly returned to trying to find my determination to wait for her to finish growing up. Her wants didn't occur to me until she frowned and spoke what I'd been trying not to think of.

"But I don't want to wait, Marc. If it's wrong later *and* it's wrong now, what does it matter?" She staggered off.

I stayed against that tree until the light faded and my curfew passed. I knew I was in trouble.

A thousand ideas went through my mind. For once, I was grateful for my mother's insistence on

thinking a situation through before reacting. I hadn't been able to when I'd spotted Angie fighting with my cousins, but now, my brain was full of the slipknots and tightropes I was about to walk.

Rodney and Scot came searching for me an hour after dark. I stayed against the tree as they approached me, shoulder-to-shoulder. Both wearing bandages, they avoided looking at the crusty bat at my feet and kept their distance.

"She has people out searching for you." Scot rubbed his shoulder.

"I'm going to give you my pass to the convention this year." I immediately took control of this dangerous situation. The convention was a weeklong excuse to party that didn't even end when dawn came.

Both of my cousins studied me suspiciously. They flinched when I stood up. *Good.*

"Why?"

"Yeah, why?"

For being older than me, they were dumber. I let them figure it out on their own, sweeping the area to be certain that we were still alone.

"What's in it for you?"

"Why would you...?"

Here it comes. I braced.

"Son of a bitch!"

"What?"

"*He* wants to poke her!"

“He wants to poke who?”

“Angie!”

Their next words were too crude for me to repeat, and the insults hurt—mostly because they were true.

“Wait until your mother hears!”

Before I could reply, Scot elbowed his brother. “We don’t tell, stupid! That’s why we get his slot at the convention.”

I slowly bent down and retrieved the bat. “What did you tell everyone about today?”

“No one knows we were hurt.” Rodney studied me uneasily. “We went to that traveling doctor.”

“Perfect.” I pinned them with my rage, letting them see I wasn’t over it just because I’d drawn blood. “I’ll hunt you down if you betray me. That includes even talking to Angie again. Don’t *ever* do it.”

“Then we want more than your convention place.” Scot understood they would have to take another beating. Their current injuries were too minor for me to be punished that much.

Expecting it, I made the deal too good to refuse. “I won’t tell anyone that you guys killed all those pets a few years ago, or how you watch the widow and break things on her property to get close to her. I also won’t mention your pot plants behind the silo or the fact that your customers hate you. Don’t fuck with me and I won’t have to do the same to you.” I raised the bat a bit, enjoying their nervous reactions. “Take off those bandages and come earn your pass.

This has to be serious for mother to buy it.” I couldn’t wait to hit them again.

It occurred to me, as I stepped into the front parlor with bloody shoes a short time later, that in some ways I was very much like my mother. Once I locked onto something, I rarely ever let go until I got it. In the past, those things had been simple—like getting to go to the farm and visiting the recruiting office. What I wanted now was life-changing. Awful magic spun through the air. I was choosing my path, my future. My mother would put an end to that as quickly as she discovered it, but I had a solid plan. She wouldn’t expect me to have gotten so far ahead of her. She was about to make a huge mistake.

“Is that you, Marcus?”

I sucked in air, heart a thumping mess. “Yeah, I’m here. Why?” My tone was a direct challenge.

It took about three seconds for my mother to appear. Instead of waiting for me to come to her, I’d already changed the tone of things.

“That isn’t very nice, Marcus.”

As I’d expected, there was a bible in one of her hands and a cane pole in the other. A beating and lecture were standard here when anyone stayed out after curfew.

Before my mother could launch into her scold or really look at me, Rodney and Scot stumbled through the door behind me, splattering her pristine carpet with blood.

It was chaos from there.

Chapter Fifteen
Stealing Happiness
July

Marc

It was almost two weeks before I was allowed, or able, to leave the house.

Any type of movement hurt, but it was a small price to pay. Not only was I home for the summer, but I would also be here for the rest of the year. I had to pay off the doctor bills by working at the restaurant. It had worked out even better than I'd planned. It helped that I'd attacked Scot again in front of my mother and promised to kill him as soon as we returned to the farm. I'd left her no choice but to bring me home. Losing those privileges was the cleverest thing I'd done so far in my life and my mother had no idea that this time. I'd played her and gotten what I needed. Time with Angie.

I met Angie at the tire swing as soon as I could walk upright, bruises finally fading. I wasn't able to stop myself from replaying the punishment when she asked me to.

"It's fairness, Marcus. The good book says an eye for an eye."

I grunted as Rodney's fist flew out and smashed into my stomach.

"And you raised your hand to them repeatedly! I'm shocked."

Scot's meaty paw sank into my ribs. The crack sent me to my knees, gasping.

"There can't be rewards for you. You'll have to stay here."

Rodney's punch put me on the floor, and even though I'd set it up this way, I swore that someday no one would ever be able to do it again. I would learn to fight and be better at it than everyone else, no matter how hard I had to work.

I thought longingly of my Angie as Scot's kick rolled me against the wall. I stayed there, holding onto the knowledge that I would be here to protect her for months.

"I'm so sorry!"

"I'm not. I get to be here, with you."

Angie darted forward and pressed her mouth to mine. Her magic swirled around us as the pain in my head and arm sank down, and then disappeared.

"Easy..." She tensed against my lips when the sensation became intense. The fire flared in my broken rib and then vanished, leaving me breathless.

Angie dropped down on the ground by the tire. I assumed she was tired from helping me. I was so full of energy now that I grabbed the tire and swung

across the open drop, shouting my happiness. That broken rib had hurt!

Angie laughed at my excitement. She clapped when I stood on the tire to do the tricks all the kids who came here tried. I'd had years to perfect them and I used the best ones now, trying to make sure she wasn't sad anymore or feeling guilty.

As the sun rose directly overhead, I dropped down by her in the shade of the weeds and curled my hand around hers.

Angie sucked in a breath at the contact, surprising me again with the response. I knew girls got the same feelings about their bodies that boys did, but I didn't know if it was at the same ages. I decided she wasn't old enough to have those feelings yet.

Angie must have caught the thought because she spun around and tackled me!

Angie straddled me. My hands clenched into fists.

Lightning flashed as the sky above us turned into a stormy mass that showered wind and rain.

Angie slowly stood up, swiping wet hair back. "I feel everything that you do!"

The storm blew harder for a minute and then Angie stretched out her hands and it slowly calmed. I realized her anger had triggered it and gasped. Not at the power, but at the emotions I could feel as she linked our minds.

I dream about holding you.

My heart and body reacted together and gave in to what we both wanted. “I won’t hold back as much.”

Angie scowled at me, but I refused to give more. I wouldn’t be yet another male who assumed her body would be mine to take. I stiffened when her voice came in my mind.

I can love you, but you’ll never own me.

That wasn’t what I wanted anyway. “Deal.”

I controlled the urge to seal it with a repeat of the action that shouldn’t happen again for years. I felt her withdraw from my mind at that choice.

“It’s not rejection. It’s caution. Anyone could come by here.”

“And when we’re completely alone and out of sight? Like in the clubhouse?”

I realized our conversation was once again way beyond her physical age, but Angie continued to respond as if she were an adult.

“Marc?”

“I haven’t answered that question for me yet, but it has to be slow.”

“We can kiss.” Her cheeks flamed. “Right?”

I wanted to say yes. Of course, I wanted to, but I shook my head. “I don’t think so. Not until you’re older.”

“Just for hello and goodbye.”

I could feel my will crumbling. “Uh, maybe.”

“And on my birthday, we do more. A lot more.”

I groaned, not sure we should do any of that this year. Things were moving too fast for me.

Angie respected that. “Okay. Whatever you decide, I’ll do.”

I understood what that meant better than she did and felt my cheeks grow hot.

“So, uh, no more kisses, huh?” Angie began to grin. “Not even one more?”

How could I tell her no? Bodies separated, arms at my sides, I did it before the guilt could interfere.

Angie

This kiss wasn't like the first ones. The feel of his lips did funny things to me. I found myself breathing differently, hands curling into fists. It wasn't exactly what my mom's smut books described, but it was close enough that I recognized it for desire. My body liked him.

I leaned closer. My hand brushed his, sending a chill through us both. I did it again, quickly before he could pull away, and blue light shot out where we touched.

Marc didn't move. It surprised me that he was allowing so much. I moved even closer, wanting to feel his arms around me, like he'd done with Jeanie at the Christmas party.

I leaned against him. "Please?"

Marc took me into his arms for the very first time as a lover. I was mesmerized, barely able to think. His body was hard against mine as he held me close. I could feel his heartbeat. My hands went to his hair to complete the dream.

"Mmm..."

The sound of Marc enjoying the embrace was incredible. I let my fingers curl into his hair. I'd always wanted to do that.

Marc broke the kiss with a gasp that gave me another chill. I liked making him feel good.

"No more...for a while."

I wasn't sure exactly what would happen if we didn't stop, but I knew he wouldn't hurt me. A line from one of the novels popped into my mind.

"A man needs a release, Victoria, and he'll get one wherever it's available."

That made me think of Jeanie. She was letting Marc go further than a kiss. It was always in her thoughts when we ran into each other.

"Are you okay?"

I nodded, still breathing weird. "Thinking."

Anyone else would have immediately asked about what, but not my Marc. He waited patiently. Finally, I let it out. "I have to ask a personal question."

Marc smiled. "Shoot."

I blushed again. "How much of that can we do before you go to her?" The air sparked with pain. "I hate her, by the way."

Marc was startled, mostly because of my age. I wasn't supposed to feel these things yet.

"I think we're okay for a while," he answered slowly, grinning at me.

He was so pretty to the power inside. I went into his arms eagerly. "You'll tell me when?"

"Yes. Why?"

My cheeks felt hot. "Never mind." I couldn't stand the thought of Marc being with anyone else. I didn't want to push him that way.

"I'm sorry I can't make that promise."

“I won’t always be off limits, I know,” I replied before he could say it. “Stop thinking that. It doesn’t help me. I want you *now*.”

Marc’s face twisted as he got a full blast of my pain and unhappiness. He grabbed me.

This kiss was wild, totally my Brady, and I tangled my fingers in his hair again as my body came to life. He claimed me with that kiss and I surrendered willingly.

Marc

“Marcie!”

Georgie was big. He was 6’2, with huge football player shoulders and a thick skull that sported a gigantic nose. It used to be the only thing I stared at when I came in here.

I spotted Angie serving customers at the far end of the counter and dropped my head. I was here to work off the medical costs of cracking Rodney and Scot with the bat.

Georgie took a quick glance to verify I was alone as he came from the back room. “We’ve missed you around here.”

The large checks that my friends and I added up probably have something to do with that. “Thanks. Busy with the training and farm.”

“And fighting with your cousins.” He frowned. “It’s not good for family to hurt each other so badly.”

“Yeah.” I accepted the scold. “I couldn’t stop myself.”

Georgie’s expression lightened. “I forgive you!” He burst into laughter.

I grinned, a bit more uneasy than I usually was around him. “Cool.”

He clapped me on the shoulder, sending me a foot down the counter. He laughed again. “We’ll have to fatten you up.”

He turned toward the restaurant that held one customer. “Angela!”

Angie came over with the tray of dishes that she'd started to put away. I had to look at her, but I tried to do it carefully.

She didn't glance at me at all.

"Marcie needs some breakfast before he starts working off his punishment. Feed him."

Georgie laughed once more, heading for the same grill area that she did. I saw her grip on the tray tighten as he leaned forward, saying something I couldn't hear. Whatever it was, she flushed and his booming laugh echoed again.

Georgie gave me another welcoming smile and then went into the backroom to finish the morning prep for the coming breakfast rush. I wanted to know what he said. For her to be nice to me so I would spend money here again?

"Yes."

I was startled to find Angie in front of me with a pad and a pen. I cleared my throat. "Goetta and eggs, over easy. And a coke."

She moved around the grill as if she'd been doing it for a while. I struggled to recall if she'd been here long. Had she been serving people last year when Jeanie was coming in for her afterschool club meetings?

Angie cracked the eggs in the bowl once the goetta started sizzling and then came to set the timer in front of me. She did it in an unthinking manner. I was struck again, harder this time, by her age. She was barely a teenager. How could she be so...womanly?

Angie tensed.

It was only for a second, but I'd seen it. She didn't like my thoughts, or at least, they made her nervous.

"Angela."

Georgie's tone wasn't kind.

Angie turned to me with a bored voice and scared expression that begged me to be very, very careful.

"So how come your girlfriend doesn't come in anymore?"

I blinked as I made the connection. She was scared. *Of Georgie*. "Uh, I'm not sure. I think the club got cancelled."

"Damn budgets!" Georgie muttered from the backroom, clearly listening.

"We were just wondering. Georgie was going to reserve that table for them every Saturday. You can tell her that," Angie ground out.

I smiled, trying to calm them both. "That might bring her back without the club. I'll tell her."

Angie went to flip the goetta and eggs. "Sucks that you're grounded."

I hid my grin. "Yeah. Have to be here all summer now."

She spun around to flash me a happy grin and then turned back to my food. "Guess we'll be seeing more of you."

"Yep. I like this place."

There was silence for a minute where we stole peeks at each other and listened to Georgie work in

the back. Being the only restaurant in town that was open this early had advantages.

“What will I do here?”

“You’ll have to ask Georgie. Rodney and Scot were table boys and greeters. Probably something like that.”

Georgie came out with a huge slab of bacon and began laying it on the grill. He whispered to Angie again. She moved faster getting my food.

The meal was probably good, but I tasted nothing, too busy feeling the tension. This was a small example of how it was with us while we walked the tightrope. It was uglier when my mother was around.

“You mind things.” Georgie pointed at Angie. “Get him started on seat-n-greet.”

“Okay.” She took over putting bacon on the grill.

When we were alone, the uneasy silence told me she was embarrassed. I kept my mouth shut. In public, we would be careful and casual, and I would protect her where I could. And when we were alone?

I suspected I would have a hard time telling her no over almost anything she wanted.

We had the restaurant mostly to ourselves as I sat at the counter while she explained what I had to do. I picked out details I’d allowed myself to ignore. Underweight, underdressed, frightened. That last one lurked in those startling blue depths and again, the urge to help her was overwhelming.

“Careful.” Angie moved over to scrape bacon grease from the grill. *He hears everything back there.*

I nodded to show I’d heard, resigning myself to causal talk. It was still better than not being here with her.

It was a long day and I worked hard, ribs throbbing again long before I was finished. It told me her power wasn’t as strong as I’d thought. I wasn’t healed, but I was a lot better as I cleared and wiped down tables, seated patrons, cleaned up after squalling babies, mopped, fetched, and of course, watched my Angie.

When the shift finally ended, we went in different directions and ended up in the cornfield minutes later.

“Are you going to be in the Senior Backwards show this year, if the reinstatement petition passes?” Angie sank down in the cool dirt under the tall corn plants.

“Nah. My mother would have a fit.”

“Too bad. Be funny to see you in a skirt.”

I grinned. I had a cool kid image at school with my car and leather jacket. I wasn’t going to endanger that with a silly Halloween show. My brother, Daryl, was going to take part in the show even though he’d already graduated. He was in the town council’s office now, the first Brady politician. He’d chosen to MC the event in full

dress—literally. My mother couldn't stop him, but she'd registered her disapproval by doubling his rent for the apartment she'd moved him into.

The tornado siren went off, making us flinch and look toward town. It was the normal weekly testing, but it still frayed our nerves.

“Got any good classes? New teachers?”

“Just one in chemistry. Mr. Sikes got the cancer last year. He left at summer break.”

“Oh. Sorry.” She leaned against my arm.

I smiled, wishing we could spend every afternoon this way. Even the sweat and aching ribs couldn't interfere with how perfect it felt.

To my delight, we did get to spend almost the entire summer together. No one questioned where we went after work, so long as we showed up at our homes in time for curfew. We stole our happiness that summer.

Many of our forbidden hours were spent asking each other questions, often laughing at the answers. On one hot day near the end of July, Angie rolled over in the dirt. “Will you get a tattoo?”

“Huh? Do I need one?”

“When you're a Marine, I mean.”

I hadn't thought about it. “Yeah. Why not?”

Angie grinned. “My name?”

I laughed, shrugging. “You may not like me anymore by then.”

Her face darkened in denial. “That won’t ever happen.”

She held my gaze long enough to be positive I knew she meant it. I sighed happily. “What about you?”

“What?”

“Tattoos.”

“Oh, I think a writer can have a tat. We can match!”

“A tat?” I tickled her. “A tat?”

When we were tired of wrestling, (I was afraid to let the sparks gain control and called it early) we lounged in the shade of the plants, watching ants and beetles struggles through the cracking dirt.

“So you picked being a writer?” I’d never thought about being anything that might make me famous.

“So far.” Angie laid back with no thought to the dirt getting in her hair. Jeanie never would have done that.

“But I don’t want the fame part. I just have all these stories in my mind. I think they might make great books or movies.”

“You’ll need another name.” I rolled over on my side so I could stare at her in the fading sunlight. “Otherwise, you’ll get famous and the reporters will come.”

Angie snickered. “I’ll go with Snow White and everyone will think I’m Georgie’s waitress.”

I laughed with her, remembering her story of the drinks going down Snow’s shirt. Snow was one of

the girls who always stood on the *she will* side of the barn dances. As I imagined a future where Angie was a writer, a powerful thought occurred. She would have a way to tell the world about things. That could be good for people around here, especially if she exposed the way my mother controlled the town. “How about making it the same as one of your characters? That way, you can act like her for marketing and stuff.”

“That’s crazy.” Angie was still chuckling over Snow. “People won’t like that.”

“I’ll bet they would, if it was a good character.”

She grew serious. “You think so?”

“Yes. We all like it when movie stars show up somewhere in character. Why not an author?”

Angie shrugged. “It’s...cheesy?”

Seeing she wouldn’t go for the half-truths, I told her all of it. “After what you’ve been through, Angie, you deserve to be famous. Use your real name and tell our story. Don’t let it all be hidden by our family.”

“Tell the world about what goes on here? About us?” She sat up. “Are you nuts?”

I wasn’t sure. I only knew the need for justice was strong at that moment. “Maybe. I hate it that everyone here keeps hurting and stealing and doing bad shit, but I can’t change it. Maybe you could, if you became a writer. Then you and I, and all the other kids here would finally feel like we had a voice. I like the idea.”

I could tell that Angie did too. It was the fear of repercussion she was worried about.

“I might. But it would have to be a lot more exciting. I’d have to make some stuff up.”

“Not if you added your... You know.” I waved. “Make it science fiction and then no one can even sue you.”

“I don’t know. You’re being helpful to the world. Maybe I should pick something better.”

I grinned. “You can just be mine, if you want.”

Angie blushed, smiling in the way I loved. She did finally get my meaning, though.

“You mean stay home and...”

“Have my babies.”

Her chest grew pointed. She gave me a silly grin that swelled my heart.

“I think I could do that...for a while.”

“You can do whatever you want, Baby-cakes. If you want a job, you’ll have one.”

“Cool.” Angie studied the ants by her leg for a minute. “What about my education? I’ll have to leave school when...”

I nodded to show her that I understood what she meant. Neither of us liked to speak it aloud and maybe be overheard or jinx things. “We’ll spend time at the library until you’re of age and then we’ll get you into night classes. Once you graduate those, you’ll take the test and have your diploma.”

“You looked into it already?”

I was very glad that I’d thought of it a few months ago. “Yep. Got ya covered.”

Angie leaned against my arm, hugging me. “I love you.”

“Forever?” She was usually the one to ask that.

“But not a minute more,” she repeated the answer with a grin and kissed my cheek. “*My Brady.*”

It turned me on when she whispered that to me. I couldn’t resist the urge to respond. When the kiss deepened into the type that brought true passion, I didn’t separate us for a long time. I wanted her to be certain of my feelings, but I also needed to be sure of hers. Things were closer now and I was constantly scared for us. I needed this reassurance as much as she did.

When we parted on each of those hot days, we did it the same way. I kissed her on the cheek and told her I’d see her in the morning.

Angie added, “Yes, you will” and smiled, and we were both able to go home for the few hours we had to be apart. By the end of the summer, we were throwing *Honey* and *Baby* in there and exchanging a soft kiss. We didn’t talk about what would happen when our time together ended this year. We both refused to think of it.

But that didn’t stop it from happening.

My mother gave me a full month at the restaurant before she called me back to the house and other chores. It gave my ribs time to heal and made me very pliable to whatever she wanted. Four weeks of being with Angie nearly every day had

been good for me. I was smiling more, calm and eager to start each day. It was great.

Until it was over.

Leaving was always hard. I did it quickly so it wouldn't hurt us as badly. I told Angie on the same day I had to go. I didn't realize I should have given her more warning until I informed her I'd have to stay away for the next few months and then tears began rolling down her cheeks. I quickly swiped them away with my dishtowel, hoping no one saw us. "Come on, Baby-cakes."

Angie tried to smile for me, but the tears grew thicker and she fled to the bathroom.

Miserable once again, I left. When would I get to be free of this heavy guilt? When did I get to be happy? Every time I was, life interfered. How could I stop that from happening?

Knowing that I couldn't didn't make it any easier, but I returned to where I'd left off on the training without protesting. This was the math side of things and my mother was handling those lessons personally. Sneaking out would be impossible. In a few more years, Angie would be old enough and we would be gone. I would try to make it all up then, but I knew, walking home that day, that I was making the right choice. We were a couple short years from freedom. We just had to be strong enough to tough it out.

Chapter Sixteen
Washed Clean
August to December

Marc

In the fall of 1995, just as I entered my senior year of high school, my mother decided it was time for the entire family to be baptized.

She'd done this to everyone about 10 years ago and I had hated it then. Now, I absolutely loathed the idea. My mother, who pretended to be holy and care for the souls of the town, was a hypocrite and I didn't want to go through with her ceremony. Many of the family resented it, but when she promised the dinner afterward would have an open bar, the confirmations flowed in and left me no choice. I couldn't fight her alone.

The town's biggest church sat atop a hill on New Haven Road. At the bottom was a busy intersection that held the library where the geeks and younger kids lingered in the summer with their parents. The teens preferred the Drive-in and Stricker's Grove. Located between the town and the trailer park, the church only saw the entire Brady clan once every few years.

Today, the line of vehicles heading up the hill was longer than I'd ever witnessed. We had relatives in from as far away as Arizona and Nevada, where they'd gone to handle their branch of the family business. I'd learned that we were now spread across 15 states, but I hadn't expected so many people to show up. It proved my mother's hold was as strong as ever.

The parking lot wasn't large enough to hold all the cars and trucks. We parked in the grass that lined the lot and hoped no one came by driving too fast to avoid the bumpers that hung out.

The family gathered in groups in the parking lot as they arrived, discussing the harsh summer and fires the country had been plagued with this year. I stood in the rear of these adult circles, quiet and respectful while I observed. I didn't even remember some of these people.

Mary stood at the top of the church stairs with the minister, greeting people as she scanned our clan. I felt her gaze go over me, finding my innocent behavior to be just the opposite, and I reluctantly made my way to her side. She liked it when she and I presented the Brady face to the world.

After a few minutes of standing by her, Mary waved at me to go inside, to where the first few people were putting on white robes for the ceremony. I grouchily gave up my leather jacket and let the church members dress me like an angel without a halo. I'd never understood duplicating or copying moments of the past. Weren't people

supposed to learn from those mistakes and not repeat them? This felt like practicing it just to do it all wrong again. That was as deep into religion that I got. I was more occupied with observing my mother.

I used to think she brought us all together for moments like this so the family bond would grow stronger, but I knew better now. She used these days to assign places, suspend employments in person, and remove those who had displeased her since the last gathering. By the end of this farce, I expected no less than half a dozen uncles in the back of a nearby bar swilling beers and talking about how to get even.

The baptism ceremony itself was quick and painless. I walked up the stairs that led to what I called the indoor pool. Roughly 10' x 10', it was filled with water that had been blessed by the minister.

I sank down into the waist-high, warmed liquid with a grimace.

The minister waved to the reaction. "Behold! The flesh twitches as the sins hit water that has been sanctified by the blood of the lamb!"

I heard church members give the expected responses, (oh, Lord, oh yes! Heal him, Jesus!) then the minister put his hand over my nose and ducked me backwards under the water, murmuring a prayer.

Without time to suck in air, I choked a bit, but I managed to smile and climb out of the pool without breaking down in coughs. I sloshed to the waiting

changing room and plain clothes we all had to wear for the rest of the time we were here. It proved we had been washed in the blood of Christ, or so everyone kept saying. I hadn't remembered how creepy it felt to be dressed like one of the Amish.

I got a bottle of water from the cooler my mother had ordered stocked, nodding to those I knew and to those I didn't. The older family, who had at least been able to refuse the baptism, let me pass with curious glances. It made me nervous.

As the day wore on and the line of people waiting to be cleared of their sins shortened, most of the family went downstairs to enjoy the singing or the lunch table set up in the recreation room. The weather had turned too rainy and windy for many of them, but I lingered on the front stairs as cars came and went. Some people were able to leave once they'd been blessed, or fired, and some were just now showing up because they'd had to work.

I spotted a familiar brown wagon chugging up the hill and realized Angie was on my mother's list. She and I would eat at the youth table together and then be sent on the hayride, if my mother hadn't cancelled that.

Georgie quickly parked and lumbered out of the driver's seat.

I froze as he yanked Angie by the arm and shoved her toward the church. He was clearly pissed.

Angie's mom put a hand on his arm, probably trying to remind him that family members were watching.

In response, Georgie twisted Frona's arm up behind her back and marched her all the way to the church stairs.

I couldn't help the horror as I stared at Angie, at the bruises on her pale skin. Georgie had hit her?

Georgie noticed my glower as Angie darted by. He used his free hand to shove me out of the way.

Arms pinwheeling for balance, I fell into the wet bushes on the side of the stairs and landed in the mud.

Angie

Georgie rushed mom and me down the stairs and into the preparation room, then immediately left, stomping outside.

My mom dropped to her knees, rubbing her arm, but the pills kept her in such a fog that I didn't think she really felt it. I had. The bruise was already forming on my arm and my eye. I couldn't believe he'd brought us here anyway.

The church people were horrified. That brought Mother Brady to the doorway to see for herself. Because Georgie had carried it into public, our family now expected her to handle things. I wanted her to let it go. She didn't know how bad Georgie was getting. If she talked to him, it would only make things worse for us.

Today's fight had been over me riding on Daniel's bike. Georgie had spotted us during a supply trip for the restaurant. When my mom had finally come from her stupor to find out why he and I were screaming, he had attacked her for not watching me like she'd been told to. I tried to pull him off and got a black eye from a backhanded slap.

I shrugged away from the concerned church strangers, like my mom did. We let the family take us to a rear room to treat our injuries. As I held the ice pack to my face, I wondered if they would make me go out to be baptized this way. I had been looking forward to knowing I wasn't evil despite the voice inside, but not anymore. Marc was here; he'd

witnessed some of Georgie's abuse and it was too much. I didn't think I could get through the baptism ceremony without crying.

I'd gotten a quick glimpse of Marc flailing in the mud. I did hope that he was okay, but I didn't want to visit with him this time. I had no idea what to say now that he knew some of what I'd been hiding all these years. After his reaction to Rodney and Scot trying to hurt me, he would be able to understand why I'd kept quiet.

The church members decided my mother and I were in too much emotional turmoil to be able to accept the Holy Spirit the way we needed to be. A car was brought around to drive us home.

I was relieved, but also insulted. Mary needed to get rid of us so the talk would get off her abusive brother and return to her. As I climbed into the rear of the Brady car—the first and last time I was ever in it—my stomach lurched. I blew chunks all over her backseat.

It almost made the day worthwhile for me.

Marc

Angie being hurt sent so much rage through me that I'd fled the church, covered in mud that I later had to clean from my car seat. I wanted to attack Georgie, then comfort Angie and expose our sins to the world. To keep myself from ruining everything we'd been planning, I had to leave.

Unable to do more than get drunk or get into a fight I couldn't win, I took my rebellion to the next level, defying both God and my mother. I didn't know why it was so satisfying to sit in the church parking lot unhooking Jeanie's pink bra right after being baptized, but it was.

Five hours after I'd been cleaned of my sins, Jeanie ground her damp body against me and I tilted my hips to line us up.

This was the second time we'd gone all the way and I wanted to take my time so I could practice. Someday, Angie and I would do this. In that moment, as lust flowed, I discovered the age-old escape of being with one person while pretending it was someone else. My kisses softened, my penis grew harder than the car we were in. Jeanie growled in delight against my lips.

She had been disappointed last time, but I was determined to make up for it. I hadn't expected the need to take control and I'd sprayed my delight all over her thigh before she reached her climax. Afterward, I'd vowed that would never happen again and it wouldn't.

Jeanie smeared lipstick over my cheek as she bucked wildly, trying to push me over the edge so she could scorn me again. To make sure that didn't happen, I slid a hand between us like Larry had suggested. When she started moaning, I knew I had her.

I didn't let up until Jeanie cried my name and even then, I kept using my hand to be positive she really enjoyed it. When she collapsed against my chest, I eagerly helped her lay down on the seat. As I slid between those long legs, pushing iron, my lids closed and that forbidden face and body focused in my mind. I rutted like a pig for a minute before pulling out to coat Jeanie's thigh—this time with my male honor intact.

Jeanie was still smiling as I pulled my pants up, leaving her to clean the mess this time—like she'd demanded of me on our first try. I lit a cigarette. I finally understood those scenes in movies now.

Jeanie slowly recovered and dressed, not saying anything. That's when she was content. I enjoyed the pride of proving I was a man.

“You wanna go out again?”

I grinned at her question, ego swelling further.
“Yep. Car?”

“My parents aren't home next weekend. They have a long trip.”

“I'll be there.” Now that Jeanie was putting out for me, I planned to enjoy it to make up for all the times I'd listened to her nag or whine over the years.

Then I would take what I'd learned and use it to make Angie cry my name.

My body hardened again at the thought. I checked the time. "We've still got an hour. Turn over."

Jeanie was happy with my performance and rolled over on the seat so I could reach her dress. As I shoved deep, she moaned and slid her hand between her legs. Chuckling, I started those quick strokes she liked and studied her every reaction. I had a lot to learn.

Losing my virginity to Jeanie's knowing body gave me the distraction I needed to stay away from Angie, but she never dulled or became less important to me. I was just old enough to foresee the hell that was coming and to keep waiting. At 17, I couldn't do anything about Angie's awful life yet, but I added Georgie to my list of people I owed big time. At some point, he would pay for hurting my Angie.

Angie

I didn't understand how people could let themselves get out of control until December of 1995.

After Marc seeing Georgie's abuse, I was glad that he stayed away, but I also missed him terribly. We'd had a wonderful summer break together. It had almost killed me when it ended, and I was still carrying that pain and anger. Some days were harder than others.

I'd been dealing with bullies for a long time—other girls who didn't like me for any number of reasons. They preferred to gang up on me and their other victims. In gym, they waited in groups in the locker room. In art, the supply room. For music, the instrument room. They picked a place where they wouldn't get in trouble by a teacher who couldn't ignore it due to the rest of the class watching. Having an audience wasn't good for a bully unless the audience was on their side.

In November, I had won a public debate against the school council over holding a Christmas dance that only straight-A students could attend. My English teacher had put me up to it. Verina O'Riley, a popular council skank I'd heard was infectious, had been harassing me ever since. We had two classes together. In the first, Home-Economics, she had a large support group of other trashy, well-liked

girls. In the second, Computer Education, she was all by herself.

I didn't have a group of girls in any class, so I figured that made us even. I was going to get Verina alone and talk to her, try to apologize if that would get her off my back. I understood I had embarrassed her by pointing out the flaws in her arguments. I hoped apologizing would be enough.

As I approached the computer class, trying to figure out how to begin such a conversation, I didn't realize the group of bullies from the Home-Ec class were right outside the computer room.

Verina spotted me with glee. "There's the know-it-all!"

I cringed at the laughter, but inside, I had so much anger! No Marc, and no Daniel now that we were forbidden by Georgie to spend any time together. No money to get out, too young, no protection. It was all too much, and that anger I was always carrying raised its head and asked to be let out. I didn't know what that might mean. I held out a little longer, refusing.

I tried to march by the group, but one of the eighth graders grabbed me and shoved me into the circle. The girls pushed me back and forth, pulling my hair, my books, and my school bag until everything was on the ground. They might have ripped my clothes off too if the teacher hadn't heard people chanting 'fight!' 'fight!' and come running. I wanted to do more, but with 10 of them and one of

me, there was no way I could win. I suffered the humiliation in silence.

The computer teacher slung girls aside to get to me, but I'd already been too abused to accept the kindness he wanted to offer as the smirking girls backed away or ran for their rooms. I shrugged off his arm and stomped into the class to take my seat.

The teacher picked up my books and folder as he berated the older girls, but when he and Verina came in, closing the class door, her smirk told me she had excused herself somehow. Despite being caught, she wasn't going to get in trouble. The rage went up another level, and I snapped. But it wasn't wild frenzy and screaming. I stood, walked over to the next row of seats.

Verina glanced up. That smirk returned. "What?"

I leaned down as if to whisper something...and then slammed her face into the computer as hard as I could.

As her nose shattered and bright red droplets sprayed over the cracked screen each time she screamed, as the other kids shouted and flinched away, I realized I was turning into Georgie.

Marc

It was hard to believe Angie had been suspended for two weeks for attacking another student and almost cutting her throat on the glass.

The story had come from my mother. The tales were even worse from the family. Angie had grown too wild for school, according to everyone. It was easy for them to overlook the fact that Georgie was beating on her and Frona. I had no doubt that it was connected, but I still couldn't be around her right now. I suspected my mother had told me what Angie did just to draw a reaction. Mary hadn't liked how I'd refused to work with Georgie anymore. She hadn't believed me about it being because the man had shoved me into the mud.

Had she figured out my scheme with Rodney and Scot? Those two were back from the convention where they'd been arrested for drunken behavior in public. My mother was planning to send them to the farm soon and I was glad. I didn't want Angie to run into them again. Even with my threats, she wasn't safe. Those two had no morals and they'd had time to make sneaky plans of their own. When January rolled around, I would also be sent back to the farm and the family training with the uncles. I wanted to be with Angie, but she hadn't come from her trailer since being suspended. I'd run into Daniel recently, riding his bike alone. He told me Angie hadn't been out of the trailer or restaurant in weeks. She was being held prisoner.

By Christmas, the stories had faded and I hoped my mother would have the family gathering somewhere that Angie would be able to attend. To my anger, it was held at the restaurant and Angie was forced to wait on everyone with Georgie's other hired girls. It must have been humiliating for her. That drove my reaction.

When Georgie finally sent Angie home—on foot, in the snow—I pulled up in a blind curve and popped the passenger door open.

She didn't hesitate.

Knowing we only had a couple hours, I drove into the woods at the top of the hill and hid us in the snowy trees. We were both minutes from home this way.

When I killed the engine and looked over, Angie's smile made it worth the risk. We'd been apart for five months this time.

Angie could have started babbling and I wouldn't have minded, but she only scooted a little closer and rested against my muscled arm. I was always improving my body when I had free time. I hoped she noticed.

Peace filled the car. We spent half the time that way, just enjoying being together. It had been a long, stressful year for both of us.

Feeling the clock ticking, I shifted to face her, wanting to stare now while I could. As she aged, she got prettier. I started to ask if she and her mom were

okay, but Angie distracted me, not wanting to discuss it.

“Can I kiss you?”

Her soft plea went through me like lightning. I agreed before I could think about it. I always wished it was Angie with me in my car, not Jeanie, and now, it was.

Angie liked the necklace I got her and the watch she gave me was great, but the time together was our real gift. We were about to do another six-month stretch and these moments were all we had to hold on to. I wouldn't have traded them for anything.

As Angie prepared to get out of the warm car, she asked a question I wasn't ready to answer.

“Are you still joining the Marines after you graduate in June?”

“...not until next January. They need the help on the farm.”

“Okay.” Angie leaned over, content that I would be back at least once more before I signed up. “Thank you.”

I melted as she kissed me so softly that I barely felt her lips.

“I love you.”

“Good night, Baby.” I suddenly wished I could hold her while she fell asleep.

“See you in the morning,” she whispered.

Six months of mornings to get through first. I swallowed a lump in my throat. I would miss her.

Angie wiped away her tears and flashed me a sad smile that hurt my heart.

“It still fits. It’s always night for me until you come home. One long night.”

Christmas break was over for me the very next day. My mother shipped me to the farm to resume my old customer route and tours with the uncles. She didn’t act as if she knew I’d been with Angie, but I couldn’t be sure.

Determined not to let things come between us anymore, I called the restaurant the next day, hanging up and calling back a bit later until Angie answered the phone so I could tell her I had to leave again. It was one of the few times I was ever able to do that.

1996

Chapter Seventeen
Poison Ground
January to June

Angie

In 1996, the Enquirer broke [the story about Fernald.](#)

Hours after the story went live, we became the focus of state and local investigations that caused a horde of reporters and scientific employees to descended on us, knocking on doors at all hours, cornering people in their businesses and as they shopped. For the town, Fernald wasn't the emergency the rest of the nation seemed to think it was. When the details began to emerge however, people were horrified. Fernald, the feed materials processing center that we had lived only a half mile from our entire lives, was actually a uranium enrichment processing site with a gigantic leak that had been poisoning us for more than a decade.

Panic hit our sleepy little town as we were unwillingly put on the map. All illnesses and deaths were viewed with instant suspicion, especially after representatives from Fernald started to make offers and deals that would give them immunity from prosecution. They were aggressive, threatening

government actions like such as audits for anyone who might consider a lawsuit. Those who refused to sign up or come in for medical monitoring were labeled as troublemakers and denied access to public meetings that ran until April, when the money started flowing in.

The lawyers and scientists came next, taking statements and tests, grabbing soil and water samples to send off to labs in big cities we'd barely heard of. People who took the deals were considered sellouts to those who had lost a family member to cancer or other illnesses that could have been caused from exposure to chemicals. As the meetings dried up, and the private deals peaked, we heard rumors of a second big leak. This one had contaminated the ground wells the entire town used for drinking, cooking, and cleaning. No one was surprised this time.

Mother Brady had her hands full keeping peace between the two factions of our town. We were split down the poverty lines. Those who could afford to wanted to hold out and be a part of the lawsuit everyone assumed was coming. Those who were having trouble selling their goods to out-of-towners thanks to a polluted reputation wanted to take the cash and tests and move on with their lives.

There were few facts released to townspeople after the initial hysteria died down. It was as if the world forgot about us when Princess Diana got a divorce and Mad Cow disease hit Britain. Most of the town was glad. The rest of the world didn't have

to go on living here. The sooner people forgot we had such a damaging skeleton in our closet, the better. We needed our small bit of tourism to survive.

Mother Brady did a great job bring us back to life when the furor finally faded in May. She organized town meetings for the Fernald people to discuss offers with the residents, and when fights started, she was right there to threaten the shouters into submission. She also brought in family lawyers that no one cared for. Wearing slick suits and shiny boots, they acted as if laws were just something you got around. I didn't like the idea of selling out, but when Mary told the family she was considering one massive lawsuit, everyone left the negotiations up to her. In that area, we couldn't have a better representative.

The first payments came in the middle of May, proving Fernald would keep their word. They were \$1000 per person in each house that had signed the forms swearing they wouldn't sue. The town celebrated with hangovers and a drunken brawl that filled the jail for a week. When the money ran out, those same people then asked why it was only \$1000. They didn't care if cleanup was happening to remove the poison from the ground or if it was being overseen. They just wanted to be bought off. Fernald was happy to oblige.

By the time school let out for summer break, Mother Brady had quietly converted the holdouts in town, and we had all learned to avoid the few

remaining reporters still pushing for justice. The payments continued to roll in, though they grew smaller each time, and there was no more talk of a Brady lawsuit. When Mary gave us papers to sign, we took the deal and kept quiet about how much higher the payments were.

During all this chaos, I wasn't allowed to work in the restaurant and neither were some of the other girls. Georgie didn't have the proper papers on us and with all the media in town, he wasn't taking the chance on losing his business license. I loved being freed from that hell, but it still left me without cash coming in. When Marc and I ran, we would need money. Georgie didn't give me much, and sweeping Patty's walks was something I'd been doing free since the tornado. Patty still hadn't recovered from losing her front window and much of her collection, but even if she could hire me on like she still wanted to do next year, it wouldn't be much.

So I began to job hunt, searching for something that would pay a me a fair wage, but not bore me into old age over the summer. I chose Stricker's Grove, the local amusement park—mostly because I could walk to it.

Stricker's Grove was off limits to everyone in the Brady clan. I knew that when I applied there. I got a job as soon as the owner found out who I was related to. He assumed Mother Brady had sent me. It would mean she'd forgiven him for whatever he'd done to make her ban everyone from his park. I didn't tell him any different.

I didn't understand that I was encouraging the rest of the family to rebel by taking a job there. When word went around that we finally had someone working at the Grove, I suddenly became popular with distant members of our clan, the ones whose names I barely knew. It made me and my new job a target, but I didn't know what I'd started until it was too late to stop the snowball.

It turned out that a lot of our family had been waiting for an excuse to go against Mary on this one—including Georgie. He liked the idea of another paycheck in the house, even if it was a tiny one. My mother was also happy because it would keep me busy until November. I liked it because *I'd* chosen it.

Stricker's Grove had 10 rides, and half as many animal exhibits. There was a slow train that circled the property a few times an hour, and of course, an arcade area next to a food court. Some of the outer fields were also occasionally used for horseshoe or cricket tournaments, and accompanied by a raffle. It was usually the residents of the three surrounding counties that came to Stricker's Grove every year. The owners were locals. But not from the Brady side of the line.

These locals were free to do as they pleased. They ate and sang with the band, danced and gossiped around crappy picnic tables and hordes of honeybees that were drawn to sweet treats. These people drank beer, played cards for money, and enjoyed all the other freedoms of America that were

forbidden to us. They had my respect before we ever met. They'd escaped Mary's traps somehow. I found out later that it was all about their location. Because they lived in the next township—Ross, Ohio—they were free. Mary had no pull there.

My boring position at this forbidden park was to sit at the top of the three-story, metal slide and help kids get settled into the burlap sacks so they didn't go tumbling down head-first. It was scary how many small children were sent, alone, up three flights of rickety stairs, dragging a long bag. I didn't yell at anyone over it or even mention it because of my age. I had no power here either.

The job was easy, but it left me too much time think. The slide wasn't popular. For most of the shift, I just tried not to roast in the sun. I was bright red after only a couple of days. Georgie thought it was cute. I thought I was frying alive until Patty gave me a bottle of lotion.

By the second week, I was peeling and tanning. My skin went to beige and then bronze very quickly. I hated the way the glow made people stare, but it did teach me something about the power of good looks. The Ross high school boy running the drink stand wouldn't let me pay. The cotton candy lady gave me the extras. People smiled, said nice things. It was so different from the way I'd been living that I instantly distrusted all of them, certain they were hiding a monster inside.

When I asked Patty about it, she said I had emotional baggage due to being abused, but that I

would get over it in time when those people turned out to be just people and not monsters.

The downside to a job at the amusement park was Jeanie Hornsteader.

Jeanie was a regular at Stricker's Grove. I often wondered if Marc knew she brought guys here from other schools, but I would never have told him to cause trouble. She was careful, only going to forbidden places so she couldn't be ratted out. It was ammunition I could have used to hurt her in Mary's eyes, but I wasn't that type of person. I also didn't want Marc to be upset.

Jeanie was too old and dignified to be caught going down a large slide in a sack like a toddler, so she didn't know I was there. It allowed me to follow her around on my breaks, but reading her thoughts about her latest sexual encounter bothered me. I switched to just making sure she didn't find out I was there. I hated the images I got from her mind, but she was Marc's cover, his relief and release now. It was just the way things were, but my emotions on that subject continued to bubble and boil.

By the end of the May, I loathed the sight of her red car pulling into the parking lot. I could feel that old rage building, the one that had gotten me suspended and beaten. I knew I needed a release, but I couldn't get one that way. They would lock me up this time.

On June 7, 1996, Marc graduated without me there. It hurt to be absent, but we were both afraid Mary had noticed us acting differently. We'd chosen to never be around each other in front of her, but as I listened to the tornado siren give the weekly warning, I wanted to be there to celebrate with him. This was a big moment in his life.

The day after his, I had my own ceremony to attend. The hot chaos of a gym filled with strangers was a distraction as the witch tried to read everyone's thoughts. By the time it was finished, I was exhausted, but I went to the rear street of the trailer park in search of Daniel instead. I didn't care that the sun was close to setting. He was still teaching me to drive his dirt bike and I wanted to practice if he didn't mind. Tired or not, I wasn't ready to sit in my room and stare at the walls.

I found Daniel and his sister, Mandy, already at the small riding area they had set up in the field. Daniel waved me over.

I ignored the pointing and staring from the other kids who still thought Daniel and I were boyfriend-girlfriend. It was how we'd covered my being around Marc to his mother last year, but if Georgie found out, I would be sorry for that lie too. During the last beating, he had told me I belonged to him and if he ever caught me with a boy, he'd make me suffer. I didn't doubt that, but I also knew he was going to make me suffer anyway. I had chosen to disobey him again. My few, rare friendships were worth it.

As if I'd conjured him with that thought, Marc drove by Daniel's house in his blue Buick and sent me a hand code message that he would be at the creek in the morning.

I told him I would be there early, while pretending that I didn't care Jeanie was in his passenger seat. She was his cover. I had his heart.

I was at the creek a little after dawn, waiting with nervous excitement for Marc to arrive. Had he missed me as much as I had him? Would he still like me as much? I'd grown up again during the six months he'd been away. I was now a full-bodied teenager with needs and everything. I was so worried over Marc's reaction that I didn't notice the steps coming through the woods behind me. I had a bad habit of that.

"I want to talk to you!"

Jeanie's voice was startlingly loud in the morning air. Around us, crickets and tree frogs went silent.

I turned awkwardly, ready to run or fight as needed. This was the first time I'd been alone with the bleached blonde bimbo. I wondered if she knew that pink shirt over those white pants made her look like a cotton candy cone.

"You have to listen!" Jeanie hands went to her hips.

"What do you want?!" Marc had kissed this girl, had loved her with his body—probably last night! I

knew he'd been thinking about me, but my jealousy was powerful.

"I want you to leave him alone."

The demand made me furious, but I held my sharp tongue to let her have her say.

"He belongs with me, not some gypsy mutt! Get out of his life or I'll tell Mother Brady everything. She'll put a stop to it right quick."

"No." I fell into that dangerous place where anything might happen. It didn't matter that Jeanie was right, that I had no claim to him. "Even if we were two planets apart, he would still be mine."

Jeanie's perfect face filled with horrified triumph. I realized too late that she'd tricked me into confirming it. What would she do?

She'll tell, the witch whispered slyly. *Close her mouth.*

Before I'd considered any alternatives, I started swinging. I'd always wanted Jeanie's blood. Now was my chance to get it.

Marc

It was my nightmare to see them talking. My guts twisted at Jeanie's vicious words. Our time was up. We had to go now, today!

Thud! Thud!

The punches were nasty and hard enough to make Jeanie stagger. She fell on her butt, holding her bleeding lip.

"You will not tell!"

Angie shouted it, right into Jeanie's face. A hard shake and a shove put my whiny girlfriend on her back on the ground. I stared, shocked, with no thought of stepping between them.

"It'll take Mother Brady time to get rid of me and I'll spend it hunting you!"

Angie kicked Jeanie in the ribs, making me wince as I thought of my own injury there.

"And break up with him! Do it tonight or I'll be at your door come morning."

Another kick curled Jeanie into a crying ball... I finally remembered I was standing in plain view. All they had to do was turn around.

"You got it?!"

"Yes, you evil bitch! Get outta my head!"

That shocked me again, more than Jeanie's fear. Angie was using her gift!

"Say it!"

Angie's arm drew back. Jeanie scrambled away.

"I won't tell! I'll break up with him!"

Thud!

“Oww! I will!”

The noise I hadn't noticed before glared at me as Angie continued to intimidate my older girlfriend. It sounded like an engine, but I knew it for what it was—the hum of power.

“I won't! I swear!”

Angie's face worried me. It wasn't the face of the girl I loved. It also wasn't Angie's voice coming from those lips. It was the inside creature that sometimes glared at me from empty sockets.

“No matter where you go, Jeanette. You can't hide from me.”

And that girl was no longer the self-centered intern I spent time with because of my controlling parent. This was only a quivering soul my Angie had terrified. Listening to the instinct that proclaimed me male, I slipped behind the nearest tree to observe from cover. I couldn't decide what to do until this was over.

“That's not true.” Angie finally stepped back. “He never loved you.”

Jeanie wiped at her bleeding lip. “How long have you been between us?”

“Always.”

“You bitch! He was mine.”

“He was never yours!” Angie growled in bitter anger. “He didn't pick you. His *mother* did.”

Jeanie began to cry. “She promises me things...and she threatens my dad. He doesn't even like your family.”

“You cheat on him.” Angie didn’t take pity. “I saw you. That’s not love. You just use him so Mother Brady will give you stuff.”

Jeanie didn’t reply.

Angie’s voice dropped into a nasty tone that gave me a chill.

“Tell the truth!”

Jeanie’s tears stopped as she got scared. “Yes. She gives me things!”

Angie gave a short burst of laughter. “I knew it! That old bitch buys off everyone!”

Angie wasn’t keeping anything back, but when she handed Jeanie the tissues from her pocket, neither of them flinched.

Good. The fighting is over. I’d never enjoyed the sight of violence, though I was certainly capable of dishing it out when it was called for.

“It’s not like that. I don’t do those things with him.”

The girls had clearly moved on to a different topic than my mother’s scheming.

There was a pause and Angie snarled.

“Keep that to yourself!”

“Then get out!”

“Nope.”

“You’re lying.”

“Ask him.”

That made me nervous. I hadn’t heard the question. What if I gave the wrong answer?

Easy.

Angie soothed me mentally.

I've got it covered.

I jumped, jaw dropping in shock. She was able to link to both of us at the same time!

“I can help with that.” Angie was clearly trying to make a deal.

“No! Get out!”

“Stop whining. You know that’s how he sees you, right? The whiny extra he can’t get rid of.”

I winced again. Jeanie ducked her head in shame. She’d known all along, deep down, that she was a cheap substitute for someone.

“Yes. Once you graduate those classes, she can’t control where you go.”

Jeanie stood up, and kept a good distance between them. “In October, what happens?”

“The Braves blow out St. Louis on the 14th. On the 31st, pick Alphabet Soup at Woodbine.”

“I don’t know what that means.” Jeanie didn’t whine this time.

“Tell your dad. Convince him of those two things and your family will have the money to get out of here.”

“My dad won’t move.”

“He will when you tell him what everyone else is too scared to say. She doesn’t own you. You can leave. Her arms aren’t that long.”

Jeanie stared at Angie for a long time. I assume they were still talking mentally, but it was quiet for so long that the birds and bugs came back out.

“You mean it?”

“Yes. Your dad calls them winners. He comes into the diner. Unlike you, his thoughts are nice!”

“We’ll get to leave this shitty little town?”

Jeanie now appearing exactly like the self-centered intern I spent time with because of my mother.

“Yes, but if you betray me, it’ll get bad for you.”

The deal was closing now, with Angie bartering our future. Would it be enough?

No, it will not, Marcus Brady.

The witch inside Angie spoke to me directly for the first time.

You will make an unavoidable mistake. Love her while you can. The future holds darkness.

The warning tortured me. *How can I stop it?*

There was silence as my answer and I understood I couldn’t stop it. We would be separated.

“Do you want me to walk you home?”

“No.” Jeanie stood up, wiping more blood from her lip. “Stay away from me, you freak!”

Angie winced. “I will, as long as you remember our deal.”

Jeanie didn’t answer. As I watched her leave, I wondered if that was the mistake. How much time did we have left?

There was no response to any of my concerns. Pain surged. *Angie!*

She shared my anguish in a look as I stepped into view. We knew right then that we were

doomed, but I tugged her into my arms anyway. We would have this moment.

“Missed you.” I pressed a kiss to her forehead. “A lot.”

Angie sealed our lips with a quick move that reeked of my own desperation; her embrace held the urgency it had lacked before. She’d grown up on me, all the way this time. I’d known it was coming after catching her with her hand in her pants, but I’d refused to accept it then. Now, I had no choice. Her body melted against mine in a way I instantly responded to. The heavy fear in my heart let me take things further than they’d gone before. I tasted her.

Her mouth opened automatically under light pressure from mine. I slid my tongue in with a shiver of want that Angie felt through our mental link. Her breath caught. Her hands tightened into fists against my chest. She liked that.

I did it again, taking my time. So did I.

I drew back slowly. Her eyes were the darkest blue! It was incredibly sexy against that tan skin and ebony hair. I couldn’t help kissing her again—really kissing her. My mouth slanted over hers hungrily and I forgot, for an instant, the walls between us. My hand slid up her arm to curl behind her neck... The feel of her hair went through me like lightning. I’d known it would be this good. I’d waited years to touch her openly and I pushed my limits now, letting those silken locks tangle around my fingers. *Angie!*

Her breath caught again. I felt the wave of furious need that rushed over her skin. I wanted to explain, to slow things down and make every single step perfect for her, but she responded in a way I wasn't braced for. She tasted me back.

One feel of her sweet tongue against mine made me arch against her. *Yes!*

Lightning flashed again and I fought for control. I could take her now, claim her. She'd let me.

It was picturing her on the ground under Scot and Rodney that broke temptation's hold. I pulled away from her as if she was fire. Because for me, she was. There would never be anyone else. The taste of her was burning into my soul.

"Sorry."

I grinned at her. "I wasn't protesting."

"We should go." Angie glanced around. "There are a lot of people out today. More than I thought there would be since it's already so hot."

"Wanna go for a drive? I have air conditioning."

Angie delivered one of those rare, soul-catching smiles. I gently took her arm and led her toward where I'd hid the car. It was impossible not to grin like an idiot as I did it. Angie had fought for me. She had freed me from Jeanie. She was perfect.

I still went to Jeanie's house after doing my chore list the next day, but Jeanie wouldn't tell me how she'd gotten the black eye and fat lip. Her breakup with me was quick and brutal.

“You’re only coming over here because your mother wants this land...and you’re not even good at sex! Tell her we’re gonna sell. I’ll get my dad to agree. Now get lost, Brady!”

I left two minutes after I’d arrived, completely awed with how Angie had set me free of that chain. I’d spent the last year exploring Jeanie’s body and coming up disappointed because her mind was so lacking. I wouldn’t miss her.

My mother wasn’t as angry as I’d expected. Instead of threats to keep dating Jeanie or even possible comfort over a breakup, Mary calmly told me to take a little time and then pick someone else who was worthy of joining our family. That proved it all for me. Jeanie had been chosen because her family owned land my mother wanted. It had nothing to do with me. That’s why we hadn’t been a match. My mother hadn’t even tried to find a female I might like. As usual, I’d underestimated her lack of empathy, but it had worked out in my favor this time.

I told myself that evil voice could be wrong about the future. Everything was rolling our way.

But even when we were laughing together over the next weeks, Angie’s eyes never lost that haunted edge. I didn’t have to ask why. I already knew.

Chapter Eighteen
Summer Bonds
July to September

Angie

I saw Marc almost every day in June and July.

He finished teaching me to drive on *his* dirt bike, which was nice. I liked it best when I had my arms locked around his waist and my cheek pressed against his back while we tore down dirt paths behind the neighborhood. Marc reminded me how to laugh, how to live for the enjoyment and not just the survival. And he taught me to hide better, so if Rodney and Scot, or even Jeanie came searching for me, I would be safer. I taught him to listen to the world, and to talk over long distances with his mind.

“You have to concentrate.” I said it the tenth time as we held our first lesson on mental communication.

He was trying, but I couldn’t stop my fingers from playing in his hair as I stood behind him. It was long and feathered now, against his mother’s wishes, and so silky that I didn’t want to let go.

And Marc liked my touch. I could tell by the way he would tense and close his eyes.

“Try again.” Marc also liked it when I got into his mind. I reluctantly withdrew my hand from his

hair so I could concentrate enough to connect us. This was important. “You’re searching for a door in your mind. Sometimes there are words or shapes on it, but not very often.”

“What kind of door?”

“The hidden kind. Check the shadows.” I entered further, searching with him. “When you can find it and open it, we’ll be able to hear each other.”

“No matter how far away?” There was sadness in his thoughts of leaving when school started up.

I withdrew from his thoughts to keep from carrying his sadness too. Mine was heavy enough. “Yes. They won’t be able to keep us from talking.”

I could feel his determination grow. “We’ll always know what’s going on with each other, or if there’s trouble.”

Marc found the door on my last word. The line between us lit up as he shoved into my thoughts.

“Mmm...”

He groaned at the feel of me, and I shuddered, fighting the need to kiss him. These new feelings were growing. I sometimes found myself staring at his mouth as we talked.

“Easy.”

His warning was tense, full of need and control. I grinned, feeling it from his side too as we stayed connected. I loved how he felt.

“Angie.”

I giggled and he sucked in a tight breath that made my stomach feel funny. His pleasure was mine and I liked it. A lot.

The world shifted suddenly, becoming hard and gritty.

“I like you too. A lot.”

I blinked in surprise at his rough growl and the rougher ground. How had we gotten down here? Marc was lying on top of me, hard where I was soft. The fear rose.

“Sorry.” His face was flushed, blue eyes glowing. “Did I hurt you?”

His concern banished my worries. This was my Brady. I wanted to do these things with him. “No.” I smiled and let both hands go his hair this time. His weight was almost like a blanket I could hide under. “Can you find the door again?”

“More than one,” he stated, sounding odd.

“Good.”

Marc leaned down to kiss me.

Anyone passing our clubhouse would have seen a sin or a crime, but there was nowhere else on earth I would have rather been. And it was only a kiss. I wasn't ready for more and he knew it. His hands didn't move from the dirt, but his mouth! Those lips did things to my insides that made me feel hot and guilty. It was a strange mix.

Marc drew back, pressing short, almost rough kisses to my lips. “We have to stop now.”

“Okay.” But I wrapped my arms around his neck to pull his mouth down for one more. *My Brady.*

Marc left at the end of July, headed back to the farm as far as we both knew, and I tried to keep myself together. We hoped to see each other again at Christmas, but nothing was certain. After the way we had spent the summer, it wouldn't surprise me if Marc stayed away until next year. As hard as it was, I understood. If we were caught in a bad situation now, he would go to jail. We'd been sneaking around family rules and society's opinion before, but now, we were actually breaking the law.

That thought bothered me so much I went to Patty about it a few days after he left. With no Marc, no job at either place, and another full month before school went back in, I was a bit lost again. Maybe that's why I didn't notice Mother Brady's car in front of the shop.

"It would be in your best interest to agree."

I stopped at the door, recognizing the voice. She sounded angry.

"This is my place! I'll make the payment."

"I doubt that, Ms. Shaw, but until you don't, all I can do is ask."

"You'll get the same answer!"

I heard steps and ducked into the evening shadows of the next doorway.

"At some point, I will have this place. You know that. Why fight it?"

"Because this is my home, my life, you old hag! Please, get out. You're bad for business."

Mother Brady huffed across the street to disappear into her office.

I waited for the light to come on and for her blinds to close before I slipped inside Patty's shop.

"There are hard times coming for you, child."

Patty's words sent a chill over me. The nightmares had been rougher than usual this week. I started to tell her I already knew that and then I saw her glowing orbs.

Patty rarely used her gift. I could tell she was searching hard, trying to discover what the future held. I used to do that to avoid the bullies and Georgie, but I hadn't in a while. I was scared to. I could feel the start, or end, of something big coming and it was terrifying.

"Do we make it?" I asked suddenly.

Patty slowly shook her head, still searching. "The sacrifice is worthy, but the pain may last lifetimes."

"What can I do?"

Patty came back, hair settling down onto her thin shoulders. "Always make the best choice for the future, not for yourself." She stood up as my mouth opened. "I can't say more."

I was angry that my future was always dictated by people other than me, but I could understand how my power might help the world. What if I found a cure for something that saved millions of lives? Was that worth giving up Marc? Because it would have to be something that big for me to agree.

Patty handed me a thin book from her desk. "I think you're ready for this now."

I blushed furiously as I read the title.

How to Please Yourself.

Patty chuckled as I immediately took it to the table and started reading. I knew it was a distraction, but I couldn't help being intrigued.

‘Maybe that will keep you out of trouble this winter.’ She locked the door to do her money count and paperwork. Because of reporters who didn't knock, everyone now locked their doors at night. It was sad.

I poured over the book and finished it in about an hour, relieved in several ways. Now I understood why my breathing got funny and why I wanted to keep kissing Marc forever. My body was preparing to accept his in those moments. I liked that idea, but this wasn't what I'd come for and I approached Patty hesitantly. She was in the back now, warming up old stew for dinner.

‘You feel troubled tonight, child.’ Patty set two places at the table.

My stomach growled eagerly. ‘I don't want him to get in trouble. But I don't want to stop.’

Patty ladled the stew into bowls without answering right away. I could feel her wondering how far we'd gone. My face flamed. ‘Just kissing.’

Patty's tense shoulders relaxed and she gave me a proud smile.

‘If he was a bad man, it wouldn't stop with kisses.’

I took my seat. ‘But I don't want him to stop at all. It...’ I broke off, cheeks scarlet and mind all mixed up.

“Feels too good?” Patty poured two small cups of milk.

I wasn't sure I could explain it. “It's right.”

“But everyone else is against it, including the law?” Patty asked, as if she'd been waiting for this moment.

As I recalled how often she'd been prepared for whatever question or problem I had, I guessed that was probably true. “Yes. He could go to jail.”

Patty handed me a chunk of the bread we'd made together. It was called sourdough and it was made from the very last piece of old dough, called a starter. Some sourdough recipes had starters from bread that had been baked 100 years ago. I thought that was cool.

“Is the threat of jail the reason he only kisses?”

I thought about it. “No. He wants me to be older. He says I'm not ready for the things he wants to do with me.”

Patty chuckled. “Wise man you got there. My advice is to listen to him and go slow. You only get to do these things, to feel this way, once in a lifetime. Go slow and be careful. You don't want to end up like Snow.”

I grimaced, making a funny face so Patty would smile. Snow now had two kids and lived in a trailer on the rear street. I'd heard she was now like my mom used to be—buyable. “I won't. I'm gonna be a writer, I think. Marc said I could stay home if I wanted or have a job. I decided I want a job first and then his kids.”

“So you have time together first?” Patty asked, biting her cheek to keep from laughing.

I wasn’t offended. I knew what it sounded like to an adult, but I meant every word. “Mostly so we can take care of them,” I told her, fun leaving the atmosphere. “I won’t ever have a child I can’t take care of or that I’m not able to love. I’d rather not have kids at all than to treat them this...that way.”

Patty came over and hugged me, one of the few times she felt like she could, I assume.

“You’re a sweet girl and a smart girl. Hang on. You’re almost free.”

Those words from her meant more than when I said it. Patty was my strength in so many ways. If I had known how fast time changes things, I would have spent more of it with her. But I didn’t. I was just a teenager with her own concerns to be dealt with or suffered through. I didn’t understand how fragile and brief our lives actually are.

I began ninth grade in the fall of 1996 and quickly discovered that high school wasn’t any better than junior high. In fact, it was scary, where the other schools hadn’t been. On my first day, while we were being assigned lockers, I saw a knife fight. The blood that pooled on the black and blue tiled floor haunted my dreams for weeks. Then there were the locker searches, the metal detectors, and the way the senior kids scanned the freshman as if they were about to have a feast. I hated it, but I tolerated the seven hours I had to be there because I

knew I couldn't be a good wife and earner without an education.

I did get to go through most of my classes unmolested by bullies now. My attack on Verina had spread to the high school. Only the kids who could back it up chose me as a target. After a month or two of fighting, (I won as many as I lost, so that was good) the rest of the senior females left me alone. I blackened eyes and split lips, ripped out handfuls of pretty hair. I was known for not stopping even when the girl cowered at my feet, bleeding. I had a hard time with that. Once I drew blood, I always wanted more of it.

The boys, however, were another story. They were soft at first, flirting and trying to buy my lunch, but as the fall break approached, they became more persistent. A group of them liked to escort me from class to class and to the bus. Then they wanted to sit too close and put their hands on me in ways that Marc hadn't even done. I didn't care for any of them. I made it so clear that I got the reputation of being a lesbian and became isolated again. It went well with my fighting and nasty mouth when angered. I didn't try to convince people otherwise. It actually made me happy when all my teachers were able to tell my parents I didn't willingly hang out with any of the males or the females. Georgie especially liked hearing that. My mom didn't care. Her addictions had complete control now.

As my birthday drew closer and my body continued to fill out, I learned to skip the showers at

school after gym class and to wear jeans, never a skirt. I also avoided the alley between the band and art dorm, where the smokers hung out. Most of the time it was okay there, but I'd walked that gauntlet when it was full of boys after the football game once and I almost hadn't made it out the other side. I ended up using my gifts, sending a stinging mental blast that distracted the groping hands and snickering minds so I could flee. No matter where I was or how old I got, peace wasn't something I ever got much of. That was for people like Jeanie and Mother Brady.

October arrived as the furor over Fernald finished dying down and the flow of relatives visiting me increased. They all wanted to view the park for the first time. Stricker's gates closed each November and they were afraid to wait any longer and miss this chance. Mother Brady had heard of my visitors by now and she hadn't scolded any of them. I was still employed there, so they assumed they could get away with it too. We all should have known better than to cross her, of course, but the amusement park had been forbidden for so long that it was worth the risk at the time.

On the day it all came to a head, I woke two hours before my alarm and couldn't get back to sleep. I listened to Frona and Georgie arguing about the plans for the day. She wanted to stay closed because of my birthday. It was a great excuse to drink. Georgie wanted to do it on a break. The restaurant was still hurting for money.

I tuned them out, wishing they would ask me, even once. I would have told them I wanted to pretend that it was any other day. I was on fall break right now, another year closer to the future, and with Georgie always exposing himself or touching me, or making me do things to him, I was scared. I avoided him as much as I could, but that was making him even more insistent. I didn't understand why he hadn't already raped me. He was obviously able to do whatever he wanted.

I crawled from bed and dressed, then slid from the trailer without alerting them or leaving a note. They knew I had to work this afternoon. They would think that's where I'd gone. I just wanted a few minutes alone without hearing them bitch at each other. It was never ending and kept me stressed, always wondering if this would be the fight where Georgie killed my mom. If he ever snapped, once she was gone, I would be next, but my death at his hands wouldn't be the quick neck break or sleeping pills I'd begun to suspect that Georgie wanted to arrange for my mom. My death would take days. After waiting so long, I had no illusions that he would be gentle. I could only hope Marc timed it right and got me out of here before that happened. Considering that Marc didn't know we had a time problem, I wasn't counting on it. I was trying to accept the fact that Georgie would get what he wanted. Afterward, Marc would take me away from here and I would try to recover.

I'd considered going to the police or even to Mother Brady at times, but I knew what happened to those girls later. Peggy Shaffer had claimed sexual abuse by her uncle last year. No one had found any proof and Peggy had been left in their home. She was still coming to school with bruises the teachers overlooked. I hated them for that. Wasn't that an adult's duty to protect the kids? I didn't understand the rules of being a grownup. Some days, *most days*, I didn't want to understand. It seemed like to be an adult, you had to hurt people and that didn't appeal to me.

Before my shift that day, I spent a little time on the tire swing and running through the corn. Then I practiced with my knife for a bit. I didn't think I would ever be good with it. My fingers always did the opposite of what I wanted.

None of those activities satisfied me. I surrendered to what I had really come for, ducking into the clubhouse. I stretched out on the couch Marc had dragged in here last year and a few minutes later, was busy taking care of my needs. I hadn't been exploring my body for long, but I was starting to understand why sex was so important to people. The ending felt good!

Quickly nearing that edge of wonder, I opened my eyes to find Marc standing in the door of the clubhouse with a stunned expression on his handsome face.

I froze.

“Please,” he choked out. “Don’t stop!”

Fire swept through me and I gave him what we both wanted—I climaxed while he watched. As I shuddered and groaned, staring at him, I had one thought: *I love you.*

Marc stiffly turned away and left. I respected him for his control.

“Thank you, Baby.”

I giggled at the strained gratitude and fixed my clothes. This birthday had already been one to remember. “Tomorrow?”

“In a few days.”

Disappointed, I rose with a scowl, great mood gone. I could have had Marc time today, but I’d blown it. *I’m sorry.*

Don’t be, he answered, still sounding choked. *It was beautiful.*

I wondered if he meant that. There was silence again for a moment and I could feel him wanting to say something else. I kept our minds connected in case he gathered the courage.

I’m not scared of anything!

We were both surprised at the revelation. He could hear my thoughts. I’d never had that happen. The witch usually guarded my mind.

Lost in the discovery, I kept us connected as I went to work. The walk took me 10 minutes. I was almost there when Marc finally broke the silence.

Will you do that again...for me?

I blushed, body waking back up. *While you watch?*

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked. Please forget it.

I'm here. I have to go now.

Have a great day, Baby.

Heat seared me again. I broke the connection, but I didn't forget that Marc had asked me for something. Even when I noticed the police officers at the park gate, it lingered in my thoughts.

The officers asked for identification—something I didn't have yet. I instinctively told them I was a customer, not an employee. I was informed that the park was closed. Indefinitely.

They didn't give me a reason, but as I stood there, trying to figure out how to read their minds without being caught or how to trick them into telling me, Mother Brady's car pulled into the lot. She slowly drove by, smirking, so I would know who was responsible.

Anger and despair came, but this time there was also determination to best the woman at something, anything. She had to learn she wasn't better than everyone else, and at some point, I thought fate would take care of that. What I wanted to teach her involved a split lip and a long lecture on being a good person. Mary Brady was anything but.

To my surprise, Mary stopped next to me; her window rolled down. Wondering where her driver was, I waited tensely for the threat or whatever she wanted to throw. I expected it to be ugly and I wasn't sure how I might respond. I had a lot of bad feelings inside right now.

“Marcus is home.”

“So?” I glowered at her. “Why tell me?” I’d been working on keeping emotions and reactions off my face since Patty mentioned how bad a liar I was. I thought I did a good job now.

“Because you’re a wild, reckless child, of course,” Mary stated as if discussing the weather. “Be very careful, my girl. Oh, so careful.”

She rolled into the park before I could form a response. The officers locked the gate behind her, eliminating any chance of further communication.

I headed toward the trailer park in a state of confusion. Why would she tell me Marc was home? Hoping we’d rush out and get caught together? Then why warn me to be careful?

The woman was slick, evil. I worked on her motives for the rest of that long, hot day. What was she trying to pull?

Chapter Nineteen
Coming of Age
October to December

Marc

I was terrified as I stopped outside the clubhouse.

This was Angie's 15th birthday. She expected us to be intimate. And I wanted it more than I could say. When she'd first begun to remind me of my promise, I was forced to make plans. I often forgot that her age and her mind were different. When I considered us being together, I knew slow was best, but she hated it. She wouldn't care for how we were going to crawl along, but it was necessary. I hoped the delivery of these moments would allow me to stretch things out, but if she forced my hand, I would have to go away again.

"I won't."

Angie's voice from inside the clubhouse reminded me that the time for thought was over.

My body jumped to life. Now was the time for action. Angie and I were about to have our first milestone and I would enjoy every second of it. I'd already taken care of myself so much over the last two weeks with the memory her pleasing herself

that I was nearly raw. I thought that would help me stay in control.

Tonight was about her, not me.

Angie

“Happy birthday, Baby.”

I heard the difference in Marc’s voice as he greeted me. The intense longing in his tone flooded me with those cravings again and I didn’t wait to make sure that we were alone like I usually did. I threw myself into his arms for a kiss. Now he would give me what I’d been asking for.

Marc kissed me back the way I had been dreaming of, and his hands dropped to my hips in a way that sent chills over my teenage body. When he stopped, I was breathing funny again.

Marc had gotten taller. He grinned down at me with some secret knowledge I was tired of being excluded from. Before I could protest, he kissed me again.

I surrendered eagerly. I wrapped my arms around his neck and leaned against him. His tongue slid over my lips, drawing a rough moan from my throat. I hadn’t known that was coming!

I wanted to stop and ask questions now, but Marc pushed against my lips and I opened, enjoying one of the few French kisses he’d given me so far. I didn’t want the moment to end.

Marc broke the kiss with a series of tiny presses against my lips between mutters about control and patience. I didn’t know what he meant, but I was willing.

Marc led us into the clubhouse to sit down. With the fire going, it was warmer inside, cheery. I

hurried to pour him a cup of the tea I'd been perfecting. No one ever noticed the small amounts of tea bags and sugar I snuck out.

Marc set the cup down and led me to the couch we'd covered with blankets and cushions scrounged from older people in the trailer park.

"I want to give you your present."

We sat down close enough for me to feel the muscles in his leg tighten as I shifted. He smelled good. "What is it?"

Marc handed me a small box with a red ribbon. "A promise ring."

I couldn't stop the tears as Marc put the silver band on my finger. It fit perfectly.

"Are you still sure?" he asked nervously.

I nodded, wiping at my cheeks. I buried my head against his chest when I couldn't stop crying. Deep down, I think a part of me had been positive he was lying to get what he wanted, just like the other males in my life. This was proof that I was wrong.

"Hey! I'll get you a better one later," Marc joked, making me snort loudly.

I got myself together, trying to find the words to tell him how much this ring already meant to me, but Marc kissed me again. Like that first one, it was intense. When he drew back, I'd forgotten how to speak, let alone how to think.

Marc ran a thumb over my lips, making me shiver. "Do you still want to do more?"

I nodded quickly, but still couldn't form words.

Marc hugged me, chin coming down to rest against my neck. “I get worried I’m going too slow, that you’ll get impatient and find someone else to show you these things.”

I tightened my arms around him. “That won’t happen. But I do want more. You already know that. I’ve been very patient.”

“So have I,” he murmured. “But we’re getting closer now and I... I didn’t know you were ready and *I* need these moments with you! I’ve already waited so long.”

I understood exactly how he felt. When he’d given these moments to Jeanie, it had hurt me deeply. I didn’t want him to experience that. “Kiss me again?”

Marc became serious. “I want to go further. A lot further.”

“All the way?” I was suddenly a bit nervous myself. This wasn’t how I’d imagined that.

“Hell, no!” He smiled at me. “How about half way?”

I frowned. “How far have we gone so far?”

Marc thought about it. “Probably not even a quarter.”

“Big jump.” I now wished I’d kept reading that book so I would know what was coming.

“Scared?” he asked, tugging me closer.

“A little.” I smiled, feeling the V come out on my chin. “But I want you, and I’m not afraid to get hurt if it means gaining something I want.”

Marc sighed. "Yeah." His hand slid down my arm to my hand where he twined our fingers. "You're really sure?"

I kissed him for my answer.

Marc

I slid my hand up her thigh as if I was in a daze. This was so wrong.

“Please. You can stop when you want to, but you at least have to start!”

I laughed, fighting with myself. The amusement faded when she leaned back and closed her eyes. Angie had decided she was going to do this and if I wanted to be a part of it, the time for thinking and discussing it was over.

Confirming that thought, Angie slid a hand inside her jeans and smiled. “Love me. As much as you can.”

Angie

Ten minutes later, moans were spilling from my mouth that should have attracted every dog in hearing distance. I couldn't be quiet. It felt too good. I couldn't believe a single finger could do that to a person through their clothes.

When it was over, I wanted to do it to him, but that's where Marc stopped us. I wasn't allowed to touch him that way until I was older. I began planning my next birthday.

When I immediately got hot again from discussing that, Marc repeated the cure. I realized he was giving me a release from the hormones that had plagued me. He swore he wasn't going to anyone for relief when I asked him about it. His answer that he would use his hand while replaying these moments with me was good enough. Since I planned to do the same when he wasn't around, I had no problem with it. I did hate the restrictions though, and pushed him by dropping my hand to his hard lap anyway.

Marc stiffened and groaned against my lips. His hands came up to grasp my shoulders, but he took a long time to push me away.

I reluctantly let him put me back on the couch by his side. When we were alone, I wanted to be able to explore these feelings. I knew they were connected to him, to my attraction for him, but I had no idea what it led to—only that it was forbidden and complicated. I had asked Marc to explain the final

act to me, but he'd refused, saying I was too young and he wasn't strong enough to get through the conversation. I planned to bring it up again next year.

"Thank you."

Marc was now reading my thoughts as easily as I could his. He'd been practicing. I beamed at him, glad he understood the gift I was giving. Boys followed me around a lot and I had no time for them. Georgie was all over me, and even my teachers stared. It was hard not to notice the difference that my looks and body had on people, as compared to how things had been when I was younger. Now that I was approaching the age of consent, the males were crowding me, hoping to be chosen, and no matter how nice I was about it, my refusals brought ugliness. If I forgot to smile at my science teacher, I got a low grade on that day's assignment. If I wouldn't go out with the jock, I was called a lesbian whore. It got so bad that I hated speaking to anyone except Patty and Marc. No one noticed.

"Are you okay?"

I blinked, brought back. *Marc would have noticed.* "Thinking about life."

"Your expression was too adult. Is something bothering you?"

I swallowed a dozen replies to say, "No." Now that Marc was committed to me, telling him more about my troubles would just get him sent away and that already happened enough.

“I would try to help you,” Marc stated quietly, sounding ashamed. “I’d do everything I could.”

Marc was observant and that skill grew each time we were apart. He was asking if I wanted to run now. “You think it could work?” I had to ask. I was constantly miserable and any hope was desperately wanted.

Marc shook his head. “Not really, but I’d try my hardest. We might make it.”

I hadn’t thought we would go until I was 18. I didn’t ask him to change those plans now. If he had given a different answer, I might have, but I doubt it. Any bad choices now endangered his freedom. I wasn’t going to be the reason Marc was locked up or hurt by Georgie. Mother Brady was no longer my biggest fear.

“I’ll survive.” I flashed a rough smile. I didn’t need to tell him these moments would hold me. He already knew. He also knew it wasn’t enough.

Marc’s arm went around my shoulders and I melted into his comforting heat, lids closing. “I love you.”

“Right back at ya.” He nuzzled the top of my head after kissing it. “Forever?”

I grinned, arm coming around to hold his free hand. “Yup, but not a second more.”

The next day, Marc was gone again.

A month later, when Daniel found me crying in the woods, I discovered that Marc was back on the farm. It didn’t matter where he’d been sent. Without

Marc, I was back in the same old life of fear, terror, and misery—always counting the days until I could be safe.

Marc

New Years for my mother was the same each year. She pretended that it was any other day. Mary saw nothing patriotic or Christian about celebrating a new year. She usually went to bed early, with the fans on to drown out the fireworks. I used to spend them the same way.

When I went to live on the farm, I had to adjust to an all-night party that even the kids were allowed to attend. The adults drank and danced while the kids roasted marshmallows and hotdogs on the bonfire. When the magic moment came, guns were fired, spoons were banged against pans, and people kissed! There were hugs and smiles, laughter and well wishes for the New Year. It was so odd that I always found something else to do. There was no sleeping through it like at my mother's house.

Most of those years, I had visited with nearby uncles who didn't live on the farm or shivered in the barn loft with my Walkman and a book. That was before I had a car. To bring in 1997, I gathered a few things and crashed in the back seat of my Buick. I barely noticed the loud bangers for the novel that I'd been drawn into. It was called *Scarlett*. Most people didn't know there was a sequel to *Gone with the Wind*. I'd always wondered what happened after the first book ended, and I was perfectly content to spend the entire night drinking PepsiFree and reading about the infamous couple after their split.

I didn't realize my absence would be noticed this year.

My front passenger door opened.

I shot up in the seat as someone climbed inside and shut it. The person was dressed in so many layers of coats and scarves that I couldn't tell who it was until they turned around in the seat to stare at me accusingly.

"We need to talk." Daniel scanned my entertainment. His scowl deepened. "You're reading? Tonight? Instead of being with her?"

I marked my place in the book and glared. Things had been awkward between Daniel and me since I'd noticed him stealing looks at Angie. "What do you want?"

Daniel sighed, pushing his hood down. "You can't give it to me."

I frowned, trying not to get upset. "With me, Daniel. Why are you here?"

"I'm here because you always get to go off and leave her!" he stated in a fast insult. "And I'm the one who has to put her back together each time. But I won't be here to do it anymore. You have to stop."

"What are you talking about?" I was getting angry at the accusations.

"I'm moving."

Daniel's tone said he didn't want to go. I understood that feeling completely. "What?"

"My family has to move. We pissed off your mom."

I winced. If he was here to ask for my help in convincing my mother to change her mind, he was out of luck. Any power I held in that area would be used in the future—for me.

“She’s gonna be alone again.”

“Angie?”

“Yes. And she...”

I could tell he was about to give up a secret and I braced for it. None of the rumors about Daniel were good.

“I’m tough,” Daniel stated evenly. “I’m a guy. We have to be.”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“But she’s a little girl! I keep them away from her when I can, but after we move, she’ll be alone.”

“Keep who away from her?”

“The other boys!” Daniel spat. “They hound her, Marc, and so does her stepdad. Can’t you get your mom to make them leave her alone?”

I laughed bitterly, telling Daniel I was as powerless as he was.

“That’s what I thought,” he muttered.

“When are you moving?” I asked, becoming worried. I honestly had felt better knowing she had Daniel while I was away.

“In the summer or fall, I think.” Daniel turned to watch the town fireworks explode in the distance.

“What happened?” I needed to know.

Daniel shrugged, pulling his hood back up. “They won’t tell me. I think your bitch of a mother

pulled the bank notes on us because I'm not dating Angie. *You are.*"

I winced at having an outsider put a name to what Angie and I were doing. It was so much more than that. "Revenge, huh? That sounds like her."

"Can you do *anything*?" Daniel pinned me in place with his desperation. "If you can, now's the time. She can't be alone this year. We'll both lose her."

I didn't want to understand what he meant by that, but how could I not? Daniel loved her.

"I've never interfered," Daniel told me, emotions clear. "I never would have. But you can't leave her alone again this year. If you do, I'll make a move and convince her to run away with me. I'm her best friend. It might even work."

Daniel got out and slammed the car door before I could threaten him back. I didn't follow. I left the book on the seat and spent the rest of the night going over my plans and then changing them. Because after all these years if Daniel was worried enough to come clean about his feelings, then things had to be worse for Angie than I'd thought. I reluctantly changed my plans from next year to this one. I would deal with my mother 12 months sooner.

I expected it to be the hardest moment of my life.

1997

Chapter Twenty
Snowy Memories
January

Marc

“**W**here are you going, Marcus?”

Over the years, I’d lost the small bit of warmth for my mother that had once drawn tears from me on the farm. I felt nothing for her now, beyond a weary contempt.

“Marcus?”

I ignored her, gathering my keys and wallet from the dish by the door as the snow fell in thin sheets. I already had on as many layers of clothes as I could stand. I was going to be out all day.

“Marcus.”

It was ugly, that tone, and I found myself turning to face her despite my resolve not to. To balance my pride... “Yes, *mother?*”

Noting my insulting tone, her sharp gaze narrowed in on my clothing. “Biking again? In this weather?”

I gave a single nod, waiting for the rest. I mostly knew how to handle my mother, but sometimes she still managed to surprise me. I sensed she was trying to do that now.

“Be back here at 3pm.”

I raised a brow. “For?”

“A discussion about your future in this family.”

She waved off my suspicious glower. “Unless your time...biking is more important than your freedom.”

Panic sank into my gut. That tone said Mary knew all our secrets. I was careful to be expressionless when she glanced over her shoulder.

“It’s time to choose, Marcus. You can’t have it all. Not even I’m that powerful.”

I could tell she wanted to say a lot more, but she wouldn’t yet.

“I’ll be here.” I’d pushed her into this with my indifference, as I had with my car. If I’d come to her and asked for this meeting, she would have delayed it until she got me to agree to whatever she wanted before we even held the discussion. This way, I might get what I needed. There were still no guarantees. My mother wasn’t one to give more than she thought she had to.

When I left the room, Mary was still watching.

Putting off leaving last week had triggered her reaction today, but it was merely the final straw. I had employed several sneaky tactics. The first had been showing up, unannounced, on New Year’s Day. I’d refused to explain, just saying I needed some time at home. Because of my age, it would be hard for her to get me to go if I really put my feet down, and she wasn’t sure if I was doing that now.

A few days ago, I'd left my Marine gear lying across the bed to be sorted while I'd talked to the recruiter on the phone. I was positive she'd overheard every word. I also mentioned selling my Buick. That had definitely gotten her attention. I'd given her the impression I was about to leave home permanently. I much preferred to actually have the good hand instead of bluffing. I'd only employed that tactic a few times in my life so far, but Mary held all the power here. I would do what I had to. I wasn't leaving for any reason until I knew Angie would be safe.

Angie was waiting for me near the empty lot that was full of kids riding bikes. I ignored her while I joked with a few approved friends and did some wheelies. I stayed a full 10 minutes and then spun off toward the cornfield, skin stinging. The wind was bad, even through my many layers of coats and shirts. I didn't know how the kids here could stay outside so long in a snowstorm. Angie had told me they couldn't go home and had learned to tough it out, but I still didn't understand how they could. It was cold! It didn't occur to me that Angie was also one of those kids.

As I left the lot, I didn't spot her, but I knew she couldn't have gotten very far yet. I sped up.

When I arrived, Angie was standing inside the dead rows of the cornfield, just below the tire swing. "How do you do that?"

"I'm fast."

“And pretty,” I added, making her red cheeks grow even darker.

Angie giggled.

The sound drew me as much as it ever had, melting my will to resist that treasured hug. Sometimes, late at night, I wondered if these feelings would fade over time. So far, they had only grown.

Eager to hold her, I quickly put down the kickstand, but without my usual cool move. I was frozen and too thickly padded.

Angie only had a thin coat on over her usual pair of jeans and t-shirt. She did have a scarf and gloves, but the scarf was open at the neck and her gloves had holes in them. Around her birthday, I had asked if I could buy her some things, but Angie had gotten upset over it and shouted at me for the first time. I assumed it had embarrassed her.

“I’m fine.”

Angie waited for me to make the first move toward our hug. She was always scared that I would change my mind while we were apart, but she never said it. I respected that.

Angie’s eyes lit up as I got closer, pulse at the base of her throat pounding with nervous anticipation. She’d missed me.

“Yes, I have.”

I took her in my arms, chuckling over how we couldn’t get very close because of the bulk. “We were here yesterday and the day before.”

Angie burrowed through my layers to settle against my chest. Warmth rushed over my skin, producing sweet chills. Her happy sigh floated straight into my heart and I held her tighter.

“Are you okay?”

I didn’t feel her in my mind, but it wouldn’t have bothered me if she’d climbed in and set up a tent. “Nerves, I think. Let’s go inside. I’ll tell you about it.”

We ducked into the misshapen clubhouse that still needed a few more small panels on one side to be completed. We planned to do some of them today. I had the nails in my pocket.

Angie struck a match to the tinder we kept ready to go. I lingered nearby as she coaxed the sullen flame into a roaring warmth that quickly forced her to move back.

Tension thickened while I tried to find the right words to explain what I was feeling. As I did, joy spread across my cold face. I took her hands, gently rubbing them. “I have a very important meeting today. Afterwards, we can make plans for our future together.”

I slipped into my mother’s hall with an untucked shirt to cover a wet spot, mud stains all up and down my pant legs, and brittle debris in my hair. I was two hours late.

Angie had been excited that we would finally have some peace once this meeting was over. I

wasn't as optimistic, but I did think I could buy enough calm waters to launch us a boat out of this hellhole. "I'm home, mother."

Mary's steps clacked down the hall toward me.

Now that the moment was here, I tried to relax and find my determination. I would have this.

Mary stopped, studying my appearance. Her lips tightened. "Do you think perhaps you're pushing the...rides too far?"

Considering what Angie and I had just been doing, I nodded. "Yeah."

Surprised by the admission, Mary regarded me in uneasy confusion. I could feel her trying to dig into my mind to discover whatever I had locked away from her. My will weakened as she bored into my soul...

My sister came through the hall at that moment.

"Can I—"

"Get out!" Mary snapped, breaking her hold on me.

Tracy fled, immediately glad that she wasn't on the receiving end of it. Nothing good ever came from our mother when she was angry enough to shout. We'd all learned that over the years.

Tracy might have flashed me a glance of sympathy as she pulled the heavy door shut, but I couldn't be positive. We'd never been close. Being so far apart in years had hurt our relationship as much as my mother's cruelty had.

My mother waved for the servants to go away, telling me she wanted to be sure no one would be

able to eavesdrop outside the door. She motioned to her study.

We waited until we were alone to fight, both knowing we might be shouting loud enough for the neighbors to hear before it was over.

As I sat down, I refused to let her condemning gaze back inside my head where it could stir up the dirt. She loved mind games.

“This meeting should have taken place a year ago.” Mary settled herself in the plush chair and adjusted her glasses. “It would have, if you had shown any signs that you want what I’m offering.”

“I don’t.”

“Yes, you’ve made that clear. However, we do our duty in this family, young man.”

“I’m in love with Angie.”

Mary’s expression shifted into distaste, but there was none of the surprise I’d hoped for.

“How could you do that? She’s your family!”

“Not by blood!”

“By God!” Mary lunged forward. *Slap!* “You’ve gone against both of us!”

I let the sting sink in and strike a match to the fury I’d been carrying for so long. “That is the last time you *ever* put a hand on me.” I looked up, letting her see some of my hatred. “If you hit me again, I’ll hit you back.”

Mary was stunned. I don’t think anyone had talked to her like that in a very long time. I continued before I lost the advantage. “I already

know I'm trapped. You don't need to rub it in first. Just lay out your damn deal so I can make a choice."

My mother's mouth dropping open in shock was a great moment. I'd dreamed of causing that.

Mary sat back down, readjusting her glasses as she studied me.

"You've changed."

"You haven't," I countered, almost shaking with the fury. "You're still the same cold bitch who thinks she can rule my life." I slowly controlled the anger to let my shoulders slump as if I were defeated. "And you can. I'll give a lot to have what I want."

"You'd give up the *Marines*?"

I hated the way she said the word. It already meant a great deal to me. I pushed that annoyance aside as I realized she also knew the Marines didn't have my top slot anymore. "Is there a way I can have all of this?" I was thinking hard. "I'd make that deal without arguing at all."

Mary shook her head, almost seeming like she held pity. "No. Your family needs you."

"To take all their money because they aren't true Christians?"

To my surprise, Mary chuckled. "You really *don't* know who I am. I didn't think it would hold this long."

"Your cover?" I knew she had sneaky things going on, but I'd never dug in to discover exactly what they were.

“Very good. But before we get into those details, we’ll settle the rest of this first. I need you to do your duty.”

“I don’t know what you mean by that, but I don’t want to. I’m not like you. I don’t enjoy causing other people pain.”

“I’ll send her away.”

Terror rushed over me. Rage came right behind it. “Say that again.”

She ignored my threatening tone.

“I’ll send them all away. Is that what you want?”

“I want Angie!”

“Let that tramp go!”

My mother finally revealed the side of her I’d always known was there.

“So help me, Marcus. If you fail me on this, I’ll send those two away together for a romantic cruise! She won’t even be able to run.”

I leapt to my feet, blazing with 100 things I’d wanted to tell her for years now. I started to shout, to threaten her with what I knew, and then coldness fell over me as if I’d been drenched in a sudden rainstorm. I lashed out in a devastating swipe. “Be careful threatening the things I love, Mother. When I control the family, I’ll also control *you*.” I studied her shocked dismay coolly. “I think I know the perfect nursing home.”

To my surprise, tears welled behind those wire frames. I hadn’t thought she was capable of feeling anything anymore.

“You wouldn’t, not after all I’ve done for you.”

I swallowed the snort in favor of a promise. “If one hair on her head is missing when I return from your tour, you’ll have to kill me to keep me quiet. Be careful threatening the people you need. It always backfires.” I sat down and calmly began to pry mud from my fingernails. I meant it. She knew I did, but I didn’t expect her to sit idly by and take it. She would make me pay somehow, but she would leave Angie alone, because like everyone else who’d spent time around me, Mary knew I never said things I didn’t mean. I would blow her out of the water on the front page of the paper, the local sheriffs, and even the FBI if I had to go that far. No, Angie wouldn’t be harmed at all in my absence. In fact, she might just get a little peace.

“So, we have a deal?” Mary’s tears were gone.

“How long have you been planning this?” I pretended a nervousness that was really anger. She’d also expected my threats.

“Since you began crossing those incestuous lines, Marcus. I’ve watched for it. Your guilt was easy to spot. I’m only surprised that you thought I didn’t know.”

“Why are you splitting up the family, sending people away again?” I hoped to distract her for a minute so I could think.

Mary merely smirked in satisfaction at my observation. “They’re extending us, branching out. Much like oil, in fact.”

“As salesmen?” I didn’t understand her reference. I didn’t know any oilmen.

“If I let you into this part of the business, Marcus, you have to be loyal. If you even hint about rebelling, the others will kill you. This is no game. It’s why I’ve kept you in the legitimate side of things for so long.”

That was the first time I’d ever heard Mary admit she was into anything illegal. As she’d known it would, it captured my attention. “What side businesses do you have going?”

“Many.” Her expression was deadly. “You’ll stay and follow in my footsteps. I’ll keep doing what I have been—leaving you alone while you rut in sins of the flesh with your cousin.”

I had spent so many years worrying over hearing those words from her that now, at the actual moment, they held no power. I didn’t even flinch. I went straight into considering her deal. It was better than I could have hoped for. In the far past, I would have leapt at any opportunity to get deep into the details of our family, so I could find her weaknesses. Now, I hesitated. I still wanted to be a Marine. I was meant to be a Marine. I knew it. And when Angie and I ran, she would let me have that dream. My mother likely never would.

“For how long?” I hoped there might be light at the end of that tunnel.

“You’ll spend a year and half in true training. Then you’ll begin to take over my chair.”

“Your chair?”

“I’m the leader of our...organization. You’ll be the boss, Marcus. In time, I’ll be too old to protest and you can even have the whore of your dreams.”

“Don’t do that.”

Mary’s lips drew up, but she restrained herself from calling Angie more names just to prove that she could. If she pushed me too hard here, my true anger might rise back up and land us both in hell.

“What if I hate it or I’m not good at it?”

“The first makes no difference. The second is unlikely. You are clearly clever and capable of being sneaky.”

I didn’t know if I should be ashamed or proud. The offer was too good to be true. I was positive she had a loophole that would allow her to deny me what I wanted the most. “I’ll think about it.” Once Angie was of age, we could go—legally. Mary wouldn’t be able to interfere. If I fought now, the opposite was true.

“One day, Marcus.”

“I’ll give you my answer in the morning.”

I locked myself in my old bedroom to consider the offer. If we could stay, would Angie be happier? Safer? Would I?

No, but the Marines could wait a couple more years. They would take me as long as I was in good shape and this way, I would be around to help guide Angie into womanhood while I protected her. I mostly trusted myself now. I didn’t trust my mother at all.

Morning came before I'd made the choice. I stretched it out with a long shower, but in the end, I had to give in. I had to try. If we ran and got caught, everything would be lost. I had to try to do this the right way, to give us an honest shot at happiness in the future. It felt as if a heavy chain was wrapping around my chest as I said, "I agree, with conditions."

Mary peered up from her tea and eggs. "Those are?"

"I want all the details, even if you think I can't handle it." I joined her at the table. "I'll promise to spend time thinking about any actions and discuss them with you, even when I get angry."

"Agreed. You can't do this job without the details, but it will take you the year and a half to learn them all. You'll spend much of that time traveling. It's called the inheritance tour. You'll leave come Christmas."

I stored that for later. "I have to know you won't do any of the things you've threatened."

Mary glared at me. "I'm known for keeping my word."

"I want you to do the opposite of your threat, as an act of good faith."

"Opposite?" Mary grimaced. "As in clean up her family issues?"

"And more. I want her accepted into the family—by you, personally."

My mother's bark of hard laughter was unexpected. I leaned back in case it was the prelude

to a strike. I wanted to get a good swing in before I connected, just to get more impact.

“You have no idea the power I wield, young man. Before you yell, consider this. My power will be *your* power. I have no need to bring her in. The first time you cross the line publicly, after you take over, the family has no choice but to accept her. Who she is won’t matter.”

I couldn’t imagine kissing Angie in front of my horrid family. They didn’t deserve to witness something as pure as what we shared. “I found your loophole. It’ll be years before I take your place. Years that I still can’t have what I want.”

“Only openly.”

“Why? Why can’t you let it go?”

“Why must you consort with the whore’s offspring?” Evil inside rose up to spew from her mouth. “That family line will die out in time and there’s nothing you can do to stop it!”

Mary stormed from the room before I could form a response. She clearly hated Angie’s mom, but I had no idea why.

Who could I ask? If Mary wasn’t lying, I would be known as her heir in whatever this seedy side of the family business was and that meant one of our relatives would tell me what I wanted to know. Judy and Larry were out. As the farm fell further into disrepair, they fell further into debt with my mother. They wouldn’t risk her anger. I didn’t blame them.

I listened to Mary slam the drawer in the hallway where she kept her papers for household

maintenance. I suspected I was about to be sent out of the house and that suited me. There was a chance Angie would be in the clubhouse now. I might be able to stop by for a few minutes. I was sure she was waiting nervously to find out how the meeting had gone.

“Take this letter to the diner. Georgie should be at the restaurant, prepping for the lunch shift. Then be back here by dark and we’ll finish discussing your conditions.”

“That’s it.” I put the letter in my pocket. “Just keep your word. Please.”

Mary reddened angrily. “And you, as well, Marcus. If you cross too many lines, if you’re caught together, it will be the end of our deal and my displeasure will be felt by everyone. It will be quick and extremely harsh.”

I didn’t doubt her.

I got my coat, worrying over the deal that I’d made with the devil who called herself my mother. And for the first time in many years, I wondered where my father was, if he was still alive. That was another answer I needed to get. I now understood why he’d abandoned us, especially since I was planning on the same strategy. My mother had that effect on people.

As soon as I was out of sight of the house, I examined the note she had suddenly needed delivered.

George, I require your escort over the next months. Surprise visits. Be ready to leave at dawn.

My heart leapt. She was giving me a good faith gesture by taking Georgie out of town with her. It would require Frona to sober up and run the diner while he was gone. Angie would have free time. Mary was proving that she would keep her word.

My hatred softened the tiniest bit, but the fear increased. I had admitted I wanted Angie. I could only hope the deal I'd made was good enough to cover us for the next two years. If we settled into a good life before then, one that would eventually put me in charge of the family and shove Mary out of the picture, then maybe we wouldn't have to run at all.

I didn't plan to tell Angie that part unless the cards fell that way for us naturally. The odds weren't very good. My mother wasn't the forgiving type and I'd just challenged her and mostly won. A payment would be required for it.

Angie

“Can you hold it up a little higher?”

“Sure!” *Marc asked for something!* I hefted the wide board higher, arms screaming for a break. “How’s that?”

Marc hammered the nail through, and quickly took the weight off me. He knew I wasn’t very strong. He repeatedly offered to do all the labor whenever we worked on the clubhouse, but I wasn’t okay with that. I’d insisted on holding and fetching things. I tried to make a joke. “That’s what Georgie says women are for, anyway—holding and fetching.”

Marc’s profile darkened. “That’s not true. He was joking.”

I shrugged. Georgie did like to joke, but this time he had been yelling at my mom for not getting his dinner quick enough. He’d tossed a book at her. I doubted she thought the bruise was funny.

“Is she ok?”

“Yes.” I remembered that everyone knew about Frona’s latest hospital trip for a broken hand. Georgie said she fell and no one at the emergency room had questioned him. “They gave her a lot of pills. She likes them, I think.”

Marc nodded, but didn’t ask more. I could feel him wondering how bad my mom’s addiction was, but I didn’t want to talk about her or about my home life. I wanted to stay here all day and finish our clubhouse. “What’s it like on the farm?”

“Hard. They’re not like me.” Marc sighed. “I’ve figured something out, if you’d like to hear it.”

“I would.” I answered him calmly, hiding how impatient I was. I hoped this might be the opening into how the meeting with his mother had gone. For some reason, Marc wasn’t eager to discuss it, so I didn’t push. I was scared he had made a deal that would be the end of us. If that was the case, I needed to know.

Marc hammered the final board into place quickly. As I stepped aside to let him come around the wall we’d just completed, I felt his gaze go over me from curls to boots in a wave of heat. I tried to catch it on his face, but he stepped around me before the spark could flare into anything. He always did that. I respected him for it.

It got stressful in my thoughts sometimes, having both Marc and Georgie desiring me, but I never had trouble keeping the two separate. One was a horror that I lived in fear of. The other was a light in the darkness I couldn’t live without. With Marc, I knew I was wanted, but I also knew I was safe.

And when you’re older? the witch questioned in my mind. *When you’re legal?*

I’d considered that after my last run-in at home with Georgie. When he finished, one of my first thoughts had been to wonder if Marc would treat me the same way when the time finally came. It had been an easy answer at that moment. It still was.

Marc is good inside. He doesn't think about hurting me, only loving me. That's why I like it with him. I'm not bending my pieces.

The witch snorted loudly, and fell silent.

I glanced over to find Marc staring at me in concern. "I'm okay."

"Something about us?"

I shook my head. Since the witch's ominous warning, Marc had asked that question a number of times, but there wasn't anything new yet.

"Liar."

I blushed. "She said I may not feel safe with you when I'm old enough to..." Now, I flushed scarlet. "She's wrong."

"I don't like the witch." Marc glared. "Why doesn't she protect you?"

I'd asked that question a long time ago. "She said there are people who would take me to a lab and never let me out. I assume she means a funny farm. Her words aren't always the same as mine, you know?"

Marc nodded absently. "If that's true, I understand she can't do anything big, but why can't she help in small ways?"

I thought of how I'd been led to Marc by tracking thoughts. "She gave me you."

Marc grinned, feelings about the witch eased.

I pointed toward another place on our clubhouse where we still needed to finish filling the cracks with mud and leaves. "Shouldn't we be working?"

Marc patted the frozen log next to him. “We’ll take 10 now and make it up later.”

I pretended not to know that we would have to make it up on our next visit. The sun was sinking faster. “Okay.”

“I think Mary has been sabotaging our family.”

Marc rarely ever spoke about his mother. All my personal drama vanished for a minute as I dropped down next to him with my mouth open. “What? No way!”

“The selling business is a scam.” Marc took out a pack of Winstons. “She’s been sending people away, splitting us up. Did you notice how few people are still here?”

I hadn’t. “No. I…” It clicked in place easily when I thought about it. “Wow. Not many!”

“Exactly. Remember the first Christmas party, when you sat in the chair?”

I nodded, hiding an automatic wince and need to rub my butt. That chair was a memory maker.

“We had at least 50 people here. Same for my sister’s wedding. Now, think about how many were at our last gathering.”

I quickly added it up. “Less than a dozen.”

“Yes. She’s sending us all away. I don’t know why.”

I wasn’t able to help him there and I remained silent, able to feel him thinking on it. I didn’t know Mary as well as he did, though I thought I might hate her as much.

“Judy is going to lose the farm. With no one to work, she can’t take care of it.”

“No new kids.” If the parents were being sent away, so were the children. “Maybe that’s why. Your mom never has liked your aunt.”

Marc studied me in surprise. “Since when?”

I understood that Marc didn’t know. I quickly told him about a recent conversation I’d had with Patty. “Judy was supposed to marry your dad. Judy’s marriage was changed and she got Larry, who was supposed to be with your mom.”

Marc scowled deeply. “They switched husbands?”

“No.” I was unable to keep the bitterness from my tone. “They switched wives.”

Marc

“Are you going to confront her?”

Angie’s question brought me back from the daze I’d been in since hearing those words. It explained so much! “Maybe. I have to think about it first.”

“Be careful. It feels bad now.”

I agreed. Even before I’d told my mother, it was as if we were never alone anymore. I suspected the scientists still crawling around our neighborhood had something to do with that feeling, but we’d broken so many of the rules now that it was hard not to jump at every shadow—whether anyone was there or not.

“I’m glad you’re staying!”

I’d only told her the basics of the deal. Angie didn’t need to know that I might actually give up my dreams for her. That was too much weight for a teenager to handle. “I’m not letting her send me away. I don’t want to sell cars or run a pawn shop. I’m still going into the Marines after we...”

Angie paled, but to her credit, she didn’t voice a single protest. I knew she was dreading the time we would have to be apart once I enlisted.

Angie shifted unhappily on her seat, kicking at a log about to fall from our fire. Now that the clubhouse was finished, we were tweaking things. We’d moved the fire a bit, so there was still some warmth even if we wanted to be outside. I studied her as she held her hands out to the flames,

wondering what she was thinking. “Will my being gone in the service be any different than what we have now?”

“No.” Her voice trembled. “Except... Things are bad for me, Marc. Really bad, and...I may not wait for you to get out. I may run on my own.”

I studied her in dismayed surprise, and then let the first thing that came to mind pass through my lips. “You’ll say anything to keep me here. Just like my mother.”

I wanted to pull it back, but of course, I couldn’t.

Angie crumbled. Her mouth opened, eyes filling with tears. Then she fled toward the woods.

Knowing I’d hurt her so bad that she wouldn’t even fight made my stomach cramp.

I’m sorry!

She didn’t answer. I thought about following, but when Angie didn’t want to be found, she wasn’t.

I settled for kicking things around our campsite for the next 10 minutes, cursing myself.

Chapter Twenty-One
Leaves of Change

Angie

I couldn't believe he'd said that to me.

It triggered every insecurity I had, including the secret fear that I'd dumped myself on Marc a long time ago and demanded he love me. He hadn't been given a choice. I'd always feared that would come back to haunt me and now, it had.

I considered a lot of reactions, most of them based on my hurt feelings, but then I'd come to a piece of wisdom that made sense. If Marc thought I was holding him here, then I needed to stay away and let him make his own choices about us now. If he loved me, wanted to be with me, then he wouldn't let my anger keep us apart. If he actually wanted to be free, then this was his way out. I wouldn't hound him or make him deal with an ugly scene. As far as I was concerned, we were broken up. If he didn't want it to be that way, he would do something about it.

To keep myself from going to our meeting places and bawling like a baby every day, I started a new pattern of behavior. At first, I watched movies.

I spent the next weeks engrossed in all the films on Georgie's adult shelf. When that distraction ran out, I went to Patty, hoping she might have a few books to get me through Valentine's Day. I immediately wished that I'd come sooner.

"I'm closing down. This was my last day in business. I'm glad you came by."

Patty's words dropped fear and pain into my heart. "What?"

"I'm being sent away."

"Why?" I was stunned once again.

Patty continued as if I hadn't spoken.

"They have a great *home* picked out for me. Wonder how long they'll pay that bill before they find out I'm in Hawaii, sucking down drinks on the beach?"

I tried to think around the pain. "Can you afford that?"

Patty gave me a short smile, silver hair and golden scarves still a striking contrast. "I did very well at auction. I should be able to open a small book stand with what's left. I only need to rent a single room.

"That sounds lonely." I began bleeding inside.

"Yes, it will be." Patty came over to me. "I've grown very fond of you. But you're not going to stay, are you?"

I hadn't thought of what would become of Patty when Marc and I ran. "No."

“Then my leaving is a blessing, child. I won’t be left here, alone. Don’t begrudge me that happiness. I’ve wished the same for you over these many years.”

That made it easier to hug her and then walk away from the only place where I’d ever felt wanted. I even did it without crying, mostly because I honestly did want Patty to be happy and this was her chance. She was excited to be going. I didn’t want to take that away from her. Patty’s biggest regret was how many of her books and personal items she couldn’t take. She said I could have whatever I wanted after she was gone, but I already knew the memories were what I would cling to.

My tears came a short while later, muffled by the blankets and the latest fight between Frona and Georgie. What would I do without Patty?

She was gone a few days later.

The same kids who had ignored Patty for years came to search for any valuables their mother might have left behind. They also trashed the place.

I was doing my shift at the diner when their BMW pulled in, but even if I’d been free, I couldn’t have stopped them. Over the years that we’d been friends, I’d gathered enough of Patty’s odd comments and slips about her past to have an idea of what had happened. Patty’s husband had gone missing from work one night. She thought he’d run away, like Marc’s dad. Her kids thought she’d paid Mother Brady to get rid of him since he liked to

smack her and drink. They'd had a huge fight where the family split. Patty had stayed here. The kids took their father's insurance payment and set up a business in the city. Neither side had made a move to talk to each other for more than two decades until now.

I knew in my heart who was responsible for that. Mother Brady had threatened Patty not that long ago. Now, she'd followed through.

As soon as my shift finished, I rushed over, but I got to the shop right as Mary and the realtor arrived. I lingered in the doorway to listen. There was no point in acting as if I hadn't known Patty, but I also didn't need Mary understanding how much sneaking around I'd been doing. If she asked, I planned to say I thought I was allowed to be here since I had worked for Patty. Sweeping sidewalks wouldn't count as a real job. I knew that now, but I was going to use it anyway.

"We'll clean it up first, of course." the realtor scanned again, nose curling. "These gypsies don't care about cleanliness."

Steam came from my ears, but I knew better than to tell them Patty's kids had left the mess.

"I'll have the papers ready in a few days, Ms. Brady."

The realtor continued to gush as Mary scanned the possession-strewn apartment. As usual, she was wearing her black robes and pearls. She appeared almost normal until you caught a glimpse of the fanatic lurking behind those fading blue eyes.

“Fine. Bring it to my home.”

I wondered what type of shop Mother Brady was planning to replace Patty’s store. Injustice filled my mind with several ugly shouts that I held in. After they left, I might have a few minutes alone to mourn.

Mary turned, catching sight of me in the shop’s dusty doorway. Her lips flattened into a thin line that warned my presence here wasn’t welcome. *Like I don’t know that.*

Maybe it was the droop to my shoulders or the refusal to back down on my face that made her sweep by me without speaking. She knew I’d lost. She had the class not to rub it in.

I hated her even more.

The realtor hurried after her best client, falling over herself to make sure she stayed in Mary’s good graces. I could have told her she wasn’t going to achieve that high goal. The realtor’s short skirt and red blouse were merely tolerated because the woman was employed by someone that wasn’t yet beholden to my awful relative. As soon as Mary secured that grip, the realtor would be forced to dress, talk, and act like everyone else in the cult that was our family. I’d witnessed it too many times to have hope for the happily bubbling woman holding Mary’s car door while she climbed in. The woman would eventually be broken, just like the rest of us.

I entered the shop slowly. As I let the memories rush over me, the sun started to sink, throwing deep purple shadows across the apartment. She’d only

been gone a little while, but I already felt lost. Patty had tried to prepare me for being alone, but nothing could have helped ease this pain, this gaping hole where she'd existed for me. Mother Brady had once again taken something I loved, something I needed to be happy, and replaced it with emptiness.

I found my way home a short time later, too tired and depressed to cry. I didn't answer my mom's shouts of outrage because I'd forgotten her beer. I collapsed in my bed and let sleep carry me into a world where I made the choices that directed the future.

March brought our town the first ever Boil Water Advisory. Over the last year, we'd almost forgotten about the poisons in our water, land, and ground. Panic hit again. Every store ran out of water the same day. It made shifts at the diner harder. Without Georgie there to keep things under control, my mom quickly got in over her head. I tried to help, but I had school during the day. I walked into a mess each afternoon and spent the rest of the evening trying to fix it.

On the good side, it kept me too busy and too tired to mourn Patty or Marc. I'd wondered if Georgie was home after seeing Mary, but she'd left him behind to oversee things. I was glad for that, but if Georgie came home from his trip and found out business in his diner was down by half, he would snap. I worked hard to make sure that didn't happen, pulling 18-hour days while my mom sat in the rear

of the restaurant and nursed vodka. I hated her during those times.

She didn't notice.

The boil advisory lasted for two days. Then the din calmed and we once again returned to ignoring our problems in hopes that they would go away.

The spring of 1997 saw other changes that hit me hard. Thanks to Mother Brady's constant complaints, big city inspectors had come to Stricker's Grove. They'd sent three employees home for being underage and now the rides were being examined for flaws or poor maintenance before the spring opening that the owners would miss this year. The park was shut down until it proved compliant.

The Drive-in was also closing, thanks to poor attendance after the rape report the police hadn't found enough evidence to support. The girl was a known flirt, but I doubted she was lying considering that she was transferring schools next week and her parents had put their trailer up for sale.

To add more weight and grief, Daniel was also moving. His father was deep in debt to Mary. She was sending them all west to run a small carnival where Daniel's bike tricks would pay off. Daniel said he was ecstatic about it. I was sad he would be leaving, but we couldn't see each other anywhere now except school anyway. I hoped Daniel would be happy. He was getting what all of the kids in this shitty little neighborhood wanted—out.

I wasn't there with the other kids to gawk as Daniel and his family loaded their U-Haul truck. I was lying in my bed with the worst cold of my life, listening to my mom swear over something in one of her books while I shivered and heaved. As soon as I got sick, she shut down the diner and fell into her stash of bottles. I still couldn't figure out why Frona hadn't just jabbed a coat hanger in herself when she'd found out she was pregnant with me.

As the cold got worse and Frona got drunker, I began to hope that I would die. I didn't have a reason to fight anymore. Patty and Daniel were gone. Marc hadn't tried to get in touch. When Georgie came home, he would start abusing me again. My life was awful. If death was the only relief I could get, I wanted it.

Marc

“What are you doing out here in this weather?”

I didn't move, barely feeling the icy rain.

“Thinking.”

Mary sighed, stepping outside, but only as far as the covered porch. I was on the bottom step, studying her muddy rose bushes. I'd done a good job of bringing them back after running them over.

“Thinking about what, Marcus?”

Her tone said she was annoyed.

“About digging up your rose bushes with my bare hands. I need to destroy something.”

“And why would I be the recipient of such actions?!”

“Because you always get what you want. I hate that.”

“Is this over that whore?”

She knew to shut up when I spun around to glare. I must have been a sight because my mother threw her arms up and heaved a weary sigh.

“Fine! Come in and clean up. I'll see what I can do.”

Not soothed, I turned back to those rose bushes. They represented the tenacious growth sucking the life out of me.

Mary shut the screen door with a loud snap. “By all means, Marcus, continue this melancholy behavior. Destroy my property. Just don't forget that you leave in December and nothing will change that. We have a deal in place.”

Didn't she know that was part of why I was tormented? Angie had already wasted two months of our time together.

Yes, of course Mary knew. She was merely trying to save her roses.

I came in a few minutes later, not covered in mud, but wishing that I was.

Mary was waiting for me in the chair by the phone.

"She's ill."

I immediately felt bad for blaming Angie. "I hadn't heard that."

"I suppose you have to visit her, right?"

Surprised, I nodded.

Mary sighed unhappily. "We're going to make a sick call. We leave in one hour. Get cleaned up."

"I don't need an hour to—"

"Well, I do!" Mary lifted her hand. "I loathe that woman, Marcus. You have no idea."

"Because she stole my dad from you?"

"No!" Mary's expression filled with rage as she shoved away from the table. "Because she locked away what I wanted!"

"I don't understand." I frowned. Where did that piece fit?

Mary calmed down, face going blank. "Get dressed and do it now before I change my mind."

I hurried, getting a shower so I wouldn't carry any dirt to Angie. As I scrubbed, I realized my mother must have a lot of faith in my skills as a leader to allow me to put her through this. Even

Georgie didn't have power over her anymore. Only I did now and the feeling was strange. I would be careful not to abuse it very often. At least, not until I was officially in charge. Then, my mother had a number of surprises coming—one for every year she had kept me from being with Angie.

“What are we telling her mom?”

Mary tapped the driver's seat so Douglas would get the car moving. “Nothing, of course. This is a family visit.”

I snorted. “You've never treated Angie like family.”

Mary frowned, fastening her seatbelt. “I have it covered. Try to act normal.”

I started to tell her how good I was at hiding things, and stopped. I needed to let Mary think she was teaching me some of this stuff. If she knew what I was already capable of, my plans would be in danger.

“When we arrive, stay quiet and by my side. You understand?”

“Yes, but this wasn't what I meant—”

“I know what you want, you ungrateful child! Be quiet.”

I did as ordered by falling into a glassy-eyed stare of rebellion that I happened to know drove her crazy. I wasn't sure why I was pushing her this way, but it was getting me what I needed so I didn't stop. Telling her the truth was out of the question. My

mother didn't know Angie and I had been fighting or she might have refused to do this.

I had spent two months trying to mentally talk with Angie, but she'd made it clear she wanted to be left alone. She didn't go to the clubhouse anymore or the cornfield. She also hadn't spent much time with Daniel or Patty before they left. That had been a memorable day for me, finally meeting Patty.

Angie had spoken well of the old woman over the years, but she hadn't mentioned that Patty also had power. I'd thought only our family had that curse. It was a shock to find out otherwise. We only talked for a few minutes, but one simple sentence might have changed my life.

"I'm sorry."

"For what."

Patty smiled sadly. "Your pain. You love her deeply."

"Well, yeah." I was unable to contain the emotions. "She's everything to me."

"I hear you'll be taking over your family."

Patty changed the topic so fast that I just stared.

She smiled coldly. "You do realize you don't have to wait to use that authority?"

Now, on my way to Angie, I wished I'd thanked Patty again for her advice before she left. She'd been absolutely right. My mother had already told the family I was her heir. That gave me a powerful hand to play. So powerful that I could drop a card

here and there and not feel the loss. This was my first flip of the deck.

I thought Angie's mom might have a stroke when she opened the door to Mary's sharp raps.

"What...? I... Do...?" Frona leaned against the frame of the door, giving up the attempt to form a sentence. She stared with bloodshot eyes.

Mary stared back with a dislike that I believed could have resulted in a murder.

"The diner has to be reopened. I'm here to discuss that."

"Uh... What?"

"I want the diner open." Mary didn't wait to be let in. She climbed the three metal stairs and shoved by the drunken woman without the invite I doubted would have come even if we'd stood there for days. Frona's buzz wasn't clearing, but I had no trouble reading the hatred on her face. It gave us an instant bond.

I followed my mother, not picking up anything from Angie. Worry for her slammed me as the smells of vomit and filth filled my nose.

"What...?"

I stared around in shock as my mother came to a halt in the living room. The trailer was a mess. It looked like there had been a fight except there was also trash everywhere, most of it reeking.

"What the hell happened here?!"

My mother cursing sent me fleeing back to the door to wait for the explosion. I'd never heard that from her, not in all the years I'd been alive.

Frona stumbled toward Mary and tripped over the corner of an overflowing garbage bag. She plunged forward into the mess, passing out.

“Oh, my Lord, this is not what I expected.”

My mother's shock matched my own. That gave me a moment of calmness where I realized I still hadn't heard anything from Angie. “Angie?”

“Marc?”

The voice was so weak that even my mother hurried into the room off the hallway. It was another first—to see Mary running.

What we found was so bad that my mother immediately dropped down on the corner of the bed and dug in her purse for her phone.

“Douglas!”

He appeared in the doorway a few seconds later. “Yes, ma'am?”

“Go get my doctor. Pull him off whatever golf course he found this week and get him here. Now!”

I stayed back as Mary gently lifted Angie's emaciated body into a sitting position. She'd lost at least 20 pounds and she hadn't been that big to begin with! I forced myself not to stare so the anger wouldn't gain control. She needed help right now. Emotions had to wait.

I hurried to put pillows behind her as Daniel's warning rang through my mind like a blade.

You can't leave her alone again. We'll both lose her this time.

“Go help her waste of a mother!” Mary went to the dresser that was covered in tissue boxes and bottles of medicine. All of them were unopened. “What? Did she drop off the medicine and expect you to do it yourself?”

Angie tried to answer, but a cough came that lasted so long her face went purple from lack of air.

“We have to get her to the hospital!”

Mary thumped her on the back.

Angie sucked in a gasp of air, followed by another. Her skin slowly returned to bright red cheeks over pale skin.

“Doctor Kim will take care of her.” Mary gave Angie a bottle of water from the dresser.

Angie couldn't open it. The bottle slid from her grasp as a thin tear rolled down her cheek.

I looked down to give her privacy from her misery, but the shitty pile of clothes at my feet was covered in flies. Angie had tried to care for herself because she'd had no one else who would. It was too much. I broke, storming from the room.

I dragged Frona to the couch and let her drop on a pile of clothes I assumed were dirty from the smells. Any sympathy I'd first felt for her was dead now.

I verified that Frona was breathing and then stomped outside into the sleet. I couldn't say in there anymore or I'd start shouting and never quit.

Douglas pulled up, tires sliding, a short time later. The Asian doctor in the passenger seat didn't appear upset or even surprised to be stolen away. He nodded respectfully to me as the pair climbed out, reminding me everyone knew I would be the next leader of our family. It also reminded me that I wasn't acting like it.

I went back inside and observed every move and sound that was made, this time letting it fuel my flames. Georgie and Frona would pay for this. So would my mother. She'd promised to handle things.

Mary sensed my train of thought, frowning up at me.

"She couldn't run the diner. We tried it. I thought keeping Frona...happy, would trickle down."

"That's not how it works with alcoholism!"

"Well, I know that now, don't I?" Mary retorted hotly. "Don't blame this on me, young man. I may not like our deal, but I'm sticking to it."

I had to concede that she was. "Okay."

Pleased, Mary resumed helping Angie pull on another nightgown while the doctor examined her. Frona would be next, I hoped. Angie wouldn't be happy if her mom died. I, on the other hand, thought Frona deserved it. Even my mother was better than this.

"Pneumonia," Doctor Kim informed us a few minutes later. "Lot of it going around. Mostly

farmers who labor in the bad weather, but kids can get it too.”

The doctor didn't mention the state of the trailer. He also didn't comment on Frona being passed out when he was directed to her. I wondered how much my mother would pay for his silence.

Through all of this, Angie remained quiet and observant, except when a coughing spell hit. Then she made so much noise that I couldn't believe her mom didn't wake up. Wasn't there supposed to be some sort of connection between child and parent? I didn't have it with mine, but I had hated her for a long time. I'd always gotten the feeling that Angie loved hers. After finding this, I had no idea why. “What happens now? *He'll* come to take care of Angie?”

“You'll do that for the next week or so.”

Shocked again, I still pushed. “What about after? He's going to come home soon. Word about the diner being closed will spread.”

“I'll delay him.”

“We can't keep him out of his own home.” I saw that Angie had dozed off under my mother's careful hands.

“No.” Mary gently wiped Angie's filthy arms with a warm, soapy cloth. “We'll have a short time to fix this before he figures out something happened and demands to come back.”

“Then we just pretend we don't know they live like this?”

“Yes. Georgie keeps them in line when he’s here.”

“But he doesn’t care about her either!”

“Actually, he cares too much.” Mary began tugging Angie’s gown down over soiled leggings. “Help me lift her and we’ll get these nasty things off. We’ll leave the soap on for a minute.”

Caring for Angie wasn’t as awkward as I might have imagined it would be. When Mary found a crisis, she snapped into action and handled the people around her. This time, I was grateful. In 15 minutes, we had the bed changed, Angie washed and redressed in clean clothes, and the worst of the mess bagged up. That was the best we could do for her with the fever raging.

Doctor Kim gave her two shots. He also wrote a prescription. My mother immediately sent Douglas to fill it.

“What about the drunk?” Mary inquired, rubbing her hip as we finished.

The doctor finally let his disapproval show. “She’ll be alert enough for jail come morning.”

“If only. Please stay as long as you can, Doctor Kim. As usual, it will be worth your while.”

The man surprisingly waved off the offer. “No need, Ms. Brady. I always stay nearby when my patients are this ill.”

Satisfied, Mary left the room, motioning for me to follow.

The doctor sat down on a chair by Angie’s side. I reluctantly went out, not sure what to expect.

“Thank you.” I got it out around the hatred as best I could.

My mother breathed deeply of the fresh air, for once not appearing to mind the winter weather.

“Yes, and you’ll earn this favor, my boy, but for now, let’s get your little friend taken care of and handle the fallout. I have to change my plans. I’ll need time to think.”

“What plans?”

“I’ll cover it. You can go sit with her for the first shift. Don’t bother with food yet. She won’t keep it down.”

“Is she...” I forced myself to go on. “Will she be okay?”

“I think praying on it is something that we might both do, Marcus. She’s bad off. You know that.” Mary patted my arm, the first time she’d ever shown me compassion. “Go be with her while you can.”

I was at Angie’s side seconds later. I didn’t care about witnesses as I took her hot hand and sank down on the floor across from the doctor. I rested my cheek on the edge of her mattress to do something I never thought I would. I prayed to my mother’s God. But I didn’t just beg for mercy for Angie. I also promised to bring down the evil tyrant who was killing our entire town. I thought that was a fair trade.

We spent the night at the trailer, surprised when Frona sobered up around dinnertime and scurried into the kitchen to cook.

Mary didn't speak to her. She observed the drunken gypsy with a hateful sneer I couldn't fault her for this time. When the meal finished heating—leftover spaghetti—Frona disappeared into her room without a word to anyone or even glancing into Angie's room as she staggered by. We heard the lock click.

I frowned. "Bet she has a bottle in there."

"Yes. Go take it from her. Search the drawers and closet for more."

"She's probably gonna scream."

Mary looked up, hard eyes challenging. "So correct her."

I went to the rear room with a deep scowl. My mother didn't understand me at all or she would know I could never hit a woman. I knocked on Frona's door. "Can I come in?"

There was no answer. I drew in a deep breath. "Open this goddamn door right now!"

I sounded so much like Georgie that I heard Angie whimper from down the hall.

I thought my mother would be scowling at my choice of words and was pleased.

The lock clicked. Frona cowered back as the door opened.

"Give it to me." A bottle was already in her hand. I snatched it before she could pull a last drink.

Frona slapped at me while I searched the filthy, stinking bedroom, but I didn't react. I found two more bottles, both vodka. I also took the stash of pill bottles from her vanity, earning a kick in the ass.

That's when I told her what she needed to hear. "You're pathetic! Get your shit together!"

Frona winced, hands coming up in defense.

"Stay in there until I'm ready to deal with you!" I slammed the door in her face.

I didn't know it at that moment, but I had just taken over my mother's position. She was usually the one who did this part.

I joined Mary and the doctor, standing in the hallway outside Angie's tiny room. I didn't know if we'd ever had a family member so addicted that they'd almost let their child die. "Will a rehab help her?"

Dr. Kim reluctantly shook his head. "She doesn't want to stop. Nothing will help until she changes."

"Won't happen!" Angie choked out. "Too scared. Hides in there."

Mary and I both grimaced. We knew what she was scared of.

"So we do nothing?" I was horrified. Surely the tyrant had something up her sleeve for moments like this?

Mary offered a suggestion reluctantly. "I can keep him away longer, but you would have to help run the diner... It doesn't fit with our deal."

I knew that. She didn't need the family to hear that I'd been shoved into a shop somewhere. "What if you asked Larry? Rodney and Scot can run the farm now."

Mary frowned a bit. “They’ve sold off enough livestock that both of them don’t need to be there. That could work.” She stood up, going to check on Angie’s fever now that the shots had been given time to take effect. “I’ll make the calls.”

“What about Frona?” I didn’t care about her, but Angie still might.

Mary sighed. “We’ll let the doctor and the good Lord make that call, Marcus. Some things are out of my hands.”

The doctor decided Frona shouldn’t be dried out all at once. He suggested sending her to a clinic over the state line, where she would receive treatments of a new drug to help her ease off the dependence. Neither of us cared for that suggestion. We chose to send Angie’s mom to the farm, where Judy could try to help her. The two women had no animosity between them that I knew of, and with Larry at the diner and Georgie out of town, it would give her a little peace to think. Angie was all for that. Between coughs, she thanked Mary as if she actually meant it. Knowing Angie, she did. I hoped she was smart enough to understand that my mother wasn’t helping out of the kindness in her heart. She would want something in return. A simple visit might have been covered in our deal, but this was more than either of us had anticipated. There would be a heavy payment required for all the sudden favors that had to be called in.

I didn't care. It was all worth it when Angie's fever broke and the doctor declared she would survive. I didn't know what I might have done if she'd died, but it definitely would have been the end of all deals.

It took four days of medicine before Angie's cough started to go away and she could eat real food. In that time, Frona was shipped out and I was allowed to stay. I fed Angie, helped her dress, and took her to the bathroom, all under Mary's guidance. She knew when Angie was ready for food or a trip to the john. I was grateful for that.

Angie was so weak that even a few minutes of alertness exhausted her. We got to say hello and goodnight a lot during those four days, but we didn't talk much. She wasn't capable of it yet. I didn't mind that part, but it made me angry all over again when she would fall asleep during a sentence or with food in her mouth. She should have never gotten this bad. Daniel had been right. I couldn't leave her alone again unless she was protected.

My mother knew. She didn't try to send me off or distract me. She did teach me how to care for someone who was deathly ill, though. I hadn't realized how good Mary was at nursing. When had she learned to care for someone other than herself? I'd always assumed Douglas did the labor.

My mother went home on day three, leaving me and Douglas to finish tending Angie through her

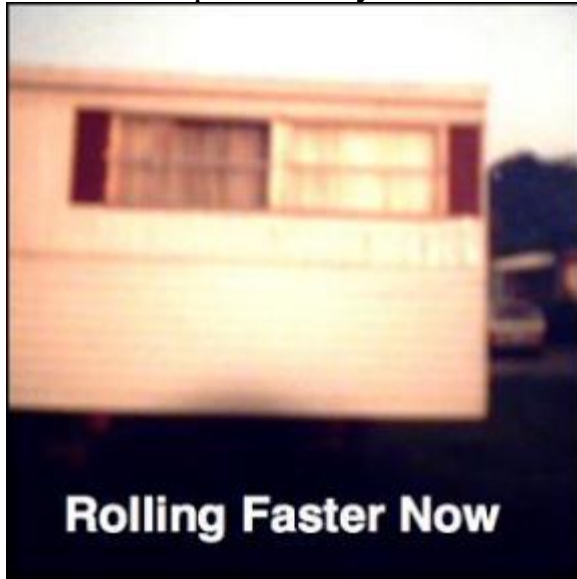
illness. She got well quickly as both of us pushed soup and water into her. When she was able enough to walk down the hall on her own, the expected separation still didn't come.

At night, a nursing student sat with Angie while I tried to sleep on her couch. During the day, it was just us, the way we preferred it. My mother kept her word and then a little more.

I was the one who finally decided it wasn't right for me to be there any longer. We arranged for the nurse to stay during the nights and I visited every day.

During that time, neither Frona nor Georgie called to check on her. It was heartbreaking to know that I really was the only one who cared if she lived or died.

Chapter Twenty-Two



Marc

Exactly a week after we found her, Angie and I were on the couch.

She'd walked to on her own after complaining that she couldn't take staring at her bedroom walls anymore. It hurt her to lean straight back without support, so I settled into the corner of the now clean couch and patted the spot in front of me. Angie slowly sat down and leaned back against my chest, sighing in relief. The pneumonia had settled into

one of her lungs; she still got excruciating pains whenever she tried to bend or breathe in too deeply.

Douglas quietly came over to place a footstool under her legs, and then resumed washing the dishes. We still weren't caught up on them. Douglas and I had decided to clean the trailer shortly after Larry arrived to take Frona to the farm. We couldn't hack the smells.

"Do you think it's all preplanned, like Mary says?"

Angie was staring at the window. I'd already opened the curtain so she could watch the snow come down. *She's been listening to my mother too much while we've been here.* I was quiet for a minute, enjoying the feel of her sitting in front of me. I liked playing with her long braid. "Maybe," I finally answered. "But I don't think that we're evil, if that's what you're asking.

"I was."

I gently shifted a little so I could see her face. "Love is not wrong."

Angie glanced up at me somberly.

"You know that's not true."

"No, I don't." I hoped to convince her, and through her, myself.

"We're family!"

Her horrified hiss tore at my heart. She was wrestling with the concerns that had twisted my insides a few years ago. "Do you remember when I left early? By my choice?"

Angie nodded right away, muttering. “I thought it was because of something I did.”

“It was, sort of. You were making me feel like you do right now—guilty, confused. I had to get away and wait until you were older or I couldn’t sleep, like being around you was wrong.”

“But I can’t do that!” Angie clenched her fists against the pain in her lungs. “I can’t be away from you now.”

Her tone evened out, but that desperate light didn’t leave her eyes.

“What made it better?”

My heart thumped. I chose to give her the honesty she was old enough to hear now. “I love you and I realized that wasn’t ever going to change. I learned to live with the rest of it, not matter how much it bothered me. I’ll always pick being with you.”

Her breath caught. I wondered how many times she’d heard that in her life. Ever? I gently held her close, ignoring our audience. “Forever, Angie. I mean that.”

“You promise?”

“Just that long, though. Not a second more.”

Angie got better quickly, much to my relief. As soon as she could shower by herself, I had to let her out of the house too. She’d been closed up for a long time and her reckless nature immediately asserted itself. I tried to stay ahead of her, but most days the best I could do was to keep up. Instead of being

worn out or tired of the drama, I was delighted. I had my Angie back.

Close your eyes for a moment. Concentrate. Search for the door in your mind marked with the date of 1998. Was it a good year for you or your family? Do you even remember it? It was the best one of my life then, and now, all these years later, it still is.

“Gently, Honey!”

Teaching Angie to drive wasn't fun. My car was one of the few things I owned that I loved. It ranked right up there with my leather jacket.

Angie was rough on the brakes, hard on the gas, and indifferent to the other traffic on the road. Almost fully healed now, she liked to go fast. I didn't mind that so much, but she swerved too wide on curves and she didn't leave enough room when passing. However, she could drive better than I could. She had an instinctive feel for the machine around us that allowed her to manipulate through narrow, one-lane bridges, sliding between two other cars in the process. She cackled while I cringed, begging God to keep us alive. Angie had survived. That was now another blurred line for me. How could I not have faith in a higher power when Angie was alive and right here next to me?

There were a few benefits to it, outside of the adrenaline rush and relief when she finally ran low on fuel. When she was finished exploring the freedom of my car, Angie liked to pull off the road

that branched at the top of the hill. She would find us a spot thick with trees and we *parked*. I'd done this with Jeanie, but it hadn't been my Angie.

"I almost died, you know."

We were sitting together in the front seat. I cringed at the words. "Yes, I know."

Angie continued as if I hadn't spoken.

"And it showed me some things."

"Like what?" I was intrigued by her sudden slyness. I already knew where she was going with this. I could feel the heat building, but her delivery was new.

"You made a sex schedule."

I coughed to cover my surprise, reddening at having it stated so plainly.

"I know you did. I almost have it figured out."

I leaned back to look at her. "Have what figured out?"

"What comes next."

Heat flayed me at the images in my mind. *Next* was something I'd dreamed of doing for her since 1993. The guilt was heavy.

Angie took my hand in hers, sighing at my frozen posture.

"I'm older now, Marc, and I'm willing. I love you more than my life. Please stop letting guilt come between us."

I ducked my head at the deserved scold. She was right on all of that. The guilt was my mother's brainwashing fighting with my heart. "I'm sorry."

Angie smiled at me, shining in the way I adored.

“You’re awfully cute when you don’t shave. Does your mother hate it?”

I snickered. “That’s why I didn’t.”

“Sweet. I kinda like it.”

I hadn’t even thought about that, but I was glad. I didn’t always feel like shaving. It was nice to know it wouldn’t upset my future wife.

Angie blushed. “So, um, the schedule you have us on. Is it...negotiable?”

I loved it that she was taking the adult approach, but I couldn’t give in. “Not really, Baby-cakes. I can’t make love to you and still hide our relationship. The whole world will know because the joy won’t ever leave my face.”

Angie dimpled again, blushing prettily, and I congratulated myself on sidestepping that one.

“What if I use Jeanie’s tactics and tell you there are a lot of boys who would do whatever I ask.”

That got me to sit up straight. I frowned at her. “Is that what you want?”

Angie’s shoulders drooped dejectedly. “No. I was tricking you.”

She had almost no ability to lie to me. I loved that innocence. “Those boys wouldn’t care about your pleasure.” I leaned over to hover near her lips. “But I do.”

Fire flamed between us. This time, Angie let me have the lead.

I didn’t refuse it. I slowly melted my mouth to hers and slid a hand up her thigh. She’d worn a skirt

and low top today, obviously trying to push me further than I wanted to go, but unlike Jeanie, Angie understood I wouldn't and didn't force the issue. I didn't mind that she'd tried to talk me into more, though. I was learning that Larry was right in some ways. Women did need guidance, but it never required hands-on or insults. It took love and years of careful tending.

Angie burst out laughing. The sound wasn't amused, however.

Whatever it was had struck her so funny that she had a coughing spell and I had to help hold her up.

I waited until she was breathing normally again. "What was so funny?"

Angie leaned against the steamy window, sighing. "You think women need guidance, but I've never been afraid of a female in my life. Do you know why? I've never been *guided* by one."

She frowned a little, scaring me.

"Until now, I've been beaten into submission. That gives me a more accurate view on things."

I nodded, hating it that she'd been hurt so much.

"You think you're protecting me, *guiding* me, but what you're doing is taking over Georgie's role, and frankly, I don't need the dad that I have. Why would I ever want another one?"

While I sat there, stunned, Angie fired up the car and took herself home. She drove perfectly calm, better on all of her weaknesses than I'd witnessed so far, and I kept my mouth shut so I didn't dig the hole any deeper. She was telling me almost exactly

what I had told my mother. It was her life. I had no right to plan it without taking her feelings and needs into consideration. She was completely right.

Angie gave my hand a squeeze as she pulled up in front of her trailer and put my car in park.

“I need some time to think. Please don’t come by tomorrow.”

And then she got out and left! After everything I’d done for her, been through to get time with her, she was ready to split us up because I wouldn’t have sex. As I slid into the driver’s seat, I could almost hear my mother laughing at me.

Our next drive went very differently.

Angie took my call and agreed that she needed to practice again. Her tone was so remote that it increased my determination to give her what she’d asked for. I had spent three days stewing over it before finally deciding—based on myself. At her age, I’d been doing a hell of a lot more than we had so far. We could survive a jump in levels that would satisfy her. I just had to be careful that I didn’t let it go much farther or I’d end up spreading her legs in my backseat. She had no idea how badly I wanted to.

I had Angie drive to a new spot along New Haven Road. She carefully maneuvered through the woods, parking where I told her.

As soon as the keys were in my pocket, I climbed into the rear.

Angie regarded me in the mirror.

“I’m not in the mood.”

I grinned. “Yeah, right.”

Angie snickered, letting go of her anger to join me. She settled into our favorite position—her on my chest—and laid her cheek against my neck. I held her for a few minutes, loving the feel of her, and the peace. But my body reminded me that it had been a while since I had a willing female laying on me, wanting pleasure “Did you have enough time to think?”

Angie nodded against my chest. “Yes, but it doesn’t matter. I love you no matter how you try to control me.”

That hurt. I didn’t know what to say.

“Just promise me that when we leave, you’ll stop it. I couldn’t take it if you turned out to be like *her*.”

That was an even harder blow, but I was a man and I sucked it up. “I won’t. Promise you won’t become a drinker?”

“My word on it.”

Her tone left no doubt. She’d seen enough of her mom to know that was a bad life. “Then I promise to stop holding back any more than I have to. Now. Today.”

She peered up at me. “You mean that?”

“Yes.” My voice grew husky. “Can I prove it to you?”

“Something new?”

She smiled eagerly, almost breaking my will to only do what I'd planned. "Yeah. Something new. For both of us."

"You didn't do it with her?"

I lowered my mouth to her ear, lying. "No, I didn't do it *to* her."

"What?" Angie whispered, breath catching.

"I'm going to kiss you."

"But we've already—"

"Not here, I haven't." My hand went to her thigh. Angie's body arched. I sent my other hand to her hair. "Come here, Baby-cakes. I've always wanted to know what you taste like."

"Can I try that on you now?"

I stiffened as I understood what she meant. We were cuddled up. I'd thought she was about to fall asleep in satisfaction.

"Please? I'll be careful."

I wasn't positive I could breathe as her hands went ahead without my permission, freeing the hardening flesh I'd just gotten to go down. She had the strongest effect on me that way. With Jeanie, I'd had to concentrate to get aroused after only the first few encounters. Even when we'd had sex, it wasn't that great for me. With Angie, I was still on fire after coating the inside of my jeans.

Angie's head lowered and I shut my eyes, ignoring the voice screaming at me to stop her, that she was too young. These moments were little

compared to what we would do without everyone stealing our time. I would try very hard not to knock her up for a few years, though. She deserved a chance to pick her career and chase it before I saddled her with my kids.

She stopped, peering up at me in surprise. “You really do want children?”

With my now fully hard manhood inches from her lips, speech was impossible. I wanted to fill her with my life and grow a dozen children that looked just like her.

The afternoon flew by as we learned more of each of other’s likes, dislikes, and dreams. After each hot encounter, Angie curled under my arm and talked to me. It was like nothing I’d ever gone through. She actually cared about my dreams, my hopes! We spent hours talking, asking questions that meant the world to us at that moment. We asked, compared, and planned, but most of all, we touched and stared. We could have gazed at each other for hours. Always denied that liberty in public, we devoured each other in private, in any way that I would allow. And as the weeks flew by, I allowed more and more. I walked a delicate and sometimes vanishing tightrope that held our lives in the balance.

I wouldn’t have traded those moments for anything.

Marc

We spent the morning of July 4th riding through the cornfield with Angie's arms locked around my waist, her full breasts against my back. I'd never been more aware of the wind, the sun, of my life.

"Faster!"

I laughed at her shout, twisting the throttle. We shot through the tall rows with no thoughts but of our fun.

By noon, it was too hot for movement. We lay between the rows of corn in the cool shade. Our hands stayed close, sometimes brushing in agreement or comfort, but we kept space between us. When we didn't, things got carried away.

"Why a sniper?"

I struggled with the question, but tried to answer it honestly. "Some people don't deserve to live. I think I've got the stomach for it."

Angie brushed her dusty braid over the other shoulder. "I don't like it."

"I'm sorry." I was.

Angie was still and quiet for so long that I slid my hand over hers. "Can you love a man who does that? Kills."

There was another tense quiet for so long that I wasn't certain she would answer at all. And then she looked at me in a way that was haunting.

"Yes. I think I would still love you even if you murdered people. I wouldn't want to, but I don't think I can stop now."

That, from Angie, who hated to eat meat she was so against taking a life. It caused my heart to skip a beat. *She's perfect.* I leaned forward and touched my lips to hers. "Only the bad guys. I swear."

She nodded, nostrils flaring as her eyes turned a smoky, roiling blue.

"Kiss me? Really?"

I hadn't for a couple weeks now—not since we'd gone parking. I sighed. "You'll stop things?"

Angie blushed, but tilted her chin up. "Of course."

It was a challenge, something she liked. I braced my arm to crawl closer.

Unable to wait, Angie lunged forward to claim my mouth. Lightning flashed and sank into my stomach, waking those hormones that wanted to take her in every way. I longed to love her.

My tongue dipped, tasting, and her arms wound around my neck, pulling me down against her teenage body. She felt so good!

Angie caught the thought, smiling as I pressed soft kisses to her cheek, her jaw. And then to the base of her throat.

She shuddered as my lips slid across her salty skin.

"I like that."

Her whisper gave me chills.

I did it again, hardening against her thigh. The shirt she wore was loose. It moved easily under my gentle efforts. I let my mouth ease into the cleft of

her bra, dizzy from the scent, the need that was building faster than I could defend us against.

“Mmm...”

That sound did things to me that I couldn't describe. I let my free hand come up to her waist. So sweet. So young. *Forbidden*. My hand froze before it could slide further. *We have to stop*.

“Just a little more!”

Angie kissed me again before I could refuse. My hand began to move up as I kissed her back. Her body was warm, soft, her breathing ragged. I nuzzled her jaw, kissed her neck. She arched against me again, groaning lowly, and it sent the curve of her breast right into my hand.

Alarm bells blared, but this time, I ignored them, extending my thumb so I could slowly stroke the hard nipple so near to my mouth.

“Ohh!”

There's that intoxicating response to her pleasure! I couldn't stop myself from doing it again.

She shuddered, fists clenching as I pressed another kiss to the bare skin I could reach. Vanilla invaded my senses whenever I got near her, but it was in the taste of her too. It wasn't the chemicals of perfume, but the sweetness of nature. I let my tongue trail over her neck in delight.

Her hands came up to tangle in my hair. It was only natural to give her what she was unconsciously asking for. I moved closer.

Stopping shortly was still in my thoughts as I adjusted hard flesh and lowered my body onto hers.

I'd been bracing on one arm, but now, I let her feel me.

Where we touched, fire flamed up.

I sucked in air, trying to pull back from that beautiful edge. Our lips met, bodies pressed tight as I rocked against her legs and stroked that nipple again.

She groaned. "Yeah!"

The response stunned me a little, and sent pure lust through my body. I shifted so she had to spread her legs. I lined us up, calling on my control. "Hold on, okay?"

Angie tightened her grip, legs instinctively coming up to hold my hips. I thrust against her damp heat like there were no clothes between us.

"Ohh! I... Mmm..."

My senses were full of her, making me dizzy. I saw my hand slip under her shirt, but I didn't stop. I wasn't sure that I could.

Angie arched against me, moaning. I rocked faster as I touched the bare skin of her waist. She rose up in pleasure as I ran my hand over her bra to capture that nipple with my fingers.

"Ugg!"

She cried out and my control snapped. I thrust wildly, pushing her up on the dirt with every pump of my hips and squeeze of her breast.

She exploded under me, nails digging into my neck as I joined her, groaning. Lips and hips locked, we pulsed together, connected mentally.

I gasped against her mouth. "Love...you!"

She shuddered again. “Oh, Brady!”

After that, Angie wanted to fool around a lot and things went further each time. I just wasn't strong enough to resist.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Independence

July

Angie

In August, Frona and Georgie both came home, and I had to go back to the restaurant.

Fernald was no longer the main story while Stricker's Grove continued to be investigated. All the underage girls were once again waitressing for Georgie as he tried to bring in customers with 24-hour shifts on the weekdays. With the diner open that long, there wasn't much time for him to mess with me or beat on my mom, but I could tell he was just waiting for a good moment to do both. He was extremely mad about the diner, but worse, he had been gone almost five months and he'd missed his toy.

My mom went straight back to her books and a few days later, her drinking. Neither of them had spoken to me upon their return. I later found out from Marc that I'd been declared off limits. I had no idea what Mary expected in payment for that.

Walking by Patty's empty shop on the way to work every day was fresh pain. She'd been gone for

a while, but I still missed our nights of cookies and talking. I needed her more now than I ever had. With my parents at home, Marc had to stay away and I'd gotten used to having him close! Now, we had to sneak again, but he didn't have as much free time as he had before. He had to attend meetings with his mother in preparation for his trip. He was leaving right after the Christmas gathering, to be gone for *18 months!* I knew it still bothered him that he wasn't getting to join the Marines. I wished we could do it a different way. I wanted him to have his dreams, and I didn't want him to get deeper into the Brady mess. Someday, the house of evil cards would fall and he would get in trouble.

I tried not to think about what would happen if he chose to run his family and left me here for all that time. He had promised to call and tell me his decision as soon as he made it, and then I would make mine. I planned to tell Marc everything if I had to—Georgie's abuses, the coming rapes, all of it. And then I would tell him I wasn't going to wait. I had to believe he would pick me. I didn't trust Mary at all. Making deals with her would hurt us. I didn't care that it had gotten us all these months together. The woman was a snake, and snakes always ended up biting whoever trusted them.

My dangerous restlessness returned with my fear of the nights. After Georgie's first *I've missed you!* visit, it wasn't hard to fall back into the old terrors and depression. Marc noticed, but he

couldn't help me until he made a career choice and I aged at least one more year. I tried hard to suffer in silence, but some days, that was impossible.

I delivered the tray to the front table, trying not to stare at Tracy's black and green cheek. Her new boyfriend, Mary's choice again, hadn't cared for how much noise she and the baby had been making. I heard her whisper that Roy liked it quiet in the mornings and wondered again if Marc would end up being like his family.

His sister didn't protest being beaten on. His brothers were odd fellows with strange jokes I didn't understand. His cousins were pure trouble. They were both on the farm right now, but family gossip said they were about to go to jail for a recent robbery in a nearby town. Marc's uncles were all either like Georgie or drunks, and his father had abandoned his family. Did all of that mean Marc would be no good as well? I would never be able to accept that, but it was hard not to think about it as Tracy's boyfriend stomped into the restaurant, complaining that his lunch hadn't been delivered on time. Roy worked at the landfill and he stank.

I hurried out of the main dining area, not wanting to witness whatever might happen. Georgie ran in as the shouting began.

I slipped my apron off to trade with the waitress who had just come in for her shift. Glad to be able to escape the coming Cops Show moment, I hurried

to the clubhouse, where I already knew Marc was waiting.

As if he'd sensed my need, Marc motioned to where he had hidden his car.

“You drive.”

Ten minutes later we were on the highway, both pretending we didn't ever have to come back.

When I suggested we go parking, Marc directed me to another new place. We steamed up the windows for an hour, but I still wasn't satisfied. It was time to let him know some of what I was feeling.

Since Georgie's visit, I'd made some choices. They were hard, but they might allow me to keep my sanity when things went crazy again. I couldn't run while Marc was away. I needed him emotionally, but I also wouldn't get far without his help. I had to stay here and wait for him, but I wouldn't be able to avoid Georgie during that time. He was going to do whatever he wanted to. The only choice I had in the matter, was *who* would get to show me that side of being physical first. I wanted it to be Marc.

I didn't know if Georgie would know the difference, but I thought it would be enough for me to know that no matter how much Georgie hurt me in that moment, Marc had already shown me it didn't have to be ugly. I would hold onto the good and use it to get me through the bad.

Except, Marc wouldn't cooperate. I doubted that he would even if I could explain all that to him, which I couldn't. That only left pushing him into these moments while hoping his control failed. I felt so bad for doing it that I'd decided to try to talk to him once more. I would try hard to reason with him without revealing my motivation. I didn't want Marc to feel like he was being used, and I certainly didn't want him getting mad and going to jail. I just needed him to love me.

Marc

“I don’t want to wait anymore.”

Her words brought me back from that hazy place. “What?”

Angie’s lashes fluttered against my arm.

“I love you. You love me. We’re tired of waiting. That’s all we do and...I need more.”

Terror sank into my male heart. She wasn’t satisfied with me! “I thought you were happy.”

“It feels good at the time, but afterwards, I know that I missed something and it sort of ruins it.”

I kissed the top of her curls. “For missing it, you certainly have things figured out. You get any wiser and I won’t be old enough for you.”

Angie refused to be drawn into the joking distraction. “I want you to think about it.”

“As if I don’t already.”

“Please?”

“I’d rather wait a bit longer.” I sat up. She did too, but immediately leaned against my seat in a way that began to get me hard again. Dark, sexy curls barely covering her breasts made it hard to concentrate, but I pushed on. I had known this would happen again, but I hadn’t expected it so soon. “There are other things we can do.”

Her lids flew open, pinning me in place with eager curiosity.

“Like what?”

“I can rub against you...” She started to protest that we’d already done that. “Without clothes on.”

Angie paused, clearly fascinated by that forbidden line.

“And I can kiss you again.”

Angie gasped, eyes darkening in desire as I rubbed against her through her unsnapped jeans. I slowly leaned forward, following my plan to the letter. In my wildest dreams, I’d never thought it would go exactly as I’d envisioned, but here I was, lowering my mouth to kiss her bare stomach. It had made sense that there would have to be jumps in levels since I’d been going so slow. I would have to be careful when my pants came down, but not with hers. I could enjoy this and carry it to my bed for when I was alone again.

“So sweet.” I kissed her stomach again. Someday, I would put my sons there to grow.

I slid her jeans down a few more inches. Her hands tangled in my hair as I kissed her lips. I did it again and she shuddered. When I stroked the tip of my tongue upward, she cried out, lifting into my mouth. I rocked an already hard body against her leg as I pleased her, the sound of her moans and cries preventing rational thought. I spoke to her between licks and kisses. I told her how much I loved her, how I’d always wanted her, and how much I needed her. I loved her with my soul and the mental doors between us swung open wide. We connected in a flash of happiness and need that caused us both to arch, groaning in completion.

“Oh, Brady!”

My ego also burst and we enjoyed the waves. It seemed like the perfect time to say, “I can’t wait to do this again.”

Angie giggled, hands playing in my hair as I rested my cheek on her thigh.

“Two minutes, right?”

I almost choked on the laughter. I’d once told her that guys needed a couple of minutes between moments like this. We usually stopped at one because we wanted to spend our short visits doing more than groping each other.

I wiped my mouth on my shirt and gently helped her dress. If she stayed uncovered, we would have moment number three. I was young, but that was still a bit much for two hours. I was over the days of coated sheets and piles of tissues. I preferred quality to quantity.

“Do you really think you’ll love me forever?”

I peered up to discover her not smiling, so I didn’t either. She was serious. “Why do you ask?”

“Georgie says if I give myself to a boy, he won’t like me anymore because that’s all he wanted in the first place. Is that why you’re waiting, stretching it out?”

“No. You’re too young to—”

“Shut up!”

Angie shoved me away and sat up, reaching for her bra.

“I don’t ever want to hear that again!”

I tried to think of the right thing to say and I took too long. She jumped out and slid onto the hood.

I followed, not sure what she was worrying about. I leaned against her and was glad when her arms and legs brought me in close. I hugged her, loving how she smelled like both of us after we had these moments. “I really will love you forever.”

“You promise?”

I smiled. “I’ve always been yours, you know. The end of the world couldn’t change how I feel. I dare it to try.”

Angie

In the dream, I was flying. I blew by scarlet hills covered in yellow flowers that hid dinosaurs. I weaved through clouds hiding unicorns, and then into a dark sky that sent me speeding toward a waterfall. I dove through the crystal liquid and came out into a burning hell that held screaming souls by the thousands. As I flew over, unharmed by the flames, they stretched out to me, begging for help.

I snapped awake with a jerk that also jolted Marc into alertness. We were snuggled together in the chilly backseat. While he checked the time and began to worry, I tried to recover from the nightmare. I'd never had one like that.

The witch had once told me that going through a hole or water was like going through time, which would mean I saw the present—our happiness, and then the future—the result of our relationship maybe. It was impossible to be certain. Predicting the future wasn't easy and never controllable for me. I didn't have the concentration for it yet.

Marc kissed me on the cheek.

“That was incredible. Thank you.”

I blushed. “Wanna do it again?”

Marc stiffened, and then sighed, nodding. “You bet that sweet mouth.”

I grinned and held his hand while I got things started. It was a great birthday.

Fall rolled by, bringing snow before Thanksgiving. Mary didn't have a gathering for the holiday, but only because she was in the next state undergoing medical tests. Some of the family thought maybe she'd been forgetting things and dropping stuff. I knew what was wrong with her, but I had no sympathy. I didn't tell Marc. He stayed by her during the trips to the doctor that month, but he didn't have much sympathy for her either.

She returned with a clean bill of health that Marc verified. He said he'd been there when the doctor announced it. I wondered if Marc had forgotten how powerful his mother was. If she didn't want the family to know she had the cancer, then they wouldn't discover it. Again, I didn't say anything. I wasn't worried that Marc would ask me to help her. I was worried that my own morals would force me to. Someone was sick and I held the power to help them. And I owed her for the last months of peace, for helping me while I was ill. Refusing to repay the favor was very wrong to me, but I was more scared of her finding out about my curse than I was of damning my soul.

Mary's control certainly didn't appear to suffer during her illness. There were no artifact shops in our town now, no signs that gypsies had ever existed here except in the coloring of the people. But like Marc had pointed out, she was still working on that one.

There had been many changes to our town. The Drive-in was shut down now. It was blamed on VCRs being so cheap that everybody could have one. I thought it was really because of the missing girl being found on their property. The Junior had vanished months ago from a school football game and bonfire, and been found in the Drive-in bathroom, severely decayed. Rumors said she'd been dug up and dumped, but it didn't matter. No one had felt safe enough to go there anymore.

The kids also lost the top of the hill to a power substation that workers finished building around the start of Christmas break. Once the fence was put around it, our sledding place was also gone. With nothing to occupy their time, the town's remaining youth immediately became wilder. The peacefulness was constantly broken with boom boxes that cranked out anger against the strict authority in their lives. Even the bike paths became unsafe for the younger kids as the teenagers claimed the last places in the neighborhood for their drinking and parties.

In town, the small stores were replaced with a Walmart, and the cornfield no longer held dead plants waiting to be plowed. The field had been burned by people from Fernald and was taped-off to prevent anyone from going in there. We'd heard they paid a huge fee to the farmer. That was supported by the cash Mary was handed for various gardens, plots, and animals that had to be destroyed on her properties. The reps didn't tell us exactly

what was so bad that the very ground had to be burnt, and no one asked. The reporters were long gone for the next hot tragedy. As usual, the town just waited for the newest round of checks to arrive.

Marc and I spent most of our time driving around or parking, but we did get a few more moments at the clubhouse. It was visible from the burnt field during the day, but at night no one was out running tests or guarding the tape.

As the snows came, leaving feet of white ice behind, we refused to discuss the coming 18 months apart. Marc said he would call me a few weeks after leaving, and we would make our plans from there. I thought I could make it for that long without him. The holiday season had Georgie and Frona busy, and they were both too tired after our shifts to do much more than shower and sleep. It was almost nice.

I had no illusions the peace would hold.

Marc

A week before Christmas, Angie and I exchanged gifts and said goodbye. We both cried a little, but we mostly just held each other. Even if I didn't take the family deal, I would still have to wait until she was 17. We had one more year of pretending, but I would be able to call her this time, where I hadn't been able to as easily before. I also believed she would be safe. Mary knew that was a deal-breaker. She had told the family she had plans for Angie. She also said she'd spoken with Georgie directly concerning both Angie and Frona. It would have to be enough. I'd made her deal and she'd told everyone. I was her official heir, beating out my brothers, which meant that despite my aloofness as some put it, I was smarter than others who'd been considered for this position. I wasn't sure if I was smarter. Maybe I was just a little cleverer, which I didn't consider to be the same thing.

The Christmas gathering was held at my old home. The first 10 minutes helped prove my mother would keep her word and make sure Angie was taken care of. Instead of directing her to the chair she'd always occupied, Mary waved Angie into her study in front of a dozen witnesses. It allowed me to relax enough that I noticed the way the family who had been invited were viewing me. Their gazes held fear and a slight contempt I credited to my getting the coveted position instead of them.

Mary disappeared into the study behind Angie as I went upstairs to finish packing so Douglas could load the car. We were leaving as soon as this gathering was over. It didn't occur to me until much later that I should have been in that study with Angie. I didn't know they were going to be discussing anything other than the job my mother had recently mentioned giving her. I assumed she was handling the loose end before I left, to prove herself. Mary had gone out of her way to do that over the last months and I was more optimistic now than I had been before Angie's illness. Depending on what it was, I might be able to live with running things. My mother might not, however. If I took over, I would change everything bad she had going on. Nothing in our family would be the same when I was through.

Angie

Mary pointed to a seat and shut the study doors. She had long robes over white undergarments again, still playing the holy act, but I knew better. She was about to demand a payment for all her help. I had decided I wasn't going to do anything dirty, but if she had an honest job, I would consider it.

"Have you chosen a career yet?" Mary sat down behind her desk.

"Sort of." I stiffened as she adjusted those glasses so she could peer down her nose at me.

"What does that mean?"

"I might be an author. I might try to do something more important. I'm not sure yet."

"Typical teenage answer." Mary took a paper from her middle drawer. "I wanted to be a dump truck driver for a while."

I studied her in suspicion. Until I got sick, Mary Brady had never once spoken to me unless she had to, and here she was telling me about her childhood. What the hell?

"Did you know that Jeanie moved?"

I tensed again. I couldn't help it.

Mary flashed a tiny, cold smile. "Her father had a run of good luck and paid me off. Then, he moved and refused to say how he could afford it."

I shrugged, trying to recover. "Good for them."

"Indeed."

Mary locked onto me with gleaming orbs.

“I have a job for you. If you do what you’re told and you do it well, you’ll be rewarded.”

“With Marc?”

Mary’s upper lip curled, but she nodded. “In time, yes. You’ll settle down in the far country with other relatives. No one there will care what you do.”

I frowned. “You told Marc we would be together openly.”

“And you will. Just not here.”

“You lied to him.”

“I told him what he wanted hear.” Mary studied me knowingly. “Like you do.”

I crossed my arms over my chest defensively. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Mary smirked. “Does my son think the liberties he takes with you are new?”

She was asking if Marc knew the things Georgie had made me do. I flushed. “He would have gone to jail by now over it. I protected him.” *Unlike you.*

“I’ve done much the same, Angela. You don’t think so now, but if the truth about your relationship were to come out here, it would ruin more lives than just yours and his.”

“You deserve to go down. You knew Georgie was bad and you didn’t do anything to help me or my mom!”

“Why would I?” Mary didn’t hide her cruel enjoyment. “I arranged for Georgie to comfort Frona a long time ago. I’m only surprised over his...obsession with you.”

Before I could form a response, Mary hit me again.

“It’s because of the witch you carry.”

Panic. I had no idea how to react, and Mary took my silence for confirmation. I was afraid to deny it. She’d brought it up and that meant she had witnessed something.

“You owe me, young lady. Those gifts will come in very handy while Marcus strengthens my hold over this family.”

I stared in stunned silence, but as usual, Mother Brady had it covered.

“If you refuse, all the protection that you’ve had this year will vanish. Marcus won’t know, of course, and by the time he finds out, it will be much too late. I’d imagine that Georgie discovering the truth about you two would be enough to ensure that an hour alone with him would feel like days.”

I shivered at the threat, certain she was right. I’d always hoped Marc and I would be gone before Georgie found out.

“Your refusal will also violate the deal I’ve made with Marcus.” Mary destroyed any hope for that future, as well. “He’ll be arrested for the things you two have done. A few years in prison might straighten him out.”

Trapped.

Mary read my expression in satisfaction. “Now that we’ve got that ugly business out of the way, it’s time for you to give me an act of good faith. I have

to know you won't tell Marcus about this talk until after he's taken my chair."

"How?"

"Heal me."

I gasped as the witch inside flatly refused. "What?"

Mary shoved the paper across the desk. "Heal me."

I quickly scanned the doctor's form, but I still found no sympathy for her when my diagnosis was confirmed. If not for her threats, I wouldn't even consider it.

"What are you waiting for? Pay your debt."

"We're even, if I do?"

Mary laughed harshly at my validation. "We'll never be even, Angela. I own you now, like I do Marcus and the rest of this ungrateful family."

I tried to buy time to find a way out. "How long have you known?"

"The tornado."

I blanched. She'd known since I was 11.

Mary put the paper back in her drawer. "Marcus making a miraculous recovery after your visit confirmed it."

"You sent me up there!"

"Of course. I couldn't let him die. You never would have agreed to become my...employee."

I was almost too dazed to form a response. "It's not... You want me?"

Mary smirked nastily as she dropped the final stone. "He has no value to me, except as a way to

control *you*. I gave you my son, Angela. Now, you'll give me your power.”

1998

Chapter Twenty-Four
Family Business
January

Marc

In January of 1998, I finally learned the truth about our family business.

Horror was my first reaction.

When males came of age, they were sent to another town where Mary wanted to increase the Brady holdings. She provided a small business like a mechanic shop or an appliance store—which incurred a loan with heavy monthly interest—and the new man happily went forward to start what he thought would be a new life, free of control.

We all should have known better. Each business ran drugs, guns, and a betting hub that paid a cut into my mother's accounts. She was indeed the hypocrite I'd imagined but much, much worse. I quickly discovered there was no refusing the setup once the deal was made. By the end of the first day of my tour, I understood too much about my family; none of it was good.

I wasn't impressed by the small shops in Grayson or the large pond across the street as we

pulled in. Everything was dingy, neglected, ominous even. I'd been hoping for better accommodations after that long drive.

Douglas got out and opened my door in front of a laundry mat that was lined with half a dozen unfriendly faces. I recognized two of them. The first was my uncle Bean, the owner. He had a drinking problem, which was why he'd been sent to this dusty town in Oklahoma. His wife was trying to reform him with church, but it didn't appear to be working. He was swaying with a breeze that didn't exist.

The other man was Larry. It was a surprise to find him here. On the ride down, Douglas had begun telling me how things really worked. I'd been too shocked to say much, but the anger was finally coming. In all our conversations, Larry had never mentioned this side of our lives.

To his credit, Larry dropped his gaze in shame as I walked by.

"Sorry to see you here, boy."

"Not as sorry as I am." He'd followed Mary's orders to keep me out of it. She was the evil boss, but this destroyed my relationship with Larry. All my respect shattered at his snow boots.

It was hard to hide all my thoughts as I entered the laundry mat and walked straight to the private rooms Douglas had assured me were there. Not waiting for a welcome or invitation was my way of showing them how serious I was.

The laundry mat held a dozen rusty machines on each side of the room, but no customers. The back areas were full of parts and dead shells that had sacrificed themselves to fix the other washers and dryers. It didn't appear as though this business made good money, but Douglas had told me not to judge anything by appearances. It was supposed to look this way.

I glanced pointedly at the guard in the final storage room. The tall, older man wore a gun on his hip and a wary expression he studied me with for a moment. Then he opened a panel in the closet that revealed steep, brick stairs going down into a wide, dank hallway.

I entered without hesitation.

The door shut behind us. Douglas stayed close while we went down the hall. I wondered if he knew what I was going to do. He was aware of Mary's plans and plots, but did he suspect mine? Over the years, it had occurred to me that the driver was much smarter than I'd ever given him credit for. How else had Douglas managed to remain with my mother for so long? And then it hit me.

I stopped outside a final door and turned to the man who tensed as if I was about to punch him. In a way, I was. "What does she have on you?"

His face fell through the stairs.

I leaned patiently against the damp door, blocking our way. "Doug?"

As I stared at his black hair and blue eyes, horror slapped me again. "You're a Brady!" It was obvious

now. I didn't need his shameful nod. "What did you do to be punished so badly?"

I expected him to answer me with details, but he shoved by.

"Same thing you're about to do, kid."

That meant he did know my plans, and if he knew, so did Mary.

As Douglas entered the room, I took a moment to reexamine my course of action. Did this change anything?

Yes, I admitted reluctantly. I would have to do the exact opposite of what Mary was expecting. Instead of the thinly veiled threats I'd hoped to use to convince them to overthrow my mother, I stepped into the room and greeted the leadership here with an awed smile. I'd known I may have to change my plans while on this tour, but I hadn't expected it to be at the first stop.

The people here had been told to expect the hard sell, but I didn't bring up the idea of rebelling. I only acted honored by the men I was introduced to. It made me want to vomit into my mouth, but I got through it by picturing the confused leeriness Mary would feel upon receiving this report.

I did great through all the explanations of how the laundry mat worked and how much money was sent in to Mary or the family fund, which I learned contained roughly a million and a half in gold, cash, and bonds. My dear mother had been busy over the last decade. I excelled at math and I suspected there was a lot more. This one store brought in over

\$100K a year, 25% of which our patriarch received between the cuts and loan payments. A million, after 10 years, was short to me for even one store, but I had 35 of them on my tour list! When this trip was finished, I would spend a little time with a pad of paper and estimate the true family worth. Then I had to figure out where it was stashed, because if the Bradys were millionaires, the government should be up our asses, wanting their share. My mother had found a way around that. I wanted to know what it was. Calling the IRS on her would be even worse than tattling to the FBI.

When Douglas led me outside a few hours later, we were set to have dinner at whatever local restaurant there was, then we would book a room at a nearby hotel. Everything changed as we reached the car.

Douglas pointed to the pond, where my uncle Bean and his wife were sitting on the edge, talking quietly. Bean looked upset.

I spotted the white van rolling toward them a second later.

“Who is that?” I watched in horror as the van sped up, heading right for the couple who was unaware of the danger.

“They sit there every day at this time,” Douglas confided in a horrified whisper. “They said it’s the most peaceful place they have.”

The van was flying toward them now. I instinctively started to go help my family.

Douglas grabbed my arm and swung me around. “She said if you interfere, the deal is broken and she’ll have Angie scrubbing toilets in her house before the end of the day!”

To hear someone else blurt such a threat openly was more than I could handle. The freeze melted in a wild swing that took the driver down.

Knocked backward, Douglas fell to the ground awkwardly, but there was no surprise. He was used to this reaction from the people Mary held hostage.

I twisted around as the van reached the point of no return, unsure what would happen, but determined not to interfere. *These people mean nothing to me. Angie means everything.*

Bean and Angel were finally standing up, but it was too late. The van smacked heavily into the surprised couple, lifting Bean into the air. There were agonized screams and an awful crunch as they both disappeared under the murky water.

The van’s black-masked driver jumped out as the van kept going, plunging into the scummy liquid on top of the victims. He took off running toward the highway, where I could just make out a parked truck with someone waiting behind the wheel.

I looked back at the sinking van, wondering if Bean and Angel were fighting to get out from an under it or if they’d been killed from the impact. My stomach crawled as I imagined I could feel their terror.

Townspeople rushed toward the pond. Brady men blended into the group, but none of them went

into the water and they didn't ask anyone else to. I stayed with Douglas, who had stood up and forced me forward to be a part of the rubbernecking crowd. It was the last place I wanted to be, but I was hoping someone might come out of this alive. Bean drank and his wife prayed. Neither was a threat to my mother. In fact, I was already sure her only rival for control would be me... "That's why she did this!"

Douglas jerked me toward the side of the pond that held fewer strangers.

"Because of me!"

Douglas took pity on my instant guilt, I think, because he shook his head.

"She did it because she can, kid. Wake up. She doesn't care about anything but control, and even that is negotiable. She's a mean, nasty bitch, and we're all stuck with her."

Instead of being surprised by his words, I scanned the family around us. The men were desperate, fearful, angry, but not outraged enough to allow my words to make any difference. Anything I might have said earlier would have been forgotten as we watched two family members die. My mother hadn't set this up just for me. She'd done it because she knew there were a few people who might have supported my idea of rebelling, like Douglas and Larry.

"She owns us," Douglas whispered distantly, mind clearly in the past. "We all need something and she controls it. For Larry, it's Judy. He does love her, though Judy can't stand him. That's what

happens when a man has to rape his wife, when marriages are arranged based on money or power. For me, it was trying to stand up to her when I got to where you are now. After she destroyed what I needed, she made me serve her directly. Payback wasn't enough. I'm an example to everyone." Douglas glanced at me in shame and warning. "Your weakness is that girl. We all have something we need, something we would die for, and your mother controls it. If you don't want to see Angie become a drugged-out whore in the basement of one of these shops, then stop fighting your place in this family. Being her son will *not* protect you."

As I stood there, stunned by being related to someone so evil, Douglas took my elbow and led me toward the car.

"She said you shouldn't be here when the police show up."

I let him put me in the backseat. I could still see the pond. Half a dozen brave townspeople had gone in to attempt a rescue. I wished them luck, feeling guilty I hadn't helped anyway. I was also relieved. If I had talked to the family about rebelling, I might have been causing Angie's death. My mother was worse than I had ever imagined. All our plans were in danger. I glared at Douglas in the mirror as he shifted into drive. "I don't owe you anything."

"No."

I heard sirens coming in our direction. "Do you owe me?"

The man shrugged, pulling onto a side road that would get us out of sight. “I owe your mother. That’s pretty close.”

“And if I asked you to risk her wrath, for anything, your answer would be?”

“Not on your life.”

“She still has something to hold you with.” I was numb to the guilt and the disgust. “Our activities, our conversations? You tell her everything, right?”

Douglas hesitated. “I may sometimes... censor the report. You’ve had a little more freedom than she wanted, but a lot less than you’ve thought. She knows about most of what you don’t want her to.”

The confirmation couldn’t break through my haze of concentration. I would find a way out of this. “As long as I keep our deal, I’m good?”

“That’s what she said.”

“But?”

Douglas sighed. “She had that gleam. If you made a deal where you get to be with that girl, don’t count on your mother upholding it. Something will happen and she’ll be gone. Mary will tell you it was out of her control, but I think you know that never happens in our family. She’s never out of control.”

If that was true, then Mary knew about our plans to run. I leaned against the seat and shut my eyes, but I could still see uncle Bean flying through their air, screaming. Our date for leaving had to change. If Mary knew we were going, she also knew when. “I think you and I should find a bar and get drunk.”

To my delight, Douglas let out a chuckle of nervous relief.

“I’d like that.”

“Good. Find us a tavern where no one has ever heard of the Brady family.”

“She’s got branches in the next three towns to the west and south.”

“Just drive until we’re away from her spies.” I shifted to find a comfortable spot. “Wake me up when *you* can’t feel her eyes on us anymore.”

Douglas started to voice a protest as he considered how unhappy she would be with the unapproved change in schedule. “Maybe we should call—”

“We’re not running away or plotting against her. We’re stealing a little happiness. I’ve been told there’s nothing wrong with that as long as no one gets hurt and both people are willing.”

Douglas smiled and eased us into the passing lane where he could make better time. “Yes, sir.”

Douglas was talkative once I got a few shots into him, but he still didn’t say much that I couldn’t have eventually figured out on my own after a tour like this. Until his eyes were bloodshot, not a single bad word came out of his mouth, but as the alcohol wore down his inhibitions, his pager beeped, scaring both of us. If not for that call, I may not have made progress. He had sensed what I’d brought him here for, I think.

“Be back.” Douglas went to the payphone to return the call.

I waited nervously, hoping it wasn't another lesson in Mary's control. I wanted to check on Angie after the events of the day, but I couldn't. Mary knew her cover was off. If I made one wrong move here, she would come down on me hard. I had to be very, very careful.

Douglas dropped heavily back into the booth with a loud belch and a low mutter that I couldn't be certain of. It sounded like he'd said history repeating.

“What?” I asked.

“They'll make it.”

The call had been an update. Bean and his wife had survived. They would be in the hospital for a while and their eldest son, Zack, would run their business. According to what my mother wanted, I was sure. Zack wasn't going to resist her while his parent's lives were at stake. Chalk up another win for Mother Brady.

I had a lot of questions for Douglas, but only a few that mattered. I asked one now, before he got too drunk to provide the details I was hoping for. “What did he do wrong? What was my dad's mistake?”

Douglas grimaced, focusing on me in sullen resentment. While I was searching for a way to force him to answer, he started speaking.

“Your pop made a bad deal. His mistake was believing your momma would honor her end of it.” Douglas emptied his warm beer.

I flagged down the waitress for refills. “What was the deal?”

Douglas belched. “He made her promise that the gypsy would never have to prostitute herself again for food or rent. In return, he agreed to stay away from her and be loyal to his marriage. He did it for four years and then he split. Once he found out about—”

“Wait. My parents were married for 10 years before he split. My mother told all us kids that they...”

Douglas shook his head.

Lies. All lies.

“She already had kids, like your sister will while she’s on her next couple of marriages. Some women are hard to get rid of.”

“Step sister?” I both asked and corrected.

Douglas belched again. “Yep. That Brady name comes from the first husband. Right son of a bitch, he was. When that blew up, she went after your dad. He was engaged to Judy then.”

“But my dad didn’t want her either, right?” I’d had years to imagine what happened. Another woman always came into those scenarios. “He fought his parents and they switched it to Mary, hoping it would satisfy him.”

“She waged a war when she found out he was in love with Frona. Mary didn’t understand how he

could love someone who sold herself. She didn't understand having to survive."

"What happened to make them all hate each other?"

"Mary sent Georgie in to be Frona's white knight. By the time your dad found out, she had his family under her thumb. If he had taken any action, Frona would have been treated to what Bean and..." Douglas realized how loud his voice was and stopped, glancing around.

"Please?" I wasn't too good to beg. "I need these details."

Douglas grimaced again and blew out another belch. "Without money to help her, your dad lost. Frona fell for the lines and got engaged to Georgie. Your dad couldn't watch them. He knew what Georgie was really like, but so did Frona. They were both at his first wife's funeral. Your dad refused to stay, but he also couldn't interfere or Mary would retaliate. Man, did he want your mother dead! In the end, he took off and made everyone think he was a coward who ran out on his family."

"Was he removed?" I was reasonably positive of the answer.

"I've always wondered that."

We waited for the waitress to set the drinks down, neither of us interested in her flirting. I could almost feel her wondering if we were gay.

Might be easier if I was. I now understood why my dad had left, but it still hurt that he hadn't taken me along. The wound of having a missing father

slowly began festering into having a dead one. It was worse this way, because I would never be able to talk to him, to tell him I would have run too, that I could accept him abandoning me. If he were dead, it did me no good to keep carrying the weight of it, but I wasn't sure how to make it go away. I leaned forward. "What does Mary Brady fear the most?"

"You," Douglas shot back instantly. "She's terrified of you remembering life before your dad left. She fears that freedom...the magic."

That implied we'd been happy. I frowned as an old memory surfaced in a vague, shifting flash. Floating flowers were all I could make out. I shoved it aside for my next question. "Am I dangerous to her? Why?"

Douglas took another healthy swallow. I assumed he was trying to find the words. We were passed censoring now as far as I was concerned.

"You're not like the other Bradys." He clumsily banged his cup down. The previous pint was taking effect. "They'd follow you, if you can challenge her and win. If you can't win, you have no power—forever."

"What can I do?" I asked dejectedly, hoping it sounded right as my own swimmy buzz hit.

"You've got three choices, boy. You can give in, fight, or run. That's all any of us can do." Douglas drunkenly surveyed the suds at the bottom of his glass. "I gave in. Your father ran. Maybe fighting is the only way to keep your balls."

Hungover, Douglas grunted at me the next morning when I kicked his bed in our hotel room. I grinned and cheerfully headed for the bathroom as if I didn't have the same problem. "We leave in an hour. My tour continues."

Douglas rolled over to regard me balefully. "I thought you had balls, kid."

I chuckled. "Balls without brains are useless." I shut the bathroom door, going over the new plans I'd still been working on as dawn arrived. I hadn't been to sleep yet. I would do that in the car, something I enjoyed. When we got to the next town, I would stay the night in the hotel before meeting with anyone. I needed more time to go over things. Moving up my timeline had to be handled carefully. It meant Angie and I would be on the run for over a year instead of the six months I'd first estimated. If I decided we couldn't do it for that long, then I would have to give in to Mary and fully join her awful business. When Angie hit 18, if she still wanted to go, we would. My final option was the police. I could offer to testify in exchange for protection, but again, Angie's age held us hostage. We couldn't step into a courtroom for years yet.

I thought of how Douglas had said he thought I would fight, but he didn't understand what Angie meant to me. What I had accused Angie of trying to do, I could now do to myself—if I got to fall asleep at night with her in my arms. I would give up anything for her. I assumed that was a part of

growing up. Why else would the choice hurt so much?

I spent the next weeks touring businesses, meeting relatives, making connections, but I mostly learned how crooked my mother was. I acted like the honored heir and there were no repeats of the van in the pond. By the end of January, I had been to five states and visited 12 businesses, with more of each on my list. On the last day of the month, we arrived in Lansing, and everything changed again. I was never ready when life did that to me. This time was no exception.

I could feel the tension before Douglas opened the car door. The four men waiting in front of the small general store wore dirty jeans, thick coats, and expressions ranging from anger to fear. I wasn't welcome.

The impression was reinforced when none of the men echoed my polite nod and smile. As I approached, with Douglas behind, it was as if I could hear their thoughts.

Come to collect the payment early.

Must be tired of short payments if she sent Douglas and the momma's boy.

Bet he still doesn't know. How blind can he be?

Embarrassment came. I lifted my chin, straightened my shoulders. Mary's words flashed in my mind.

Observe and report, as needed. You understand, Douglas?

Of course, ma'am.

That meant there might be trouble here. As I felt their gazes go over my nice clothes and straight teeth in resentful jealousy, it occurred to me that by cheating Mary, they were also cheating me. I didn't like that. If these men were guilty of something, I would find out what it was.

As I got nearer, maybe the uncles realized I could be a problem because fake smiles and handshakes emerged to greet me.

"Marcie!"

"Been a long time."

"Man, do you look like your dad!"

I saw my uncle Bobby give a curt glower over that comment that instantly made me wonder if he'd been the one to remove my father.

"Wow, have you grown up!"

"Come on inside, Marcie."

"Get him a drink."

I acted like the green kid they'd been expecting as I let them lead me into a room set up with food, drinks, and low music. I refused the girl for my lap, making the men all snicker as I chose a beer instead.

Douglas stayed by the door, talking to Bobby, who was in charge of things here. Bobby was accompanied by a large black and white dog with a long, thick tail that stung when it was whipped against you. The dog was clearly excited to have

company. It wouldn't stop dancing around their feet, hitting both men repeatedly.

Tiring of the dog's enthusiasm, Bobby slammed his meaty fist onto the dog's skull.

The animal yelped and scrambled away from the door before another blow could come.

The other men snickered or voiced their approval, even Douglas, but I didn't. I stared out the window to keep anyone from viewing my anger.

When the dog hid behind my chair, I wondered if it was a usual hiding place or if the animal could sense that I would never do that.

The rest of the welcome party was uneventful, boring even because I refused to get falling down drunk with the uncles. As they picked females, I left with one of the younger kids as my guide.

After I toured the grimy store and the mostly empty stock room, the kid made an excuse to leave and I was completely on my own. I went to where I assumed the private rooms were located, hoping any guards stationed there would let me through without asking questions or alerting anyone.

They did, but only because they were passed out on the ground in front of the door. The bottles and cards nearby implied they had both lost the drinking game.

I slid inside and followed stairs down to an old cellar that appeared to be the base of operations for this business. As soon as I saw the girls in the moldy room, I understood what I'd stumbled into, but at that moment, I didn't know if it was another part of

the illegal businesses that Mary had going. My outrage woke. I saw the bruises and the chains on their ankles, and my stomach flipped.

The back of this slavery room held beds. The men in them jumped up to explain, but I stomped back outside in blind fury. Even my mother wouldn't do that!

Douglas was waiting for me by the car. I hadn't seen him leave the party. I didn't like the expression he wore as I joined him. "What does she want me to do about it?"

"She wants them...corrected. You wouldn't handle Frona over the drinking. Now, you have to do this."

I stood there for almost five minutes, debating. I had more than enough anger to give out a correction for something like this, but would it hurt me inside? Hitting Frona would have.

No, I realized, letting that hard part of me come to the front. These men needed to be corrected. Frona needed help I couldn't give her.

"If you don't—"

"Shut up." I was thinking it through. Once I did this, the rest of the family would know. I would become her enforcer, and in the future, if she wanted a female corrected, I would have to do it.

Not if you leave, a voice inside whispered. *Just go now.*

Could we do that?

All these thoughts and more continued to run through my mind as I went back to that cellar and expressed my rage at the unfairness of life.

Douglas observed in approval as I drew blood against people who weren't allowed to fight back. I mourned my humanity.

Afterwards, as I struggled not to throw up in the car, I understood the new place my mother had pushed me into. A few years of beating on people would turn me into her. And that, I couldn't ever stand for. Angie and I were going to run away—now.

Once I made that hard choice, I didn't question it or second-guess myself. It was the only solution. I had a few thousand dollars saved and I'd made a few connections over the years. It would have to be enough.

What I struggled over was finding a way to come home early without raising suspicion. How could I make that happen? Why would Mary want me to... I had information, didn't I? I knew who wasn't paying their share and who hadn't shown the proper respect. All I had to do was find the right piece of information and then get her to need it firsthand instead of the daily phone reports through Douglas.

Douglas...

I looked toward the main hotel room, where Douglas was sinking into the bottle I had told him to stop for. It had been a perfect thing to do if I was going to set him up.

Douglas grunted in harsh amusement at something on the television. I frowned deeply. Douglas wasn't a good person. I knew that for certain, but could I really throw him under the bus? Was I already corrupt enough to do that?

The answer wasn't comforting.

Chapter Twenty-Five
Risk VS Reward
February

Marc

I put the receiver to my ear, heart pounding.

“Hello?”

“Hello, mother.”

“Marcus. How is your tour going?”

I could hear her rustling through papers on her desk. “It’s educational.”

“Good.”

“There are some points I’d like to discuss with you.”

She would expect me to be unhappy about the secrets she’d kept, and about uncle Bean’s treatment. All he’d asked was that the drugs not flow through because of their kids. When he’d discovered what was in the crates on his rear loading dock, he’d called and threatened Mary with reporting her to the FBI if she didn’t let him leave the business.

“Do you need another demonstration?”

“I’d like to discuss it in person...”

Mary caught my note of caution.

“Are you at the hotel?”

“Yes.”

“Ask Douglas to step outside.”

“A bit obvious, don’t you think?”

She hadn’t been expecting that. I had just implied I didn’t trust Douglas enough to even let him know I had a secret to discuss. He was currently throwing up, so I doubted he was listening. Even if he was, Douglas was my mother’s spy, not her enemy.

“Your timing is convenient.”

“I’m not sure how you mean that,” I answered honestly.

“Very well. You’ll come home and run the restaurant while Georgie and I go to Sterns. We’re having production problems at the diner there.”

I tried not to sound relieved. “We’ll talk before you go, right?”

“Is it that serious?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t ask to cut the tour short if it wasn’t. I understand the stakes.”

That should be enough to convince her I was serious, but in case it wasn’t, I snapped into my usual monotone. “But of course, I’ll do what I’m told.”

The pause told me I might have overacted it, but Douglas helped me by yelling.

“I’ve never puked so much in my life!”

“I see.”

Mary’s tone was a bit ugly. I had to bury my sympathy for Douglas. She would find out in time that I’d lied. Until then, I would remember that it

was for a good cause and he wasn't a good person, no matter how much we might have in common.

"Put Douglas on the phone."

I held the receiver out, mouthing, *Sorry. She called while you were in the bathroom.*

Another lie, as I'd called her, but I was counting on neither of them covering that.

Douglas shakily held the phone to his ear. He was even greener than when he'd woken up and run into the bathroom. I hadn't slept yet. I couldn't until I saw this through.

"Yes, ma'am?"

I stepped outside to smoke a cigarette, listening through the paper-thin door as Douglas tried to explain being drunk.

"No, ma'am. I shouldn't have... Of course! I won't ever... No, ma'am."

I scanned the parking lot, ignoring a car of older women studying me from the gas pumps next door. One of them was cute, but I'd already been working on the female I wanted for too long to be distracted by anyone else. Girls at school had tried to get my attention when Jeanie and I broke up, and now, I always received flirting while on the road. I hadn't found a reason to give in yet. None of them could compare to what I would have if I could be patient. *But I'm not going to be that anymore. I'm going to run. A week from now, Angie and I will be gone.*

Douglas opened the door a few minutes later. "We're heading back. She's pissed."

“She heard you yell.” I was glad I hadn’t gotten smashing drunk like I’d first intended.

“Figures. Wonder how she’ll punish me for this one?”

While I felt guilty that Douglas would take all the blame, I was also elated. My plan to get home to Angie was in motion.

Two days later, I was sitting in Mary’s office.

“We’re alone now, Marcus. I’ve even sent Douglas to collect Georgie so no one can overhear. What was so important that you had to tell me face to face?”

This was it, the big moment. “You’re positive he’s gone?”

Mary frowned. “Yes. What is it?”

I sighed heavily, as if I didn’t want to give her the information. “Right after I...corrected Lancing for the infraction, I overheard Douglas on the phone. The uncles were getting the women out of there and he thought we were all occupied. I think he was talking to the FBI.”

Mary hadn’t been expecting that. She studied me impassively.

“What did you hear?”

“He told someone he would meet them during my tour. Said for them to be careful or you would find out. Then he said *you* should go to prison for the girl who went missing.”

She paled, telling me I'd guessed right. Instead of elation, there was disgust that she was related to me.

"I see."

"Is he talking about the body they found at the Drive-in?" I kept playing my role. I doubted Mary had hurt the girl. It was more likely that she was covering up for one of my uncles or cousins.

"Never mind that. What else did you hear?"

"Something about causing trouble in one of the farthest towns so you'd be distracted. I think he plans to have your office searched for evidence."

Mary glanced out the window, where people were passing by without any idea how dangerous a conversation was taking place. She drummed her fingers on the table. "Anything else?"

I shook my head. "Just acted jumpy when I came in the room. I wasn't sure if he knew I'd heard, so asking him to leave the room would have triggered his suspicion, I think."

"Yes. Very well. Your tour will resume when I return. While I'm gone, Douglas will stay here to drive you around. Keep track of him."

She meant I should try to catch him searching her office.

"Yes, mother." I tried to appear proud of the responsibility. Douglas had no idea how ruthless I could be, but he did know what Mary was like. That should have told him not to trust me either.

Mary slid her chair back to stand up. "You'll also help at the restaurant while Georgie's gone, but

no free roaming.” She pinned me with a glare. “You understand me?”

“Yes, mother.” My heart thumped. She would be 200 miles away. It was perfect.

A few minutes later, Douglas arrived with Georgie, who ignored me in favor of telling Mary how smart she was for taking him along as muscle.

“That Sterns clan is wild.”

Mary nodded. “Yes, but they do produce some of the finest whiskey that under-the-table money can buy.”

It was the first time neither of them had bothered to play the perfect Christian act in front of me. It changed the level of what I was doing from dangerous to deadly. They were talking in front of me, trying to discover if I could be trusted.

I couldn’t. The threat of calling the FBI was no longer a bluff.

“What’s the problem this time?” Georgie waited by the door as Douglas carried my mother’s suitcase to the trunk.

“The town sheriff is new. We need to get him working with us, so control your temper when he gets rude. I’m expecting it.”

They walked to the car, still discussing the trip while ignoring me. I had no problem with it. I wanted to be forgotten about. I needed to pack and then go talk to a man about a car. Tomorrow, I would put in a full day at the restaurant to keep up the act. After that, the diner would be shut for the

weekend and I would have time alone with Angie. I couldn't wait to tell her we were leaving now. I needed one of those incredible welcomes. The darkness growing in my heart was hard to fight without her light.

Angie

Mary stared through her glasses. “You’ve had a month. Why would more time make a difference?”

I was standing by her car, talking through the window because of the cold. She didn’t like winter weather. Most of the time, I barely felt it.

“Angela.”

I loathed my name coming from her. As far as Mary was concerned, I was hers to command. At Christmas, I’d gotten up and left her home without giving an answer. For a minute, I’d thought she wouldn’t let me go. I’d walked to the trailer in a frozen daze that still hadn’t cleared. She hadn’t been in touch, but I’d known she would come. She had given me time to consider my lack of options. In that month, I’d made a hard choice.

“I’m going away for a week, young lady. When I return, you will do as I’ve asked or the consequences will be worse than you can imagine. For *Marcus*.”

I assumed the disease was growing. Her glazed eyes had always been fanatical to me though, so it was hard to tell. When the witch scanned her, she said Mary only had a few years left to live if she didn’t receive a treatment of some kind.

Watching her drive away, I thought I could tough out her threats and control just to spit on her grave, but I couldn’t take more of Georgie. He’d been rough on me the week after Christmas, getting closer and closer to snapping. Now that he was

leaving again, when he got back, he would want another long moment. He said being absent made him harder for me.

The horror came again as I stood there. Marc hadn't called yet, but it didn't matter at this point. I couldn't take another moment with Georgie. I'd made that hard choice. *I'm leaving.*

As soon as Mother Brady picked Georgie up from the restaurant, my mom would go in a rear stock room and start drinking. She would pass out right there. I would call a cab. I had enough money to stay a few days at a hotel, until Marc could come and get me, but even if he didn't, I'd had enough of living this way. I would be safer on the streets of any city than I was here.

The witch agreed that it was time to go. Anger flooded me. *Why won't you tell me what happens in the future? Why can't I tell Marc what his mother said?*

The witch sighed miserably in my mind. *Just remember what Patty told you. Make the choice for the future, not for yourself.*

Frustrated, I stomped toward the trailer, where Georgie had insisted I stay. I didn't know if Mary had told him to keep me locked up, but at least I didn't have a guard. No one would know I was gone until it was too late.

“Angie?”

I turned around to find Marc standing there. At first, I thought I was imagining things. He couldn't

be here, right when I needed him the most. That had never happened.

“Are you okay?”

I slowly shook my head, still not convinced he was there.

“What’s wrong?” He came over to wipe a tear from my cheek with his thumb.

“I’m scared.”

Marc folded me into his arms right there in public and I hugged him tightly, neither of us caring about the witnesses or payment that would be required when word got back to Georgie and Mary.

“Will you still run away with me?”

I nodded, almost unable to speak. I wanted that more than anything. I *needed* it. “When?”

“In two days.”

I gaped. I didn’t have to go alone?

“Angie?”

“Tonight would be better.”

Marc chuckled and led me toward the trailer.

“I have to pull a shift tomorrow. I want to keep our cover. We’ll leave in two days.”

“Will you stay with me? I don’t want to be alone right now.”

“I’ll do better than that. I’ll spend *both* of those nights. Pretty sure I can fit through your window.”

Panic starting to ease, I agreed without thinking it over at all. I wouldn’t be alone! That meant worlds to me. Some days it felt like I’d been alone my entire life.

As we stepped into the trailer and shut the door, I could feel evil around us waiting for an opportunity to close in, but I ignored it.

Big mistake.

Marc

“What happened on your tour?” Angie was lying on my chest. We were in her bedroom, where I’d already unsnapped the screen in her window.

“My mother expected me to give a correction. She’s so much worse than we thought.”

“So we’ll just take a cab to the city and get a hotel room?”

I nodded, trying not to harden against her stomach. “Yes. Even if we get split up, follow that plan. I’ll find you.”

“What are you doing with your car?”

Angie was making sure I had everything covered.

“I sold it. The cops would track it down in about 10 seconds. One of our neighbors has wanted it for years. Now, he has my Buick and I have \$1000 of his dollars.” I grinned at Angie. “We have five times that amount total. We’re gonna be fine.”

Angie’s happiness blasted me as we embraced. When her lips found mine, the heat rose up to sear us both.

“Will you make me yours now? Please?”

I kissed her again, harder, then gently pushed her off my chest and stood up.

Angie started to apologize for pushing, but I held up a hand. “Don’t do that. You’re not in the wrong here.”

“I just have these things in my mind, Marc. I get so scared... I need you to be the first!”

I stared at her as anger raged. My mother hadn't protected her from Georgie while I was away. "I'm sorry." I returned the bed to lean down and kiss Angie's cheek. "I need a shower. You think about it real hard. If it's what you want when I get out, you can have it."

Nervousness flooded her expression, but that V on her chin stood out.

I hardened painfully. She wasn't going to back down.

"No, I'm not. Go take your shower. I'm going to finish packing."

We shared a heated glance that said the time had finally come. Angie and I were about to make love.

I thought my heart might explode.

Angie

I wasn't scared while I waited. I wanted this moment with Marc. I was afraid of the mess that could come afterwards if we didn't get out before Georgie discovered someone else had taken what he'd claimed, but I told myself Marc had us covered.

The shower turned off. I shivered a little. Just days from now, we would away from this life of hell and pain.

Marc appeared in the doorway with only a white towel around his lean hips. His skin glowed at me, captivating my senses. I'd never seen a fully naked man before. "Take it off?"

Marc grinned, letting the cover fall to the carpet.

"Wow." My face reddened. "You're hard all over."

Marc's grin widened. "I'm a man. I'm hard where you're soft."

He stayed in the doorway, hot eyes burning over my body.

"Can I see you?"

I stood up self-consciously, but I wasn't afraid. I just didn't know if I was able to compete with Jeanie. I'd also never seen a fully naked woman. I didn't shower at school.

Marc's grip on the doorframe tightened his knuckles into white fists as I dropped my shirt. The jeans followed. I heard his gasp as I leaned over to pull them off my feet.

“Damn.”

I looked over to find his hand stroking that jutting hardness. I laughed a little as I realized I now knew what that phrase in the smut books meant.

Marc didn't take offense. He seemed to understand my emotions were rocky. Wanting to make it up to him, I arched like I'd seen actresses do, sticking my chest out as I lifted my arms. Did he like that?

Marc slowly came toward me, expression dark. “You're sure?”

I slid my naked body into his arms as my answer.

Do you wish to be connected? the witch asked in my mind.

Yes. Bond us in every way, I replied without hesitation. *I'll never love anyone else.*

The witch muttered a spell and then vanished, leaving us alone. Doors swung open, connecting our minds as Marc loved me. Old, powerful magic covered us.

I had my soul mate.

Marc

I knew we should wait. There was too much stress right now, too many things up in the air for us to do this, but she was willing and I couldn't help it. I didn't want to be that unhappy, fake old man who spent his dying minutes wishing he'd given fate a chance. Angie was everything to me, in every way except that one, and I needed her. It was... I couldn't...

Sigh.

I can still feel it. I can still smell us together, but I can't describe how perfect it was. I spent the next decade searching for an encounter even half as good as that one and never succeeded.

I slid my hard body between her long legs without breathing, afraid to wake up from the best dream I'd ever had. Angie was about to be mine in ways that would carve our future in stone.

"Hang on, Baby." I guided, getting set to claim the part of her that could never be replaced. I eased down, balls tightening from the sensation. "I love you."

"Forever?" Angie asked, sounding nervous.

"Forever, but not a minute more."

She smiled, arching upward to meet me as I pushed into her tight, wet body with the taste of her still on my lips.

I wanted to go slow. I'd been dreaming about this moment for years. I'd even researched it in the

library two towns away so I would know what to do when this moment came. But I underestimated the pleasure.

As I rocked forward, I did it hard and quick, straining to get as deep as I could as lust flowed thickly. I didn't want to hurt her, but the need to get all the way in there was unstoppable. I entered her virgin body, groaning her name. It was like nothing I'd ever felt as I shoved forward. Her barrier snapped against my hard flesh and I sank in fully, drawing a cry from both of us.

Hers was pain. I stilled, hoping the worst of it was over. I kissed her cheek, fighting the need to thrust that was rolling through my balls.

"Angie?" Her arms had gone to mine in protest. I felt her nails slowly withdraw from my skin. "You okay, Baby?"

"It hurt," she complained, sounding as if she wanted to cry.

I kissed her neck softly. "I'm sorry."

"You told me it would."

I kissed her again, searching for that sensitive spot. "I'm still sorry. Are you okay?"

I felt her shift under me and held my breath for a few seconds.

"Yes. It feels..."

"Amazing," I supplied. "It will for you, too." I kissed her once more, getting a shiver, and felt her fingers relax a bit more on my arms.

"You promise?"

“Oh, yeah. Just give me a few minutes. You’ll be happy.”

“Okay.”

I grinned, lingering on that neck spot as she thawed beneath me, starting to enjoy my closeness again. I brought a hand up to rub her nipple, marveling that we were actually here, and she arched. As her tight body contracted around me for the first time, mashing us together, her eyes met mine in surprised pleasure.

I was golden from there.

The hardest part was waiting for her to be finished before I exploded. When her tight body finally clenched down on me, legs out like a board in spasms of orgasm, I cupped her bare cheek and lifted her up.

When I jerked forward, we locked together in a way that I didn’t know was possible. I lost control of myself, spraying thickly. Unable to stop, I slid in deeper and rode the waves, feeling that the damage had already been done if we were that unlucky. For now, I would enjoy the feeling of straining against her in ecstasy as I emptied near a decade of need into her willing body. She was mine.

I rolled to the side and Angie kept her body locked around mine. Her cheek rested on my chest, a smile on her swollen lips as we drifted in that sweet spot between sleep and awake.

“Night, Brady.”

“Night, Honey. See you in the morning.”

“Yes, you will.”

When full sleep came, we were still locked together, unwilling to be separated.

“Do you love her?”

I knew I was dreaming because that voice terrified me.

“Yes.” Lying wasn’t an option. I’d never been so scared.

“What would you give up for her?”

“Everything.”

“The world?”

“I don’t understand.”

The ground shook in anger, knocking me to my knees. From that position, the light around the voice was blinding.

“Would you give up my world, my creation, for one woman?”

I was certain of the correct answer, the answer that would save my life from this shinning horror.

“Make your choice!”

Positive that I was about to die, I tried to forestall the judgement. “No.”

The light began to dim.

“Remember that choice as you mourn the chance to live in truth and light.”

Sure that I’d been tricked, I shouted, “Wait!” but the light was gone.

I snapped awake to the sound of a familiar car pulling into the driveway. It sounded like my mother hadn’t made it to Sterns after all. I felt the

earth shake again. We were about to be caught in Angie's bed.

Chapter Twenty-Six
Paying the Piper

Marc

“Go out the window!”

Angie fled the warm embrace to grab her nightgown.

I wanted to. We might even get away with it, but my pride wouldn't let me leave her here to deal with the chaos. “No.”

I hurriedly pulled on my jeans and shoes as Angie dressed. We were both in the middle of adjusting our shirts when the door to her room opened and both of our nightmares filled the frame.

“You little son of a bitch!” Georgie lunged forward, catching my shirt and arm. “I'll kill you!”

“Wait! Let me—”

Georgie slammed me into the bedroom wall before I could say more. I fell to the floor, head ringing.

Georgie screamed at Angie as she yanked on his arm. “Get back in that bed and wait for me!”

I didn't notice the pain or the blood. All I heard were his words.

“Leave him alone!” Angie kept pulling.

Georgie delivered a nasty punch that knocked her into the bedpost. I heard the ding when she hit, but I was helpless as blood flooded my vision and little birds danced merrily around my head. I'd thought that was only in the cartoons.

"Don't kill them!" Mary snapped. "Get him out to the car."

I understood they were splitting us up, but I had to wait for my body to recover. I was limp as Georgie dragged me through the room by my hair and arm, growling threats.

"Just wait until she gets him out of here! You'll be sorry!"

I tried to move my arms and found that my legs would respond now. *Fair enough*. I began to kick.

"You can't stay here!" Mary argued.

Georgie landed a fist in my ribs and then went on hauling my body toward the door while I gasped for air.

"I need your help with him!"

"You'll have it covered." Georgie tossed me into the wall by the door.

Mary must have made him stop then because there were no more blows. I couldn't be certain with the darkness swimming in and out of my vision. I never would have thought these walls could do so much damage, but he kept using my face to absorb the impact. A ringing noise made me think of Angie. She was back there! We wouldn't see each other again.

“I’ll find you!” I shouted, positive that vomiting was on the way. I spat out blood. “I will find you!”

“Brady!”

Thick chunks blew all over the trailer door, but Georgie didn’t let me get my stomach under control. He dragged me through the muddy slush and shoved me into the car, hefting my wooden arms when I couldn’t. He slammed the door in my face, muffling sound, but not blocking the words.

“Get him out of here!”

“You have to come along!”

“I have business here!”

“Not with that little tramp!”

“She’s mine!” Georgie screamed, meaty fist rising.

Still gagging, I rolled onto my side and kicked at the window. I couldn’t stay upright anyway. The glass shattered on my fifth kick.

“Now you see why you have to come along!”

Georgie didn’t answer her. He was out of breath from getting me into the car.

Mary hurried into the driver’s seat. Georgie came around to slide in next to me. After locking the doors, we were on the way, leaving no witnesses. I struggled to keep from succumbing to the blackness as pain lanced through my bleeding face.

“Is he okay?”

“Why do you care?” Georgie snapped, wiping mud and dirt from his big arms.

“Eventually, he’ll come home to take his place.”

“What happens to Angela?”

“That depends.”

“What does that mean?” Georgie asked resentfully.

“It will bring trouble we don’t need. You have to wait.”

Georgie scowled and didn’t argue. He also didn’t agree. “What about the base commander?”

“The man I spoke to is guilty of many sins. Blackmailing him wasn’t hard. He agreed to take Marcus without the official signature. He won’t be able to leave for two years.”

“Bitch!” I got out, before Georgie wrapped his hands around my neck and started to squeeze.

I don’t know how much time passed before I woke up. I didn’t move. After being strangled until I lost consciousness, I felt lucky to be alive at all. It didn’t stop my rage, however.

My mother had tricked me, again. I wanted to attack, but Georgie was her muscle. My best bet was to wait for the car to stop and make a run for it. I could circle around, hitch a ride, and collect Angie while they were searching for me here. If I made it away from the car. My entire body was rubbery, like I didn’t have fully-formed bones yet.

“Is that him wheezing?”

“He’s just waking up.” Georgie grunted. “Pull over.”

My stomach dropped again.

“Okay. I’ll find us a place.”

A short while later, the car stopped under a dark overpass. I looked around nervously, hurting and not sure what to expect.

Mary pinned me through the mirror. “We’re going to talk for a minute, Marcus. Maybe we can come to an arrangement.”

“I’m not making any more deals with you!” I forgot about her muscle. “You have no right to do this. We’re in love!”

Georgie, angry at not getting to extract his revenge on Angela yet, punched me in the ribs again at the reminder. I cried out as the weakest one fractured.

Mary didn’t protest.

“We’re at the literal fork in the road, Marcus. If I turn right up ahead, it takes you to the Marine base, where you will stay until I tell you otherwise. To the left is the police station, where you’ll be arrested for rape. Either way, Angela’s fate is *mine* to determine.”

Georgie shifted angrily next to me, but he didn’t interrupt.

“I want a military connection. You want to be a Marine. You want to be away from me. You’ll get two of things you need.”

“No.”

“Jail it is,” Mary chirped sharply. “A few hours from now, it’ll be Georgie sliding between that whore’s legs.”

“I’m going to stretch it out.” Georgie stared out the window at occasional cars passing by. “And do it again and again until we’re both bleeding.”

It didn’t take long to figure out I was trapped. “How do I know she’ll be safe from him?”

“She’s mine!” Georgie punched my leg.

I struggled not to scream.

“You don’t.” Mary ignored her brother’s outburst. “But you do know what will happen if you refuse me again.”

“Maybe I’ll tell your secrets if we go left!” I threatened in a gasp. I absolutely would now.

“I stand by my word, Marcus. She’ll be gone before they can stage a rescue, and it’ll be your fault.”

With no other choice, I tried to cross my arms and glare out the window. “Make the right, but as soon as I can, I’m coming back and there’s nothing you can—”

Georgie punched me in the face this time. The lights went all fuzzy as I slumped over.

Mary got the car rolling.

As we sped down the highway, I was able to put together a few more of the pieces. She’d known we would cross those lines. She’d just been waiting for us to grow careless. Would begging help? “Please!” I forced out, trying hard to sound sincere.

“You’ve put me in an awful position. You have to go away for a while, Marcus.”

“If he hurts her, I swear, I’ll bring you down.”

“By the time you can hurt me, I will have cleared things up, with all the evidence gone. You give yourself away repeatedly.”

“I’m telling you.” I braced for another blow when Georgie tensed. “I’ll find a way. I’m your blood. Remember that.”

“Your threats hold no power over me, young man. I’ve already protected her as much as I’m going to. Considering what was done to me, I’m still owed a serious debt!”

“What the hell happened that caused all this hatred for someone who wasn’t even born yet?” I demanded roughly. My throat felt like I’d eaten ground glass.

The truth rolled out like a bitter snake set to strike.

“Your father wanted Frona!” Mary shouted, making even Georgie flinch. “Neither of us was good enough after having Angie’s mom!”

“Wait.” I tried to process the new information. “Are you saying that Angie is my...sister?”

Georgie obviously hadn’t known either, because his mouth dropped open and his face darkened.

Mary shrugged, visibly calming herself. “It’s hard to tell. They both denied it, but she has his coloring. That’s why I hate her. She *might* be his daughter.”

I was stunned as the car rushed me over the ramp that would take us to the base I’d been dreaming about for a long time. Everything that I’d

feared about our familial ties might be truer than we'd thought. It all fit with what I'd gleaned from Angie and Douglas, and from being around Larry and Judy.

"Build our connections in the service, Marcus. Do it well, and maybe the future you want will be waiting. I have a job for Angela. George will not be allowed to harm her so long as she cooperates. With you locked away, she will. If you try to come home, I'll send a van for her. Do your duty."

Georgie didn't react. Like me, he was thinking it through. Only, he wouldn't care about the blood connection because he was mentally ill. I cared a lot. If she was my sister, our relationship was worse than wrong. It was an abomination. *But I love her! And she loves me! Why would fate do this to us?*

It never occurred to me that Mary was lying. "He'll never leave her alone."

"Yes, he will." Mary increased speed. "George doesn't want to go to prison for murder. Do you?" She pinned her brother in the mirror this time.

He shook his head, glowering hatefully. "No."

"Angela won't be around to be a distraction to any of the Brady men anymore," Mary informed us coolly. "I have a very nice house near a beach picked out for her. She'll have cash and peace outside of the family business. She'll be happier than you will once those Marines you admire so much start working on your attitude and sloppy habits. In the future, if she wants to see you, I'll arrange a short visit here and there. Douglas has the

same setup with *his* cousin.” Mary made another disgusted face. “I’ll never understand why the Brady men are cursed with a predisposition for incest.”

Knowing I couldn’t trust her didn’t make any difference. Neither did her threats. What sank in and burned through to my guilt was the blood connection. Without a DNA test, we would never know who Angie’s father was. And because of that, I had to walk away. Her life would be ruined. People wouldn’t forgive a brother and sister relationship, no matter her innocence. We would be hunted and hounded. I could never put her through that.

“Will you at least try to understand what I’ve done?” Mary reverted to logic. “I’ve saved her future. Neither of you can screw it up now.”

True or not, only my love for Angie allowed me to agree. I couldn’t sentence her to a life of shame. “You’ll tell her about this conversation?”

“Every word. I’ve already been discussing the job with her. Now I’ll make my final offer and we’ll all go away content that we’ve done our duty.”

“We’ll want to write.”

Mary shook her head. “You’ve crowded her as much as the man next to you. Give the girl some time to decide what she wants. You robbed her of something precious, Marcus. You owe her peace and a life without the shame you’ve forced on her.”

Sharp. Merciless.

“I’ll sign up.” I tried to close down my screaming heart. I’d loved Angie for too long to

destroy her. I could do the right thing, no matter how hard it was.

With the choice made, a part of my soul withered up and died right there. She couldn't be my Angie anymore. She would have to belong to herself now.

Angie

“She’ll settle him down.” Frona patted my arm. “It’ll be okay.”

Stunned at how fast things had gone bad, I stared at my mom in horror. “We have to get out of here!”

“Leave Georgie?” she repeated in drugged concern. “He loves us, and uh... He cares for us!”

“He hurts us, mom. We can leave. I’ll work and take care of you until you’re better!” I begged. “Then you can get a job. Marc will help us.”

It was as if I’d slapped her. Frona recoiled and scrambled toward the door to my bedroom.

She slammed my door before I could grab it and the new lock clicked. Georgie had put it there last week.

I stood there, crushed again. My mom had finally betrayed me as fully as she could. I was trapped in here to wait for Georgie’s wrath.

Terror flowed as that inside voice gave me the words that I’d been waiting to hear.

It’s time to go. Gather your things.

I didn’t wait to be told twice. I gathered stuff as quietly as I could, not wanting Frona to hear. I was hoping the fear of Georgie would send her into a bottle of one kind or the other. Marc had once told me it was a two-hour drive to the base, and I’d caught Mary’s thoughts about going there as the car pulled away. It sucked that she was going to make

Marc pick between the service and me, but I was confident of what choice he would make.

I still had over an hour left when I slid through my window. The screen already had holes in it. I'd just had to widen them with the nail clippers.

It was very dark as I hit the ground and grabbed my bag. I took off running toward the clubhouse. There were things I wanted to take.

As the trailer faded, I didn't look back. Frona had never been my mom. *Patty was*. I mourned as I wiped away cobwebs and ducked into the clubhouse. I still missed her every day.

I grabbed what I wanted, and reluctantly put the rest into the fire ring. When I lit the match, I took off, unable to watch it all burn. I couldn't take it, but I wouldn't leave our secrets to be exposed.

Marc had told me to go to the nearest hotel and wait for him if I had to run in an emergency. Neither of us had expected it to be alone or so soon, so we hadn't finished those plans. I was sorry about that as I jogged down the path to the cornfield. Once I got across and climbed the fence into Stricker's Grove, I could use the payphone to call a cab. I would have it pick me up right there at the gates and take me to freedom.

Traveling through the plowed cornfield at night wasn't as bad as I'd thought it would be, but the cold was worse than I'd prepared for. I pulled on more clothes as I walked, wishing I'd left some of these things behind now. I didn't usually feel the weather,

but that was during daylight, when I wasn't shaking like a leaf.

It was a frustrating escape. My bag was too heavy to move fast, and my lungs were hurting after only a few minutes of jogging. Now I understood why Marc strengthened his body and worried over his health. In moments like this, it mattered. I was ashamed at being so out of shape. I would work on that.

Climbing the fence into the park wasn't as easy as I'd thought it would be either. I put the bag around my neck, but the freezing fence kept sticking to my sweaty hands. When I got to the top and dropped my bag down as gently as I could, I studied the ground for a long minute, trying to judge the distance. This was gonna hurt.

“Umph!”

I hit the concrete hard and twisted my ankle, falling awkwardly into the fenced kiddie area. I also skinned my palm and knee.

I now limped toward the pay phone, dragging my bag. I felt like Georgie had worked me over. My climbing skills would also have to be sharpened. Until I was of age, I would be on the run and I would probably have to do something like this again.

The payphone was another disappointment. A healthy dial tone flooded my ear, but I didn't have enough quarters. I dug for change, just to find myself a nickel short. It was frustrating and scary. The booths and empty concession stands mocked

my bid for freedom as shadows lengthened and shortened by the light of the Valentine moon.

Something shiny on the ground glinted near my feet. I sank down to capture the coin in relief that was almost tearful. During all our talks, we'd never considered having change for calling a cab.

The dispatcher didn't like where I was calling from or what time it was. I could hear it in his voice, but there was no way I could beg for the help I needed. I settled for a quickly thought up lie and told him our car was out of gas. When I hung up, I wasn't positive the cab would show at all. Even if it did, the driver was expecting an adult with me, carrying a gas can. I didn't know what to do. Marc and I hadn't covered these possibilities.

The cold sank into my bones as I stood by the phone, sending chills and shivers over my body each time the wind blew. I reluctantly donned the rest of my clothing and stuffed my things into my pockets. I hid the bag in the empty trashcan by the phone, thinking it was evidence. I doubted anyone would find it for months, if at all. The park had been cleared of wrongdoing, but it still wouldn't reopen until warmer weather returned.

I hurried toward the front gate, glad this park hadn't made the switch to security cameras yet. It was still just the same little amusement park I'd grown up viewing nearly every day of my life—until now. I was never coming back. Even if the world ended, I was finished with Harrison, Ohio.

An hour later, I was ready to go back and spend the night at the clubhouse where I had a warm fire. I could try this in the early morning by hitching a ride. I wasn't crazy enough to do that at 3am.

As I started to climb the front gate again to go back, headlights appeared. Knowing not to run and draw attention, I walked down the road, hoping it wasn't a cop. If it was, I was caught and I'd only made it a mile from home.

The lights slowed as they neared me; the twinkle on top sent fear into my heart. It *was* the police!

The car slowed... *Should I run into the corn and try to hide?*

“Did you call a cab?!”

The shout wiped away the fear. I ran to the door, nodding and grinning. I slid inside the warmth with a groan of relief. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

The driver thought I meant him, but I was thanking God, or fate, or whatever higher power had sent the taxi against the wishes of the disgruntled dispatcher.

“The radio was too fuzzy out here to hear your destination. Where you going?”

That was another blessing I repeated my gratitude for mentally. “The closest hotel, please. My mom's meeting me there, but I forgot the name of it.”

The man studied me in the mirror. “Dating trouble?”

I seized on the excuse, trying to force a blush even though I didn't know how. "Yeah, too many hands."

The driver laughed and pulled the cab around to go back the way he'd come. I was ecstatic as I realized we wouldn't pass by the trailer park.

"How much, do you think?" I wanted to be certain I had the fare covered.

"About \$15 bucks," he replied, getting up to speed.

There were no other vehicles on the road, something else I was grateful for. "Cool. Here's a \$20. Keep the change."

Paying ahead was something I instantly adored being able to do. I vowed that I would live my life that way. Marc and I wouldn't get in debt and live beyond our means. We would work hard and be happy.

Tired elation swept over me as the taxi sped through the darkness. I was free of Georgie, free of Mary, free of my mom's indifference. No more groping, bullying, or hiding who I was. The world had better be ready for me, because in two years, when age couldn't hold me back anymore, I would make a mark on the world that could be viewed from space. I was sure my Brady would help me with that. We were stealing our happily-ever-after and these were the first hours of it. I wanted to remember them forever!

9 months later...

“Push now!”

I grunted against the pain, bearing down. After so long, I thought this kid would want to be out, but I could feel his big head lingering.

“Come on!” I gave a gigantic heave and felt the baby squirt from me in a ripping sensation.

“It separated!”

“I told you we should have tried to stop her labor again!”

“Shut up!”

Lightheadedness overwhelmed me as cold flooded my limbs. I listened for the cry of my son, of Marc’s son, but there was nothing.

“He’s not breathing!”

Hospital alarms sounded loudly.

I felt the witch return from wherever she’d gone.

Hang on, girl. The world has great plans for you.

“Not without my son!” I screamed, no longer able to keep mental and reality divided as I faded toward the darkness.

You shall have your son. Fight for your life!

Marc didn’t come...

He will, in time. And it won’t matter then, either. Do you want the life you have? Will you give it up so easily?

Challenged out of my weaknesses, I struggled to stay alert as the doctors tried to fix whatever had gone wrong. “Give me my son!”

The nurses were close to giving up as the pediatric team slammed through the doors and took

over trying to get the baby to breathe. I focused on the blanket he was in, all I could see, and sent a blot of blue light in that direction. It held the last of my strength.

As the power struck the baby, the lights dimmed and the sound of an engine filled the delivery room.

“What is that?”

“Keep trying!”

“I’ve got her bleeding under control,” one of the doctors muttered. “Shut up and work!”

The room became a steady hum of intent as everyone snapped into their training and fought for our lives.

“He’s breathing!”

A weak wail split the air and I laughed in joy, even as I arched from pain now rushing through my stomach.

“Get her under! I have to cut it out.”

A mask slid over my face and the darkness rushed upward. My last thought was to order the witch to protect my son.

I woke up in a fast blur, lifting into an upright position that cramped my stomach like a pile of knives had stabbed me. My cry echoed into the hall.

Doctors and nurses rushed in. One of last white-coated people to enter held a blanket-covered bundle I extended my arms for. The exams and tests they wanted to do could wait.

She gently put the baby into my arms. *Marc’s baby.*

A feeling of love and peace filled me so deeply that tears spilled from my eyes.

“Momma loves you,” I cooed, drawing approval from my concerned audience. I could tell they hadn’t been sure I would survive.

“What happened?” I looked at the tallest doctor. He had more gray hair, so I assumed he was a senior staff member.

“We’ll fill you in later. Right now, you need to feed that boy.”

“And give him a name.” The nurse who’d been carrying him smiled. “Cutie will only work for so long.”

I thought of how Mother Brady’s private detective had called me a cutie, right before I let him meet the witch. When he’d sworn not to tell where I was, I’d believed him, and so far, my fragile peace had held.

As I settled my son onto my breast for the first time, the longing for Marc was stunning. He should be here.

Call him, the witch suggested, also in awe over the baby. *He’ll come.*

During the months we’d been apart, I’d grown up a lot more. I had accepted that Marc also needed freedom. I had given him the burden of me when he was too young to decide if it was what he wanted for his future. Because he hadn’t come for me, I had to assume it wasn’t. Otherwise, why would he have forgotten our love, our promises?

“His name is Charles Marcus.” There were no Charlies in our family for me to be reminded by. His middle name was my tribute to the man who’d taught me so much about love and life that I’d been able to gain my freedom and still have my sanity. I hated Marc for leaving me hanging the way he had, but I also still loved him for our childhood and I always would. I answered the witch tiredly as weariness swarmed me. *No. Let him have the life he always dreamed of. Let him be happy. I want that for him.*

Truly?

Yes. I can never forgive him for abandoning me. Let him stay there and make a difference in the world if he can. I’ll find happiness as a mom, and maybe even a doctor.

A doctor?

Yes. After all these months around them due to having problem after problem, we’re on a first name basis. Any of them will help me study.

Where will you live? The shelter is already too crowded.

As soon as I recover, I’ll apply for a job here at the hospital. I’ve thought about these plans for the last six months of my visits. I can help people and find satisfaction there. I... I don’t need my Brady anymore.

A tear rolled down my cheek, proving that a lie, but I wasn’t going to change my mind. Marc had traded me for the Marines. There was no going back. He would never know we made a baby, and I

would try hard to make sure that this child's life was never the mess mine had been. I was smarter than my mom, smarter than the rest of the family who had stayed and tolerated lives of misery and abuse. I was different. I had gotten out.

I'm free.

Seventeen months later...

2000

Chapter Twenty-Seven
Restless Ghosts

Marc

Douglas met me at the bus station.

It was the first time I'd seen him since I was betrayed. In fact, other than a short visit from my mother, I hadn't seen anyone from the family while I was away.

I stepped down to the ground, causing warmth and bitterness to return in a rush. I was home. I'd been gone for two and a half years.

"Good morning, sir!"

Against my wishes, Mary had still put me in charge. Her stroke last month had sent the relatives into a perfect tizzy. Douglas assumed I would be stepping into her role now.

I walked by him without a reply. I also walked by the waiting car. I'd made sure he knew my arrival time so I could do this to him. It felt great, but it was only a small payment. Douglas had called my mother right after I sold my car. He'd helped trap me. I owed him.

"Bastard," Douglas muttered under his breath.

I grinned in the hard, cold way that I was becoming known for among the ranks. “I learned from the best.”

I’d had plenty of time to piece together how I’d been tricked, lied to, manipulated. I’d searched down every mistake after finding out Angie was missing. Until I’d learned she ran on her own, I had suspected my mother of killing her. That’s why I had gotten in touch with the FBI. My contact there had given me the details on Angie after the investigation into the Brady family began. I was set to testify whenever it went to trial. My mother had a lot to answer for. So did I, if Angie ever spoke to me again.

I knew now that my unavoidable mistake had been believing the final lie. Angie wasn’t my sister. We didn’t share blood. Mary had used her most powerful tool of submission and I’d knuckled under the layers of guilt that she’d instilled over the years. I couldn’t change that, but I could be comforted by the fact that I was different. Thanks to the trickery and betrayals, I was one of the most aloof and respected new grunts. I was no longer a rookie to be hazed. I’d made it to that harder second level and the trek had sharpened my mind and body, just like I’d always hoped it would. I loved being a Marine. There was only one thing I would ever love more.

Douglas knew better than to try following me as I took the tiled path that used to be dirt and walked toward the poor side of town. He probably assumed I was searching for Angie.

In a way, he was right. I'd already tracked down a few addresses for her in the city, but I'd had to come here first. I still wasn't sure if I would go find her. I was hoping to hear that she was happy.

My heart twisted. I admitted I also hoped to hear she was single and pining for me. It was impossible to describe how much I'd missed her over the years I'd been gone. Had she missed me like before or had she moved on? I didn't want to interfere in her happy new life if she had one, but I had to have that answer. I had big career choices coming up, but I'd come to understand that the Marines and Angie were no comparison. If she didn't want me in the service, I would give it up and settle into civilian life a content man. If she had moved on, I would take the invite to Scout Sniper school. That choice depended on this trip.

I skipped the trailer park in favor of haunting our old spots. I didn't spend time looking over the town either, but it was hard to miss the fact that there were no heritage shops of any kind. Mary had gotten her way.

The bus I'd come in on was leaving as I neared the main road. The driver gave me a strange look as I stopped at the corner of the neglected intersection. I didn't try to respond. I wasn't capable of speech as the cornfield came into focus.

Yes. That's where I want to be.

I shouldered my kit and trotted toward the old path eagerly. I could see the beaten-down edges from here. It looked like it was still being used.

I sank my boots into that sweet soil with a huge grin, still running. I didn't stop until I got to where the clubhouse should have been. For some reason, I had expected it to still be here, but there wasn't even a plank of wood to prove we'd ever existed.

Suddenly feeling as though my instructor was gut-punching me again, I knelt down to ferret out any sign of our past lives. Surely it couldn't have all been erased so soon?

As I dug down with a thick stick, I discovered wood—our wood, and realized the clubhouse had been buried by mud. Had there been flooding after I left? I couldn't remember reading about it in the paper that I special ordered to the base a few times a year. The only news had been tornados and cover-ups. Fernald had recently announced that cancer rates in the area were not elevated or related to the leaks. They had paid off the lawsuit, but never admitted responsibility for any of the deaths. It didn't surprise me.

Not in the mood to dig, I wiped my hands on the weeds and trekked farther into the field. I wondered briefly if the farmer's dog was still roaming out here, but pushed it away with the other ghosts. I was a man now. I was trained and proficient with all the weapons that I carried. I also doubted Ticker still had his sight, if he was even alive.

With that list of comforts, I strode into the cornfield, searching for the place where Angie and I had spent so many sweet, hot afternoons hiding from the world. I could concede that now. Neither

of us had been made for the stresses of our lives. This had been our escape and we'd rarely shared it without outsiders.

I spotted a glint on the ground and hurried that way. *Our flag!*

No.

It wasn't our flag, but it was. My heart pounded. It was a copy, all shiny and new, waving in the light breeze.

Trying to control my emotions, I knelt by it, wishing Angie would appear behind me to say something cute.

"I always knew someone would come back to that damn thing."

Startled, I spun around, hand going to my hip for the gun that was secured in my kit now that I was in the civilian world.

"Easy, boy," the farmer cautioned.

The huge dog at his side glared blindly from his place on the leash in the man's wrinkled hand. I studied the farmer, picking out faded overalls and a wide hat that couldn't hide the sun-ruined skin. It was probably what had kept him out of town unless he had to go. "You put the flag out?"

"I replaced it last year too, but the wind carried it off."

I stared in surprise. "Why?"

The old man we'd all feared shrugged his thin shoulders and tipped his straw hat back a bit. "Never saw two people so in love. Was sorry when it ended." The farmer turned toward his field,

clucking to the dog, “Come on, old man. We’ve got supper a waitin’.”

I stared at the corn where he vanished for a long time, hurting. Angie hadn’t put the flag there. She hadn’t come back at all.

Considering the new situation in the family, I think a part of me had expected her to out of the same sense of duty that sometimes still pulled at me even after so long and so much betrayal. Mary having a stroke had sent the relatives into panic. They’d called this meeting and demanded I come, as her heir, to decide what would happen to our family now. They would demand that I take over and save them, but they’d all forgotten what it felt like to have their heart ripped out and shit on. I had no mercy now, for anyone.

I’d come for one reason. I had lived a life that no one understood. I had loved a girl who was my soulmate and then lost her. Their offers of power and cooperation couldn’t match what I’d already given up. I wanted my memories to give me some sense of peace when I looked back on our past. I’d come to calm my restless ghosts.

I wandered for another hour before heading to my mother’s home. By the time I arrived, the depression had caused a thick layer of hatred that would be my shield.

There were cars all over the yard. I hoped it bothered Mary, but doubted it would. If the letter was right, she was incapable of communication.

I didn't knock on the door.

The house smelled the same. I stayed in the open doorway for a minute, tuning out the voices coming from the rest of the rooms. This entrance hall had been where I composed myself to face my family and I used it for that purpose one last time. It didn't surprise me to find out that I was looking forward to this moment. I should be. I'd waited for it long enough.

I glanced back at the cluttered yard, spotting the dead rose bushes. I lingered on the rusted brown wagon nearby. What I wouldn't give to see young Angie climb out so I could do it all over, but without the mistakes this time! I assumed everyone felt that way about their past as they got older, but I'd only aged two years. My time in the service had given me new insights to the life that had created the man I was today.

I shut the front door, aware of coldness falling over me. I used this shield in battle and in drills where I needed to be perfect, but this wasn't a time for the Marine inside. I pushed him to the rear. Some of this confrontation might hurt, but it would only be from cleaning puss out of a wound that was trying to heal. I needed that.

The family was gathered in the large living room, much as they had during the gatherings where I was being offered leadership of our household and a lot more. As I scanned them, viewing familiar, hated faces, and ones that I hadn't seen before, it occurred to me that my FBI friend was right. After

I'd told him everything, he'd suggested finding the missing money before opening the investigation. He'd had it all ready to go when I called him, though. He thought I deserved the 6.8 million I'd estimated the Brady family to be hiding. The thought was still repulsive; coldness swept over me hard enough to cause harsh laughter to bark out unplanned.

Silence descended as everyone turned to discover who was happy at such a bad time for our family.

Across the room, seated in her customary place at the head of the table, Mary didn't even blink. Drool ran down her chin in a thin line and I knew it was true. The stroke had removed her ability to function. She was aware, but unable to respond in any way. I found the irony immensely satisfying. For once, she had to just listen. She couldn't even protest whatever we decided to do with her or her precious family legacy. The doctors had said she could recover with enough effort, but I doubted anyone was praying for that. My siblings certainly weren't. My sister was pregnant with yet another abusive man's baby. My brothers had taken off the instant Mary had been stricken.

"Marcie's here!" Bean exclaimed. "Praise the Lord!"

His wife sighed in relief from her seat behind him. "We're saved!"

Except, Mary had gotten her way on that too. Bean and his son, Zack, were heroin addicts now,

and his wife no longer went to church. She cooked their drugs.

Three dozen people erupted in cries, some good and bad, some of them standing to make their shouts travel. I ignored them all and crossed the room to my mother. As I went, the fighting stopped. Their attention returned to me, where I wanted it.

My personality drew people now. It had given me team lead, along with my efforts. I knew I could make these useless bags do anything I wanted in a short amount of time. But I'd already chosen their fate and set it in motion. My regret about this moment, other than Mary not being able to shout and cry, was that Scot and Rodney would miss it. They were both in jail. Rodney for selling drugs and Scot for two murders. He was serving life and I was glad, considering that Scot was likely the serial killer we'd had here. During my time away, I'd put a lot of things together.

I took the handles of Mary's wheelchair and gently pushed her over to the window as the family murmured and muttered in confusion and speculation.

I made sure she could see outside as I knelt down in front of her and took a pamphlet from my jacket pocket. I held it up. "The town nursing home already has a room waiting for you, *mother*. I've made payments on it since you came to the base and told me Angie was missing."

My family reacted much as I'd expected, aside from one. They exclaimed their fake surprise, and

then waited to discover what else I had planned. The one who didn't react that way was Georgie. He stiffened in response to the name and glared at the empty seat where Frona should have been.

I'd heard she overdosed, but I was certain Georgie had helped that along after Angie ran. He would have needed someone to take his anger out on. Between him and my cousins, all the females in our neighborhood had been terrorized.

Mary couldn't respond as I sat the pamphlet on the windowsill where she would have to stare at it. "Across that cornfield, was a clubhouse. It took us *eight* years to build. It's gone now, but *that* was my home. *Angie* was my home. I always, always hated you. And now, your legacy will cease to exist. In one or two generations, people will say Mother Brady who?"

I stood up, turning around before her lack of response could ruin it for me. As far as I was concerned, my last meeting with Mary Brady had been her final visit to the base, where she'd told me that I could come home. I'd declared her dead to me then, and I still stood by that. A stroke had crippled her and the nursing home was a punishment, but for me, that moment of Mary finally seeing that she'd gone too far, that she'd cost me too much, would always be our last meeting. I hadn't come here for her anyway. I'd come to remember Angie and to pay them all back for our pain.

I spotted Larry, with Judy seated demurely behind him, and finally let my true feeling out. I spewed them all over everyone.

“I have always been ashamed to call myself a Brady. You might be tempted to think that’s because of my mother, but you would be dead wrong.” I swept them in contempt. “I’ve watched you grovel, beg, steal, and allow her to ruin your lives. You sat by while she sent people away, banned them, *killed* them. You’re all as bad as she is. I would never, not for anything in this world, save this family.”

The room erupted in chaos.

“Until she recovers,” I continued, forcing them to quiet down. “My dear mother will be in the nursing home down the street. *Georgie* will run things.” I slowly rose and walked toward the door, enjoying their dismay. The truth was setting me free.

“Where are you going?” Judy called angrily. “We trusted you to fix it! Where are you going?”

I stared back at her in dislike. She’d almost been my mother, but I doubted that life would have been any better than the one I’d barely survived. “You guys started this shit all those years ago with my dad. I’m just finishing it.”

Judy paled and sat back down as if I’d slapped her. That was the final confirmation for me. My dad was dead, on Mary’s orders.

“I’ll drive you around!”

Douglas was still hovering near my mother like he always had.

“I wouldn’t let you lick my shoes! You told her we were leaving. I know you did.”

“I didn’t have a choice!” Douglas whined. “You know what she was—”

“Save it!” I cut him off without sympathy. “You betrayed me. Her little spy.” I glowered. “You sold out your family.”

“Some family. She never trusted me again after your lie. Even when she knew it wasn’t true, she turned on me!”

“So? How many of us did you sell out, *Dougie?*” I demanded, taunting him. “How many lives did you crush, just when they were about to run like hell? Don’t expect sympathy. You don’t deserve it.”

Douglas sank into the chair by Mary, now looking very much like her twin. Through her spies, Mary had been able to keep her grip over everyone. They deserved to rot with her.

I swept the tense family and settled on Georgie, who gamely glowered back.

“Georgie has control of the family.” I walked out the door to wait, enjoying the groans and mutters. Everyone knew Georgie couldn’t handle this job. He was too reckless, too careless. He would get them caught.

As people began to talk of leaving the family for a better connection, I felt the hatred in my heart for this place ease. I had a royal hill in the city to find

and a lost love to reclaim, if it wasn't too late. I would spend the rest of our lives trying to make up for the last two years, and for the other errors of youth that I'd made. Angie and I could still have our happily ever after.

A group of uncles and cousins followed me outside and congregated nearby as I lit a cigarette, waiting for one last need to be fulfilled. I hoped they left Mary at the window for a long time. Let her have a few hours of dread before the nursing home employees came for her. I'd paid them to arrive at dawn tomorrow, with orders to treat her as if she was anybody else. There wouldn't be any of the special privileges she'd certainly expected me to arrange. Mary would have the basics of life, the same as she'd given her children.

Hatred flashed through me as the door opened again. The uncles moved back, recognizing the danger. I wasn't the naïve young heir they'd last seen.

Georgie stomped straight toward his wagon.

I rushed forward to slide into the passenger seat.

For a second, while Georgie paused in surprise, I thought I could smell vanilla. It infuriated me. I waited, encased in ice for him to shut the door.

"I'll bet you know where she is!" he accused in the low growl of a wounded, dangerous dog.

"And I'll bet you're on the way to check the office safe for money to track her down."

Georgie flushed guiltily. The red shading continued to spread over his skin as I laughed

harshly. I knew the type of dirty, bloody fight he wanted. Beating the hell out of me with walls hadn't been enough. Now that I was different, it might be a challenge and I was tempted. Since joining the Marines, I'd discovered a need for fighting, an outlet for my rage, and this piece of slime deserved someone to let go on him. Still, I had other plans. Georgie was about to become a lesson, an example. "You molested her. A little girl. All her life. You hounded her like a fucking animal. I can't wait to see you in prison."

Georgie's anger fled in a wave of fear that twisted my stomach. I calmly asked the last thing I needed to know. "What would you have done to her, if she hadn't run?"

Georgie wanted to deny it all, maybe worried that I was taping the conversation. He didn't answer.

My anger unleashed without my permission. Like it did during battle, the fury was a blade that cut the offender's throat. "You're being investigated for murder, rape, embezzling. Your restaurant will be shut down next week by officials from three different agencies." Which was a lie. They would be at his trailer tomorrow morning and the restaurant an hour later. "You might as well tell me the truth. If Mother Brady was right and confession is good for the soul, you need it."

"All a lie, right?" Georgie demanded, ignoring the suggestion. "Giving me the family?"

“No.” I was unable to stop the grin. “That’s the best part. When the investigators come next week, the family will tell them *you’re* the leader of our clan. Perfect setup, right?”

Trapped and about to fight his way out, Georgie pinned me with furious hatred. “She was mine!”

“Tell me about her dad.”

Georgie went so still that I wasn’t sure he was breathing. “I already know it wasn’t a Brady. I checked into things like birth certificate dates and family lines. He wasn’t a local.”

“Mary doesn’t know. I wouldn’t tell her.”

“Why would you...” I laughed again. “That’s what you had on Mary. You know the truth and you... Did you threaten to tell people her husband had impregnated a gypsy whore?”

Georgie’s face grew even redder and I made the final connection. “You were bluffing! You have no idea who Angie’s dad is. Mary figured that out and you lost your power over her.” I grinned. “Well, ain’t life grand.”

“I found out later, from my wife!” Georgie shot back. “It’s some fancy man from Washington who came through to tour the tornado damage in Cleves. Never even knew he dropped a gift on a working girl.”

Relief and infinite sadness competed for room in my heart. Of course, my mother had lied. How else would she have gotten her way for so long? “What happened after I left?”

Georgie relaxed a little, probably thinking he might be able to talk his way out of trouble with me, be forgiven.

“Mary went crazy. She drove herself into the ground trying to find Angie.”

“You helped her on that, right?”

Georgie clammed up at my accusing tone. He was realizing I wasn't the forgiving kind. “I've arranged something special for you, Georgie.” I subtly adjusted my position to be ready. “See, I have this new friend. He hates a person who messes with kids. Well, he knows this guy who runs the prison we're gonna send you to. He's got the perfect bunkmate waiting.”

I'd never seen Georgie so angry and yet so helpless. I wished Angie was here to enjoy it.

“You can't do that to me!”

“I can do anything I want. Maybe I'll be in Angie's arms an hour from now. She'll laugh and laugh when she hears where you're going.”

“I'll kill you!”

Magic words, I thought, snatching the knife from my belt as he swung on me. His big blow bounded off my arm as I jerked forward, stabbing him in the groin.

“Aaahhh!”

I leaned back as Georgie forgot all about me, easing out of the car without memorizing the image. Angie couldn't ever know I'd come here and settled some things. She couldn't know about this side of

me. I was a killer now, born and bred for the position.

I strolled casually toward the uncles now clustered behind the wagon in tense, quiet alertness. I wiped my hand down my jacket. “He’ll need an ambulance. He fell on his knife as he got into the car.”

They regarded me in disbelief. They’d all witnessed the event through the windows.

“That’s what happens when you’re drunk. Right?” I pinned them with my Marine glare and got fast nods in return.

“Does this mean he...” Larry hesitated, worried over his little part of the family.

I had no time for his timidity either. “All of you are guilty. Georgie is the best leader you can have when you’re corrupt.” I looked at the family lawyer, who had been staring at me thoughtfully since I arrived. “Pass it all to Georgie. I never wanted any of it.”

The lawyer nodded, respect appearing on his tired face. “I will.”

“Do it quickly.” It was the only warning they would get.

“What about us?” someone called.

“Yeah, we’re your family!”

I snorted at them in derision as a hollow ping filled my stomach with acid. “I had one family member here, and none of you protected her. Go to hell.”

I left them in terror for the future, as I'd meant to, but the satisfaction wasn't as good as I'd imagined. Mary's condition had made it less enjoyable. Even though my mother might know I'd given her the nursing home life, it wasn't enough. I would try to find the rest of my peace in the family falling apart. Mary had been a tyrant, but she'd also been a smart tyrant, which was what had allowed her to operate under the law for so many decades. That was all over now.

The tornado siren sounded suddenly, jarring me, making my heart clench. *It's Wednesday.*

I caught a flash of voices on the May wind, our voices, and soaked them in like a desert needing rain.

My Brady.

That's me, Baby-cakes.

"You'll love me forever?"

"Yep, but not a second longer."

Pain flooded my soul.

I tried to lock it away as I jogged to the storage facility that had been built while I was gone. It was along 128 and held a payphone.

I called a number written on the box, heart pounding.

"Towne Taxi."

"I need a cab at the Branch Hill Mobile Home Park entrance."

"The one way out on 128?"

I smiled. “Yes.”

“Okay. Might be a while.”

“No problem.”

“Where you going?”

“Queen City hill, near the top.”

“Hey! Nice fare. Keep an eye out for us.”

“You got it.”

I hung up, wondering if Angie’s escape had included a taxi. My investigator friends hadn’t been able to discover how she’d made it to the hotel. She’d checked in under Miss Angie Brady, like I’d told her to. My friends had assumed she’d hitchhiked, but that theory hadn’t fit with our plan. However, none of the city cab companies held records long enough to track her down that way. In fact, she’d only been found at all because of a hospital admittance form. It had been about eight months after she split. From there, the trail had gone cold. The addresses I had for her were long shots, but at the same time, I knew she was there. It was as if I could feel the old magic, the connection that had lit us up each time we got close.

A shiny orange and white taxi arrived at the payphone about 20 minutes later, time that I’d spent wading through the nearby corn and having flashbacks I planned to never explore again once Angie and I were reunited. It was too sad.

I climbed into the seat; an older man turned to me with a yellow grin from the driver’s seat. “Hiya. Where we going?”

“Queen City hill, in Cincinnati.” I handed him two twenties.

“Great!”

He got us rolling quickly and started the usual small talk that people expect from a driver.

“You know, this is only my second fare ever from this zone, in three whole years, and it’s even better than the last. How sweet is that for a streak?”

I nodded in agreement, trying to think about what I was going to say to Angie, but he kept talking.

“Yeah, that girl called from a pay phone too, but she was at the amusement park we already passed. And it was late.”

My head snapped up as my heart pounded in my chest. “How long ago was that?”

“Oh, about two years, I guess, maybe a bit more. Was cold out. She had on a lot of clothes, but I could tell she was frozen. I bumped my heat before she got in. Nice kid.”

Angie! I tried to sound casual. “What did you two pass the time with?”

“She didn’t want to talk at first, just seemed glad to be gone. Said her mom was meeting her at the hotel. But ol’ Fred had her yapping like any female by the time we got there. Nice kid,” the driver repeated.

I spent the rest of the ride prying tiny details from the driver while trying not to let him know why. It was a good test of my skills as team leader, but when we got within minutes of Queen City, I

grew impatient. “I used to know her. She was running away.”

The driver’s shoulders rose and fell. “Yeah, I thought it was something like that. I made her keep half the fare because I wasn’t sure she had someone meeting her when we got there. That hotel wasn’t even open.”

I winced, thinking of how she’d been alone, in the cold, short on cash, while I’d been signing papers to go away for years. She’d stuck to our plan all the way. I hadn’t.

I had to ask, giving away my concern with the need in my voice. “Did you see her again?”

The man grew serious, meeting my eye in the mirror.

“I still do, each Monday when she does her shopping. When you said Queen City, and you called from the pay phone out there, I knew where you were going.”

“Is she okay?”

The driver shrugged. “She always looks sad, but that baby sure does make her glow.”

The driver kept talking, but the words rang through blurry ears. Angie had a baby. Angie had a man. She’d moved on.

My heart broke into a million pieces.

I almost didn’t get out of the cab.

I could feel the driver evaluating me, but all I could think of was how much my family had hurt

her. Angie had been innocent in everything, but she'd paid the heaviest price. I had no right to interfere with the new life she'd built.

I forced myself out of the cab and up the brick walk. It was a nice building with a security door that was propped open to let in a breeze. My FBI friend had given me this address a few weeks ago. It had taken longer than I'd expected, but I was here.

And I couldn't knock.

I could hear the television blaring a ballgame. That probably meant her man was home. I could also hear the softer babble of a female and a child.
My Angie!

The baby giggled as I stood there, sending that old rush of need and guilt through my heart. The baby's laughter sounded just like Angie's had while we were growing up. It was the final straw. Someone else had my life with her now. Those sounds didn't belong to me anymore.

Hurting in ways I'd never thought possible, I walked back to the cab. I'd finished growing up over the last two years. I could walk away without destroying us all over again. She was free.

The driver's gaze held sympathy as I returned, and also, disappointment.

"Too bad, boy, but life sure is full of this, ain't it?"

I nodded distractedly, closing the door as desolation filled my soul. I would never be close to another female. Angie had ruined all of them for me.

"Where to, son?"

I sighed, turning my sight away from the past. “Nearest train or bus station. I need to get back to my base.”

The cab rolled away slowly, giving me time to glance back once more if I wanted, but I didn’t. I would always remember Angie as we were—young and so in love that nothing else mattered. She would have wanted it that way.

The End

What would you like to do now?



[Marc and Dog](#)

[Note from Author](#)

[Go back to the beginning of this book](#)

Author Note

This work of fiction is loosely based on a true story. Some of it is real and some of it isn't.

What parts are real?

Here are three:

Marc and Angie do exist. So do Frona, Georgie, Mother Brady, and the entire cast of characters. Even Ticker is real, though I think old age would have taken him by now. It's been many years and time is rarely a friend.

The locations, including the clubhouse, did exist. Progress and nature covered some of them over the decades, but I bet hard evidence could still be found. It would be a bit like an excavation at a forgotten site from history. There would be broken tools and charred pottery, remnants of a life spent there...but the ghosts probably wouldn't just leave our shoulders when we finished digging up those old bones. In so many ways, it is cursed ground.

The events are documented facts, but it isn't 50+ years in the past, so it's not historical fiction. As a result, it made picking a category difficult for this backstory. I chose coming of age because that's what happened in the grand scheme of things. During all of those wonderful, appalling moments, Marc and Angie grew up.

What isn't real?

You'll have to decide that for yourself, but personally, I believe in magic. It swirls around every word I put onto paper, carrying the potential to be amazing or terrible. If I can't see something, that doesn't mean it isn't there and I'm wise enough to accept that fact, even if I don't like it.

Marc and Angie were reunited more than a decade later and none of their need for each other has faded. Would you like to read that story? They are both main characters in my big book series, [Life After War](#), where the awful visions Angie saw have come true.

Thank you for taking the time to read this novel.

-Angela White

What Did You Think?

I'd love to hear how you feel about this book!

You'll see this request at the end of every title I write because it matters so much to me and to the other readers out there. [Please take this link to the book's page on my website](#), so you can pick the store of your choice for a review. It doesn't have to be long, though it certainly can be if you like. Just tell me, and the world, how you feel about it.

Feedback helps me in many ways, but the biggest is that it drives me to keep producing. I have self-doubt moments just like everyone else. Your review might be what pops me out of a bad place and allows me to keep rolling! And if you ever need some kind words, I'd be happy to do the same for you. The world is often an ugly place, but we can help each other through those hard times with small acts of kindness.

“I have found that it is the small everyday deed of ordinary folks that keep the darkness at bay. Small acts of kindness and love.” -Peter Jackson

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This is what came next for Marc.



[Marc and Dog](#)

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