

Dog Days of Summer
Moonridge Memories
Book 1

by L.M. Pfalz

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Some memories can't be forgotten.

Chapter 1

Theresa

Moonridge, Ohio - August 7, 1998

The week had been a long one for Theresa, having gone through a bad breakup and starting an arduous job working the loading docks at Allen's Appliance & Electronics Emporium. At the end of this particularly hellish day, her legs felt like jelly, and she could hardly muster the strength to make it up the cement stairs to her second floor apartment. When she reached her front door, she heard the telephone ringing from the other side.

"Shit," she muttered, fumbling with her keys. Over a dozen dangled on the ring, half of which she didn't even know what lock they opened. She finally found her house key while the telephone still beckoned. She entered the apartment, tossing her purse and keys on to the dining room table before picking up the cordless phone off the wall. "This had better be good."

"Uh, yeah, hi," the male voice said on the other end. "Is Theresa there?"

"Could be. Who's this?"

"Oh, hey, Theresa, it's David...Thompson."

Theresa slid down into a dining chair, shocked to hear that name. "David, hi. I just got home from work. What's up? It's been what, ten years since we've talked?"

"Give or take. I'm back in town—er, *we're* back in town."

"We? You and...your wife?"

He chuckled. "Not exactly. Wil and Paul."

"Oh! How are they? How are you for that matter?"

"Good, we're all good. You?"

Theresa kicked off her sneakers and propped her feet up on the adjacent dining chair. "Oh, I'm just great. Still stuck in Moonridge, life's just dandy."

David laughed. "Yeah, I never thought I'd be back here."

"Why are you?" She squeezed her eyes shut, brushing a long strand of her curly black hair away from her face. "I didn't mean to be so blunt."

"No, it's fine. Hell, I'm wondering myself." He laughed again, more weary this time. "I guess we got to thinking of old times."

"And here I am trying my damndest to forget em," she said. "A town this small though, that's nearly impossible."

"Exactly why we left in the first place."

"Yeah, well, that's the wise thing to do. Me, I'm still waiting for my ticket out of here," Theresa said, forcing a good-natured laugh.

"To be honest, it's not that much better out there."

"Oh, so there's nothing to look forward to," she remarked. "How comforting."

He laughed. "Sorry. It was a long flight, I'm just kind of tired."

"Oh, well, I won't keep you," Theresa said. "It was really good to hear from you though."

"Wait, Theresa," David said, "I didn't call just to shoot the breeze."

"Oh?"

"We wanted to get together and hang out with you guys. That is...you're still friends with Beth and Donna, right?"

“Oh, yeah, of course,” Theresa said. “I usually hang out with them on Saturday nights anyway, so if you guys are free tomorrow, we could meet up then.”

“Sounds good. How about six o’ clock at Carla’s Diner?”

“Carla’s.” Theresa sighed inaudibly, remembering the long forgotten place. “Sure.”

“Okay, great, we’ll see you then.”

“Okay. Bye, David.”

“Bye, Theresa.”

She pressed the “Talk” button on the phone to disconnect the call. She set the receiver on the table and rested her head in her hands. Childhood memories flooded into her mind, as if someone had unplugged a hole in the dam keeping them at bay all these years. They were memories she was all too happy to forget, even if life-long friendships had forged then and still stood the test of time. Fading snippets from her youth played out like a movie trailer, but the summer of ’83 was clearer. That time in her life she could remember all too well, like a scary movie she had seen a dozen times and tried so hard to desensitize herself from...

* * *

Theresa was twelve years-old during the summer of ‘83. She lived in a modest four bedroom, two-story home with her parents, John and Joanne, and her eight siblings. In such close quarters with so many kids running around, fighting and arguing became an everyday occurrence in the Jenkenson household. Theresa felt like she lived in a madhouse most of the time. She shared a room with her little sister, Brenda, who was ten at the time, and her adopted brother, Michael, who was eleven. Michael was biracial—half-white, half-black—and even though he was adopted, Theresa felt closer to him than most of her blood siblings.

Sharing a room beside theirs were the three eldest of the Jenkenson children: Whitney, sixteen and favored by their mother; Barbara, fifteen; and Michelle, fourteen. Down the hall, the three youngest shared a bedroom often referred to as the nursery: Kevin, six; Leslie, five; and Lindsay, four. Their parents’ bedroom (the master bedroom) stood across the hall from them. The upstairs looked like a series of twisters had torn through it. Toys cluttered the hallway, scribbled crayon and magic marker stained the walls, and the overused carpeting had gone from a lush peach to a dull beige. In the children’s rooms, the floor had vanished beneath piles of clothes, sneakers, toys, magazines, and other random paraphernalia, leaving little space to walk on. Since three kids shared each room, bunk beds had become a staple in the Jenkenson household. The basement even contained a backup set, just in case one broke.

As much as the second story was a disaster area, the first floor remained spotless in case of unexpected company. The living room, with the exception of an overused sofa, showed no sign that children even lived in the house. When Joanne ran errands, occasionally John would allow the younger children to bring their coloring books downstairs to the coffee table, while he watched television. However, as soon as Joanne’s car pulled into the drive, they were to grab their crayons and coloring books and hurry them back to their room.

Theresa’s mother was a stern, cold woman, who had her youth sucked away by marriage and motherhood—or so she always said. For as much as she favored her eldest daughter, she seemed to loathe Theresa even more. She never gave Theresa the benefit of the doubt, leaving her to be the scapegoat for her mother’s verbal and physical abuse. This made Theresa rebellious from a young age and tougher than the rest of her siblings.

On a lazy Friday morning in the beginning of August, John lounged on the living room sofa. The CBS line-up of game shows ran on their console TV, starting with *The New \$25,000 Pyramid*. Theresa sat slumped in the adjacent easy chair guzzling a can of Sunkist, while Dick Clark introduced

the contestants. Joanne had left early to go to the grocery store, so Kevin and Lindsay, like clockwork, set up their coloring books and their 64-count box of Crayolas on the coffee table. Kevin did the brunt of the work, even opening Lindsay's coloring book for her and curling her fingers around a random crayon. Only last year, Lindsay's pediatrician had diagnosed her as being "mentally retarded" and advised John and Joanne to put her in programs for children with learning disabilities. Instead, they ignored it.

"Reesa," Kevin said, "she won't color."

"Just leave her alone, Kevin, she'll color when she wants to," Theresa replied.

A door slammed upstairs, and Barbara shrieked, "You bitch!" before running downstairs. "Dad! Dad! Guess what Brenda did!"

"Barb, can't this wait 'til a commercial?" John said.

She grunted, storming out the front door in a huff. After a couple minutes, she came back inside crying, Joanne's arm wrapped around her shoulders. In Barbara's hands laid some of the shattered remains of her cherished unicorn figurine.

"Brenda!" Joanne shouted from the bottom of the stairs. "Brenda, you get your ass down here right now!"

Theresa set her pop can on the side table and slithered down out of her chair to help Kevin and Lindsay get their crayons back into the Crayola box neatly.

"BRENDA!" Joanne roared. She released Barbara and marched into the living room. "What the hell is going on around here, John? I'm gone for an hour, and this place goes to pot! And what are these three doing coloring in here?"

"Relax, Jo," John said. "It's my fault. I told them it was okay."

"Relax? If I *relaxed* this place would turn into a zoo!" Joanne snatched the coloring books and crayons from the coffee table. "Say goodbye to them, they're going in the garbage."

"No!" Kevin screamed.

Joanne ignored him, marched down the hallway, and pushed open the swinging door to the kitchen.

"Dad," Theresa said, "don't let her do this to them. Please."

"Your mother's made up her mind. You gotta learn to pick your battles."

Theresa's lips curled. "Well, I feel right at home on the frontlines." She ran into the kitchen. "Mom!"

"Go away, Theresa."

"Mom, this isn't fair! They're just little kids!"

"No, you know what's not fair, Theresa?" she said, rolling the coloring books in one hand and waving them at her with authority. "The way you always have to stick your nose where it doesn't belong. Kevin will get over this and learn from it, and Lindsay..."

"Lindsay what?"

Joanne's voice lowered, almost snarling. "Lindsay doesn't know what the hell is going on."

Theresa winced at the comment, shocked to hear those words spoken aloud. Her body trembled, overcome with so much rage and anguish on her little sister's behalf. She had no words to combat her mother's insensitive comment, no way to come to her sister's defense. Instead, she simply said, "It's so on!"

Theresa turned and kicked open the swinging kitchen door with the ball of her foot. She walked past John, Kevin (who was down to sniffles), Lindsay, and Barbara without saying a word. She ran up the stairs to her bedroom, where she found Brenda sitting in a beanbag chair, clutching a tattered and torn album to her chest. Michael lay on his bed facing the wall, an old comic in his hands.

"What happened?" Theresa asked Brenda.

"Barbara's a psycho," said Brenda.

“And?”

“She ripped pages out of my stamp book and tore them up.” Her nostrils flared. “That’s why I broke that stupid unicorn. She had no right to do that!”

“Why did she?”

Brenda shrugged.

“So, what, it was a random act of violence?”

“Why not? She’s psycho, remember?”

“I’m not buying it.”

“I don’t care!”

Theresa rolled her eyes. “Fine, don’t tell me. I have bigger things to deal with anyway.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

John rapped on the partially opened door. “Hey, guys, mind if I join the party?”

Theresa folded her arms and averted her eyes.

Brenda shrugged and said, “Sure, why not?”

John pushed the door open wider, leaning against the doorjamb. “How are things going up here?”

None of them responded.

“That good, huh?” John said. “Listen, Brenda, your mom asked me to talk to you. I know you and Barbara don’t get along, but you’re both getting older, and it’s time to start acting civil with one another. Do you think you can do that?”

“She ruined my stamp collection,” Brenda said, “*before* I broke her unicorn.”

“Well, that wasn’t nice, and I’ll talk to her about it. But, sport, what you did was dangerous. You could’ve hurt someone. What if you’re mother happened to be coming up the walkway when the figurine landed? It could’ve hit her in the head.”

Theresa snorted and muttered, “If only.”

“No comments from the peanut gallery,” John said. “Brenda, do you get what I’m saying?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.” He stooped down in front of her. “Now listen, sport, I hate to do this, but your mother thinks you need to learn a lesson and decided to ground you for the rest of the summer.”

“What?” Brenda shrieked, getting to her feet and tossing her stamp album on the floor. “I’m supposed to pitch in tomorrow’s game, they’re counting on me!”

“Honey, it’s not the Major League, they’ll manage without you. You have to be taught a lesson, and I have to stand firm on this,” John said.

“And what happens to Barbara?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Pfft,” uttered Theresa. “Ain’t that typical.”

“Is there something you’d like to say to me, Theresa?” John asked.

“Oh yeah, I have a million things to say,” she said. “But I have plans for the rest of the summer, and they don’t involve being confined to my room. No offense, Brenda.”

Brenda plopped down on the beanbag chair in a huff and sulked.

John stood up, approaching Theresa. “I advise you to watch that smart mouth, Theresa. You’re on thin ice as it is.”

“Is that you or Mom talking?”

“Both.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

John patted her shoulder, shook his head wearily, and left the room.

After waiting for him to clear out, Theresa headed downstairs and left the house. The smell of freshly cut grass filled the summer air, and the faint hum of lawnmowers could be heard from blocks over. She walked down the sidewalk, passing old but mostly well-kept homes. However, one house, not too far from where Theresa lived, was in shoddy condition. The overgrown lawn sprouted tall weeds, the wood porch had met its match with termites, and there was a sizable hole in the roof. A chain link fence and gate separated Theresa from the property, but from where she stood, she saw ol' Mrs. Ratchett come out the screen door, which hung on only one hinge. She was holding an old-fashioned round broom that the kids in the neighborhood called a "witch's broom". Theresa half-heartedly waved to her, and she reciprocated before beginning to sweep her front porch.

Theresa walked away, keeping one eye on the house, and for a moment, she thought she caught a glimpse of the ogre son of Mrs. Ratchett, known as Jim, standing behind the broken screen door. For as much as the neighborhood kids thought Mrs. Ratchett was a witch, the real mystery surrounded her teenage son, who had only been seen in shadow or by a select few. One story went that he could be seen lumbering around town at midnight, looking for stray dogs to eat. Other kids said he was a monstrous creation, like that of *Frankenstein*, who preys on children. Theresa didn't know what to believe, as she had never seen him herself, but she didn't believe the stories of Mrs. Ratchett being a witch. She thought she just seemed like a sad, lonely woman taking care of a son whom, Theresa concluded, was at the very least, not normal.

Theresa continued down the sidewalk, once again leaving the mystery of the Ratchetts behind. She went to a small park located near Moonridge Lake, where the kids around town liked to swim. Every summer day around this time, she was sure to find her two best friends, Beth and Donna, hanging out on the swings. Today was no different. As she crossed the grassy knoll, she saw Beth's blonde pigtails hanging low and Donna's poker straight long blonde hair cascading down her back. In the summer sun, their hair shined like gold, something Theresa's hair would never do. In the humidity, her black curls tended to frizz and puff out like a poodle's tail. She kept her unruly hair pulled back in a tight ponytail to try to keep it under control.

"Boo," Theresa said to her friends.

"Fancy meeting you here," said Donna.

Beth giggled. "Hey, Theresa."

"What are you guys doing?"

"Boy watching," Donna said. "You gotta love hot summer days when the boys dive half-naked into the lake. What a sight."

"Donna," Beth said, "don't talk about stuff like that."

"I didn't see you looking away."

Beth blushed.

Theresa turned her gaze to the lake where five boys of varying ages were splashing around in the water. She shrugged. "They don't look so hot to me. How about we go catch a movie?"

"What's playing?" asked Beth.

"Oh, you're gonna love it, Beth," Theresa said. She wiggled her fingers at her and put on an ominous tone. "There's a *spooOOooky* one showing called *Twilight Zone: The Movie*. You've seen the old series on TV right?"

"Once or twice," Beth said, squirming. "I don't know. Maybe we should just go see *Superman III* again."

"We just saw that one...twice," Theresa said. "I wanna see something new."

Donna nodded. "I'm with Theresa."

"Does it have to be something scary?" Beth asked.

"Come on, Beth, don't be a baby," Theresa said. "It'll be fun. Remember last summer when we saw *Poltergeist*? You liked that."

“Yeah, but it still gave me nightmares for a week,” said Beth.

“Please, Beth.”

She sighed. “Okay, if you guys really want to.”

The three girls walked to the Moonridge Multiplex Theater, an old red brick building in disrepair. Some of the letters on the marquee were even missing. It shared a building with a consignment store on one side and a real estate office on the other. The girls bought their tickets and went inside. The air-conditioned theater always felt nice on hot summer days. They passed the back rows of theater seats, where groups of teenagers were already making out, and sat down in three empty seats toward the middle. There were several kids sprinkled throughout the rows, and as the movie trailers ran, Theresa happened to notice three boys sitting several seats down in the row in front of them.

“Psst,” she said to Donna and Beth. “Don’t look now, but the Jordan brothers are in the next row.”

Donna and Beth both turned their heads to look.

The eldest and largest of the three boys, Patrick, tossed a piece of popcorn in the air and caught it in his mouth. He was fourteen, but he was in the same grade as the girls, along with his two younger brothers who were thirteen and twelve. Rumor had it the older two brothers purposely got themselves held back so all three of them could be in the same grade, as well as most—if not all—of the same classes. Seeing as Theresa had never seen the three apart, she didn’t doubt the rumor was true. The brothers were infamous for being the worst bullies in school, always shoving some poor kid into a locker or doling out swirlies and wedgies. The girls had been fortunate enough to fly under their radar and hadn’t fallen victim to their cruelty.

“Ugh,” Donna said, “they’re revolting.”

“Totally,” replied Theresa. “Maybe we’ll get lucky, and they’ll choke on their popcorn.”

The girls laughed, causing Patrick to turn around and look at them. Donna and Beth quickly looked away, but Theresa didn’t. In the dark theater, with only the flicker of the movie screen’s projection, Patrick’s eyes pierced hers. When the final movie trailer faded to black, she could no longer see him, so she returned her attention to the screen. When the Warner Bros. logo came up, it illuminated the theater again. Theresa checked on the brothers and discovered they were gone. She elbowed Donna and pointed subtly to the now empty seats, not wanting to alarm Beth. Donna shrugged, and turned her attention back to the movie. Theresa did the same.

The movie opened with a creepy deserted road Albert Brooks drove along with Dan Aykroyd as his passenger. As Albert Brooks tried to spook Dan Aykroyd by turning off the headlights, the movie theater went pitch black yet again. During this time, Beth let out a bloodcurdling scream, and uproarious laughter followed from behind them. Once Albert Brooks turned the headlights back on in the movie and lit the theater again, Theresa turned around and found the Jordan brothers doubled over like a pack of laughing hyenas.

“Jerks!” She knelt on her seat backwards and threw a handful of popcorn at them. “Get out of here and leave us alone!”

“Ooooh,” Patrick said, pretending to tremble. “I’m sooo *scared*.”

“You oughta be, jerkoff.”

“Theresa,” Donna said, “just sit down. He’s trying to get a rise out of you.”

“Yeah, *Theresa*,” Patrick mocked. “Listen to the rich bitch.”

Donna twisted a bit to look back at them. “Oh, I’m sorry, am I supposed to get offended by that? I take it as a compliment. Rich, check. Bitch? Sure, why not? Now excuse me, you’re making me miss my movie, and I paid good money to see it. Can you three say the same?”

Patrick glared at Donna, but she cut his stare by turning back around in her seat. She tugged on Theresa’s sleeve, urging her to do the same.

“Come on, guys, I’m bored of this,” Patrick said, and the three of them made their way to the exit.

“You okay, Beth?” Theresa asked.

Beth had her feet up on her seat, her knees curled to her chest. She nodded.

“Do you want to go?” Theresa asked.

“No, let’s just watch the movie, okay?”

Beth kept her head buried on her knees for most the movie. When the credits rolled, and the lights overhead reilluminated, Donna nudged Beth who jerked her head up, startled.

“It’s over, Beth,” she said.

As Theresa watched her friend unfold her knees and replant her feet on the floor shakily, she couldn’t help but feel a twinge of guilt. “Hey, Beth, next time you can pick the movie, okay?”

“Yeah,” Donna agreed. “Next five, even. Anything you want.”

Beth nodded. “Okay. Thanks.”

The girls left the theater, and a whistle caught their attention. The Jordan brothers were leaning against the brick wall, Patrick flipping a coin into the air again and again. He caught it for a final time, and the brothers strolled up to Theresa, Donna, and Beth.

“What do you want now?” Theresa asked, placing her hands on her hips.

“Chill out. We just came over to apologize.”

“Uh huh, as if.”

“Not to you, fatso, to her.” He pointed to Beth. “What do you say, darling? Forgive us?”

Beth didn’t look at him. She shrugged and nodded.

“I can’t hear you, Beth,” Patrick said.

“She said, ‘Fuck off,’” Theresa said with a smirk.

Donna laughed, but Beth didn’t.

Patrick gave Theresa a good hard shove. “What’d you say, fatty, what’d you say?”

She stumbled backwards, grabbing Donna’s arm to keep from falling on her rear. A rage boiled inside her so deep and so raw she curled her fingers into tight fists, her nails digging into her palms until they bled. This boy had laid his hands on her, and in Theresa’s world, no one got away with that. No one. If she tried to slug him, her fist would come up short, as he towered over her. Instead, she became like a bull, charging at him with everything she had in her, her right shoulder slamming into his broad chest. The impact was so severe, Patrick crashed into his brothers, and the three of them fell like ninepins. Patrick’s face reddened with such haste, Theresa envisioned steam coming out of his ears. She stifled a laugh, imagining that.

“You’re fucking dead!” he roared.

Theresa grabbed Donna and Beth’s hands and took off like a shot. She checked over her shoulder, and the brothers had already gotten to their feet and gave chase. Patrick growled a string of obscenities that would make even a drunken sailor cringe. Their footsteps grew louder behind them, so the girls were forced to pick up their pace.

“I have to stop!” Beth said, clutching her side.

“Just a little further, Beth,” said Theresa. “We’re almost to my house.”

The stone walkway to Theresa’s house came into sight. The girls darted up it and through the front door. Beth doubled over catching her breath, while Theresa peeked out the narrow window next to the front door. The Jordan brothers had stopped on the sidewalk outside, and Theresa waved to them smugly. Patrick seemed to give a lingering look at the house, before his brother swatted him on the arm as if to say “Come on, let’s go.” Once the Jordan brothers were out of sight, Theresa turned around.

“Those guys need to be neutered,” she said.

Donna smirked. “Well, hey, I’ll get one of my dad’s scalpels if you get the chloroform.”

Theresa laughed.

Beth shook her head. "I don't think that's very funny. In fact, I don't think any of this is very funny."

"We're just joking around," Theresa said. "Besides, they started it."

"Well, that's the point. You went and made them angry, and what if they start tormenting us at school? Have you seen what they've done to other kids?" Beth said.

"Three against three—sounds like a fair fight," Theresa remarked.

Beth folded her arms and uttered a "Hmph."

"Look, they were probably just bored, and we were there. Tomorrow they'll go pick on some other poor sap, and we'll be off the hook."

"I doubt it."

"Come on, Beth. You're usually the optimistic one," Theresa said. "What's your problem?"

"Just forget it."

"Are you scared?"

Beth shrugged.

"You have no reason to be," Theresa said. "Like you said, I'm the one who made them angry. So I'll deal with it if it becomes a problem, okay?"

She nodded. "Okay, I guess."

Joanne approached them, hands planted on hips. "I hate to interrupt your little meeting, but, Theresa, where have you been?"

"I went to the movies. What's the big deal?"

"The big deal is the way you acted earlier in the kitchen, the way you spoke to me—what did that even mean?"

Theresa rolled her eyes. "Nothing."

"*Nothing*. Well, that's a subject you know a lot about, isn't it? What you always have been, what you always will be. *Nothing*. I'm sick of your attitude, I'm sick of your mouth, I'm sick of you, period," Joanne said.

Theresa felt her cheeks flush, but she refrained from responding. She kept her eyes down, the toe of her sneaker digging into the faux parquet wood floor.

"Beth, Donna," Joanne said, "I think it's time to run along home."

Beth opened the front door and ran like a bat out of hell.

"Bye, Theresa," Donna said, following.

Joanne stepped right in front of Theresa and stared down at her. "What do you have to say?"

"Nothing."

"Wrong answer. Go to your room."

"Why?"

"You're grounded for the rest of summer."

"Mom, that's not fair!" Theresa shouted. "I didn't do anything!"

"You exist...that's enough."

"It's not like I asked to be born!"

"Yeah? Well, I came this close to having an abortion, and had it been legal, we wouldn't even be having this conversation!"

"I hate you!" Theresa screamed, running up the stairs crying. "I *hate* you!"

* * *

A knock came at the front door, taking Theresa out of her flashback. She begrudgingly dragged her feet off the chair and stood up, her tired muscles aching. She staggered to the front door and opened it. She kept one hand rested on the doorknob and one on the doorjamb to lean on. Her ex stood before

her, his hair overgelled, and a loose tie around his neck.

“What do you want?” Theresa asked.

“No ‘hello’? No ‘how ya been’?”

“That would involve me giving two shits, which I don’t. So what do you want?”

“I left my sunglasses here.”

“No, you didn’t. And even if you had, they would be in a landfill by now.”

“You know, this is exactly your problem: so much hostility. Here I am, trying to be civil, and you’re acting like a bitch.”

“I’m really not in the mood for your bullshit, Jackson,” Theresa said. “Why don’t you go and find another bar slut to screw around with, and leave me the hell alone?”

“I told you that was a misunderstanding—”

“I don’t care! Dumping you made me feel like Mary fucking Sunshine, and if I could do it every day, I would. But for now, I guess I’ll just have to settle for telling you to fuck off.”

Theresa slammed the door in his face. She sat down on her living room sofa, pinching the bridge of her nose. She could feel a migraine coming on, perhaps because of Jackson, or because of her rotten childhood memories, or because she skipped breakfast and didn’t get a lunch break at work. She forced herself back to her feet and entered her tiny galley kitchen. She opened a can of condensed soup, poured it into a small pan, and let it simmer on the stove. As she stirred it, memories continued to run through her mind. Among the collage of rotten ones, one highlight snuck in, and it occurred the day Theresa decided to run away.

Chapter 2

Running Away

Moonridge – August 6, 1983

The day after Theresa and her friends went to the movies, she woke up at four in the morning before anyone else in the house got up. She crept downstairs to the kitchen and picked up the wall phone's receiver, dialing Donna's number. Donna had her own phone line, so Theresa figured she'd be less likely to wake up her parents, as opposed to calling Beth. As the phone rang, she stretched the phone cord to the basement door and ducked behind it, shutting the door as far as it would go.

After four or five rings, Donna groggily answered, "Hello?"

"Donna, it's Theresa," she said softly. "I'm sorry to wake you."

"Theresa? Is there something wrong?"

"I can't stay here, Donna," Theresa said. "My mom hates me. So I've decided to run away, and I want you and Beth to come with me."

Donna sighed heavily. "Theresa, you've lost your mind."

"Listen, if you guys don't want to come, fine. I'll go by myself. But I really want you to."

Donna waited a beat before responding. "What's the plan?"

Theresa grinned. "I'm gonna pack real quick, and I want you guys to meet me by the multiplex. Stop by Beth's on the way there and throw some pebbles at her window, so you don't wake her mom. I'll expect you guys there by 6:30, got it?"

"Got it. But Theresa, what if Beth doesn't want to come?"

"Then I guess it's just me and you. See you soon, Donna," Theresa said.

She poked her head outside the basement door to make sure the coast was clear. It was. She returned the phone to its hook and got herself a bowl of Pac-Man cereal. She ate quickly, standing by the kitchen sink to rinse her bowl the second she was done. She ran the water low, constantly glancing over her shoulder to ensure no one was coming. When the bowl was clean, she returned to her room to pack. She dragged her school backpack out from under her bed, emptying out her Trapper Keeper and loose pieces of paper from sixth grade—it was long overdue to clean it out anyway. Michael and Brenda slept soundly in their bunkbeds, so Theresa had to be careful opening her dresser drawers and closet door to ensure they wouldn't creak too loudly. After packing some clothes, what little money she had, and a few toiletries, Theresa looped her backpack straps over her shoulders and went downstairs. She left through the front door and crossed the lush green lawn. Even the crunch of the blades beneath her hightops made her uneasy, as if she was going to wake the entire neighborhood with her footsteps. Once she reached the sidewalk, she started to relax.

It was still dark out with streetlamps illuminating her way. She felt nervous being out at this time of day and found herself quickening her pace to reach the multiplex faster. She couldn't wait to see her friends and calm her anxieties. A light breeze past through the treetops, and a flock of birds flapped wildly out of one of them, causing Theresa to gasp and freeze in her tracks. She started moving again, picking up her pace into a jog. Once she reached the movie theater, she rested against the brick wall, sliding her back down it until she was sitting on the warm cement. She held her head down, catching her breath and calming her rattled nerves. She checked her watch. It was 6:15.

When the sun started to rise, Theresa worried that her friends weren't coming. Maybe Donna fell asleep. Or maybe she changed her mind. She stood and walked over to a nearby row of three

payphones. She took off one strap of her backpack, swung it around on one shoulder, and unzipped the front pocket. It was where she always kept her lunch money for school, but now it held her running away money. She felt around for some change, finding a couple nickels and a dime. Just as she picked up the receiver of the payphone, Donna and Beth came into sight.

"I thought you guys weren't coming," Theresa said.

"We wouldn't ditch you," Donna said, grinning.

Theresa smiled. "Come on, let's go."

The girls headed to a ballast path leading into the woods. The path was actually once a railroad bed, but the tracks had been pulled up and relocated several years prior. Theresa must've seen this mysterious trail a hundred times before, but never knew exactly where it ended up. Now, they were going to find out.

The uneven rocks under their feet made for hard treading, especially for Beth who had decided to wear sandals on their journey. Theresa and Donna both wore high tops, but the walk was still difficult. Theresa nearly twisted her ankle a couple times, landing on particularly large or jagged stones beneath her feet.

After an hour of arduous walking, Donna said, "Maybe we should try going through the woods."

"That could be dangerous," said Beth.

"I think Donna's right," Theresa said. "We're not gonna get very far like this."

Beth bit her lip. "But—"

"It'll be okay," said Theresa. "We just have to stick together."

Theresa and Donna stepped off the railroad bed, but Beth remained still, reluctant to join them.

"Come on, Beth," Donna said. "Get the lead the out."

"What if there's bears?" Beth said.

"Beth, there aren't any bears," Theresa replied.

"But how do you *know*?"

"Because someone would've reported a bear sighting by now."

"Not if they got...eaten."

"Come on, Beth, you're acting stupid."

"I'm not stupid!" She plopped down on the ballast, folding her arms and hanging her head.

"Beth, I wasn't calling *you* stupid, just the way you're acting," Theresa said. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by it."

Beth absentmindedly played with the glass teardrop necklace she wore, which her father had given her before he died. "Everyone always thinks I'm stupid, but I get good grades, even better than you guys'."

"We know that, Beth," Donna said. "You're sensitive and maybe a little naïve at times, but there's nothing wrong with that."

"If that's true why does everyone tease me about it?"

Theresa shrugged. "Everyone gets teased, Beth. If they didn't tease you about that, they'd find something else. That's just the way it is. Now, are you coming or not?"

Beth shook her head. "I wanna stick to the path."

Donna stepped back up onto the railroad bed. "Come on, Theresa. It's not that bad."

Theresa rejoined her friends, and they started walking again. She kicked the rocks along the way, while the three girls played the Grocery List game. In the game, they had to take turns alphabetically listing food items to bring on a cruise.

"I'm going on a cruise, and I'm bringing apples," began Beth.

"I'm going on a cruise, and I'm bringing apples and butterscotch," added Donna.

"I'm going on a cruise, and I'm bringing apples, butterscotch, and cake," continued Theresa.

The game was a great way for them to pass the time and forget about their aching feet. After another hour passed, the girls saw something ahead that troubled them.

“...molasses, nectarines, oranges—whoa!” Theresa said. “What happened to the path?”

The railroad bed stopped abruptly, and only overgrown foliage lay ahead. The girls stopped right before the mess, and Theresa began rifling through the debris to see if the gravel lay underneath.

“It’s gone,” she said. “There’s nothing here.”

“What happened to it?” Beth asked.

Donna shrugged. “Maybe storms washed it away, who knows? It looks like we have no choice but to cut through the woods now.”

“Yeah,” Theresa said. “We can’t walk through this, and I don’t see the road beyond it. Sorry, Beth.”

“That’s okay. In a sense, we all sort of got our way,” she said with a smile.

The girls stepped down off the railroad bed and headed into the woods. The soft earth felt better on their tired feet, but the trees stood tall and ominous, blocking out much of the sunlight. With every rustle, Beth’s head would jerk side to side looking for the source. “Just a squirrel,” Theresa would say, even if she hadn’t seen the cause of the noise.

Apart from distracting and startling sounds, their trip through the woods was uneventful until they happened upon a stream. Green leaves and broken twigs floated on the murky water, like the dead of summertime passing along to make way for fall. Theresa found herself entranced by her own dark reflection in the water.

“There’s no way I’m swimming through that,” Donna said, grimacing.

“I second that,” said Beth.

Donna looked up and down the bank. “Maybe there’s a bridge or a—hey look! Down there!”

Theresa’s eyes followed her friend’s pointed finger to find a knocked down tree stretched out across the water. The girls ran along the bank toward it.

“Is it sturdy enough?” asked Beth.

Theresa kicked it with her foot. The tree didn’t budge. “Seems to be. I’ll go first, we’ll hold each other’s hand, and that way if one of us falls, we all fall.”

Donna and Beth nodded.

Before proceeding, Theresa—the strongest of the three girls—flung Beth and Donna’s suitcases one at a time on to the opposite side of the stream. The luggage barely made a safe landing on the bank, settling on a nest of leaves beside each other. She stepped onto the fallen tree—the now makeshift bridge—and outstretched her arms to steady herself as it wobbled a little.

“See,” she said when her feet were firmly planted, “piece of cake. Come on, Donna, you next.”

Donna climbed up behind Theresa, grabbing hold of her shoulders to keep her own balance. Theresa reached back for her hand and walked forward a few paces to make room on the tree for Beth to come up. Next, Donna extended her hand to Beth to help her up behind her. Beth trembled, holding on to her for dear life. Theresa started to walk forward, taking short steps and staring down at the tree and the dark water beyond it. She could hear Donna and Beth’s footsteps shuffling behind her, and she felt a great sense of responsibility for getting her friends to safety.

Theresa reached the end of the tree and jumped down. Still holding Donna’s hand, she helped her down, then Beth. Beth exhaled heavily, crossing herself, and quietly thanking the Lord for the girls’ safe arrival. As Theresa and Donna picked up their bags, Beth reached for hers only to be greeted by a hissing snake. She screamed and stumbled backwards, the heel of her sandal catching on a tree root. Her arms flailed as she disappeared under the murky water with a splash.

“Beth!” Theresa shrieked, kneeling on the bank. She reached her hand into the water, feeling around but couldn’t find her.

“Where is she?” Donna asked, joining Theresa. “Do you see her?”

Theresa got up, unknotted the denim jacket tied around her waist, and kicked off her sneakers. Just as she was about to dive in, someone beat her to it. Theresa turned to find two blond boys staring at the stream. The shorter of the two puffed on a cigarette and shifted his gaze to Theresa, as the smoke swirled around his face.

“Who the hell are you?” she asked.

With a sudden splash and gasp of air, Beth emerged from the water with a dark haired boy. He pulled himself onto the bank, while Theresa and Donna grabbed Beth’s arms and dragged her to safety. Theresa wrapped her denim jacket around Beth’s shoulders.

“Are you okay?” she asked, kneeling down by her traumatized friend.

Beth trembled while weeping. “I couldn’t come up. I was stuck, my foot was caught on something. I couldn’t see, I couldn’t breathe, I thought I was...”

Donna hugged Beth. “It’s okay now. You’re okay now.”

Theresa looked at the soaking wet dark haired boy who averted his eyes and returned to his own friends. The shorter blond boy extended his hand palm up for him to slap, as if to say, “Good going.” The three boys turned to leave.

“Wait!” Theresa said. “I asked you a question. Who are you?”

The shorter blond boy turned around, walking backwards, as he said, “Just think of us as the guardians of the woods.”

“Not good enough,” Theresa said, placing her hands on her hips and marching up to them. They stopped. “I want names.”

“You’re kind of a pain in the neck, aren’t you?” the blond boy said.

Theresa grinned. “Sometimes.”

He snorted. “I’m David. That’s Wil—” He pointed to the dark haired boy. “—and Paul.” He pointed to the tall blond boy. “And you?”

“Theresa. That’s Beth and Donna.” She pointed accordingly, as they walked up to join her.

“What are you guys doing out here? Besides saving lives, that is.”

“Well, we kind of live out here.” He shrugged. “Since the beginning of summer anyway. We ran away from home.”

“No kidding. Us too,” Theresa said. “But just since today.”

“Cool,” he said. “We set up camp in a cave not far from here. You wanna see it?”

“Yeah, okay,” Theresa said, intrigued.

Beth grabbed her shoulder and whispered, “Maybe we shouldn’t. I think we should just try to get out of the woods.”

Theresa held up a finger to the boys. “Excuse us, one second. I have to converse with my colleagues.”

David smirked. “Okay.”

The girls backed up and huddled.

“What are you afraid of, Beth?” Theresa whispered. “That kid saved your life.”

“Yeah, but they’re *boys*.”

Donna half-smiled. “That was gonna be my *point*. They seem nice.”

“And,” Theresa added, “they know these woods a lot better than we do. They could probably get us out of here faster.”

“What if they...try...stuff?” Beth said, biting her lip.

Theresa and Donna laughed under their breath.

“They’re just kids like us, Beth,” Theresa said. “I even remember them from school. One grade ahead of us and kept to themselves from what I noticed. Besides, it’s not like they had to come and help us, but they did anyway.”

“I guess you’re right,” Beth said.

“So you’re in?”

“I’m in.”

The girls broke from their huddle and faced the boys.

“After careful consideration,” Theresa said, “we’ve decided to join you guys.”

“Awesome,” David said, flicking his cigarette into the stream. “Follow me.”

David led them to a nearby clearing between the trees, where the boys had left their bicycles. They lifted the bikes off the ground to a standing position. David climbed on to the banana seat, leaving space behind him.

“Hop on,” he said, patting the seat and looking at Theresa.

“Are you serious?”

“Would you rather walk?”

Theresa glanced to her friends, and then said, “Hell no.”

She climbed on behind David. There wasn’t much room left, so she felt awkward sitting so close.

Donna tugged on Beth’s sleeve. “Come on, Beth. Why don’t you ride with your savior there, and I’ll ride with... what was your name again?”

“Paul.”

Donna grinned. “Oh yeah. Paul.” She climbed on to the back of his bike and wrapped her arms around his waist with no reluctance. Theresa envied her confidence.

Beth approached Wil and said, “Hi.”

“Hey.”

“Thanks, by the way, for helping me,” she said.

“No problem.”

There was an awkward moment where Beth stood there, playing with her necklace and staring at the ground.

“Everything okay?” Wil asked.

Beth shrugged. “Is it safe?”

“The bike?”

“Everything.”

Wil’s expression softened. “You’ll be fine. Promise.”

Beth smiled. “Okay.”

She finally gave in and climbed on to the back of Wil’s bike.

The group rode off, David taking the lead. Leaves crunched beneath the rubber tires as the children sped through the woods. Theresa never imagined they’d be able to ride so fast with the weight of an extra passenger and on uneven terrain, but the summer wind caught her black curls and made them dance. She found herself smiling, feeling freer than she ever had before.

They rode down a slope, and David skidded to a stop outside a cave. Wil and Paul stopped beside him. When the group entered the cave, Theresa saw how shallow it was, almost more like a carved out alcove. Rolled up sleeping bags were stacked against the cave wall between an old cardboard box and the boys’ backpacks. The kids sat down in a circle on the dirt floor and dry leaves.

“Pop?” David asked, reaching for the cardboard box.

“Sure!” replied the girls in unison.

David passed around cans to each of the kids and kept one for himself. The collective sounds of tabs popping and the soda fizzing echoed in the cave.

Theresa took a drink and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “So what do you guys do all day?”

“Well, you know, beyond these woods are the outskirts of town,” David said. “It’s right off the interstate, and there’s a diner and some shops and a gas station and stuff. We sometimes head there to

kill time.”

“Doing what?” asked Theresa.

“There’s a place that sells comics, so sometimes we hang out there.”

“Comics, huh?” Theresa said. “What’s your poison, Marvel or DC?”

“It’s gotta be Marvel.”

“Pfft, you’re nuts! It’s DC all the way.”

Donna piped up, “What’s the difference?”

“DC has Batman...need I say more?” Theresa said.

“X-Men trumps Batman,” David argued.

“No way!”

Wil chimed in, “I like them both.”

“Me too,” agreed Paul.

“I like Nancy Drew,” said Beth.

“That’s not a comic book,” remarked Theresa.

Beth shrugged. “I know, but I still like it.”

Theresa chuckled and shook her head, taking another drink of her pop.

“So,” David said, “why’d you guys run away?”

“Why did you?” Theresa asked back.

“I asked you first.”

Theresa lowered her eyes to the ground. “What can I say? My mom hates me.”

Beth turned to her. “No she doesn’t, Theresa.”

“What do you know, Beth? You didn’t hear what she said to me.”

“What did she say?”

Theresa shook her head. “Just forget it.”

“Your mom has a temper, I’m not denying that,” Beth said. “But she doesn’t hate you. No parent could hate their child.”

“My dad hates me,” David said.

Theresa shifted her eyes to him. “Really?”

“Yep,” he said. “He calls me a ‘waste of space’, which is funny considering all he does is sit around on his fat ass drinking beer and watching TV.”

“Not all parents are bad,” said Beth. “Tell em, Donna.”

She scoffed. “Oh, yeah, parents are swell. Especially when they’re too busy to even pay attention to you. My parents won’t even notice I’m gone until the maid tells them.”

“Well, how about you, Wil?” Beth asked, a twinge of hope in her voice.

Wil shifted uneasily where he sat, gazing out the cave opening. When the sun hit his eyes, they resembled thick molasses. “My parents,” he said, under his breath and almost without sound. But everyone heard. His eye twitched as if struck by some invisible force. He bent one knee and rested his arm on it. “My mom is quiet. She has to be. Because in my house, if you say the wrong thing, you get hit. Hell, sometimes if you say the right thing you get hit.”

“Oh,” Beth said. “Sorry.”

Wil shrugged.

“Um, Paul?” Beth said.

“My parents are dead,” he said.

“So is my dad,” Beth said, giving him an empathetic look.

The children sat in an awkward silence for a moment, until Theresa said, “Well, Beth, you sure know how to cheer people up.”

They laughed, relieving some of the tension.

David said, “Hey, some parents may be assholes and some may be gone, but at least us kids

know how to stick together, right?"

"Well, some kids anyway," Theresa said.

"Right," Donna agreed, "let's not forget the dreaded Jordans."

"Jordan, Jordan..." David said. "Where do I know that name? Ah, crap, not those three brothers who are in the same grade now?"

"Yeah, *our* grade," Theresa said. "You know em?"

"Not really. I've seen em picking on the geeks sometimes at school. Were they bothering you?"

"Yeah, kind of," Theresa said.

"*Kind of?*" said Beth. "Patrick shoved you, Theresa."

She glared at her. "Thank you for reminding me, Beth."

David narrowed his eyes. "Yeah, you guys should stay away from them. They're pretty messed up."

"I thought you didn't really know them," remarked Theresa.

He shrugged. "I've heard things. I know the one...Patrick...got suspended once for bringing a knife to school and cutting some kid with it."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah." He got a faraway look in his eye, as though he were finding more memory fragments.

"Who was that one kid, Paul? You sat next to him in, uh, English, I think. Red-haired kid, real pale."

"Oh, yeah," Paul said. "Uh...Randy, I think."

"Yeah, that's him. Remember when he was out of school for a month in sixth grade?"

Paul nodded. "Uh huh."

"What happened?" Theresa asked.

"He wouldn't name names, but three boys jumped him one day after school," David said.

"Really messed him up. Eye swollen shut, broken wrist, broken collar bone."

"Geez," Theresa said. "What makes you think it was the Jordan brothers though?"

"I just know."

"Come on, you have to have a reason."

David glanced at Paul who gave a quick nod. His lips buzzed, releasing a sigh. He said, "When that kid, Randy, finally came back to school still looking kind of traumatized by the whole thing, we invited him to sit with us at lunch. Well, the Jordans passed by, gave him a look, and Randy pissed himself."

"Oh, god," Theresa said.

"That poor boy," Beth said.

"Yeah," David said. "He was kept out of school for the rest of the year."

Theresa had a feeling of dread, which she couldn't quite shake.

"You okay?" Donna asked her.

Theresa chortled. "What? Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

"You looked upset, that's all."

"Oh, no. I mean, yeah, it's a shame about that boy. The Jordan brothers are assholes," Theresa said.

David nodded. "Yeah, try to stay out of their way."

"Shouldn't be a problem," Theresa said. "I don't intend on going back into town...ever."

Beth turned to her wide-eyed. "Ever?"

"We ran away, Beth."

"Yeah, but Donna didn't tell me it was for forever."

Donna said, "This is the first I'm hearing about it."

"What did you guys think?" Theresa said. "That we were going on a little vacation? We *ran away*. I don't ever want to see my mom again."

Beth's brow furrowed. "Theresa, I have a confession to make."

"What?"

"I left a note for my mom."

"You did what? What did it say?"

"I just told her that you called an emergency meeting and that we were going to spend the day and night at Donna's," Beth said.

"Well, that maybe buys us some time before they start looking for us, but what about tomorrow when you don't go home?"

"I kind of thought I would be home by tomorrow."

Theresa rolled her eyes. "I don't believe this."

"You didn't say forever," Beth maintained.

"So, what, you thought I could just waltz home tomorrow and my life would be peachy?"

"What about your family, won't you miss them? Apart from your mom?" Beth asked.

"Of course I will. Well, some of them. But you didn't hear how my mom talked to me after you guys left," Theresa said. "I can't live with that woman!"

"What did she say?" Donna urged.

Theresa groaned and stormed out of the cave. She went behind a tree and leaned against it, her arms folded. She thought of her mother's words, essentially telling her that she wished she hadn't been born. Tears stung the corners of her eyes and rested there.

David walked up beside her and held out a pack of cigarettes. "Smoke?"

Theresa turned her back to him and furiously wiped the tears away from her eyes. "No, thank you."

David walked around Theresa to face her. "So, what, your mom's a total bitch?"

"That pretty much sums it up."

"Sorry."

Theresa shrugged. "Apparently no one gets the perfect family or parents or whatever. I think what bothers me the most though is that for my older sisters, they *do* have the perfect mom. She's nice to them, spends time with them, compliments them. What's so bad about me?"

"I dunno, you seem pretty cool to me...for a girl."

Theresa scoffed. "You really had to tack that on?"

"I'm kidding. Come on, you gotta lighten up."

The right edge of Theresa's mouth curled up slightly.

"Well," David said, "that's almost a smile."

Theresa bared her teeth in a big unnatural grin, causing him to grimace.

"Okay, now that's just disturbing," he said.

Theresa laughed.

"There we go, that's better," he said. "Wanna come back in?"

Theresa shrugged. "I guess."

"Good," he said, starting to walk away. "Oh, and Theresa? I guess Batman is pretty cool...but Marvel still reigns supreme."

She rolled her eyes. "In your dreams."

The girls spent hours at the cave hanging out with David, Wil, and Paul. They pigged out on junk food—which the boys provided—and the group talked about movies, school, and whatever else came to mind. After the confessions about their home lives, they kept the mood light and didn't delve into any further detail about it.

At one point, Wil produced a deck of cards from his bag, and the kids played poker, using pretzel sticks and caramels as betting chips. Theresa checked her watch. It was 4:30.

"It's getting late," she said, regretfully. "We should probably try to get out of the woods and find a place to stay before it gets dark."

"Or," said David, "you all could just stay here."

"I don't know if that's a good idea," Theresa said.

David shrugged. "Suit yourself. You guys want a ride out of the woods at least?"

Theresa nodded. "Sure."

The group exited the cave and rode off through the woods in the same pairs as before. As it turned out, the cave wasn't too far from civilization. The outskirts of town, which David had spoken of, sat just fifteen minutes away on bike. Once they were out of the woods, David stopped and pointed.

"That's Carla's Diner. She's really cool, and the food's good."

Theresa climbed off the bike, and Beth and Donna did the same. She walked past the front tire of David's bike and turned to him.

"Thanks," she said, "for everything."

"No prob, it's been fun."

"Yeah."

There was an awkward silence then, as the boys seemed reluctant to leave. Theresa felt the same, but she had the bigger picture in mind of leaving Moonridge.

Finally, Paul said, "You guys gonna be at school?"

Theresa shook her head. "If I have my way, we'll be long gone by then."

"See ya around then," David said, turning his bike around.

The girls said their goodbyes and waved to the boys as they disappeared back into the woods. Theresa stood there a moment, a melancholy washing over her. She shook it off to keep from crying. "Let's go," she said, heading to the diner.

Donna and Beth followed.

When they entered the diner, a skinny woman with teased red hair rushed by them. Without stopping, she said, "Hey girls, grab a seat anywhere."

Theresa and her friends sat down in a free booth. They looked around the diner, seeing mostly truck drivers and out-of-towners. Some of the men sitting at the counter were half-turned on their red bar stools leering at them.

"Nice place," Theresa remarked. She took out one of the menus tucked behind the napkin dispenser and looked it over. "What do you guys think? Just some burgers? I don't have much cash."

Donna reached into her pocket and pulled out a ten dollar bill. "Don't worry, it's my treat."

Beth grimaced. "You're always paying for us. It's not right."

"I don't mind," Donna said. "What good is money if I can't share it with my friends?"

"I like the way you think," Theresa said with a grin.

"My mom says it's not right to accept charity when you don't need it," Beth said.

Donna rolled her eyes. "It's not charity, Beth. But hey if you really wanna pay your own way, go for it. I was just trying to be nice."

"Yeah, right," Beth muttered.

"Is there something you want to say to me, Beth?" Donna asked.

She shook her head. "Never mind."

"No, I want to know what your problem is."

"Fine. The way you flash your money around is vulgar."

"Oh, well, now I *know* that's your mom talking. What the hell does that even mean?"

"It means you're doing it to boast, not to be nice."

"Wow," Donna said, crossing her arms. "If you have issues about being poor, don't take it out on me, Beth."

"I'm not poor."

“Oh, okay, Beth. Whatever.”

“I’m not.”

“Look, you know what, I don’t care,” Donna said. “I’ve never made you guys feel bad for not having as much as me. And you know, the other rich girls at our school are their own group—living it up, shopping, and spending Daddy’s money like it grows on trees. I’ve been asked to hang out with them, did you even know that? But I don’t want to hang out with girls just because they have money. I know who my friends are...or at least I thought I did.”

In that uncomfortable moment, the waitress came up to their table. She pulled a pencil out from above her ear and readied her notepad. “Okay, ladies, what’ll it be?”

Theresa answered. “Burgers and Cokes, thanks.”

“Fries?”

“Yeah.”

“And would you like cheese on your burgers?”

“Yeah, sure, great,” said Theresa, losing patience.

“Okay, hun, I’ll be back in a jiff.”

When the waitress was gone, Beth said, “I’m sorry, Donna. I shouldn’t have acted like that. I think all this is just getting to me.”

“All what?” Donna asked.

“Running away,” Beth said. “Theresa...”

Beth didn’t have to say anything; Theresa already knew what she was thinking. Beth always wore her emotions well, revealing every raw nerve. At that moment, her face writhed in angst and worry. Even her fidgety body movements and the way she tucked her shoulders inward as though trying to shrink away into nothingness, gave herself away.

“You regret coming, don’t you?” Theresa asked her.

Beth nodded.

“What about you, Donna?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I was having fun before with those boys.”

“Yeah, I bet you were, you hussy,” Theresa teased.

Donna snorted. “I didn’t mean it like that. Though, true, they’re pretty easy on the eyes. But besides that, it was cool being far from home, far from the main part of town, where it’s nothing but drama all the time. I think we should’ve stayed with them.”

“My mom would freak if she knew I spent the night with boys,” Beth said.

Donna scoffed. “It’s not a harem, Beth.”

“What’s a harem?”

Theresa chuckled.

“Never mind,” said Donna. “My point is, we were enjoying ourselves and isn’t that partly what this is about? Besides, Theresa, I’m not sure where you think we’re gonna spend the night. We haven’t even talked about it.”

“Well, here’s what I was thinking,” said Theresa. “We—”

The waitress returned with the girls’ burgers and pop then, so Theresa stopped talking.

“Here you are,” she said, doling out the food. “Would you like anything else?”

“No, we’re good, thanks,” Theresa said a bit abrupt.

The waitress smiled. “Well, you just flag me down if you need anything.”

When she left, Theresa continued, “We’re near the interstate, David said so. We head up the road to it and hitchhike out of town. We can sleep in shifts in the car.”

“Are you crazy?” Beth said. “You want us to go in some stranger’s car?”

“How else are we gonna get the hell out of Moonridge?”

“I don’t *want* to leave Moonridge,” Beth said. “This is all too much for me.”

“You want out?”

“I want us all out. I don’t want you leaving either.”

“What about you, Donna? You’re being awfully quiet all of a sudden.”

“I told you how I felt,” Donna said. “We should’ve stayed with those boys. We could’ve kicked back for a few days, without parents, and let the dust settle. We could’ve taken it from there.”

“And you don’t think our parents would come looking for us? This town is miniscule, the woods aren’t much bigger. It wouldn’t be that hard to find us.”

Donna shrugged. “The boys have been there for months.”

“For all we know they told their parents they were going off to summer camp,” Theresa said. “Our parents will come looking, you know that. And I don’t want to be here when they do. But you guys are my best friends, and if you want to go home, I understand. No hard feelings.”

“Let’s just eat before our burgers get cold,” Donna said. “We can figure out what to do afterwards.”

So the girls ate their meal in silence. When they finished, Donna paid the check, and the three of them left the diner. The girls stared down the unfamiliar road that led to the interstate and then turned their gaze to the woods.

“We can’t hitch,” Donna said. “No matter where we ended up, we don’t have the money to live on our own. It’s not like we can get jobs. I’m sorry, Theresa, but without a goal—”

“We can go live with my aunt,” Theresa said. “I think she’d let us. She lives out in California, so we just have to get there.”

“Where in California?”

“San Francisco, last I heard.”

“Last you heard?”

“She’s kind of a free spirit and likes to move around, but I’m sure we’d be able to find her.”

“No,” Beth said. “No, I’m not going to California. My mom needs me. I’m all she has.”

“Okay,” Theresa said. “I told you you guys don’t have to come with me.”

“Theresa,” Donna said, “you shouldn’t go either. I’m all for adventure, but you could get hurt. And you don’t even know where your aunt lives. Even if you made it out to California, anything could happen to you. *Anything*. Let’s just go back to the cave and tell those guys we changed our mind.”

A man in casual business attire came out of the diner. He stopped beside the girls.

“Excuse me,” he said. “You wouldn’t happen to have the time, would you?”

Theresa checked her watch. “5:25.”

“Thank you. Say, you wouldn’t know how to get Delaware and Montgomery Street, would you? I’m not from around here, and I’m trying to get to a friend’s house,” he said.

“No,” Theresa said abruptly.

“Theresa, don’t be so rude,” Beth said. “Right now, you’re on the outskirts of Moonridge. Do you have a map?”

“I spilled coffee on it and had to throw it out, it got ruined. My car’s right over there, maybe you kids could show me the way?”

Beth pressed her lips together and averted her eyes from the stranger.

Theresa spoke up, “Not on your life. Get lost.”

“I apologize,” he said. “I don’t know what I was thinking. You girls just seem a little far from home, and I—”

“Hey man, seriously, you need to get away from us,” Theresa said.

Down the road, a car came into sight, followed by two more. Theresa recognized them immediately: Donna’s mom’s Jaguar, Beth’s mom’s sedan, and her mom’s orange station wagon. A heaviness filled Theresa’s stomach, like a rubber band ball growing in size. She turned to the man, enraged.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“That’s not very ladylike. I’m a friend of Mrs. Morrison.”

Donna furrowed her brow. “You know my mom?”

Theresa shook her head. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

The man grabbed her arm. “Uh-uh. It’s time for you girls to go home.”

The cars pulled into the parking lot of the diner. Donna’s parents got out first, rushing up to her.

“Oh, thank God you girls are all right!” her mother exclaimed. “What were you thinking?”

“Beth!” her mother called, running up to her like she hadn’t seen her in years. She pulled her into a strong embrace before giving her a once over. “Thank the good Lord above. Are you okay? Did anyone hurt you? You’re filthy!”

“Thank you, Bob,” said Donna’s mother. “We owe you one.”

“No problem, happy to help out, Suzanne,” he said.

When Theresa saw her mother step out of the station wagon, her face stiff like stone, she panicked. She kicked the stranger in the shin to get him to release her, and she ran off for the woods.

“Theresa!” Beth shouted after her.

John chased her down and grabbed her, just as she made it to the edge of the woods.

“No, Dad, let me go!” Theresa begged. “Please!”

“What has gotten into you, Theresa?” he asked. “We’ve been worried sick.”

Tears burned her eyes, as she struggled to free herself from his grasp. “I can’t go back. She’s gonna be mad, she’s gonna be *so* mad!”

“Theresa.” He gripped her shoulders and turned her around to face him. “Theresa, calm down. You have to come home.”

John ushered Theresa towards their car, passing the group.

“Take it easy, John,” Donna’s father said.

“You too, Dr. Morrison.”

John walked Theresa up to Joanne.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” her mother asked. “You think this is funny? Do you see how many lives you ruin just by existing? You had their parents worried sick.”

“Joanne,” John said, “that’s enough.”

“No, I’ve only just begun,” Joanne said. “What were you trying to accomplish with this little stunt? Huh?”

“Getting away from you,” Theresa said.

Joanne slapped Theresa right across the face with such force that she fell to the ground. The palms of her hands scraped the cement, causing them to bleed.

“Jesus, Joanne,” John said. “Get in the car, we’re going home.”

Theresa looked up to see Donna, Beth and their parents looking back at her. Her cheeks flushed in humiliation. Her mother had won, and Theresa felt forever trapped in Moonridge.

Chapter 3

The Hanging Tree

Moonridge – August 6, 1983

Theresa rode home in the back seat, ignoring her mother's ongoing slew of insults. She picked at the loose skin on her scraped palms, while absentmindedly gazing out the window. They drove by familiar haunts and houses, playgrounds and her school. She had a taste of freedom, and now Moonridge just seemed like a penitentiary with no hope for parole.

When her parents pulled into the driveway of their home, Theresa stepped out of the car and stared at the peeling paint on the wood siding. The house seemed smaller to her, and knowing her eight siblings were waiting inside, it seemed even tinier. Joanne nudged her shoulder blade to urge her forward. Theresa ran into the house, just to get away from her.

Inside, Michael and Brenda were sitting at the bottom of the stairs. They jumped up when Theresa entered and hugged her.

"We thought you were gone for good," Brenda said.

"So did I," Theresa remarked.

Whitney, Barbara, and Michelle came downstairs then.

"Well, well, well, the reject returns," Whitney said. "I told Mom and Dad not to bother looking for you. It was such a nice day without you around."

"Go to hell," Theresa said.

Whitney sneered. "Ouch, that stings."

John and Joanne walked through the front door, and the children stopped talking. Joanne took a strand of Theresa's hair in her hand and wrinkled her nose.

"You're filthy," she said. "Go upstairs and take a bath. Then stay in your room until dinner's ready."

Theresa obeyed, too exhausted to argue anymore.

After her shower, Theresa put on her pajamas and went into the room shared by Kevin, Leslie, and Lindsay. She found Lindsay sitting on the floor, holding a Barbie doll upside down and gnawing on its rubbery plastic foot.

"Lindsay, that's not how you play with Barbie," Theresa said, sitting down beside her. She picked up a Ken doll and pantomimed him walking. She deepened her voice. "Barbie? Hey, Barbie, where'd you go?"

Lindsay giggled and removed the doll from her mouth. She dropped it on the carpet.

Theresa—still in Ken's voice—said, "Barbie! Barbie, are you okay? Speak to me, Barbie!" She made his little plastic hand tap Barbie on the arm.

Lindsay laughed harder, wobbling around in hysterics before her head settled on to Theresa's arm tiredly. Theresa laughed at her little sister's amusement and tousled her mess of loose light brown curls.

"I love you, Lindsay," she said.

Lindsay didn't say it back. Instead, she began sucking her thumb, her eyelids opening and closing heavily.

"Are you sleepy?" Theresa asked her.

Lindsay nodded.

Theresa stood up while cradling Lindsay's head, so she wouldn't topple over. She picked up her little sister and carried her to her toddler bed, tucking her in. She knelt down on the floor beside her, took her tiny hand in hers, and sang "You Are My Sunshine", lulling Lindsay to sleep.

Theresa left the room and closed the door just enough to leave a crack. Whitney approached her in the hall, shaking her head.

"Mom told you to go to *your* room, not the nursery," she said smugly.

"Tell her. See if I care."

"I guess you have a point. After all, I don't know how much worse your punishment could get," Whitney said.

"What do you know about it?"

"Plenty. I heard Mom and Dad talking."

"And?"

"*And* you're grounded from now until the end of the school year."

"Bull."

"Ask them," Whitney said. "See if I'm lying."

Theresa stared at her sister's piercing green eyes, which reminded her of a snake. And that's just what she was—a snake. Theresa had never gotten along with her. Whitney had tormented her as far back as she could remember. When she was a toddler, Whitney tied knots in her hair so tight they had to be cut out. Theresa was mistaken for a boy in public for a full year after that incident. And that was only one of the memories she had of Whitney making her life miserable.

"Whitney, why do you hate me so much?"

Her older sister appeared taken aback by the question, but that brief second of humanity vanished as quickly as it came. She scoffed. "What's there to like?"

Theresa nodded. "Yeah. I guess I could say the same about you."

"Hmph. I'm the most popular girl at my school," Whitney said. "What does that tell you? Those two blonde friends of yours only hang around you out of pity. No one *really* likes you." She gave a nod towards the nursery. "Not even our own little retard."

Theresa winced at the word. *Retard*. It sounded so harsh, so foreign coming from the lips of a family member, even Whitney. Not even their mother, who had all but washed her hands of Lindsay, used that word. Theresa thought of the precious little girl sleeping in the room behind her. Her little sister's sweet, innocent giggling rang in her ears. At that moment, Theresa realized how fortunate she was to see Lindsay for all the good qualities she possessed instead of just her mental challenges. So few people had that privilege, and Theresa, for the first time, felt truly special within her horrible family, just for having the ability to see what so few saw. And at that moment, she felt nothing but pity for her older sister, who would forever be blind to it. She shook her head, having no more to say to Whitney, and walked past her to her own bedroom.

When dinner was ready, Theresa joined her family at their long dining room table. John held Lindsay on his lap, as she picked tiny pieces off his dinner roll and ate them. John and Joanne sat at the ends of the table, while the children sat four to each side.

"So, Theresa," Joanne began, while scooping mashed potatoes on to her plate, "your father and I discussed your punishment, and we've decided that you will be grounded from now until the beginning of next summer. That means when school starts, you will be coming home right after and won't be seeing Donna and Beth. Do you understand?"

Theresa stared at John. "*You* helped decide this, Dad?"

"Yes, I did," he said. "Theresa, running away is very dangerous. Anything could've happened to you."

"I didn't even go very far."

"It doesn't matter. You trekked through those woods, didn't you?"

Theresa shrugged, pushing the peas on her plate around with her fork.

“Well, they just picked up some guy living out there not so long ago,” John continued. “Just some old homeless man, but you never know what people will do—especially desperate ones. It’s important that you learn never to pull a stunt like this again.”

“Yes, because nothing will make me wanna run away less than being stuck in the house all the time,” Theresa remarked.

“Well, if you do attempt something like this again, we’ll just have to lock you in your room,” said her mother. “Or maybe even the basement. Michael, pass the rolls.”

“The basement?”

“Your mother is only kidding,” John said. “Aren’t you, Jo?”

“Michael, I said pass the rolls,” Joanne repeated.

He picked up the basket of rolls and handed them to Theresa to give to their mother. Theresa didn’t pass them along though. She held them in her left hand, away from Joanne.

“Theresa, knock it off!”

“How badly do you want them, *Mother?*”

Joanne grabbed hold of Theresa’s wrist and squeezed it. Her long nails dug into her skin so hard, goose bumps slithered up Theresa’s arm. She didn’t pull away though, nor did she hand off the rolls. Instead, she glared sidelong at her mother through slit eyes. She wasn’t about to give in; she had nothing more to lose. Joanne pressed her nails harder until tears burned the brim of Theresa’s eyes.

“Jo...” John said, his voice like a meek little mouse. “You’re hurting her. Theresa, give your mother the rolls.”

Theresa disobeyed. She instead leaned in closer to her mother and whispered, “You’re never gonna win. You can’t beat me.”

Joanne’s face tensed. Her ash blonde curls tumbled carelessly in her face, creating a veil. She unclenched her hand from Theresa’s wrist, letting four droplets of blood drip down on to the white tablecloth. She wiped her nails off with her napkin.

“Barbara, pass the peas,” she said.

Theresa set the basket of rolls down out of her mother’s reach. She cradled her wrist, feeling the sting even worse now that the pressure had been released. A drop of blood dripped on to her plate.

“Eww, that is so gross!” Barbara said.

John rubbed his brow in his typical weary fashion. Theresa had never seen such an old-looking thirty-six year-old before. It was as if life had kicked him to the curb and left him for dead.

“Theresa,” he said, “go to the bathroom and fix yourself up. Bandages are under the sink.”

She got up from her chair and headed into the downstairs half-bath. She left the door open a crack as she ran her wrist under the cold tap. When the water hit her sores, the pain made her suck in her breath through her teeth. As soon as she turned off the faucet, she could overhear her family talking.

“You really shouldn’t do stuff like that,” John said.

“She’s a brat and pushes my every button,” Joanne said. “Sometimes I just can’t control myself.”

Theresa stooped down and opened the cabinet under the sink. She rummaged through the various toiletries until she found a box of square bandages. After sticking one over the four nail slits on her wrist, she exited the bathroom.

“Theresa, get yourself a new plate,” Joanne said.

“I’m not hungry. Can I just go back to my room?”

Joanne nodded. “If you’d like.” Theresa started to walk away when her mother added, “On second thought, I need you to do me a favor.”

She stopped and turned. “What now?”

"I need you to go to the market for a can of coffee. We're out."

"Now? It's almost dark."

"It's not that far, you'll be home before dark."

"And you trust me to not run off?"

"No. You're taking Lindsay with you, as...well, let's just call it insurance," Joanne said.

"Jo," John said, "she doesn't have to go down there now, she's already in her PJ's. I can get up early and get some. Or I can even go after dinner."

"No, I asked Theresa to do it. It's only, what, 6:30 or so? You'll be back by seven easy."

Theresa shrugged. "Whatever. I'll go change."

After changing into jeans and a T-shirt and getting some money from John, she took Lindsay's hand and headed outside. The sky overhead was cloudy but painted in dusky purples, pinks, and grays. It looked like a storm might be coming sometime in the night. Theresa and Lindsay walked to the market, which was located a block before the movie theater. Right inside, there was a bin of colorful pinwheels, which Lindsay stopped to play with. She spun them around and around, hypnotized by them.

"Okay, Lindsay, you stay right here," Theresa said, not wanting to interrupt her little sister's fun. "I'll be back in a sec."

The market was small, not much more than a general store. Theresa only had to go two aisles down to fetch the can of coffee. When she went back to retrieve Lindsay, several of the pinwheels were spinning, but Lindsay was gone.

"Lindsay!" Theresa hollered. "Lindsay!"

She ran past all the aisles, looking down them for any sign of her sister. She dropped the can of coffee and rushed outside. Her gaze shifted left and right. It was then she heard murmurs from the side of the market. She rounded the corner of the building, and her heart sank. Lindsay was standing with the Jordan brothers, Patrick having a firm grip on her shoulder. He was holding a bottle of beer and trying to force Lindsay to take a drink.

Theresa stormed up to them, grabbing hold of Lindsay's arm and pulling her behind her. "What the hell are you doing?"

"She looked thirsty," Patrick said, and his brothers snickered.

"Asshole. She's only four."

He scoffed. "What difference does it make? She won't live that long anyway—they never do."

"Who are *they*?"

"You know...the tards," he said.

Theresa shook her head. "If you ever lay a hand on my sister again, I will destroy you."

He flitted his hands, pretending to tremble. "Ooooooh, I'm soooo *scared*."

His brothers snickered again.

Theresa took her sister's hand. "Come on, Lindsay."

Patrick stood in her way, blocking her path. "Do you know what my dad says about people like her?"

"Get out of my way," Theresa snarled.

Patrick deepened his voice, and in a slight twang impersonated his dad: "'You know, son, those tards cost us our tax dollars and don't do shit. Most of em can't even wipe their own ass. If it was up to me, I'd round em all up, take em out back with my twelve gauge, and *BANG!* Splatter them useless brains all over the lawn!'"

Theresa couldn't believe what she was hearing. Fear and horror washed over her, causing her to shake. She averted her eyes from Patrick, staring at the ground in shock. She felt like crying but didn't dare allow herself—not in front of them.

When Theresa didn't say anything in response, Patrick said, "What do you say? Maybe I should

go home and get my dad's shotgun."

"Yeah," Theresa said, "and use it on yourself, you worthless piece of shit."

She pushed past him, ramming her shoulder against his arm. He grabbed her arm and pulled her back to the group, her sneakers skidding on the rough pavement. Theresa spat in Patrick's face, struggling under his grip. He wiped at his face with the back of his hand and sneered. He smashed his beer bottle against a nearby dumpster, sending glass flying. Theresa closed her eyes as some of the shards grazed her skin. Patrick slugged her in the stomach, causing her eyes to shoot open and her body to double over. She felt like vomiting, but it passed as she felt a sharp sting on her stomach. She looked down to find a spot of warm blood soaking through her T-shirt. In Patrick's hand, she saw the glint of a broken glass piece of glass before he tossed it to the ground.

Lindsay cried, and Theresa looked at her blearily. "Run," she said. "Run, Lindsay!"

Her little sister turned on her heels and took off running, her small cries echoing through the alleyway.

Patrick glared at Theresa. "That was stupid." He punched her in the nose, leaving a trail of blood slithering out her left nostril. "You think that little tard will find her way home, huh?"

Theresa grabbed hold of his shirtfront with all of her might and used it stabilize herself enough to knee him in the groin. As Patrick fell holding his crotch, Theresa ran. Her swollen nose made it difficult to breathe. Her pace slowed as she struggled for air, but she could see Lindsay ahead trotting down the sidewalk in her little sandals. She was going the right way; God help her, she could possibly find her way home.

"There she is!" Patrick yelled behind Theresa. "You're dead, girl! You're fucking dead!"

She darted down a side street to ensure the Jordan brothers wouldn't go after Lindsay. She ran as fast as she could, heading into an open field with a lone tree standing in the middle of it. She knew she couldn't run much further, so she started climbing the tree. When she tried to pull herself up, her abdominal muscles were too weak to help her. She hadn't even made it up the first branch, when the Jordan brothers grabbed her ankles and pulled her down to the ground with a *THUD!*

Theresa looked up to see the two younger brothers gazing down at her, and Patrick caught up only seconds later. He was like a caged bull—so enraged and fired up, he started kicking her in the side repeatedly.

"Fucking bitch!" he growled. "You're gonna pay for what you did to me!"

Theresa weakly rolled over on to her side, and with one final kick to her kidneys, she vomited on to the grass.

"Patrick, man," one of his brothers said. "Hold up."

Theresa coughed and choked, getting to her hands and knees and continuing to heave. Through watery eyes, she saw the blurs of Patrick's brothers holding him back. She wiped at her mouth with the back of her hand, then clutched the grass below her, mustering her strength. She propelled herself up to her feet. She only made it a few steps before her dizziness and aching body forced her back to her knees.

"Hey, guys, look at that," Patrick said, pointing to a coiled rope near the tree. "It gives me an idea. Rod, go get it."

Rod, the middle Jordan brother, fetched the rope. Patrick took it from him and tied a hangman's noose into it.

"Patrick," the youngest brother said, "what are you doing?"

"I say we make her swing, just like in the Wild West days," Patrick said.

His tone made Theresa's blood chill. There was a sick glee, almost a giddiness, which seemed out of character for his usual tough persona. She knew he wasn't just trying to scare her or pull a prank. He really intended to kill her.

Theresa scrambled to her feet, adrenaline kicking in.

“Stop her!” Patrick ordered.

The two younger Jordans went after Theresa, each of them grabbing her arms.

“No!” she shrieked. “Let me go!”

She wriggled around, kicking up her feet, hoping they wouldn’t be able to support her weight. They managed to keep a hold on her though and dragged her over to Patrick. He grabbed a fistful of her black curls and yanked her head backward, making her wince. He placed the noose around her neck and tightened the knot. He threw the other end of the rope over a tree branch.

“We’re just about ready,” he said. “We just need to tie her hands behind her back.”

“You’re all gonna rot in hell!” Theresa said, tears rolling down her cheeks. “You can’t get away with this!”

“We’re doing the world a favor,” Patrick said. “Who would miss you?”

He grabbed the bandana from his youngest brother’s head and used it to tie Theresa’s hands behind her back.

“Patrick,” his youngest brother said, “we’re not really gonna—”

“Shut up, Leo,” Patrick said, “and get to the end of the rope. Both of ya’s.” He faced Theresa and sneered. “No one fucks with me.”

Theresa tried to kick Patrick, but he must’ve anticipated it, because he moved aside just in time and laughed.

“Fool me once—”

“Coward!” Theresa screamed. She furiously rang her hands trying to get loose from the bandana. “You’d better pray you have the balls to go through with this, because if I live through it, you’re done!”

“Tell you what,” Patrick said, eyeing her up and down. “I’ll untie you, if you beg for it.”

Theresa swallowed, the noose pushing against the lump in her throat. She was afraid to die, especially like this, but she couldn’t give him the satisfaction. She couldn’t admit defeat; she was too proud. She twisted her hands round and round, pushing her wrists against the bandana cloth, and suddenly, her right hand slipped free.

“Patrick,” she said, her voice almost a whisper. He leaned in, and she grabbed him by the throat. “Burn in hell!”

Patrick knocked her hand away and roared, “PULL!”

Rod and Leo pulled the end of the rope.

Theresa grabbed the front of the noose, wedging her fingers between the rope and her throat. Her hands slipped through further, burning her fingers as they slid along the rope. The rope dug into her palms, applying so much pressure, she thought the bones in her hands might crush into dust. The tips of her sneakers stretched to their furthest points, grazing the blades of grass below her and lightly brushing at solid ground. It wasn’t quite enough to support her weight, but it took the tiniest bit of pressure off, and Theresa believed that was just enough to keep her neck from snapping right then and there.

After what seemed like hours, the rope released, and Theresa tumbled to the ground like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

“What the hell are you doing?” Patrick shouted running at his brothers.

The night’s darkness now blocked out all but the vaguest of shapes. Theresa coughed and choked on the ground. Her blistered fingers felt for the noose’s knot, but when she tried to slide it up, a burning pain raged through her hands. By the other end of the rope, she could hear a scuffle—bodies hitting dirt, punches landing on bone. Theresa couldn’t think straight. She just wanted to go home. Her hands reached for the knot again, and she gritted her teeth as her fingers curled around it. She felt moisture pool between her palms and the rope—a mix of sweat, blood, and even pus from burst blisters. The screaming, agonizing pain of raw nerves being exposed to a coarse and unforgiving

material rendered her hands useless, so she removed them from the knot. She gingerly felt around for the bandana, hoping to use it as a buffer between her burned palms and the tortuous rope. Instead, someone took her by the wrists.

“No,” Theresa croaked, her voice hoarse from strangulation. “Go away.”

“Theresa, it’s okay. It’s me, Wil,” he said. “Hold still, I’m gonna remove the...the noose.”

“Wil?” Theresa said and coughed. “What’s happening?”

He slid the knot up and removed the noose from around Theresa’s neck. “David and Paul are beating the hell out of those boys.”

“David...” Theresa said under her breath. “How did you—”

She coughed, harder this time, and rubbed her throat.

“It’s okay,” Wil said. “You need to go home. You should probably see a doctor.”

Theresa nodded.

Wil helped her to her feet, and she wobbled a little. “Will you be okay going home by yourself?”

Theresa nodded again. “Not far,” she managed to say.

She pressed a hand against the sharp pain in her stomach and weakly walked away. Crossing the field seemed like an eternity, but once she was back to the street, it didn’t take long at all to get home. Maybe it was because the thought of seeing her family like this filled her with dread. What would they think? What would they do? She stumbled up the stepping-stones to her front stoop, collapsed her weight against the front door, and turned the knob, which left a bloody handprint on the metal and a throbbing in her hand. She nearly fell flat on the floor inside, but caught herself on the nearby staircase banister.

“Theresa!” John shouted from some inexplicable place. “Is that you?”

She allowed herself to fall upon the carpeted stairs, too exhausted to stand anymore. In the warm light of the front hall, she looked down at her hands and gasped, horrified. Patches of skin had peeled away, leaving rubbery loose flesh dangling around the edges of smooth and raw bright red skin. Blood stained her hands, but the source of the bleeding must’ve stopped, as the blood was dry. Her fingers held bulbous blisters, some of which had already burst and were oozing yellow pus. She felt the urge to throw up again, but at that moment, John walked up to her.

“Jesus Christ,” he said, his eyes bulging out of their sockets. “Theresa. Theresa, what happened? Who did this?”

Theresa couldn’t look at him. She couldn’t speak. She felt embarrassed and ashamed and weak. Instead, she stared at her mutilated hands, her head spinning from the excruciating pain, and she fainted against the stairs.

When Theresa awoke, she found herself in a bright hospital room. The smell of rubbing alcohol and any number of disinfectants wafted in through Theresa’s bandaged nose. Amazingly, she could still smell that sickening hospital smell even through swollen and bloodied nasal cavities. She was wearing a hospital gown—her first thought being wonderment of who put her in it. Hopefully it had just been some kindly nurse, who wouldn’t have thought much of it. She cringed at the idea of it possibly being her mom, or worse, her dad. She lifted her bandaged hands, immediately being reminded of *The Mummy*. They felt better. Not great. Not normal. But better. Her head felt a bit foggy, like she had been asleep for days. What logic she had swimming around inside told her it was probably just pain medication.

A tall man with sandy blonde hair and wearing a white coat entered the room. He smiled warmly at Theresa.

“How you feeling, honey?” he asked.

“Okay, Dr. Morrison.”

Donna's father. It was Theresa's luck that he'd be working the night shift tonight. Soon her friends would know everything, and she didn't want them to. Not yet. She couldn't begin to come to terms with it herself, let alone tell them that everything was fine and that the Jordan brothers wouldn't dare do anything like this again. Because the truth was, she didn't know. All bets were off now regarding them.

Dr. Morrison sat down on a rolling stool beside the bed. Even sitting so low he looked tall, almost overwhelmingly so to Theresa.

"Theresa, I'm gonna talk to you not as a doctor, not as an adult, but as your friend, okay? I want you to tell me who did this to you." His tone was strange, Theresa noted. It sounded as though he might have a suspect in mind, and he only needed verification.

"I can't," Theresa whispered, her voice abandoning her. "I'm no snitch."

"Are you afraid to tell me?"

She didn't answer him.

"I understand, Theresa," he said. "But what happened to you is very serious. You don't have to protect anybody—"

"I'm not," she croaked. "Can I just rest now?"

Dr. Morrison nodded. "Donna and Beth are waiting out in the waiting room with your parents. Would you like me to send them in?"

Theresa shrugged.

He stood up. "I want you to know that your injuries won't cause any permanent damage to you, Theresa. You'll heal. It'll take time, but you'll heal. But next time, you might not be so lucky."

Theresa looked up at him, goose bumps dancing up her arms. "Next time?"

"If the person or persons who did this are let off the hook, there might be a next time, Theresa," he said. "Think about it."

He gently touched her wrist—a fatherly touch—and exited the room.

A few moments later, Beth and Donna entered.

"Theresa," Beth said, "are you all right?"

"I've had better days," Theresa said.

"Who did it?" Donna asked.

"Take a guess."

Donna and Beth just stared at her, not naming names.

Theresa sighed, wearily. "The Jordans."

"No shit," Donna said. "Why?"

"Wrong place, wrong time? I don't know."

"Did you tell my dad?"

Theresa shook her head. "I can't. I'm not a rat."

Donna snorted. "I'll do it."

"Donna." Theresa squeezed her eyes shut. "Just let me handle it."

"And let something like this happen again? No way!" Donna said. "They should be sent away to juvie or an insane asylum."

Beth piped up. "Maybe they didn't mean to take it so far."

Theresa's eyes shot open. "What? You don't even know how far they took it."

"I know, but who could do something like this?"

Donna scoffed. "Assholes?"

"Donna, stop cursing so much," Beth said, playing with her necklace.

"Damn hell shit!" she snapped. "How can you defend them?"

"I'm not," Beth said. "It's just...we go to school with them. They're kids."

Theresa felt the noose tighten around her neck and closed her eyes. Tears formed beneath her

eyelids, trying to escape.

“Beth,” Donna said, “let’s leave and let Theresa rest.”

“Okay.”

Suddenly, Theresa gasped and her eyes shot open again. “Oh my god. How could I forget? Lindsay...did she make it home?”

“Lindsay?” Beth asked.

“She was with me, and I told her to run before...” Theresa clenched her jaw, trying to fight the memories away from the surface of her mind. “Get my dad. Please. Now!”

Donna and Beth rushed out of the room, practically tripping over one another.

The few minutes it took John to make it into Theresa’s hospital room felt like a lifetime.

“Hi, honey, how ya feelin’?” he asked.

“Dad,” Theresa choked out. “Did Lindsay make it home last night?”

“Oh, yeah, she did, sweetie,” he said. “Actually, Frank Henry from down the street found her wandering around by herself and brought her home. She’s fine.”

Theresa breathed a sigh of relief. “I could never forgive myself if something happened to her.”

“She’s fine, Theresa,” he assured her. “But what about you? What happened?”

“I don’t want to talk about it, Dad. Please.”

“Richard said you had severe rope burns on your fingers and some on your neck,” John said. He took a beat, rubbing his forehead, searching for words. “Did they—were you—”

“Hung?” Theresa finished, seeing his discomfort. “Sort of.”

“By who?”

“I wish people would stop asking me that,” she said. “I’m not telling.”

John sat down on the stool beside the bed, and now Theresa had a clear view of the door. Donna leaned over the door handle, peeking in. When she saw Theresa spot her, she marched into the room.

“Mr. Jenkenson,” she said. “I know who did it.”

“Donna,” Theresa snapped. “Don’t.”

“Three brothers,” she continued. “The Jordan brothers. They go to school with us.”

John furrowed his brow and looked right at Theresa. “Is this true? Kids did this?”

“Thanks a lot, Donna.”

“Answer me, Theresa,” John urged.

Theresa stared at the metal screen on the window. “Yeah, it’s true.”

“Jordan,” John said, pondering the name. “Ray and Peggy Jordan are their parents, I presume.”

Theresa turned back to him. “You know them?”

John nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I know them. You rest now, Theresa. I’ll see you in a bit.”

He left the room.

Donna walked up to Theresa’s bedside. “He looked ticked off.”

“We’re Jenkensons, Donna. ‘Ticked off’ is our middle name,” Theresa said, half-smiling.

“Sorry to rat em out for you, Theresa,” Donna said. “You’re my best friend...you and Beth. They have to pay for what they did.”

Theresa nodded. “I understand. But what if it gets worse?”

Donna’s eyebrows rose. “You think they’d try something again?”

“They tried to kill me, Donna,” Theresa said. “I mean they *really* tried. It wasn’t an empty threat. I’m not sure what they might try in the future.”

“And now they’ll know you told,” Donna realized.

Theresa nodded. “Well, maybe David and those guys put the fear of God into them.”

“Say what?”

“Yeah, I haven’t told anyone, and *you* won’t either. But David and Wil and Paul helped me.” Theresa swallowed, wincing at the soreness in her throat. “Saved me.”

Donna's jaw dropped. "No fair! Now *I'm* the only one of us who hasn't been saved by them."

Theresa chuckled. "Yeah, I live a charmed life."

Donna smiled sheepishly. "Well, you know what I mean. They're so cute."

"Such a hussy," Theresa teased.

"Oh, like you don't think so."

"They're not bad."

"Mmhhh," Donna said, obviously not believing her.

"Okay, they're pretty cute," Theresa said. "But right now, mostly I'm just happy they're pretty timely."

Donna chortled. "You can say that again."

Chapter 4

On The Mend

Moonridge – August 7, 1998

Theresa's memories of the horrific things the Jordan brothers did, left a bad taste in her mouth. Even after all these years, their memory haunted her in a way that made her feel twelve years-old again. She hadn't seen them since high school, even in the small town of Moonridge, and she usually didn't give them even a moment's thought. But thinking of that time, bringing it to the forefront of her mind, and remembering them at all suddenly made Theresa feel paranoid of their general presence still lingering so close to home—enough to make her get up from the dining table (where she had been eating her soup) and lock the front door. Just as she did, there came a loud knocking.

Theresa jumped a mile, clutching her heart and taking a few steps back. She stared at the door, feeling frightened in her own home. Just the mere memory of them shattered her confidence even now as a grown woman. She swallowed to moisten her dry throat.

"Who's there?" Theresa called.

"Tare? Open up, it's me, Michael."

Theresa sighed, chuckling at her behavior. She opened the door. "Michael. Long time, no see."

"Yeah." A cigarette dangled from his lips. He took it out and extinguished it on the apartment's exterior brick wall. He clutched the strap of a beat-up duffel bag hanging off his shoulder. "Can I come in?"

"Can I get a hug first?"

He looked bemused and gave her a half-hearted hug. "How ya' been, sis?"

"Great. I was only five numbers away from winning the Ohio state lotto last week," she joked.

Michael chuckled and set his bag down on the floor. "Well, you look good. What's it been now, a year?"

"At least."

"Yeah, well, on the road it's easy to lose track of time," he said. "I swear this town gets smaller every time I come back."

"Why did you come back?"

"Ah, well, maybe I just missed my big sister."

"Right. Seriously, why?"

"Haven't you heard?"

"About what?"

"Wow." He shook his head and went into the kitchen. "Hey, you got anything to eat?"

She followed him. "Wow what? And get out of my fridge, there's nothing in there."

"I noticed. You wanna order a pizza?"

"I just ate. And what is it that I haven't heard about?"

Michael grabbed a soda out of the fridge. "You mind?"

Theresa shook her head.

He popped the tab, taking a long drink. He wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his hoodie, before hopping up on the counter. "So you haven't heard from Mother lately?"

"Mother'? Is this a Norman Bates thing?"

Michael smirked. "I haven't snapped...yet. Though the idea of going to Mother's family

reunion might just do it.”

“What family reunion?”

“Jesus, she tracks me down up in Philly, and she doesn’t bother to call you right here in town? That woman, I swear.” He took another drink. “She’s having a reunion or get together or whatever the hell you wanna call it for, you know, all the kids and their families. Personally, I think it’s just an excuse to bitch out with her three eldest.”

“Huh,” Theresa muttered. “Can’t believe she left me out—not that I would want to go. Especially if Whitney shows up. How about you?”

“Well, Brenda called me and said she’s coming down from New York for it. I told her I’d tag along for moral support,” he said. “She’s bringing Steven.”

“Ah, the big shot lawyer.”

“No-no. The *black* big shot lawyer. Shocking, ain’t it? That means the Moonridge black population will be exactly two...at least for a day.”

“Oh. I didn’t know he was black.”

“Yeah, well, I guess Brenda figured she’d tell me, you know, because we have *so* much in common.” He rolled his eyes.

“Maybe she didn’t mean it like that,” Theresa said.

Michael snorted. “Get real.”

“Well, whatever. I’m surprised she’s coming down here just for that. I’d like to see her; I haven’t seen her in so long.”

“Well, come. What’s Mother gonna do, kick ya out?”

“I wouldn’t put it past her.”

“Well, who cares if she does? You know me and Brenda have your back. Just like old times.”

“God, the thought of going back to that house though...” Theresa twisted her face in disgust and shuddered.

“Well, at least for you it’ll only be a few hours. She told me the bunk beds are still up in our old room, if I needed a place to stay while in town,” Michael said.

“What did you say?”

“I told her my big sister was putting me up.”

“Oh, Michael—”

“It’ll only be for a few days,” he said. “A week tops.”

“I wouldn’t think you’d wanna stay any longer than you had to.”

“Yeah, well, I kind of owe money to some guys back in Philly. I need to lay low.”

“Jesus, Michael, when are you going to get your shit together?”

“When I’m old and have nothing better to do.” He smirked. “Come on, sis. Are you really gonna make me stay at Mother’s?”

Theresa sighed. “No, I guess not.”

He jumped down from the counter. “You’re the best.”

“Yeah yeah, I know.”

“So, listen, I’m gonna go out and get something to eat. You want anything?”

“No, I’m good.”

“All right, I’ll see ya later then,” he said, exiting the apartment.

Theresa threw out the soda can he left behind and began washing the dishes. As the suds billowed up in the sink, they reminded her of the week after the incident with the Jordan brothers...

* * *

The water soaked through Theresa’s bandages as she stood at the kitchen sink doing the dishes.

Her blistered fingers stung in the soapy water, as they hadn't quite healed yet. As she put the final plate into the drying rack, Whitney came up from behind and dropped three glasses into the sink.

"Not done yet," she remarked with a snicker.

"Would it kill you to be a little nicer to me?" Theresa said. "I've been through hell."

"Get off it, Theresa. You bring this crap on yourself. You've got a smart mouth, and it finally got you into trouble. Maybe you've learned a little lesson from all of this."

"Yeah, like avoid psychos." She gasped. "There's one here now!"

"You're so pathetic."

"And you're such a bitch."

Whitney sneered. "Hurry up with those dishes, Mom needs to start dinner soon."

Theresa splashed the soapy water at Whitney, which stung her blisters all the more, but it was worth it to see her big sister standing there looking like a drowned rat.

"You little twerp!" Whitney shrieked. She slapped Theresa on the arm, leaving a red mark. "You just wait 'til Mom finds out about this!"

As Whitney stomped out of the kitchen, Theresa shouted, "I'm trembling, Whitney!"

She rinsed the glasses that were left in the sink—not bothering to give them a proper scrubbing—and placed them in the drying rack. She let the water drain out and proceeded to the living room, where Michael and Brenda were playing checkers.

"King me!" Brenda said.

Michael grumbled and stacked the two red checkers belonging to Brenda.

Theresa plopped down in the easy chair, sighing. "I'm bored."

"Go find Kevin," Brenda said. "He was looking for someone to play Go Fish with him."

Michael, you can't go that way! You're cheating!"

From somewhere in the house, Joanne's disembodied voice bellowed, "Theresa! Theresa, where are you?"

"Ugh, hide me," Theresa said, just as her mother entered the room.

"What the hell were you thinking splashing your sister like that?" Joanne asked, with her hands on her hips and her foot tapping.

Theresa shrugged. "It looked like she could use some cooling off."

"I just don't know what to do with you anymore," Joanne said, throwing her hands up.

"Apparently, grounding you doesn't work. So, how about this? Tonight, you have to babysit."

"You're going out?"

"Your father and I are going to a party thrown by his boss," she said. "Michelle was going to babysit, but I think I'm going to give her money to go out instead. You can handle the three little ones, right?"

"Mom, I was planning on going to bed early. My hands are really bothering me, I don't think I'm gonna be able to pick any of them up," Theresa said.

"You should've thought about that before you acted like a brat."

Theresa got up in a huff and stormed past her mother. On her way to the stairs, the doorbell rang. She stopped short to open the door. A tall man with dark shoulder-length hair and five o'clock shadow stood before her, his beat-up pickup truck parked by the curb.

"Who the hell are you?" Theresa said, eyeing the man up and down.

He stared at Theresa a moment, his tired brown eyes looking thoughtful. "I'm, um, here to paint your house. Your mom home?"

"Unfortunately," Theresa remarked. She turned her head to look over her shoulder, and felt a sensitive strain on her neck. Her fingers reached up and touched where the noose had blistered and burned her skin. It was still tender, and reliving that moment even for a brief second brought tears to Theresa's eyes. Her gaze shifted to the floor. "I'll get her."

Joanne came up behind Theresa, just as she was turning to leave.

“What’s this?” Joanne said, staring at the man. She tugged on Theresa’s sleeve. “Get upstairs.”

“What? Why?” Theresa asked.

“What do you want?” Joanne said to the man. Her tone was so cold, Theresa assumed she was talking to her at first.

“I’m here to paint your house,” the man replied. “You called last week.”

“You’re not who I talked to,” Joanne said.

Theresa furrowed her brow at her mother’s strange behavior.

“Yeah,” the man said. “You talked to Ted, but he got sick. I’m the only one available.”

“Perfect,” Joanne muttered.

Theresa shifted her gaze between them. “Do you two know each other or something?”

“Theresa, I told you to get upstairs!” Joanne shouted.

The man squinted his eyes. “What are you yelling for?”

Joanne’s cheeks flushed. “I wasn’t speaking to *you*.”

“I know who you were speaking to.”

Theresa was shocked by the man’s tone, but she was even more shocked by the look in her mother’s eyes. Was that fear she saw? Nervousness at least? There was a level of ominousness to the man’s voice, which made Theresa nervous—not for herself, but for her mother. She needed to defuse the situation.

“It’s okay. I’ll go. Kevin wanted to play Go Fish anyway.” She took a few steps up the stairs before stopping and turning back. “Mom?”

“What is it, Theresa?” Her tone was low and even.

“Do...do you want me to get Dad? You know, to help with the, um, painting arrangements?”

Theresa was grasping at straws now, but heaven help her, she was afraid to leave her mother alone with this man.

“No,” Joanne replied quickly. “No, I’ll take care of it.”

Theresa nodded and ran upstairs to the nursery. Kevin was sitting on the floor with Lindsay, a deck of cards doled out between them. He was trying to teach her how to play Go Fish, but she seemed more interested in gnawing on the edge of the cards. Leslie sat on her bed with a toy beauty kit, running a stiff plastic comb through her doll’s hair.

“Reesa,” Kevin said. He got up and clung to her. “Reesa, Reesa, will you play Go Fish with me?”

Theresa smiled. “Sure.”

He let go of her and sprang back to his spot on the floor excitedly. He gathered up the cards in a pile and swirled them round and round in an effort to shuffle them. Theresa sat down beside Lindsay, putting her arm around her.

“You wanna play with us, Lindsay?” Theresa asked. “Hmm?”

Kevin passed out the cards. “There’s no use talking to her. She can’t hear us.”

“Yes, she can,” Theresa replied, brushing a soft curl away from her little sister’s face. “She just doesn’t like to talk, that’s all.”

“She doesn’t like to do *anything*,” Leslie piped up. “All she does is whine.”

“That’s not nice,” Theresa said. “Don’t say things like that.”

“But it’s true—”

“Shut up, Leslie!”

Leslie grabbed a plastic hairbrush from her beauty set and threw it at Theresa. It struck her shoulder, bounced off, and landed on the carpet.

“Ow!” Theresa shrieked. “That hurt, you little runt!”

Leslie upset her beauty kit on to the floor, spilling curlers, bobby pins, and toy hair styling

tools. She ran out of the room, kicking Theresa's arm along the way. Theresa got up and chased after her. "Leslie! Get back here!"

"*Ree-saaa!*" Kevin whined.

"I'll be right back, Kev!"

Theresa chased her little sister downstairs. Their mother was at the bottom, going through the day's mail. Leslie grabbed her pant leg, hiding behind her. "Save me, Mommy. Theresa wants to *hurt* me!"

Their mother's icy glare stopped Theresa in her tracks. Theresa crossed her arms, leaned against the railing, and awaited her mother's newest slams against her. She had often pondered writing one of those tell-all books, the daughters of celebrity moms sometimes wrote. *That would show her*, she thought. *Then the whole town would see how she really is.*

"What's going on now, Theresa?" her mother asked.

"Nothing."

"Leslie is five years-old. You're twelve. You're too old and too big to be picking on her," Joanne said. Her tone was calm, not entirely uncivil, and Theresa waited for the other shoe to drop. "Do you understand me, Theresa?"

She nodded, bewildered by her mother's sensible approach. "Yeah."

"Good." Her mother patted Leslie's shoulder. "It's okay, sweetie, you can go back to playing."

Leslie headed back upstairs, just as John was coming down. He pushed past Theresa, practically knocking her over.

"Jo, where's my suit jacket?" he asked urgently.

"In the closet."

"No, I looked there already."

Joanne tossed the mail on to a small table beside the front door. "Shit. I forgot to pick it up."

"Pick it up? Where is it?"

"I left it with Missy. Remember Missy? From high school?"

"Not really." John's normally patient demeanor turned to agitation. "Why did you leave it with her?"

"She's a seamstress," Joanne said. "I noticed last week when I took it out to iron it that some of the hems had torn and a couple buttons were loose. I was going to pick it up Sunday, but with everything that happened with Theresa—"

"Okay!" John snapped. "Come on, we'll pick it up now. Theresa, watch your siblings."

"It's silly for both of us to go," said Joanne. "I'll run pick it up."

"No, you'll get to talking, and you'll never get back here in time to get ready. This party is a big deal, it has to be perfect. *Everything* has to be perfect."

"Okay, I'll get my purse," Joanne said. "Theresa, don't you dare leave this house."

Once her parents left, the telephone rang. Theresa went into the kitchen and took the receiver off the wall-mounted phone. "Hello."

"Hi, is Theresa there?" the male voice said.

"You're talking to her."

"Oh." An awkward chuckle followed. "Hey. It's David."

"Hey. How'd you get my number?" Theresa asked.

"Donna gave Paul her number, and we got yours from her," David said.

"I should've known. So, why are you calling?"

"I wanted to make sure you were okay after... what happened."

Theresa leaned against the wall, playing with the phone cord. "I'm doing better. Still pissed off at them of course, but physically, I'm feeling better."

"That's good."

“By the way, how did you guys find me?”

“Right place, right time. We were on our way home and heard the commotion. Sorry we didn’t get there sooner.”

“They would’ve killed me,” Theresa said. Her throat tightened, as she fought back tears. “I guess I was lucky though. Damn lucky.”

“Damn lucky,” he repeated, practically under his breath.

Silence followed, but only briefly.

“So, when you say you were going home, you mean, *home-home*?”

He chuckled. “Yeah. Back to our parents.”

“Why?”

“I dunno. I guess it just felt like the right time, you know?”

“I guess.”

Theresa heard a car pull into the driveway. “Crap, I’d better go. I think my parents are home.”

“Wait, just a sec. I was calling to ask you if you could sneak out tonight.”

“Sneak out?”

“Yeah. We’re going to Moonridge Lake, thought we’d go night swimming. Donna and Beth are in. Are you?”

“What time?”

“Midnight?”

“I’ll try. Bye, David.”

“Bye.”

Theresa hung up the phone and went into the living room. She peeked out the window and saw the painter’s beat-up pickup truck in the driveway. Her parents weren’t home after all. She watched him carry four cans of paint, two in each hand, over by a ladder propped up against the house. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand, his shirt already soaked with sweat. Theresa returned to the kitchen, poured a tall glass of ice water, and went out to the front yard. The painter was stooping down by his ladder, two cans of paint lined up beside him.

“Hey,” Theresa said.

He glanced up at her, squinting his eyes against the sun. “Hello again.”

“Thirsty?”

He half-grinned. “Yeah.” Theresa handed him the glass of water, which he proceeded to guzzle halfway down before coming up for air. “Thank you.”

“No problem. So, what color did my mom pick out?”

The painter set down the glass on one of the cans of paint and pried off the lid of another. “Sea foam green.”

Theresa made a face. “That’s pretty ugly.”

He laughed. “Yeah. It is.”

“You couldn’t talk her out of it?”

“Have you ever tried to talk your mother out of anything?”

There was that sense of familiarity again, but Theresa shrugged it off. “Good point.”

“No offense, but once a woman’s got her mind made up, it’s better to just let it ride,” he said.

“‘Pick your battles.’ That’s what my dad always used to say. ‘Pick your battles.’”

“Yeah? Well, what if your battles pick you?”

The painter stared at her, appearing deep in thought. “That’s pretty astute for someone your age. Hell, that’s pretty astute for anyone.” He stood, picking up the paint can and a brush. “Hey, if you don’t mind my asking, what happened?” He pointed at her face with his paintbrush.

“I fell,” Theresa lied quickly.

“You fell?”

Theresa shook her head. "No, I lied. I don't know why I did that."

"It's okay. You don't have to tell me. It's none of my business." He transferred the paintbrush into the same hand as the paint can, and started up the ladder.

"Hey," Theresa said, "what's your name?"

"Vinnie."

"I'm Theresa."

"Yeah. That happens to be my mother's name."

"Oh, what a coincidence."

"Yeah." He kept climbing. "It was good talking to you, but I gotta work now. Thanks for the water."

"Any time."

Chapter 5

Secrets

Moonridge – August 13, 1983

By six o' clock, Theresa was alone in the house with only her three youngest siblings. Her parents went to their party, Whitney and Barbara went out on dates, Michelle went to a friend's house, and despite being grounded, Brenda snuck out with Michael to play in a basketball game. Theresa grew bored quickly. The little ones were managing to play nicely with each other, so she didn't have much to do.

As Theresa sat on the sofa watching some old movie on TV, she glanced out the living room window and noticed Vinnie was still working on the house. He readjusted his ladder, tipping it carefully against the wood siding. She flipped off the TV and headed out to the front yard.

"Hi again," she said.

Vinnie's ladder was at a shorter height now, so they were able to speak at a normal volume without having to shout to one another. "Hey there."

"You paint fast," she said admiring his work. "How long until you're done?"

"Couple more days, with any luck."

"Did you always want to be a painter?"

He chuckled, sweeping the paintbrush along the wood siding. "Nah."

"What did you want to be?"

"Well, when I was younger I wanted to be a boxer."

"A boxer? How come?"

"I had a lot of pent up anger, I guess."

"Over what?"

"Getting drafted for starters."

"You were in Vietnam? When?"

"In '66. Soon after high school graduation—well, had I finished high school anyway. I guess some lucky bastards went to college, others headed up to Canada."

"Why didn't you?"

"Honestly, I don't know. Fear of getting caught, maybe?"

"You could've been killed though."

"Yeah, and plenty were."

"How long were you there?"

"A little under a year. Eleven months, I guess. I was shot in the stomach near my spleen. They said if it had been the other side, I would've died."

Theresa's jaw dropped. "You got *shot*?"

"Yeah."

"Did it leave a scar?"

"Yep. You live long enough, you tend to rack up some scars, you know what I mean?" He glanced down at her. "Yeah, I guess you do."

Theresa shrugged. "Mine are nothing compared to getting shot."

Vinnie tucked his brush into the paint can hanging from ladder, unhooked the can, and climbed down. "You're right," he said. "Scars from childhood take the longest to fade." He moved his ladder

down a couple more feet. “If they ever do.”

“I’m not a child,” Theresa said. The words came out more defensive than she had intended. She actually wanted the so-called “normal” childhood every other kid seemed to have. The carefree summer days of ice cream and hopscotch and barbecues just didn’t exist in Theresa’s corner of the world—not now, not ever.

Vinnie pointed to her neck, then touched his own where Theresa’s burn marks were. “What happened?”

“So, what, now I’m obligated to tell you, because you told me your war stories?” She sat down on the grass and picked at the blades. “You wouldn’t believe me anyway.”

“Do you wanna know a secret?” He stooped down in front of her. “I can spot a bluff a mile away. So try me, and if I don’t believe you, I’ll call your bluff.”

Theresa stared at the partially painted house, studying the transition from the old peeling brown into the sickly sea foam green. “Three boys from my school tried to hang me.”

“Why would they do that?”

Theresa shrugged. “They hate me.”

“Yeah? When did it happen?”

“Last weekend.”

Vinnie nodded, a far off look in his eye. “There’s something about the dog days of summer... gets a man’s fur up.”

“I thought the dog days were supposed to be the lazy days of summer.”

He shrugged. “Some people believe that, I guess. In actuality, they’re the hottest days of summer, and the heat does something to a person, you know what I mean?”

“I guess so.”

Vinnie stood back up and turned his attention to the street. “Holy shit.” He took off running.

Theresa looked over and saw Lindsay kneeling in the street as a car was speeding up, about to round the bend. “Lindsay!” She sprang to her feet, chasing after Vinnie.

He darted into the street and swooped Lindsay up, pulling her back to the curb. The car rounded the bend and sped onward, the driver oblivious to the goings-on. Theresa grabbed Lindsay from Vinnie, holding her in her arms.

“Lindsay, what were you doing? What were you thinking?” Theresa asked. Her grip tightened, frightened to let go of your little sister. “That was dangerous, Lindsay. The street is dangerous.”

Vinnie bent forward, resting his hands on his knees and catching his breath. He glanced up at Theresa and Lindsay out of the corner of his eye. “Is she okay?”

“I think so,” Theresa said. “Just scared, I think.”

He nodded. “What about you? Your hands are bleeding.”

Theresa looked at the palm of her hand, where blood had soaked through even her most recent bandage. “Crap. I told my mom I shouldn’t be left alone to babysit tonight. I’d better go re-bandage this.”

“Are you okay?” Vinnie asked. “Do you want my help?”

“No, no, I’ll be fine. You should finish up your work. I’m sure you wanna go home soon.”

“Yeah.”

Theresa went back into the house, locking the door behind her before setting Lindsay down. “Now you stay out of trouble, okay?”

Lindsay moved her lips, making cooing sounds but not saying a word.

Theresa went into the downstairs bathroom and reapplied a fresh bandage. Just as she was taping down the gauze, a knock came at the front door. She left the bathroom and peeked out the window to see who it was. Vinnie stood there, his head down, and his hand resting on the wall as though propping himself up. The smoke from his cigarette swirled over his head. Theresa opened the

door.

“Long time, no see,” she teased.

He looked up at her, holding his cigarette down at his side. He smirked. “Yeah, I just wanted to ask you something before I took off.”

“Uh huh?”

“Why’d you come out and talk to me?”

Theresa furrowed her brow. “Was I bothering you?”

“No, I was just wondering what compelled you.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“You sure?”

“What, do you know something I don’t?”

“I was wondering if your mom had said something about me.”

“I knew it!” Theresa said. “You two *do* know each other, don’t you?”

“We did a long time ago. Back in high school.”

Theresa snorted. “Small town, huh?”

“Yeah. But she didn’t say anything?”

“Uh-uh. Why?”

“Nothing. Ancient history, that’s all.”

“Okay.” Theresa waited an awkward moment before adding, “Is that all?”

His eyes averted from hers briefly. He finally replied, “Yeah, I guess it is.”

“Okay. You’ll be back tomorrow, right? To continue painting?”

“Yeah, should be.”

“Cool.”

“So, you’ll be okay here by yourself?”

Theresa scoffed. “Why do you care?”

“I don’t. I mean...are your parents gonna be gone long?”

“Til around ten they said. I’ve babysat before, you know.”

“Oh, yeah, sure. I mean, you’ve got to be what now, twelve?”

“How’d you know that?”

“You look twelve, that’s all.”

“No, but even the way you said it was sort of weird,” Theresa said, folding her arms. “What’s your deal?”

“What do you mean?”

“This isn’t the first thing. You’ve been sounding sort of like you know me or something.”

“Nah, I just knew your mom, that’s all. Like I said...ancient history.”

“How’d you know her?”

“It doesn’t matter now. I’ll finish painting your house, and I’ll be on my way, and that’ll be that,” he said. “You’ll never see me again.”

“Small town, remember?”

“True, but we never met before now, right?”

“I dunno, you tell me.”

He sneered. “We haven’t.”

“If you say so.”

Vinnie started to leave, but stopped and said, “Listen, when I come by tomorrow, you shouldn’t come and talk to me, okay? No offense.”

“How come?”

He took a puff of his cigarette and exhaled the smoke. “I can’t afford to slack off.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Theresa couldn’t help but feel a little offended. “I wasn’t supposed to leave the

house anyway. My mom would've flipped."

Vinnie slit his eyes and asked, "Hey, listen, your folks...are they nice to you?"

Theresa leaned against the doorjamb, fidgeting. "Sure."

"I call your bluff."

"Yeah, well, it's my problem, not yours. Besides, you really shouldn't ask kids stuff like that. It's not right."

"Sorry. But they don't ever hurt you, right?"

"Why are you asking me about this? So you can call social services or something?"

"No, I'm just..." He shook his head. "Nothing."

Theresa snorted. "Yeah, you got that right. It doesn't concern you so, you know, you can go now."

"What if it did?" His tone changed into something more ominous. He looked at her sidelong. His eyes, even at this angle, showed a severity that made Theresa nervous.

"Goodbye," she said, starting to shut the door.

Vinnie dashed in front of her, holding it open. "I can't let it go. I thought I could—"

"What the hell are you doing? I'll call the police, don't think I won't!"

"Theresa, listen—"

"Let go of the door!" she yelled. "I'll tell my dad—"

"He's not your dad, Theresa, I am!"

Her eyes widened, as she let the pressure off the door. Vinnie stumbled inside, catching his balance before falling face first. He exhaled, running his fingers through his hair. He brought his cigarette up to his mouth, but instead dropped it at the last second and crushed it under his sneaker.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to blurt it out like that," he said.

Theresa shook her head, staring in a daze. "No. I call your bluff. I don't know what you're trying to do, but you need to go now."

"I'm not lying, Theresa. Your mother and I dated back in high school, I went off to Vietnam, she wrote to me for a couple months and then nothing. When I got back, she told me she married John, and they had a baby. She broke my heart, Theresa. And then a few years later, she and John were having problems, and she told me she was leaving him. And we..." He rubbed his eyes. "I didn't want you to find out like this."

Theresa didn't look at him. She couldn't. She just kept saying, "You need to go. You can't be here. You need to go."

"Theresa, I had to tell you when they weren't around, because they never would've let me have the chance to talk to you," he said. "I was trying to just let it go, do my job, and let that be that. But you don't know how long I've wanted to meet you, how many times I've contemplated coming here to see you. Joanne made me promise never to tell you, but Theresa, you have to believe me, I didn't give you up willingly. They decided what would be best, and I wasn't in the position—"

"Stop!" Theresa shrieked. "This isn't fair!"

"You're right. You're just a kid, and I shouldn't be dumping all this on you."

"No, not that. I already have a dad—a good dad. No, a *great* dad. It's my mother who's shitty, okay? She hates me," Theresa said.

"Theresa, listen to me—"

"No! I can't deal with this. You have to leave."

"Theresa, please don't tell them about this. If you do, then I may never get to see you again."

"And why should I care about that?"

"Like it or not, Theresa, I *am* your dad."

"Yeah? Well, why wouldn't my parents tell me? What did...John...have to gain from it?"

"I dunno, normalcy?"

Theresa feigned laughter. "You don't know my family."

"Look, I don't know his exact reasons. He just wanted me out of the picture. That's really all I know."

"And if you're such an upstanding guy with so much remorse about it, why didn't you fight for custody?"

Vinnie lowered his head. "I couldn't. I had nothing to offer you."

"And now?"

He clenched his jaw. "I guess I still don't." He lifted his head, his brown eyes staring into hers. "I'll see you around, kiddo."

As he turned to leave, Theresa felt a twinge of guilt. "Vinnie, wait." He stopped once more. "How do I know you're telling me the truth if I don't ask my mom about it?"

"What reason would I have to lie?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

"Well, I don't have anything to gain from this except the chance to get to know my daughter."

Theresa shrugged. "How do you expect that to happen without talking to my parents about it?"

"Good point. Okay, listen. Just give me time to finish my job so your mother can't fire me. When I'm done, I'll talk to them. Deal?"

"I guess that sounds okay."

"Good. Okay, so I'll go now."

"Okay."

Vinnie got into his pickup truck and backed out of the driveway. When he drove out of sight, Theresa shut the front door and locked it. She headed upstairs, her feet feeling like two anvils below her ankles. Her throat tightened, and she burst into tears before making it to the last step. She ran into her bedroom, slamming the door shut behind her. She flopped on to her bed, burying her face into her pillow. She let out muffled, anguished screams until she was too hoarse to scream anymore. Her sobs continued though, overcome by the lies of the past twelve years. She thought of everything John had done for her, all the times he stuck up for her to her own mother, and she wasn't even his.

Her chest heaved, unable to contain her emotions. She darted from her bedroom, into the bathroom, and knelt down in front of the toilet. She gagged and choked on her cries until she vomited. It was as if she was throwing up twelve years' worth of pain and misery. She thought it might never end, but after a moment, it did. Her breathing calmed and her stomach settled. She flushed the toilet and pulled herself up to her feet. She leaned over the sink, rinsing her mouth out with water.

A knock came at the bathroom door. "Reesa!" Kevin called. "You okay, Reesa?"

Theresa opened the door. "I'm okay, Kev. I just have a tummy ache."

"Would Go Fish make you feel better?"

Theresa forced a smile. "Sure."

Theresa put the kids to bed at nine and rested on the couch watching TV until John and Joanne arrived home at ten.

"Hey, hun," John said, poking his head into the living room. "Everything go okay?"

Theresa nodded. "Kind of burned out on Go Fish though."

He smiled. "Everyone get home okay?"

"Yeah. Well, Michelle called, she said she was sleeping over at Jan's."

"Alrighty. Well, your mom and I are going to turn in. Don't stay up too late, okay?"

"You got it."

"And Theresa." He crept into the living room and lowered his voice. "I talked to your mom a little bit about you being grounded. She still doesn't want you leaving the house, but if you want, Beth and Donna can sleep over one more night before school starts, okay?"

Theresa turned to him. "You did that for me?"

"Well, you know, summer's almost over and you're only a kid once. I know what a tough week it's been for you, and with what happened, you deserve to have a good day." He kissed her forehead. "I love you, Theresa, and remember, don't stay up too late."

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"Why do I have black hair?"

He chuckled. "Well, as far as random questions go, that's certainly a doozy."

"Sorry, never mind. It's late."

"Just chalk it up to genetics, sweetie. Like how Whitney has green eyes, when neither your mom nor I have them. It's just one of those things."

"Yeah."

"Goodnight, Theresa."

"Night...Dad."

Just before midnight, Theresa snuck out of the house and headed to Moonridge Lake. Even in the middle of the night, the summer heat hung in the air like a smothering blanket, and by the time Theresa reached the lake, sweat beaded on her forehead. She tugged at the sleeve of her T-shirt, blotting her forehead. She sat down on one of the swings near the lake. She swayed lazily while waiting for her friends to show up.

Soon, she heard footsteps coming up behind her, and she looked over her shoulder to see David and his friends. He grabbed the parallel chains on which the swing hung, pulled Theresa backwards, and then released her. Her hands ached as they gripped the chains, but she welcomed the breeze that caressed her face.

"Donna and Beth not here yet?" David asked, pushing Theresa gently on the swing.

"Guess not. Haven't seen them," she said.

"Here they come," Wil said.

Theresa dragged her sneakers through the dirt, slowing down the swing. She hopped off to greet her friends.

Donna had on a hot pink bikini top and white shorts. When she dressed like that, she could've passed for fourteen or fifteen years-old. Where Donna had developed curves in all the right places, Theresa seemed to have developed curves in all the wrong ones, and Beth's slender body hadn't begun to develop any curves at all. She dressed modestly in a pair of green shorts and orange tank top.

"Thought you guys got caught," Theresa said.

"Donna took forever picking out a bathing suit," Beth said.

Donna grinned. "What can I say? I've outgrown most of my tops."

Theresa snorted. "Yeah. Me too."

"Come on, what are we waiting for?" Donna said, heading toward the lake. "Last one in is a rotten egg!"

The kids kicked off their shoes and dove into the water, all except for Theresa. She walked to the edge, sat down on the damp grass, and dipped her feet into the water.

"Come on, Tare!" Donna said. "The water's nice and cool."

Theresa held up her hands. "Can't get my bandages wet."

"Oh, Theresa," Beth said, "I didn't think of that. I'll sit out with you."

"No, that's okay. You don't have to."

"Yeah, Beth," said Donna. "David will do it."

Theresa shot her a look, but Donna just gave her a devilish smile.

"Yeah, sure, what the hell," David said, swimming to the bank. He pulled himself up,

inadvertently splashing water on to Theresa before settling down beside her.

“Thanks,” she said. “But you really don’t have to do this.”

He shrugged. “The lake will still be here tomorrow.”

“Yeah, and unfortunately I’ll still be grounded.”

“Yeah, that sucks. At least you could get away tonight.”

Theresa nodded.

“So, your hands still hurt?” he asked.

“Yeah, not as bad as they did. The skin keeps re-opening and bleeding; I’m probably not being careful enough. I just hope they heal eventually, you know? I wanna learn to play the guitar someday.”

“That’d be pretty rad. You wanna be a musician?”

“Yeah, kind of. Like Joan Jett, I guess—sing and play guitar. I wanna start a band someday.”

“Cool.”

“What about you? What do you wanna be when you grow up?”

“I dunno. An architect, maybe? I like to build stuff.”

“Like what?”

He shrugged. “Nothing major. A few years back I built a birdhouse for my mom. And I’ve built shelves and stuff.”

“Well, that’s sounds pretty impressive to me.”

He lowered his head, half-smiling. “Thanks.”

Theresa could tell he was embarrassed. She nudged his shoulder with her own. “Hey, you wanna see what my hands look like?”

“Are they gross?”

“Kind of.”

“Then, yeah.”

Theresa chuckled and unwrapped the bandage off her left hand. She revealed bright red patches of raw skin where the rope had rubbed and burned away the top layer. Loose, rubbery skin circled the edges of these patches, where the old, dead skin continued to peel away. Her fingers had started to heal—new skin having grown back where the blisters had been. David’s jaw dropped as he gently took her fingers between his and pulled her hand towards him for a better look.

“Geez, man, that’s gnarly looking,” he said.

“Yeah.” She shrugged, unfazed. “It was even worse a week ago.”

David looked at her. His typical good-humored expression turned serious, almost grim. “I’m sorry we didn’t get to you sooner.”

Theresa pulled her hand away and began rewrapping the bandage around it. “Yeah, well, the important thing is you showed up at all, right?”

“Yeah.”

The memory of hanging from the noose flashed through her mind again, and she squeezed her eyes shut to force it away.

“Theresa?”

She stood up and walked over by the swings. She leaned against one of the angled metal posts, wiping away a tear.

David joined her. “Hey, you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she snapped.

Theresa stared out across the grassy knoll to the Moonridge Motel across the street, whose blinking neon sign had both M’s burnt out. Theresa tried to remember back to a time when the neon sign ever had all of its letters aglow, and for the life of her, she couldn’t. In some ways, it represented everything she hated about this small town: the shoddiness, the way the citizens ignored problems, the lack of care and concern for even the simplest of things. The town had been forgotten and neglected

somewhere along the line. And now these children—Theresa’s generation—would be left to decide whether to continue on turning a blind eye as their parents had done, clean up the mess, or get the hell out while the getting’s good.

While Theresa pondered this, overwhelmed by everything going on, she saw her mother’s station wagon pull into the parking lot of the motel. Even at this distance, the bright orange paint was unmistakable. Theresa walked across the grassy knoll to get a better look. She peered out from behind a weeping willow tree, its drooping branches creating the perfect cover. She watched her mother meet up with an older bald man, taking his hands in hers.

“Whatcha looking at?” David asked from behind her.

Theresa gasped and whacked his arm. “You scared the hell out of me.”

“Sorry.”

She faced the motel again. “My mother’s over there...with some man.”

Joanne kissed the man on the cheek, and then the two of them went into a motel room together. Theresa shook her head and headed towards the street.

“Whoa, Tare, what are you doing?” David said, following.

“I’m stopping whatever it is she’s doing,” Theresa said.

David grabbed her arm and whirled her around to face him. “Are you crazy? You’re gonna get grounded for the rest of your life.”

“I don’t care! My dad doesn’t deserve this.” Her dad. But he wasn’t—he wasn’t her dad. Her mother had already cheated on him once, with Theresa’s *real* dad. Who knew how long she had been cheating on him and with how many men? There’s a lips curled. “I *hate* her.”

David furrowed his brow and nodded. “I get that.”

“No, you don’t,” Theresa said. Her voice cracked, as hot tears brimmed her eyes. “She cheated on my dad before, twelve years ago with a man named Vinnie, and he...” Her mouth felt like the Sahara Desert. The words got caught in the back of her throat, unable to cross the dry terrain.

“He what?”

Theresa’s voice softened into a whisper, as though she could somehow erase the truth in what she was about to say. “He’s my real dad.”

“What?”

“They’ve lied to me my entire life. I don’t know who I am anymore.”

“Bull,” he said. “It doesn’t change anything. It doesn’t change who you are. Your parents are just...parents, you know? They don’t determine what makes you...*you*.”

“You think?”

“I *know*. Trust me on this.”

Theresa smiled. “Thanks. I actually feel a little better.”

“Don’t sound so surprised. I’m not as dumb as I look.”

Theresa laughed. “The jury’s still out on that.”

“Ooh, ouch, that stung, Tare,” he said, clutching his chest dramatically. “Like a dagger to through my heart!”

Theresa laughed harder. “Come on, you weirdo. I feel like swimming.”

“But what about your bandages?”

“Meh, I’ll deal.”

Theresa ran back towards the lake with David running at her side. They dove into the water together, their legs tucked under to form cannon balls. They splashed their friends, had underwater breath holding contests, and laughed. Theresa didn’t give a second thought to her injured hands or the drama awaiting her at home.

Chapter 6

A Time To Break Down

Moonridge – August 14, 1983

At breakfast the next morning Theresa asked, “So, how was the party?”

John cut up his fried eggs, scraping his fork and knife together. “It was fine.”

“What did you guys do there?”

“Just grownup stuff,” replied John. “Talk, ate...nothing special.”

“What Dad means, Theresa,” said Whitney, “is that he schmoozed all evening. Right, Dad?”

“I see you’ve been talking to your mother,” John said, giving Joanne a look.

“You gonna get a raise, Dad?” asked Brenda.

John shrugged.

“Your father is up for a promotion,” Joanne said. “If everything goes as planned, he could become the new supervisor at the Moonridge division of P&Z Paper Inc.”

John took a bite of his bacon. “It’s a long shot at best.”

“Nonsense. Your father is a shoe-in, kids.”

“So, you *will* get a raise?” asked Brenda. “Cause my birthday’s a couple months away, and I saw the coolest bike—”

“Get real, Brenda,” Whitney said. “Dad’s not gonna spend all that hard-earned cash on *you*.”

“Is too!”

“Is not!”

“Enough!” John shouted. “The job isn’t mine yet, so let’s change the subject, shall we?”

“Yes, let’s,” Joanne said. “Theresa, did you go out yesterday evening?”

“No. I’m grounded, remember?” she said.

“We were gone until ten—you didn’t step one foot outside? Not even say, in the front yard?”

John furrowed his brow. “What’s this about, Jo?”

“Ask Theresa.”

“Okay.” Theresa realized they knew nothing about her late night swimming, so she decided not to press her luck. “I did go outside for a second to bring the painter a glass of water. That’s all.”

“Bonnie from next door said you were out there for some time,” Joanne said.

Theresa rolled her eyes. “Yeah, well, Bonnie’s a busybody and should get a life of her own.”

“What were you doing talking to him?” John asked.

“Nothing. We shot the breeze a little, I was bored.”

“Bored? You were supposed to be watching your siblings.”

“I was only out there for a few minutes. They were fine. What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal,” John said, “is that you’re grounded, and you were home without our supervision. You don’t know that guy. You don’t know if he’s dangerous.”

“And you do?”

“What?” John looked anxious. His fork bobbed up and down as his hand trembled. He finally just set it down on his plate and folded his hands together. “What would make you ask that?”

Theresa felt as though every secret she harbored could be read in her eyes, so she stared down at her own plate. “You just seem to be assuming a lot, that’s all. Look, I’m sorry I went outside. We didn’t talk long, he told me a little bit about Vietnam—he was in the war—and I think that upset him,

so he told me not to bug him again. Case closed.”

“That’s all?”

“Yes,” Theresa hissed.

“Good, let that be the end of it,” John said. “Let the man do his job, and don’t speak to him again.”

She nodded.

“We just worry about you, Theresa.” John became stoic, more like his normal demeanor.

Theresa realized he must’ve been relieved to know his and Joanne’s secret hadn’t been discovered, but she *did* know, and the truth was eating away at her.

“May I be excused?” she asked.

“No, sit here and finish your breakfast,” John said.

From the kitchen, the telephone rang.

“I’ll get it,” Theresa said, standing.

“Sit back down, *I’ll* get it,” John said, heading into the kitchen.

Theresa felt her mother’s eyes on her so she turned. “What?”

“Are you keeping something from me, Theresa?”

“Plenty of things, which is why I don’t keep a diary.”

“I’m so sick of your mouth,” Joanne said.

“Yeah, well, likewise.”

Joanne reached across the table and struck Theresa’s cheek. The angle didn’t allow for much pressure—just an annoying tap really—but it still pissed her off. She glared at her mother.

“You should really start being nicer to me,” she said in a low tone.

“And why is that?”

A clatter came from the side of the house, and Theresa saw Vinnie walk passed the dining room window.

Joanne checked the wall clock. “He’s here awful early.”

“God, Theresa,” Whitney said, “why are you staring at him? Do you like him or something?”

Her eyes widened. “Uh, no, trust me, I don’t.”

“Aww, I think Theresa has a crush—”

Joanne slammed her hand down on the table. “Stop it, Whitney, that’s sick!”

Theresa had never seen her mother reprimand her oldest sister before. It filled her with a sick sense of satisfaction.

Whitney’s eyes bulged, her mouth agape. “Geez, I was just messing with her. What’s the big deal? I mean, look at him. The guy’s gotta be, like, forty.”

Joanne had gone back to eating her breakfast and seemed to reply almost absentmindedly, “Thirty-five.”

“Wow, Mom, do you know *everyone* in town?” asked Whitney.

“Just about,” muttered Theresa.

Joanne cleared her throat, patting her napkin on her lips as she finished her bite. “No, I was just making a guess about his age. I don’t know anything about him.”

Theresa stifled the urge to laugh. She had never realized what a terrible liar her mother was.

“Well!” John said, coming back to the table with a smile on his face. “That happened to be Ms. Drew, personal assistant to one Mr. Zuckerman.”

“Your boss,” Joanne said. “Well, what did she say?”

“She said Mr. Zuckerman was so impressed by me and my lovely wife that he decided to give me the promotion.”

The kids cheered for their father, all except Theresa who just forced a smile.

“All right, Dad!” Brenda said.

“Congratulations,” said Michelle.

“You deserve it, Daddy” said Barbara.

Joanne got up, put her arm around John, and kissed the side of his head. “I knew you could do it. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks, honey,” he said, and kissed her hand. “Oh, so, I hope you don’t mind, but I invited my boss over for dinner tonight as a thank you.”

“Of course not,” Joanne said returning to her seat. “I’ll prepare something nice.”

“I’ll help you,” offered Brenda.

“Stop sucking up, Brenda,” Whitney said. “You’re not getting a bike.”

“Whitney,” John said, “that’s not up to you.”

“You mean she *is*? On my birthday, I didn’t get the earrings I asked for!”

“Well, honey, what can I say? I guess we just love Brenda more than you,” John teased, giving her a wink.

Whitney grimaced. “Ha-ha. I’m always the one who has to do without. I hate being the oldest.”

Theresa scoffed.

“What was that, Theresa?” Whitney snapped. “Did you say something?”

“Nope.”

“*Nope*,” Whitney mocked. “Oh, of course you didn’t, you’re too busy staring at your *boyfriend*.”

“What’s that now?” John asked.

Theresa rolled her eyes. “She’s referring to Vinnie—er, I mean, the painter.”

“Vinnie?” Whitney said, cracking up. “Oh my god, you know his *name*? You little tramp!”

“Whitney, knock it off,” John scolded.

“Hey, why am I the one getting in trouble? Theresa’s the one flirting with forty year-old men and leaving the house when she’s grounded.”

“I wasn’t flirting, you sicko!” Theresa shouted.

“Calm down, Theresa. Don’t get your panties in a twist.”

Theresa folded her arms, slumping down in her chair. She could feel her cheeks flush.

“Theresa,” John said, “would you like to go up to your room?”

She nodded.

“All right. Clear your plate and go on up.”

Theresa didn’t have to be told twice. She carried her plate to the kitchen sink and then ran up to her bedroom. She turned on the radio to Irene Cara singing “Flashdance... What a Feeling”. Theresa sat down on her bed, sighing. Her mind raced with thoughts of Vinnie, seeing her mother at the motel the night before, and John’s new promotion. How could she talk to him about any of this, when he was having such a good day? She just wanted to ignore it. She just wanted it all to go away. She lay back on her pillow and forced herself to go back to sleep.

Theresa awoke and glanced at the alarm clock on her bedside table. It was 5:30; she had slept the day away. The house was quiet, and Michael and Brenda weren’t in their shared bedroom. Something felt wrong—not that it ever really felt right. Theresa got out of bed and went downstairs. She heard voices from the living room and peeked in. John and Joanne were sitting on the sofa, and a man sat in the easy chair with his back to Theresa.

“Theresa,” John said. “This is my boss, Mr. Zuckerman.”

The man turned his head to look at Theresa, and her heart sank. She recognized him as the same man from the motel—the bald man her mother had met up with. Theresa’s stomach churned, her head growing dizzy.

“Jesus H. Christ! What happened to you?” Mr. Zuckerman asked.

"I fell," Theresa said. That same lie slipped through her lips again, and she didn't know why. Maybe she preferred people to think she was simply clumsy rather than a target for something so heinous.

"What, didja fall down a well? Did they have to fetch Lassie?" Mr. Zuckerman busted into hysterics, his round belly sloshing up and down as his face turned beet red.

Theresa didn't laugh. She didn't even plant a fake smile on her face. Instead, she turned to John. "Where is everyone?"

"Your older sisters went out, Michael and Brenda are in the backyard, and the three little ones are in their room," John said. "Dinner should be ready soon, right, Jo?"

"Yeah, any minute."

Mr. Zuckerman wheezed as his laughter ended. He sipped from his glass of scotch. "You know, Johnny, this little girl here hardly looks a thing like you."

Theresa held her breath. John and Joanne sat perfectly still, like someone had hit the pause button on the world. The only sound was the vague tinkling of ice in Mr. Zuckerman's glass.

"I bet the lasagna is just about done," Joanne said. "Excuse me."

Joanne brushed past Theresa.

"You adopt two kids?" Mr. Zuckerman asked.

"No, no, just my son," John said. "Theresa, why don't you help your mother?"

There came a knock at the front door.

"On second thought, get the door, would ya?" John said, half-smiling at her.

Theresa went to the front door and opened it. Vinnie stood before her, paint-splattered and sweat soaked. He looked at her through tired eyes, and Theresa realized in that moment that his were the same as hers. John's eyes were brown too, but theirs were different. They were narrower, more almond-shaped, and showed the busted road they had traveled. How could she have been so blind to never notice her lack of resemblance to John? Perhaps it was a child's trusting nature; after all, a parent's words are gospel to a child—at least until a certain age.

"I'm done for the day," said Vinnie, wiping his brow. "Would you tell your mother that I'll be back in the morning, and I'll be done tomorrow?"

"You'll finish tomorrow?"

He nodded. "Only got the back of the house left."

"That means—"

"Tare, who's at the door?" John hollered.

My dad, Theresa thought. Instead she hollered back, "Just the painter! He's leaving now!"

Vinnie flicked his eyebrows up, as though surprised she told the truth. Theresa was so sick of lies...she was sick of everything.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Vinnie said, grasping her shoulder.

John cleared his throat behind Theresa, and Vinnie released her. "What's going on?"

"He was just leaving," Theresa said.

Vinnie nodded. "Yeah, um, Mr. Jenkenson, I'm done for the day."

"Great," John said, placing his hands on Theresa's shoulders. "Next time, maybe keep your hands off my kid."

Vinnie's eye flinched, like the comment physically struck him. He clenched his jaw and gave a quick nod. "Sure."

He turned to leave, while John rubbed Theresa's shoulders and said, "Come on, sweetie. Let's go have some dinner."

A car pulled up on the street behind Vinnie's truck, and Whitney, Barbara, and Michelle emerged from it. The girls walked past Vinnie, while Whitney laughed at him.

"God, that guys stinks," she said, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Theresa twisted her head around to look up at John. “Hey, Dad—”

“Yeah?” Vinnie said.

The pause button on the world reactivated. Theresa stood there, frozen and wide-eyed. The three eldest Jenkensen daughters stared, their jaws dropped. Vinnie rubbed his forehead, realizing his mistake. John’s grip on Theresa’s shoulders tightened.

“How long have you known, Theresa?” John said, his voice low and calm.

She shuddered under his grip. “Since yesterday. I’m sorry I didn’t say anything.”

“Wait a minute!” Whitney said. “You mean this little freak isn’t one of us after all?”

Barbara elbowed her in the ribs. “Shush.”

Theresa started crying. Not just from what Whitney said, but the whole situation. She wanted to sink into a hole somewhere and never come out again.

John stormed outside, right up to Vinnie. “We had an arrangement, but you just couldn’t keep your fucking mouth shut, could you?”

“It was *your* arrangement, not mine!” Vinnie shouted.

Michelle went up to Theresa and put her arm around her. “Theresa, don’t listen to Whitney. No matter what this means, you’re still our sister.”

Theresa cried harder, touched by her sister’s kindness.

John continued, “You hurt her for your own selfish reasons. And here’s the deal, Vincent. You’re gonna get in your truck, drive away, and never show your face around here again. You haven’t raised her all these years, you haven’t taken care of her—”

“Yeah, like you’ve done such a great job. How did you let *that* happen to her, huh?” Vinnie asked, pointing at her. “You got so many damn kids that mine gets lost in the shuffle there, John boy?”

John shoved him. “I’m gonna call the cops if you don’t get the hell out of here! You were a loser back then, and you’re still a loser now! You just couldn’t just let her be happy.”

“Happy? Take a closer look, John! She’s not *happy*! I’ve known her one fucking day, and I can see that!”

John turned around, his brow heavy and his jaw clenched. He ushered Whitney and Barbara towards the house. “Get inside. All of you, we’re going inside.” He closed the door behind his children and locked it.

“Dinner’s ready!” Joanne announced. She stopped dead in her tracks upon seeing John and her daughters. “Did something happen?”

“Theresa,” John said softly, “why don’t you skip dinner for now and rest in your room?”

Michelle rubbed her back. “I’ll bring you up a plate, okay?”

Theresa nodded.

Joanne placed her hands on hips. “Is someone going to tell me what’s wrong?”

John sighed. “She knows.”

She turned her gaze to Theresa. “How?”

“It’s not important right now,” said John. “Let’s have dinner, let’s finish the evening, and we’ll handle this after my boss leaves.”

Theresa went up to her room. Michelle was true to her word and a few minutes later, brought her a plate of lasagna and a glass of milk.

“Thanks,” Theresa said. She was so nervous about facing John and Joanne after dinner she could hardly speak. She didn’t particularly feel like eating either.

“I can’t imagine how you feel,” Michelle said. “But you know, nothing has to change. Dad loves you no matter what.”

Theresa nodded.

“It’ll get better.” A brief silence followed, before Michelle added, “Well, I guess I should go have dinner.”

“Michelle? Why do you always go along with Whitney? She’s so mean.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s to avoid her getting mad at me. Or maybe because she’s my big sister, and I’ll always sort of look up to her. Or maybe it’s because she always seems to know what she’s doing. Right or wrong, she just does whatever she wants. It’s kind of nice to just know what to do...you know?”

“Not really.”

“Of course not. You’re not a follower, Theresa. You’re a leader like she is—alpha females.” She smiled. “That’s really why you two don’t get along. She can’t budge you. And Brenda and Michael look to you, like Barbara and I look to her. It’s just the roles we fell into. That’s how I know that you’re going to get through this, and everything will be fine. Because you make it through everything. Like running away. Like what happened with those boys. Who else among us could survive that?”

Theresa had never heard such nice things from any of her siblings. She got up and hugged Michelle, silently crying on her shoulder.

“You’ll be okay,” Michelle said. “You should eat your dinner though before it gets cold.”

Theresa leaned back and nodded.

Michelle left the room.

Theresa nibbled at her food, trying to choke it down past the steady lump in her throat. The more time that ticked away, the more nervous Theresa became. She didn’t know what her parents would say to her, and she really didn’t want to be part of such an uncomfortable situation. She just wanted a break from everything. Before she knew it, she found herself on her knees, fishing her backpack out from under her bed. The green nylon still had dirt smudges on it from when she ran away. She unzipped the bag and started shoving clothes inside. She smiled in her frenzy. The idea of just taking off and avoiding any further emotional stress made her almost giddy.

“Theresa.” Her head snapped to the bedroom door so fast, she thought she might’ve given herself whiplash. John stood in the half-open doorway. “What are you doing?”

“N-nothing.” She tried to slide the backpack under the bed, but she knew he already had seen it.

“You were going to run away again?”

Theresa closed her eyes. “I can’t deal with all of this.”

John entered the room and sat down on the foot of her bed. He patted the empty spot beside him. “Come on.”

Theresa slid up onto the bed next to him, her hands clasped between her knees and her head bowed.

“Why didn’t you tell us what he told you?”

“He was afraid,” Theresa said. “He didn’t want to get fired.”

“Well, he shouldn’t have guilted you into keeping quiet.”

“It wasn’t just that. *I* was afraid,” she said. “I was afraid of hurting you—of things changing.”

John put his arm around her. “Theresa, you will always be my daughter. Do you understand that? Just as Michael will always be my son. Your mother and I raised you since you were born. The circumstances of where you came from were all but forgotten by the time I held you for the first time. Grownups make mistakes, probably even more than children do. But what your mother did is in the past. I’ve forgiven her for having an affair.”

Theresa’s face crumbled. Through tears she said, “It’s not just the past.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, but I can’t keep secrets anymore.”

“Theresa...”

“I snuck out last night, Dad, to go swimming with Beth and Donna. I saw Mom at a motel across the street.”

“You what?”

“She wasn’t alone, Dad. She was with your boss.”

“Theresa, that’s not funny.” He removed his arm from around her shoulders. “Why are you doing this?”

“I’m not making it up! I wish I was,” Theresa said.

“Are you trying to punish your mother?”

“No! It’s the truth!”

John left the room.

“Dad!” Theresa followed him downstairs. “Dad!”

He ignored her. He slammed open the swinging door to the kitchen. Joanne stood at the sink washing dishes with Michelle, and they both whirled around when he and Theresa entered.

“John?” Joanne said, a nervousness in her tone. “What did Theresa do now?”

John glared at her. “Are you screwing my boss?”

Michelle’s jaw dropped.

Joanne blinked several times, looking back and forth between Theresa and John. “What? Why would you think that?”

“Are you?”

“No!” Her voice cracked. “No, of course not. Is this about how he was at the party last night? He had a little too much to drink and got a little flirty. It was harmless.”

“No, not that,” John said. “I’m going to ask you one more time. Have you *ever* slept with him?”

“John, this is—”

“Yes or no!”

“No!”

John turned around, shot Theresa a cold look, and exited the kitchen. Joanne followed, and Theresa and Michelle followed her.

“John!” Joanne said. “Please tell me what’s going on.”

“Ask Theresa!” he shouted.

He left the house, slamming the front door behind him.

Joanne grabbed Theresa’s arm, digging her fingernails into her skin. “What did you do? What did you say to him?”

“Let go of me!” Theresa screamed.

“Mom,” Michelle said, “you’re hurting her.”

“Tell me what you said!” Joanne grabbed Theresa’s other arm and shook her. “Tell me!”

Theresa tried to pull away. “Let *GO!*”

“You little shit, you’re gonna tell me what you said to him!”

“I only told him the truth!”

Lindsay, who was sitting at the dining room table, suddenly knocked a plate on the floor, shattering it. “Uh-oh.”

“*Goddammit!*” Joanne screamed. She released Theresa and marched up to Lindsay. “Look what you did!” She grabbed Lindsay by the wrist, pulled her down off the chair, and started spanking her repeatedly. Lindsay cried out, shrieking and sobbing.

“Mom, stop!” Theresa shouted.

Joanne ignored her.

Theresa charged at her, ramming her shoulder into her mother’s side, knocking her away from Lindsay. Joanne crashed into the side of the dining table and fell to the floor. Theresa picked up Lindsay, backing away from the broken glass.

Michelle rushed to her mother’s aid. “Here, Mom, let me help you up.”

When Joanne was back on her feet, she kicked some of the broken glass in Theresa’s direction. Theresa crept backwards away from her mother, seeing a look in her eyes that terrified her. They were

like that of a mad bull, burning with so much rage, so much fire. With John gone, she had little to lose, and Theresa knew it.

“Mom,” Michelle said, “why don’t you go upstairs and rest? I’ll bring you up a nice tall glass of iced tea.”

“Michelle,” Joanne said, “leave us alone.”

Michelle glanced at Theresa sympathetically but obeyed her mother and hurried toward the stairs.

“Mom,” Theresa said, tears brimming her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? John left! He might not be coming back! And it’s all because of *you!*”

“If you care so much about him, why did you cheat on him?”

“You really are stupid, aren’t you?” Joanne spat. “He had no chance at that promotion. He’s a spineless, nameless jellyfish in the company. He’s not ruthless enough to step up and impress his boss. Someone had to step in.”

“That’s why he got the...” Theresa fell back against the wall. It had never occurred to her. John worked hard; he did deserve that raise. But he hadn’t earned it outright, and Theresa felt bad for him—*really* bad. Why couldn’t she have kept her mouth shut? Was she really trying to help John? Or was she just trying to hurt her mother?

Joanne planted her hands on the wall, on either side of Theresa, trapping her. “I’m tired. I am so goddamn tired.”

“I’m sure Dad will be back soon,” Theresa said. “Maybe you should go up to bed.”

Joanne’s lips curled inward, pressed so firmly together that Theresa thought she might bite right through them. Her hands slid along the wall towards Theresa’s head, and when she finally lifted them, they were tense and trembling, twisted like those of an old crone. She grasped tufts of Theresa’s hair just above the ears, curls tangling in her talon-like fingers. She applied pressure to her skull, giving Theresa an immediate headache.

“Mom!” she whined, releasing Lindsay to grab hold of her mother’s wrists. Lindsay slid down Theresa’s body and legs, until her rear end landed on the floor.

“You’ve been nothing but a burden to me since the day you were born,” Joanne said through gritted teeth. “Maybe I should just bash your skull in right here. Nice and quick, no witnesses except for a little retarded girl whose testimony would be shit.”

Theresa dug what little fingernails she had left into her mother’s wrists. “Mom, let go! Let go! *Please!*”

Lindsay clung to Theresa’s legs, making her feel all the more trapped. If she tried to kick her mother away, she might inadvertently injure her baby sister in the process. She couldn’t—or wouldn’t—take that chance.

Joanne didn’t let up. If anything, the pressure increased. Through angry tears she said, “You’re my punishment for committing adultery. You’ve made my life a living hell, you evil...” She thumped Theresa’s head against the wall. “...little...” *THUMP!* “...demon child!” She pulled Theresa’s head forward ready to slam it back one final time when—

“Jo!” John shouted. He cupped the back of Theresa’s head in one hand, and tried to pry Joanne off of her with the other. “Jo, look at me!”

“John,” Joanne said, and finally let go of Theresa. She threw her arms around him, weeping and clinging to him for dear life. “You came back. Oh, John, I’m so sorry for what I’ve done. But John...I can’t do this anymore.”

John half-dragged, half-escorted Joanne away from Theresa. “It’s okay. Let’s just talk about this.”

“John, this is all her doing,” she said. “I haven’t been myself since she was born. She makes me so unhappy, and I can’t live like this anymore.”

Theresa held the back of her head and stared at her mother in shock. “*You can’t?*”

“Theresa,” John said, shaking his head at her. “Go upstairs, while I talk to your mother.”

“But she—”

“Now!”

Theresa could hardly see straight. Her head spun and throbbed. Before she knew it, she was bending over the downstairs toilet, throwing up the evening’s dinner. No one came to check on her. No one held her hair back. No one cared. And now she was sure she couldn’t live like this anymore.

Chapter 7

A New Path

Moonridge – August 15, 1983

Joanne spent most of the following day in bed. After lunch, John gathered all of the kids into the living room. He stood by the TV, while the nine children spread out around the room wherever space was available. Theresa sat on the arm of the couch next to Michael.

“Is Mom okay?” Barbara asked. “I thought she would’ve been up by now.”

“She’s going to be fine,” John said, “But she’s going through a tough time, and I need everyone here to start being on their best behavior. It’s not easy raising nine children, especially ones who argue, disobey, and disrespect each other, as well as me and your mother.”

“What’s wrong with her exactly?” Whitney asked.

“She had some sort of break down last night,” he said. “She’s just very stressed out and needs some peace and quiet and relaxation.”

“I don’t see why you’re talking to us about it,” Whitney said. “Theresa’s the problem. She always has been. She drove Mom to this, and she finally snapped.”

“Mom’s crazy?” Brenda asked.

“Geez, Brenda,” Barbara said. “Do you have to be so insensitive?”

“Cool it, all of you” John said. “No, she’s not crazy, Brenda. She’s just overwhelmed. She reached her limit.”

Theresa snorted and muttered, “Of men?”

“What was that, Theresa?”

“Nothing,” she said. “I just said, ‘poor mom’.”

“No, you didn’t,” Whitney said. “You’re such a liar!”

“Okay!” John rubbed the back of his neck. “Apparently, you kids have no desire to try to pull together as a family. I guess I was foolish enough to think you guys might actually give a damn about someone other than yourselves. So, here’s the deal. If you kids can’t shape up, behave, and stay calm and not argue, then we’ll have to take more drastic measures.”

“What do you mean by that, Dad?” Michelle asked.

“Your mother suggested to me that we send all you kids away to stay with relatives... indefinitely.”

Theresa looked around the room at the sullen and thoughtful faces of her siblings. She remained indifferent.

“Mom didn’t say that,” Whitney said, grimacing. “There’s only a couple of us who stress her out. Send them away, sure. But all of us?”

“Picking and choosing wouldn’t be fair.”

“None of this is fair!” Whitney said. “It’s not fair that some *Scarlet Letter* baby drove my mother insane!”

Brenda raised an eyebrow. “What are you talking about?”

“She’s talking about Theresa, you moron,” Barbara said.

“I’m not the only one thinking it,” Whitney said. “I’m just the only one with the guts to say it. When Theresa ran away, the only one who cared was you, Dad. You should’ve just let her stay away, and none of this would’ve happened. Or how about we just get the Jordans to finish the job?”

“Whitney!” Michelle said, stunned.

“What, Michelle? You have something to say?”

Michelle sat back and shook her head.

Theresa got up. “Maybe she doesn’t, but I do.”

“Theresa, sit down,” John said.

“Did you hear what she *said*?”

“Sit. Down.”

Theresa returned to her seat, crossing her arms.

“This is it,” John said. “Not another peep from any of you, unless it’s a kind word. Or hell, I’ll settle for neutral. No more yelling. No more arguing. Your mother’s wellbeing is at stake here, and she has done a lot for all of you. She deserves some peace. Is that clear? From now on, there are no more second chances.”

The children nodded, some more subtly than others.

“Okay. Now, with that being said,” John continued, “I’ve lost track of who’s been grounded, so I’m lifting those punishments.”

Brenda raised her arms with a resounding, “Yes!”

“However, if you leave this house, you *will* stay out of trouble. The ‘no second chances’ rule always applies. You’re all accountable for each other’s actions, but there will be no arguing. For once, you kids are gonna have to learn to work as a team. Got it?”

The Jenkenson children were on their best behavior for the rest of the day. All of them went their separate ways and did their own thing, interacting very seldom with one another. Theresa called up Beth and Donna and had them meet her at the lake, where she caught them up on all the craziness going on at home. When she told them about Vinnie being her dad, they were shocked, but Theresa only felt numb at that point. She played down her mother’s behavior when she told her friends because she had trouble thinking about it herself. Her mother had lost control, and if John wouldn’t have come back, she might’ve killed her. She couldn’t come to terms with it. She couldn’t even come to terms with her mother being let off the hook for cheating on John.

The Jenkenson children reunited promptly at dinnertime. Michelle and Michael set the table without issue, while John ordered a pizza. Joanne hadn’t left the master bedroom all day, but once the pizza arrived, John retrieved her.

The kids sat in their seats as silent as mice. When John escorted Joanne into the dining room, they all stared at her. Michelle smiled. “Hi, Mom. Feeling better?”

Joanne’s makeup was smeared; her hair was frazzled. Usually, her strong sense of vanity disallowed her from leaving her bedroom until she was fully made-up and looking her best, but not today. She was even still in her frilly, lace-trimmed pajamas and bare feet. Theresa almost felt sorry for this disheveled and vulnerable-looking version of her mother—almost. John brought Joanne to her chair and placed a slice of pizza on her plate, before returning to his own seat.

“It sure looks good,” he said, laying his napkin on his lap.

“Yeah,” Michael said. “Real cheesy.”

John cut up a slice into bite-sized pieces for Lindsay. She poked at the pepperoni with the tip of her finger. “Sweetie,” he said, “don’t play with your food.”

The kids chowed down on their pizza. Joanne shifted her gaze around to each of them but didn’t touch her own piece.

“Joanne, do you want a piece of the sausage and onion pizza instead?” asked John.

She shook her head. “Bunch of animals.”

Everyone stopped eating.

“Honey,” John said, “would you like to eat in the bedroom?”

Joanne's eyes fixated on Lindsay, who still hadn't begun to eat. She pushed the tiny pizza pieces around on her plate making a random pattern. John followed Joanne's gaze to Lindsay.

"Lindsay," he said, "eat your food."

She ignored him.

"Theresa," John said, "could you help her?"

Joanne's gaze shifted to Theresa, making her feel uncomfortable. "Sure," she said, getting up from her seat.

"Theresa," Joanne said, "don't eat any more. You're becoming a blimp."

Theresa took a deep breath and held her tongue. She continued on to Lindsay's chair, picked her up, and set Lindsay on her lap. She took one of the bits of pizza and pretended to make it fly. "Zoom! Where's this yummy pizza going? Oops, not into your cheek! Open your mouth, the pizza's coming in for a landing."

Lindsay stared intently Theresa's hand, and when it moved up to her mouth, she chomped at the pizza, inadvertently biting Theresa's finger.

"Ouch!" Theresa shrieked. "You're supposed to bite the food, silly, not me."

Lindsay giggled.

Joanne rubbed her temples. "This shit is giving me a headache."

Theresa rolled her eyes.

"Tare," said John, "feed her quietly, would ya?"

"This is ridiculous," Theresa said.

Brenda elbowed her arm and gave her a look, as if to say, "Don't blow this."

Beyond Brenda, Theresa could see her mother staring at her from the other end of the table. It wasn't her typical stare (the stare filled with annoyance and anger); this stare was different. She almost resembled a hovering vulture waiting to ensnare Theresa, with a look that said, "I'm going to get you." Her blue eyes were like shards of ice piercing Theresa's soul, and that frozen stare gave her goose bumps.

Theresa rubbed Lindsay's arm and unglued her gaze from her mother's. "Come on, Lindsay, let's try another bite."

Joanne slammed her hand down on the table. "Shut. Your. Mouth."

Theresa glanced at John, hoping to find some sort of guidance there. He sat calmly as if nothing had happened.

"I guess I could feed her in the kitchen," Theresa said.

"Shut up!" Joanne's voice wavered and warbled, sounding like fingernails on a blackboard.

"Shut *uuu-UUUUUP!*"

Still nothing from John.

Theresa had had enough. "This is insane!"

"Theresa!" John shouted. "Go to your room!"

"No!" She set down Lindsay so she wouldn't be screaming in her ear. "Where does Mom get off acting like this? Having a nervous breakdown after screwing your boss, beating the shit out of Lindsay, and nearly bashing my head in? Puh-lease! She's only acting like this to get her own way and not have to deal with the shit she's done, and you were dumb enough to fall for it! You're a door mat, Dad—or John—or whatever the hell I'm supposed to call you now!"

He shook his head. "I am so disappointed in you."

"Yeah? Well, back at ya."

"Go to your room, I'll deal with you later."

"No!" Theresa said, standing. "I've watched her play favorites for all these years. She barely acknowledges Lindsay, and when she does, it's usually to hurt her. Why isn't she in a special school? Or getting any help? She didn't ask to be this way, and she has two parents who should be giving a

damn about her! She's not going to have any chance in life! No chance! You two are the last people on Earth who should be responsible for nine kids! You're both completely useless!"

John got up, grabbed hold of Theresa's arm, and dragged her out of the dining room. He flung her on to the lower steps to the second floor, pointed a finger in her face, and said, "You're done."

Theresa sobbed. "How can you just pretend what Mom did last night was nothing? She needs mental help—"

"No, Theresa, she needs you to stop starting shit with her! I don't know what the fuck your problem is! She's your mother, for Christ's sake!"

"And she's your wife—your cheating, abusive wife! You must be so proud!"

John raised the back of his hand to her but stopped himself before letting it fly free. He instead dismissively flicked both hands in her direction, letting out a "Bah" and headed outside, presumably to cool down.

Theresa ran upstairs to get her backpack, which still had some clothes stuffed inside. She flung it on to her back and headed back downstairs. Her mother was waiting for her at the bottom, holding a flailing, screaming Lindsay. Joanne opened the front door, grabbed the scruff of Theresa's shirt, and pulled her outside.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Get in the goddamn car if you know what's good for you."

Theresa obeyed, getting into the backseat. Joanne practically threw Lindsay back there with her. Theresa shakily put the seatbelt around Lindsay's waist, keeping an arm around her to comfort her. A knot formed in Theresa's stomach, her raw nerves unraveling. Their mother got into the driver's seat, still barefoot and in her pajamas like some madhouse escapee. When she turned the ignition, John appeared by her window and knocked on it.

"Jo!" His voice came through muffled. "Jo, turn off the car! I'll take Theresa to my mother's!"

Joanne put the car into reverse, speeding out of the drive while the tires squealed. She tore off like a madwoman.

Theresa frantically felt around for her own seat belt, clicking it into place. Her heart raced as the car continued to swerve and weave, speeding almost out of control.

"I should have done it," Joanne said. "Even if it was illegal, I should've gotten rid of you."

Back to the abortion. It hardly fazed Theresa now after everything else that had happened.

Joanne drove out of the familiar part of town to the bad side located past the old railroad tracks. It was literally the "wrong side of the tracks", though in Moonridge it was hard to tell since most of it was in poor condition. In this area though, everything was neglected and most of the shops were out of business. Vagrants slept in the gutters. The houses were all but condemned. The tiny shred of hope that still existed on Theresa's side of town was missing here.

Joanne pulled up in front of a tiny one-story house whose gray exterior perfectly matched this gloomy summer's day. The grass in the front yard had turned brown and died. Broken cement squares made a path up to the front door that had a cracked awning overhead. Theresa stared uncomfortably at the rundown house.

"Who lives here?" Theresa asked. Joanne ignored her. Outside her window, she saw an old beat-up pickup truck in the driveway. "The painter. What are we doing here?"

Joanne said nothing and got out of the car. She yanked the backdoor open and dragged Theresa out. She pushed her aside to reach Lindsay.

"Mom, don't be so rough with her."

Joanne moved swiftly up the concrete slabs on her tiptoes. Even at the end of the day, the sun still heated the cement like a hot griddle. With the side of her fist, she pounded on the front door. Theresa came up and took Lindsay from her. As they waited, Joanne shifted her weight from one foot to the other. Theresa figured the stoop must've been hot as well, even with the awning.

"I still don't get what we're doing here," she said.

It took a few minutes for Vinnie to come to the door. His eyes widened at the sight of them.

"What are you doing here?"

"Congratulations," Joanne said, "it's a girl."

"Huh?"

"I've dealt with her shit long enough," Joanne said. "It's your turn."

"What? I can't—"

"Deal with it, you fucking loser!"

"You're leaving us here?" Theresa asked. "Both of us?"

"Both of them?" Vinnie said.

Joanne rolled her eyes and sprinted on her tiptoes back to the car.

"Hey, Joanne!" Vinnie shouted going after her. "Only one of those kids is mine!"

"Consider her a bonus," Joanne spat, and got into the car.

Vinnie slammed his hands down on her hood. "Joanne!"

She sped off, nearly running him over.

Vinnie ran his fingers through his hair and walked back to the house. "Well, come in, I guess."

Theresa followed him inside, Lindsay clinging to her for dear life. They went into the living room, where a busted up blue and green plaid sofa sat with duct tape over the tears. Across from it, a thirteen-inch TV sat upon an upside down crate. Beyond the living room, a round dining table stood with only enough seating for two. The house smelled of old cheese and paint—a weird and unpleasant odor.

"Wanna sit down?" Vinnie asked.

Theresa was afraid to touch anything. "I'll just stand."

"Are you hungry? I think I have some...expired tuna fish maybe." He scratched his eyebrow with his thumbnail. "We could order a pizza."

"We ate before. Pizza, ironically," Theresa said.

He nodded. They stood there in an uncomfortable moment of silence, before Vinnie leaned in and whispered, "This is surreal, huh?"

"Why are you whispering? Is someone here?"

"No." He shook his head. "I don't know why I was. You wanna watch TV?"

"No," Theresa said. "Could you maybe give me a ride to a friend's house? I don't think this is going to work."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean...this." She waved her hand at the room.

"There's a bedroom too. It's..." Vinnie lit up a cigarette and exhaled the smoke through his nose. "I guess it's pretty shitty too."

"No, I didn't mean that." Of course, that was what Theresa meant, but now she felt bad about it. "It's fine, I guess."

Vinnie nodded and sat down on the sofa. "You wanna tell me what happened? Your mother must've been pretty desperate coming over here looking like that."

"She hates me."

"You think so, huh?"

"I know so. I guess she finally found a way out."

"Nah, this is just temporary. She'll cool off and come back for you."

"Don't bet on it."

"No, see, this is what I meant by the dog days, you know? People act crazy, and then they cool off. This is just a setback."

"And if it's not?"

Vinnie took a long drag and shrugged.
Lindsay squirmed in Theresa's arms, wanting to be put down. She obliged but said, "Don't go far."
"It's not like she could get lost," Vinnie said. "How old is she?"
"Four."
"And her name again?"
"Lindsay."
She stopped and stared at her reflection in the TV screen. She tapped it lightly.
"What's wrong with her?" Vinnie asked.
Theresa shrugged. "Mental retardation, they said."
"Who are *they*?"
"Her doctors."
Vinnie nodded. "She's cute as a button."
Theresa smiled. "Yeah, she is." Her smile faded. "Mom's always so mean to her."
"You know, this might just be an outsider's opinion, but it seems like your mother takes issue with you and her because you two are a reminder of her... imperfections?"
Theresa rolled her eyes. "My mother has plenty of imperfections, she doesn't need to blame us for them."
"I'm not justifying it."
"Really? Cause your view of my mother seems like a crock of shit. 'Just an outsider's opinion'," Theresa remarked.
"I loved her once."
"Yeah, well, so did I."
"Ah, c'mon now. She's still your mom. You shouldn't say stuff like that."
"I'm not going to apologize for it. You have no idea how she is—no idea!"
"Whoa, okay, chill out," he said, putting up his hands. "I surrender."
Lindsay ducked under one of the dining chairs.
"She sure is quiet," Vinnie observed.
"She's shy," Theresa said.
"Nothing like you then." He winked at her.
Theresa shook her head.
"So, Theresa, is there anything you wanna know about me? Your family?"
"Not really."
"You don't even know my last name." She looked at him expectantly. "Manzoni."
"Sounds like a type of pasta."
He smirked. "Well, we are Italian."
"*Full* Italian?"
"Yeah, pretty much. Well, not you of course. You're half of whatever the hell Joanne is."
"Norwegian-Scot, I think. And my dad is—" Theresa turned her attention to the wall to avoid the awkwardness.
"Takes some getting used to, huh?"
She nodded. "Sorry."
"Not your fault."
Theresa let out an airy chortle. "Hm. Funny, I don't think anyone's ever said those words to me before."
Vinnie took another puff of his cigarette, glancing over at Lindsay. "Aww, Theresa, look at that."
Lindsay was nodding off, her head resting against the chair leg.

"I think all this stuff is getting to her," Theresa said. "She's always so sleepy anymore."

"Well, if it's all right by you, you and Lindsay can use my bed tonight and I'll take the couch," he said.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Come on, I'll carry her in now and you can have a look."

Vinnie extinguished his cigarette in the ashtray on the end table. He then carefully pulled Lindsay out from under the chair, cradling her in his arms. Theresa followed him past a tiny kitchen, an even tinier bathroom, and into the only bedroom in the house. It was a decent size, compared to how small everything else in the house was. A full-sized bed stood flush against the wall, and an old, short dresser sat to the foot of it, a 19" TV sitting atop it.

Theresa furrowed her brow. "Wouldn't it make more sense to have the bigger TV in the living room?"

"I don't spend much time out there," Vinnie said. He laid Lindsay down on the bed and covered her. "Is she okay like this?"

"As opposed to?"

He shrugged. "She's so little...the bed's kind of big compared to her."

"You don't know much about kids, do you?" Theresa said. "She should be fine."

"Okay, then let's head back into the living room so we don't wake her," Vinnie said. "Unless you wanna stay in here."

Theresa shrugged. "Doesn't matter to me."

She followed Vinnie back into the living room and they both plopped down on the couch, a space between them large enough to fill another person. He rested his head back, sighing something like a groan. Theresa knew he was having trouble adjusting to this, and she couldn't blame him—she was too. All she wanted to do was run to Beth's or Donna's—someplace comforting and familiar. Instead, she sat on the worn out sofa with a stranger whose blood coursed through her veins.

"What a mess," he muttered.

Theresa heard, but didn't want to let on. Instead, she struck up a conversation. "Are you painting someone else's house now?"

"Not yet," he said. "Some other guy I work with is finishing your house though. John put in the call this morning."

"Oh. That sucks."

"Yeah, it really does. I might have to take a second job if I can find something."

Theresa nodded.

"It ain't easy for a guy like me," Vinnie said. "As much as you try to run from the past, it always seems to catch up to you no matter what. A high school dropout, war vet with a criminal record...hardly appealing to employers."

"Criminal record?"

"Oh, I just assumed your mom told you about it." He shrugged. "Yeah, I was pretty screwed up for a while. Sometimes you just need to dull the pain in any way you can, you know? Well, hopefully you don't."

"Drugs?"

Vinnie nodded. "I'm not proud of it. When your head's as fucked up as mine was, you don't really care about anything. Living or dying. Nothing matters."

"Was this before or after I was born?"

"After."

"Is that why couldn't get joint custody?"

"No, I couldn't get joint custody because I didn't have a home. I was living on friends' sofas and floors and in my truck. I didn't have a job, I didn't have anything." His eyes narrowed and his

nostrils flared, as if a fuse had been lit somewhere inside him. “But you know what destroys a man? When someone offers a flicker of hope and then snatches it away again. When they take that last little bit of yourself, that last shred of dignity, that last part that makes you feel human. Without that, life is a fucking cesspool.”

Theresa felt as though someone had opened the door into the darkest recesses of Vinnie’s mind and soul, and she was being forced to take the guided tour. Her uneasiness made her flesh crawl and her bones rattle.

“Hey,” he said, nudging her arm.

Theresa jolted, pulling away from him. “What?”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you,” he said. “It was a long time ago. I’m not that person anymore.”

“Okay.”

“I freaked you out.”

“No, I’m—”

“It’s okay. I’m not used to being around kids, you know? I tend to not have much of a filter between my brain and my mouth.”

“Hm. I guess I know where I get it then.”

He half-smiled. “Hey, listen, do you just wanna chill out and watch some TV or something? We don’t have to talk about all this shit tonight, you know.”

That sounded good to Theresa. Vinnie flipped on the TV to an episode of *That’s Incredible*, and they watched it in almost complete silence.

Theresa slept fitfully that night. She lay in bed beside Lindsay who slept like a baby. It felt like she had only just gotten to sleep moments before she awoke to the sound of voices. She crawled out of bed, making sure not to wake Lindsay. Opening the bedroom door just a crack, she could make out the voices of Vinnie and John.

“We need to keep this informal,” John said. “If we get the courts involved no one will win.”

“So I’m a glorified babysitter?” said Vinnie.

“Look around. Do you really think you’d have a snowball’s chance in hell of winning custody in court? Let me guess, you clear around...four thousand a year? Five tops? And with your history—”

“I get the point. But it’s not just Theresa we’re talking about. You expect me to take in Lindsay too, and she’s not even my kid, and she has...mental problems. She’s a cute kid, but she’s not my responsibility, Johnny.”

“Lindsay would be lost without Theresa; we can’t separate them. Theresa’s the one who’s been caring for her, and I’m not proud of that, but Jo couldn’t handle it, and I was working—”

“Yeah yeah, you’re breaking my heart,” Vinnie remarked. “But I’m not your chump. You want me to take her, you need to shell out some cash every month, you get me?”

“And all the years I paid for your kid, where was your child support?”

“Oh, this is bullshit. You didn’t want any trace of me around. You two have eight kids, and you took my only daughter. As I recall, that was another time we kept it out of court, and I got screwed. Maybe I should just get a lawyer—”

“Okay, okay!” John said. “I’ll send you a check each month for fifty bucks. Take it or leave it.”

“Fine.”

“*Fine*. Then I guess it’s settled.”

Theresa stormed into the living room. “No, not fine.”

“Theresa, were you eavesdropping?” John asked.

“Yeah, this is my life we’re talking about, isn’t it? Shouldn’t I get a say?”

“You’re just a child.”

“So my opinion means nothing?”

Vinnie placed a hand on her shoulder. “Of course it does.”

Theresa shook it off and ignored him. “So, what, you’re just ditching us?”

“I’m not going over this with you, Theresa,” John said. “What’s done is done.”

“Nothing’s done!”

“Isn’t this what you wanted, Theresa? I mean, you did run away not much more than a week ago, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“You pushed your mother too far, Theresa,” John said. “I’m sorry it has to come to this, but our family needs her.”

She snorted. “So, I guess that makes me and Lindsay expendable.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Vinnie chimed in, “Well, I don’t see how it could be taken any other way, Johnny.”

John glared at him. “This is between me and my—between me and Theresa.”

It was with that correction that Theresa suddenly saw the gravity of the situation. She wasn’t his. The man she had grown up with—the one who bandaged her scrapes, read her bedtime stories, taught her to ride a bike—was just that: a man. He was letting her go. The ties that once held them together, that paired them even against his own wife, had now been severed. He had cut himself off, and Theresa could tell. It had happened before when he and Joanne arrived home after taking Lindsay to the doctor the previous year. That dead vacant look in his eye that said he was finished, that an emotional part of him had been amputated and forgotten. Maybe that’s how he was able to come to peace about Lindsay, here and now, since he had already let her go. He was like a robot in that way—going through the motions but not putting his heart into it.

Theresa stared at the floor. “Will you be bringing our things over here?”

“Yeah,” John said. “I’m going to bring some boxes home from work tonight, and Michael said he’d help pack.”

“Because Lindsay doesn’t have any toys here,” Theresa continued, disregarding what he said. “She’s going to want her dolls. And her crayons. And—”

Theresa clenched her jaw trying to fight the tears begging to emerge. She didn’t want to cry in front of them. She wanted to be strong.

“I’ll make sure to get everything,” John said. “Kevin will probably know what she’ll want.”

“Kevin won’t understand,” she said softly. “He won’t understand why we’re not there anymore.”

“Well, it’s not as though you’re moving to China, Theresa. You can still visit.”

“How generous of you,” she remarked.

“Don’t make this harder than it already is, Theresa,” John said.

“I think she’s handling it pretty well, all things considered,” Vinnie said.

“Yeah, well...” He checked his watch. “I’m gonna head out before I’m late for work. I’ll be back tomorrow with some of your stuff.”

“Whatever,” Theresa muttered.

John turned and left.

“You okay?” Vinnie asked.

“Yeah,” Theresa snapped. “Good riddance. I don’t need them. I don’t need anybody...especially you.”

“Thanks a lot.” He walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. “Like it or not, I’m responsible for you now, kiddo...which probably means I have to keep more in the fridge than soda and old batteries. What do ya say we go get some donuts?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Well, see, legally I have to feed you. The law’s crazy like that,” he said, smirking.

Theresa leaned against the counter. “Do you really see this working, Vinnie? You can’t even take care of yourself, and now you expect to take care of me and a four year-old with special needs?”

Vinnie closed the fridge door. “What do you want from me? Huh?”

“A promise.”

“A promise?”

“I want you to promise me that you’re not going to be like them and give us up if—or should I say when—the going gets tough,” Theresa said. “Because, trust me, it will. Lindsay should’ve been getting help all this time—*professional* help. This isn’t about making sure we’re fed or that you keep this crappy roof over our heads. There’s a lot more to it than that.”

“Why don’t we just go get some breakfast, huh? One thing at a time.”

“So, you aren’t going to promise me? Because I can fend for myself, but I don’t want Lindsay ending up in some orphanage or institution or something.”

“You think if I can’t cut it, John and Joanne would do that?” Vinnie asked.

“I wouldn’t put anything past them at this point.”

Vinnie nodded. “Good point. Listen, I can’t promise to do everything perfectly, you know? But I promise to give it my all. Okay?”

“I guess it’ll have to do.”

Vinnie chortled. “You’re gonna keep me honest, aren’t you? I can already tell.”

She sneered. “You got that right.”

* * *

Theresa couldn’t believe how much time she had spent dwelling on the past. It was already eight o’ clock, and she still needed to call Beth. She picked up the phone and dialed, hoping she was home.

Chapter 8

Beth

Moonridge - August 7, 1998

As the telephone rang, Beth stood in front of her bedroom closet trying to decide what to wear on her date. The phone sat on the nightstand beside her bed, and she rushed to answer it. “Hello.”

“Hey, Beth, it’s Theresa.”

“Hey, Tare. I’m running late for my dinner date with Robert, so I can’t chat long,” Beth said, browsing through her wardrobe. “What’s up?”

“Robert? Are you still seeing that asshole?”

Beth sighed. “Theresa, don’t call him that. He’s really a good guy if you just got to know him better.”

“Uh huh. Listen, I won’t keep you. I was just wondering if you had plans tomorrow evening at six.”

“Nope. Why?”

“You won’t believe who called me today.”

“Who?”

“David.”

“David who?”

“Don’t ‘David who’ me! Our social circle isn’t that big, Beth.”

“Oh! *That* David! What did he want?”

“Well, he and Wil and Paul are back in town and wanna see us.”

“Really? I’m not sure if I can do that, Tare. I mean, Robert—”

“What about him?”

“Well, he might be upset if I go out with other guys.”

“It’s not an orgy, Beth. It’s just old friends getting together.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. I’m being silly. So, six tomorrow?”

“Yeah, at Carla’s. And hey, could you call Donna for me and tell her, even if it’s after your date? Michael just walked in.”

“Michael’s there?”

“Yeah, but that’s a whole other story. I’ll tell you about it tomorrow.”

They said their goodbyes, and Beth hung up the phone. She picked out a long white and yellow sundress to wear on her date. When she finished getting ready, she left her apartment and got into her car. As she drove away, the windows were rolled down, and there was a nice summer breeze, cool enough to chill her bare arms. However, it might not have been the breeze that made her flesh crawl but rather the anniversary of her father’s death twenty-two years before. She had struggled all day not to think about it, but now with night upon her, and the dark, desolate streets stretching out before her, Beth felt ill at ease and crept out.

The night her father died had become foggier and foggier over the years. Sometimes she wished she could forget everything about it, but she had so few memories of him, she wanted to hang on to all of them—even the grim ones. She remembered going to the movies with her parents that night. They were viewing the silly Don Knotts flick *Gus*, during which five year-old Beth fell asleep. They left the movie early so Beth could be put to bed. Her father carried her cradled in his arms. He had carried her

like that so many times that even now Beth could remember how his arms felt—the strong, protective hold only a father could provide. She thought of his scent: a subtle cologne she could no longer recall the name of. But mostly she remembered the beating of his heart. Whenever he carried her, or she sat upon his lap, her head rested against his chest, and she found comfort in his steady, calm heartbeat. Of all the sounds in the world, that gentle thump was the sound she cherished the most. Even his voice had long disappeared from her memory, but she could never forget the sound of his heart.

Another sound she could never forget...

The gunshot.

The shot that startled her awake and left her covered in her father's blood. The bullet had struck the carotid artery on the left side of his throat. He collapsed to his knees before falling over on his side. The details of what happened next had become blurry for Beth. Did her mother take her from his arms? Was there any attempt to stop the bleeding? She could only remember the vague detail that he died within a few moments and had no hope for survival. Information like that was intended to help console the witnessing family members, she knew that much. What about earlier though? Beth lived with the guilt that had she stayed awake and finished the movie, her father wouldn't have been in the wrong place at the wrong time. There was no consolation for that, and the regret and guilt still haunted her.

As Beth drove to Moonridge Bistro to meet Robert, she passed some of the familiar stomping grounds from when she was a kid. She passed the lake where no kids dared to swim nowadays, the Moonridge Multiplex with boarded up windows and the words For Rent on the marquee, and even the graveyard where her father was buried. The town's size made it impossible to avoid drudging up the past and painful memories on a daily basis. It was as though Moonridge was one giant scrapbook where all the pages contained snapped photos of events better left forgotten. Passing the graveyard reminded Beth of an important day in the summer of '83...

* * *

August 7th. Beth lay in bed that morning playing with the necklace around her neck, sliding the teardrop jewel back and forth along the chain. The air felt heavy like someone had sucked all the oxygen out of it, leaving her to suffocate. Through the air vent, she could already smell the pancakes her mother must've been making. Pancakes were her father's favorite food, so Beth's mother only made them on his birthday and on the anniversary of his death as a way to remember him. It was tradition, but one Beth would've preferred to do away with.

"Beth! Breakfast is almost ready!" her mother called from downstairs.

She climbed out of bed, put on a pair of yellow shorts and light blue T-shirt, and went downstairs. The round dining table stood in their kitchen since their house lacked a formal dining room. A small tower of pancakes sat upon it, next to a bottle of maple syrup. Everything looked perfect as always. Nothing was missing except—

"Eat up, Beth," her mother said. "I have more on the skillet now."

Beth opened the fridge door.

"What are you looking for?" asked her mother.

"The butter."

Her mother reached over and shut the refrigerator door, forcing Beth to step back. "Your father never ate butter on his pancakes and neither will we."

"But we used to—"

"Well, not anymore."

Beth furrowed her brow. She sat down at the table and poked her fork through the first two pancakes in the stack, transferring them to her own plate. She poured a generous amount of syrup on them, but the more she added the less hungry she became. The way the syrup pooled and spread out on

top of the pancakes suddenly resembled the way her father's blood had done the same on the concrete beneath his dying body. In her mind, the syrup turned red and thickened, until it resembled blood. She covered her mouth as her stomach churned. She squeezed her eyes shut. When she reopened them, the syrup looked normal again, but her appetite didn't return.

"Mom? Are we going to Daddy's grave today?"

"Not today." Her mother sat at the table with another stack of pancakes.

"How come?"

"I don't have it in me to go today, sweetie," her mother said. "But you can go if you want."

"We always go together though."

"Eat your breakfast, Beth."

Her mother seemed more depressed than usual, even for this day. It worried Beth. She could usually count on her mother to comfort her and console her and tell her that her father would always be with them. Today her mother just seemed distant.

Beth stared across the table at the empty chair where her father once sat. In her mind's eye, she rebuilt him sitting there in his nice casual beige suit and blue tie. His sandy blond hair had a subtle curl, just as Beth's hair had. He always seemed to have a broad smile on his face—a warm, inviting, friendly smile for everyone he met. And his eyes...Beth couldn't remember their color. They weren't blue like hers, but were they gray? Or green? Or hazel?

Beth sprang from the table and ran into the living room. She fell to her knees in front of the bookcase housing their family photo albums. She picked up the one labeled "1975" and flipped through the pages. None of the photographs were clear enough to see his eyes.

"Beth?" her mother said, coming up behind her. "What's the matter?"

"Daddy's eyes...I can't remember what color they were."

"They were a greenish gray," said her mother, solemnly. "They changed colors sometimes to look more green or more gray. It was one of the first things I noticed about him."

Beth looked over her shoulder. "Do you think you'll ever get married again?"

"What? No, never. Jay was the love of my life. I would never betray him."

Her mother didn't often refer to him by his first name. Beth realized she had struck a nerve and felt bad about it. "Sorry," she said. "I was...I was just wondering."

"Mhmm. Well, come and finish your breakfast before it gets cold."

"I'm not very hungry." Beth returned the photo album to its shelf. "I think I'm going to go to the cemetery early. I wanna get some fresh air."

"Well, all right. Don't stay out too long."

It was a gloomy day to visit the cemetery. The gray clouds overhead gave Beth a creepy feeling as she passed through the wrought iron gates. Rows of graves lay out before her. The space always felt cramped, as if the town had produced more death than its small size could accommodate. Her father's grave was set apart in a secluded area near a weeping willow. Some might've found this to be a prime location, but Beth felt isolated every time she approached his grave. She worried about him getting lonely being separated from even the dead population. It was the sort of logic a child could find amongst the morbidity of it all.

Since the weeping willow cast shade over the grave, the grass leading up to and around his plot had dried out. Beth heard it crunch underfoot. She knelt down in front of the gray, serpentine top headstone—the kind of headstone a child might draw for Halloween with nothing particularly special or unique about it. She traced his engraved name with the tip of her finger. James Henry Williams.

"Hi, Daddy," Beth said, softly. "I'm sorry Mom isn't with me, but she's thinking about you. We miss you so much."

She sniffled and looked out at the rest of the cemetery. An old woman in black was kneeling at a grave about fifteen plots down. She was weeping, holding a handkerchief to her nose. Beth hadn't

noticed her when she walked through, which made her feel kind of bad. The old woman turned and looked at her. Beth gave a half-hearted wave, but the woman didn't reciprocate. Instead, she returned to her mourning.

Beth did the same. She stroked the dry blades of grass in front of the headstone. "You shouldn't have died, Daddy. It's not fair. You were kind to everyone—did so much for them. Why did it have to be you?"

She covered her face with her hands and began to cry.

Suddenly, a whispering voice breathed, "*Beeeeeth.*"

Beth gasped. She looked up but didn't see anyone. "Hello?"

"It's Daddy, Beth," the voice whispered. "It should've been you. You should've died instead of me."

She scrambled to her feet and started to run, but it was then she heard laughter behind her. She stopped and turned. The Jordan brothers emerged from behind the willow tree, doubling over in hysterics. Beth stared at them in horror. "You boys are awful, just awful!"

"*You shouldn't have died, Daddy,*" Patrick mocked. "*It's not fair! Wah wah wah!*"

"Stop it!" Beth shrieked. "Just stop, you're being mean!"

"Oops, boys, we'd better stop. We're being *mean!*" Patrick continued to mock.

Beth's face crumpled. She turned on her heels and headed down the winding graveyard path, crying.

Patrick and his brothers caught up to her. He put his arm around her shoulders. "Aww, we're sorry, Beth. We were just messing with you, weren't we, boys?"

She shook his arm off. "Please, just leave me alone."

"Leave you alone? Beth, I'm hurt. You're not afraid of us, are you?"

"You hurt Theresa...*bad.* You tried to hang her," Beth said, shaking her head. "How could you do something like that?"

"That's easy. Theresa's a worthless pig, and piggies gotta get slaughtered."

Beth lowered her head, feeling uncomfortable. "Theresa's one of my best friends."

"Yeah, I know. You must really be stupid to hang out with that loser."

"I'm not stupid."

"Sure you are. You choose to hang around with a fat freak and a rich bitch. And now those three queers? Face it, Beth, you're surrounded by losers."

"Why do you have to pick on everybody?" she asked. "What do you get out of it?"

Patrick snickered. "Anything I want, and that's why I do it. So, do you know what I want now, Beth?"

She shook her head.

He leaned in close to her ear and said, "You."

Beth's eyes widened, as she tore off away from the brothers. She ran down the graveyard path looking around for anyone to help her. The old woman was gone, and the graveyard was deserted. She veered off the path, through the grass, running over the rows of grave plots.

Patrick caught up to her, grabbed her around the waist, and tackled her to the ground. He sat on top of her, pinning her arms to the earth. "Hey, darling. What were you running for?"

Beth cried, "Get off me!"

"Say please."

"Patrick, man," Leo, the youngest Jordan, said. "Let her up."

Patrick released one of Beth's arms and grabbed his shirtfront in his fist, pulling him down near him. "You turning pussy on me?"

Leo shook his head, and Patrick released him. "Good," he said. "Then keep your trap shut."

With her hand free, Beth grabbed hold of a nearby tombstone, trying to pull herself away from

Patrick.

“Hold still!” Patrick yelled.

Beth didn't obey. She squirmed under his weight, trying to wriggle free.

Patrick grasped Beth's necklace and ripped it off. She gasped, lying still. She stared at the silver chain dangling from his fist.

“Give it back!” she screamed.

“This must be important to you,” Patrick said. “You're always wearing it.”

“My dad gave it to me. It's all I have left of him,” Beth said. “*Please* give it back.”

“You *really* want it?” He grinned devilishly. “What will you do for it?”

Beth reached for her necklace to take it back from him, but he pulled his hand away. She was sobbing now, praying silently for her father to help her. She looked past Patrick and his brothers and saw the old woman in black standing on the graveyard path watching them. Beth felt relieved and waited for the old woman to help her. But she didn't. The old woman just turned and continued on her way.

“Help me!” Beth shrieked. “*Help MEEEEEE!*”

Patrick covered her mouth with his hand. “Shut up!”

Beth heard the sound of quick footsteps as someone ran up and crashed into Patrick, knocking him off of her. She was too afraid to see who it was. Instead, she sprang to her feet and took off running towards her father's grave. She plopped down on the grass, hugging the headstone. She scraped the sides of her arms against the rough stone edge, but she didn't care. She rested her head against the front of the headstone, praying the Jordan brothers would leave her alone.

Within a few moments, Beth heard footsteps coming up behind her.

“Your daddy can't save you now, Beth,” Patrick said.

She closed her eyes. “Go away.”

“You hurt my feelings, Beth.” He stooped down next to her and laid a hand on her back, startling her enough to make her eyes open. “I never wanted to hurt you.”

“You hurt Theresa,” Beth said.

His lips curled and his nostrils flared. “Theresa! Theresa! Theresa! Fuck Theresa! She's nothing!” He got up and kicked the back of the tombstone. “This is about me and you, Beth, got it? You're mine now!”

More footsteps could be heard coming up through the dry grass.

“No, you're just warped.”

Beth turned to see David, Wil, and a disheveled Paul standing there.

“Hey, fuck off, pansies!” Patrick yelled at them. “I'm through with Theresa, but Beth is mine! Tell em, Beth!”

She shook her head but said nothing.

Patrick was seething. “This ain't over. Rod! Leo!”

David chortled. “Oh yeah, your brothers took off without you. I guess they're tired of getting their asses kicked.”

Patrick started backing up toward the cemetery gates. He held up Beth's necklace. “Hey, darling, if you want this back, you better come and get it.”

And with that, he turned tail and ran.

Beth let go of her father's gravestone and stood up. She trembled and said a meek little, “Thank you.”

“Thank Paul,” David said. “He was the one here visiting his—”

Wil nudged his arm and shook his head.

Beth nodded. “Thank you...all of you. I don't know why they have to be like that. They're so mean.”

“Yeah,” David said with a shrug. “You want us to walk you home?”

Beth shook her head. “I can manage.”

She walked home alone, wondering how she would get her necklace back...

* * *

Beth pulled into the crowded parking lot of the bistro. It was the nicest restaurant in town and had only opened last year, so the place was always hopping. She found a vacant parking space in the farthest row along the right side of the building. Her heels click-clacked on the pavement as she hurried up to the double glass doors. She spotted Robert through the windowpane, waved to him, and nearly bumped right into a man who was coming out of the restaurant as she was entering. Beth’s gaze shifted upward as she smiled apologetically, but when her eyes met his, her smile faded. As those two dark orbs bored into her soul, it was as if the world slowed almost to a halt. Her body shifted to the right—practically dancing around the man—giving him enough room to get by her while she made her way into the restaurant. Their eyes remained glued on one another the entire time.

Those eyes. Even after all these years, she could never forget those eyes that belonged to Patrick Jordan. They were so black, so dead, so deep in a hell of his own creation. There was no twinkle, no light. All she saw when she looked into them was an abyss of hopelessness.

“May I help you, Ma’am?” said the hostess.

As much as it unnerved Beth to turn her back on Patrick, she addressed the hostess. “I’m meeting someone, thank you.”

Beth made her way through the crowded restaurant, periodically checking out the window to see if Patrick was still there. She couldn’t see him anymore. She walked in a dreamlike state, unaware of her surroundings.

“Beth,” Robert said, finally making her stop. She had passed his table. “Where are you going?”

She smiled, embarrassed. “I’m sorry, I was in a daze.” She sat down across from him, picking up the menu.

“Are you all right?” Robert asked, pushing his horn-rimmed glasses up the bridge of his nose. “You seem...nervous.”

“No, I’m fine,” she said, smiling. “I just feel bad for running late.”

Robert nodded. “Yeah, I do have to get up early tomorrow.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“We’ll probably have to wait over an hour for our food.”

“Maybe not. Let’s flag down the waitress, I know what I want.”

After ordering, Robert took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

“Long day?” Beth asked.

“The new computer system at work is driving me crazy,” said Robert. “I mixed up the records of two clients and got chewed out for it.”

Beth wrinkled her nose. “I don’t like computers. They’re too complicated.”

“On the contrary, computers make life a lot easier. It’s just the software they have now is so convoluted. I can’t make heads or tails of it.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out,” Beth said. “You’re so smart.”

Robert shrugged. “You just have no idea how hard my job is. I mean, your bad day consists of what, serving someone the wrong sandwich? Mine consists of possibly sending someone into financial ruin.”

“Robert, I own my diner,” Beth said. “I’m responsible for more than just serving food now.”

“Uh huh. You still have no idea what it’s like out in the real world. You’re so naïve about everything.”

Beth shrugged. "I guess I am a little."

He scoffed and muttered, "A little."

Beth's feelings were hurt, so she decided to change the subject. "Robert, before I forget, I'm meeting Theresa and Donna tomorrow evening. Sort of a...girl's night out. So I might be home a little late."

"Really? What are you ladies doing?"

"Just...having dinner and catching up."

"Catching up? You talk to them every day."

Beth chortled. "Not *every* day—"

"What's going on, Bethany?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're hiding something, because you're a crappy liar. So spill it."

"Promise you won't get mad."

"Okay."

"There are some old friends of ours in from out of town, and we're meeting up with them."

"Why would I be mad about that?"

Beth smiled, uneasy. "They're...guy friends."

"I see. Old boyfriends?"

"No! No, nothing like that. Just friends from when we were kids."

"Uh huh."

"Don't be upset. It's one evening, and Theresa and Donna will be there—"

"Yeah, because they're such great role models."

"Please don't. They're my best friends. We've been through everything together."

"Well, see, that's my point," he said. "You spend way too much time around them, and they start to rub off on you."

"I don't want to argue about this," Beth said. "Do you mind if I go tomorrow?"

"I'd rather you didn't."

"Well, I guess if you really don't want me to..."

"Look, just do whatever you want, okay?"

Beth nodded. "It'll only be for a couple hours. You won't even have time to miss me."

When their food arrived almost forty-five minutes later, Beth could tell Robert had grown moody and impatient.

"It looks good at least," said Beth.

"It had better *taste* good after that kind of a wait," Robert remarked. He took a bite, seeming a bit indifferent about it. "So did you go to the cemetery today?"

Beth shook her head.

"Good," he said. "Dead is dead, right?"

"Yeah," she said. "Would you excuse me? I'm just gonna go to the restroom."

Beth headed into the lady's restroom, which was surprisingly empty for how crowded the restaurant was. She leaned over the sink and started to cry. *Dead is dead*. Robert's words had struck a nerve. He made death seem so final, so impersonal. But even after twenty-two years, her longing for her father to still be alive consumed her. *Dead is dead*.

When a trio of women entered the restroom, Beth dove into one of the stalls for privacy. She sat down upon the toilet lid, and as she tried to get a hold of her emotions, thought back to later that day on August 7th, 1983...

* * *

When Beth returned home from the graveyard, she picked up the newspaper off the front porch and brought it inside. She unbound it and looked at the front-page headline: Ex-Con Saves Woman. It piqued her interest, and she began reading the article aloud.

“Lou Perkins, released six months ago from prison, is now proven to be a local hero. Missy Carpenter, a 34 year-old mother, dropped her change on Wilkes Street yesterday afternoon. When she got down to pick it up, a gray truck sped towards her. The driver claimed he could not see Carpenter in the road. Perkins saw the woman in peril and quickly pulled her out of the street, before the truck hit her. ‘He’s my hero,’ Carpenter tells the Moonridge Caper. ‘I don’t care what happened in his past. He saved my life!’ Perkins refused to comment on his heroic deed.”

Beth studied the picture of Lou Perkins and Missy Carpenter shortly after the rescue. She shook her head and ran through the house calling for her mother. She found her in bed.

“Mom!” Beth shrieked, holding up the newspaper. “Did you read about this?”

“Yes, Bethany, I did. I’ve known Missy a long time, I’m glad she’s safe.”

“And what about Perkins?” Beth asked. “How could you not tell me Daddy’s killer was out of prison?”

Carol sat up. “Beth, I just didn’t want to upset you. You don’t understand the situation. There’s no justice, no fairness in any of it. For whatever reason, it was just God’s will to take your father from us. Lou Perkins isn’t going to hurt you or me, whether he’s in prison or not.”

“How can you say that?”

“Beth, I’m tired. Let me rest please.”

She left her mother’s bedroom and headed back downstairs. She tossed the newspaper on to the dining room table, feeling distraught. Her mother was right; Beth didn’t understand the situation. She didn’t understand how a murderer could be released from prison after only seven years. She didn’t understand how a murderer could be called a hero. She needed answers, and there was only one way to find them.

Two phonebooks sat on the counter close to where the telephone hung on the wall. Beth picked up the white pages and flipped through them to the P’s. Her finger scanned the page and stopped at Perkins, Louis. Beth jotted down the address on a nearby notepad and left the house. Lou lived in the not-so-great area of Moonridge, so she decided to take the bus there instead of walk. Bravery wasn’t usually her strong suit, but today, she couldn’t bring herself to care about the dangers of where she was going. Her grief overwhelmed her as did her desire to find some answers.

The bus stopped outside a tiny shopping plaza sitting beside a gas station. Checking the address on her slip of paper again, Beth headed for it. One of the metal street numbers had fallen off the house, but the outline of it told Beth she was at the right place. She took a deep breath and walked up nonexistent path to the house, ringing the doorbell when she got there.

A man opened the door with the chain on, one eye peering out. “Yeah?”

“Lou Perkins?”

“Yeah?” His eye looked her up and down. “I’m not buying any Girl Scout cookies.”

“I’m not a G-g-girl Scout,” Beth stammered, frightened.

“I’m not buying anything!” he snapped, starting to shut the door.

Beth spoke quickly. “My name is Beth Williams, and seven years ago you killed my dad.”

The door closed, but Beth heard the jingle of the chain being removed. A second later, Lou opened the door wide. There stood her father’s murderer, younger than she was expecting, appearing to be in his mid-20’s. His brown hair was long, hanging past his shoulders, and his face was unshaven. Beth’s growing nervousness made her lightheaded and nauseous.

“Williams,” Lou said. “What do you want from me?”

“You’re out of prison.”

“Yup.”

“Why?”

His eyes narrowed. “Why don’t you go ask my parole officer and leave me the hell alone?”

Beth clenched her jaw, tears stinging her eyes. “You killed my dad! Do you expect me just to forget about that? Don’t you care?”

“It was an accident! Involuntary manslaughter, ever hear of it? What do you want from me? I served my time.”

“I want my dad back,” Beth said, as a lone tear slithered down her cheek. “How do you shoot someone by accident?”

“Listen, little girl. I was really screwed up, okay? I took a bad mix of drugs that night. I don’t even remember going out or taking my gun or shooting anyone. I was out of my head, okay?”

“No, it’s not okay. It hasn’t been okay for me to not have a dad. I was five years-old. He was carrying me when he got shot.” Her tears flowed more freely now. “It’s not okay. He was a good man. He did so much for so many people. And now he’s gone, and he can’t ever come back, and I don’t know how come to terms with that!”

“Jesus, kid, I can’t deal with this. Look, I’m clean now. No drugs, no alcohol. I’m turning my life around. I made a mistake—a big one, I’ll grant you that—but I can’t take it back.”

Beth shook her head. “Why did you even have a gun in the first place?”

“Because I wanted to kill myself. Is that real enough for you, kid? Maybe that was even my intention that night, I don’t remember. But I have a second chance now. I get how screwed up I was. I don’t know what you expected to get out of me, kid, but I ain’t got nothing to give you.”

“An apology,” Beth said, “would be a start.”

“You want me to say I’m sorry? Fine, I’m sorry. Happy now?”

“No!” she shrieked. “You don’t get it. You just don’t get it! There is no happy for me. *You* get a second chance? *You* get to start again? *You* get to live a normal life? It’s not right, and it’s not fair. You’ve ruined my life, and I’m only twelve! I don’t want you to be happy. I don’t want you to be normal. I wanted to come here and see someone who’s as miserable as I am, who regrets that night as much as I do. But look at you. You’re a waste!”

“Yeah? Tell that to Missy Carpenter. See, folks now are calling me a hero, and it feels pretty damn good. And I’m not gonna let some little crying brat take that away from me. I’ve done my time, I’ve made peace with what I’ve done. Get over it, kid. And don’t come knocking on my door again.”

Lou slammed the door shut.

Beth turned around, walked halfway to the sidewalk, and collapsed to her knees sobbing. She sobbed so hard her stomach hurt.

“Well, well, well,” Patrick said from the sidewalk. “Never thought I’d see you in my neck of woods. What’s someone like you doing here?”

Beth looked up at him, barely seeing him through her tears. “You wanna know? The man who lives here killed my dad.”

“Hm. A genuine daddy killer right here on my own street. How much do you think it would take for him to bump off my old man? A grand maybe? Shit, for that, I might as well just do it. Maybe I could put some antifreeze in his whiskey—”

“Stop it,” Beth said. “Just stop.”

“Why you gotta cry over every little thing? What are you crying over this loser for? Huh? Daddy’s dead either way, right, darling?”

Beth stood and walked up to Patrick slowly. “This ‘loser’ lives while my dad’s six feet under.” In an exhale, as if trying not to say the words aloud, she breathed, “I hate him.”

Patrick half-grinned. “Yeah?”

Beth nodded. “I’m horrible. My dad used to say we shouldn’t hate anybody, that there’s good in everyone...even you, Patrick Jordan.”

His grin faded. “You and your daddy are wrong about that. There ain’t no good in me. Being good is no fun. I’m pure evil and proud of it.”

Beth shrugged. “After what you did to Theresa, maybe you’re right. Or maybe that was a prank that got out of hand. Or maybe you just don’t think before you do things.” She shrugged again. “I’m gonna find the good in you one of these days, Patrick Jordan. But in the meantime, can I have my necklace back?”

He snorted. “That ugly thing? I pawned it.”

Beth held out her hand, palm up. “Please.”

“I told you. I pawned it.”

She lowered her hand. “Where?”

“Like I’m gonna tell you.”

“The pawn shop on the corner? The one I passed to get here?”

“No. I know a better one, gives me more money for the junk I find.”

“Forget it,” Beth said.

Across the street and down a couple of houses, a slovenly heavysset man came out of a busted screen door hanging halfway off its hinges. He had on a stained white tank top and blue boxer shorts. He shouted while slurring, “Patrick, stop chasing pussy and get your worthless ass back in the house, you piece of shit!”

“In a minute, pop!” Patrick shouted back.

His dad staggered back into the house, nearly falling over a couple of times.

Beth looked at Patrick sympathetically. “I should be getting home anyway.”

“Did he scare you off?”

“No. I didn’t tell my mom I was leaving. She’ll be worried.”

“You better run along then, goody two shoes.”

Beth furrowed her brow. “Just like that?”

“What?”

“Nothing.” She shook her head. “Nothing.”

Beth started to walk away but stopped and turned to him. “I like you better like this. Just thought you should know. You don’t have to be violent all the time.”

Patrick scoffed. “Yeah. Right. And you don’t have to hang around with those losers, when you could be hanging out with me and my brothers. What do you say, Beth? Why don’t you ditch them for good? Life’s a lot more fun on this side.”

“I’m sorry, Patrick, I can’t.”

“Come on. We’ll protect you from them.”

“It’s not because they won’t let me. It’s because you’re too cruel, and you scare me most of the time.”

Patrick grinned. “That’s what makes it fun.”

“Not for me. If you could be a little nicer...maybe.”

Beth continued down the sidewalk, her back to Patrick.

“Hey, Beth!” he called.

She turned, and he threw something to her that landed at her feet. It was her necklace. She picked it up, admiring it in her hand for a moment. As she put it back around her neck, she smiled at him.

He gave nothing back—no smile, no nod, no acknowledgement whatsoever. He just turned and headed home, like a man taking the long walk to his execution...

* * *

Beth hadn't thought of it at the time, but looking back it seemed painfully obvious. Whatever went on in the Jordan house was at least partly responsible for the way Patrick and his brothers were. It didn't excuse them of course, but it made some of Beth's fear for them turn to pity. Remembering that somewhat civilized conversation she had with Patrick, she started regretting staying quiet and staring dumbly when she bumped into him instead of saying *something*. She had to let that go for now though since Robert was waiting for her.

She left the bathroom stall and washed her face at the sink, patting it dry with a paper towel. Her eyes were still red and a little puffy from crying, but she returned to her date anyway.

"You were in there a long time," said Robert. "Your food's ice cold now."

"Well," Beth said, laying a napkin in her lap, "I guess it's a good thing I'm the one eating it and not you."

Robert furrowed his brow. "Excuse me?"

"Well, isn't it?"

"You wanna cut out the attitude, Beth?"

"I'm just trying to enjoy my meal. Is that okay with you?"

"What the hell has gotten into you? Is this just because of the anniversary of your father's death?"

"Could you be a little more sensitive?" Beth asked. "I don't want to talk about my dad today. I'm sorry if I seem unlike myself. I have a lot on my mind."

"Wow, really? Something more than unicorns and dancing clowns going on up there?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're just a perpetual child, that's all," Robert said. "Your mother babies you, your friends baby you—"

"No, they don't. I know I'm sensitive and a little naïve, but there's nothing wrong with that, right?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. You know, at work I'm surrounded by smart people. People who went to college, people who are great with numbers, who challenge me mentally. And then I get home and..."

"And what?"

"It's like my IQ drops fifty points around you," Robert said. "I thought the dumb blonde bit was just an act—"

"I'm *not* dumb!" Beth said, louder than she intended. The other diners turned and looked at them.

"Don't you dare make a scene, I swear to god," he said, shading half his face with his hand. "Do you always have to embarrass me?"

Beth envisioned throwing the rest of her chicken parmesan at Robert and storming out, but she would never really have the nerve to do it. Instead, she sat quietly, her hands in her lap, and her head bowed down. She practically shrunk right there in her chair.

"I can't deal with this," Robert said. "I'm going to pay the check. Why don't you get the waitress to bring you a carry out box for your meal?"

Beth nodded, as Robert left the table. She didn't really care about her leftover food. She just wanted to sit there a moment gathering her thoughts. She rested her elbows on the table and held her head in her hands.

A clamor of dishes made her jolt upward, seeing a brown bin of dirty plates and silverware leaning halfway on the table and halfway on the thigh of the bus boy.

"Sorry," Beth said, getting up. "I was just leaving."

"No hurry," the man said. "It's good to see you again, darling."

Beth stopped and looked into those black eyes again, the ones belonging to none other than

Patrick Jordan. She swallowed, finding that all of her words were stuck somewhere in the back of her throat.

“Don’t recognize me?” asked Patrick. “I’m hurt.”

Beth finally whispered, “Patrick.”

He grinned. “You do remember.” His gaze drifted down her body and back up. “Damn, you look good.”

“Thanks,” Beth replied meekly.

“My shift is almost over. Why don’t we go...catch up? For old time’s sake.”

“I can’t. I’m here with my boyfriend—”

“Come on, ditch him.”

Beth shook her head. “I have to go.”

Patrick grabbed her arm. “I’m not the same person I was when we were kids.”

“None of us are,” Beth said. “Let go of my arm, please.”

Robert marched up to them. “Hey, is there a problem here, buddy?”

Patrick released her. “No problem.”

“Good. Maybe learn to keep your grubby hands off another man’s property.”

Patrick shoved the bin of dishes fully on to the table and stood up straight. He looked like a bear compared to Robert.

“Robert,” Beth said. “Come on, let it go.”

“This guy manhandled you—”

“It wasn’t like that. We knew each other when we were kids,” she blurted out.

Robert glanced back and forth between Patrick and Beth. “Wait, is this one the guys you’re meeting with tomorrow?”

Beth inhaled sharply, not wanting Patrick to be privy to the information that Wil, David, and Paul were back in town. Judging by the look on Patrick’s face, he had figured it out.

“Uh-uh,” Beth said.

“Wow, so this really is old home week for you, isn’t it, Beth?” Robert said, disgusted. “How much slumming did you do before you met me?”

“Robert, stop it, let’s just go.”

“No, you know what, Beth, I’m done,” he said. “I thought you were a nice, normal girl, but I guess the joke’s on me. You’re nothing but a dumb slut like all the others.”

Patrick hauled off and slugged Robert, knocking him right to the floor, his glasses flying from his face.

“Oh my gosh, Robert!” Beth said kneeling down beside him. “Robert, are you okay?”

The manager shouted, “What the hell are you doing, Jordan? Get out of here! Go home! Don’t bother coming back!”

Robert’s left eye began to bruise and swell up. He groaned, squirming on the floor.

Patrick stepped over him, threw his apron at the manager, and stormed out of the bistro.

“Robert?” Beth said. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what possessed him to do that.”

A waitress came over with an icepack and handed it to Robert. “This should help with the swelling.”

“Beth?” Robert said.

“I’m here, what do you need?”

“Go home. I only have one good eye, and I don’t want to have to look at you with it,” Robert said.

Beth stood. Her feelings were hurt. She left the bistro and found Patrick standing outside smoking a cigarette.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” she said to him. “We’re not kids anymore.”

He shrugged.

“How’s your hand?” Beth asked.

He stared at her out of the corner of his eye. “Stings a little.”

Beth nodded and headed for her car.

“Hey, Beth!” Patrick called after her. She stopped and turned. “So those queers are back in town, huh?”

Her heart sank. She felt like she was twelve years-old again, only now Patrick was built like a Mack truck. She averted her eyes from his dark pools of nothingness and ran to her car.

Chapter 9

Donna

Moonridge - August 7, 1998

Donna sat up in bed, her laptop resting on her thighs, typing up an article for the Moonridge Caper. She had been trying to get a job as a columnist since right out of community college, but the editor had been stubborn about hiring her with little to no writing experience. Donna decided to submit a few articles of her own volition to get the editor to reconsider.

It was almost ten o'clock when her cell phone started buzzing next to her on the bed. She flipped it open and said, "Donna here, don't waste my time."

"Donna, it's Beth. Do you have to say that every time you answer the phone? It's so rude."

"Well, my time is precious. Telemarketers don't fit into my schedule," Donna said, closing her laptop. "So why are you calling so late, Beth? Robert fall asleep early?"

"I just got home. You won't believe the evening I've had."

"Ooh, gossip? Spill it."

"I don't feel up to going into it right now," Beth said. "I think me and Robert are through though."

"You're kidding. You finally dumped him?"

"Well, no."

Donna sighed, exasperated. "You mean you let that bastard dump *you*?"

"Look, I'll tell you all about it tomorrow. I'm still reeling from it myself."

"I can't wait."

"The real reason I'm calling is because the guys are back in town, and they want to see us tomorrow at six."

"Ooh, what guys, pray tell?"

"Wil, David, Paul..."

"No! You mean, *the* guys? Oh my god, I bet they are all grown up and gorgeous!"

Beth laughed. "Not a bad time to be single, huh?"

Donna smiled. "Now you're talking. Sounds like I'm starting to have an influence on you."

"Maybe a little."

"So six tomorrow? Where?"

"Carla's."

"The old hang out, of course. This will be so much fun."

"...yeah."

"Is something wrong? This isn't about Robert, is it?"

"Actually, no. It's just kind of weird being home alone after living with Robert for six months."

"Weird how?"

"I'm guess I'm feeling a little bit scared."

"Oh, Beth, you're perfectly safe. Don't worry so much."

"Yeah, I'm sure you're right. I'm just being silly."

"You sure you're okay now?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine."

Donna and Beth said their goodbyes, and Donna flipped her phone shut. She reopened her

laptop but couldn't concentrate. She had a lot of fond memories of Paul, and she was starting to feel nostalgic...

* * *

The night after their midnight swim, Donna agreed to meet Paul at the swings, unbeknownst to her friends. She was a little late for their meeting, seeing as her mother was up late working on court documents in the study. Once she finally turned in at eleven o'clock, Donna snuck out. She ran to the lake, crossing the grassy knoll, hoping Paul hadn't decided to leave. She found him sitting on one of the swings, hunched over, elbows on knees, and hands folded. She smiled, approaching him.

"You waited for me."

He turned to her. "Yeah."

Donna sat down on the swing next to him. "My mom was blocking my escape. Though I'm not sure she would've noticed even if I walked right in front of her."

Paul nodded.

"You're kind of shy, aren't you?" She didn't wait for a response. "I'll talk enough for the both of us, I don't care."

He smiled. "Thanks."

"No problem. You know, I didn't get a chance to say it last night, but I think that was a really cool thing you guys did for Theresa."

Paul shrugged. "It was nothing."

"No, it really *was* something. It's not even like how Wil saved Beth out in the woods, because apparently those Jordans are completely psychotic. It was really brave," Donna said, staring at him in awe.

His expression changed. She saw a faint blush redden his cheeks and the tiniest curve at the corners of his lips to form a subtle smile.

Donna pushed the toe of her shoes into the dirt, propelling the swing into a gentle sway, forward and back. Her gaze focused on the lake, and the way the moon shone along the ripples in the water.

"I really don't know what I'd do without Theresa," she said. "Beth too, of course, but Theresa especially. I don't mean that to be mean. Theresa's just kind of the rock. I bet David and Wil think that about you."

"Nah," Paul said. "David's always sort of been the leader."

"The rock isn't the leader—not always anyway. But look at you. You're one tall drink of water. I bet David and Wil rely on you more than you think."

Paul snorted.

"You guys have been friends a long time, haven't you?"

"Since kindergarten."

Donna smiled. "Longer than Theresa, Beth, and me. We met in fourth grade. It's kind of weird since we went to the same school all that time. But there's three, maybe four teachers per grade, so I guess we just never landed in the same class. What do you think the odds of that are? Slim, I'd say. There are girls at school, the so-called rich clique, who have tried to poach me—"

"Poach you?"

"You know, take me away from Theresa and Beth. They say moronic things like they're not good enough for me or they're 'not my kind'. They can go eat mud for all I care."

"Amazing."

Donna skidded her shoes along the dirt to stop the swing. "What is?"

Paul shrugged.

"No, come on, tell me. What's so amazing?"

In a low voice, almost inaudible, he replied, "You."

Donna raised her eyebrows. "Did I hear that right? Did you say...moi?"

Paul tried to conceal his chuckle, but she still heard it. She couldn't help but smile.

"Well," she said, "I certainly can't argue with you. I *am* pretty amazing."

Paul laughed more openly now. "And so humble."

"Hey, *you!*" She nudged his arm playfully. "There's nothing wrong with being confident."

"Not at all."

His brown eyes met with hers, and they gazed at each other as the laughter died out and only smiles remained. For the first time in her life, Donna had trouble thinking of something to say. For as much grief as she had gotten from her friends for being boy crazy and a perpetual flirt, in actuality, Donna hadn't really had much experience with boys. It just seemed that way because she was so outgoing and talked a good game.

"It's getting late," Paul finally said. "If my aunt catches me out of my room, she'll throw fifteen fits."

"Yeah, same goes for my dad."

Paul got up from the swing and extended a hand to Donna to help her up. Even once she was on her feet, she hesitated before letting go of his hand. He glanced at their clasped hands and then to Donna. "Do you mind if..."

"What?"

Instead of finishing his thought verbally, he instead leaned down and kissed her lips. It was only a quick peck but Donna's first real kiss just the same.

Paul tore off like a bandit across the grassy knoll. Donna giggled, knowing he was embarrassed. She headed home herself, thinking dreamily about the kiss the entire way...

* * *

Donna leaned her head back on her padded headboard, delightfully reminiscing. She knew she wouldn't be able to get a wink of sleep from the excitement of seeing Paul again after so many years. She drummed her fingers on the keys of her laptop without actually pressing any of the buttons, lost in her own meandering thoughts. As such, she jumped nearly a mile when her cell phone starting buzzing again. She flipped it open, annoyed.

"This had better be good."

"Donna, it's Beth again. I'm sorry for calling—"

"What's wrong?"

"Donna, Patrick is back."

"Back from where?"

"No, I mean he's back in my life...I guess."

"Wait, back up, what's going on?"

Beth told Donna everything that happened at the restaurant.

"Now," Beth continued, "I got a phone call from him, saying he can see me."

"That crazy son of a bitch," Donna said, shaking her head.

"Donna—"

"Beth, make sure your front door is locked, and I'll be right over to get you. You can stay with me."

"No, Donna, I don't want you to get involved."

"You called me, Beth. You're scared, I understand. But I'm not afraid of some childhood bully throwing his weight around. So sit tight, and I'll be right there."

Donna flipped the phone shut before Beth could argue anymore. She set aside her laptop,

changed out of her nightie into some skinny jeans and a blouse and hurried out the door. She hopped into her shiny red corvette and sped off.

As much as the thought of Paul brought back wonderful memories from childhood, hearing Patrick's name made Donna want to forget about the past altogether. She hadn't had as many encounters with the Jordans as Theresa and Beth, but one in particular stood out for her...

* * *

On some inconsequential date in August of '83, Donna went to work with her father at the ER. Since the running away incident, she wasn't allowed to stay home by herself, and her mother had to work late that night. It wasn't the first time she had gone to work with her dad, but she hated the depressing, dreary atmosphere at the hospital as sick and injured people hovered around. Luckily, Donna was allowed to stay in her father's office while he worked, which was quiet enough for her to just kick back and read some magazines until it came time for her mother to come pick her up. Tonight, however, all was not quiet; soon a knock came at the door.

"Come in!" Donna called, without bothering to look up from her magazine.

In her peripheral vision, she saw a man in a white coat—a doctor, no doubt. "Who are you, and what are you doing here?" he said, flippant.

Donna set down her magazine and folded her hands together atop her father's desk. "You *must* be new here. I'm Donna Morrison, Dr. Richard Morrison's daughter, and I really don't like to be disturbed when my dad's on duty. But if you leave your name, I'll let him know you stopped by, Doctor..."

"Stidwell. Dr. Stidwell. And I don't care who your father is, kids don't belong in areas meant for hospital staff only," he said. "Come with me right now."

"Are you kidding me right now?"

"No. You'll have to sit in the waiting area."

"With the sick people?"

"They won't hurt you. Now, let's get a move on."

Donna scoffed and got up from her father's desk. As she approached the doctor she said, "My father will hear about this."

"Hm."

Dr. Stidwell escorted Donna out to the waiting room located near the emergency room entrance. There was a surprising amount of people there, considering how small Moonridge was. Donna found a seat between an old woman and a boy, not much older than nineteen, who had a white cloth wrapped around his bleeding finger. She sucked in her breath between her teeth, drawing her lips back.

"Yikes, what happened to you?" she asked the boy.

"Jigsaw got away from me. Nearly cut my whole finger off."

"And no one's helping you yet?"

He shrugged. "Guess they have people in worse shape." He nodded toward the emergency entrance. "Like that poor bastard."

Donna watched the paramedics wheel in a man on a gurney whose leg was nearly been severed from his body. She covered her mouth, feeling like she might vomit.

Just as Donna was about to get up to get some fresh air, the old woman next to her said, "Don't worry, dearie. Most of them come out alive."

She turned to the old woman, and for the first time saw she was stroking a plush cat as though it were real. Goose bumps crawled up Donna's arms, and all she could think to say was, "That's good."

"My daughter was hit by a train fifteen years ago," the old woman said, dazing off. "She was quite mangled—I can't imagine anyone surviving that."

Donna squirmed in her seat, troubled by the old woman. She ran outside and took some deep breaths. It felt good to be out of the hospital, away from the sights and smells that made her so nauseated. The warm summer breeze felt good on her skin, ridding her of goose bumps and her overall creeped out feeling. She walked along the path outside the hospital, letting her fingertips dance along the plants framing it. She rounded a corner and nearly bumped into three boys coming towards her. She stood face to face with the Jordan brothers.

"You've got to be kidding me," she said. "What are you doing here? Visiting some other poor kid you've put in the hospital?"

"Well, if it isn't the rich bitch," Patrick said. "Quick, boys, find a hangman's noose."

"Oh, that's really amusing. Almost as amusing as you three consistently getting your butts whooped by Paul, David, and Wil. Oh no, wait, that's *much* funnier."

"You know what's *really* funny? Watching that fat ass swinging from the rope."

Donna gave Patrick a hard shove. He cracked up. "Woo-hoo-hoo, boys. Who knew the rich bitch was so damn feisty? You break a nail, princess?"

She shook her head. "You three are really not worth my time."

"Unlike every other boy in school?"

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, come on, like you don't know. You're the class slut." Patrick grinned, leering at her. "You here at the hospital picking up some birth control?"

"Ugh, you guys are really pathetic," Donna said. "Even if what you said is true, which it isn't, and even if I had been with every boy in school, which I haven't—I still wouldn't let any of you lay one finger on me. And I imagine that holds true for every other girl in school, because you three are repulsive. Now excuse me, I have to go find my dad."

Donna turned around and started to walk away, when Patrick said, "I guess you don't know about me and Beth."

She looked back at him. "What are you talking about now?"

"Me and Beth...we're together now."

Donna laughed. "You really are crazy, aren't you?"

"You don't believe me? Beth is mine."

"In your dreams, which is the only way you'll ever get any girl to be 'yours', because you are the lowest of the low, bottom of the barrel piece of trash, and I'd spit on you for everything you've done to my friends, but that would be a waste of perfectly good saliva. Stay away from Beth. Stay away from Theresa. And stay away from me."

"You're lucky, Donna."

She grew impatient. "Why is that?"

"You're already at the hospital."

Patrick and his brothers charged at her, and Donna took off. She ran through the parking lot, swerving through parked cars and ducking down behind them. The Jordan brothers were fast, but she managed to stay ahead of them. She circled back around toward the emergency room entrance, so she could escape if they did get too close. She stopped and turned around to check on them. They ran up alongside an ambulance parked out front and stared at her while catching their breath.

"Giving up...*Patty*?" said Donna.

"Come on, guys, let's go," Patrick said. "We don't need to mess with her. We have Beth."

Donna rolled her eyes. "You're so delusional! Beth isn't and never will be yours!"

She went back inside and waited for her mother...

* * *

Donna pulled into the parking lot of Beth's apartment building. She parked, but before getting out of the car, she scanned the area to see if anyone was lurking around. The place was deserted. She stepped outside and walked swiftly to the front door of the apartment building. As she was about to use the intercom to call Beth's apartment, she heard whistling. She whirled around but didn't see anyone. The whistling continued, and Donna traced it to the side of the building. Patrick was leaning against the wall and stopped whistling when she approached.

"Well, well, well," he said. "I'd recognize those beady little brown eyes anywhere."

Donna scoffed. "Aren't we a little old for this?"

"Depends on what 'this' is." He took a cigarette out of his pocket. "Got a light?"

"For you? No."

He snorted, patting his pockets for some matches or a lighter. When he came up empty, he tucked the cigarette behind his ear.

"So, did your brothers finally wise up and stop following you around like a couple of sheep?" Donna asked.

"What's it to you?"

She shrugged. "Nothing really. However, we're going to have a problem if you intend to skulk around Beth's apartment building or call her or basically exist at all to her."

"Why don't you let Beth live her own life?"

"Why do you think I'm here, Patty? You freaked her out, and she called me. Now, I'll admit, you punching out Robert is rather delightful, and I wish I had been there to see it, but this stalking thing is *so* Junior High. So why don't we keep past indiscretions in the past, and you go on home, 'kay?"

He approached her, standing right in front of her. "And what if I don't?"

"Come on, really? It's been fifteen years, you're almost thirty years-old. Whatever your obsession is or your problem is, get over it."

"Beth's single now...this is only the beginning."

Patrick headed off and got into an old beat-up sedan parked on the street. He tore off, tires squealing.

Donna returned to the front door and rang for Beth, who buzzed her into the building. She went to the second floor and found Beth waiting for her out in the hall.

"Donna, are you okay? I expected you sooner."

"Fine, Beth. Let's go inside."

Beth shut the door behind them, bolted it, and looked out the peephole. "Did you see anyone?"

"Yeah. Patrick was outside, but he just left."

"You saw him? Did he see you?"

"Well, I assume so, we carried on a conversation."

"You *talked* to him?"

"Don't act so shocked, Beth. You talked to him too."

"Yeah, in public and by accident and...sweet Lord, what have I gotten myself into now? What did he say?"

"Not much. He's still hung up on you, which is a little sad after all these years."

"Donna, you're still hung up on Paul."

"Oh. Yeah. Well, that's different. Paul at least liked me back...at one point anyway. Patrick is your classic stalker. Congratulations, Beth."

"Very funny. What am I supposed to do?"

"Get a big strong man to protect you—say, I wonder if Wil is single."

"Donna!"

"Hey, I'm just saying. We're not getting any younger, the guys are practically falling back into our laps, and I intend to make the most of it. I think you should do the same."

“Donna, let’s be serious for a minute. Patrick is back. Patrick *Jordan*. Which means his brothers could be back too. What if they’re still dangerous? I mean Robert—”

“—had it coming, admit it, Beth. I felt like decking the guy too.”

“Be that as it may, he got himself fired over it. He was outside, he’s calling me.” She sighed. “I feel like I’m twelve again.”

“I’d love to be twelve again. Then I could’ve told Paul how I felt, and maybe, just maybe, I would be married right now.”

“Donna, focus please... on me.”

“Sorry. Beth, I’m not going to let anything happen to you. Come home with me, and you can stay as long as you want. I have the extra bedroom, and it’s no big deal. Patrick will probably get bored and move on, especially if you aren’t at home while he’s skulking around. If he tries anything, we’ll call the cops and get his butt in jail. He’s not a kid anymore. He can’t get away with shit like that with just a slap on the wrist.”

Beth nodded. “Thanks, Donna.”

“Any time. Why don’t you go pack some clothes?”

While Beth did that, Donna sat down on the sofa. There were some magazines splayed out on the coffee table. One caught her eye with a topic titled “7 Ways to Save a Failing Marriage”. Donna picked it up and flipped to the article, perusing it. It made her think of her parents, who argued so much when she was young...

* * *

The day after going to the hospital, Donna lay in her bedroom circling clothes she wanted to buy in a fashion magazine. She tapped the end of her red marker against her chin, as she tried to decide between two skirts: one in hot pink reminiscent of a tutu and a pleaded one in blue.

A knock came at her door, and the family housekeeper entered the room. “Bad time, Miss Donna?” she asked in her southern twang.

“No, Roberta, you can come in.”

She lugged the vacuum into the room and uncoiled the cord.

“Roberta, which of these skirts do you like the best?” Donna held up the magazine.

“Oh, the blue one is very smart.” She had only given it a quick glance before bending over to plug in the vacuum.

Donna set down her magazine. “Roberta, did you always want to be a maid?”

“I don’t think any little girl aspires to be a maid, Miss Donna.”

“What did you wanna be?”

“Oh, I dreamed of several things. Perhaps the funniest one was wanting to be an engineer... you know, like on a train. I guess I just liked the idea of always traveling and being on a journey.”

“I think I know what you mean. I want to be an actress. Or maybe a model, so I can travel the world going on photo shoots. What do you think?”

“I think I have floors to sweep, Miss Donna. Maybe this is a better question for your momma.”

“Mom’s working in her office. I shouldn’t bother her.”

“No, she’s on a break. Saw her in the kitchen making one of those fruity drinks she likes. Go on and talk to her while I clean up in here.”

Donna shrugged and left her room. She heard the whir of the blender as she headed downstairs. She found her mother in the kitchen but not before her dad did.

“Suzanne!” he shouted over the blender.

She turned it off. “What?”

“I had to work a double shift. I would like to get some sleep before my next one.”

“Then, sleep.”

“You’re making a racket! Do you *have* to make one of those shakes now?”

“Smoothie, Richard. It’s called a ‘smoothie’.”

“Just keep the noise down, Suzanne.”

“Just as soon as my beverage is at the perfect consistency.” She turned the blender back on.

Richard threw up his hands and turned around to see Donna in the kitchen archway. He walked past her, without giving her much acknowledgment.

“Mom!” Donna shouted.

Suzanne didn’t turn off the blender this time. She held down the lid while her jet-black hair hung to her chin, concealing her face. Donna strolled up to her and waved a hand at her. Her mother finally turned off the blender.

“Smoothie, Donna?”

“No thanks, Mom.”

Suzanne poured her drink into a tall glass. “These are so healthy, they’ll add ten years to your life. Though, I suppose you don’t have to worry about that just yet.”

“On the contrary, I’m getting old. I’m going to be thirteen soon.”

“A teenager... God help us.”

Suzanne carried her smoothie to their kitchen bar and sat in one of the stylish high-back stools. She had a short stack of documents waiting for her.

“Mom,” Donna said, following her. “I’m conflicted about something.”

“What’s that?”

“I don’t know what to be when I get older. I’m debating between an actress and a model.”

“Both.”

“Both?”

“Donna,” her mother said, “we’re living in a golden age where women can be and do whatever they want. We’re strong, independent. We have to show men that we can conquer anything that comes our way: jobs, a home, children. We can do it all.”

“Yeah, well, that sounds like a lot of work,” Donna said.

“Bite your tongue, Donna Marie. We live in the land of opportunity. When my mother came here from Japan in 1946, I was just five years-old, but even then I knew where a woman’s place was... especially a Japanese woman. I had to work twice as hard, for half the credit of a man, but my day of glory finally came, and yours will too if you don’t squander your opportunities and that wonderful mind you have. Work is our only tool to show men that they aren’t and never were better than women. Though I have to say, you should really consider a career in something a bit more challenging to your mind. Perhaps a lawyer like me?”

“I don’t think that’s for me, Mom.”

“Well, you won’t know until you’re older.”

“I guess. Thanks anyway, Mom.”

Donna returned to her room. After about ten minutes, she heard the blender going again followed by her parents yelling. She covered her ears, but their muffled shouts could still be heard. She tried turning on her stereo to drown them out. Quarterflash sang “Harden My Heart”, and Donna cranked up the volume. She sang along with the cassette, dancing around her room. She stopped abruptly when she heard the front door slam shut. She stopped the cassette and ran downstairs.

Suzanne paced the foyer, hands on hips. “Donna.”

“Did Dad leave?”

“Yes. Your father has decided being married to a strong woman is too much for him,” Suzanne said.

“Are you saying...”

“Your father’s moving out, Donna. Maybe for good, maybe not. But we’re going to be just fine. We don’t need him.”

“Yes, Mom, *I* do. I don’t want you guys to get a divorce!”

“Donna, lower your voice.”

She fought back her tears so hard a sharp pain shot across her forehead. “You drove him away.”

“I did no such thing.”

“You had to keep pressing and keep pressing until he hit his breaking point. Why do you have to be like that? Why is your way the only way?”

“You don’t understand the dynamics between a husband and a wife, Donna. As soon as I relent, as soon as I give an inch, a man will take a mile. It’s a constant power struggle, and it’s the only way women will ever be equal to men. I want my daughter to grow up in a world where she is every bit as good as a man is in the eyes of society.”

“No, Mother, that’s not what you want. You want women to be superior, not equal—”

“We *are* superior.”

Donna shook her head. “Then why did you get married at all?”

“It was a different time, Donna.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means when we’re young, we make foolish decisions based on society’s standards. It is only with time and age you learn that society is not always right.”

“Did you even love him?”

Her mother stared at the tiled floor and said, “I don’t know...which probably means, I didn’t.”

“Never?”

“Donna, I have a lot of work to do—”

“Of course you do. That’s all you ever do. That’s all he ever does. I guess work is a great distraction from having to deal with the truth, right?”

“You’re very bright and observant, Donna. I’m proud of you.”

She snorted. “Swell. But that doesn’t bring Dad back.”

She returned to her bedroom and let her tears fall...

* * *

Donna’s parents divorced later that winter. She still had trouble thinking about it even today, and she found herself tossing the magazine down in favor of an arts and crafts one instead, even though she had zero interest in it. Fortunately, Beth finished packing soon after she started perusing the pages. The two of them headed out, and Donna drove them back to her place. Even if she didn’t feel particularly frightened by Patrick, she had to admit to herself that it was good to be home.

Chapter 10

Beth's Diner

Moonridge - August 8, 1998

The following morning, Beth waited in the diner she owned for Theresa and Donna. They usually had a quick visit before she officially opened and before they had to go to work. When Theresa and Donna arrived, they took their place at the counter, while Beth fetched them coffee and muffins.

Donna told Theresa about Patrick and what Beth told her. She grimaced and grew pale at the news of his return.

"You know," she said, "I was really looking forward to seeing the guys tonight, and this puts a huge damper on it."

"Well, if it gets out of hand, we'll just call the cops," Donna said.

Beth served them each a blueberry muffin and poured their coffee. "It shouldn't come to that. I feel kind of sorry for him to be honest."

"What?" Theresa said.

"Well, I mean, fifteen years later, and he still seems so lost."

"Yeah, that's because he's deranged."

"Theresa," Beth said. "He wasn't all bad. He *did* give me back my necklace."

"Yeah, after *he* stole it. That's like shooting someone on purpose and then taking them to the hospital, like that's gonna make up for it."

"It wasn't just that though," Beth said. "Did I ever tell you guys about Lou Perkins?"

"Yeah, about you going to see him and him being a total asshole?"

"Well, that, yeah. But what about what happened afterwards? I mean, after Patrick gave me back my necklace."

"I'm intrigued," Donna said. "What happened?"

"Well, Lou Perkins came to our house the next day. Apparently someone vandalized his car, and he thought I was responsible."

"You?" Donna scoffed. "What a joke."

"Yeah, well, apparently someone spray painted the word 'Murderer' on his car in red."

"Someone?" Theresa said. "Someone as in Patrick?"

Beth shrugged. "He denied it, but who else? The guys didn't even know I saw Lou Perkins. Patrick only knew because by some twist of fate he lived on the same block. He could've gotten into serious trouble for it. What would he get out of it?"

"Maybe he thought he'd win you over," said Donna.

Beth shrugged. "But then why deny it?"

"Regardless," Theresa said, "that hardly makes him an upstanding citizen. If anything, it makes him even more of a common criminal."

"Yeah, the action wasn't right, but maybe he had good intentions."

"Yeah? And what kind of intentions did he have when he hanged me?" Theresa asked. "He should've been put away for that, I don't care how old he was. Some shitty asylum where he'd have to wear a straightjacket and sit in a padded room all day, that would've served him right."

"That's horrible, Theresa," Beth said. "No one deserves that."

Her eyes narrowed. "How can you say that to me?"

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have. I guess I have trouble believing that someone can be all bad. My dad used to say there's good in everyone, and the challenge is to find it. Patrick scares me, but I feel like I'm letting my dad down if I don't try to help him."

"No, Beth. You're letting your dad down by endangering yourself and putting that asshole before your friends," Theresa said.

Beth fought the urge to cry. "That's really mean. You know that's not what I'm doing."

"Yeah, well, you guys will never know what it was like for me at the end of that rope. Think about that the next time you think he deserves your kindness."

Theresa stormed out of the diner.

"I didn't mean to hurt her," Beth said.

"It's a touchy subject, Beth," Donna said. "It's easy for us to forget just how savage that was. I'm sure Theresa will never forget. But as for Patrick's motives today, I don't know. Stalking very seldom turns out well."

Beth nodded. "Yeah. I know."

"You take care of yourself. I'm gonna head on to work, and when I get off, I'll come pick you up."

Donna left the diner, leaving Beth alone. She took the chairs off the tables, which were always propped up the evening before so the mopping could be done. She tucked them in neatly and wiped down the tabletops. She headed into the back room to get a stack of placemats to set out. When she came back out to the main dining room, she gasped, dropping the paper placemats all over the floor. Patrick stood in front of the counter along with his brothers, whom Beth barely recognized.

"Did we scare you?" Patrick asked.

Beth smiled, nervously. "No, just startled me. We're not open yet." She stooped down to gather up the placemats. "The cook's not here yet, but there's coffee and muffins if you guys are hungry."

"We're not. Well, not for food anyway."

Beth stood up and went about her business of laying the placemats out on the tables. "We're famous for our blueberry muffins. You really should try one."

"Do you remember our dad, darling?"

Beth shuddered at the thought of him. "Yes."

"Would you like to see him?"

"I have to work right now," Beth said, trying not to show fear. "Is...is he doing well?"

"No, actually, he's dead."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Of what?"

"Antifreeze."

Beth stopped and looked into Patrick's black pools. "I'm sorry?"

"Remember?"

She chuckled uneasily. "You almost had me going."

"I'm not joking." Patrick slid into the booth where Beth was laying out the placemats. "My old man used to smoke cigars a lot. We had a stack of those black plastic ashtrays under the kitchen sink, must've had half a dozen of those suckers. But I can't recall a single time they were ever used. See... when a man like that has sons, they become his ashtray."

"That's horrible," Beth said. "I'm so sorry."

"Leo..." He pointed to his brother, who had a full-grown beard and shoulder-length hair these days. "...Leo got the cigars the worse, didn't you, little brother?"

He nodded.

"What do you think about him now, darling?" Patrick asked. "Don't you think he deserved to die?"

"It's not for me to say."

“But you do want to see the body, right? It’s down at the funeral parlor as we speak.”

“No, I don’t think so. Like I said, I have to work.”

Patrick stood up and put his arm around her shoulders. “Come on, Beth. It’ll only take a minute.”

“The cook will be here any minute, the diner is opening soon.”

“Then, we’d better get a move on.”

Patrick had a tight grip on Beth’s arm and escorted her out of the diner with his brothers following.

“Patrick, why are you doing this?” Beth asked, trying to wriggle free.

“You knew my dad. Don’t you want to see him one last time before he’s put in the ground?”

Beth shook her head, remembering her only encounter with Ray Jordan...

* * *

The day after the vandalization of Lou’s car, Beth returned to his neighborhood to see the graffiti for herself. She knew she shouldn’t be happy about the crime, but she felt like he got at least some of what he deserved for killing her father. Those red letters scrawled on his black car looked like a work of art to her. She couldn’t help but smile.

“Nice work,” Patrick said walking up behind her.

“I didn’t do this.”

“Well, somebody did.”

She eyed him closely. “Did you?”

He scoffed. “Yeah, right. Why would I do it?”

She shrugged. “I thought maybe you did it for me.”

“Would that impress you? Would that make you leave your friends?”

Beth stared back at the spray painted car. “No.”

Patrick grabbed her arm and dragged her down the sidewalk. “Come with me.”

“Where?”

“I think it’s time you meet the family.”

“W-why?”

“Nervous?”

She trembled. “N-no.”

“Liar.” He dragged her through his front yard, through the broken screen door, and into his rundown house. His father sat like a blob on a stained sofa, surrounded by empty liquor bottles and snack bags. His head lulled back, his eyelids on the verge of closing but not quite there yet. “Hey, Pop. This is Beth...my girlfriend.”

Ray Jordan opened his bloodshot eyes, a heavy glaze over them. He waved the children over, his arm flopping around like a fish out of water. “Let’s get a closer look here.”

Patrick dragged Beth over to the couch, which had an overwhelming smell of whiskey and urine. She had to hold her breath to keep from gagging. Behind them, a black and white TV was on mute playing some old show Beth didn’t recognize. Patrick’s father leaned forward and grabbed her chin between his thumb and fingers, turning her head from side to side.

“Yeah,” he said, his gruff voice passed through his yellow teeth. “She’s a cutie all right. She’ll do just fine.”

His hand moved from her chin to her shoulder, and Beth let out a horrified scream. Patrick let go of her arm, and his father fell back against the couch, causing it and the side table to quake from his flopping weight. Beth ran from the Jordan house and didn’t stop running. She didn’t take the bus home, but instead just ran the entire way, too afraid to stop for anything...

* * *

The funeral home lay ahead, and Beth didn't want to go inside. Patrick had a firm grip on her though, as they walked up to the quaint porch and through the double wooden doors. The funeral parlor was deserted. A display of coffins stood in a semicircle around the main room to the left. A chill slithered up Beth's spine as they made their way through the funeral home.

"Someone's going to catch us," she said, hopeful at the notion.

"Not likely," replied Patrick. "See, Rodney works here, and the folks that own this place don't come in for an hour. We have the place all to ourselves."

Beth's heart sank.

Rod stepped ahead of them, opening a door leading down to the basement. Patrick pulled Beth down the stairs, each one of them creaking under their weight. She felt like she might hyperventilate, especially when they reached the bottom and saw a body covered in a white sheet laid out on a metal table. She clutched the inner edges of Patrick's open denim jacket, gazing up at him.

"Patrick, please, stop this," she begged. "Please, let's just leave now."

"Don't wimp out now, darling."

As Patrick dragged her toward the body, her heels skidded on the smooth linoleum floor. In her desperation, she rested her chest against his, reaching up to touch his cheek. "Patrick," she said, "if we leave right now, I'll go out with you. Just me and you."

He stopped in his tracks, holding Beth's arms. "What's that now?"

"It's what you want, isn't it? Right? A date?"

"Oh, I want much more than that," he said, sneering.

Beth's breathing had grown shallow now. She felt lightheaded. She needed to get away from the body. Death hung in the room like a poison gas, and she felt like she might suffocate from it. She nodded. "We'll start slow. Yes? Dating...restaurants, movies...go from there?"

He ran his fingers through her hair, gently at first, but then grasped the scruff in his fist, wrenching her head back. "How stupid do you think I am?"

"Patrick, please!" Beth shrieked, beginning to sob now.

He turned her around, forcing her to lean forward over the covered body. He held her by the throat and said, "Rod, pull the sheet back."

Beth squeezed her eyes shut, but heard the whoosh of the sheet being drawn.

"Open those pretty little eyes," Patrick said.

"No!"

"Open them!"

Beth's eyes shot open. Lying out before her was the bloated corpse of Ray Jordan. She screamed, growing sicker and sicker. She clawed at Patrick's hand as it pressed hard against her windpipe, stifling her scream.

"His alcoholism was ruled as cause of death," Patrick said. "You know drinking antifreeze mimics severe drunkenness? Hell, I didn't know. Lucky for me though, huh?"

"You're choking her, Patrick," Rod said casually.

Patrick let up. Beth gasped for air and managed to duck away from him. She stumbled towards the stairs but stopped before ascending. "I gave you a chance," she croaked, tears streaming down her face. "Who else would?"

She climbed the stairs, and the Jordans didn't follow. When her strength returned, she ran from the funeral home to the gas station across from her diner. She stopped in the restroom there to clean herself up before returning to work. She splashed cold water on her face, trying to reduce the redness and puffiness around her tear-filled eyes. With one of the rough, brown paper towels from the

dispenser, she patted her face dry while staring at herself in the mirror. In the blur of her tears, she envisioned her father's face looking back at her, the young man that he once was. He was only her age when he died, which seemed surreal to her now. He seemed so strong, so put together, so mature. She didn't feel like that at all. She felt scatterbrained, lost, lonely, and meek—almost childlike. He was married with a family, had a fine job as a teacher at an institute for children with special needs, and had a nice home. Beth had her diner—that was all she had. She had racked up her fair share of failed relationships, the majority with verbally or physically abusive men. She had an apartment she hated living alone in, which was probably why she put up with so many men who treated her badly. How disappointed her father would be in her, she realized, and the thought almost made her start bawling again.

Beth left the restroom and went into the gas station's convenient store. She headed straight for the candy aisle to pick up her father's favorite: gumdrops. She took a bag of them off their metal hook and brought them up the cashier, who was a middle-aged man with tufts of gray in his brown hair and mustache. He eyed her closely.

"You're the little lady who owns the diner across the street, ain't ya?" he asked.

Beth nodded.

"Williams, right?"

"How did you know?"

"You're Jay's daughter, ain't ya?"

"You knew my dad?"

The man nodded, punching in the price on his old-fashioned cash register. "Went to school with ol' Jaybird. Sometimes we'd go fishing together."

"Really? My dad fished?"

"Yes, ma'am. Always threw em back though. Said he felt bad killing something for no reason."

Beth's mind flashed to Lou Perkins, who had done that very thing to her father. "Yeah."

"These..." He held up the bag of gumdrops. "...were his favorite."

"Yes, I know."

The man nodded. "A buck-nineteen's your total."

Beth handed him a dollar and quarter. When he handed her her change, she dropped it into a can on the counter for a children's charity.

"He was a good man, ol' Jaybird," said the cashier. "He did a hell of a lot for people."

Beth nodded. "Yeah."

"Introduced me to my wife. We'll be married twenty-five years come winter."

"Wow! Congratulations."

"Yeah, he knew her from—Jesus H. Christ!" He stared out the window, wide-eyed.

Beth followed his gaze to see billowing black smoke over her diner. She ran from the store, stopping at the curb. She stared in horror at the towering flames reaching toward the sky, the black smoke swirling from them. The screams of sirens rang out as three fire engines arrived at the scene. Beth saw her waitress and cook coming out the front door of the diner, choking and holding on to one another.

"Jen! Trevor!" Beth called, running across the street to her employees.

A firefighter approached them as well to see if they were all right, while the other firefighters worked on extinguishing the flames.

"Beth, where were you?" Jen asked.

"I..."

"Come on, come on!" said the firefighter. "Get away from the building."

He escorted the three of them closer to the curb once he discovered they weren't injured.

"What happened?" Beth asked. "What caused this?"

“It happened so fast,” Trevor, the cook, said. “I saw the flames, small ones, in the back when I arrived. It looked like someone had left towels on the stoves or something. I tried to get to the fire extinguisher, but the fire hit the oil in the deep fryers, and all hell broke loose.”

“The stoves were on?”

He nodded. “Jen arrived after me. I assumed you had fired them up, Beth, and were in the restroom or something, but I looked for you and couldn’t find you. You weren’t inside.”

“No, I went across the street...just for a minute.” Beth knew that was a lie, but she felt so stupid, so guilty for leaving her business unattended. “I didn’t turn anything on.”

“Are you sure?” asked Jen. “Who else would’ve?”

Beth shook her head without answers. The fire was starting to get under control, and beyond the diner Beth could’ve sworn she saw figures standing among the nearby trees. Through the mist of the fire hoses, the reckless flames, and smoke, she couldn’t be certain of what she saw. When she checked again, they were gone as though they were never there in the first place.

When the fire was finally out, the chief fireman approached Beth and her employees. “One of you own this establishment?”

“Me,” replied Beth.

“An investigation will be held to see if we can locate the source of the fire—”

“It was an accident,” Beth said. “A freak accident.”

The fire chief nodded. “Well, we’ll get you a full report to give to your insurance provider.”

“Insurance provider?”

“You do have insurance, don’t you?”

“I...was going to. I couldn’t afford it right away, but I was...”

“Yes, well, we’ll still get you a report.”

When the fire chief had walked away, Jen said, “You don’t have insurance?”

“I wanted to have it—”

“I needed this job, Beth,” Jen said, upset. “I have three kids to look after. Now what am I going to do?”

“I’m...sorry,” Beth said, choked up. “I’ve lost everything though. This was my dream—”

“And it was your own stupid fault for losing it,” Jen snapped.

Beth stared at the charred skeleton of her former business and sobbed. Everything was gone.

Chapter 11

Reunited

Moonridge - August 8, 1998

Theresa went home after working the loading docks to wash up before seeing the guys. Her muscles seemed to be adapting to the ongoing soreness from all the heavy lifting. Now it was more of a nuisance than a crippling pain. She showered and changed into a pair of black slacks, violet T-shirt, and knee-high black boots. She usually kept her full curly hair tied back in a ponytail, but she let it flow free tonight. Leaving it unbound somehow made her feel more feminine, even sexy.

“Going out?” Michael said from the living room sofa as Theresa came into the room.

“Yeah. Don’t wait up.”

“Hot date?”

“Yeah, right,” Theresa said. “Lock the door if you go out, will ya?”

“You got it.”

Theresa left the apartment and hurried down the cement stairs, eager to see her friends. She walked across the parking lot to her car, and as she unlocked the driver’s side door, a shadow fell over her. She turned to find Patrick and his brothers standing beside her car.

“Hey there, Theresa,” said Patrick. “Have you gained weight?”

“Get the hell away from my car, or I’ll run your ass over,” Theresa said, opening the door.

“Touchy, touchy,” Patrick said. “Say, you wouldn’t be going to see Beth, would you?”

“Why don’t you leave Beth the fuck alone?”

“You gonna make me? Quick, boys, grab some rope.”

Theresa slammed the car door shut, marched up to Patrick, grabbed the front of his jacket, and shoved him up against the car. “You fuck with me or my friends, and you’re gonna wake up in a dirt plot, you son of a bitch. Am I making myself clear?”

He half-grinned. “Crystal.”

Theresa released him and reopened the car door.

“Oh, one thing,” Patrick said. “Beth agreed to go out with me. Looks like I get to fuck with friends after all.”

Theresa got into her car, started the engine, and slowly reversed out of the space. Just to scare them though, she swerved back in, aiming right for them. They leapt out of the way, tumbling into a patch of grass beyond the parking space. Theresa laughed and reversed again, fully this time. She flipped them off as she drove away.

When she arrived at Carla’s Diner, Theresa saw Beth’s car already in the parking lot. She parked next to hers and headed inside.

“Theresa, over here!” called Donna.

Theresa spotted Beth and Donna in a large corner booth. The guys weren’t there yet. She sat down with her friends.

“Hey, I didn’t see your car out front, Donna.”

“Beth gave me a ride. It’s all part of my master plan to get Paul to give me a ride home later.”

Theresa chuckled. “You’d better hope he’s not married.”

“Well, take it from me, marriage is hardly permanent,” retorted Donna.

“You okay, Beth?” Theresa asked, seeing the drawn face of her friend. “I’m sorry I stormed out

this morning. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"It's fine. I'm fine," Beth said.

"You sure?"

Beth blurted out, "My diner burned down."

"What?" Theresa and Donna said at the same time.

"Yeah. No one was hurt, but it's gone."

"How did it happen?" asked Donna.

"Freak accident."

"Well, the insurance should cover the damage," Donna said. "I can talk to my mom—"

"I didn't get insurance, okay?" Beth said. "I know, I'm stupid and put too much faith in things working out fine, and now I have nothing."

"You're not stupid, Beth" Theresa said. "Don't ever say that. You made a mistake, it happens. Maybe you can take out another loan to rebuild it. Maybe go into business with someone next time, help share the costs, the responsibilities..."

"I don't think so. I'll probably have to move in with my mom—"

"Screw that," Donna said. "You can live with me until you get back on your feet."

"Oh, I couldn't do that—"

"I insist. Besides, what are friends for?"

Beth hugged Donna. "You're the best."

"I know," Donna said with a playful smile.

Beth giggled.

"Don't look now," Theresa said. "But I think three good-looking men just walked through the door."

David, Wil, and Paul approached them, and Theresa and her friends stood up to greet them. They exchanged casual, yet awkward hugs as one might do with old, but unfamiliar friends.

"You guys look great," Donna said, grinning and eyeing Paul specifically. "All grown up."

"Ditto," David said. "Gorgeous as ever."

"Well," Theresa said with a smirk, "let's not exaggerate."

The group laughed and sat down in their booth—the guys on one side, the girls on the other, with Donna and Paul next to each other. Theresa lit up a cigarette, and David joined her.

"Filthy habit," he said.

"As I recall, you're the one who taught me it," Theresa said, half-grinning.

"Wil," Beth said, meekly. "How have you been?"

"Not bad," he said.

"Anything interesting we should know about?" Donna added.

"Not really."

Almost on cue, a little girl with long dark hair ran up to the table. She climbed into the empty booth behind the guys and whispered something in Wil's ear. He dug into his pocket for some change, handed it to her, and she ran off towards the jukebox.

"You in the habit of giving money to random children, Wil?" Theresa asked.

"Only when they're mine."

Beth appeared crestfallen. "You're married?"

"Widowed," Wil replied, lighting up his own cigarette. "Three years now."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Beth said, but the light was back in her eyes.

Donna started to ask, "How did she—"

"What's your little girl's name, Wil?" Theresa interrupted.

"Lacey."

"How old is she?"

“Seven.”

Theresa smiled. “Well, she’s adorable.”

“And what about you two?” Donna said, shifting her gaze between David and Paul. “Wives? Kids?”

“Dodged those bullets,” David said. “No offense, Wil.”

He shrugged, indifferent.

“Paul?” Donna urged.

“Still single and childless. How about you?”

“Footloose and fancy free, thank you very much,” Donna said.

“What she said,” Theresa agreed, “just not as cheery.”

David chuckled.

A young waitress came up to their table, note pad and pen in hand. “I’m Mary, I’ll be your server this evening. What can I get for you?”

“Is Carla here?” David asked.

“Oh, no, she’s not working tonight. May I help you?”

The group ordered their burgers and pops, just like in the old days.

“So,” Theresa said, once the waitress had walked away, “do you guys still save lives?”

“Nah, I think we’ve retired from that,” David said. “Though, I dunno, we haven’t been around you guys for quite some time.”

Theresa grinned. “Yeah, we’ve had to fend for ourselves.”

“I swear those days when we were kids seem like a lifetime ago,” David said, rubbing his eye with the palm of his hand. Theresa thought at first he might be getting teary, but then realized it must just be irritation from the cigarette smoke hanging in the air. “We had some good times though.”

“Definitely,” Theresa agreed.

“Except for the Jordan brothers,” Wil said.

There was an awkward silence among the girls, and the guys stared at them for a moment.

Paul finally said, “We shouldn’t even drudge that up. They’re in the past.”

“Not really,” Beth muttered.

“What was that?” David asked.

“Oh shit,” Theresa said getting up from the table.

Lacey was standing near the jukebox, while a man was stooping down on her level talking to her. It was Patrick.

Theresa marched up to them, took Lacey’s hand, and pulled her behind herself. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Patrick stood up, towering over her. “She belong to you?”

Theresa furrowed her brow.

Wil arrived then, sweeping Lacey up into his arms. “You okay?” She nodded. He turned to Patrick and with no sense of recognition said, “Did you want something, man?”

Patrick sneered. “No, *man*, I don’t want nothing.”

“Wil,” Theresa said, under her breath, “it’s Patrick.”

He took a step back. “Why were you talking to my kid?”

“*Your* kid? I’ll be damned. I was just asking her about the music she was picking, that’s all.”

“That’s all?”

“Yep.”

Wil shook his head and walked back to the booth.

Theresa couldn’t let it go so easily. “What the fuck is wrong with you? What did you say to her?”

Patrick grinned. “It’s gonna drive you crazy, isn’t it?”

Theresa snorted. "Every time I think you've sunk to your lowest, you prove me wrong. You're a piece of shit, you know that?"

"Like I give a rat's ass what you think... *wop*." Theresa flinched at the ethnic slur, narrowing her eyes. Patrick continued, "Things are just getting interesting. The gang's all here now, and there's some unfinished business to attend to. See ya around."

He left the diner, but not before shooting a look at Beth.

Theresa returned to the booth.

"You okay?" David asked her.

"Yeah, I'm fine. He's pretty unstable though. I guess some things never change."

"You guys could've told us Patrick was still around," Wil said.

"You just got back," Theresa said. "Why bring up something as unpleasant as the Jordan brothers?"

"They try anything?" David asked.

"Not really, no. Idle threats mostly," Theresa said. "Trust me, the first sign of anything remotely violent towards us, and I'm gonna get their asses sent to jail."

The waitress approached the table, a large tray of food balanced in one hand. She doled it out, and the group dug in.

After their meal, they decided to turn in early, as Wil had to get Lacey to bed. They stood around in the parking lot, saying their lingering goodbyes.

"Paul," Donna said, "could you give me a ride home?"

"Sure."

"Thank you." She smiled broadly and turned to Theresa and Beth. "I'll talk to you guys tomorrow." They walked over to Paul's jeep and drove off together.

"I'm gonna head out too," Wil said. "I'll catch ya later, Dave. Come on, Beth, I'll walk you to your car."

"Thanks," she said.

Theresa and David stood there alone together, finishing their last cigarettes.

"Did you have fun?" David asked.

"Apart from running into Patrick, yes."

"Yeah. You know, you can call me if things do get bad with him and his brothers again," David said.

Theresa smiled. "I appreciate that. Though if things do get bad, I think I might just have to knock his head off."

"I'd pay to see that."

"I'll save you a seat then."

"Awesome."

They each took a long drag from their cigarettes, exhaling the smoke through their mouths, like some strange mirror image of one another. Only Theresa seemed to catch their similarities though and smiled a little, her head bowed to conceal it.

"You work tomorrow?" David asked.

"No, I'm off."

"Would you wanna do something?"

"I'd love to, but I can't. My mother is throwing some family gathering, and I figured I'd make a cameo."

"Ah, feeling masochistic, are we?"

Theresa laughed. "I know. I don't know what the hell I'm thinking. It's gonna be a circus. Wanna come?"

"All right."

“I was kidding.”

“I wasn’t. I’d like to be around people who make my family seem normal,” David said.

“Wow, okay, then,” Theresa said. “I just broke up with my boyfriend this week, so definitely bringing a guy around would help keep my mother from giving me grief...about that anyway.”

“So, I’ll be your date then.”

“Just a formality.”

“Fair enough.” David dropped his cigarette butt on the ground and crushed it under his shoe.

“How is your family anyway?”

“Fine, as far as I know. I don’t see them much at all. Though at the moment my brother’s staying with me.”

“Which one?”

“Michael, of course. Kevin wouldn’t leave Lindsay’s side for anything I don’t think.”

“Really? Out of guilt or...?”

“I think he was really devastated when me and Lindsay went to live with my dad. They were really close. So, once I moved out, Lindsay sort of moved back in with my former family—or whatever you wanna call them—and I guess Kevin sort of took her under his wing...again.”

“Your dad didn’t mind that?”

“I don’t know. I think he was in over his head a little bit, and with me not around permanently, I don’t think he could’ve really dealt with Lindsay very well. He was good to her, don’t get me wrong, but he didn’t really know how to raise a normal kid, let alone one with...”

“Retardation?”

“I don’t really think of her like that, but yeah.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it. How’s she doing?”

“A lot better. I mean she’ll never be...perfect, but who the hell is, right? She’s better at communicating, is self-sufficient in many ways. She’s come a long way.”

“That’s great. You know, when you’re a kid, or a dumbass kid like I was, you don’t really understand things like that. I was kind of nervous around her, and you just always knew how to handle her. I was really impressed by that.”

“Wow, thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” He tucked his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “It’s really great getting to see you again.”

“You too,” Theresa said, crushing out her own cigarette now. “I guess I should be heading home.”

“You need a lift?”

Theresa smirked. “I have my car here.”

“Oh, right. Well, I’ll see you tomorrow then. Just call me when you’re ready to go.”

“Will do.”

Chapter 12

Paul

Moonridge – August 8, 1998

Paul drove Donna home, catching glimpses of her out of the corner of his eye. Her blonde hair blew in the breeze passing through the openness of the Jeep.

“I never thought we’d get to see you guys again,” she said.

“Yeah, same here.”

“How’d you like California?”

“It was okay.”

“Just okay? Beautiful weather year round, lying out in the sun.” She sighed, blissfully. “Sounds like the life for me.”

“Hm. That’s not exactly the life we lived. More like getting up at four in the morning to work construction. The weather’s nice until you have to work ten hours a day out in it. Then, it just feels hot.”

“Construction, huh? I never pegged you for a hammer and nails type of guy.”

“Neither did I. David got us the job. Not much out there for guys like us, you know?” He glanced at her. “On second thought you probably don’t know.”

“Right, because I’m the spoiled little rich girl.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Well, my life’s not all glamour, you know. I mean, right now I’m desperately trying to get a job at the newspaper just so I don’t have to work for my mother anymore.”

“You work for your mom?”

“Yes, at her firm. I’m her, ugh...secretary.”

“So you have the pleasure of getting paid to be bossed around by her, huh?”

Donna chuckled. “Exactly. I love her, I do, but I don’t need to spend eight hours a day with her.”

“Got ya.”

“Turn left here. The job would be okay if I had any interest in law, which I don’t. Setting up appointments for people with frivolous lawsuits is kind of mind numbing. But enough about me. Do you have a job lined up here?”

“About the only thing I could find was a job at the institution on the outskirts of town.”

“Oh...fun. What is it you’ll be doing? Giving the crazies some shock treatment?”

“No, and frankly, that’s not very funny.”

“Sorry. I say things sometimes without thinking. I wasn’t trying to be insensitive or anything.”

“It’s okay. I’m just working there as an orderly, and only for now, until something better comes along.”

“Well, we have that in common then. My apartment’s just ahead.”

Paul pulled into the parking lot of the expensive-looking apartment building. Hell, the place was even called Paradise Landing, and that’s exactly what it looked like: paradise—especially compared to the studio apartment he and David were currently living in on the bad side of town and having to sleep on the floor in sleeping bags.

“You wanna come up for some coffee or a beer or something?” Donna asked.

“I shouldn’t. I have to go somewhere before I head home,” Paul said.

“Oh, where?”

“Just an errand.”

“You can’t spare a half-hour? Twenty minutes?”

“Some other time.”

“Well, okay, if I can’t convince you, I guess this is goodnight.” Donna got out of the car, but after shutting the door, she poked her head in through the window. “Always the gentleman...I love and hate that about you, Paul Danes.” She half-grinned and sashayed away from the Jeep, swinging her hips in a way that could drive a man into a frenzy.

“Always the gentleman,” Paul muttered, running his fingers through his hair. He watched her until she was safely inside before driving away.

He drove to the cemetery, his first visit there since arriving back in town. The same old wrought iron gates loomed before him, standing all the more ominous at night. He walked between them and down the winding path until he arrived at the moss-covered graves belonging to his parents: Paul and Helen Danes. They died in a car accident when Paul was only seven, and his childhood changed forever...

* * *

Paul’s father was a traveling salesman, while his mother stayed at home and sold cosmetics in her spare time. On Valentine’s Day, they went out for a nice dinner, while Paul stayed home with his grandmother. On their way home, they collided with a semitruck, killing them instantly. Their bodies had been so mangled in the crash that the funeral had to be closed casket, which still gave Paul nightmares to this day. As a seven year-old boy who was told the caskets were closed because his parents were “unrecognizable” his imagination worked him over, picturing all the ways they could possibly look. As disturbing as the real sight might’ve been, Paul often felt it would’ve given him more closure to just see them and get it over with, as opposed to letting his mind torment him with possibilities.

Paul moved in with his grandmother, whose floral furniture was covered in plastic, and the house had an eternal smell of cinnamon and mentholated ointment. Her guest bedroom, which became Paul’s bedroom, was covered in a navy blue wallpaper with pink flowers lined up vertically. It was the ugliest wallpaper he had ever seen, and on sleepless nights, he found himself lying in bed counting the little pink buds. One night, he made it all the way to three hundred and forty-one, before finally drifting off. Apart from the décor and the smell, Paul actually liked living with his grandma, because she genuinely seemed to enjoy having him around. He was able to do the chores her old arthritic body disallowed her to do, and she paid him generously for doing so. She also cooked homemade meals every night, the ones only grandmothers seem to know how to make to perfection.

When Paul was ten, he started to notice his grandmother’s mind would wander at times. On occasion, she’d forget doctors’ appointments or television programs. He hadn’t thought much of it, but over the next few years it became worse. He’d find her struggling to remember his name, and even would ask him when his parents were coming to pick him up. As upsetting and frightening as it was, he didn’t dare tell anyone for fear he would be taken from her.

Soon after his thirteenth birthday, in June of 1983, he awoke one day to the sound of voices. He crept to his bedroom door and opened it a crack to hear a man and a woman talking.

“The poor old woman was found wandering around a couple blocks from here, dressed only in her slip,” the man said. “She was rambling about having to go to her high school prom. Luckily, a neighbor recognized her and called us.”

“Yes,” the woman said. “It seems she might have Alzheimer’s and really needs to be taken to

the nursing home.”

“And her grandson?”

“Well, we’ll have to put him in foster care for the time being. She’s in no condition to care for herself, let alone a child.”

Paul closed the door and locked it. He packed a few things and then climbed out the window of the one-story house. He ran away with David and Wil on that day.

Upon his return, he went to live with his only remaining living relative: his aunt. She was the sister of his father, but he had never met her before. He didn’t even know she existed, as his father never spoke of her. The social worker took Paul to his aunt’s house, an old brown brick home with ivy climbing the sides. It looked like the type of house the neighborhood children might suspect to be haunted.

When his aunt came to the door, Paul was surprised at how prim she looked. Her ash blonde hair was pulled back into a tight bun without one hair out of place. She wore a long wool dress in maroon, which seemed uncomfortable during these hot summer days. She was a couple inches shorter than Paul (who was nearly six feet), but her disposition made her seem much larger. Her stony expression didn’t change or warm up even when addressing him for the first time.

“You must be Paul,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“How was your trip?”

“Fine. It only took like five minutes to get here.”

“Hm. Well, come in. No sense in letting all the heat in.”

The social worker smiled at Paul and turned to leave. He entered the house, which looked as prim and old-fashioned as his aunt. Old black and white photographs hung on the wall—none of people he recognized. Various knick-knacks and antiques cluttered the house, but in a uniform, organized sort of way. His aunt headed up a rickety wood staircase, and Paul followed. She led him to a plain bedroom—a blank canvas with only the bare essentials of a bed, chest of drawers, nightstand, and table lamp. The room smelled musty, and the warm air inside it hung so still, Paul felt like he couldn’t breathe.

“This is your room,” his aunt said.

“Great,” Paul muttered.

“There will be no muttering in my presence. No mumbling, no whispering, no cursing, and absolutely no shouting. You will familiarize yourself with the rules as I present them, and you will obey them. We won’t have any problems if you do as you’re told. Now, I was just about to have lunch. Do join me.”

Paul set down his bag and followed his aunt back downstairs. They entered the formal dining room where a long table, suitable for serving eight to ten people, stood. It seemed unnecessary for a woman who lived alone. There were sandwiches set out on two of the place settings.

“Do you enjoy tuna fish?” Aunt Belinda asked.

“Sure.”

They sat down at the table, Belinda laying a napkin in her lap. Paul did the same out of courtesy.

“What did your father tell you about me?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? Nothing at all?”

“I didn’t even know he had a sister.”

“Hm. I should’ve suspected as much.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, what do you do for a living?”

“I have no need for an occupation. I inherited this house from my parents, as well as every dime

they had. I could live a hundred years or more and never have need for an occupation. Perhaps that is why your father was sore with me.”

“They left you everything?”

“Well, what does one expect when they run out on their family? Your father was what was known in my day as a ‘rebel’. When our father grew ill, he left, and I had to care for him, as Mother had already passed on the year before. Your father was a selfish coward, and your striking resemblance to him makes me wonder if I’ve made a horrible mistake in taking you in. But unlike him, I do not turn my back on family. No, I would rather sacrifice all that I am and all that I have to ensure the wellbeing of my kin.”

“He wasn’t a coward,” Paul muttered.

“What did I say about mumbling and muttering? Speak up.”

“My dad wasn’t a coward,” Paul repeated.

“Well, whether he was or wasn’t, I suppose I shouldn’t speak ill of the deceased. He let the family down. I’ll leave it at that.”

They ate in silence, until Paul said, “Aunt Belinda, do you have any children?”

“No, I do not.”

“Ever been married?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Why not?”

“Marriage and children are for people who seek something to fulfill them. I don’t have that need. I’m perfectly content. To be clear, I am not your mother, Paul. I am not your grandmother. I will give you food, shelter, medical care when needed, and any other fundamental needs, but I am not your friend. I am not a shoulder to cry on. I don’t hug or kiss or any of that nonsense. You think me cold, I can see it on your face. This may seem extreme, but it’s my way, and I’m set in those ways. You are almost a man, and soon, you won’t need me at all. I don’t think it necessary to get attached for the length of the five short years you will be staying with me.”

“Okay.”

“This isn’t a prison, Paul. You pull your weight around here, remain respectful and responsible, and you will be able to do just about anything you like. I assume you have friends whom you want to see. I have no problem with that. But they won’t come to the house, and you won’t stay out past curfew. Is that fair to you?”

“Yeah, that sounds okay.”

“After lunch, you will do your chores around here. I’ve made a list for you to go by; it’s on the bulletin board in the kitchen. When school starts, I expect all your chores to be done before you go out. Homework will be done before bed. Until that time, your chores will be done before lunch, and then you may go out. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. Do not disobey me, Paul, and we’ll have no problems.”

His aunt was true to her word. Once Paul got used to the routine, he barely interacted with his aunt at all. They shared most meals together but didn’t talk much. Her complete lack of caring caused Paul to draw in on himself and become all the more introverted and guarded. What she said would be five *short* years, felt more like a life sentence to Paul...

* * *

Paul exhaled heavily. He left his parents’ graves, trying not to get choked up. He passed through the wrought iron gates once more and decided right then and there that he wouldn’t make this trip to the cemetery again.

Chapter 13

David

Moonridge – August 8, 1998

David sat on the floor of his and Paul's apartment watching a repeat of the show *The Pretender* on TV. Paul came in just as the end credits rolled.

"Hey, man," David said. "I was starting to wonder if you were staying over at Donna's."

"She all but begged me." Paul headed into the small kitchenette in the corner. "Beer?"

"No thanks. So why didn't you?"

Paul got a beer bottle out of the fridge and twisted off the metal cap. "I don't know. Maybe I'm just an idiot."

"No 'maybe' about that," David teased.

"You're a riot, Dave." He took a long drink from the bottle. "I hit the graveyard on the way home."

David nodded. "Does it look the same?"

"Pretty much. But hell, what doesn't around here? It's like the whole damn town has frozen in time."

"Yeah, well, it's not the town we came back for," David said.

"True. You seeing Theresa tomorrow?"

"Yeah, she's going to some family reunion, and I'm going with her."

"A day with her family...not my idea of fun."

"Well, it's better than spending the day with *my* family anyway."

"Good point."

David gave a lighthearted chuckle, but as the next show on the NBC line-up started, he found himself distracted by memories of his family...

* * *

On the day David returned home after running away, his seventeen year-old sister Kristin nearly stumbled coming down the stairs when she saw him come through the front door. "You're home."

"Yeah," he said.

"Mom will be happy. She's been worried sick."

David nodded. "Is she around?"

"In the basement...doing laundry."

"The excitement never ends in the Thompson household."

He headed down the hall to the basement door and descended the stairs. He found his mother separating the whites from the colors.

"Hey, Mom."

She stopped immediately, staring blankly at the wall in front of her. She turned slowly, as though she couldn't believe her ears. When she saw David, a smile spread across her lips and tears filled her blue eyes. She laughed joyfully. "My sweet baby boy!"

"Ah, Mom," he said, embarrassed by the pet name.

She ran up to him, kissed his cheek, and pulled him into a tight embrace. "Don't you ever run

out on me again, you hear? You scared me to death!”

“I’m sorry, Mom, I didn’t mean to worry you.”

She held his face in her hands, beaming at her son. “You’re really home. I can’t believe it.” She ran her thumb across a smudge of dirt on his cheek. “You need a bath.”

David snorted. “Thanks a lot.”

“Well, what were you doing, rolling in the mud all day?”

“Not *all* day.”

“You little smart-aleck. Come on, you should see your father.”

She walked him upstairs, holding on to his shoulders as if trying to keep him from getting away again. They went into the den where David’s dad was watching sports, and drinking his fifth can of beer judging by the empty cans on the table beside him.

“Earl, look who’s here,” David’s mom said.

“What’s that, Liz?” his father responded brusquely.

“Earl, David’s here.”

“David who?” He chugged down his beer, letting out a loud belch afterward. His eyes never left the TV.

“Your *son!*” She walked over to the TV and turned it off.

“Hey, woman! I was watching that!”

“Earl, look!”

David’s father finally turned to him, his eyes squinting as if trying to see clearer. “The waste of space returns. Just what I need, another mouth to feed. Turn the set back on, Liz.”

David’s mother sighed and turned the TV back on. “Come on, sweetie. I’ll make you a snack.”

He and his mother headed into the kitchen, where they found Kristin propping her foot up on the kitchen counter, her leg extended like a ballerina might do on a balance bar. David had nearly forgotten his sister’s love of dance. Those everyday details became so familiar that once he was away, he didn’t pay any mind to them at all. Now being back, he realized how separated he had been from his family—not just physically, but emotionally and mentally as well.

“David,” his mother said, “do you want a sandwich?”

“Sure.”

“PB and J?”

“Sure.”

His mother smiled and got to work making the sandwich. “David, just ignore your father when he behaves like that, okay? Can you do that for me?”

“I’ll try.”

“Because I know that’s part of why you left, if not the sole reason—”

“No, I’m used to how he is. It’s just Wil and Paul—”

“See, Mom!” Kristin said. “I knew those two bad seeds had something to do with this!”

“Kristin, let David finish,” her mother said. “Go on, sweetie.”

“Wil and Paul aren’t bad.”

“Paul’s an orphan, and I’ve met Wil’s dad. Nuff said,” Kristin said.

“Kristin,” their mother said, “don’t. His friends are fine.”

She scoffed, pulling her foot down off the counter. “One of my friends goes away for the weekend with her boyfriend, and I don’t hear the end of it. David’s friends encourage him to leave without a trace for three months, and they’re perfectly fine. Unbelievable!”

Their mother shook her head. “Were they having problems at home, David?”

“Yeah,” he replied.

“That’s too bad. I hope they resolve things now. Running away is never the answer.”

“Hint-hint, nudge-nudge,” Kristin remarked.

“Kristin, why don’t you go out?” their mother said.

“I’m visiting with my baby brother who I haven’t seen in three months, *Mom*.”

“Then put a lid on it please. Stop being snarky.” Liz brought David his sandwich. “There we go. With chunky peanut butter, your favorite.”

“Thanks, Mom,” David said.

“Liz!” Earl hollered. “Liz, get me another beer!”

She sighed. “Be right back.” She took a beer out of the fridge and headed into the den.

Kristin glared at David. “They’ve been absolutely impossible while you were gone.”

“Uh huh.”

“You’re getting off way too easy. Mom has been crazed, and Dad has been a total nightmare. I swear I can’t wait ‘til I can get out of this house.”

“You’re almost eighteen, Kristin. I still have five years to go, so chill.”

Their mother returned and said, “David, sweetie, your father wants to see you.”

“Why?”

“Just go on and talk to him.”

David set his sandwich down on the counter and headed into the den. A commercial ran on the TV, so he knew he’d only be stuck talking to his dad for a couple minutes.

“You wanted to see me?”

“Your mother’s happy to have you back.” He eyed David, as his mop of red hair hung in his face. “But I’m not.”

“You made that pretty clear already, Dad.”

“You talking back to me, boy?”

“No, sir.”

“You’re not too old for a whippin’, remember that.”

“Yes, sir.”

“As much as I’d like it if you took off again, I know what it would do to your mother, so no second chances. You take off again, and there ain’t no coming back.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’re gonna start pulling your weight around here too. No more layin’ about, going out with your worthless friends, and bringing nothing to this family. You’re gonna start working for me.”

“Mowing lawns?”

“I run a goddamn landscaping company, boy. You’re gonna mow lawns, pull weeds, trim hedges. Come fall you’ll rake up leaves. Come winter we’re gonna plow snow.”

“How much will I earn?”

“What?”

“How much—”

“You ain’t getting a dime, boy. You’re taking some of the load off me. I work goddamn hard for this family, and all I have to show for it is a spoiled daughter and a worthless son. You’re gonna learn the value of hard work. That’s what you’ll earn.”

“Okay.”

“Get out of my sight now, my game’s back on.”

David had to bite his tongue not to say something against his father. He hated him. He hated every beer he drank, every pretzel he shoved into his fat mouth, every breath he took. The only thing he hated more was being at his mercy, and that’s exactly what happened until his father’s lawn care company went out of business when David was fifteen...

* * *

David turned off the TV. "I'm pretty tired. I think I'm just gonna hit the hay."

"Okay," Paul said.

David climbed into his army green sleeping bag, trying to get comfortable. "Hey, Paul?"

"Yeah, man?"

"Let's pick up a couple cots tomorrow."

Paul smirked. "Sounds good."

Chapter 14

Wil

Moonridge – August 8, 1998

Wil was staying in a motel with Lacey until he could find a suitable apartment. She sat at the end of the queen-sized bed cross-legged, her eyes glued to the TV while a rerun of *The Wonder Years* played. Wil sat against the headboard, his legs stretched out comfortably on the bed. He nudged her with his foot.

“Lacey, are you hungry? You only ate a few of my fries at the diner. Do you want me to go get you some chips or crackers out of the vending machine?”

“Uh-uh,” replied Lacey.

“Do you want anything?”

“Uh-uh.”

“Lacey—”

“Shh.”

He chuckled under his breath and remained quiet until a commercial came on. With the remote control, he muted the TV.

“*Dad,*” Lacey whined.

“I’m just muting the commercial, hun,” he said. “I need to ask you a question.”

“What?”

“That man at the diner—the one who talked to you—what did he say?”

She shrugged.

“You can tell me, Lacey. You can tell me anything. Did he say something mean?”

She shook her head.

“Did he say something... weird?”

“Like what?”

“You tell me.”

She shook her head.

“Lacey—”

“Can we visit Grandma and Grandpa while we’re here?”

“What?”

“They live here, right?”

“*My* parents?”

She nodded.

“You want to visit my parents?”

She nodded again.

“We’ll see.”

“I’ve never met them.”

“I know...”

“Is something wrong?”

What a loaded question. There were plenty of reasons why he didn’t want Lacey to meet his parents. For one, *he* didn’t want to see them. But how could he explain eighteen years of childhood hell to his precious little girl?

“No, honey, nothing’s wrong. Tell you what, if you tell me what that man said to you in the diner, you can meet your grandparents.”

“I don’t remember.”

“Yes, you do. Come on, honey, just tell me.”

“He asked if I belonged to that lady.”

“What lady?”

“The one who came over to me.”

“Theresa?”

She shrugged.

“What else did he say?”

“I didn’t say anything. I’m not supposed to talk to strangers.”

“That’s right, that’s very good. But what else did *he* say?”

“Can we see Grandma and Grandpa tomorrow?”

“Not unless you tell me.”

“But I don’t *remember*,” she whined.

“Think, honey.”

“Daddy, my show’s back on.”

“Then you’d better talk quick,” he said, his voice light, playful.

“He asked me to go with him. Now, Daddy, unmute!”

Wil did as she asked, but he sat ill at ease by her answer. It made him want to hunt down the son of a bitch and put a bullet in his head. However, Lacey’s giggle at the TV show banished that savagery from his mind, no matter how much Patrick might’ve deserved it. After a moment, Patrick’s face distorted in Wil’s recollection until he saw his father’s face there instead. Lacey did want to see *him*, and he had agreed to it just to satisfy his morbid curiosity of what some childhood bully had said to his daughter. *What was I thinking?* he thought, kicking himself. He hadn’t seen his father in fifteen years, but his face—that gargoyle-like face—was burnt into his memory as clearly as if he had just seen him yesterday...

* * *

Wil’s reasons for wanting to run away with David and Paul were far more desperate than either of theirs. Even Paul’s threat of getting lost in the foster care system seemed to pale in comparison to Wil’s daily fear of wondering if this day—this random day—would be the one where his father wouldn’t stop throwing punches, wouldn’t let up, wouldn’t leave just bruises and broken bones, but rather a dead child in his wake.

The day before Wil ran away, his father had been arrested for domestic abuse. It wasn’t the first time; he had been in and out of jail on several occasions. With his father safely behind bars, Wil felt he could leave his two sisters behind without too much guilt.

On the day he returned, his sixteen year-old sister, Wendy, greeted him at the door. One look in her eyes told him what he dreaded the most: their father was back. She had no visible bruises, but her turtleneck in the ninety-five degree summer heat likely hid more than a few. She didn’t say a word to him, nor he to her. She simply stepped aside so he could enter. Their home seemed smaller somehow—more oppressive, more claustrophobic. The air felt still, like a calm before the storm.

Winnie, Wil’s nine year-old sister, entered the hallway from the bathroom. With a cool cloth, she blotted at her busted lip. Blood had begun to stain the white fabric already. When she spotted Wil, she stopped dead in her tracks, and tears formed in her eyes. She ran up to him, throwing her arms around his neck. She clung to him and said, “You’re home.”

He didn’t want to be. He wanted to turn right around and run as fast as he could from that

house, but he couldn't now. His sisters needed him.

"He's out of jail," Wil said. He wasn't asking, since he already knew the answer. Saying it aloud just helped concrete the reality to which he had returned.

"Yeah," Winny said. "He—"

"What are you doing here?" his mother said, coming out of the kitchen. Her cold tone made the question all the more sound. What *was* he doing here?

"I came back. And judging by your shiner, so has Dad."

His mother marched up to him. "You shush up now, you hear me? Don't you go around shooting off your mouth and pissing him off."

"So he actually needs a reason now to beat the crap out of his family?" Wil's anger boiled up to the point where tears started to burn his eyes.

"Your father is napping. You keep your mouth shut, or you won't be welcome here."

Heavy footsteps could be heard on the stairs, and the four of them froze in place. *Thump... thump...thump...thump*. With each *thump*, Winny's grip on Wil's arm grew tighter and tighter, until his hand started to tingle and fall asleep. His father hit the floor and groaned as he stretched his arms upward, high enough to touch the hallway ceiling. He was a huge beast of a man, stocky yet muscular, and stood at six feet-two inches. His over-greased black hair seemed like a desperate attempt to retain his youth, having grown up in the fifties and sixties.

"What's this powwow about?" he asked. His deep, gritty voice seemed to match perfectly with his gargoyle-like appearance. "Shit fire, save the matches! Is that big Wilton? Get over here, boy, let me take a look at you!"

Wil approached his father after Winny finally let go of his arm. His father grabbed a hold his hair, bobbing Wil's head back and forth and up and down, studying him. "You look like hell, Wilton! Where'd you run off to? Didja become a carnie or some shit?"

"I was camping," Wil replied.

"Camping? A little pussy like you went up against the great outdoors?" His father cracked up. "You run into any bears out there?"

Wil shook his head.

"Hey, Wanda," his father said to his mother, "you start lunch yet? I want me some of that leftover liver from last night."

"I'll warm it up," Wil's mother said, hurrying to the kitchen.

"Winifred, whatcha hiding behind your back?"

Wil glanced at his younger sister, realizing it was only the cloth she had been using to dab her lip. Her hand trembled as she revealed it from behind her back.

"That one of your momma's good hand towels you got all stained up?"

Winny shook her head. "N-n-no. Just...just an o-o-old rag."

"Bring it here."

Winny stepped forward, her arm extended outward holding the cloth as far away from herself as possible. Her father snatched it from her, held it up in front of him with both hands, and with the flick of his wrists, unrolled it take a closer look. He stared down at Winny, who looked miniscule next to the hulking man. "You...little...liar."

Winny shook her head rapidly. Her father twisted the cloth and started whipping her with it, the added weight of the water causing it to snap heavily against her skin. Winny screamed and covered the back of head with her arms, ducking away. He balled up the towel and pelted her with it. It bounced off her arms, landing with a sickening splat on the floor. Winny tore off through the house, crying.

"Fucking brat," he muttered. He clapped Wil on the back. "Come upstairs, boy. I have something I want to show you."

Wil followed his father upstairs, a sense of dread enveloping him. A piece was broken off of the

dark wood banister, and he could only assume it had occurred during one of his father's many temper tantrums. When they reached the top, Wil dropped his bag outside his bedroom door, momentarily falling behind. His father stopped and waited for him, and when Wil caught up, his father whacked him on the back of the head.

"Don't dawdle, boy," he said, and continued on to the master bedroom.

Wil rubbed the back of his head and followed. His father opened the closet door and disappeared for a few seconds inside, out of Wil's sight. He envisioned taking this opportunity to turn tail and run, grab his bag on the way, and just run right back downstairs and out the front door. But the thought of his sisters kept him planted where he stood.

His father reemerged holding a 12-gauge shotgun. Wil stumbled back, bumping into the dresser. His heart raced staring only at the deadly weapon in his father's meaty hands. His fists were dangerous enough, but now this?

"Ain't she a beaut?" his father said, staring at the shotgun in awe. "A buddy of mine was gonna pawn this baby, and I said, 'hell no!' He gave it to me for a steal at twenty-five bucks, even threw in some shells. Whaddaya think?"

"Nice."

"*Yeeaaaah*," he hummed. His father's eyes widened with a kind of crazed glee. "Boy, I'm just waiting for some asshole to break into our house now. He'd take one look at me, and *BAM*—his brains would be splattered all over the carpet!" He broke into hysterics, doubling over and carelessly waving the shotgun around. At one point, the barrel was aimed upward right under his father's chin, and Wil had the sickest thought of wishing the gun would go off. Then whose brains would be splattered all over the carpet?

"Wade!" Wil's mother hollered from downstairs. "Wade, dear, your lunch is ready!"

"Ah, shit," his father said. "Guess we'll have to try this baby out later."

"Where?"

"Out back. We'll shoot at some birds or something."

His father put the shotgun back into the closet and shut the door behind him. He waited for him to take the extra step to lock it, but he didn't. Instead, he just walked up to Wil, grasped his shoulder, and ushered him from the room.

"Now don't you go getting any ideas," his father said. "That gun's for my use only, you hear? If I catch you playing with it, I'll break both your wrists. See how good you shoot then."

After lunch, Wil went to his room to unpack. He left his door open, but Wendy knocked anyway. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah."

"Your room's still a pigsty, just the way you left it," Wendy said. "I think we all figured you were gone for good. Hell, I know I would've been."

"Well, you only have a couple years to go."

"Who are you kidding? I'm not getting out of here...even when I'm eighteen. I have no money, where the hell could I go?"

Wil shrugged.

"Or maybe I should ask where the hell did you go?"

"The woods...with David and Paul."

"You guys just hung out in the woods for three months?"

"Yeah. Pretty much."

"Well...good for you." She didn't even try to hide her resentment. "Maybe I could go live off the land too, huh? Like the Indians."

"How long has he been out?"

"Thirty-four days." She picked at the peeling paint on the edge of the door with her fingernail.

"It's been worse than ever. Winny's gonna be in a coma by the end of the year. I can already see it."

"No, she's not."

"She's the easiest one to pick on. During her last stint in the hospital two weeks ago, the doctor actually told us that she was malnourished."

"What does that mean exactly?"

Wendy had tears brimming her eyes. "She doesn't eat...not really anyway. When she does, she throws up. He's messed her up, Wil, in so many ways."

Wil threw his empty bag at the wall as hard as he could. He plopped down on his bed, holding his head in his hands. "I don't know what to do about it."

Wendy hurried up to him, falling to her knees. She pulled his hands away from his face. "I know what he showed you before. I've seen him admiring it. There's a loaded shotgun one room away from us. The hospitals, the doctors—they have our medical records, they know what he does to us. The police know. Nothing would happen if you..."

His eyes widened. "If I what?"

Her voice turned to a whisper. "I don't know how to use it, or I'd do it myself."

"And you think I do? I don't know how—"

"You're his son. He showed it to you. He'll show you how to use it himself," Wendy said, almost laughing.

Wil felt disturbed when he saw the same giddy delight in her eyes as he just saw in his father's. He shook his head. "I can't do it. You can't ask me to do it."

"Who else, Wil? Who else can I ask?"

"No one."

"It's him or us, Wil. Don't you get it by now? It's him or us. I'm not dying for him."

"Wendy, you're scaring me."

"Me? *I'm* scaring you? Have you forgotten so easily what he's done? You're Winny's big brother. It's your responsibility to look out for her."

"Well, maybe the three of us could take off somewhere," Wil said. "You know? Just someday after school, just leave. I could do that."

"You've *done* that. And you lasted a few months."

"I could've lasted longer."

"Wil, face it. That's not a permanent solution. We have to—"

"*WINIFRED!*" their father roared from downstairs.

They heard the quick patters of feet running up the stairs. Wil ran out to the hall and stopped at the top of the stairs. Winny was holding on to one of the rails, while their father held her ankles. He tore her loose, and her chin hit the step below, a spurt of blood shooting from her mouth.

"Dad, stop!" Wil yelled, running down the stairs. He grabbed Winny's wrists, falling to the seat of his pants. "Let her go!"

Winny wailed, sobbing and screaming and holding on to Wil's wrists as he held hers.

"Go to your room, Wilton! Stay out of it!"

"Mom!" Wil yelled. "Mom, help us!"

"Let go, Wilton!" Wade yelled. "I'll break her in two!"

"*You* let go!" Wil shouted, angry tears now streaming down his face. "Let her go, you son of a bitch!"

Wade released Winny, her body flopping down on the stairs awkwardly. The shrill scream that followed told Wil she had hurt something bad, but he didn't have time to help her. His father stomped up the stairs to him and smacked the side of his head with the back of his hand, causing Wil's head to whip sideways and his neck to crack. He suffered a loud ringing in his ear from the impact.

"Wade," their mother said, meekly from the bottom of the stairs. "Wade, maybe...maybe you

should go for a walk and cool down a little.”

“You want some of this?” He thundered down the stairs towards his wife. “You wanna get smacked too?”

“No...no.” She crossed her arms in front of her face like a weak shield. “I didn’t mean anything.”

Winnie tried to get up but failed, groaning and holding her side. Her eyes squeezed shut, her face twisted in agony. After trying and failing again to get up, she wound up vomiting on the stairs beside her, partly on Wil’s shoe. He stood up, shook the throw up off his shoe, and leaned down to try and help Winnie up. She wailed a shattering scream, and he knew something was terribly wrong.

Wade returned to the stairs, grabbing Winnie by the hair. “Look at what you did! Look at it! Ah, Jesus, it stinks!”

Wil had had enough. He thought of his and Wendy’s conversation and knew what he must do. He started running up the stairs, set on getting his father’s gun, but before he reached the top, he came face to face with Wendy, and in her hands was their father’s shotgun. Her eyes were so distant, she appeared to be in some form of a trance. Wil pressed himself up against the sidewall of the stairway, and Wendy walked past him zombie-like. The shotgun trembled in her hands, but as far as Wil could tell, she was holding it correctly. She stopped several steps above Wade, the shotgun aimed right in his face.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, little girl?” he asked. “Trying to blow your whole arm off? You don’t know how to use that thing.”

Wendy pumped the shotgun. “I guess I’ve seen too many movies.”

Wil eked down the stairs, his back slithering against the wall. When he was past his father, he ran down the hall into the kitchen. He pulled the phone off the hook, dialing 9-1-1 frantically. Once the operator answered, Wil started to tell her about his abusive father, but then he heard the shotgun go off. He dropped the phone, covering his mouth. Fear overwhelmed him. Vaguely he could hear the operator trying to speak to him from the receiver on the floor, but Wil ignored it. It took everything in him to creep out to the hallway, expecting to see the bloody carcass of his father splayed on the floor. Instead, he found his mother crouched down, covering her head, buckshot holes in the wall, and Wendy empty-handed sitting on the stairs. His father held the shotgun by its barrel in one hand, presumably having snatched it away from Wendy and causing it to go off accidentally. No one had been shot.

Wil’s fear wasn’t alleviated. Wendy had put a gun to their father’s head, threatening to kill him, and now *he* had the gun. Wil ran back into the kitchen, skidding on the parquet floor, and falling to his knees by the phone. He picked it up.

“Hello? Hello, are you still there?” Wil asked, pleading.

Dead air.

Wil got back to his feet to jiggle the hook switch on the phone’s base. The dial tone returned. He was just about to dial 9-1-1 again when a loud rapping came at the front door. Wil hung up the phone and headed back out to the hallway.

“Who is it?” Wade hollered.

“It’s the police! Open the door, and keep your hands where we can see them!”

Wade turned to Wil. “Did you call the police, you little asshole?” He started marching towards him. “Huh! You think you can send me back to—”

The police kicked in the door, guns extended. “Freeze! Drop your weapon!”

Wade glared at Wil, his lips curled, his nostrils flared. He dropped the shotgun and put his hands up. “You think you’ve won, don’t you?” he said to Wil. “My blood flows through your veins, boy. Like father, like son. You’re gonna be just like me, you wait and see.”

The policemen handcuffed Wade and escorted him out of the house...

* * *

Wil hadn't spoken to his father since that day. He remained in prison for ten years and by the time he got out, Wil had already gone to California. He had spoken to his mother, however, and she talked about how much his father had mellowed and how he wouldn't even recognize him. Wil wasn't convinced. On that day alone, his father had managed to give Winny two sprained ankles, a dislocated jaw, two knocked out baby teeth, and four broken ribs along with a number of bruises. Winny was only a couple years older than Lacey was now, and Wil couldn't imagine how a father could hurt his child like that. He couldn't forgive him. And now he was in the unpleasant position of having to break his promise to Lacey, because he couldn't deal with the idea of facing him again, not even man to man, not even if he *had* mellowed.

The credits rolled on *The Wonder Years*, and Lacey scooted backwards on the bed until she was sitting right next to Wil. She yawned.

"You ready to be tucked in?" he asked.

She nodded. "Big day tomorrow. I can't wait."

"About that, Lacey, we might have to postpone the visit to Grandma and Grandpa's."

Her face fell. "What? Why?"

"Well, we just got here, honey. We have to find an apartment, don't we? We should take some time tomorrow to do that."

"But I wanna see Grandma and Grandpa. You said if I told you what that man said we could." Her lower lip quivered. "Did you lie, Daddy?"

Wil realized he never had lied to her before. He always told her the truth, even when it was difficult. It was part of what made their bond so strong. He sighed. "I didn't lie, honey, I just didn't think it through enough."

"But I was looking forward to it."

Wil was stuck, and he knew it. He didn't want to break his promise. He didn't want Lacey to lose trust in him. He put his arm around her. "Tell you what. We'll have a *short* visit with your grandparents, and then we'll go look for an apartment."

Lacey cuddled up next to him. "Deal."

Chapter 15

Family Gathering

Moonridge – August 9, 1998

The next day, Theresa got out of bed and yawned on her way to the kitchen. She stopped abruptly when she saw a strange girl sitting on her sofa. She looked to be in her early twenties, dressed in a pair of denim shorts and a white tank top. Her body seemed tense, especially when Theresa entered.

“Hi,” Theresa said. “Who are you?”

“Um, I’m waiting for Michael. He stepped out for a little bit.”

“Again, I have to ask, who are you?”

“I, um, met Michael a c-c-couple nights ago. We went out last night and came b-b-back here.”

“You spent the night?”

“I’m sorry.”

Theresa felt bad for her. “No, don’t be. It’s not a big deal.”

Michael entered the apartment, carrying a box of donuts. “Good morning, ladies. I have donuts straight from the bakery.”

“Uh, Michael,” Theresa said, walking with him to the dining area. She lowered her voice. “You brought a girl here and slept with her?”

“Was that wrong?”

“I can’t believe you!” she said in a loud whisper.

“Calm down. She spent the night, but nothing happened. She was having problems at home, and I said she could crash here.”

“Problems at home? She’s married?”

“No, no, she lives with her parents, who are kind of on the controlling side—I don’t know the whole story. She seemed upset though.”

“Need I remind you that this is *my* apartment?”

He grinned. “Why do you think I bought the donuts?”

“You think you can buy me off with donuts?”

He popped open the lid of the box. “Glazed chocolate...still your favorite, right?”

Theresa sighed. “Get the milk.”

Michael smirked and headed into the kitchen.

Theresa turned around to face the girl again. “So, you got a name?”

“Winifred—Winnie, for short.”

“I’m Theresa. Don’t be shy. Come on over and have some breakfast with us.”

Winnie smiled and joined them at the dining table. She picked tiny pieces off her donut and nibbled them like a bird.

“So,” Michael said to Theresa, “you wanna take one car to Mom’s or...”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. My old friend, David, is going with me. He’s gonna pick me up.”

Winnie looked at her sidelong. “Not David Thompson, by any chance?”

Theresa furrowed her brow. “How’d you know?”

“Do you know David’s friend, Wil?”

“Yeah, we all had dinner together last night. Why? What, are you an ex-girlfriend or

something?”

“I’m Wil’s sister.”

“Oh, shit! I knew your name sounded familiar, I didn’t put two and two together,” Theresa said. “We never met though, right? When we were kids?”

“Not that I remember.”

Theresa knew a bit about Wil’s upbringing and how his father was, so she couldn’t imagine why Winny would still be living at home with her parents. Maybe she didn’t have a choice, and upon thinking this, Theresa blurted out, “Look, you can stay here as long as you want.”

Michael looked at Theresa as if she’d lost her mind.

Winny squirmed in her seat. “That’s very generous, but I...I have to g-g-go home later. After the, um, reunion.”

“Oh, you’re going to the reunion with Michael?”

“If that’s okay.”

Theresa chortled. “It’s okay with me, it’s not my reunion.”

“May I use your restroom?” Winny asked.

“My *restroom*? Yeah, it’s down the hall.”

Winny got up from the table.

“Isn’t she great?” Michael said, smiling. “I swear, Theresa, it was like love at first sight.” She stared at him, and his smile faded. “What?”

“You know what. You’d better be nice to this one. Don’t go dragging her through the mud.”

“What are you talking about?”

“She seems like a nice—albeit slightly odd—girl and a little timid. *So* not your type.”

“And my type is?”

“Going by your track record? Hmm, how can I say this? Oh, yeah. Skanks.”

Michael scoffed. “That’s a little harsh. They were...” He squeezed his eyes shut and then reopened just one to look at Theresa. “Okay, okay. They were a little skanky. But this one is different. I think this one might be *the* one.”

“You’ve known her two days.”

“What can I say, sis? I guess I’m an old-fashioned romantic.”

“Uh huh. Look, she’s the sister of an old friend of mine. If you hurt her, I’m going to get shit for it.”

“You worry too much.”

Winny returned from the bathroom, and the three of them made idle chitchat during the rest of breakfast.

At noon, Theresa got ready to go to the family reunion. Michael and Winny had already left, so she just had to wait for David to arrive. Just as she got finished pulling her hair back into a ponytail, a knock came at the front door. Theresa hurried to answer it, but when she pulled the door open, no one was there. Instead, she found a noose hanging from her doorknob. Her heart skipped a beat. She knew all too well who left it: Patrick. She removed it and carried it downstairs, out to the dumpster. She hurled it in, just as she heard a motorcycle approaching. She half-expected to see Vinnie, who after all these years still rode one, but instead David pulled up alongside her.

“Hey, Theresa. Am I early?” he asked.

“Not at all. Nice wheels.”

“What, this old thing?”

Theresa chortled. “I just need to go lock my apartment door, then I’ll be ready to go.”

She practically ran back to her apartment to lock up, then returned to David. She climbed on the back of his motorcycle, feeling like a cool biker chick.

“You’d better hold on tight,” David said.

“Oh, you’d like that, wouldn’t you?” she teased.

“Hey, if you’d rather fall off...”

Theresa wrapped her arms around David’s waist, which she had to admit, wasn’t entirely unpleasant. When he drove off, the wind caught Theresa’s hair, making her ponytail bob up and down. At the first bump in the road, she found herself tightening her hold on David and leaning more of her weight against his back. She felt a strange sense of comfort, one she had never known. Even riding on the back of the motorcycle, both of them without helmets, and knowing the danger involved, she felt at ease in her trust of David. She hadn’t realized just how much she missed him until now.

When they arrived on the street where Theresa used to live, she was dumbstruck by all of the cars parked by the curb. It seemed that all of her siblings managed to make it to the reunion. *Great*, thought Theresa, losing her feeling of comfort and having it transform into dread and anxiety.

David found room in the driveway beside her parents’ Oldsmobile and pulled in alongside it. He put down the kickstand and turned off the engine.

“If my count is right, they’re all here.” She unwrapped her arms from around his waist. “Even Whitney.”

“You still want to do this?”

“Yeah.”

David climbed off the bike and extended his hand to help Theresa off as well. They walked up to the house, which was still that ugly sea foam green color she hated, only now it was sun bleached and weathered. They stood at the front door, but Theresa took a minute before knocking. She knew beyond the door lay remnants of the past, the parents who abandoned her, and the siblings who hated her. The entire Jenkenson family hadn’t reunited since they were kids.

“So...” David said, his hands in his pockets. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, growing antsy. “Are you waiting for me to knock?”

“No,” Theresa said, and finally rapped on the door. After a moment, John answered, his mouth agape upon seeing her. She broke the silence. “Hey.”

“Theresa, I didn’t realize your mother invited you.”

“Uh, no, I kind of just found out about it and thought I’d...” She sighed. “Do you want me to go?”

“Well, I’m sure Lindsay and Kevin would want to see you. You’d better come on in.”

Theresa went inside, with David following.

“Who’s your friend, Theresa?” John asked.

“Oh, this is David, my...boyfriend,” she said, uncomfortably. “David, this is John, my...”

John shook David’s hand. “Good to meet you. Treat her right.”

He nodded. “You got it.”

John rejoined the party, which seemed to have Jenkensons spread out between the dining room, kitchen, and living room. She spotted Whitney standing with her husband, Luke, talking with Barbara and her husband, Brian.

“I should not be here,” Theresa said. “What the hell was I thinking?”

Joanne came out of the kitchen through its swinging door holding a cheese platter. Michelle was following her, holding a platter of pigs in a blanket.

“So, why couldn’t Roger come?” she asked Michelle.

“I told you, he’s out of town on business,” Michelle replied. She made eye contact with Theresa, and her face beamed. “Theresa, over here!”

Everyone turned and looked at her.

“Oh, shit,” Theresa muttered.

“No turning back now,” David said. “Should we be holding hands or something?”

“Uh, no, that would really give us away. I don’t hold hands.”

“Put my arm around you then?”

She gave him a look, and he winked at her, amused.

“How about if you just stand by my side looking pretty,” she said.

“Ah, now that I can do. I’m beginning to like this relationship.”

Theresa chuckled. “Here goes nothing.”

They approached Joanne and Michelle, and the closer they got, the more nervous Theresa became. Michelle greeted her with a hug, smiling broadly.

“It’s so good to see you,” she said. “It’s been so long. You look so...grown up.”

Joanne folded her arms. “Old, you mean.”

“Hi, Mom,” Theresa said, unenthused.

“Michael told you about this, didn’t he?” Joanne asked.

“Yeah. It was my idea to come though, so don’t blame him.”

“Oh, I had no intention of blaming him, Theresa. And who is this?” she asked, eyeballing David.

“Oh, yeah. Mom, Michelle, this is my boyfriend, David.”

Joanne studied him. “Boyfriend?”

“Yes, ma’am,” David said.

Whitney staggered over to them, a glass of red wine in her hand. She was already a little tipsy.

“Did I hear that right? You’re Theresa’s *boyfriend*?”

“Yep.”

She raised her glass to him. “My condolences.”

There it was, the comment that made Theresa feel like she was twelve years-old again. She had to bite her tongue to keep from saying something she’d regret.

“Actually,” David said, putting his arm around Theresa, “I’ve never been happier.”

“You poor deluded man.”

“Whitney,” Michelle said, “would you like some coffee?”

“Can’t you see that I have wine already?”

“Yeah, but I thought maybe you might want something that would...perk you up a little.”

“What are you saying, Michelle?” She jerked her arm to the side, spilling some of her wine on to the floor. “You think I’m drunk?”

“No. Never mind, just forget it,” Michelle said.

“Whitney,” Joanne said, “ignore your sisters. They’re just jealous.”

Theresa snorted. “Yeah. Right. I think I’ll go find Lindsay.”

“What for?” Whitney asked. “It’s not like she’ll remember you.”

“Wow, after all these years, you’re still this ignorant,” Theresa said, shaking her head.

“I’m not ignorant. I’m referring to the fact that you acted so smug, so high and mighty about her when we were kids, like you were the only one who was there for her. And then you up and ditch her, and so did your worthless father. You thought we were cruel for not getting attached—what a joke! You made yourself her everything and then you just left her behind for greener pastures. You’re worse than all of us put together.”

“You don’t know a thing about the situation. Where are you living now? Indiana? What the fuck do you know about it?”

“And here we go,” Joanne said, rubbing her forehead. “Go on, take your gutter mouth elsewhere, Theresa. Cool off.”

Theresa did so, not to appease her mother but to keep herself from getting too riled up. She headed towards the stairs, and David walked alongside her.

“Your sister *is* a bitch,” he said. “You always told me so, but it’s hard to believe until you see it

for yourself.”

“She is, but she’s partly right,” Theresa said, solemn. “I did kind of leave Lindsay behind. Not intentionally, not consciously like my parents did, but still. My brother, Kevin, wanted to take over, and I let him, and my dad let him. Was Lindsay the better for it?” She shrugged. “Maybe part of me did feel like it was his turn at bat.”

“Hey.” He stopped halfway up the stairs, took her by the shoulders, and turned her to face him. “Don’t let her make you feel guilty. They’re the ones who should feel like shit. I know full well how you always felt about Lindsay, and I know you wouldn’t leave her in the care of someone else if you didn’t know for sure that she was in good hands.”

“But I *was* familiar to her. She did trust me, and I did...let her down.”

“Let her down? Do you remember when you were finally able to tell me about that day with the Jordan brothers when you were twelve? You told me everything. You faced them alone because they were trying to hurt her. Knowing how far they were willing to take things with you, and how helpless she was...you saved her that day, Theresa, I truly believe that. You’re one of the only people who haven’t let her down, and you know it.”

Theresa chortled, embarrassed. “Yeah, well, that’s nice of you to say.”

“I mean it.”

He leaned toward her, going in for a kiss. Theresa laid her hands flat on his chest, holding him back.

“No,” she said. “Not here, not now.”

“Really? Because that sort of felt like a moment.”

“This house is hell for me,” Theresa said. “Too many bad memories.”

“Yeah? Well, let’s replace them with a good one.”

He leaned in again, and this time Theresa didn’t resist. Their lips met, their bodies pressed together. His hand applied a gentle pressure to the small of her back, and the other rested on the side of her neck. That sense of comfort returned; she felt so safe in his arms. For that moment, the world melted away, and it was just them. Even thoughts of her family vanished, despite being in her childhood home—that is, until someone cleared their throat at the top of the stairs.

Theresa pulled back and nudged David’s shoulder, so he would do the same. Kevin stood at the top of the stairs, averting his eyes.

“Don’t mind me,” he said. “This isn’t awkward at all.”

Theresa chuckled and headed upstairs to greet him with a hug. “How ya doing, kiddo?”

“Fine, until I saw my sister making out with some random dude on the stairs,” he remarked. “I would’ve retreated, but Lindsay wanted her afternoon snack, and I knew she’d pitch a fit if I returned without it.”

“How’s she doing?”

“Good. Real good. She’s up in her room. I was helping her with a jigsaw puzzle. She loves those things.”

“I think I’ll head on up and see her,” Theresa said.

David waited in the hall while Theresa went into Lindsay’s room. From what she could tell, Lindsay still had the room that acted as the nursery, while Kevin had Theresa’s old room, and Leslie had Whitney, Barbara, and Michelle’s old room. Theresa found Lindsay sitting on the floor in front of a low, square table—probably intended for use by small children. She worked intently on her jigsaw puzzle, which depicted three kittens in a wicker basket.

“Hi, Lindsay,” Theresa said.

Lindsay looked up at her, her light brown curls bobbing in front of her face. “Reesa, hi! Look!” She pointed at her unfinished puzzle. “Just four more pieces until the tabby is done.”

Theresa smiled and looked around the room. The décor hadn’t changed much. Many of

Lindsay's old toys and children's books were up on shelves, most of which they must've gotten back from Vinnie. The children's beds were gone in favor of one twin-sized bed covered in pastel striped sheets. A CD boombox sat atop a yellow dresser, with a dozen or so CD cases stacked beside it. Theresa picked up the top one, which was Michael Jackson's Thriller album.

"No, no," Lindsay said, getting up and walking over to Theresa. She took the CD from her and returned it to the stack, ensuring it lined up neatly with the others. "Not until three sharp. Three sharp is when I listen to it."

"Sorry," Theresa said. "I was just looking at it, Lindsay, I wasn't going to play it."

Lindsay nodded. "That's good. Because it's not three quite yet."

Theresa smiled. "Right. So, Lindsay, have you missed me?"

Lindsay shrugged. "I guess."

"You know who I am, right?"

"My sister, of course," Lindsay said, swatting at Theresa's arm and giggling. "Lots of sisters today."

Theresa chuckled. "Yeah, there are. Can I have a hug?"

Lindsay nodded. Theresa put her arms around her, and Lindsay lightly patted her back. She pulled away after a couple of seconds and tapped the side of her own head.

"What is that?" she asked.

"What is what?"

"Sound. Too loud."

Theresa strained to hear. She realized it was the cackling of one of her sisters downstairs. It suddenly dawned on her that Lindsay was probably secluding herself in her room because of the crowd noise and amount of people in the house. She felt bad for her.

"Someone's laughing," Theresa said. "They've stopped now."

Lindsay nodded and returned to her puzzle. She glanced at the clock. "Almost 12:45, and no snack yet."

"Kevin will be right back with it. Hey, look, you finished the tabby."

Lindsay nodded. "Calico next."

Kevin entered a moment later with a pink plastic bowl of mini pretzels and a small Yoo-Hoo drink box with a red and white straw attached. He bent down to set the bowl on the floor by Lindsay, and then inserted the straw into the Yoo-Hoo box for her before setting it down as well. He sat down beside her, and worked on flipping up the unused puzzle pieces so their picture side was showing.

"Well," Theresa said, "I guess I should go back downstairs."

"Okay," Kevin said. "See ya later, Tare."

"Reesa," Lindsay said. "I'll miss you."

Theresa smiled, as she felt tears trying to emerge but held them back. "I'll miss you too. But I'll see you again before I leave, okay?"

Lindsay nodded.

Theresa and David returned to the gathering downstairs, only this time they went into the living room where Michael and Brenda were.

"Where'd you disappear to?" Michael asked.

"I went to see Lindsay."

"Oh, right, I should've known."

Brenda got up from the sofa and hugged her. "Theresa, how ya been?"

"All right."

"Good. I want you to meet Steven. Steven, this is my big sister, Theresa."

Steven, who looked to be pushing forty, got up and shook her hand. "There's a whole gaggle of you Jenkensons, you should've worn name tags."

Theresa chuckled, wearily. “Well, not to confuse you more, but technically, I’m a Manzoni, not a Jenkenson.”

“Oh, please,” Brenda said. “Don’t think you can escape that easily, Tare. You were born a Jenkenson, and you’re gonna die a Jenkenson.” With that comment, Theresa could tell she had been drinking. “So, who’s your friend?”

“Oh, sorry, Brenda, this is David,” Theresa introduced.

“David,” Brenda said, narrowing her eyes. “Didn’t you know a David when we were kids?”

“Jesus, Brenda, you don’t forget anything,” Theresa said.

“I know. It’s my curse,” she said, “which is probably why I like to get hammered so much.”

“Speaking of,” Steven said, “I think that should be your last glass of wine.”

“It’s a party, Steven, relax.”

He folded his hands in his lap, resting his elbows on his knees. “So, Theresa, what is it that you do?”

“I work on the loading docks at an electronics store,” she said.

Steven smirked. “No, really.”

“Really, that’s what I do.”

Brenda rolled her eyes. “Don’t mind him, Theresa. Where we live, it’s all about what you do. It gets pretty annoying, especially if you’re like me and don’t do squat.”

John poked his head into the living room and said, “Hey, kids, your mother just set out the sandwich fixings if y’all are hungry.”

Theresa dreaded sitting around their dining room table eating a meal together. Such a simple event always turned into mayhem at the Jenkenson household, and she hadn’t missed it. She was tempted to just say her goodbyes, walk out the door, and be done with the reunion, but then—

“Come on, Tare. This should be a trip,” Brenda said, grabbing her arm.

A rectangular folding table stood against the wall of the dining room, acting as a buffet table. Bread, both white and rye, cheese, sliced ham, turkey, and roast beef were neatly laid out on platters, alongside bottles of ketchup, mustard, and mayonnaise and bags of potato chips.

Everyone seemed to be talking at once, causing a raucous of random conversations.

“Mom,” Whitney said, “you really should’ve made a salad. I’m a vegetarian.”

John said, “So eat a cheese sandwich.”

“Brian, do you want ketchup and mustard?” Barbara said.

“Michelle, will you get the napkins?” Joanne said.

“Brenda, quit shoving,” Whitney said. “You’re such a child.”

“Is this baked or honey glazed ham?” Luke asked.

“There’s no difference between baked and honey glazed,” Brian said.

“What? Of course there is,” Luke said.

Theresa rubbed her head, feeling a migraine coming on. “It’s a fucking zoo,” she muttered.

Joanne went to the bottom of the stairs and hollered, “Leslie, come down for lunch!”

“Theresa,” John said, “go ahead and make your sandwich.”

She headed over to the table with David, and they made their sandwiches. They took their seats next to Brenda and Steven. Michael and Winny sat down on the other side of them, Winny eating her sandwich in nibbles just as she had done with her donut that morning.

Leslie walked into the dining room, and everyone stopped and stared at her. She was dressed all in black, with heavy black eyeliner and black lipstick on as well. Both her nose and eyebrow were pierced.

“Whoa,” Whitney said. “Leslie, what happened to you?”

“It’s called goth,” Leslie remarked.

“Well, I’d call it hideous,” Whitney said.

"I've told her," Joanne said. "She's such a pretty girl under all that gunk."

Leslie rolled her eyes. She took a piece of Swiss cheese off the table and returned to her room.

"Kids nowadays," Joanne said, slathering her sandwich in mayonnaise. "I don't understand them."

"She's not even a kid," Whitney said. "She's how old now? Twenty? Twenty-one?"

"Twenty-one in November," Joanne said.

"Exactly. Way too old to be doing this shit."

"Maybe she's still trying to find herself," Theresa said.

"Of course. Leave it to Theresa to defend freaky behavior," Whitney said. "You can relate to freaks better than anyone, right?"

"You're just never gonna grow up, are you?" Theresa said. "It's pathetic."

"You're..." She scoffed. "You're calling *me* pathetic? Why are you even here, Theresa? You haven't been a part of this family in fifteen years. You weren't even invited here. Talk about pathetic."

"So, Michelle," John said, obviously trying to change the subject, "who's watching your little ones?"

"Oh, Roger's sister volunteered," Michelle said.

"You could've brought them," John said. "How old are they now?"

"Four, two, and seven months."

"Ah, Jo, did you hear that?" John said. "We need to see our grandkids more often."

"Definitely," Michelle said. "You and Mom should come over next weekend. Roger will be back in town by then."

"If you ask me," Whitney said, "you can't trust a man who's always out of town."

"Whitney," John said. He had that tone in his voice similar to when they were children—that stern, abrupt tone that seemed to say "not another word".

"I'm just saying..." She stopped to take a sip of her wine "...you let go of the leash too many times and eventually your dog will run away...to someone else."

A slight smile crossed Michelle's lips. "Whitney, I know you're just looking out for me, but honestly, I don't have any need to worry."

"Good girl," John said. "That's the best attitude to have. No sense in being suspicious without just cause."

Winnie got up then and ran into the bathroom, covering her mouth. The downstairs bathroom wasn't far from the dining room, so they could hear her coughing and gagging.

Joanne's face twisted in disgust. "Is your little girlfriend not feeling well, Michael?"

"Oh my god!" Whitney said. "She's bulimic, isn't she?"

Michael stood up from the table. "Too far, Whitney. I'm out of here." He clapped John on the shoulder as he walked by. "Good seeing you, Dad, Mom...I'll keep in touch."

When Winnie came out of the bathroom, Michael immediately escorted her out of the house, presumably before Whitney could get any more shots in.

"One down..." Whitney said.

"Oh, Whitney," Joanne said, snickering. "You're terrible."

"I'll say," Theresa muttered.

"Brenda," Michelle said, "we haven't heard much from you. You were thinking about going back to school, right?"

"Oh, not really," Brenda said. "I'm playing housewife right now."

"You two are married?" Barbara asked.

"Six months. Nobody knew?"

"You didn't call me?" Joanne asked. "I wouldn't expect an invitation or anything, even though I did spend twenty hours in labor with you, but not even a phone call?"

"I honestly didn't think you'd care that much."

Steven chimed in, "I told her to call. It's just what you do."

"Yeah," Barbara said. "I mean, were you trying to keep it a secret?"

"No." Brenda furrowed her brow. "What are you implying?"

Barbara shrugged. "I'm not implying anything. You're the one who felt the need to keep your marriage hidden from everybody."

"I didn't—I wasn't!" Brenda exclaimed.

"Hey, don't get defensive," said Barbara.

"You know, this is exactly why I didn't say anything," Brenda said. "You guys ruin everything. This family ruins everything!"

"Brenda," Steven said, "don't say something you might regret."

"No, the only thing left to say is goodbye. Let's go, Steven."

Brenda kissed Theresa's cheek, as well as John's and then headed out.

"Two down," Whitney said.

Theresa rolled her eyes. "I'm going into the living room."

"I'll join you," John said.

Theresa stared at him surprised but didn't say anything. She and John went into the living room, while David took a cigarette break out on the front stoop. Theresa sat down on the couch, and John sat down beside her.

"It felt like old times in there, huh?" he said.

"Too much, in my opinion."

"Eh, you shouldn't let your sisters get to you so much. With nine kids, you have nine personalities clashing all the time. You can't take it personally."

She shrugged. "I guess."

"You know, Theresa, I know things were rough when you were younger, especially with what happened with Vinnie," John said. "I want you to know that I'll always be here for you. We live only a few miles away, and we never see you."

"Well, you planned this get together and didn't invite me."

"Your mother planned it, Theresa. I'm sure she just assumed you wouldn't want to come." He glanced at her sidelong. "Don't give me that look. Your mother is not as conniving as you want to believe. Anyway, I don't want you to think things have to be awkward between us. You're all grown up now. The past is in the past."

"Okay."

John put his arm around her shoulders and kissed the side of her head. "I love you, sweetheart."

Theresa felt uncomfortable. For her, the past *wasn't* in the past. She still could feel all the pain of her parents' abandonment as if it were yesterday. Even being back in this house made her feel like a traitor to Vinnie.

"I think I should get going," Theresa said, standing.

"So soon? Is it because Michael and Brenda left?"

"No, I just have stuff I have to do today," Theresa fibbed. "I'm gonna say bye to Lindsay and take off."

"Okay, if that's what you want."

Theresa let David know what was going on and then headed upstairs to Lindsay's room. Lindsay had completed her puzzle and was now watching an animated film with Kevin. She was sitting on the bed, and Kevin was sitting on the floor leaning against it.

"Hey, guys," Theresa said. "I'm leaving now."

Kevin paused the video. "Okay, Tare, see ya later."

Theresa walked over to Lindsay and gave her a hug. Lindsay remained seated for it. Theresa

held her hands. "I'll see you again soon, okay?"

She nodded. "Okay, Reesa. I...I miss you."

"I know, I miss you too. We'll start seeing each more, okay? I promise."

Lindsay smiled.

"I love you, Lindsay," Theresa said, touching her cheek. She turned to leave.

"What am I, chopped liver?" Kevin asked.

Theresa smirked and patted him on the shoulder. "I love you too, Kevin."

On her way out, she stopped in the doorway to take one last look back at them. She envisioned them at four and five years-old and became choked up. She smiled at them, waved, and left her childhood home.

Chapter 16

Wil Keeps a Promise

Moonridge - August 9, 1998

On that Sunday, around two in the afternoon, Wil drove back to his old neighborhood with Lacey. His childhood home stood in disrepair. There were shingles missing from the roof, peeling paint from the exterior walls, and a broken post on the front stoop. His first thought was that the house had been abandoned, that his parents had moved away or even died while he was away. He felt a twinge of guilt feeling happy at that notion.

Lacey stared at the window. "That's it?"

"That's it."

"It's... is it haunted?" she asked.

"No, honey, it's not haunted. Just old. You still wanna do this?"

Lacey slowly nodded.

Wil got out of the car, not wanting to put it off any longer. The sooner they visited, the sooner they could leave. He held Lacey's hand as they walked up to the front door. The wood on it had splintered and warped from years of neglect. Wil knocked, scraping his knuckles on the rough wood.

They waited.

And waited.

Wil knocked again. *Good*, he thought. *Maybe they aren't home.*

Following that thought, he heard the vague sound of footsteps and a clamor from behind the door. It opened slowly, and his mother appeared from behind it. She had wrangled a large dog, a German Shepherd mix, and was holding it by the collar as it barked at them.

"Hush up, Bruno," she said to the dog. She finally looked up at them. "Sorry, he doesn't like—Wil?"

"Hi, Mom. When did you get a dog?"

"Never mind that. Come in, dear, come in."

Lacey hid behind Wil, frightened of the dog. He picked her up and entered his old home.

"Let me go chain Bruno up in the backyard," his mother said. "I'll be right back."

Wil looked around a bit, while he waited for her to return. The house was remarkably different—not in a bad way, but everything was different than how he remembered it. The old wooden stairs, the same ones that had resulted in Winny's broken ribs fifteen years ago, were now carpeted in a periwinkle blue. The banister had been replaced with a thicker one with detailed rails below it, all painted white. The home seemed brighter, more welcoming—almost cozy, to the point where it disconcerted Wil.

His mother returned, wiping her brow. "That dog will be the death of me." She pulled back her dark brown hair, now powdered with heavy amounts of gray. She smiled at Wil. "I can't believe you're here. And who is this?"

"Oh, Mom, this is Lacey...my daughter."

Her jaw dropped. "Daughter? My..." She smiled. "...grandbaby?"

Wil nodded.

"How old are you, sweetheart?"

"Seven," Lacey replied, softly.

“Oh, Wil, she is just the cutest thing. She looks just like you.”

“Thanks, Mom. Where’s Dad?” He blurted the question out, as if beginning an inquisition. He needed to know though. The dog, the redecorating, his mother’s sweetness—it was all too much, it was all too...normal.

“He actually just stepped out, he’ll be back soon.”

“Stepped out?”

“Mmhhh. He went to the store to get some ground beef and hot dogs. We’re grilling out this evening while the weather’s still nice. Is it me, or are the summers getting shorter and the winters getting longer?”

Wil shrugged. He struggled to remember the last time his family grilled out or even sat down together for any sort of normal meal. He was convinced it never happened when he was a kid. He felt as though he was peering into some alternate universe, like the one he used to fantasize about where fathers don’t beat their wives and children, where hospital visits weren’t a weekly event, and where fear of his own flesh and blood didn’t exist. *It’s just an illusion*, he figured. *An act for the cameras.*

“Would you guys like something to drink?” his mother asked. “We have iced tea, juice, soda?”

“You want something, Lacey?” Wil asked her. She shook her head. “I’m good too, Mom.”

“Well, let’s move into the living room. The air unit’s in there, so it’s cooler.”

The living room had also been redone with nice cream-colored sofas, fresh paint on the walls, and a glass coffee table. The fireplace mantle had been painted white, similar to the banister. Everything looked clean and fresh and new. The TV in the corner was the most dated thing in the room, being an old-fashioned console from the late eighties. Wil and Lacey sat on one sofa, while his mother sat on the adjacent one. A bowl of Bull’s Eyes caramel candies sat on the coffee table, which Lacey eyed. Wil’s mother must’ve taken notice.

“Help yourself, sweetie...if it’s okay with your daddy.”

Lacey looked at him with pleading eyes. “Just a couple,” he said.

She took two of the wrapped caramel creams, sat down on the sofa, and unwrapped the first one.

“School will be starting soon, won’t it?” his mother asked.

“September, I think,” Wil said. “We just got back to town, I haven’t checked yet.”

“Oh, so you’re staying in town?”

Wil suddenly saw himself being roped into future family grill outs, Thanksgiving dinners, Christmas...

“I’m not sure yet,” Wil said. “For now anyway.”

He heard the front door open and close, followed by heavy footsteps.

“Wanda!” his father called—not roared, not thundered, just called...like a normal person.

“In the living room!” his mother called back.

“I got the—” His father paused in the doorway upon seeing Wil. “Hey. Hey, boy, how’ve ya been?”

“Okay.” Wil stared at the aged man who used to instill so much fear into him. His once over-greased hair had begun to bald and seemed to lack all product. Most of what was left of it had turned stark white. His gargoyle-like face had drawn down all the more and showed deep wrinkles and heavy jowls. He seemed shorter, less hulking—the result of losing a child’s perspective, Wil figured. He didn’t seem like the same man, the same...monster. He just seemed old.

His father pointed to Lacey. “Your kid?”

“Yeah.”

He half-smiled. “Wanda, doesn’t she look a little like Winifred when she was a girl?”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of it before, but she does!”

“Spittin’ image, I’d say. But anyhow, I gotta put away this meat,” Wade said. “You’re staying

for the grill out, right, son?”

“I, uh, I don’t think we can,” Wil said. “We have to look at apartments today.”

“I passed those ones on the way home,” Wade said. “What are they called, Wanda? Those orange-colored apartments?”

“Sunset Hill?”

“Those are the ones. There were signs out for a couple units, and they’re right up the road. You should check them out.” Wade shifted the cold, packed meat from one hand to another. “Gah! Let me go put this meat away.”

“Wade!” Wanda called after him. “Don’t knock over the—”

“Dammit!”

“Jell-O mold,” his mother finished with a sigh. “Excuse me, Wil.”

His mother left the room.

Wil leaned back on the couch, feeling like he had entered the Twilight Zone. His parents seemed like a normal old married couple. The idea of a shotgun being in this bright, white house seemed jarringly out of place. How much blood had been spilt on these floors over the years? That, and other family secrets, now seemed to be lying dormant under the new plush periwinkle carpeting.

“Daddy, are you okay?” Lacey asked.

“I’m fine, honey.”

“Grandma and Grandpa are really nice,” she commented, playing with one of her empty candy wrappers. “Don’t you think so?”

Wil felt an aneurysm coming on. “Sure, why not.”

“Something’s wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

Wanda came back into the living room. “Phew, that was a close call. Almost lost the Jell-O mold.” She carried a tall glass of iced tea to the sofa and sat down. She picked at the invisible lint on her blouse. “You really should stay for the grill out, Wil. I’m not sure when your sister is coming home.”

“Wait, what? Which sister?”

“Winnie, of course. Wendy lives over on Sycamore, or is it Roosevelt? Wade! What street does Wendy live on?”

“Sycamore!”

“Ah, I was right. Yeah, she has, uh...gosh how many kids now? Five, I think.” His mother whistled exasperated. “I thought three were a handful.”

“*We* were a handful?” Wil said, dumbfounded.

“Well, I guess all kids are. But anyway, Wendy never got married, I think there’s multiple fathers involved, but you didn’t hear that from me.” She took a long drink of her iced tea. “Ahh, that is good. Are you sure you two don’t want something to drink?”

“But Winnie still lives here?” Wil asked.

“Yessiree.”

Dear god, they’re on drugs. That would explain everything. They’re both high as a kite, thought Wil.

“She likes it here?”

“What a strange question, Wil,” Wanda said. “I guess you’ll have to ask her. She doesn’t chip in on rent, because she’s never held a job, so I assume she likes it here just fine.”

Wade entered. “Who likes what?”

“Wil didn’t know that Winnie still lives here.”

Wade sat down beside Wanda. “Oh, yup. She can’t seem to learn how to make it on her own. I guess that’s what happens when you spoil your kids. Hey, hey you—”

“Lacey,” Wanda said.

“Lacey. How old are you?”

“Seven.”

“Old enough,” Wade said. “Wilton, take it from me, teach her the value of a dollar early on. Kids in my day used to have lemonade stands, uh, sold stuff door to door, that sort of thing. You should encourage that.”

“Are you seriously giving me parenting advice?” Wil asked. His tone was calm, but inside he was seething.

“Yeah, you know, one father to another,” Wade said.

“Daddy,” Lacey whispered, “I need to go to the bathroom.”

“I’ll show her where it is,” Wanda said. She took Lacey’s hand. “Come on, sweetie.”

Wade chuckled. “You got yourself a cute kid there, Wilton.”

“Cut the crap, what the hell is going on around here?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Did you and Mom wake up with complete amnesia of the eighties or something?”

His father’s eyes narrowed. “What’s your problem, Wilton?”

“My problem? My problem is the fact you guys are going around acting like Ward and June Cleaver, pretending like you didn’t make mine and Wendy’s and Winny’s childhood a living hell.”

“That was a long time ago, Wil—”

“Not to me it wasn’t! And Winny, my god! Winny is still living here? Why? Why would she still be living here after everything you did to her?”

“That’s enough. I won’t have you speaking to me like this in my own home,” Wade said, standing. “You sent me to prison...ten long years. Don’t talk to me about hell, son.”

“You had a shotgun, Dad—”

“A shotgun your sister pulled on *me*! I bought that thing to protect my family; I wouldn’t have used it on any of you.”

“Why not? You nearly killed Winny more times than I care to count. What, did you think I would forget? I wish I could.”

“You kids were out of control—”

“No, Dad, *you* were out of control. And you and Mom can carpet and paint all you want, but our blood and tears are in the bones of this house. That will never change. Our childhood will never change. And you, Dad...you will *never* change.”

Wanda returned with Lacey. “Did you boys find something to talk about, while we ladies powdered our noses?”

Lacey giggled.

Wade returned to his seat. “Yup. Wilton was talking about the changes we’ve made to the house.”

“Oh, yes, a fresh coat of paint covers up a myriad of sins,” Wanda said, beaming.

Wil imagined his mother with two shiners and an arm in her sling. He didn’t just imagine it—he *remembered* it. How could she forget? How could she forgive? This new picturesque life was a façade, and only Wil could see it. He felt as if he might be driven crazy by it.

“We should be on our way,” Wil said.

“No, Daddy,” Lacey said. “What about the grill out?”

“Some other time, honey.”

“I’m sorry, Wil,” Wanda said. “I told her she could try some of the Jell-O mold after our meal.”

“Not today. We have to look at apartments.”

“Oh, but, Wil—”

“Don’t beg, Wanda,” Wade said. “If he wants to leave, let him.”

The front door opened and closed again.

“Winny!” Wanda called. “Winny, is that you?”

“Yeah!”

“Come into the living room!”

Wil stood up when Winny entered. She stared at him a moment, tears in her eyes. She ran up and gave him a hug. It was a tight squeeze—the exact same one she gave him the day he returned after running away. He didn’t embrace her so hard. She was so slender, almost frail, he was afraid he might hurt her. Her sullen face looked wan.

“How are you?” he whispered. “Are you okay?”

“Fine.” He could she was forcing a smile. “And who is this?”

“Oh, this Lacey. Lacey, this is your Aunt Winny.”

“Hi,” Lacey said, quietly.

“Hi,” Winny said. “Wil, have you seen the upstairs? It looks really different.”

“Uh, no.”

“I’ll give you guys the tour,” Winny said, taking Lacey’s hand. “Come on, sweetie, do you want to see your daddy’s old room?”

Lacey nodded.

The three of them went upstairs. The same periwinkle carpeting had been laid upstairs over the old dark wood floors. Winny led them into Wil’s old room, which looked to be in the middle of transitioning into a sewing room. Boxes labeled “Wil’s Toys” and “Wil’s Clothes” were stacked in the corners. The bed had been stripped. A couple of his old posters hung on the wall, one of U2 and one of The Who.

“This was your room?” Lacey asked.

Wil nodded. “Yeah.”

“It’s a bit cluttered right now,” Winny said. “Your grandma is turning this into her arts and crafts room. Can you believe that, Wil? Mom does arts and crafts, goes to the church bazaars, and sells them.”

“No, I really can’t. Mostly the church part.”

“Mmhmm,” Winny said.

Lacey picked up an old Etch-A-Sketch and started playing with it. “Was this yours?”

“Yeah, it was.”

“It’s neat. Can I have it?”

Winny grinned. “Go ahead. They won’t care. In fact, if you don’t mind, why don’t you sit in here for just a few minutes while I go talk to your daddy, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I’ll be right next door, honey,” Wil said. “If you need or want anything, come get me.”

They went into Winny’s sparse room that didn’t have one piece of decoration: no personal items, no photographs, no posters. It was as stark white and boring as the rest of the house.

“Okay, Winny, what the hell is going on with Mom and Dad?”

“Long story short, they found Jesus and lost their minds.”

“I’m gonna need the slightly longer version,” Wil said.

“About a year before Dad was released, Mom met this woman at a craft fair, and they became friends and started going to her church all the time and volunteering, and Mom started doing crafts. So, in her letters to Dad, and in her visits, somehow he went right along with it. I guess prison sort of put him on the straight and narrow, I don’t know.”

“So, he doesn’t hurt you?”

“Not exactly.” Winny went to her closet and pulled out two suitcases. “Unless you count trying to save my soul. I don’t have anything against religion, but they’re sort of delusional now about our

childhood..."

"I noticed."

"...and they want me to join them, and I just don't want to. They basically haven't let me move out or get a job or anything."

"They won't let you?"

"No. I'm like a prisoner. I went out Friday under the guise of going to a prayer meeting, when really, I was on a date. I snuck out last night and spent the night with this guy I met, who by the way, is the brother of your friend, Theresa. So, fast forward to now, I'm packing and moving in with her for a while."

"You think they're gonna let you?"

"I think I have my big brother to distract them," Winny said, throwing clothes haphazardly into suitcases.

"What could possibly go wrong?"

"Just go back downstairs and chitchat until you hear the front door close."

"I already told them I was leaving. Hell, I already confronted Dad, sort of, about our childhood."

"Please, Wil. I could always count on you, and I'll never ask you for another thing."

He sighed. "Fine. But hurry."

Winny nodded.

Wil got Lacey and they returned to the living room. He leaned in the doorway. "Hey, do you guys mind if Lacey takes my old Etch-A-Sketch?"

"Not at all," Wanda said, smiling. "We have a bunch of your old toys upstairs. We were going to donate them. Do you want anything else?"

"Uh, no, that's okay."

"Well, what if you have a son one of these days? He might want some of your old things," Wanda said. "Here, I'll go get one of the boxes for you to take with you."

"No, Mom, really. I don't want them," he said.

"Hey, Wanda," Wade said, "shouldn't we go ahead and fire up the grill?"

"Oh, wow, it's almost three already. Time flies, huh?"

"Wait," Wil said. "I want to hear about the other changes you guys are planning on making to the house."

"You do?" Wanda asked, surprised.

"Yeah. Winny was telling me that you're turning my room into an arts and crafts room," Wil said.

"Oh, I sure am!" said Wanda, enthusiastically. "I learned embroidery several years ago, and I make pillows and framed art. I'm also learning how to knit. Maybe for Christmas I'll make each of you a nice sweater...if my skills improve by then."

Wade was staring dead at Wil, his eyes burning a hole through him. Wil fidgeted where he stood. "That'd be great, Mom."

A clamor could be heard on the stairs, and Wil turned to see one of Winny's bags tumbling downstairs and bursting open at the bottom. Shirts and socks exploded out of the suitcase.

"What was that?" Wade asked.

"Nothing," Wil said.

But by then Wade and Wanda were already pushing past him.

Winny ran down the stairs, frantically repacking the clothes scattered on the floor.

"Winny," Wanda said, "what are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" Wade yelled. "She's trying to run off!" He bent down and grabbed Winny's arm.

“No, Dad! Let me go!” she shrieked.

Wil put himself between them and shoved his father away. “Back off, old man. If Winny wants to leave, let her. She’s an adult.”

“She’s nothing but a stupid little girl!” Wade yelled. “She don’t belong out there! She belongs here where we can keep an eye on her!”

Winny opened the door to leave.

Wil hurried and picked up Lacey, temporarily leaving a space between Winny and their father. Wade wrapped his arms around Winny’s waist and dragged her back into the house.

“Dad, stop!” Wil yelled.

Wade turned Winny around and slapped her across the face.

Lacey wept quietly. Wil set her on the front stoop, protectively standing in front of her. Winny lay on the carpeted stairs, rubbing her jaw.

“You haven’t changed, old man,” Wil said, giving him another hard shove. “But I have.” He shoved him again. “I’m not a kid anymore. This ends here!”

He extended a hand to Winny and helped her up. She hurried past him, grabbing her suitcases on the way, and ran out to the curb where Michael’s car was parked.

Wade nudged Wil aside and looked out the front door. “Winifred! You get your scrawny ass back in here!” He narrowed his eyes. “Ah shit! She’s with a goddamn coon!”

Wil shook his head, sickened by his father’s behavior.

As Michael and Winny drove off together, Wade slammed his fist against the doorjamb, as he groaned in frustration. He looked down at Lacey and knocked her new toy out of her arms. It smashed upon the concrete stoop, the screen cracking, and the magic powder spilling out. Wil swooped a sobbing Lacey up in his arms and rushed out to his car.

“Yeah, run away, Wilton! That’s what you’re good at!” Wade shouted. “Fucking ingrate!”

Wil felt no shame in running, not this time or any other. But he was ashamed of himself for thinking there was any chance for a normal visit with his parents. He felt like the worst father in the world for inflicting them on Lacey. His father’s words echoed in his mind: like father, like son.

Chapter 17

Glimmers

Moonridge - August 9, 1998

A deep sense of hopelessness greeted Beth when she awoke on that Sunday morning. Her diner and dreams were gone, and the reality of that had sunk in. The telephone rang, but she didn't feel like crawling out of bed to get it. When she heard the murmurs of voices, she remembered she was at Donna's. Beth dragged herself out of bed, covers pulled around her, and listened in by the door.

"You got the article? Did you read it?" Donna said. "Uh huh...I really feel it's my best—uh huh. No, I understand, I just think you're wrong...my writing is good...okay. Thanks anyway."

Beth crept out of the guest room to find Donna resting her forehead against the wall, the phone still clutched in her hand.

"Is everything okay?" Beth asked.

"They rejected my article again," Donna said. "I could understand if this was New York City, but it's Moonridge. I know my writing is better than the amateurs they have here."

"You'll win them over eventually."

She snorted. "I'll probably be a secretary for the rest of my life...a single one at that."

"Is Paul not interested?"

"Who knows? He didn't want to come in last night when he dropped me off."

"Well, he is on the shy side. Maybe that's all it is."

"Maybe. How are you?"

"I dunno." Beth shrugged. "It hit me today just how bleak things are. I should go home and start packing stuff up, because I won't be able to afford rent or anything for a while." Her voice broke, as she felt the tears coming. "How could this have happened?"

"You'll get back on your feet, Beth," Donna said. "You still own the property, if you could clean it up and have it rebuilt, you could have your diner again."

"How am I supposed to do that? I have no income."

"It'll take a while, but it could happen. Or maybe you could sell that piece of property to someone doesn't mind putting some work into it. Maybe sell it for what you still owe on the loan and break even."

"Maybe. I can't think about all this right now. It's too overwhelming. I'm gonna go home and start packing my things. I'm sure my mom would let me store some of it in her basement until I figure things out."

"Hey, you know, Carla had a Help Wanted sign in the window of her diner," Donna said. "Stop by there, see if she'll give you a job. You have the experience. At least it would be a start."

Beth nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, that's a good idea. Thanks, Donna...for everything."

She shrugged. "Don't mention it."

Beth left Donna's apartment, and on her way to her own, she stopped at her burned out diner again. In the new morning light, the blackened building looked sadder than ever. She went inside. The aqua booths she picked out specially were now scorched beyond recognition. The smell of smoke overwhelmed her to the point of having to pull the collar of her T-shirt up around her face, covering her nose and mouth. She headed into the back room where the kitchen and storage areas were. Everything was blackened and charred. Piles of ashes—probably of paper products and towels—covered the floor.

She nudged one of the piles with the toe of her gym shoe, watching the ashes billow up and settle again—the perfect metaphor for her dreams.

The smell of smoke became too much for Beth, and she went back outside. She took some deep breaths to clear her lungs.

“I thought I might find you here.” Beth turned to see Patrick standing there. “It was rude of you to run off yesterday...so disrespectful to the dead.”

“What do you want?” Beth said. “Can’t you see that I’ve been through enough? This was my diner, and it’s gone.”

“Aww,” Patrick said, feigning sympathy. “Well, maybe now you know not to mess with us.”

Beth’s eyes slowly widened. The realization hit her, but she didn’t want to believe it. “You didn’t...you couldn’t...”

“You have no idea what I’m capable of,” Patrick said. “Maybe now you do. And now you have nothing...except me.”

Her breathing quickened, and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t seem to inhale enough air. She fell to her knees, holding her chest. She was having a panic attack; she had had enough in her lifetime to know how they felt. Her heart raced, her chest tightened. After a moment, the pressure released and the tears came in a sudden gush, as if a dam had burst open. She fell forward, planting her hands on the pavement, having trouble finding the strength to hold herself up. The teardrop necklace her father gave her dangled downward, as her tears fell past it.

Patrick hoisted her up, wrapping his arms around her waist. Strands of her hair were matted to her damp cheeks, and he brushed them aside.

“There now,” he said. “There’s my pretty girl. I’m gonna make it all better.”

Beth’s arms were folded upward, crossed at the wrists, pinned between their bodies. She couldn’t move. He turned her around and dragged her behind the diner, into the wooded area there.

“Oh, Beth,” Patrick said, as they walked through the woods, “if you could’ve only seen all these years that we were perfect for each other. I know how you always tried to find the good in people, and I admire that. Most women are such bitches, feminazis, and well, let’s face it...whores. But you, Beth, you’re different. You’re...*better*. Maybe you can still save my soul.”

Beth nodded, afraid of what Patrick might do if she disagreed. “I can. I will, but you can’t hurt me, okay? You’re not going to, right, Patrick?”

“Only if you disobey.”

He took her to a little shack in the woods, which looked to have been abandoned for a long time. He kicked open the door, jostling Rod and Leo up from where they slept on two old cots. Rod cupped a hand over his eyes, shielding out the stream of sunshine coming into the shack. Leo ran his hand through his long hair, sweeping it out of his face.

“Look who’s come to visit!” Patrick declared.

“Jesus, Patrick,” Leo said. “What’s going on?”

“Funny you should mention the good Lord, Leo, because Beth has decided to save my soul,” Patrick said. “First things first, Beth, tell us you’re abandoning those bitches you call friends and of joining us instead.”

“What?” Beth said.

“Come on, Beth. Don’t disobey.”

Beth trembled. She could feel his hot breath on the back of her neck. “Fine, yes, I...”

“Start with telling us why you’re leaving them,” Patrick said. “What are Theresa and Donna?”

Beth cried and shook her head. Patrick drilled his knuckles into her ribs, making her squeal in pain.

“Bitches?” she sobbed.

“Good. What else?”

It pained Beth to talk badly about Theresa and Donna, as they had always been there for her, and she knew they would never say anything bad about her, even in these extreme conditions. She hated herself in this moment. She again thought of her father and all the good he did, and what a great friend he was to everyone. She wasn't being a great friend, and so she refused to allow herself to say anything else bad about them.

"What else, Beth?" Patrick urged.

"Nothing!" she cried out. "They're my best—"

Patrick threw Beth against the wall. Her head struck the wood so hard her vision blurred. Her body collapsed into a slump on the floor in between a third cot and a broken bookcase. In her haze, she saw Patrick approach her. With his massive fist, he slugged her, and she hit her head again, only this time against the bookcase. Everything went black.

Beth awoke with a killer headache and a huge lump on the side of her head. She was still slumped on the floor. She blinked a few times, trying to clear the fog. It felt late in the day, but the sun still shone through the one muddy window of the shack. She heard footsteps, just as her vision cleared.

Patrick stooped down in front of her. "Good morning, sunshine." He grabbed her by her shirtfront and pulled her too her feet, making the world spin for a moment. "You wasted almost the entire day, I was getting pretty bored. I had plenty of time to do some thinking though, and I decided I'm going to win you over in my own way."

"You hit me," Beth said, weakly. "I never thought you..."

"What are you mumbling about?"

Beth closed her eyes. The throbbing in her head was too much for her to bear.

"I wanna go home," she said. "Take me home, Patrick. Please."

He touched her cheek, and Beth sucked in her breath sharply between her teeth. His hand rested upon her bruised side, the side he had struck.

"Why did it have to come to this, Beth?" he asked. "We could've made each other so happy."

He kissed her lips sloppily. Beth's face twisted in disgust as she fought to pull away. He tasted like beer, causing her to gag. He finally let up, and Beth wiped at her mouth, trying to get every trace of him off of her. While she did this, Patrick shoved her on to the cot. His fingers fumbled to unbuckle his belt.

"Oh, God," Beth said.

"Shh," he said. "You're going to enjoy it."

Beth looked around the shack for his brothers, but they weren't there. "Where are they?"

"What?" Patrick said, stopping for a brief moment.

"Your brothers, where are they?"

"They don't get to join in." He unbuttoned his jeans.

"Patrick," Beth said, inching back on the cot. "Don't do this. Please, don't do this." A solitary tear fell from her eye. "We knew each other as children for God's sake."

"Yeah, and you *tormented* me," Patrick snarled.

"I what?"

He bent over and grabbed her by the arms, making her gasp. "I couldn't get you out of my head. You were there, you were always there... *teasing* me! You drove me crazy! And now...now I'm taking what's rightfully mine."

"Patrick, don't!"

He climbed on top of her, holding her down.

Beth sobbed. "Patrick, stop!"

"You couldn't just love me," he said, ripping her shirt. "You couldn't just give me a chance."

"Patrick," Beth said, digging her palms into his shoulders, "you don't want to do this. All the

games, all the destruction, all the messed up things you've done...this is beyond that. There's no coming back from this!"

"Why should I care? You hate me anyway!"

Beth stared into those black pools, those distant dead eyes. But the words she spoke were true. "I never hated you."

"Bullshit."

"I defended you to my friends. I always did. I always gave you the benefit of the doubt," Beth said, talking quickly and with desperation. "I never thought you were bad. Even after what you did to Theresa, I still didn't think you were bad. Just a prank that got out of hand, right? That's what I always thought. And that man, Lou Perkins, who murdered my father and acted like it was *nothing*...I hate *him*! I've never been able to say that before, but I do. He's the only person I truly hate. I never told anyone about him at the time, about going to see him. You were the only one who knew about it. That was our secret, Patrick. It was a secret we shared. And what you did to his car, I was *happy* about it. You did that for me, and it was something none of my friends would've had the guts to do...not Theresa or Donna. Not David or Paul or Wil. Just you."

Patrick got up, whirled around, and flung his arms up with an utterance of "goddammit". She had gotten to him, and Beth didn't squander this opportunity. She had a clear shot to the door if she could outrun him. He laid his hands on a wooden table, leaning his weight on them and bowing his head. Beth made a mad dash for the door and darted outside. Leo and Rod were sitting on either side of the door, but she kept on running.

"Stop her!" Patrick shouted.

The Jordan brothers gave chase.

Beth ran between the trees, having trouble keeping her speed up on the foliage under her feet. She nearly fell over tree roots but managed to maintain her footing. She hadn't gone in the same direction as they came, so she didn't know exactly where she was going. She just kept running, hoping the Jordans wouldn't be able to catch up.

She reached the end of the woods and wound up in the deserted parking lot of a hair salon. It must've been closed on Sundays, since no one was around. When Beth reached the sidewalk, she stopped to catch her breath, looking behind her to check on the Jordan brothers' progress. They were on the side of the hair salon building and gaining quickly. Beth continued across the street, heading into an alleyway, which had a tall chain link fence blocking the opposite end of it. She stopped abruptly, beginning to turn back but the Jordan brothers were already there. She was trapped.

Patrick approached her, his brothers close behind. Beth held her torn shirt together, crossing her arms awkwardly over her chest.

"You little fucking tease," Patrick said. "To think I fell for your lies."

"They weren't lies," Beth said. "Can't we stop this? Can't we just start everything over? Be friends?"

"I don't WANT to be *friends*!" he shouted, grabbing her arms.

A car passed the alleyway, and Beth stared at it longingly, wishing someone would help her.

Patrick shoved her up against the wall. "Why do you make me hurt you, Beth? I don't want to, but what choice do I have?"

Wil walked into the alleyway. "Well, you could rot away in prison for all the shit you've done, but hey, I guess I'm just old-fashioned that way."

Beth breathed a sigh of relief.

"Are your buddies just around the corner?" Patrick asked. "Or were you stupid enough to go up against us alone?"

"I see no need for bloodshed," Wil said. "Why don't you just leave Beth alone?"

"Come over here and make me."

Wil walked past Leo and Rod, who ignored him for now. He stopped beside Patrick. “Let’s not do this. We’re not kids anymore.”

Patrick sneered and slugged Wil in the stomach, causing him to fall to one knee.

“No!” Beth shrieked.

Patrick shot her a look of disgust and anger and even a hint of anguish. He spun her around and threw her at Rod, who held one of her arms. Patrick’s focus was now on Wil. With his heavy work boot, he kicked Wil under the chin. He fell backwards, landing flat on his back.

Beth glanced over her shoulder and saw Wil’s car parked past the alleyway. She saw Lacey in the front seat staring out the window. Her heart sank. She didn’t want Wil’s daughter to be put in danger.

Patrick laughed at Wil as he lay on the ground, struggling to get up. “You’re not so tough without those pansies backing you up, huh? C’mon. C’mon and get up, you weak piece of shit!”

Wil propelled himself up, charging at Patrick. He slammed him into the wall and with a heavy fist, slugged him clean in the jaw. Patrick stumbled and doubled over. Wil grabbed him by his collar, kneeling him in the stomach. He then brought down another punch, this time on his cheekbone. Patrick fell face down on the cement.

Wil didn’t let up. He kicked him in the side and with each kick said, “You…don’t…hit…women!” One final kick to the ribcage, and Patrick rolled over on his back, groaning.

Rod released Beth and ran over to Patrick. He held up his hands to Wil, a motion of surrender. Wil stepped back and allowed Rod to help Patrick up.

“This isn’t over,” Patrick said, spitting blood.

The Jordan brothers left the alleyway, both Rod and Leo helping Patrick walk.

Beth ran up and hugged Wil.

“Oof,” he muttered, wincing.

“Oh, sorry,” she said, backing up. “Are you hurt bad?”

“I’ll survive.”

“You really did a number on him. I’ve never seen you like that before,” Beth said.

“He deserved it.”

“Yeah, I guess, it’s just—”

“Wait wait wait…you *guess*?”

“No, I mean, he did.”

Wil snorted and headed back to his car. Beth followed.

“Are you mad at me?” she asked.

“No, Beth, I’m not mad.” But she could tell that he was. “Do you want me to take you to the police station?”

“What for?”

Wil furrowed his brow. “To file a report against them? Or at least Patrick?”

“Oh. Well…” Beth chewed on her lower lip.

“He gave you that bruise, didn’t he? And the bump on your head?”

“He was just throwing his weight around,” Beth said. “I’m okay. Really.”

“What will it take?”

“I’m sorry?”

“When is enough, enough? When you’re dead?”

“He’s a bully—”

“He’s a grown man!” Wil snapped. He exhaled, calming down. “He was a criminal when we were kids, and now he can finally be brought to justice. He tried to murder Theresa—”

“It was wrong, I know. But calling it attempted murder is very serious. Kids do stupid things.”

“What’s the matter with you? Does he have dirt on you? Is he threatening you? Why are

sticking up for him at all?”

“You don’t understand—”

“You’re right, I don’t understand,” Wil said. “He approached my daughter and asked her to go with him. Was that a joke?”

“Oh,” Beth said. “Now I get it.”

“Get what?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. I didn’t know your daughter had gotten involved, that’s all.”

“So you’ll file a report?”

“My car is parked at my diner. I’ll get it and drive there myself.”

“Good. Tell them...” He glanced at her torn shirt. “...everything.”

Beth nodded. “Thank you for helping me.”

“It’s what I do, isn’t it?” Wil said, getting into his car.

Beth watched him drive away and then walked a block to her diner. She got into her car, starting up the engine. She sat there a moment, as the A/C started to cool her down. She replayed the events. During his attempt to force himself on her, she had managed to get through to him, even if just for a fleeting moment. He stopped. He didn’t have to. No one had stopped him. Beth certainly wasn’t going to overpower him. He *chose* to stop, and that meant something important to Beth. It left that glimmer of hope, that same glimmer from when they were kids. There might be some good left in him, something worth saving, and to Beth, prison wasn’t the answer.

She pulled out of the parking lot and headed home.

Chapter 18

A Fighter's Spirit

Moonridge – August 9, 1998

After leaving the family gathering, Theresa and David walked over to his motorcycle. He climbed on it, and just as Theresa was about to, she spotted a pickup truck across the street. Vinnie sat in the driver's seat, smoking a cigarette. When he saw Theresa, he sped off.

"Shit," she said.

"What's wrong?" David asked.

"That was dad," Theresa said. "I didn't tell him I was coming to this."

"Is it a big deal?"

"The way he took off, I guess so. I guess he's hurt." She sighed. "I should probably go to his house and try to, I dunno, talk to him about it. Do you mind taking me?"

"Hop on."

Theresa gave David the directions to Vinnie's house, and he drove her there. He still lived in the same place, though it had been fixed up over the years. The neighborhood, however, had only gotten worse. Every single shop—the few that were still in business—had bars on their windows. Vagrants wandered the streets, drunk and without purpose. Distant gunshots could be heard, even in the middle of the day.

Vinnie's truck was in the driveway, so David pulled up on the street.

"I won't be long," Theresa said, climbing off the motorcycle. "Will you be okay waiting out here?"

"Sure. But if things get hairy I'm taking off," he said with a smirk.

"Such a prince," Theresa remarked. "I'll be right back."

She went to the front door and knocked. A moment later, Vinnie answered.

"I figured you saw me," he said.

"Can I come in?"

"Why not?"

Theresa rolled her eyes and entered. He shut the door behind her.

"Have a good time?" asked Vinnie as he passed her.

"Don't be upset with me, Dad. Michael told me about it, and I went so I could see Brenda and Lindsay. That's all."

"That's all?"

"Yes. Why were you there anyway?"

"I tried calling your house, and there was no answer."

"So you automatically assumed I was at my mother's?"

"I knew about their gathering, Theresa. Joanne called to warn me just on the off chance I might've thought about stopping by to see Lindsay today," Vinnie said. "I never thought you would..."

"Visit my family?" Theresa said. "I know how hard it was for you, Dad, when Lindsay went to live with them again. But we're grown up. This isn't a custody issue anymore. I don't get to see my siblings that much. Hell, I don't get to see Mom and Dad—John... Mom and John that much either."

Vinnie stared at her, obviously hurt. "Mom and Dad, huh?"

She sighed heavily. "He raised me for twelve years. You weren't around, and he was a good dad

to me. Now I'm sorry if that's hard to deal with, but you guys have been putting me in a tug of war for years, and it's not fair."

"No, it's not fair that they get to have *any* sort of relationship with you or Lindsay," Vinnie said. "They abandoned both of you. They ignored her. They made you miserable, you told me that yourself. And now they throw some family shindig, and you go running back to them?"

"Whoa, wait a minute. It's not like that. Maybe I needed some closure. They didn't even invite me to the party, that's how much I'm part of their family. I found out from Michael, and I crashed it. It was a dumb thing to do, I know that now. Whitney hasn't changed, my mother hasn't changed. It was awkward and uncomfortable, but I got to see Lindsay, and she's doing well. Kevin's looking after her, spending time with her. I wanted to make sure she was doing okay. I trust Kevin, but I still wanted to see for myself that she was fine. Sue me."

"I guess I can't fault you for that," Vinnie said. "I thought of stopping by there a hundred times to do the same thing, but I just couldn't. I felt like it would be too hard, if they even let me in at all."

"Dad, I want you to know that you don't have to feel threatened by them. I'm never gonna turn on you in favor of them. I know the score, it hasn't changed in twenty-seven years. I'm the reject there, and I can live with that. You don't have anything to worry about. They're not going to win me over or anything. You're my dad, and you always will be."

He grinned, pulling her into a hug. "You're a good kid, Theresa."

She chortled. "I'm not a kid anymore, Dad."

"You'll always be a kid to me."

Theresa half-smiled. "I should get going."

"Oh, Theresa, hold up," he said going into the bedroom. He reemerged a minute later holding an acoustic guitar. "I want you to take this."

"Your guitar? I can't take this."

"It's the guitar you learned on. You got more use out of it than I ever did. You should have it," he said, handing it off to her.

"I don't know. I don't even remember how to play."

"Music is in the blood. You don't ever forget how to play. And you don't ever give up on your dreams."

"Dad," she said, touched that he remembered.

"I always loved watching you play," he said. "Just promise me you won't pawn it if times get tough."

"I would never do that."

"I know you wouldn't."

"I'll see ya."

He nodded.

Theresa left his house and headed back to David's motorcycle. He sat there smoking a cigarette, which he dropped on the ground and crushed under his sneaker when she approached.

"Nice guitar," he said. "What'd you do, knock him down and take his stuff?"

Theresa snorted. "We patched things up. We're fine."

"Good to hear it."

Theresa looped the guitar strap over her head and across her chest, while the guitar hung on her back. She got on the motorcycle, sitting awkwardly so that the guitar would hang just past the end of the seat.

"Don't go too fast, okay?" Theresa said. "I feel like I'm gonna fall off."

David scooted back a couple inches. "Can you hold on better now?"

Theresa grinned and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Yeah, better. Thanks."

As David drove Theresa home, she thought back to when Vinnie taught her how to play the

guitar...

* * *

When Theresa's hand healed after the horrendous encounter with the Jordan brothers, she was finally ready to learn how to play the guitar. Vinnie had talked about wanting to teach her for weeks, but her blistered fingers wouldn't allow it. The weekend after school started back up, Vinnie pulled out a tin box of 45's from the garage and flipped through them.

Theresa sat on the sofa holding his acoustic guitar. She played around on it, strumming it, familiarizing herself with it.

"I think I know the perfect song for you to learn," Vinnie said, pulling out one of his 45's. "Do you know 'What The World Needs Now Is Love' by Jackie DeShannon?"

"No," Theresa said. "One of the songs from *your* day I assume?"

"You'll like it, trust me," he said. "There are plenty of great songs from my day."

He put the 45 record on his turntable, swinging the arm over to bring its needle in contact with the record. The record hummed and popped, showing its age—or perhaps the dullness of the old needle. The 45 played fine apart from the diminished sound quality, and Theresa was taken in by the sweetness of the song. After everything she had been through with her family and with the Jordans, Vinnie was spot on: the song was perfect for her.

When the song ended and the arm swung back to its original position, Vinnie said, "So what did you think?"

Theresa played it cool. "Not bad."

"Not bad, huh? You think you can learn it?"

"I know I can."

Vinnie grinned. "That's what I like to hear... because you'll be performing it tomorrow night at my buddy's bar."

"I'm doing *what*?"

"You want to be a musician, don't you?"

"Well, yeah, someday but—"

"No, Theresa, not *someday*. I want you to pursue your dreams, kiddo... starting today."

"What if I can't learn it by then?"

"What if?"

"I'll look like a moron."

Vinnie sat down next to her on the couch. "I won't let that happen. You'll get up there, and you'll be great... because you're a Manzoni now. And Manzonis always look cool, no matter what." He winked at her.

"Cool." She snorted. "Sure, that's me. Maybe you can tell all the kids at my school that."

"They don't matter one bit, Theresa. Don't let them stop you from doing whatever it is you wanna do."

Theresa smiled faintly. "Come on, we're wasting time. I've got a song to learn, don't I?"

Vinnie taught her the song, and she practiced it all day long. The more she practiced, the more nervous she became. Her fingers felt clumsy on the strings and grew very sore by the end of the day.

The following evening, Vinnie drove Theresa and Lindsay down to the bar. It was a Saturday night, so the place was packed. Theresa gripped the guitar in her hand tightly, while her stomach did flip-flops. Vinnie approached the bartender.

"Hey, Vinnie!" the bartender said. "Is that your kid?"

"Yeah, Mario, that's Theresa."

"Jesus, Vin, she's the spittin' image of ya!"

“Yeah. How’s the crowd tonight?”

“Not bad. Still pretty sober though.”

“How many performers?”

“Three, yours included. One’s covering Jerry Lee Lewis and the other is doing some country song. Want your girl to open or go last?”

“Last.”

The bartender gave a thumb’s up and went down to the other end of the bar to take orders.

“Vinnie,” Theresa said. “I don’t think I can do this. I feel like I’m gonna throw up.”

“Just relax. This isn’t life or death. You’ll do fine.”

“What if they laugh? Or boo?”

“They won’t. Stop worrying.”

Theresa fidgeted, looking around the bar. Her gaze stopped on the door, where she saw Donna, Beth and the guys entering.

“Hey, you guys made it,” she said.

“Are you kidding?” Donna said. “We wouldn’t miss your debut.”

“You nervous?” David asked.

“A little.”

“Just a little?”

Theresa shrugged. “I’ll get through it.”

The first two performers finished up on stage, and then it was Theresa’s turn. She climbed the three steps up to the short platform and approached the microphone. She stared out at the crowd, hearing vague murmurs about her age. The guitar hung on her shoulder by its strap, and Theresa kept a firm grip on it—*too* firm. Vinnie had advised her not to do that since it would make her fingers tire faster. She cleared her throat and began to strum. She missed a chord, and her anxiety grew. Her eyes found Vinnie in the crowd, and he smiled at her. When she started to sing, her nerves made her voice hoarse and shaky. After the first few lines, she closed her eyes and tried to envision an empty room: just her and her guitar. Her nerves lessened. Her throat untightened, allowing for more even and relaxed vocals. She missed fewer chords on the guitar. No one else existed—just her.

By the second verse, she opened her eyes. She belted out the song to the best of her ability, and she found herself enjoying her time on stage. When her song ended, the crowd applauded, much to Theresa’s surprise. Donna and Beth and the guys were cheering for her. She smiled, feeling her cheeks flush. She walked off stage and rejoined her friends.

“Oh my god, Theresa!” Donna said. “That was awesome!”

Vinnie clapped her on the shoulder. “You did great, kiddo.”

“I screwed up a few chords,” Theresa said.

“Eh, it was nothing. No one could even tell,” he assured her.

“Hey, Manzoni,” some big guy in a trench coat said to Vinnie. “We need to talk.”

Vinnie set down Lindsay next to Theresa, and she took her hand.

“I’ll be right back,” he said, and walked over by the exit with the man.

“Who is that?” Donna asked Theresa.

“No idea.”

“Come on,” Donna said, “let’s get some Cherry Cokes. My treat.”

The group of them went over to the bar, and Donna took the initiative to order for them. Theresa kept her eyes on Vinnie, noticing the conversation seemed to be getting heated. Suddenly, the man in the trench coat punched Vinnie in the jaw.

“Crap,” Theresa said. “Watch Lindsay.”

She ran up to the scene, as others had gathered around to watch the fight. She pushed past them, just as Vinnie threw a punch.

“Vinnie!” Theresa said, staring at his bloody fists. “Come on, stop!”

He threw another punch and another. Blood spurted out of the man’s nose.

“Dad!” Theresa shrieked, and finally Vinnie turned to her. She had never called him that before, but in that desperate moment, it felt right, it felt...natural.

Vinnie left the man bleeding on the floor. He turned to the crowd and said, “Go on, get out of here. Show’s over.”

Theresa couldn’t take her eyes off his bloody fists. The knuckles had split open, but most of the blood came from the other man, not Vinnie. She knew with his boxing training he must throw a hard punch, and that made her frightened. She had never seen him lose his temper to the point where she could hardly get through to him.

“Come on,” he said to her. “Let’s go home.”

Theresa returned to her friends to retrieve Lindsay.

“Is everything okay?” Donna asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Theresa,” Beth said, “your new dad is kind of...scary.”

“Just then he was. I’ll have to find out what the story is,” she said. “I’ll see ya guys.”

Theresa turned around to see Vinnie already leaving the bar. She held Lindsay’s hand and followed him out. Vinnie got into his truck and started the engine, before Theresa had even gotten in. She ran to the passenger’s side door, climbing in quickly for fear of being left behind.

“What the hell was that?” Theresa asked.

“Nothing.”

“You totally went off on that guy. You probably broke his nose—he was bleeding a lot. What did he say?”

“Nothing. Let’s just drop it.”

Theresa held Lindsay tightly. “You scared me. You were out of control.”

“Now you know why I was such a good boxer,” Vinnie said. “Once I start hitting someone, I can’t stop. It’s like this fury that courses through my veins and comes out through my fists. It’s a rush...a high. And you’re right, I can’t control it.”

“Should I be scared?”

“No. He KO’ed, I would’ve stopped then.”

“No, I mean for us.” Her eyes drifted down to Lindsay.

Vinnie stared at her. “Never. I would never hit a child. Ever. Or a woman. There’s no sport in that...just violence.”

“I don’t want you to hit *anybody* else.”

“I can’t guarantee that, Theresa. I’ve got the fighter’s spirit...and so do you.”

“Me?”

“You don’t back down. You don’t take your hits with a smile and ask for more. You hit back.”

“And that’s a good thing?”

He shrugged. “It’s not really good or bad, Theresa. It just *is*.”

Theresa thought about that a moment, while Vinnie gripped the steering wheel. Blood dripped down off his knuckles. It fell on to the steering wheel, then on to Vinnie’s jeans. He didn’t seem to care. He just drove away, as if the blood wasn’t there at all...

* * *

David pulled up in front of Theresa’s apartment. She climbed off the motorcycle and faced him.

“I had a good time. No, that’s a lie. I had a terrible time. But you made it fun.”

He bowed his head, half-grinning. “I always have been good company.”

“Don’t forget modest,” she retorted.

They laughed.

He looked up at her. “Do it again sometime?”

“No, I’m done with family reunions.”

“I meant—”

“I know what you meant.” She leaned down and kissed him. “Does that answer your question?”

“And then some.”

Theresa smirked. “Call me.”

She headed up to her apartment, floating on cloud nine. She was as giddy as a schoolgirl, which as anyone could attest to, never happened to Theresa. David brought some good into her life, and she was thankful for it. When she entered her apartment, she found Michael and Winny sitting on the couch, luggage sitting near the wall that hadn’t been there before.

“Hey, guys,” Theresa said.

“Hey,” Michael said.

“Theresa.” Winny got up and walked over to her. “I really wanna thank you for letting me stay here. I’m gonna look for a job tomorrow.”

“Don’t sweat it. I’m happy to help. And if it keeps Michael out of trouble...”

“Hey!” he said.

“Don’t ‘hey’ me, Michael. You know it’s true.”

“Whatever. By the way, there was an envelope taped to the front door when we got here. It’s on the table.”

Winny returned to the couch, while Theresa picked up the blank envelope and opened it. She removed the folded piece of paper and opened it. In sloppy handwriting, the note read, “Midnight. The Hanging Tree. Come alone!!!”

The warm fuzzies Theresa had been feeling turned to loathing and anxiety.

“What is it, Theresa?” Michael asked.

Theresa refolded the paper and put it back into the envelope. “Nothing important.” She started to crumple it up, ignore it, with no intention of following the note’s instructions. But then she remembered what her father said. She had a fighter’s spirit. *You don’t back down.* Maybe he was right. Maybe it was time to finish this once and for all.

When midnight came, Theresa dressed in a pair of jeans, T-shirt, and leather jacket. She knew she’d be hot, but she wanted to be as protected as possible. She slipped a can of pepper spray into her pocket.

Michael and Winny were asleep, but Theresa left a note on the dining room table telling them what she was doing. She figured it’d be some sort of backup plan if things went badly. She left her apartment and drove to the street near the tree. She parked by the curb, keeping all of her doors unlocked. That way, if she had to get away fast, she wouldn’t have to fumble with unlocking doors. She took a minute to compose herself. The visions of hanging—the rope burning her neck and hands—flashed through her mind. She found herself having trouble catching her breath, just at the mere memory of it.

“Never again,” she whispered, calming herself down.

Theresa got out of her car and walked across the field. The area hadn’t changed much, as there were still no trees around except for one: the hanging tree. After she was hung, from that day forward, it was always known by that name, even by kids she didn’t personally know but who had heard about the story. She wondered if the new generation of children called it that too. Maybe she was a local legend and didn’t even know about it. She stopped before the tree, gazing up at its outstretched branches, overlapping one another. The thick tree trunk twisted into itself. It looked distorted and

unnatural as if the earth had given birth to some sort of abomination.

“Well, well, well,” Patrick said, coming up behind her. “I underestimated you.”

Theresa turned around. “You thought I wouldn’t show?”

“Yep. You’re even stupider than I thought you were. You do know we’re not going to sit down for a picnic, right?”

“Yeah. And judging by the bruises on your face, someone’s already gotten the better of you today. Anyone I know?”

Patrick narrowed his eyes. “Don’t you wish. It’s the middle of the night. All of Moonridge is asleep. Do you think anyone’s going to save you this time?”

Theresa nodded. “Yeah. Me.”

Patrick snickered. “Good luck with that. Boys!” Leo and Rod emerged from behind the hanging tree. “Three against one...you feeling lucky?”

“Three against one...you feeling cowardly?”

Patrick shoved her, and she fell against the tree, Rod and Leo on either side of her.

“Leo,” Patrick said. “Did you get the rope?”

“I...thought Rod was supposed to.”

“Goddammit, Leo!” Patrick yelled. “I asked you to do one thing!”

Theresa kicked Patrick in the stomach and started to run off. Rod caught up to her quickly and wrestled her to the ground. He was wiry compared to Patrick, but surprisingly strong. He held Theresa’s arms behind her back and pulled her up off the ground.

Patrick held his stomach and approached them. “You bitch!”

Theresa spat in his face. “You don’t scare me, Patrick! Or what was it Donna would call you? Oh, yeah. *Patty*.”

He wiped the spit off his face with the back of his hand. The shadows of the night darkened his face, giving it a demonic appearance. He stared at her, his black eyes looking like hollow sockets in the dim light. His claw-like hands lunged towards her, and Theresa kicked him in the groin. He collapsed like a ton of bricks.

“I’ve always enjoyed doing that,” she said, getting a sick sense of satisfaction watching him writhe on the ground in agony.

“Patrick, get up!” Rod yelled.

Theresa tilted her chin forward, and then snapped her head back, hitting Rod right in the teeth. A shooting pain raced through the back of her head. *They make that look too easy in movies*, she thought, as Rod released her arms. She took off running back toward the hanging tree. She skidded on the moist grass when she saw Leo. She had almost forgotten about him.

“You gonna make a move?” she asked, trying to sound tough.

Leo ran to his brothers.

“Not the move I was expecting,” she said to herself.

She zipped up her leather jacket, even though she was already sweating bullets. She realized before how exposed she felt with it unzipped though. Glancing over her shoulder, she watched Leo help Patrick up. Theresa looked around at the tree, with a weird sense that it might give her something useful. Maybe it was the slight dizziness in her head causing her to have minor delusions, but she felt like the tree *owed* her something. She circled around it and discovered a thick stick lying on the ground, broken off of one of the branches above. She picked it up and tried to bend it to see how sturdy it was. It didn’t bend easily at all, so she figured it would do as a weapon for now.

Theresa peered around the tree and was met with a large hand grasping her hair and slamming her head against the tree. She fell to the ground as the world spun around her. She felt a warm trickle of blood slither down the side of her face. She had no time to recover before a heavy work boot kicked her in the ribs.

“Having fun yet?” Patrick said from above.

He had the upper hand. She had let her guard down, and now he was overpowering her. She couldn't see straight, so she closed her eyes. Her fingers moved along the grass and loose foliage from the tree. She tried to strategize, tried to think, but her throbbing head wouldn't let her. He kicked her again. Theresa clawed at the earth, trying to slither away. She reopened her eyes to find her vision clearer but not completely recovered. Patrick got down on bended knee, straddling her. He flipped her on to her back and held her down.

“I wanted to do this the old-fashioned way—I don't like to get my hands dirty—but since my brother screwed up, I guess I don't have a choice,” Patrick said. He wrapped his meaty hands around her throat. “Feel familiar?”

With Patrick on top of her and his face only inches from hers, Theresa realized that using her pepper spray would result in her being affected by it as well. Instead, she dug her fingernails into the earth at her side. She grabbed a large clump of dirt, closed her eyes, and threw it in Patrick's face.

“Ow, shit!” he cried, letting go of her.

Theresa coughed and rolled to her side. She had to move, she had to get away from him. Her ribs ached as she tried to drag herself out from under him, as Patrick was still kneeling over her. He wiped at his eyes. She flipped herself over on to the seat of her pants, scooting backwards away from him. Now she sat facing him and noticed he was wiping the last bit of dirt from his eyes. Theresa reached for her pepper spray, flipped the tab, and held it out in front of her.

“You can't hurt me,” she croaked. “You can't defeat me...ever.”

As soon as Patrick turned to face her, she sprayed him. He fell backwards, rolling around in agony. Leo and Rod tried to help him, but he just continued writhing on the ground, groaning and hollering and clawing at his face.

Theresa attempted to stand up, but her ribs hurt too much to support her weight.

“You bitch!” Rod yelled at Theresa. “You pepper sprayed him?!”

Theresa ignored him and tried to use the tree to help herself stand up. She still couldn't manage it. She felt so helpless.

Suddenly, sirens could be heard in the distance. They weren't coming near them, but the Jordan brothers panicked anyway.

“Ah, shit, man,” Leo said. “Let's get the hell out of here.”

He and Rod pulled Patrick up to his feet and dragged him away. They disappeared into the darkness of the night.

Theresa sat down, leaning against the tree, relishing in her victory. She didn't come away from it unscathed as she hoped she would, but a couple of bruised ribs and a clock on the noggin was a small price to pay for winning.

A figure came into view, but Theresa couldn't make out who it was at first.

“Theresa!” Michael was running towards her. “Jesus, Theresa.”

“I'm okay, really,” she said. “I beat them.”

“Yeah? Then get up.”

Theresa exhaled sharply. “I can't. I need help.”

Michael leaned down, and Theresa put her arm around him. His slender body made for a decent crutch. Once Theresa was on her feet, her ribs didn't seem to hurt as much. They were sore, but she really didn't need much help walking.

“I'm taking you to the hospital,” Michael said.

“No, I can't. My health insurance hasn't kicked in yet,” Theresa said. “Just take me home. I'm okay. I'm...perfect.”

Chapter 19

The New Place

Moonridge – August 9, 1998

Wil decided the best way to lose the bad taste in his mouth after visiting his parents was to start their apartment search. Lacey's sobs had subsided in the passenger seat, but she hadn't said a word about the experience. He didn't want to press it either. He figured she'd talk when she was ready.

Earlier that morning, Wil had gotten the Moonridge Caper newspaper and circled potential apartments, calling ahead to make sure they could see them today. He needed someplace furnished, since they had no furniture, and he couldn't afford to buy any right now. There were only three furnished apartments in Wil's price range, and one of them was in the Sunset Hill building his mother had brought up. He immediately scratched that one off the list.

The pricier of the two remaining was located not far from where Beth lived. The other more affordable one was near the not-so-desirable side of town, but not right in the thick of it. They went to look at the pricier one first. Wil wasn't too keen on it from the get-go. It was only a one bedroom, had no air conditioning, and although it was furnished, it only had a twin bed. Wil knew the extra money was for the location, and he just wasn't sure if it was worth it.

The cheaper apartment was a first floor unit, which Wil wasn't too thrilled about, thinking it seemed less safe than a second floor one. The inside of the apartment was nice though. It had two bedrooms, compared to the other listing that only had one. Lacey seemed comfortable enough sleeping with Wil, but he worried about it possibly stunting her development, so he really wanted her to learn to sleep in her own bed. It had a dining area, small kitchen, a living room, and one bathroom. It was a good size for the price and well maintained.

"What do you think, Lacey?" Wil asked her.

She just shrugged.

"We'll take it," Wil said to the landlord.

After signing the paperwork, Wil headed back to their motel (after the ordeal with Beth and the Jordan brothers) to get their luggage and to check out. They returned to their new apartment afterward.

"Not bad, right?" Wil said. "Feels like home."

Lacey shrugged.

"Come on, let's check out your room again," he said. They headed into the second bedroom, which had a twin bed, nightstand with a small table lamp, and a dresser. "You've never had your own room before. We'll get it decorated really nice for you. Just tell me what you want in here, okay? For now, let's unpack your things."

He set her suitcase on the bed, popped the snaps, and opened it. On top there laid a stuffed purple bunny her mother had given her as a toddler. He removed it and laid it on the pillow. "There, we'll put Kitty right there." Lacey had picked the name herself when she was three, mistaking the rabbit for a cat. Wil and Jess (Lacey's mother) thought it was too cute to correct her. So now at seven years-old Lacey still carried around a stuffed rabbit named "Kitty".

Wil put some of Lacey's clothes away in the dresser drawers and closet. Tucked neatly between one of her folded skirts and a pair of shorts was a framed photograph of her mom. Wil looked at it for a moment, Jess's broad smile beaming back at him. She never looked like that when she was alive, only in photographs. It was her own personal masquerade, able to appear clean and sober and happy in

pictures.

“We’ll put this right on your nightstand,” Wil said, placing the photo thusly.

“I liked the Etch-A-Sketch,” Lacey said out of the blue.

Wil turned back to her. “I know you did. I bet they still sell them in stores. Tell you what, my first paycheck when I get a job, I’ll get you a brand new one. Even better than mine.”

“It was my fault.”

“Nothing was your fault, honey.”

“Mommy was.”

Wil sat down on the bed and pulled Lacey onto his lap. “Honey, Mommy’s death was an accident. She fell off the balcony, you know that.”

“Because of the drugs.”

Wil nodded. “Yeah. Because of the drugs.”

“I was there.”

“I know. You saw her go over the railing. We’ve talked about this before, remember? That Mommy wasn’t in pain, it was like flying and then...never waking up.”

“It wasn’t the drugs.”

“Yes, it was, honey.”

“I was on the balcony with her.”

“I know—”

“I tripped her.”

“What?”

“I was on the ground catching ladybugs, and I guess Mommy didn’t see me, and she tripped on me.” Her voice wavered. “She fell because of me. Do you hate me now?”

Wil hugged her. “Lacey, I could never, *ever* hate you. It was an accident, a freak and sad accident. It wasn’t your fault. I shouldn’t say this, but she was getting worse with the drugs. She couldn’t stop them, and Lacey, I think Mommy would’ve passed away no matter what. When it’s someone’s time, it’s just their time. We don’t have control over it. Do you understand?”

She nodded.

“I wish you would’ve told me sooner,” Wil said. “I’m sorry you had to feel bad all this time.”

“It’s okay. Daddy?”

“Yes, honey.”

“I really like my new room. Can we put ladybugs on the wall?”

Wil smiled. “Sure we can.”

“And can I have green sheets?”

“Green?”

“Like grass, Daddy.”

“I’ll see what I can do. Are you gonna try sleeping in here tonight?”

Lacey nodded.

“You’re growing up so fast, honey.”

“Daddy, I’ll finish unpacking by myself. And then can we order a pizza?”

“You read my mind.” He kissed her forehead and then lifted her off his lap on to the floor.

As he started to leave, Lacey said, “My grandparents didn’t like me much, did they?”

Wil stopped and turned to her. “Actually, Lacey, I think they did. They’re just weird and unpleasant people. And now you know.”

“It makes me sad. I don’t have family.”

“You have me. And you David and Paul who would do anything for you. And now Beth and Theresa and Donna...I’m sure they’ll be around from now on too. Sometimes good friends are just as important as family.”

Lacey smiled. "I liked Theresa."

Wil raised his eyebrows. "Did you?"

She nodded. "You should marry her. Then she'd be my new mom."

"Lacey, that's a nice thought, but Theresa and I are just friends." As an afterthought, he said, "What do you think about Beth though?"

She shrugged.

"Okay, well, I'm going to go unpack my things," Wil said. "Come get me if you need anything."

That night, Wil awoke suddenly at one o'clock. He rolled over to check on Lacey, but remembered she wasn't in the same bed. A knot formed in the pit of his stomach, but he wasn't sure why. He left the room, walked the short distance to Lacey's room, and peeked in. When he saw an empty bed, he threw open the door.

"Lacey!" he hollered.

He checked the closet and under the bed. Just as he was about to leave, he saw the curtains over her window swaying. He ran over and spread them to find an open window.

"Lacey!" he shouted out the window.

"Hey, keep it down, buddy!" some random neighbor shouted back.

Wil slammed the window shut and ran from her bedroom. Panic mode set in. He checked every nook and cranny of the apartment for her—every cabinet, the bathtub, even his own closet. Lacey wasn't there.

"No, no, no," he muttered, holding the sides of his head. "Where is she? Where is she?"

He had worn a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt to bed, so he threw on some sneakers and went outside as is. He went around the building to where Lacey's window was located. Her window looked out on to the common area of the apartment, where benches sat in small areas of grass. He searched for clues, and his heart skipped a beat when he saw "Kitty" lying on the ground. He picked up the rabbit, holding it to his chest.

"She's gone," he said, overcome by emotion. He bellowed an anguished, "*LACEY!*"

"Shut up!" another neighbor shouted.

Wil ran to his car and sped off, not sure where to go. Kitty sat in the passenger seat. He knew Lacey would want the doll if she was found.

If. The word rattled around in Wil's head, inserting itself into his last ounce of hope, trying to rob him of it. *When. When. When-when-when,* Wil repeated in his head. He tried to think of who might've taken her. His first thought went to his parents, since he helped them "lose" their daughter, they might've made him lose his. He started driving there, thinking there was some logic to that. Winny for Lacey—seemed like a good trade.

"Fuck!" Wil cried, slamming on his brakes. The tires squealed, zigzagging the car to an eventual stop. "Idiot!"

It suddenly dawned on him who had Lacey. He remembered what she had said: *He asked me to come with him.* Patrick. Of course. How could he be so foolish?

Wil pulled the car over by a payphone. He picked up the heavy black metal case housing the White Pages. He flipped to the J's, scanning the page for "Jordan". The only listing was for a Ray & Peg Jordan. He tore out the page and returned to his car. Turning on the interior light, he double checked the address and sped off. He felt crazed, like he might just inadvertently drive into a telephone pole. Some primal fear he had never known set up house within him. He needed to find his daughter. He needed to bring her home safe. If anything happened to her...

Wil didn't even want to entertain the notion. His foot pushed the accelerator further, bringing his speed up to eighty miles per hour. He traveled to the bad side of Moonridge, pulling up in front of

the dumpy house belonging to Ray and Peg Jordan. He made a mad dash to the front door and pounded on it with the side of his fist. It was a continuous banging; he refused to stop until he saw a light come on. A few minutes later, a haggard woman in a silk nightie answered the door with the chain on.

“What?”

“Peg Jordan?”

“Who’s asking?”

“Is Patrick here?”

“He owe you money?”

Wil shook his head. “Please I have to find him. Is he here?”

“He hasn’t been here for something like twelve years,” she said. “What do you want with my boy?”

Wil did a double take. As haggard as the woman looked, she still couldn’t have been much more than forty-five, maybe not even that old.

“You’re his mother?” Wil asked.

“You sound surprised.”

“Look, do you know where he is? Where he lives?”

“No idea. Not that I’d help someone who’s looking to hurt him.”

Wil slammed his hand on the door. “He took my daughter. If you can help me at all—”

“It’s late, you’ll have to go now. And if you don’t, I’ll call the police.”

He huffed and returned to his car. Under a pair of cup holders, there was a compartment where he kept loose change. He gathered up some quarters, while driving off. He stopped at a twenty-four hour convenient store, where some thugs were hanging around outside. He pulled up by the payphones and dialed Beth’s number.

No answer.

He rifled through the White Pages again, searching for Theresa’s number but not finding it, so he continued on to Donna’s. Her number was listed, and he frantically dialed. After four rings, she answered with a groggy “hello”.

“Donna, it’s Wil. Do you know where Beth is?”

“In my guest room. Why? What’s wrong?”

“Patrick took Lacey. I need to know if she knows where he might be.”

“I knew it!” Donna said. “She comes in with bumps and bruises, claiming to have fallen on the street, but I knew, I *knew* he had something to do with it.”

“Donna, please put her on. I need to find my daughter!”

He heard a scuffle on the other end of the phone—Donna getting out of bed, no doubt—and a moment later Beth came on the line. “Wil, Lacey’s missing?”

“Where is Patrick, Beth?” Wil asked. “Please give me something—”

“There’s a shack in the woods behind my diner,” Beth said. “It looked like they were staying there.”

“All of them?”

“Yes. I’ll meet you at my diner, I’ll show you where it is.”

“Yeah, you do that. It’ll take me about ten or fifteen minutes, but please, hurry.”

Wil hung up and drove away again. His heart raced with the glimmer of hope.

When he arrived at the burned down diner, Beth wasn’t there yet. Wil parked the car but didn’t get out yet. He felt under the dash for a key he had taped there. He used the key to open the locked glove compartment, which held a pistol. Wil took it and got out of the car. He opened the trunk to retrieve his denim jacket. He put it on, tucking the gun safely into its side pocket. He closed the trunk and saw Beth pull into the parking lot. Donna was in the passenger’s seat, and Wil approached her window.

“This isn’t a party, you know.”

“I’m your backup plan,” Donna said, holding up her cellphone. “If you two aren’t back in twenty minutes, I’m calling the cops.”

Wil nodded. “Sounds like a good plan. Beth, let’s go.”

The two of them ran into the woods. He held her hand as the moon provided little light in the darkness. Luckily, the trees weren’t too dense, and Beth could remember the way there. They stumbled upon the shack in no time. They stayed low, and Wil peeked into the dirty window. He couldn’t see much, just vague outlines of objects. But then a shadow fell over the window of someone walking around inside. Wil ducked down, putting his finger to his lips so Beth would remain silent. He mouthed, “Wait here.”

Wil went over to the door and kicked it open. “Patrick!”

Leo turned on an old-fashioned kerosene lamp, providing much needed light. Patrick stood over by the window, Rod and Leo in their respective beds.

“Bout time you got here,” Patrick said. “I expected you much sooner.”

“Where is she?” Wil asked.

“Who?”

“My kid!”

Patrick stepped into the light and for the first time, Wil saw the red burns around his eyes and halfway down his cheeks.

“Couldn’t tell ya,” Patrick said. “Maybe she’s drowning in the river or bleeding to death, or I don’t know...hanging from a tree somewhere.”

“Where the fuck is she?!” Wil shouted and pulled the gun on him.

“Oh shit,” Leo muttered, climbing under his cot.

“You don’t have the balls to pull the trigger,” Patrick said. “Besides, if you did, you’d never find her.”

“Patrick,” Beth said coming in behind Wil. “She’s just a little girl. She’s innocent. She has nothing to do with any of this.”

He glared at her. “You’re with him?”

“He asked for my help. Patrick, let her go. Your issues with me don’t have anything to do with her.”

“He got in the way!” Patrick shouted, pointing at Wil. “You, Beth, *you* dragged them into this! It was supposed to just be me and you!”

“Shut up!” Wil yelled. “Where is my daughter, you son of bitch?”

Suddenly there was pounding coming from behind a wooden door. The table was shoved up against it.

“Daddy!” Lacey shrieked from behind it.

Wil kept the gun pointed at Patrick and inched his way over to the table. He nudged it aside with his knee and opened the wooden door. Lacey staggered up to Wil, clutching his waist. He picked her up with one arm, looking her over. Black and blue bruises covered her arms and legs and one side of her face. Wil could hardly look. He felt a savage rage build up in him.

“What the fuck did you do to her?” Wil asked Patrick.

He didn’t say anything.

Wil walked back over to Beth, and she covered her mouth upon seeing Lacey. She even shed tears for her.

“Patrick,” she cried. “How could you? What have you done?”

He shrugged, indifferent.

Beth marched up to him, pounding on his chest weak-wristed. “You’re a monster! What everyone said about you is true! You’re horrible! You give nothing to this world but hate and fear and

pain! There's no good in you! There's nothing!"

Patrick grabbed her wrists to stop her punches, as weak as they were. His expression changed from indifference to some semblance of humanity. "Beth, I'm..." He growled and threw her aside. "Get out! Just get out! Fuck you all!"

Beth ran out of the shack, and Wil reluctantly followed. He wanted to blow Patrick's brains out. It would've done the world a huge favor. But he couldn't. He needed to focus on Lacey. He put the gun back into his pocket, never even taking the safety off, and held Lacey with both arms. He could feel her chest lurch with quiet sobs.

"It's okay, honey," he said. "Daddy's here. Daddy's here."

He walked alongside Beth back towards the diner.

"Wil, I'm so sorry," she said. "I never thought he would..."

"Please don't talk about it," Wil said. "I just thought the police would've done something when you filed the report earlier."

Beth was quiet for a moment. "Wil, I...didn't go to the police."

He stared at her in disbelief. "What?"

"At that point he was just messing with me. I never thought it would go further than that. And I couldn't be responsible for giving up on him."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm sorry. I made a big mistake."

"Yeah, Beth, you did. I trusted you to do the right thing. You chose him over me—"

"No, it's not like that."

"Yes, it is. You can't help everyone, because in the end it screws over the people who really care about you. After everything he's done, when we were kids and now, how could you even *want* to help him? What's the matter with you?"

"My dad—"

"Stop using your dad as an excuse to act like an id—" Wil couldn't finish. He didn't want to hurt her, even if he did partially blame her for what happened. "Never mind. I just hope this opened your eyes at last. This isn't a joke. It's not a game."

"I know," she said. "I know that now. He went too far. Please forgive me. I'm so sorry."

Wil looked down at Lacey. "It's not me who needs to forgive you."

Chapter 20

Tragedy & Revenge

Moonridge - The End of Dog Days

By Tuesday, things were starting to feel halfway normal again. Theresa had caught up with Donna and Beth that morning, discussing the issues with the Jordan brothers, who hadn't been seen or heard from since Sunday night. Beth informed Theresa that Wil had filed a police report against them, and the Jordans disappeared soon after.

That night, however, things changed. While Theresa, Michael, and Winny were watching a movie on TV, the phone rang at eleven o'clock.

"Tell me what happens," Theresa said to them, as she went to answer the phone. "Hello."

"Theresa." It was Kevin on the other end, his voice low and half-panicked. "Did I wake you?"

"No. What's wrong, Kevin?"

"It's Lindsay, Theresa. She's in the hospital."

Theresa slowly slid into one of the dining chairs. "What happened?"

"I found her unconscious in her room, beaten and strangled. She wasn't breathing, Theresa. Dad called for an ambulance, and I tried to do CPR, but I just don't know if it was enough." He was crying now, she could hear it in his voice.

"I'll be right there."

Theresa hung up the phone. "Michael, we have to go to the hospital. Lindsay's hurt."

"What? How?"

Theresa rifled through her purse searching for her car keys. "I don't know! Someone...attacked her, I guess—dammit, where are my keys?" She upended her purse, dumping everything out on to the table. Her wallet, pens, old receipts, loose change, and other random small items spilled down on to the floor.

"Theresa, Theresa!" Michael said, as she frantically went through the debris. "I'll drive. Winny, hold down the fort."

The two of them left, running down the stairs of the apartment building. Michael drove them to the hospital, parking near the emergency room entrance. They hurried inside to the nurse's station.

"My sister," Theresa said, frantic. "Lindsay Jenkenson, where—"

"Theresa!" Kevin hollered from across the waiting area.

She and Michael ran over to him. "Kevin," she said, "how is she?"

Kevin hugged her, clinging to her. He cried on her shoulder. Michael patted his back. "It's okay, man, let it out."

Theresa choked back her own tears, needing to be strong. Not just for her family, but for herself.

"It's not good, Theresa," Kevin sobbed.

John and Joanne approached.

"Kevin," John said. "Let's go outside, son. Let's get some air."

"I'm not leaving her."

"You can't help her in here. Just for a minute, come on," John insisted. He ushered Kevin outside.

Joanne didn't look Theresa in the eye. Her face, drawn and suddenly aged, was as stiff as stone.

“Dr. Morrison hasn’t retired yet.”

Michael furrowed her brow, but Theresa understood the randomness of her mother’s statement. Dr. Morrison, Donna’s father, had seen their family through every tragic event. It was her mother’s way of saying that everything would be all right.

Theresa only nodded and went to the payphone. She fished a quarter out of her jeans’ pocket to call Vinnie.

“Hello.”

“Dad,” Theresa said.

“What’s wrong?”

“Lindsay’s in the hospital.”

Vinnie hung up. That’s all it took. She knew he was on his way.

Theresa leaned her forehead against the nearby wall, unable to truly accept what was going on. It felt surreal, as if she were going to wake up from this horrible dream any second. She was dressed; when Kevin called, she was still dressed. Usually by nine or ten, at the latest, she had put on her comfy jammies to prepare for bed. But today she didn’t. She had gotten home kind of late from work (getting some extra hours for calling in sick on Monday) and had sat right down to watch the movie. *I knew. Somewhere in me, I knew something was going to happen*, she thought.

“Theresa,” Brenda said from behind her. “I came as soon as I heard.”

Theresa turned and hugged Brenda. “Thanks for coming.”

“Dad said she was attacked.”

She nodded.

“Who would do something like that?” Brenda asked.

Theresa had her suspicions of course. Whenever something bad happened anymore, her thoughts went to Patrick. But why Lindsay?

John and Kevin came back inside. Kevin sat down on one of the plastic chairs pushed up against the wall. He sat with his feet up on the seat, his knees tucked in to his chest. To Theresa, he looked like a little boy again, scared and vulnerable. The rest of the family sat down as well, but Theresa couldn’t. Her nervous energy forced her to pace up and down the sterile hospital corridor.

“What’s taking so long?” Brenda asked. “I hate waiting.”

As Theresa paced, she saw Vinnie approaching them from the emergency room entrance. He marched up to her and hugged her.

“What is he doing here?” Joanne asked.

“I called him,” Theresa said. “He has every right to be here.”

“Why? She’s not his kid,” Joanne spat.

“Jo,” John said, “just let it go. No need to get everyone upset...more upset.”

“How’s she doing?” Vinnie asked.

“We don’t know,” Theresa said, leading him away from the Jenkensons. “I haven’t seen her. Kevin found her and said she had been beaten and strangled.”

“You don’t think one of...” He sighed. “I mean, John or Joanne—”

“No,” Theresa said. “No, I don’t think they would. Even with how my mom was in the past, I couldn’t see her doing something like that now. Not with Kevin taking care of Lindsay, and me out of the picture.”

“How are you holding up?”

“It’s Lindsay.” She swallowed past the lump in her throat.

Vinnie nodded.

“Theresa,” Michael called to her.

Dr. Morrison had approached everyone. Theresa and Vinnie returned to the group.

“Rich,” John said, “how is she?”

“We did everything we could,” Dr. Morrison said in a flat tone. “The trauma was too severe. Her heart kept stopping as we tried to deal with the internal bleeding. Our last attempt to restart it didn’t work. I’m very, very sorry.”

Kevin sobbed on his knees. Brenda cried right along with him.

John sniffed, fighting back his own tears. “She’s...”

Dr. Morrison nodded and clutched John’s shoulder. “I swear to you, John, we did everything we could.” His jaw clenched, and Theresa could tell he was trying to remain calm and unemotional. “I didn’t want to call it.”

Theresa stared, deadened. It was like she was sucked into a tunnel, seeing only the blurry, dreamlike images of her family grieving. She wandered past them, vaguely hearing Vinnie call her name. She didn’t stop. She went to the payphone, pushing the buttons robotically. David answered.

“Lindsay’s gone,” she said and hung up.

She wandered past the nurse’s station, nearly walking right into a group of paramedics and doctors bringing in some other poor soul on a gurney. She sideswiped them, continuing on outside. She tried to make sense of any of this. It couldn’t be happening. When Patrick hit her head against the hanging tree, maybe that put her into a coma. Maybe nothing that happened since then was real—just some hallucinogenic dream while she vegged out in her own hospital bed somewhere. Theresa could live with that, if it meant Lindsay was alive and well.

But the earlier events of the day seemed much too mundane to dream about: going to work, getting overtime, hearing her coworkers bitch about the union, coming home to watch some old movie on TV. However, she hadn’t changed into her pajamas. It’s always those details that dreams seemed to miss. Chilling on the sofa in her jeans and old T-shirt, work boots still on. The real Theresa wouldn’t do that. *Stupid dream self*, thought Theresa. *Can’t even get into your comfy jammies with the little fluffy clouds on them.*

Theresa closed her eyes, feeling the warm night breeze pass through her curls. She almost felt serene. She just needed to wake up. She just needed to—

“Theresa,” Vinnie said.

Her eyes shot open. “Dad?”

“Theresa, do you want to...that is...” He ran his fingers through his black hair. “This isn’t easy, but Theresa, do you want to see her? Dr. Morrison said we could. I didn’t want to. Kevin did. Joanne and John did. It’s your turn if you want it.”

“My turn,” Theresa said in a daze. “I get to be the thimble.”

“What’s that?”

“I don’t like the thimble. What kind of playing piece is that? Whose idea was it? I wanted the man on the horse, but Whitney took it already.”

“Theresa,” Vinnie said in an even tone. “We’re not playing a game, Theresa.”

“Roll the dice. What comes up? Ding-ding-ding. One dead sister.”

“Theresa!” Vinnie scolded. “Get a hold of yourself. You’re coming unhinged.”

“I’m not dreaming, am I?” Theresa said, her eyes wide and staring at nothing.

“No, Theresa, I wish you were.”

“And it’s my turn to gaze upon the body?” Her voice broke now, a few large tears dropping upon her shirt, seeming to bypass her face altogether. That probably wasn’t the case, logically speaking, but that’s how it felt to Theresa. They came on so suddenly, so hard they just went where they wanted to go.

Vinnie cleared his throat. “You don’t have to. No one would think less of you if you didn’t.”

“I want to.”

Theresa walked through the hospital, Vinnie somewhere behind her. Or maybe he stayed outside to smoke. She hadn’t really noticed. Dr. Morrison led her into the room where Lindsay lay and left her

alone there.

“Take all the time you need,” he said.

For a moment, Theresa changed her mind. She didn't want to see an image that might just haunt her for the rest of her life. But she knew herself well enough to know she'd regret it if she didn't take one last look. She approached the bed slowly, the white sheet covering Lindsay up to her chest. Theresa's eyes drifted up to find the purple finger marks on Lindsay's neck, and then finally the bruises on the left side of her face. She wanted to look away but she forced herself to burn the image of her battered baby sister into her memory. She wasn't even conscious as to why she needed to. Her tears flowed more freely now, as she took Lindsay's hand.

“Lindsay,” Theresa whispered, letting out a shuddering sigh. “I should've protected you better. I shouldn't have left you. I'm sorry. I hope wherever you are now you get to do all the things you were never able to do. I bet everyone's a lot nicer there too...at least, I hope so. You were too good, too sweet, and too innocent for this hell on earth. I love you, Lindsay, and I always will. And I'll find whoever did this to you, and they'll pay. I'll make sure of that, Lindsay. I promise you.”

Theresa kissed Lindsay's hand and sobbed. She sobbed so hard she lost the strength to hold herself up and collapsed to her knees at Lindsay's bedside. Memories of her sister flew through her mind, like a video tape on fast forward. She saw all the good times, the games they'd play, the talks they had that few people understood. She saw the bad times too, mostly with her mother or Whitney, the names they called her, the insensitive things they said. All the hurt, all the pain, all the sorrow started to bubble and churn, turning into a boiling hot hate for anyone who brought Lindsay an ounce of harm.

Theresa got to her feet, wobbling at first, but she steadied herself. She laid Lindsay's hand down on the bed, gently stroked her light brown curls away from her face, and left the room.

“Did you say your goodbyes, Theresa?” Joanne asked.

Theresa said, “Fuck you” and marched down the corridor. It was harsh, but she didn't care. Joanne either ignored Lindsay or showed cruelty towards her, so Theresa had no desire to be cordial. She left the hospital, just as she saw David coming in.

“Theresa,” he said. “What happened?”

“She's gone,” Theresa said and kept walking.

He followed her out. “You mean, she's...dead?”

She nodded.

“How?”

Theresa stopped on the walkway outside of the hospital. “Do you have a cigarette?”

David gave her one of his and lit it for her. She took a long inhale, rubbing her head.

“Theresa,” he said, gently. He put his arm around her shoulders. “Talk to me.”

“She was attacked in her bedroom,” she said, through clenched teeth. She could hardly stifle her anger now.

David shook his head. “Who...who would do something like that?”

“Some random asshole...or a not so random one.”

“You think Patrick did it?”

“I hope it was him.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I can find him in this puny town...and I can kill him.”

“Theresa, I know how you feel, but—”

“You don't know how I feel!” she shouted. “Nobody knows how I feel! Especially when it comes to Patrick. He knew I finally got the better of him on Sunday night. *I* won...for once. And I know that pissed him off. I told him...” Her eyes widened with a sudden realization. “I told him he couldn't hurt me. Oh my god! I told him he couldn't, but he found the perfect way to.”

“Theresa, Patrick is a crazy bastard, but you don’t know for sure he did it yet.”

“I have to go.”

“Wait, Theresa. Let me go with you wherever you need to go.”

“No,” she said. “I have to grieve in my own way. And that doesn’t involve you.”

“Just don’t do anything crazy. Don’t let vengeance ruin your life.”

“Goodbye, David.”

Theresa walked home to retrieve her car. She drove around town aimlessly, swimming in grief. Part of her was hoping to run into Patrick, to confront him and find out the truth (the truth she was sure she already knew). As she drove, it occurred to her she hadn’t even thought to call Beth and Donna to tell them. Theresa was the strong one in their group, the rock. She couldn’t let them see her like this. She felt like half a human being, like she might never feel whole again. Part of her didn’t even care if she ever did or not. She just wanted her little sister back.

She must’ve driven for an hour—or two. She hadn’t kept track of time. Moonridge was like a ghost town at night, which added to her surreal feeling. Sometimes the reality of the situation wouldn’t sink in. Theresa envisioned just driving to her childhood home, going upstairs, and finding Lindsay lying in her cute little room with her pastel sheets. Other times it hit her like a ton of bricks. There would be no more kitty cat puzzles, no more Thriller playing at three in the afternoon, no more pretzels and Yoo-Hoo. She was never going to get to go to Disney World or Coney Island. She was never going to age another day. She was just...gone.

These thoughts made Theresa stop at the bar she sang at when she was twelve and want to drown her sorrows. She wasn’t much of a drinker, but tonight she wanted to drink herself stupid. She sat down at the bar, unobservant of those around her. She ordered a beer from good ol’ Mario, who still owned the place after all these years.

The man two stools down from her said, “Hey, barkeep. Nother whiskey.”

She knew the voice, but she felt it must be a random hallucination again. Her head turned, almost beyond her control, like a reflex. There in his old flannel shirt over a dirty white T-shirt sat Patrick Jordan.

Theresa scooted to the stool separating the two of them. Now it was his turn to reflexively turn.

“A wise man once said,” began Theresa, ““There’s something about the dog days of summer... gets a man’s fur up.”” She took a drink of her beer. “Do you know what he forgot to mention? It holds true for women also.”

She set down her beer, stood, grabbed the back of Patrick’s hair, and slammed his face forward on to the bar. She returned to her seat, while Patrick groaned and hollered and cupped his hands over his nose and mouth.

“You broke my nose!” he yelled, tears forming at the corners of his eyes.

“Shh,” Theresa said. “You don’t want to wake the dead...like my sister.”

He looked at her sidelong. “What?”

“My sister, Lindsay. The one you tried to give beer to when she was only four. You know, on the day you hung me,” she said, perfectly calm. “Remember? Such carefree childhood summer days, huh? How’d you get into her room, Patrick? Climb the tree outside her window? Hm?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Hm, okay. My mistake then. I think I’ll find another bar.” Theresa stood, but didn’t leave. She broke her beer bottle on the bar and shoved the jagged glass up against his throat. “Don’t fuck with me!”

“Hey!” Patrick hollered to Mario. “You gonna call the police on this broad?”

Mario wiped down a glass with the towel. “Who, Theresa? Nah, I’ll wait to see where this is going.”

“Guess I have a few friends in this town after all,” she said. “Did you attack my...” She jammed

the glass further into his throat, drawing a drop of blood. "...sister?"

"I've seen that little feeb around town," he said. "'Bout time someone put her out of her misery."

Theresa pulled the bottle away and slammed his face into the bar again. He roared out like a bear caught in a trap.

"You killed her!" Theresa cried out. An outpouring of her misery followed in a guttural, primal wail soaked in her anguish. "Why? *WHYYYYYYYYY*?"

She slapped and beat on him with her fists with everything in her. She struck his twice-injured nose, and now he was really shedding some tears. It wasn't enough though. It was never going to be enough. She grabbed the beer bottle and shoved it against his throat again. This time she envisioned propelling it forward, almost straight through to the other side. She wanted to see it for real. She wanted to see his life's blood spill out of him as it had spilled out of Lindsay. She applied the tiniest bit of pressure, just before someone grabbed her wrist.

"Theresa," Vinnie said. "It's time to go home."

Tears pooled in her eyes, as she dropped the beer bottle. She sobbed on her father's shoulder, letting every raw nerve be exposed. She didn't want Patrick to see her cry, but the floodgates had opened. Seeing her dad, there and then, shook her awake from the nightmare and opened her eyes wide to see the reality... and it hurt. It hurt like a thousand daggers to the heart.

"Mario," Vinnie said. "Call the police. This man is wanted for murder."

They waited there for the police to come. Patrick didn't try to run. He had lost a lot of blood and slipped in and out of consciousness. The police took him away, one of them confirming the found fingerprints of Patrick Jordan at the crime scene. They questioned his broken nose, but Mario was quick to tell the lie that Patrick had had too much to drink, tripped, and hit his nose on the bar. Either the cops bought the lie or didn't care enough to question it, as they simply nodded and escorted him out.

On Saturday night Theresa, Beth, Donna, and the guys met up at the bar. Theresa was still in mourning, but her guard had been rebuilt, and no more tears had come. The healing had begun, as slow and painful as it might be.

Lacey sat on Wil's lap. Her bruises were beginning to fade. Hers were taking the longest of any of them, perhaps because of her age. She hadn't spoken again since the kidnapping, a result of post-traumatic stress syndrome. Wil assured them it would pass in time. Theresa held on to hope for her, but worried Lacey's experiences with the Jordan brothers would forever haunt her. Only time would tell.

Beth talked about how Carla had given her a job as a waitress. She spoke optimistically, saying someday she'd get her diner back, and Theresa was glad for it. She was glad to see traces of the old Beth again, before Patrick had reentered her life and sapped all the hope from it.

Mario called Theresa's name to get up on stage to perform. She carried her acoustic guitar up and stood at the microphone.

"This is for Lindsay," she said softly.

She strummed her guitar and began singing Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here". Her voice cracked a couple times, warding off the urge to cry. Her friends didn't fare so well; Beth and Donna were crying at their booth.

When she finished her song, the audience stood and clapped. Some even cheered. It gave Theresa some confidence back in her ability to perform, and she owed that to Lindsay.

Six months after Patrick was sentenced to ten years in prison (a miniscule amount of time in Theresa's opinion), she drove out to Wolfen Penitentiary, which stood approximately ten miles north of Moonridge's city limits. It was a desperate attempt at closure, as well as her own morbid curiosity and

satisfaction to see Patrick right where he belonged. She was taken to the visitor's area, where she sat down in front of a thick piece of glass that separated her from the soon-to-be-arriving Patrick Jordan. A red telephone hung on the narrow wall, separating her from the visitor next to her.

When Patrick arrived, he appeared exasperated, and Theresa waved at him. He sat down, arms folded, just staring at her. Theresa picked up the telephone receiver and pointed at it to get him to do the same. Patrick visibly sighed, puffing up his cheeks and then exhaling. He finally picked up the phone receiver.

"I bet you think you're pretty cute, don't you?" he said.

"It doesn't matter. All that matters now is...I'm out there, and you're in here."

"Hmph. Not forever."

"Long enough."

"Ten years. And how long will your sister be dead for? Oh yeah. Forever. I've left you with memories that will haunt you eternally. This is just a minor setback. I've won."

"Tsk-tsk-tsk. You haven't won," Theresa said. "You'll have nothing when you get out. Your brothers? They'll move on. They might actually have a chance at some sort of normal life. And if that happens, do you think they'll still give a shit about you? You're done. You're *so* done. You'll have nothing, because you are nothing. Life, as you know it, is a never ending, hopeless abyss." She sneered at him through the glass. "Enjoy your stay."

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Author's Note

Thank you for reading *Dog Days of Summer*, Book 1 in the Moonridge Memories series. If you enjoyed this book, please check out Book 2 in the Moonridge Memories series, *Leaves In Autumn*.

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